

The Kingmaster

By

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(Arc Legends of Ellunon: Book 1)

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect](#)

Chapter 1

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

The statue smiled down, posing with an arm on his sword, with his cloak flared, with a confident lift to his chin. In the shade he cast, the living warrior drooped.

A line of blazing light, curving from one rooftop-studded horizon to the other, split the washed-out sky over the two warriors' heads. It cast the shadow over Kyen, bleached the cobblestones, and glared off the pale buildings edging the city square. A man in breeches led three horses behind the statue. The clops of hooves on paving stones rang through the empty space. Across the square, another swordsman appeared with two paper-wrapped packets in hand. He ambled up to Kyen's side.

"Kyen!" Seeing the look on Kyen'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 a grain basket on her head cast them a wary glance and hurried on.

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, Kyen cut a sharp contrast next to Finn, a younger, shorter, brawnier redhead.

Kyen ripped the paper off his sandwich and stuffed it into his face.

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

"Yoo ih?" Kyen asked with his mouth full.

"Yeah, I did." Finn 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," said Finn.

"Wha's geh'ing worse?"

Finn fixed Kyen with a serious frown.

Kyen stared back, oblivious. "What?"

Finn shook his head and turned his frown 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."

Kyen chewed while he waited for Finn to say more. When he didn't, Kyen swallowed and pressed him. "Then what? You've been out of sorts all morning."

"It's just—trade counsels, treaties, grain accounts, nobles, etiquette, dances—argh!" Finn 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—" Finn 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 Finn's sandwich.

"I'm not hungry." Finn passed the sandwich over.

Kyen stuffed the entire half in his mouth and chewed with a look of bliss on his face.

Finn glowered across the city square.

A castle wall of beige sandstone dominated the far side. Two life-sized stone griffins flanked the gatehouse, a square-ish tower with battlements and turrets, where two guards in red livery stood at attention. Above 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. He started across the square. Kyen, still picking crumbs from his tunic and eating them, hurried after him.

"Eh, Finn? We need to go that way." Kyen pointed over his shoulder at the castle.

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

"That doesn't sound like a good idea..." said Kyen. "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 Kyen.

Kyen looked dubious. "Does this mean we're staying at an inn?"

Finn 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 hazel shutters sprawled out in both directions. Wheatberry Inn: read the golden lettering painted beneath a wheat stalk. Beside it, an arch opened into 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 great, velvet-wrapped girth down 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," said Kyen. "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. "I'm set to be coronated after the 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 Finn—"charged me to keep an eye on you. I don't approve of this."

"I'm just scoping out my options. Nothing more." Finn smiled and shrugged. He 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." Finn 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.

Finn 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." Finn 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 Finn.

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 Finn an uncertain look 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?" Kyen 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 to the ground. "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. The rumbles, thuds, and shrieks from above drew uncertain glances from the dining nobles. Every head turned as the two swordsmen ran through the common room.

"Everyone outside!" yelled Finn.

Noblemen and women abandoned their chairs to crowd towards the door.

Kyen dashed up the stairs with Finn on his tail.

On the upper floor, a door banged open.

A handmaid ran screaming past them and down the stairs.

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, bumping against an armchair, before settling to the griffin's back.

Finn looked down at his sword. "What I wouldn't give for a good spear right now. Will our longswords 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 go outside! They're all going to be gathered around like gaping idiots! What are we going to do?"

"You're the strategist," said Kyen. "Think!"

A scream issued from the bedroom.

"A maiden's in there!" Finn dashed past Kyen.

"Finn!"

When Finn entered, the griffin rounded on him. A young maiden cowered in the corner, half-hidden beside the dresser. Finn leapt the four-poster bed to plant himself between her and the griffin.

The griffin's slitted eyes fastened on him. It stalked forward.

Clutching his longsword with both hands, Finn backed away. His back hit the wall beside the maiden. She whimpered beside him and covered her face with her hands.

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

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

The griffin roared and spun on Kyen. Its head and forepaws smashed through the end of the bed. Kyen's sword, stuck in the griffin, ripped out of his hands.

Kyen stumbled backwards.

The griffin sprang after him.

Kyen dove out of the way. He hit the ground on his belly. Snatching up a broken bedpost, he scrambled away. The griffin lunged after him. He threw himself against the wall, bracing the bedpost. 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!" Kyen yelled. He pressed himself back as another swipe of claws breezed past.

Finn seized the maiden's hand. Yanking her to her feet, he ran her behind the raging griffin and shoved her into the corridor ahead of him. The maiden's knees buckled. She cringed to the ground and started hyperventilating.

"Stand up! Stand up!" Finn pulled her up, but she sank back. Hauling her upright, Finn pressed her up next to 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 for the doorway, but a loud crack like a lightning flashed out. Finn stumbled backwards, shielding his eyes. A thud shuddered through the walls.

Blinking and squinting, Finn told the maiden, "Don't move!" He re-entered the room.

"Kyen!"

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 the griffin's chest up to the hilt. A single great breath shuddered through the griffin. Then, it lay still.

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

Kyen nodded, swallowed.

Finn sheathed his sword. They both stood, regaining their breath, staring at the dead griffin.

Finn looked at Kyen. "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 the blade off on the bedsheet, Finn stepped forward.

A welt the size of a black apple stood out on the griffin's feathered mane. At its center protruded a little black dart.

Finn plucked out the dart 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 blow dart? 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 maiden still whimpered.

"It's alright. You're safe now." Finn took hold of her hand as she straightened away from the wall. When she saw the dead griffin through the doorway, she turned the color of the sheets. Her breath squeaked 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 didn't move. "Help me with her, Kyen! She looks like she could faint!"

"Coming!" Kyen ripped a piece off the bedsheet, wrapped the dart up in it, and stuck the bundle in his pocket. He hurried to take the maiden's other elbow. Kyen caught her arm as she fell in a faint.

"I got her. I got her." Finn scooped the limp maiden up in his arms. He staggered under her weight and straightened with an effort. Kyen eyed him dubiously taking the stairs ahead of Finn as Finn carried the maiden down to the common room.

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

The two swordsmen brought her outside.

"Aliza!" The velvet-girthed man ran from the crowd. The handmaid hurried behind.

"She's unhurt." Finn lowered the maiden to the ground. "Only fainted."

The handmaid gathered her mistress in her arms, weeping and stroking her brow.

"Oh! Thank you! Thank you, young sir!" The man wrung Finn's hand up and down.

Finn 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 offered empty air. Not a single black-haired head could be seen throughout the crowd.

"Argh! Excuse me!" Finn extracted his hand from the man's and pushed his way through the spectators. Beyond them, Finn 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?"

Kyen stopped, his vacant eyes straying further down the road.

"Kyen? I said, 'Kyen!'"

"Hm...?" His gaze drifted over to Finn's face. "Oh. Hello, Finn."

"What are you looking at?" Finn 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?"

"Never mind. Come on." Finn walked off.

The two friends walked 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?" Kyen grinned. "You probably won yourself a wife with that rescue. That maiden 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. Kyen's statue threw a long black prong that jabbed towards the gatehouse's arch. The two guards nodded to Kyen and Finn as they entered the gate tunnel. Kyen nodded back, but Finn slunk past without looking at them.

A drawbridge, spanning a moat, reached to another gatehouse and the castle's inner wall. With the deepening shadows, the gate 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. Their boots clunked on the wood as they walked.

Finn stopped in the middle of the drawbridge.

Kyen, when he noticed, looked back.

Finn stared up at the tunnel. Desperation shone bright in his eyes. "Can't you tell dad the griffin ate me?"

Kyen smiled. Returning to Finn, he 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." Finn skulked over to glower into the moat.

Kyen followed him.

"My sisters would do a better job ruling the kingdom than me anyway," said Finn.

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

Finn 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!" said Finn. "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. He put 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, guide you while you're a young king. And you have your sisters. 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 his arm instead, turning the pebble over in his fingers. After a moment, he let it drop back onto the drawbridge.

"You're right." Finn sighed. He turned back towards the castle, walking with his head still hung.

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

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

Kyen hung back, smiling.

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 shut his mouth 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," said the king.

"Thank you, your majesty." Kyen 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."

Adelaide hid her face in the king's hand.

The king chuckled at her. He turned to Finn.

Finn stood, blushing in embarrassment, as his many sisters chattered away around him. They'd begun arguing over whether or not Finn had 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 exchanged a smile with Kyen. "That is, Kyen, you have my thanks."

"You're welcome, your majesty."

Finn, finally extracting himself from his sisters, narrowly escaping their catching hands, dashed over.

A chorus arose behind him.

"Look, Kyen's come with him!"

"It's Kyen!"

"Kyen!"

Kyen paled. "Oh no."

King Veleda chuckled, watching the warrior back away as the gaggle of red-headed maids closed in on him.

Finn, slightly out of breath, stopped next to his father as Kyen bolted.

Kyen fled onto the lawn with a stream of little girls on his tail. The girls spread out, circling around Kyen, closing in on him.

Kyen turned back, jogging a few steps backwards, watching the girls surround him. They dove, chased, and lunged, but Kyen 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.

Finn sighed. "It's getting worse."

King Veleda 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 all dashed back to regroup around Finn and king.

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.

Twilight was deepening into night around them. The king herded his flock of maids towards the doors of the keep.

The girls chattered incessantly.

"Are you 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 arose around him.

"Will you play dress-up with me and my dollies?" Adelaide tugged at Finn's tunic.

"Uh... sure," said Finn, 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 aside as his family mounted the steps to the door. He allowed his father to pass in first then waited patiently as all his many sisters streamed in after.

Finn turned to enter himself 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 dashed across the bailey. His feet thumped against wood as he crossed the drawbridge. He pushed past a surprised guard and bound 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.

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

Finn cupped his hands to his mouth.

"KYEN!"

Kyen turned and waved.

Finn swung his arm over his head in response.

The distant warrior disappeared around the corner.

Slumping against the stones, Finn huffed a sigh and dangled his arms out over the wall.

"Ow!" Finn flinched.

A tiny black dart protruded from his forearm.

Finn frowned. He plucked it out of his skin. He 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. A cloth bundle lay 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. A hiss of steam burst up.

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

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

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I—" Kyen 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 out into the grasslands. The clang of the smithy faded into 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, or checked the dirt on the roadside. A pair of horsemen eyed him and crossed to the opposite side of the road to trot past. Kyen swept apart a thick stand of grass taller than himself.

"Ah! I knew it."

A footpath hidden behind the grasses wound away into the prairie. Kyen stepped off the road to follow it. Within moments, the high grasses swallowed him and blocked all sight of the road behind. The path followed the low of the land, skirting the rises and running in the dips. The Arc sank low. The murmur of the river unseen joined the beetles and birds. Stands of river reed, their tops a dark ridge against the setting Arc, rose above 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 of the hollow. A house and lean-to, cobbled together with reed-sheets, propped up with hay bays and boards, leaned against the chimney's sides.

Kyen walked to the lean-to, looking around at the disarray of a smithy. Rods, ore chunks, pinchers, chisels, and hammers of a hundred sizes lay strewn over the workbenches and the ground.

Kyen bent to pick up a small hammer at his feet. "Ewin?"

The prattling beetles crackled at each other in the grasses.

A cow lowed in the distance.

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

"He never lets the forge go out," said Kyen. "Ewin!"

He hurried around to the house and pushed open the door. 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. He paced back and forth, sometimes stooping to look at the dirt. He widened his search until, coming to the edge of the river reeds, he stopped.

A reed hung broken.

Scuff marks marred the sandy soil up to the edge, 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 popped up. A trail smashed

through them, winding away over the sandy ground. Night fell fast in the thicket. Darkness closed in on the trail, slowing Kyen down. The rush of the unseen river filled the night air.

A light glimmered out of the night, 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 curtained the mast of a boat. More like a barge with a stubby sail-mast, the boat squatted its broad hull low in the water. Its front half lay beached up in the sand. The glimmer shone from a lantern hung beside a gangplank. Under its light stood a broad, burly man with his arms crossed. His bald head sported a red bandana with tails that dangled down his back. A bronze, leaf-bladed sword hung off his belt. Another like him but with hair guarded the door to the boat's only cabin.

Kyen frowned. He ducked into the weeds and snuck away behind the ship. Portholes glowed yellow above Kyen's 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. He came level with the porthole and looked 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 oversized leather apron, a crooked cap, and soot dusted every inch of him. A dirty sling wrapped one arm against his side. Rope bound his other arm to his ankles.

Kyen edged towards the end of the branch. It bowed under his weight, but Kyen kept hold of the dangling leaves above for balance. He let go to lean out and grab the rim of the porthole. Taking his dagger from his belt, he slid the blade underneath the edge, shimmied the latch up, and pulled the glass open. He peered at the pirates. None moved.

"Ewin!" Kyen whispered.

Ewin's head snapped up, and he stared at Kyen for a long moment. 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."

"They're trying to threaten me into making black weapons." Ewin shot the pirates 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's pensive face vanished from the porthole.

"Wait! Give me your dagger!" hissed Ewin.

Kyen's face reappeared. "Right. Here." He dropped his dagger into Ewin's lap before he vanished again. He let himself drop from the tree to land at a crouch in the sand.

"Kyen! Kyen!" Ewin's voice floated out the porthole after him. His face followed in a moment.

Kyen looked up.

"Don't do anything—" Ewin hesitated. "Anything stupid. A dark power is at work here."

"I won't." Kyen smiled a little. Ewin's face disappeared, and Kyen jogged around to the front of the ship. When he leaned around the curve of the hull, 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. Padding softly through the sand, keeping to the shadow of the hull, he crept up on the pirate.

When Kyen left the shadows, the pirate's face turned. He drew his sword. Kyen lunged for him as the pirate slashed down.

Two loud clangs rang out as one. Kyen deflected the blade to the side and flicked out a following blow breaking open the pirate's guard. The two movements happened so fast, they blurred into one.

Before the pirate could regain his guard, Kyen smacked his hilt into the pirate's face.

The pirate dropped to the sand.

Kyen stepped back, but the pirate lay stunned. As Kyen looked down at him, his eyes narrowed.

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

Kyen turned and hurried up the gangplank at a crouch. He peered on deck.

The pirate guarded the cabin doorway, unmoved by the sounds of battle or the thunk of Kyen's boots on deck. A black welt stood out on his forearm in the lamplight.

Lifting his sword, Kyen edged towards the pirate.

The pirate stared into space, his face blank.

Kyen frowned. He moved in and hefted his sword.

The pirate responded by drawing his blade.

Kyen struck first with a lunge.

The pirate moved to block, but Kyen feinted; Kyen's sword slashed wide only to whip back in underneath the pirate's guard. It caught the pirate's cross guard and ripped his sword from his hand. The pirate stumbled sideways. 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 slung it open with a bang.

The three pirates at the table all 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 open door as the pirates drew their swords on him. He stood at the ready, the lantern light glinting off the edge of his blade.

As the first pirate stepped over the threshold, Kyen lashed out low, striking at his ankle. It connected, and the pirate fell forward into the deck.

Kyen stabbed out at the pirate behind, but he jerked back from the blade point. He stumbled up against the third pirate behind him.

The first pirate on the deck tried to get up between them.

Kyen kicked him, but the pirate caught his foot. He gave it a nasty yank, and Kyen fell over backwards. His head smacked down hard against the deck. Kyen rolled away, scabbled for a moment to get away but collapsed back, clutching 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 bounds, ran out of the cabin. He jumped onto the first pirate's back. He grabbed him around the neck in a headlock, trying to get his dagger to the pirate's throat.

The pirate shrugged this way and that.

Ewin clung on.

The two pirates from behind seized Ewin and wrenched him off, one grabbing his dagger hand. Ewin bit the arm that had seized him, but the pirate didn't let go, even as Ewin ground his teeth in.

The first pirate hefted his blade as he neared Kyen.

Kyen stirred. Slowly, with head hung, he lifted himself to his feet. When he straightened, he wobbled backwards a few steps and stood there. His sword dangled from his limp arm.

"Kyen! Look out!" shouted Ewin.

The first pirate raised his sword to slash.

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

The pirates holding Ewin dropped him. They moved to surround Kyen.

The first pirate slashed down on Kyen, but Kyen flicked the slash aside with his blade and gutted him. As he shoved the first pirate off his sword, the second and third came at him from the 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. The pirates dropped their swords with a start. The blades hit the deck as dust.

Kyen lunged into the pirates' midst. 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 appeared out of the pirate's back.

Kyen let the pirate drop, his blade slipping free as the body collapsed. Kyen's sword arm dangled back to his side.

Rising to a crouch, Ewin stared at Kyen.

Kyen lifted his face to Ewin. The fierce, golden-eyed gaze pinned him in place.

Without warning, the golden color flickered out. Kyen's stormy eyes returned only to roll up into his head. Kyen 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 ore hit the bottom with a tinny clank.

Kyen groaned and 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." Ewin threw the last ore into the bucket with a clank that made Kyen wince.

"I'm sorry," said Kyen.

"Keep your apologies. 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 him. He pulled them on with sluggish hands. Once booted, Kyen stared at the far wall with a faraway look in his eyes.

Ewin stood, bucket in hand, and glared at Kyen. 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. He turned away to his work table. "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."

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

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

Ewin shot the dart a brief glance only to give it a double-take. He pushed aside his bucket to come frown into Kyen's hand.

"Where did you get it?"

"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. Ewin 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," said Kyen.

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," Ewin 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." Ewin looked over to meet Kyen's eyes. "You fought in the Black War. You remember, don't you?"

Kyen held Ewin's gaze.

"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?" said Kyen.

"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." Ewin held Kyen's gaze steadily. "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 Kyen, but Kyen hesitated to take it back.

"You can hold onto this," said Ewin. "But don't let anyone else touch it 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," Ewin glowered at him. "Be a good friend and leave before your problems swoop down on us both. I have to move again because of you."

"I'm sorry," said Kyen, ruefully. "I'll go now." Getting to his feet, Kyen made his way to the door while using a hand on the wall to steady himself.

"Kyen."

Ewin's voice stopped him on the threshold.

Kyen looked back.

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

"I will," said Kyen. "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. The unwieldy scrawl of a child filled the page. Kyen skipped to the bottom of the sheet where the letter had been signed:

Prinsezz Adelaide of Valeda

He chuckled to himself and 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 anemor. 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 Veleda. Two guards stood at attention inside the gate tunnel.

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

One guard motioned to the other. The gate clanked and began to ascend; its iron bars rose up past his grave face.

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

"Heard what?" asked Kyen.

"An assassination attempt has been made on the king," said the guard.

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

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

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

Kyen left before the guard finished his sentence. He strode quickly across the bailey and pushed open one of the double doors into the castle keep. Without waiting for a footman, Kyen mounted the nearest staircases. He bound up two flights, taking the steps three at a time and drawing stares from a couple maidservants as he passed.

Kyen exited onto the third floor, 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. A chorus of sobbing and wailing echoed around the solar.

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 chorus of grief 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 Clarissa 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 sniffing girls clung to one another behind them.

"How is King Veleda?" Kyen 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. He returned to his station at the bedside as Kyen and the girls gathered into the room.

In his bed, King Veleda groaned and shifted with fever. His face looked pale beneath his wiry, red beard. Broad bandages swathed his chest. The apothecary dabbed at his brow with a damp cloth.

"How bad?" asked Kyen.

"He's still in danger until the fever breaks," said the apothecary.

Fresh tears rose to Elenora and Lionora's eyes.

Lionora sniffed.

Kyen shook his head, gazing on the wounded king.

"What happened?" said Kyen. "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 Valeda muttered incoherently under his breath.

The apothecary laid the cloth over the king's 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 Clarissa, the guard unlocked the door.

Kyen stepped inside. The door shut and locked behind him.

A lantern hung from the ceiling and lit the crates and boxes pushed to the back of the room. Under the 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. He lifted his head when Kyen entered, cast him a single dark glance, and looked away.

"Finn?" Kyen took a cautious step forward.

Finn paced past him.

"What happened Finn?"

Finn strode up to the wall, turned.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Kyen.

"Nothing." Finn crossed the room.

"I don't believe that."

Finn reached the opposite wall, turned.

"Finn?"

"Go away."

"Not until we talk," said Kyen.

Finn kept pacing. His fists clenched tight.

"Finn."

With a yell of rage, Finn lunged at Kyen. He swung out a fist at Kyen's head.

Kyen sidestepped.

Finn collided with the door.

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

"Don't fight me," said Kyen.

Finn spat on the ground.

Kyen's frown deepened.

The lock rattled, and the guard put his head inside

"Everything alright?" He eyed Kyen's drawn blade.

Finn returned to pacing.

"I'm finished." Kyen sheathed his sword. He stepped out around the guard.

Clarissa, Elenora, and Lionora looked up as Kyen joined them. Clarissa was biting her lip.

Elenora and Lionora clutched each other's arms for support. Behind him, the guard re-locked the door.

"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 time gazing at the door.

The three young princesses watched him.

"I need to speak with Adelaide," said Kyen.

Eyebrows rose.

"Adelaide?"

"Yes." Kyen 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 waved them away. The twins exchanged perplexed looks, but Clarissa walked to the table and took up her sewing. The twins followed, and the three sat together, stealing glances at Kyen 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," said Kyen.

Adelaide 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, but he just says go away." 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?"

Adelaide nodded. She hopped off the cushions. Taking two of Kyen's fingers in her whole hand, she 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. She pulled Kyen inside.

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

"Let me look around." Kyen slipped his hand free. He checked out the window and surveyed the view of the grounds. He opened the desk drawer—a neat stack of parchment, an ink bottle, quills—and he closed it again.

Kyen turned to leave but paused.

A bedside table supported a candleholder. Beside it lay a dart of dark metal.

Kyen picked the dart 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 from Finn's bedside table.

Chapter 6

Putting both darts together, Kyen wrapped them up. He stashed the bundle in his pocket.

"Come." Scooping up Adelaide, Kyen returned to the solar. "Princess Clarissa?"

"Yes?" The girl jumped up.

"Would you summon a counsel?"

"Of course!" Clarissa beckoned a serving girl over. "Summon a counsel."

"Yes, my lady." The girl dipped a curtsy then watched the princess expectantly.

Clarissa gave her a long, blank look. She turned to Kyen. "Who should I summon?"

"The king's counselor, the captain of the guard, and the castle apothecary, if you please."

"Summon them," Clarissa said to the serving girl, and she hurried off.

Sitting Adelaide down, Kyen moved to the window. He gazed out unseeing with a grim set to his stormy eyes.

The three elder princesses sat watching him. Their embroidery lay abandoned on the table.

The wrinkly apothecary arrived first. As he seated himself, Beuwell, the king's thin, long-nosed counselor, and Sir Hector, the burly captain of the guard, walked up the stairs together. Kyen turned to the table as they approached and, seeing him, both their eyes grew wide.

"It is good to see you again, Kyen of Avanna." Hector bowed to him.

Kyen shifted and looked at his feet.

Beuwell dipped his head to Kyen before bowing to the princesses. "You summoned us, my ladies?"

"I did," said Princess Clarissa. She sat up a little straighter in her seat. All eyes turned to her. She met each of their gazes and grew red in the face. Lionora elbowed her.

"I—I—Kyen of Avanna wanted to address us."

"My lady." Kyen bowed to her; she blushed darker. Digging into his pocket, he drew out the bundle. He took a dart from the folds and placed it on the table. "Do you recognize this?"

All eyes in the room fastened on it.

Hector scowled.

Beuwell raised an eyebrow.

The apothecary sank in his chair and meshed his fingers over his chest.

"I found it in Finn's chambers," said Kyen. He drew out the second dart. "It's not the first that's turned up in Veleda."

The color drained from Hector's face.

"The Black War ended three years ago," said Beuwell. "It must be a fake."

"Father ordered all the black weapons locked up in a vault in Varkest, didn't he?" said Clarissa. "Under guard?"

"May I?" Hector asked.

Kyen stepped back so the captain could pick up a dart. Hector squinted as he peered at it, turning it this way and that.

"Finn isn't in his right mind," said Kyen. "I think we can all agree on that."

The princesses and Beuwell nodded.

Hector set the dart down and snatched his hand away as if bit. He rubbed his fingers. "It is a black weapon. After the Black War, I'd never forget. Never!"

"It's taken a hold of Finn," said Kyen.

"But who?" said Beuwell. "And for what purpose? These are the important questions."

"None of that matter if we can't get Finn back," said Elenora.

"How do we reverse it?" asked Lionora.

"There must be some way to reverse it." Clarissa wilted in her seat.

"King Veleda is in no fit state to rule," said Hector.

"Don't any of you see?" Beuwell's sharp voice silenced them all.

Kyen glanced up at him.

"The king and crown prince incapacitated. The princesses too young to rule. Veleda is stricken. This is no accident," said Beuwell.

"Are you saying Veleda is under attack?" asked Hector.

"The royal family, at the least." Beuwell turned to the princesses. "My ladies, if you will, may I suggest remaining indoors. Keep away from windows. Hector, check all staff and guards for welts."

Hector nodded.

"If we can restore Finn, he may be able to tell us more." Kyen looked to the apothecary. All eyes followed Kyen's gaze.

The apothecary stared at his meshed fingers on his chest.

"There's no herb nor poultice known in Valeda for this," he said. "The poisons of black weaponry are beyond mortal ability to heal."

"Then, Finn is—" Tears rose in Elenora's eyes.

"Lost?" Lionora finished for her.

Princess Clarissa looked at the tabletop. Tears stood out bright in her eyes.

"I'm going to Isea," said Kyen.

They all looked at him.

"The Kingdom of the Summoners?" said Hector.

"You mean the Kingdom of Nothing." Beuwell scratched his nose. "There's not been a summoner seen from Isea in ten years. The arcangels have gone silent."

"There may be a remnant of knowledge among them," said Kyen. "If anyone in Ellunon knows how to restore Finn, it would be the summoners of Isea."

Hector nodded, and Beuwell pursed his lips.

"Unless, the ladies need me here?" Kyen looked to the princesses.

Lionora and Elenora glanced to Clarissa. Tears glimmered in Clarissa's eyes. She swallowed hard and said, "If it means returning Finn to himself, then yes, please. Go, Kyen of Avanna."

* * *

"At least take a guard with you, Kyen of Avanna," said Hector.

Kyen stood with him and a couple guards underneath the portcullis of the first gatehouse. The Arc shed its last golden rays above the rooftops, touching the brow of Kyen's statue in the square. Kyen belted on a knife opposite the sword on his hip.

"Fiends and robbers keep the Great Highway closed between here and Isea," said Hector.

"I can slip by more easily alone," said Kyen. "I may need to cut across country. Any company would slow me down."

"Kyen of Avanna! Wait!" Beuwell ran up from over the drawbridge. The guards parted as he, huffing and puffing, stopped beside them. He handed Kyen a folded piece of parchment.

"Your emissary papers."

"Emissary?" Kyen blinked.

"The name of Veleda carries respect among the Kingdoms of Ellunon. Papers recognizing you as a Veleda emissary may speed you on your way," said Beuwell. "Princess Clarissa insisted, and every lady stepped forward to sign them."

"Thank you." Kyen accepted the papers and tucked them away in his pocket.

A breathy—*pahff!*—popped in the distance. In the same moment, a dark blot flashed past Kyen's face.

Kyen flinched backwards.

The guard next to Beuwell gave an awkward jerk.

A black dart stood out from his throat.

All emotion drained from the guard's face.

"Seize him!" yelled Hector.

Beuwell duck out of the way as Hector tried to wrest the spear and sword from the guard.

Whirling around, Kyen dashed out into the square. Except for his statue, the square stretched empty so close to arcdown.

A cry caught his attention.

Off to the left, a peasant woman threw up her hands. Turnips lay scattered from the basket at her feet. She shouted at a nearby alleyway. Around its corner, a flap of cloak disappeared.

Kyen dashed after it. The woman bent to gather her turnips, but Kyen leapt over her and sprinted into the alley. It twisted back and forth, hiding the fleeing figure in bands of shadows. He disappeared behind a sharp bend.

Coming around the corner, Kyen halted.

The alley branched away in three different directions. Down each lay a quiet, empty path half-shadowed in the failing light.

Pahff!

Another dark flash shot down from above. A black dart ricocheted off the cobblestones at Kyen's feet.

Kyen started backwards.

A cloaked figure stood on the roof above, his blowpipe aimed at Kyen.

Kyen ducked, dodged, and backed away as three more darts bounced off the ground around him. He hid behind the corner of the alley.

A last dart followed him; metal rang as it rebounded off the brick.

Kyen pressed himself against the wall. He let out a breath. Leaning around the corner, he peeked out.

Beneath the cloaked figure's feet, gnarled stems of an ancient grapevine had climbed up the brickwork towards stronger light.

The cloaked figure whirled around and disappeared.

Kyen crouched down. He bolted across the ally and grabbed hold of the vine. Hand over hand, he slung himself up and jumped onto the roof.

Kyen landed at a crouch, tense. He crept to the top of the house underfoot.

A rolling landscape of shallow roof peaks and pale clay shingles spread out in every direction. Not a shadow moved as the Arc's last gleam disappeared below the horizon.

Chapter 7

Adeya sighed. Her reflection gazed back at her with sad eyes.

The handmaiden patted at a crystal pin in Adeya's hair and smoothed her embroidered blue silk skirts one last time. Stepping back, the handmaiden looked with Adeya into the full-length mirror. She smiled at Adeya's reflection.

Adeya sighed again.

The door opened, and Queen Isea walked in. She shared Adeya's golden blonde tresses, but the years had faded them to a pale flax color. Her deep green evening gown swished as she stepped up next to Adeya.

"Ah, my dear daughter, so beautiful!"

Adeya tried to smile.

Queen Isea took Adeya by the hands. She spent several long moments admiring. A smile of pride and satisfaction never faltered from the queen's face.

Noticing Adeya's downcast eyes, Queen Isea said, "Are you anxious my dear?"

"No, mama."

"Let me tell you something." The queen squeezed Adeya's hands and stepped closer. "Prince Galveston has asked your father for our blessing. He's going to propose!" As the Queen's smile deepened, Adeya's mouth twitched.

"That's—wonderful."

"You have nothing to be anxious about." Queen Isea squeezed Adeya's hands. "All of our hopes for the kingdom are being realized. He may even propose to you tonight!"

Adeya smiled half-heartedly at the floor.

"You won't refuse him, will you, dear?" asked Queen Isea.

"No, mama."

"You've always been a good girl." The queen laid a kiss on Adeya's forehead.

"Can I... have a few minutes alone? To compose myself?" Adeya glanced at her handmaiden.

"Of course." The queen favored her with an understanding smile. With a parting squeeze of the hands, Queen Isea swept from the room, beckoning the handmaid to follow.

The door clicked shut.

Adeya drooped. She wandered to the glass doors overlooking a balcony and the palace grounds beyond. Resting her forehead against the cold glass, she stared at the manicured lawns, the white rose gardens, the broad fountains. The forest crowded the edge of the grounds, a black wall under gray twilight. At her neck, she fingered an aquamarine pendant the same color as her eyes.

Adeya blinked as her eyes grew watery.

A soft glow filled the jewel of the pendant. Adeya didn't notice at first, but then the glow strengthened to a shine. It lit up her face with blue light.

Adeya looked down and gasped.

"Can it—?" She threw open the balcony doors and hurried into the cool evening air.

Neither a soul nor creature moved on the palace grounds below. She leaned out, breathless, scanning the deepening shadows. Overhead the sky yawned as a lightless expanse darkening from gray to inky black.

A single spark flared up out of the forest, trailing a tail of light. Adeya's eyes followed it as it streaked across the sky. The spark arced overhead and disappeared into the mountains in the distance.

Adeya stared. Her eyes traveled from the dim prongs of the mountains back to the forest. Her hand rose and gripped her amulet.

A knock sounded inside Adeya's chambers.

"Milady? It's time."

"I'm coming." Adeya hurried from the balcony. She snatched up a brown cloak from her closet. "Just—just a moment more." Adeya plucked out the crystal pin and swept up her hair into a scarf. Running to the balcony, she paused at the threshold to call back. "I'm not quite yet composed!"

"As you wish, my lady," replied the handmaid, but Adeya never heard it.

Outside, she swung a leg over the railing. A mesh of thick, old vines ran up the wall next to her. She gripped these and, step by step, lowered herself to the ground.

In the failing twilight, no one noticed the cloaked damsel clutching a blue glow at her throat and disappearing into the shadows of the forest.

* * *

A smile of sharp teeth leered at Kyen from the signpost. Above it, red lines x-ed out "To Isea" on a board pointing into the forest. The words "Fiends!", "Danger!", "Highway Closed!" surrounded the mouth in red letters.

Kyen gazed past the sign down the highway.

A map hung slack in his hands. It displayed a dark patch labeled "The Deepwood," spanning from the southern lake of Nalayni, swallowing up the kingdom of Varkest, and swathing across Isea into the foothills of Denmont. One line, the Great Highway, split the continent north to south. It traveled up through Valeda and, entering the Deepwood, connected to Palace Isea before continuing north.

Giving himself a shake, Kyen stowed away the map unlooked-at. He passed the leering sign without a glance and entered the woods. A breeze, spicy with the scent of pine, stirred his bangs and sighed through the needled branches. Squat, dense conifers crowded the sides of the road. Their needles carpeted the hard-packed road in umber. An occasional rustle and flick of a bushy tail flitted through the trees as Kyen passed.

The Arc rose to its zenith, and the Great Highway wounded Kyen deepened into the evergreens. He dug a journey bread from the pack on his shoulder, gnawing on it as he walked. The soft sigh of the wind followed him. The angry chatter of a squirrel echoed through the woods.

Kyen wrenched at the tough end of his bread but couldn't pull the bite off.

A shrill scream cut in over the squirrel's chatter.

Kyen stopped.

"Help me! Somebody, please, help!"

Stuffing the bread in his mouth, Kyen drew his sword. He dashed down the road towards the cries.

"Help! Help!" The scream resounded from the woods.

Kyen, dropping his pack, sprinted into the trees.

Branches cracking, small shrieks, and the angry chatter escalated.

Kyen stopped at the base of a young pine, spindly in the shadow of its neighbor.

Halfway up its height, a young lady scrambled from branch to branch as if trying to escape the ground.

"What's wrong?" Kyen called up.

"It's chasing me!" She yelled back. A dead branch she grabbed broke. She cried out and seized the trunk to save her balance.

Kyen squinted into the branches below her.

A black, furry shape scampered around the trunk with a flick of its bushy tail.

Kyen lowered his sword. "It's just a squirrel."

"It's a fiend!"

The squirrel scurried around the other side of the trunk and chattered at Kyen.

Kyen's eyes grew wide.

Instead of a squirrel's face, an empty nub faced him. No button eyes, no cute nose, no buck teeth – only a hideous, spiky grin. It gnashed its sharp little teeth at Kyen and scrambled up after the damsel.

Kyen sheathed his sword and, running to the base of the neighboring tree, grabbed his dagger. He put the blade between his teeth and leapt into the tree. Hauling, pulling, ducking, weaving, jumping up through the branches, he raced the squirrel up the other trunk. The damsel struggled to out-climb them both.

"Don't let it touch you!" The damsel stopped at the top of her tree. Its trunk swayed and the young branches bowed under her weight.

The fiend rushed up underneath her.

She kicked at it.

The fiend gnashed its teeth and tried to bite her foot.

Kyen dashed out along a length of the branch. Towards the tip, it bent and swung under his weight. He slid off it into the damsel's tree and landed on the branch beside her.

The fiend circled the trunk and skittered up onto the branch next to them.

The damsel cried out.

Kyen grabbed the knife from his teeth and stabbed. The blade plunged through the fiend's body and thunked into the wood. The fiend screamed and wriggled, but the knife pinned it in place.

"Quickly!" Kyen held out his hand to the damsel. She grabbed it, and they slid down into the branches below.

"But—"

"Go!" Kyen ushered her down in front.

The damsel descended, her skirts snagging, and Kyen swung down behind her.

The fiend twisted back on itself. It sank its teeth into the knife handle. A dark venom began flowing over the leather.

Kyen clambered around the damsel, leapt to the branch below her, and handed her down.

The venom swallowed the knife. Its outline liquefied, and its shape dissolved into the fiend's body. As it disappeared, the fiend squirrel doubled in size. The next moment, its body popped free of the trunk.

The fiend snarled. It sped down the branches after them.

"Down! Down!" cried Kyen. "But don't step—"

The damsel slid onto a dead branch. It cracked.

Kyen snatched her back as the dead limb broke away, but he overbalanced. He grabbed for the trunk. His hand slipped, and he tumbled over backwards, crashing through the remaining branches. Kyen hit the ground back first with a thump, pine needles raining down around him.

"Oh!" The damsel covered her mouth. She glanced up.

The fiend scrambled onto the branch over her head.

She hopped off her branch to dangle from her arms. She let go. The force of the drop knocked her to all fours.

Kyen, groaning, rubbed his head.

The damsel scuttled up next to him. "Are you alright?"

"Get back!" He bolted up and shoved her aside.

The fiend launched from overhead.

Kyen drew his sword with a slash. His blade slit the fiend midair and flung it to the ground. Its back half disintegrated into smoke. The front half landed, rolled, clawed in the pine needles. It shrieked.

Kyen with his sword upraised stepped between the fiend and the damsel. They watched the fiend sink its teeth into the ground. The venom spread over the soil. The fiend's back half regrew, and its muscles bunched larger as the fiend ingested the ground.

"How do you stop it?" cried the damsel.

"You don't." Kyen backed away, pushing her behind him.

The fiend lifted its spiky grin towards them. It stalked forward then darted for Kyen's feet.

He kicked it.

The fiend tumbled through the pine needles. It righted itself and launched at Kyen again.

The damsel seized a dead branch lying at the foot of the tree. She hefted it up over her head.

Kyen flicked out with his blade, slicing the fiend's front legs out from under it.

The damsel slung the branch down. It squashed the fiend with a thump. The brown needles quivered and snarled from the fiend clawing underneath.

Kyen stared.

"Run!" The damsel, gathering her skirts, grabbed Kyen's hand. He lurched after her, and, together, they fled into the trees. The fiend's shrieks resounded behind them.

"Road's this way!" Kyen pulled their course aside as they dashed and wove their way through the pines. Breaking out onto the road, Kyen paused only to snatch up his pack. "Don't stop!"

The damsel pelted down the road with Kyen close on her heels.

Chapter 8

Gasping for breath, the damsel slowed to a stop. She staggered up to a tree trunk and collapsed against it, clutching her side. Kyen slowed to a stop next to her. They both looked back.

The pines threw thick shadows in the failing light, casting long swatches of darkness over the winding road. A hush throughout the wood heralded the coming night.

"Thank you—for saving me," said the damsel between breaths.

"Hm?" said Kyen, not looking at her.

"I said thank you." She straightened, still holding her side.

"You're welcome." After another moment, he faced her.

The damsel wore a brown cloak and a scarf over her hair. Flowers, embroidered on blue silk, peeked out between the folds of the cloak, and locks of golden hair escaped from underneath the scarf. Soft, delicate shoes suited to dancing, not walking, poked out from beneath the hem of her skirt. She carried neither pack nor knife.

"Are you out here by yourself?" Kyen asked.

At the question, she blushed. "No—I mean, yes. I'm looking for something. When I—when I—ran into the fiend. Who are you?" She leaned forward, her aquamarine eyes suddenly intense, staring at him.

Kyen flushed a little. Looking away, he flipped his blade underhand and sheathed it. "Eh... Just a traveler. Nobody in particular."

"Do you have a name, traveler?" She took a step closer, clutching the amulet on her neck.

"My name can't be significant to the likes of a fine lady like yourself. Come." He started walking. "Let me take you home."

"No!"

Kyen stared back at her in surprise.

"I mean." She cleared her throat, brushed out her skirt, and folded her hands. "No, thank you. I can't go home. Not—not until I find what I'm looking for."

"The Deepwood is dangerous, especially after nightfall, which is coming on soon," said Kyen. "Surely, there's a better time to search?"

"It's very important I find what I'm looking for," said the damsel. "As soon as possible. I don't have any time to waste."

"What are you looking for?"

At this, the damsel's face fell. She fingered the amulet at her neck as she answered. "It's a secret. I can't tell you."

"Oh."

"But it's very important!" She cried. "I must find—what I'm looking for. I can't return without it. I just can't."

"I don't believe you've mentioned your name yet, my lady?"

The damsel cast him an arch look. She lifted her nose in the air. "My name can't be significant to the likes of a noble warrior like yourself."

Kyen opened his mouth. No sound came out.

A smile sparkled in her aquamarine eyes.

After taking a moment to find his voice, Kyen said, "It'd be against my honor to leave you alone and unprotected. There are fiends bigger, hungrier in these woods."

"I'll be fine," she said. "I've been in the Deepwood many times."

"Ah..." Kyen said, casting a dubious glance at her choice in footwear.

"You may go on your business." She punctuated her sentence with a graceful flick of the hand.

"Eh—"

She tramped away down the road as Kyen opened his mouth. He stared after her for a long moment. Then, with a shake of his head and a sigh, he started after her.

"What is it you've lost? A brooch? A glove? How am I supposed to help you find something if you don't tell me what it is?"

Again, her manner sank. "You'll laugh."

"No, I won't. I'm always losing things."

"It's not like that," said the damsel. "And why are you following me? I thought I dismissed you."

"I'm not following you. I'm traveling this way anyway."

"You're going to Isea?" Again, her eyes lit up. Her stare intensified.

"Yes." Kyen shifted his feet. "I'm an emissary from Veleda. I need to see King Isea."

"Oh." Disappointment clouded her face. "You're just an emissary?"

"Yes."

"Nothing more?"

"Nope."

The damsel heaved a deep sigh and said no more.

They walked together down the road in silence. The sky above the pine tops darkened. The Arc sunk behind the forest. A gray and purple dusk set in around them.

The damsel shivered and pulled her cloak closer around her.

An eerie wail rose in the distance, echoing in the twilight. They both paused and looked into the dim forest.

The damsel's eyes grew wide. "Another fiend!"

"A bigger one," said Kyen.

The damsel clutched at the amulet at her neck.

"It's far off yet," said Kyen. "I'm hoping we'll reach the road-post before deep night sets in. You'll be safe there."

She edged closer to Kyen, walking at his side.

"Emissaries from Veleda usually come on horseback. And with guards. You must be someone important—more than an emissary," she said. "Why won't you tell me your name?"

"Look. Up ahead." Kyen quickened his step.

A light winked in the deepening darkness. As they rounded a bend in the road, the source of the light emerged. A lantern flickered out the window of a tall, wooden tower standing beside the road.

"We can stay the night with the road-post guards," said Kyen. "It'll be far safer than sleeping in the open. Come."

The damsel hesitated, biting her lip.

Another eerie wail ascended into the night, closer this time.

She jumped and hurried after Kyen. Tugging the edge of her cloak down to hide her dress, she followed him up to the door.

Kyen knocked.

A road-post guard in gray surcoat with the emblem of Isea—six white wings spread in a circle—opened the door. Two other guards sitting at the table peered at them.

"My lady needs lodgings for the night." Kyen stepped out of the doorway. Taking the damsel's hand, he ushered her inside.

The guards' eyes grew wide.

"Princess Adeya!" All three exclaimed at once. The two guards at the table leapt from their seats to bow while the other fumbled with his helm and tugged his surcoat straight.

"How in Ellunon have you come to be out here in the wilds?"

"We had word from your father this morning that you'd gone missing."

"We will return you to the palace first thing in the morning."

"The king and queen will be so relieved! You must take the horse to lose no time in your return."

Adeya smiled as the guards scrambled to set up a seat by the fire with food and drink for her. She glanced back at Kyen, but the spot where he'd been stood empty. She leaned out the door frame. As she looked up and down the road, her smile faded.

The road under the last of the twilight stretched away empty in either direction.

Adeya stroked the jewel at her neck. "Just a traveler, are you?"

Chapter 9

Under a late afternoon Arc, Kyen wandered out of the woods. A rip marred his cloak, dead pine needles stuck in his hair, and mud stains reached up to his knees. Ahead, the trees stood back for the gateway to Palace Isea.

Two white statues, their features hidden beneath curled wings, welcomed Kyen to the palace grounds. From them sprung a low wall that encircled sprawling lawns, statuesque fountains, gardens of white roses, and winding gravel paths. The broadest path ended in a loop before the double doors to the palace. Backed by snow-capped mountains, Palace Isea gleamed under the arclight. A massive dome of seamless rock dominated an east wing and a west wing at its sides. Groups of little towers clustered at the corners or about the grounds between the walks.

Kyen walked to the foot of the double doors. The pinesingers warbled into the distance as he mounted the steps. The many dark windows reflected the failing light.

Kyen looked at the knocker: circled wings wrought in heavy metal. He clunked the wings against the door.

The three knocks boomed beyond.

Kyen waited.

A pinesinger landed on the steps.

He looked at it.

The pinesinger cocked its head and eyed him back.

Kyen reached for the knocker again when a clack sounded from within.

The door creaked open.

The pinesinger winged away.

An old doorman wearing Isea livery appeared. The hairs of his long, thick eyebrows sagged over his eyes. A last wisp curled up from his otherwise bald head. When he spoke, his voice sounded gravelly with age.

"A visitor?" His eyebrows rose.

"I'm here to see the king," said Kyen, taking his papers from his pack. He presented them.

The doorman took out a monocle and squinted. "Oh, an emissary. And from Veleda! Please come in." The old doorman shuffled aside.

Kyen's boots left prints in the dust as he stepped into the entrance hall. White sheets shrouded the chairs and side tables. The doorman took up a small lantern with ornately worked shades; it gave off the only light in the dim hall.

As he shut and locked the door, the doorman said, "His majesty, King Isea, is currently engaged for the evening. May I show you to one of the guest towers?"

"My errand is serious," said Kyen. "Is there any way I may have an audience tonight? I will be brief."

"Perhaps, as you are an emissary... Come with me and we shall ask him." The doorman squinted at Kyen's face. "What name shall I give him?"

"Kyen of Avanna."

The doorman's eyebrows rose further. "Well, I'll be... Ah, this way. This way."

He led Kyen into the passages of the palace: dark, cold corridors empty but for white draped furniture and years of dust.

"Please forgive the state of things," said the doorman, shuffling along. "The royal family keeps to the west wing anymore, and we never use the main entrance. You're fortunate King Isea had an errand for me in the main halls, or you'd have stood out there into the night. This way."

The doorman exited onto the lawn through a pair of glass doors. Together, they crunched up a gravel path into one of the gardens.

A pavilion awaited outside. White and green paper lanterns glowed in the twilight; they illuminated chairs and tables decorated in white roses. A cook hovered over a banquet table. Voices, punctuated by the occasional laughter, droned from the small party gathered inside the pavilion. Ladies in white dresses and hats with tall feathers chatted amongst themselves. Grayed men in dark velvet coats drank and gestured with amber glasses.

Kyen slowed.

A footman stood in attendance at the steps, and the doorman shuffled up to meet him.

At the back of the pavilion, King and Queen Isea sat on thrones wreathed in white roses. Beside them, dressed in white with a delicate diadem on her hair, stood the damsel from the woods. A man in a green velvet cape attended her side.

"Actually. No. Wait." Kyen stopped. "Maybe, I won't—"

The doorman finished speaking to the footman.

The footman thumped his spear on the pavilion. His voice boomed above the hubbub of the crowd, announcing:

"Kyen of Avanna!"

The noise of conversation died.

Every face in the pavilion turned towards Kyen. King and Queen Isea stared. The gentlemen and ladies surrounding them also stared: some with eyes wide; some with brows furrowed; some with forks or drink forgotten halfway to their mouths. The man in the green cape frowned. The damsel's mouth hung open as she gaped. Her hand rose to the pendant at her neck.

Somewhere, the pinesinger warbled.

Kyen, looking like he swallowed a beetle, stared back at them.

"I, uh... I..." Kyen's voice gave out. He stood as if frozen.

"Come forward, Kyen of Avanna," said King Isea.

Kyen lowered his head. As he stepped into the pavilion, the gentlemen and ladies parted around him. His mud-stained boots, torn cloak, and coarse tunic stood in sharp contrast to the rich coats and lacy dresses surrounding him.

Whispers rose to fill the silence.

"It can't be."

"I thought he died in the Black War."

"Of Avanna? But Avanna is gone."

"Is it really him?"

"He has the Avanna countenance. I'm sure of it."

"Look at his hem! You'd think he could dress better."

"Could he really be alive?"

"I can't believe it!"

Every eye tracked his slow steps as he approached the thrones. King Isea, a thin man with pale hair combed back beneath his crown, rose when Kyen stopped before him.

"Many apologies, your majesty." Kyen bowed low. "I—I should have waited for your audience at another time."

"You are always welcome at Palace Isea, Kyen of Avanna," said King Isea. "Your business must be urgent?"

"Yes, but one morning's wait will do no harm. I don't wish to disturb your banquet."

Adeya fixed Kyen with her aquamarine gaze, bright and searching, but Kyen avoided her eye.

"Very well," said King Isea. "Sergueo?"

"Yes, sire?" The old doorman came forward.

"Will you see the best guest tower is prepared for Kyen of Avanna?"

"Yes, sire."

"You are welcome at my table, if you wish, Kyen of Avanna." King Isea opened his hand to the banquet table. "Will you join us?"

"I'm grateful, your majesty, but I must decline. It's been a long journey."

"Indeed, no doubt you're weary. Take your rest. Refresh yourself. We will speak in the morning."

"Thank you, your majesty." Kyen bowed again. He turned and followed Sergueo out of the pavilion. He kept his head down and looked at no one as he passed through the party.

Adeya watched as he departed. The party reanimated around her. Her eyes followed his back until he disappeared with Sergueo into the palace.

Under her breath, she said to herself, "Kyen of Avanna."

Chapter 10

Adeya crouched in the bushes at the base of the tower. A pinesinger alighted on the branch next to her. It eyed her. Adeya put a finger to her lips. The door to the tower cracked open, and the pinesinger darted away.

Kyen stepped out. Bathed and in fresh clothes, he swung a new cloak around his shoulders as he started off toward the palace.

"Kyen of Avanna!"

Kyen flinched. His hand flashed to his sword hilt.

Adeya popped out of the bushes. A branch snagged the hem of her cream walking dress. She tsk-tsked and bent to free her skirt while Kyen stared. Righting herself, Adeya pushed her golden hair out of her face and fixed him with her bright aquamarine eyes.

Kyen flushed. His unclasped cloak slipped from his shoulders, and he grabbed at it to pull it back.

"Good... good morning?"

"Are you really Kyen of Avanna?" Adeya's hand rose to the pendant at her neck.

"Y-yes, eh... excuse me." Kyen turned away, working the clasp of his cloak.

Adeya capered into his way. "I heard Kyen of Avanna died in the Black War."

Kyen's face screwed up as he struggled with the clasp. "Why is this thing so difficult?"

"On the battlefield, it's said Illeth of Norgard and Kyen of Avanna struck each other down at the same time."

"I was a little faster, I guess." Still intent on the difficult clasp, Kyen shifted to go around Adeya.

"But she wounded you." Adeya blocked him. "Mortally. All the tales say so."

The clasp clicked.

"Ha! Got it."

"How did you survive her black weapon?"

Kyen shifted inside his cloak trying to get the folds settled. "Please, I have an audience with the king. I don't want to keep him waiting." Kyen tried to move again, but Adeya barred his way. He feinted to one side and, as Adeya moved, Kyen darted by on the other. He hurried away down the path.

"You're a summoner," she said. "Aren't you."

Kyen stopped.

"No, I'm not, my lady."

"But you are," she said, her hand clutching her amulet again. "I know you are."

"No," said Kyen. "I'm not, my lady. Please, believe me. If you'll excuse me, my lady, I must see the king." He kept walking.

Adeya's smile fell. She watched him cross the lawn. She lifted the amulet from her neck and looked at it. The aquamarine gleamed under the arclight as if lit from the inside.

Gripping it, she looked back up at Kyen with a determined light in her eyes. She followed him as he entered the palace.

* * *

Kyen waited as Sergueo opened the door to the king's study. At a nod from the doorman, Kyen stepped inside.

Bookshelves lined both walls of the long room. At the far end, a fireplace warmed two high-backed armchairs. King Isea sat at a parchment-littered desk facing the door. Light poured over his back through a casement window opened to the morning. An amber glass and decanter waited at hand beside an inkwell and a penknife.

"Welcome, Kyen of Avanna." King Isea glanced up. "Have a seat."

"Thank you," said Kyen.

"May I offer you a drink?" The king nodded to the decanter then picked up his own glass.

"No, thank you." Kyen, careful of his longsword, lowered himself into the chair opposite the king.

King Isea sipped from his glass and returned his attention to his papers. As he scribbled, he said, "What brings the great Kyen of Avanna to Isea?"

"Your Majesty, I need the counsel of the summoners."

King Isea's quill paused. He shook his head and bent closer to his paper. "Summoners haven't walked in Isea—or all the rest of Ellunon—for almost ten years."

"Prince Finn of Valeda has fallen to a black weapon," said Kyen. "It's taken hold of his mind and is controlling him."

King Isea's quill halted for a moment but then scrawled on. "Surely you're mistaken. Does not King Valeda keep those all vaulted away in Varkest?"

"I've seen black weapons before. I'm not mistaken."

"Then, it's unfortunate. Prince Finn is beyond all of our aid."

"Didn't the arcangels teach the summoners of Isea skill in healing?" asked Kyen.

"Indeed, but the arcangels are silent. Our power is departed," said King Isea. "We are reduced to herbalists and apothecaries such as can be found even on the street corners of Valeda."

"Finn will become a fiend if the grip of the black weapon isn't loosed," said Kyen. "There must be something, your majesty."

King Isea set down his quill. He gave Kyen a long, weary look. "Black weapons release ethereal dominions that do not yield to herb, bed rest, or tincture. Only arcangels can bestow the power to reverse a black wound. But none attend our call. And the few summoners left are forgetting how, lost as we are in the degradation of common mortals. You have my condolences. You really do."

Kyen said nothing.

"I've already given you more time than I can spare," said the king. "I am sorry, Kyen of Avanna."

"Thank you, your majesty." Kyen bowed his head and rose.

King Isea took up his quill and returned to his papers.

Kyen left the king's study. Stepping into the corridor, Kyen shut the door behind him. He breathed a heavy sigh and stared out the window at the manicured grounds.

"I can help you."

Kyen jumped, his hand flinching towards his sword.

Adeya stood, hands clasped behind her back, smiling sweetly.

Kyen let his breath out. His grip on his hilt relaxed.

Adeya lowered her voice and stepped nearer. "I overheard you and papa talking. You need the help of the summoners?"

"Yes." Kyen eyed her, leaning away.

"Come with me." Adeya spun a graceful twirl on her heel and bobbed down the corridor.

Kyen hesitated.

"Come." She beckoned with her hand before disappearing around the corner.

Kyen plucked himself up and followed her.

"I will help you," Adeya said when he caught up with her. "But first, mother has invited you to lunch."

"Lunch?"

* * *

On a single table, cucumber sandwiches, fizzy cordial, and fresh apricots laid out on the pavilion. The garlands of flowers and paper lanterns from the evening party hung overhead. Bright noon arclight and cool, pine-scented air wafted in from the grounds.

Queen Isea waited beside the table when Kyen and Adeya stepped into the pavilion. Near the railing, the man in the green cape overlooked the lawns with a hand behind his back. When Adeya saw him, her smile faded.

"Welcome, Kyen of Avanna." Queen Isea extended her hands.

Kyen accepted them, bowed deeply over them. "Thank you, your majesty."

"You honor us with your presence today," said the Queen. "Visitors are a treat these days. Will you eat with us?"

"With pleasure, your majesty."

The caped man turned at the sound of their voices and moved to the queen's side. He stood a little shorter than Kyen but more broadly built and grayed. The deep green cape, pinned to a shoulder with an obsidian brooch, swept around the hilt of a one-handed arming sword at his side. He surveyed Kyen with a keen intelligence. His face, though lined and serious, softened when he smiled.

"May I present," said the queen, "Prince Galveston of Eope."

Prince Galveston bowed his head, and Kyen returned the gesture.

"Years ago we obliged a constant stream of guests. Now we make every excuse to honor those who do come, such as Galveston and yourself. You saw the little gathering last night we gave for Galveston," said the queen. "It'd been planned for the previous night but, ah, was delayed. Unfortunately." Queen Isea looked at Adeya.

Adeya lowered her eyes.

"We meet again, Kyen of Avanna, though I doubt you remember me," said Galveston. "We fought on the side of the Great Alliance during the Black Wars."

"We did?" Kyen fidgeted and reddened. "I don't remember any of the Princes of Eope being there. You'll have to forgive me. My memory is terrible."

"We all bear our scars, don't we?" Galveston lifted his arm from beneath his cape. He wore a gauntlet—a metal plate to protect his forearm—but it ended in a stump instead of a hand. "You'll forgive me for not shaking your hand?"

"Of course."

Prince Galveston, hiding his stump again beneath his cape, turned his attention to Adeya.

"You are lovely as ever today, princess." Galveston took her hand and kissed the back of it.

Adeya smiled with an obvious effort. "Thank you."

"Shall we eat?" Queen Isea motioned to the table.

Galveston looped Adeya's arm in his own and escorted her the short distance to the table. "You disappeared so suddenly last night, princess. I was disappointed not to have more of your company."

"I, uh, didn't feel well. Thank you for excusing me," said Adeya.

Galveston handed her into her seat. He then helped the queen into her chair before seating himself next to Adeya. Kyen took the place opposite them beside the queen.

When she extended a platter toward him, Kyen piled a dozen of the dainty sandwiches on his plate.

Queen Isea cast him a dismayed look as she took one sandwich before handing the platter to Adeya.

Kyen popped a sandwich into his mouth whole.

The queen, shaking her head, cut a little bit off hers with a fork and knife.

While Kyen chewed, Prince Galveston talked.

"Princess Adeya," he said. "Would you honor me with your company on a walk after lunch?"

Adeya made a tiny strangled noise. She coughed.

Prince Galveston poured her a glass of cordial and handed it to her.

After a long draught, Adeya set the goblet down carefully. "Th-thank you, Prince Galveston, but I'm afraid I'm already retained. Kyen of Avanna has asked for a tour of Palace Isea."

Kyen stopped chewing and stared, bafflement plain on his face.

"My dear," said Queen Isea. "Surely Kyen of Avanna would happily concede. You could give him the tour later." Her voice sounded tight with apprehension.

"It's a matter of some importance to Kyen of Avanna to see the palace. It cannot be postponed. He is an emissary of Veleda." Adeya turned to Kyen. They stared at one another for a long moment. A desperate plea glimmered in her eyes.

Kyen swallowed. "Forgive me. Yes. It can't wait."

"Ah," said Queen Isea.

"It's no matter, madam," Prince Galveston said to the queen. "When Kyen's inquiries have been settled, perhaps after. Why not I join you both on the tour instead?" He smiled on Adeya.

"Oh. Yes... why not?" Adeya stuck a bite in her mouth.

"Very well." Queen Isea sighed.

Adeya cast a grateful look on Kyen, but he was busy eating his sandwiches.

* * *

Kyen gazed dubiously up at the dome. He stood with Adeya in a courtyard between the palace's two wings. Adeya wrestled with a lock on the heavy double doors to the dome. The thick wrought of the lock mirrored the deeply carved doors, both fashioned like six wings spread in a circle. The Arc, setting in the trees, cast the pale, seamless dome above in an orange hew. The pinesingers warbled from the rose gardens behind them.

"Are you sure this will help Finn?" Kyen asked.

"I meant to bring you here all along, and I would have if Galveston hadn't joined us!" Adeya cried. "Instead, I had to spend my whole afternoon actually giving you both a tour. I don't know what I would have done if papa hadn't called him away. Foreigners aren't allowed in here, and I couldn't—ah!"

The lock clunked.

Adeya pulled hard at the handle. The thick door swung open with a slow squeak. Pale, white light streamed out the opening as it widened. She gave Kyen a smile before walking inside.

Kyen followed but stopped mid-step on the threshold.

A massive orb shone underneath the vault of the dome. It could have swallowed the whole gatehouse of Castle Veleda, yet it levitated as if weightless in the air over Adeya's head. Flank by four pillars of seamless stone, the orb radiated a white mist. Its light filled the dome, cast every nook and cranny in stark relief, and threw sharp, black shadows behind Kyen and Adeya.

Adeya walked up to the orb, the bright mists wafting over her golden hair, and smiled back at Kyen.

Kyen stepped forward. A gentle hum from the orb vibrated the tiles underneath his boots.

"This is the Nadir," said Adeya, "The seat of the arcangel's power."

Kyen lifted his face, his mouth hanging open.

"My nana said the arcangels would rest in the air here as thick as fireflies," said Adeya.

"They drew their strength from the Nadir. With its aura, they could heal all but death when summoned."

Kyen said nothing. A faraway look came over his face as the Nadir's light reflected in his stormy eyes.

Moment after moment stretched on.

Adeya watched his face intently.

Kyen gave his head a little shake then looked at Adeya. "The king said the arcangels are silent. How will the Nadir help Finn if the summoners can't use its power?"

Adeya stared at him. The faintest hint of a smile played in her eyes.

"I'm not a summoner," said Kyen.

"If you were, you could help Finn," said Adeya. "Summon the arcangels. With the Nadir's aura, any arcangel could heal your friend."

"I'm not a summoner. I'm really, really not." Kyen rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm just a swordsman."

"Sure, I believe you." The smile in her eyes began to touch her face. She looked away to the Nadir and bobbed on her heels.

"If I had the power to help Finn, I would have done it already," said Kyen, becoming grim.

Adeya started. The happy light faded from her eyes. "I suppose you're right. Forgive me."

Turning away, she walked slowly towards the exit. Kyen gave the Nadir one last troubled look then turned to follow her. They both entered the cool night. The light from the Nadir cast a long glow over the path through the open doorway.

Kyen moved to close the door behind them, but Adeya stopped him. She stepped right up into his face, her eyes bright, grasping her amulet with both hands.

"You must take me with you!"

"What?" Kyen flushed and stepped away.

"There is one last summoner," Adeya said. "There is, but he lives in secret, in hiding. Papa doesn't even know about him. But I do. I'll take you to him if you take me with you."

"Uh..."

"Please? Please, take me with you! I can help you," said Adeya.

Kyen moved again to shut the door. "I don't think—"

A low "Pahff!" sound cut him off.

Kyen jerked and grimaced.

Adeya gasped.

A black dart protruded from the side of Kyen's neck.

Chapter 11

Still grimacing, Kyen jerked the dart out of his neck and cast it to the ground. The metal dart tinkled across the gravel.

"Get back!" Kyen drew his sword; he stepped in front of Adeya as another pahff sounded from the grounds.

A dart pummeled Kyen in the shoulder.

Adeya cried out, covering her mouth, eyes wide.

"Inside!" yelled Kyen.

She whirled around and dove through the doorway.

Ripping the dart from his shoulder, Kyen stood with his sword upraised. His eyes searched the palace grounds.

In the failing twilight, the shrubs and fountains cast long, deep shadows over the lawn. A shadow shifted. A figure rose from the cover of a couple bushes. He hunched, cloaked and hooded, with a blowpipe the size of a walking staff in hand.

Kyen charged him.

Swinging up the blowpipe, the hooded man fired a shot, then another, and another.

Darts struck Kyen in the side, in the arm. The third flew wide. None stopped him.

The hooded man backed away as Kyen reached him.

Kyen launched two quick slashes at him.

The hooded man ducked, dodged sideways, and fled.

Kyen chased after him.

They sprinted across the grounds in and out of the shadows. The hooded man ran for the low wall and, beyond, the forest; Kyen gained ground on him. The figure glanced back. He whirled on Kyen as Kyen lashed out. Wielding his blowpipe like a staff, the hooded man knocked Kyen's sword aside.

Kyen staggered off balance.

Whipping the pipe back, the hooded man swung out at Kyen's head. A resounding crack rang through the grounds as it caught Kyen in the side of the face and snapped in half.

Kyen staggered to the ground, catching himself on his hands

The splintered half of the blowpipe landed in the grass in front of him.

The hooded man whirled and fled.

Kyen shoved himself back to his feet. He tottered. Blinking and squinting, Kyen watched as the hooded man vaulted the low wall and disappeared into the woods.

A rivulet of blood escaped Kyen's hairline and ran down from his temple.

"Ow." Kyen touched his head. He turned back towards the dome, weaving back and forth up the path. He grabbed the dart in his arm, but the other dart stuck in his side unnoticed. His feet crunched on gravel as he neared the empty doorway to the Nadir.

"He's gone," said Kyen.

Adeya peeped out. One hand clutched her amulet.

"Oh, you're hurt!"

"I'm alright." Kyen checked his hand, his fingers bloody. The red rivulet dripped off his chin. "Come on. You'll be safer in the palace."

Kyen ushered her onto the path.

"Here. At least—" Adeya took out a handkerchief. "Hold that to your head."

"Thank you. Hurry."

Together, they strode off down the path to the west wing. Kyen kept himself between the princess and the darkening grounds beyond. His hard gray eyes never stopped searching the shadows. He kept his sword drawn in one hand while he pressed the handkerchief to his temple with the other. As they walked, Adeya's eyes found the dart still sticking out of his side.

"A blowpipe? Why..." Her eyes widened in alarm. "Poison! You need to go to the infirmary!"

"It's not poison."

"Then, why ..."

Kyen followed her stare, noticed the dart in his side, and yanked it out. He cast it away. Adeya watched it hit the grass.

"This is the black weapon you told papa about, isn't it? But why haven't you—"

"I'm alright." Kyen paused to open one of the main doors to the palace.

Adeya stared at the red mark on his neck.

"My lady, if you please."

Adeya entered; Kyen shut the door behind them. The thin twilight dwindled in the thick darkness of the entrance hall. He hurried her into an empty corridor.

"He's followed me here," said Kyen. "You and your family are in great danger, princess."

"But why didn't the dart—"

"Listen to me," said Kyen. "Run to your chambers, bar the doors, stay away from the windows till morning. And don't go outside. For anything."

"I will," said Adeya.

"I'm going to see your father. To warn him."

Adeya nodded, her face pale in the dimness.

"Hurry now, my lady."

Adeya gathered up her skirts and dashed away up a flight of stairs.

Kyen sheathed his sword and strode down the corridor towards the king's study. He pushed open the door without knocking. Coals glowed orange in the fireplace. King Isea still sat at his desk with his papers fluttering around him. A breeze issued through the open window at his back.

"Forgive me, King Isea, but—"

King Isea stared at him with empty eyes and a blank expression. He sat, hands folded, as still as a statue.

Kyen tensed.

The sound of footsteps behind him made him turn.

Queen Isea entered with Sergueo and the footman. Black welts stood out on their necks. All three wore the same expression as the king: empty-eyed, blank-faced.

"Welcome, Kyen of Avanna," said all four, simultaneously. "To my kingdom. I am the Kingmaster."

Chapter 12

"Don't be concerned for your life." The four spoke as one. "Not yet. I've wanted to speak with you."

"Then speak," said Kyen.

"You and I are allies in the same cause, Kyen of Avanna. We shouldn't be fighting one another."

"I'm not in the habit of manipulating and hurting good people."

"Good?" All four voices laughed. Then, the king alone spoke, "You think me good?"

"And I?" added Queen Isea.

"You know nothing." The king and queen spoke together.

All four spoke as one again. "I have no pangs of conscience, Kyen of Avanna, about using 'good people' to right wrongs. Are we not both in the business of righting wrongs?"

"I'm afraid I'm still missing what we have in common," said Kyen.

"The legendary Kyen of Avanna. Hero of the Black War. Victor over the terrible Illeth of Norgard. Peacebringer to the Kingdoms of Ellunon. Tell me, Kyen of Avanna, where has that gotten you?"

Kyen didn't answer.

"Renown," said the voices. "And poverty. How many of your friends and allies know you are a penniless, homeless wanderer? Surviving off charity where you can find it? Is this how the royal families of Ellunon repay your feats of valor? They owe you their lives, their children, their kingdoms. And they leave you destitute. Is that gratitude?"

"I have some doubts about your idea of gratitude." Kyen thumbed the pommel of his sword.

"Leave behind your life as a destitute wanderer. You shall have riches for poverty, comforts instead of suffering, a home, even a family, if you so wish. Will you not join me in reclaiming what is our rightful reward?"

"No. Thanks," said Kyen.

The four breathed a single sigh. "Then will you not step aside and let me have my justice unimpeded? We need not be enemies."

"For as long as you threaten my friends, you are already my adversary," said Kyen.

"Very well."

King Isea rose with a short sword scabbarded in his hand. The king unsheathed it, Sergueo and the footman pulled arming swords from their sides, and the queen drew free a hidden dagger.

Kyen grabbed the chair and slung it behind him. The queen and the footman fell over as the chair slid into their knees. Kyen lunged around the desk, but the king slashed out, driving him back. King Isea encroached on Kyen; his sword-point blocked the path to the open window. Sergueo joined the king's side while the queen and the footman shoved the chair out of the way.

The four backed Kyen down the room towards the corner. The glow of the coals lit their faces in eerie orange. Kyen kept a hand on his hilt but didn't draw. He backed into one of the armchairs but shoved it away.

Queen Isea, Sergueo, and the footman charged Kyen from three sides at once, stabbing or slashing. Kyen half-drew his sword. Using its blade, he deflected the queen's thrust—her dagger thudded into the books at his side—and the footman's—the sword slammed into the books above his shoulder—and he scrunched his body around a slash from Sergueo. Books tumbled to the ground as the blade lodge in the shelf.

Surprise flashed across all three faces.

Bent and crowded by the three, Kyen grabbed Sergueo's wrist.

The queen and the footman jerked their blades free.

Kyen wrenched Sergueo's arm backwards. Sergueo's body arched, and Kyen slung him into the queen, knocking her sideways. The footman stabbed at Kyen, but Kyen, keeping hold of Sergueo, ducked the sword and dove out the opening the queen had left. Kyen whipped Sergueo backwards into the footman. Both crashed into the shelves and slid to the floor.

Kyen, running for King Isea, unsheathed his sword. He slashed out at the king; his longsword clipped the armchair as it swung. King Isea deflected Kyen's blade off to the side and thrust. Kyen jumped backwards and returned with thrust. His sword plunged into a bookshelf as the king sidestepped. Books cascaded to the floor as Kyen whipped his blade around to block the king's slash.

Behind them, Queen Isea and the footman rose back to their feet. Sergueo climbed to his hands and knees while Kyen and the king locked blades. He dove, grabbing Kyen around the knees. Kyen toppled backwards, landing on Sergueo's back. Kyen tried to roll away but the footman tackled him. Sergueo clung to his arm, clawed to get a hold of Kyen's sword. Queen Isea gripped the dagger with both hands and stabbed at his head.

Kyen grabbed her wrist before the blade plunged into his eye.

King Isea neared, raising his sword.

Behind him, a green mass flew through the open window. Galveston, bare blade in hand, landed on the floor with a thump. He lunged at the king with a flash of steel.

Kyen wrenched the queen's wrist; she dropped the dagger with a cry. He smacked Sergueo in the face with his hilt. Jerking his arm back, he elbowed the footman in the nose. They both released him.

"Kyen! The window!" yelled Galveston, as his sword clashed against the king's.

Kyen rolled to his feet. He ran for the window while Galveston disarmed the king and shoved him back. The king stumbled backwards over the footman.

Kyen dove out the open window.

With a parting kick to the king, Galveston jumped out behind him.

The two swordsmen landed together on the grass.

"This way!" Galveston bolted onto the lawn.

"But Princess—"

"I've helped her escape the palace already," said he. "Quickly!"

Kyen and Galveston sprinted across the grounds. A couple other guards ran to intercept them. Kyen easily outstripped them. They caught up with Galveston, but a deft slash and kick to the guts dispatched them.

Together, Kyen and Galveston leapt the wall and ran pell-mell towards the trees. As they reached the border of the forest, Adeya emerged from the shadows of a young pine to meet them. She held a shaded lantern that threw a mild glow at her feet. Galveston and Kyen slowed to stop as they met her.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"No, princess." Galveston huffed.

Kyen shook his head and slumped against his knees to regain his breath.

Adeya stood in silence, but even before a moment passed, Galveston reached to take her elbow.

"We must leave this place, princess. They may give us chase." Galveston drew her into the forest. Kyen straightened and plodded after them.

The trees, dark crouching giants in the night, soon hid Palace Isea's candle glimmers from view. The night and dark closed in with only Adeya's small lantern to hold it off. She looked pale as a ghost in its glow.

"What madness is this, I don't know," said Galveston to Adeya. "But we must get you to safety."

"Kyen, you said he followed you." Adeya looked to Kyen. "Is it the man who used the black weapon on Prince Finn?"

Galveston bristled then looked over his shoulder at Kyen. "From the war? Surely, not!"

Digging into his pocket, Kyen pulled out the cloth bundle. He unwrapped it and showed them the darts.

"How? The black weapons are all kept in a vault in Varkest. Under King Veleda's best guards," said Galveston. "Even if a man could get one, who'd be such a fool? A child would know better than to take hold of a black weapon!"

"He called himself the Kingmaster," said Kyen, stowing the darts back in his pocket.

"Then you've spoken to him?" Galveston's eyes narrowed.

Kyen nodded.

"He spoke to me through King and Queen Isea."

"Then papa and mama..." Adeya's voice faltered.

"And Sergueo as well," said Galveston. "He called on me in my chambers just as I'd retired. I thought him acting strange, and then he bared steel on me. I'd barricaded him in my chambers. My next thought was for the safety of the princess."

"The palace guards are in the Kingmaster's grip also," said Kyen.

"Yes, two came for Princess Adeya as I reached her chambers," said Galveston. "We'd fled out onto the grounds when we saw you being attacked through the window."

"The Kingmaster has taken them all," said Adeya. "He has taken Isea."

"Except you, princess." Galveston put a hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze.

An eerie wail quavered in the distance drawing their gazes.

"The woods are not safe at night," said Galveston. "At the crossroads to Eope, there is a roadpost where we may shelter. It's far—too far to travel with fiends abroad in the deep of night—but it's our closest refuge."

Adeya, who'd been watching the ground with unseeing eyes, lifted her head.

"There is a refuge closer," she said. "And safer from fiends than any roadpost."

Galveston raised his eyebrows and shot Kyen a look, but Kyen didn't return it. He nodded to Adeya. She took the lead, holding her lantern aloft.

A thick mist rose from the ground and swallowed them in a deep hazy. Pine needles underfoot muted their steps. Moisture dripped from the branches overhead. Their path bent to join a gurgling stream and to follow alongside its banks. Galveston walked with Adeya, the bubble of lantern light at their feet, while Kyen hung in the dim background.

"Our first priority must be your safety, princess," said Galveston. "Allow me to escort you to Eope come morning. My family will protect you and care for you there. We must remove you from this peril before we can turn our minds to delivering Isea from this dark mechanism."

Adeya didn't answer him, eyes intent on the path at hand. Her fingers stroked the pendant at her throat.

"You are the crown princess and sole heiress to the throne," continued Galveston. "Having taken the king and queen, the Kingmaster may come for you next. There is no better place than the keep of Eope to defend you."

"Then, what, Galveston?" Adeya asked. "Only a summoner can remove the grip of a black weapon."

"I shall find a summoner, princess," said Galveston. "Even if I have to scour the very brink of Ellunon."

"What if you didn't have to?" said Adeya. "I know where a summoner lives hidden. He's the last summoner in Ellunon."

"Then direct me. I shall go there at once, even if I must commit Kyen of Avanna to be your escort to Eope."

"No, Galveston," said Adeya. "I want you to take me with you."

Galveston's eyebrows rose. "But—but, princess, surely you must understand? There are such dangers in the wilds of Ellunon!"

"With the palace and papa under his grip, the Kingmaster controls all of Isea. I cannot sit by drumming my fingers and waiting for news. It's my kingdom!"

"You are a refined lady and a princess, not a rugged wanderer. Have you ever traveled the wilds? And that on foot?"

"No, but I shall certainly try."

"Princess, I don't think you fully understand—"

"I do understand!" Adeya stopped. The stream bubbled at their feet as Adeya glared at Galveston.

Galveston rubbed his temple with his nub arm. "Princess, please, be reasonable."

Adeya stuck her nose in the air and crossed her arms. "Even if you take me to Eope by force, I will run away—and follow you!"

"It's not a wise decision," said Galveston. "You're a woman—"

"Thank you for your opinion, Prince Galveston," said Adeya. "I will absolutely not go to Eope. And if you will not accompany me to find the last summoner, then I will set out myself."

"Kyen of Avanna, help me convince her. It's folly—worse than folly!" Galveston stretched out his nub-arm to Kyen.

Kyen, however, walked past them both to kneel by a stream. He scooped up the cool water in his hands. He splashed his face then, more gingerly, scooped water to cleanse the dried blood from his temple.

Adeya turned her glare from Galveston to Kyen.

Kyen felt around his temple and winced.

When Adeya saw it, her anger vanished. "Oh, I forgot you're hurt." Adeya, pushing past Galveston, crouched next to Kyen. "Let me see."

"It's alright." Kyen leaned away from her caring hands.

"You're not alright. You've got a lump the size of an egg. Now hold still and let me see. Does it hurt?"

"Not much—ow!"

Galveston crossed his arms, looking like he had a bad taste in his mouth. "Kyen of Avanna, surely you of all people understand the impropriety of Princess Adeya's undertaking this. The kingdoms of Ellunon are not as safe as they used to be. The wilderness is no place for a lady."

Kyen met Adeya's eyes. She bit her lip, a plea shining bright in her eyes.

"Think of her safety," said Galveston. "And of ours! Anyone with no experience and no skills will slow us down—and jeopardize us in battle, if the Kingmaster comes upon us. The Kingmaster and whoever else is under his control. Surely you of all people would understand this?"

Kyen broke his gaze away from Adeya's to regard Galveston.

"I believe the lady's wishes should be respected," Kyen said.

Galveston's expression darkened. He threw aside the edge of his cape to cross his arms. "I will not oppose you if this is truly your decision, princess. Not if you insist."

"Thank you." She favored him with a sweet smile. "I do insist."

"If, my lady, at any point you should change your mind," Galveston continued, a little softer. "I will drop everything to escort you to Eope."

"Thank you." Adeya nodded and walked past him.

"If we don't seek your sanctuary from the Kingmaster, then what do you suggest we do, my lady?" asked Galveston.

"We need a safe place to pass the night." Kyen rose to his feet, gazing around at the mist.

Another wail echoed in the distance.

"We're very nearly there," added Adeya.

Galveston and Kyen both looked to Adeya. She rose, lifting up the lantern. Its light shone in her determined eyes.

"Follow me." Adeya stepped along the stream bank. The shaded lantern sparkled yellow on the water as she passed. Galveston and Kyen followed behind.

The mist darkened as deep night set in. The stream turned aside. The trees around them parted and fell back from a murky cloud. The ground rose as a dark shadow loomed ahead.

As Adeya approached with her lantern light, the shadow materialized into an old ruin in the mist. A small, round building of seamless white stone, it stood out in the night like a giant's pale marble pushed into the ground by enormous hands.

Adeya walked to the doorway and set her lantern down. She grabbed the rickety door—a bark-wood replacement bolted into the stone. With a shove and a lift, it opened with a whine.

"In here." Adeya, taking up her lantern, entered the darkness beyond.

Kyen and Galveston followed her.

A glass pillar dominated the inside of the little dome. It shed a faint glow, like arclight streaming from a high hole. Under its weak light waited a cot, an old cabinet, and a rusted fire basin with a stack of wood at its side. Ash blacked a streak up the wall to a hole knocked through the stone ceiling.

"We can rest here." Adeya kneeled and began to stack wood in the basin.

Kyen stood in the doorway, staring wide-eyed at the glass pillar.

"A remnant of the Firstworld." Galveston approached to run his good hand over its smooth surface.

"The fiends won't come near it." Adeya lit the fire's kindling from her lantern. She straightened as the fire began crackling behind her. She put her hands behind her back and smiled. "There are some provisions in the cupboard."

"Allow me to get them for you." Galveston moved to the cupboard.

Kyen's eyes wandered over a worn book on the cot and a strung bow propped up next to it. "Is this place—yours?"

"There are enough provisions here for a month!" Galveston exclaimed from inside the cupboard.

Adeya flushed and brushed out her skirts. "I told you I've been in the Deepwood many times before. Let me get you something for that bump." She nudged past Galveston to retrieve a jar from the cupboard.

Kyen took a step away, but Adeya persisted in dabbing some paste from her jar on his head.

"It's really fine," said Kyen.

"Well, now it's more fine."

"Journey bread, dried apricots, and is that pickles?" Galveston withdrew from the cupboard, holding up a packet of journey bread. "Princess, just what is this place?"

"Papa... wouldn't approve." Adeya, taking up the old book, sat down on the cot. She stroked the cover with loving fingers as she gazed at it.

Galveston snapped apart a journey bread, handing a piece to Kyen, to Adeya, before crunching on his own.

"Where is this last summoner? You said he was in hiding?" asked Galveston.

"In Varkest. My nana found him." Her fingers tightened on the book. "She left me her journal and—" A hand went to the jewel at her neck. "Her summoner's amulet. When she died."

She looked first to Kyen then to Galveston. "I never showed nana's journal to papa. I was afraid he'd take it away. He never approved of my becoming a summoner. He felt the age of the summoner ended with the silence of the arcangels. If Isea would survive, it'd have to find a way to do so without summoners. But nana thought—nana knew one summoner left in Ellunon that the arcangels still answered."

"In Varkest?" repeated Galveston. "A person could stay lost forever in the Kingdom of Trees. What is this summoner hiding from?"

"I don't know," said Adeya. "Nana tracked him to a logging village just north of the walls of the Timbered City."

"We'd do well to go there." Galveston crossed his arms, tapping the nub of his arm in the crook of his elbow. "If we cannot find this summoner, we could consult the Obsidian at the Timbered City. It may know how to reverse the grip of a black weapon, perhaps without the aid of a summoner."

A muscle worked in Kyen's jaw, but he said nothing.

"I will go with you, princess," said Galveston. "To guard you and help you find the last summoner."

Adeya's face lit up. "You will?"

"As my princess desires, I obey. But I am no guide, and I've only been to the fringes of Varkest." Galveston looked at Kyen. "You will accompany us? Your renown as a woodsmaster goes before you."

"I don't know if I'd say that." Kyen looked at his feet. "But I've been in Varkest before. I'll go."

Adeya, clasping her hands beneath her chin, gazed on them with shining eyes and looked fit to burst. "Thank you so much!"

Chapter 13

Kyen and Galveston waited outside the ruin in the thinning mist. Between the whorls and puffs, the clearing around them materialized into view. The Arc glowed bright over the shadowy treetops.

The door to the ruin opened, and Adeya stepped out.

"I'm ready!" She wore plain traveling clothes now: a brown skirt, a blouse, a cloak. A laden pack hung off her shoulder, and she held the bow in her hand.

"You're bringing the bow, princess?" asked Galveston.

"I always thought I'd do well with a bow. They look easier than a sword." She hefted the bow in her hand. Upright next to her, it stood longer than she was tall.

"Eh, that's a longbow," said Kyen.

"See if you can draw it." Galveston smiled.

"I bet I can use it—just—fine." Adeya pulled on the taut string. She adjusted her grip and pulled harder. The bow's tips barely bent. Screwing up her face, Adeya yanked at the string. It popped out of her hands with a twang.

"Here." Galveston took the bow. He stood in stance with it, hooking the string around the nub of his arm. He leaned against the bow's shaft as he pulled. Strain scrunched his face, and he drew the string nearly to his ear before releasing it with a huff. "That must be nearly two bushel's worth of draw."

"What's that mean?"

"You'd have to lift two bags of wheat with one arm before you'd be able to draw this," said Galveston.

Kyen frowned as Galveston handed the bow back.

"A beautiful weapon, but beyond your abilities, I'm afraid, my princess," said Galveston.

"You'd better leave it here."

Adeya fingered the bow. "If I can't even draw a bow, how will I defend myself?"

"I'm not s—"

"We'll find you a sword," said Kyen.

Galveston cast him a disapproving look. "Swords aren't for women, Princess Adeya. Even if a lady knows what she's doing, a man can easily best her by strength alone."

"Well-made swords aren't that heavy," said Kyen.

"Might I suggest," said Galveston. "That we set off? We've lost daylight already, and the journey for Varkest isn't growing shorter. Best leave the bow here, princess. A weapon you can't use will only be a burden."

With a sigh, Adeya put the bow back into the ruin and shut the door.

Together they set off. Throughout the morning, the mists dematerialized, and a gentle breeze began thrumming through the pine needles. By noon, they struck a highway cutting through the trees. They started down it, lurching on dried fruit and journey bread while they walked. Adeya stayed abreast of Kyen and Galveston, bobbing on her toes and marveling over every new glade and wizen trunk they passed. Her gay chat slowed as afternoon wore on. The spring sank out of her step. She began to lag behind, limping and shifting the straps of her pack.

"Are you alright, princess?" asked Galveston.

"Yes."

"Why are you limping?"

"Only a blister. I can manage."

"This is the first day of our journey, princess. Are you sure you won't reconsider coming to Eope with me?"

"I can do this." Adeya frowned at him.

"May I carry the pack for a while?" asked Kyen.

"Will you? Thank you!" Adeya shrugged off the strap. She held it out for Kyen, but Galveston snatched it first.

"Come, then, princess. We can't afford to stop until nightfall." Galveston walked away.

Adeya frowned after him, but when she looked to Kyen, he smiled a little and shrugged.

"Why do packs feel heavier the longer the day wears on?" Adeya rubbed her shoulder with a hand

"You'll get used to it," said Kyen.

"You've done this a lot, haven't you?"

"I suppose so."

"They say you're a wanderer," said Adeya. "Have you been to all the kingdoms of Ellunon?"

"Here and there," said Kyen. "I traveled a lot with Finn of Veleda before coming to Isea."

"Finn must be a great friend that you'd come all this way on his behalf."

"He's like a brother," said Kyen. "He and his family have shown me more goodness and kindness than seems reasonable."

"You must be in good graces with King Veleda, then?"

"If you want to call it that."

"I met King Veleda once," said Adeya. "His great, red, bearded face frightened me! I couldn't stay afraid, though, because he smiled and laughed so much—What is it you're thinking?"

"Hm? Oh, the king was hurt when I left Veleda," said Kyen. "I hope he's recovering..."

"Of what I hear, he's a good king. I'm sure his subjects will spare every care for him," said Adeya. "He has many daughters, doesn't he?"

"Ten of them."

"So many! King Veleda will not be short of nurses either."

Kyen laughed a little. "True."

"It must be nice to be part of such a large family."

"Come, princess, you're still lagging behind!" Galveston called to them over his shoulder.

* * *

A signpost—framed by the setting Arc, backed by the turf and bounders of the highlands—overshadowed the travelers. One board reading "Denmont" pointed north up a road that wound into the mountains; the other, "Varkest," pointed south where the road entered the taller, darker, older trees of the Deepwood.

Galveston slung Adeya's pack to the ground.

"Shall we stop here for the night?" Without waiting for an answer, he took a pipe and pouch from his pocket and began setting himself up for a puff. Kyen dug the foodstuffs from Adeya's pack. Adeya lowered herself to the ground with a sigh of relief. She kicked off her slippers.

Pulling in one foot, Adeya examined a swollen welt on her toe. She put her foot down and untied a little pouch from her belt. She opened the flap to take out a bandage, a bottle of brown liquid, and a penknife.

Galveston and Kyen stared as she unsheathed it. The tiny, razor sharp edge glinted in the evening light. Adeya took the edge to her blister. Both swordsmen groaned and winced.

"I've got to drain it somehow," said Adeya without looking up.

"I've lost my appetite," said Galveston. He pushed away the journey bread Kyen had been offering him.

"But you're a swordsman! Surely your stomach is stronger than that?" Adeya took up the little bottle and the bandage roll. She cut off a strip.

"I've no taste for the healing arts," said Galveston. He rose from his seat and surveyed the southern forest. Little puffs of smoke rose from his pipe.

Adeya placed a drop of liquid on the bandage and began wrapping her toe.

Kyen walked over and crouched down, examining her pouch. "Where did you get this?"

"Everyone in Isea has one."

"I wouldn't expect the royal family to be trained in herbs and apothecary," said Kyen.

"The royal family is trained the most rigidly of all. Our duty is to attend the urgent and grievous." Adeya tied off the bandage. "At least, it was. In my nana's time. Before the arcangels fell silent." She stretched out her legs and wiggled her toes. "Ah... That's better."

"You keep the practice alive, then?"

"My nana taught me some things before she died. And I've read a great many books—without papa knowing." She smiled sweetly.

"You really know what all this is?" Kyen looked into the pouch.

"Of course."

"What's that you used?" Kyen looked at the bottle of brown liquid.

"Oil of candula and scallafew."

"What's this one?" Kyen took out a dark purple bottle.

"Heverfy tincture. For sickness."

Out of the pouch, Kyen pulled a bottle so green it glowed.

"Ooh, ah, be careful with that one," said Adeya. "Reeking dragon venom."

Kyen nearly dropped it in his haste to put it back. He rubbed his hand on his tunic. "Why do you carry that?"

"It's the most powerful analgesic, sedative, and numbing agent in all Ellunon."

Kyen stared at her.

"It, ah, helps with pain and can knock you out."

"Oh."

"You have to dilute it though. At full strength, it causes seizures and paralysis. Then, it stops your heart."

Kyen looked at Adeya. "Wow."

"It's nothing really." Adeya flushed. She started to put back her knife, bandages, and bottle.

"I could never learn stuff like this." Kyen straightened up and rubbed the back of his neck. "I never did well in my books."

"People say you're the best swordsman in Ellunon, though!"

Galveston looked over his shoulder to eye Kyen, puffing out tiny, gray clouds from his pipe.

"I'm thinking," said Kyen. "We should visit the borders of Denmont before we enter the forests."

"The Kingdom of Mines? Why?" asked Galveston.

"Adeya's ill-suited for travel—and unarmed," said Kyen.

Adeya looked down at her clothes and cloak. "Really? I thought—This is the best I could get without papa finding out."

"Oh, it's not your clothes," said Kyen. "A sturdier pair of shoes, I'm thinking. And a sword."

"A sword?" Adeya's aquamarine eyes grew wide. A smile like breaking dawn followed it.

"You think I should carry a sword?"

"Why wouldn't I? A dagger and a polearm couldn't go wrong either."

"Kyen of Avanna," said Galveston. "Princess Adeya is a lady of refinement. What right do you have to put a weapon of war in her hands?"

Adeya's face fell.

Kyen shrugged. "She should be given the ability to protect herself, if need be. Since she's decided to come with us—well, she is our guide, to be honest—she should be equipped as one of us."

"But Denmont?" said Galveston. "A day's journey, yes. Over steep roads and rocky mountainsides. And what welcome would Denmont give us if we arrive? They sided with Varkest in the Black War."

"Denmont never chose sides. The same smiths furnished the Great Alliance with weapons as well," said Kyen. "In fact, Denmont should be considered the true victor of the Black War. They have everyone's coin now."

"I still don't like the sound of them," said Adeya. "Papa always complained whenever he worked with them."

"They are what they are," Kyen said. "The people of Denmont are businessmen, not conquerors. I don't pretend to understand them. Besides, no finer craftsmanship can be found in all the kingdoms of Ellunon." Kyen cast a glance at Adeya. "Everything you'll be needing you'll find there. We can spare a detour of a day or two."

Galveston uncrossed his arms. With a fist on one hip and his stump on the other, he turned to size up the mountains. Clouds of smoke still puffed from his pipe.

"A day or two? Humph! If the weather holds."

Chapter 14

Kyen gazed at the sky as he stood on the hilltop. Behind him, the landscape descended into rolling hills studded with pines. Above rose the mountains of Denmont, their snow-capped heights gleaming white in the morning arclight. The road at his feet wound up the steep slope like a tan ribbon before disappearing around the shoulder of the mountain. Kyen's eyes stared unseeing above it all at the faint wisps gathering over the peaks.

Galveston crested the hill beside him. "Kyen of Avanna."

A cold breeze stirred Kyen's hair.

"I say, Kyen of Avanna!"

Kyen started. "What's that? Did you say something?"

"By the Arc heights, man, are you deaf?" Galveston chuckled.

"Maybe." Kyen smiled a little.

Galveston leaned in close, lowering his voice. "I know I've expressed my thoughts before, but I'll do so again. I don't think it's right to let her continue on like this." He looked over his shoulder, and Kyen followed his gaze.

Halfway up the hill, Adeya weaved back and forth, clutching her side and wheezing. She tripped over a rock and, catching herself with her hands, crawled onto the hilltop. She tottered to her feet, steadied herself against Galveston, and doubled over to catch her breath.

"Are you alright, princess?" asked Galveston.

Adeya wagged a hand at him.

"I wish you'd reconsider accompanying us. It's not too late to cut across to the Lesser Highway and circle back to Eope," said Galveston.

"I'm—fine," Adeya gasped out. A crisp breeze tugged at her hair, sticking strands to her sweaty forehead. "Just need—a rest."

"It's not even midmorning yet, princess," said Galveston. "We must keep moving."

"I know." Adeya tried to calm her heavy breathing with an obvious effort. "A moment."

Kyen's face clouded.

"We can't spare a moment, my princess," said Galveston. "The weather in Denmont is precarious. We rest at our peril on these slopes."

"We can take a short break," said Kyen.

Galveston opened his mouth only to shut it again with a scowl.

"No. Galveston's right," said Adeya. "I can do this."

"Come, princess, allow me to assist." Galveston offered her his arm.

Adeya puffed a breath up at her bangs. Then, gathering up her skirts, she trudged past him and his proffered arm. Galveston followed. Adeya started up a tumbled pile of boulders that blocked their path. She lost her balance part way up, but Galveston caught her with two hands on her back and pushed her up over the pinnacle. Kyen clambered up behind them only to sit and wait while Galveston navigated Adeya down the other side.

"Is your brother well, Prince Galveston?" asked Kyen.

"My brother?"

"Prince Hepilaeus?"

"Oh yes, he's quite well," said Galveston. "You've been to Eope?"

"Finn and I spent many days there," said Kyen. "How goes his philosophizing?"

"Oh, as well as it can. I have not my people's mind for deep theories and stargazing," said Galveston. "My father packed me away as a youth to learn horses and blades at Veleda."

"I thought you had something of Veleda in your accent."

"Truth be told, I begged my father to send me to Avanna that I might learn under the legendary swordsmen there. It's providence I submitted to my father's choice of Veleda. I am still alive today for it," said Galveston. Kyen's face fell at this, but Galveston continued, "Perhaps you may pass to me something of the Avanna skill on our journey?"

"I suppose."

A moment of silence took over as Adeya leaped the last boulder into Galveston's grasp.

Kyen hopped to the path next to them.

"Rumors say you were there when ruin came to Avanna. Is it true?" Galveston finished his question with a glance at Kyen. When Kyen said nothing, Galveston said, "It was years ago now. How many? Six or seven? It's a great mystery in Ellunon. What was it that happened to Avanna?"

Kyen stayed silent for a very long moment before saying, "It fell."

"Surely there's more to it than that?"

Kyen walked past them both, his eyes on the path.

Adeya shot a frown at Galveston. His eyebrows rose in surprise. She huffed and, shrugging off his arm, followed Kyen. Galveston trailed after them.

The party fell silent again, saving their breath for the stiff climb. Throughout the rest of the day, they trudged up into the mountains. The trees soon abandoned the empty, gray ascent. The paved highway thinned into a foot trail.

As they stopped to eat at midday, Adeya dropped to the ground and leaned back against a boulder. She sat there with her eyes closed, head lolled back, trying to catch her breath. Galveston took journey bread, dried fruit, and dried meat. He passed them to Kyen then to Adeya.

Adeya took hers and bit into it hungrily.

Kyen lifted a dried apricot to his mouth but his hand faltered. He gazed up at mountaintops.

"Do you suspect a blizzard?" asked Galveston.

"I don't know," said Kyen.

Arclight beamed from clear, pale skies and glistened on the white peaks. Shreds of cloud and vapor encircled their heights.

"We'd best hurry as much as we can," said Kyen.

After eating, they rose, Adeya most slowly and painfully. They continued up the steep path. Kyen and Galveston walked leisurely, but Adeya still lagged. The Arc like a bow of fire yellowed as it sank toward the horizon. It arched from the mountainside down into the distant woods. The long shadows cast by the Arc enveloped the travelers in a chill. The party reached a pass between two lower peaks where the road entered the mountain realm. The clouds overhead grew a denser, darker gray and swallowed the setting Arc. A brisk wind swirled snowflakes down from the heights. The three companions trudged on in the descending gloom. Galveston took Adeya's arm to keep her from falling with exhaustion.

The road curved to reveal a little castle keep, surrounded by a wall, tucked against the mountain, and flanked by the road. The three companions made towards it. Snow fell in billows, and the wind whipped the icy flecks into their faces. By the time Kyen banged on the gatehouse doors, they stood up to their ankles in white, shivering, and half-blinded.

A little panel slid aside in the gate.

"Who goes?" An eyeball stared out at them. "Tch! Travelers! We don't take no travelers!" The panel slammed shut before Kyen or the others could get a word in.

"We're here on business!" Kyen yelled above the wind, hugging his cloak to himself.

The panel clacked back open. The eye reappeared. "Business?"

"We're here to purchase weapons and equipment," said Kyen.

"Oh, customers!" The panel slammed shut again. The rattling and banging of locks sounded. The gates cracked apart. "This way, lords and lady. Come in! Before our terrible weather sets hold."

The gatekeeper hurried them across a courtyard already underneath a blanket of snow. A thick white layer buried the pointed roof of a squat keep inside the walls. The gatekeeper thrust open the doors to let them in.

"Master! Customers!" His shout rang through the entrance hall. Without waiting for an answer, the gatekeeper bowed himself out the door.

A little man, younger than Kyen but balding nonetheless, bustled up the stairs. He wore a woolen, fur-rimmed tunic that fell past his knees.

"Welcome!" He spread his arms wide. "Come in. Come in. Please excuse any incivility from my gatekeeper. The blizzards always put him in a foul mood. Acts on his rheumatism, he says. Let me take your cloaks. You're soaked through." Ladening himself with their travelwear, the man shouted up the staircase. "Marna! Customers!" He hung their cloaks on stone pegs by the door then returned, rubbing his hands together.

"I'm Arold, Son of Arold, of Denmont," said the little man. "How do you do? How do you do? How do you do?" He said to each of them and shook their hands in turn: Kyen rubbed the back of his neck; Galveston frowned on him; Adeya stared tiredly at his bald spot. Arold spread his arms wide. "Welcome again! To the Mine of the Arold Family, ten generations of the finest craftsmanship! Come, let me show you to your apartments." Arold took a step then stopped them with an upheld finger. "No, no, I insist. No business until morning. Not until you're well rested and fed. Business can wait till morning!"

Kyen sighed, but saying nothing, followed the little man up the stairs. Galveston supported the weary Adeya behind.

On the second floor, Arold opened a pair of double doors into a parlor as big as the entrance hall. Fur rugs carpeted gleaming tiles. Candles burned from niches carved in the walls. The

furniture, shaped from smooth-polished granite, boasted piles of red velvet cushions and plush blankets. A maidservant, who'd just finished lighting the fire, hurried to stand by her master's side.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable," said Arold. "Rooms for the gentlemen over there, one for the lady there, and a washing room through that door. I don't think you'll find anything lacking, but if you do, please don't hesitate to mention it to Marna. She will be up with a warm meal soon. Won't you, Marna? Go! Be off with you!"

The maidservant, Marna, jumped and scurried out the door.

"Thank you for your kindness," said Adeya.

"Oh, nothing to it, my lady, nothing to it." Arold waved her off. "I shall come for you in the morning. No business till morning, gentlemen. I insist!" With that, Arold bowed himself out of the room. The door shut behind him.

"I've never been so glad to see a fire!" Adeya moved to the growing blaze in the hearth. She held out her hands and rubbed her chill fingers. Galveston unstrapped his gauntlet from his stub arm and dropped it on the table. He sank into one of the velvet-pillowed chairs with a sigh. Kyen wandered around the room, gazing at the boar's head above the mantel, fingering the curtains, looking out the windows.

The door reopened, and Marna returned carrying a tray. A large tureen of stew steamed from the center along with a loaf of fresh bread. The three companions all sat down, too tired, too hungry to talk. After eating, both Galveston and Adeya retired to their separate rooms. Kyen, however, stayed up in the parlor. Night drew on, and the wind howled outside the window. He stretched out on the couch as the fire died down to coals. The shrinking glow reflected in his grey eyes as he stared unseeing at the ceiling.

Chapter 15

The morning arcshine cast long shafts from the dead coals of the fireplace to Kyen sprawled asleep on the couch. A scream from the bedrooms made him start upright. He blinked and rubbed his mussed-up hair, looking confused.

The scream rang out again.

Kyen leapt up, drawing his sword. He collided with Galveston as he ran from his room.

"The princess!" Galveston shoved Kyen aside.

Together they burst through the door into her bedchamber. Adeya sat in bed, sheet drawn up to her chin, and stared at them with wide eyes.

"There's something in my fire!" She pointed to the hearth.

Both Kyen and Galveston moved to look.

The coals glowed hot in the fireplace. Underneath, a pair of bright orange eyes stared up at them.

Kyen lowered his sword, and Galveston slumped.

A dark little shape slithered deeper in the coals. The eyes blinked.

"It's just a fire dragon," said Kyen.

"A dragon!" Adeya pulled the sheet over her nose.

"It's a little small, isn't it?" said Galveston.

"Most I've seen are smaller," said Kyen.

"Aren't they dangerous?" Adeya whispered.

"Not really. You just have to be careful that—Hey!"

The fire dragon extended a claw and pawed at a fallen blanket near the hearth. Kyen kicked it out of reach.

"That they don't burn your stuff." Kyen picked up the fire tongs. "Galveston, would you open a window?"

"Surely." Galveston moved to unlatch a pane.

Kyen pinched the tongs around the little black body. It hissed and wiggled as he drew it from the coals. The lizard—no bigger than a cat—waddled its short legs in the air. Sooty scales armored its body, and its underbelly glowed hot orange. A forked tongue flicked out and licked its eye. It hung limp in Kyen's tongs as he carried it across the room. Galveston opened the window. The dragon belched a whorl of flame at him, and Galveston flinched back. Kyen lowered the dragon out the window and tossed it into a snowdrift. The dragon disappeared with a powdery thump. The snow immediately began to hiss and steam.

Kyen withdrew from the chilly air, and Galveston clamped the window shut.

"Fire dragons love to nest in things that can burn," said Kyen.

"You're fortunate it didn't try for the bedsheet during the night, princess," said Galveston.

"There's a reason everything in Denmont is stone."

"May... May I have my chambers back to myself now, please?" Adeya asked from under her sheet.

Kyen flushed and strode out without another word.

Galveston bowed himself out, shutting the door behind him.

* * *

After breakfast, Kyen, Galveston, and Adeya followed Arold and Marna downstairs to a bolted door in the basement. Marna held aloft a lantern while Arold, with much grunting and shoving, opened the door into darkness. Inside, Marna set the lantern down. Both he and Marna lit tapers from it and then hurried about to spread the flame to candles in sconces. New bubbles of light revealed rows of racks, weaponry, and gear crowded from wall to wall.

Galveston's eyes grew wide.

Kyen fingered the pommel of his sword.

Adeya's hand rose to rub the amulet at her neck.

Still lighting candles, Arold talked, "Look around! By all means, look around! Let me know if you see anything you like. We've a sparring square outside, so you can test before you buy. Anything in particular you're looking for? Look at that dust! Marna! I'll just—let me polish these up. Marna!" He took the first from a line of shields and rubbed it with his tunic.

Galveston wandered towards a shelf crowded with gauntlets.

"Ah, sir! What do you think of my plate armor?" Arold left off polishing to follow him.

Adeya walked between the shelves. Her eyes wandered over rows of pikes, racks of knives and daggers, lines of helmets, and steel plate. The more she saw, the wider her eyes grew.

Kyen dallied behind her, hands in his pockets, following her gaze, examining after her the items on which her eyes lingered.

The narrow aisle ended at a wall of swords, and Adeya stopped. Hundreds of swords—longswords, shortswords, arming swords, sabers, rapiers, falchions—hung pegged to the wall. Adeya's fingers curled around the amulet at her throat as she looked at them all.

Galveston appeared out of the shelves two aisles down with Arold trailing him.

Seeing her looking over the swords, Arold hurried over. "Is the fair lady interested in a blade?"

Galveston cast a disapproving look at Arold even though he spoke to Adeya.

"Swords aren't for women, Princess Adeya. Even if trained, women aren't strong enough to wield a blade effectively. I'd recommend something a little better suited to you. A dagger, perhaps?"

Adeya turned away, but Kyen blocked the aisle behind her. He looked over the display.

"If, uh, if my lady will pardon me through?" He smiled a little at her.

"Of course." Adeya backed out of the aisle to let him get a closer look at the swords. She watched Kyen select a two-handed longsword from the wall. He held the hilt out to her.

"Draw that and see how it feels."

Adeya pulled the blade from its scabbard with a zing of metal.

Galveston scowled.

She stared wide-eyed at the naked blade. She gave it a little swing.

Arold ducked, and Galveston jumped back, knocking into a shelf.

"Have a care!" cried Galveston.

"I didn't realize they were so light!" said Adeya.

"An arming sword with a gauntlet or a shield would be better suited, if she must have a sword," said Galveston; he gave his own arming sword a pat.

"True," said Kyen. "But the longsword is just the backup. Here. You'll want this." Kyen edged past Adeya and Galveston to a rack nearer the front of the armory. It bore a variety of vests and coats, all densely padded. He selected a thick, linen vest off the rack. "Does this fit?"

Adeya slipped the vest over her arms. "It's a little big."

"Smaller then."

Adeya traded him for another size down.

"Kyen of Avanna, please tell me you're not serious," said Galveston.

"This fits. What is it?" Adeya looked down at the vest and fingered the latches.

"Linen armor." Kyen put his thumbs under his own vest. He wore one just like Adeya but considerably more travel-stained and beat up.

"Do you really expect cloth to stop fiend fangs?" asked Galveston.

Arold, looking offended, opened his mouth, but Kyen spoke first.

"No, but it'll stop just about everything else. It's made of layers and layers of linen, see? It'll protect you from arrows, sword slashes, even slow down a hearty spear thrust."

"Why not use leather?" Galveston knocked on a leather breastplate hanging from the wall.

"It's uncomfortable and not as effective," Kyen said as he wandered away.

"Your friend is very knowledgeable. Yes, very. Swordsmen of Avanna always are." Arold looked between Adeya and Galveston. "Hard customers to please, swordsmen of Avanna."

Adeya followed after Kyen. Galveston, muttering something under his breath about plate, trailed behind.

"This is why you won't have to worry about fiend fangs," said Kyen. He selected a long, plain spear from a rack. He handed it to Adeya. "If a fiend charges you, crouch down, plant the butt of the spear to the ground, and let the fiend ram itself. You'll have such range, any swordsman would hesitate to engage you." Kyen grinned.

"You're equipping her like she's a man." Galveston crossed his arms. "How do you expect her to lift these weapons much less wield them effectively in combat?"

"Excuse me?" Adeya's eyebrows went up.

"A little conditioning, some time, and patience." Kyen surveyed her up and down, rubbing his chin. He smiled at her. "You'll do fine, Adeya."

"Of course, I will!" Adeya stuck her nose in the air. She whirled around. Her spear tip knocked a helmet off the wall. Galveston caught it before it smacked him in the head.

"Have a care!" he cried, putting the helmet back on its peg.

"Will that be all?" Arold asked as they filed back towards the stairs. "Did you make a decision about that gauntlet, sir? Or you, sir, how about a new longsword, sir?"

"Many thanks for your courtesy, but no," said Galveston.

"Very well. Very well. How do you intend to pay?"

Kyen turned out his pockets and looked to Adeya.

"We could put it on my papa's tab?" Adeya looked to Galveston.

Galveston heaved a sigh and pulled out his coin pouch. As Galveston counted the gold into Arold's hand, Adeya spoke up.

"One other thing, Sir Arold?"

"Yes, yes, of course, my lady."

"Do you also happen to furnish clothes for traveling?" Adeya lifted her skirts to show her dainty slippers underneath—soiled and holey from travel.

"You'd better take it all." Galveston gave up counting and dropped the pouch into Arold's hands.

* * *

In the courtyard, Kyen and Galveston waited. Kyen perched on the low fence that enclosed the sparring square. Galveston leaned on the railing next to him. Their pack sat on the ground between them. Snow shoveled into great mounds sank and trickled under the late morning arclight. One mound, heaped up against the mountainside, all but buried the square opening of a mining tunnel. A black wedge like a crooked mouth frowned over the mound at them. A smithery, unseen behind the keep, exuded billows of black smoke and the sharp clanging of metal. Two large mountain dogs, made even larger by great white fluff, scampered around the courtyard. One trotted up to sniff Galveston, but Galveston shooed him off.

Adeya stepped out of the keep beaming. She wore a long, fur-lined coat, a thick, brown wool skirt, and high leather boots, all new. She'd belted her longsword sword at her side and carried her spear.

Galveston heaved a sigh.

"Weapons aren't fit for women," he told Kyen in a low tone, while Adeya was still out of earshot.

"I think Adeya should know how to protect herself," said Kyen.

"You've seen for yourself the bow is too much for her," said Galveston, sadly. "The battlefield is no place for a woman."

Kyen said nothing.

"Well?" Adeya capered up to them. She swished her skirts back and forth. "How do I look?"

"Lovely as ever, princess." Galveston heaved another sigh.

Kyen looked absent as he stared past Adeya.

Adeya scrunched up her shoulders and smiled sweetly.

"How long do you reckon before the snow melts and the roads reopen?" Galveston looked at Kyen. Receiving no response, Galveston nudged him. "How long before the roads reopen?"

"Hm? Oh, about half a day." Kyen shrugged. "Maybe more."

"Then might as well use our time productively." Galveston straightened up. "Come, my princess. There's no use in you carrying weapons you can't use. Let's see if you have what it takes to learn the ways of warfare."

"You'd—you'd teach me?" asked Adeya.

"It's against my principles," said Galveston. "Since you insist on being of our party—and since Kyen of Avanna insists on arming you—you ought to learn how to wield your weapons. If you can."

Adeya drew herself up. "Of course, I can!"

"Then shall we?" Galveston took her hand and helped her over the fence. Adeya paused before stepping out onto the sand of the sparing square.

"Which first?" She looked from the spear in her hand to the sword at her hip.

"The sword."

"Can you hold this?" Adeya handed the spear off to Kyen.

Kyen swiveled on his perch and, tucking the spear pole against his shoulder, settled in to watch.

"Stand here, my princess, watch me," said Galveston, drawing his own arming sword with his good hand. "You have a slash and a thrust. Like so!"

He demonstrated with a flash of steel then looked to Adeya.

Adeya gingerly pulled the longsword from its scabbard at her side. Trying to hold it with one hand like Galveston, she gave it a swing. The blade moved in a slow, clumsy arc. Adeya lost her balance, stumbling forward, as the point of the blade stabbed into the sand.

Galveston covered an awkward, laugh-like cough with his nub arm.

"No, no, not like that, princess," he said. "Try it again."

Adeya, biting her lip, lifted the longsword with a hand. She gave it another clumsy swing.

Galveston sighed, shaking his head.

"Once more, princess. The slash."

Adeya's shoulders drooped, but drawing her brows together, she gripped the hilt for another swing, this time a lob with force.

Galveston jumped back to save his toe from the out-of-control arc. He rubbed his forehead with his nub.

"I just don't know, princess," he said. "Some are inclined to the books, some to the plow, some to the sword. I don't think you have it in you to be a swordsman."

Adeya looked down the blade, avoiding his eye.

"Your form is wrong," said Galveston. "Your grip is wrong. Your blade alignment is off. You must be able to replicate what you see in order to learn the sword."

"Yes." Adeya bit her lip.

Without a word, Kyen hopped off his perch. He hefted Adeya's spear as he approached.

"May I?" Kyen asked Galveston.

"Surely." Galveston bowed Kyen. "If a legendary swordsman of Avanna can't help her learn a basic swing, I don't believe it's worth her carrying a sword."

Adeya blinked furiously at the ground.

Kyen surveyed Adeya for a moment. "Can you dance?"

"What?" Adeya sniffed.

"You're the Crown Princess of Isea. You must've been taught how to dance, right?"

"What does dancing have to do with anything?"

"Were you any good at your first lesson?"

"No," said Adeya. "I kept tripping and stepping on my tutor's toes."

"Do you dance now?"

Adeya drew herself up a little bit. "I'm—I'm better than my tutor now."

"Dancing and swordsmanship aren't so unlike," said Kyen with a smile in his grey eyes.

A slow dawn of realization came over Adeya's face; she wrung the grip on her longsword.

"Please show me! I will learn!"

"First—here—this is making it harder." Kyen repositioned her hands on the hilt with one at the bottom and one at the base of the hilt. "Use both hands. A longsword works better that way."

Backing away, Kyen surveyed her again for a moment. He suddenly lunged forward. He struck out with the haft of the spear so fast that Adeya cried out. She stumbled backwards, holding up her sword and wincing her eyes shut. Kyen stopped the spear short of striking her.

Adeya opened one eye, still wincing.

Kyen smiled a little; he withdrew the spear haft. "You stumbled."

"Anyone would—heavens! Don't—don't do that!"

"Open up your feet." Using the spear, Kyen poked Adeya's feet until she stood with them a step apart. "Bend your knees a little. Good. That's a guard stance. Stand like that in every fight. Now—"

Kyen swung out at her again; Adeya jumped out of the way as if the spear had been a lightning strike. The butt of the spear thudded into the sand in front of her.

Adeya, still wincing, lowered her sword.

"See?" said Kyen.

"I—I can do this!" Adeya beamed at him and at Galveston.

Galveston took out his pipe and made a show of packing it.

Kyen's smile faded. He shifted the spear from hand to hand. "Nobody, eh, that is—nobody in Avanna ever called me a prodigy."

"No!" cried Adeya. "You're the best swordsman in Ellunon, though!"

"Any skill I have came from practice. A lot of practice. We all can practice, right?" He smiled a little.

Galveston puffed away at his pipe, frowning.

"I'll practice until I'm better than you!" Adeya brandished the sword at him.

"I hope you will."

"Show me what's next!" said Adeya, already trying to slash again. As she did, the amulet at her neck flared. Its blue light blazed out.

All three of them shielded their eyes.

Like a flash, it vanished.

"What by the Arc—" Galveston peered over his hand at her.

Adeya took up her amulet in the palm of her hands. For a long moment, she stared at it, frowning. The amulet's aquamarine sparkled with luster, like a candle flame dancing inside the gem.

Adeya looked up at the two swordsmen.

"A summoner is calling an arcangel," she said. "And it answers."

Chapter 16

Adeya whirled around. Leaping the fence, she ran out of the sparring square.

"My lady!" Galveston called; both he and Kyen hurried after her.

One hand holding her amulet, the other her sword, Adeya stopped in the middle of the courtyard. She looked around, searched the gray morning sky, and stopped when her gaze found the mouth of the mine.

She walked towards it. The amulet's light grew brighter and brighter. She stopped at the foot of the snow mound blocking the mine and looked up. The black opening gaped down at her over the white crest. The amulet's blue glow danced over Adeya's hand and up her face like water shadows.

Kyen, spear in hand, stopped beside her.

At her other side, Galveston eyed the opening.

"The summoner is in there," said Adeya.

"In the mine? How do you know?" asked Galveston. "No disrespect, my princess, but you are not yourself a summoner."

"My nana taught me!" Adeya shot him a frown. "A summoner's amulet comes alive when a calling is answered—when an arcangel comes."

The three of them stood staring at the black mouth for a moment: Kyen's stormy gray eyes reflected concern; Galveston crossed his arms; the frown on Adeya's face deepened into determination. She clenched her amulet in a fist, and it turned her fingers blue from the inside.

"You can't be serious, princess," said Galveston.

"We have to go in there." She looked first to Kyen then Galveston. She settled her intent stare on Kyen.

Kyen looked long into the dark mouth. Turning to meet Adeya's gaze, he nodded.

Adeya eyed Galveston.

"This is a bad idea." Galveston sighed. "But come. We must, at least, ask permission."

* * *

Kyen and Galveston hurried down the stairs behind Adeya.

"Marna said she couldn't find Arold in his study," said Galveston. "He must be in the armory still."

Adeya shoved the door open.

The three stepped into the armory.

All the candles now extinguished, the armory waited in darkness but for two points of light: the lantern still sat on the counter beside the doorway; in the back a lone candle glowed behind the shelves.

"There he is," said Adeya, hurrying towards the candlelight.

Kyen and Galveston followed her between the shelves.

"Sir Arold?" she called.

They stepped out next to the wall of swords.

The lone candle's flame wavered before them as they stopped. Kyen and Galveston stood at Adeya's sides while she looked around the dimness.

"Maybe he's not here?" said Adeya. "Sir Arold?"

Kyen suddenly shoved Adeya into Galveston.

A body flew out of the darkness flashing steel. Kyen barely unsheathed his sword in time to deflect off a spear thrust. The haft ran down the edge of his blade. The steel point clanged against the wall.

Adeya cried out as she lost her balance, but Galveston caught her under the arms. He dragged her backwards.

Arold, wielding the spear, launched a series of rapid jabs at Kyen. Kyen bent left, right, sidestepped, ducked to avoid the steel point seeking contact with his body. The onslaught drove him backwards.

"Don't hurt him!" cried Adeya; Galveston pulled her into an aisle three shelves away. "He's got a black mark!" She called from behind the shelves.

Arold drew back for a stab. A black welt stood out on his neck in the candlelight. His blank eyes fixed on Kyen without feeling.

Kyen dodged in between the shelves to escape. The spearhead thudded into the shelf behind him. He flew down the aisle.

Galveston and Adeya fled a little ahead three aisles away.

Arold, ripping free the spear, ran after Kyen.

Kyen skipped around to face him. The spearhead jabbed and jabbed, relentlessly seeking to land in Kyen's body. Kyen deflected—his elbow striking a shelf loose on one side, his sword clipping a row of helmets on the other. Kyen knocked against a spear rack trying to press himself out of the way of another thrust. Arold slammed the haft of the spear into Kyen's stomach. Kyen grunted but, seizing the haft, shoved both it and Arold away. Arold stumbled backwards. Kyen bolted for the end of the aisle. Arold, catching his balance, ran after him.

Galveston stopped at the end of the shelves.

"Help me!" Galveston threw his weight against the nearest shelf.

Adeya pressed her back into it, and together they pushed.

The shelf leaned. Its contents clattered to the floor as it toppled against its neighbor. With a domino effect, the shelves collapsed one against another, heading for the aisle containing Kyen and Arold.

Kyen ran hard for the end of the aisle. The shelf beside him teetered and rained down gauntlets. He dashed out as it crashed down behind him. Arold dived out the aisle, but the falling shelf caught and pinned his legs.

"Kyen! Come!" yelled Galveston; he and Adeya fled for the stairs.

Kyen ran after them. He paused to grab the lantern from the counter and looked back.

Arold, squirming out from beneath the shelves, spear in hand, clambered to his feet.

Kyen bolted up the stairs.

At the top, Galveston and Adeya ran across the entrance hall to the doors. They slammed up against them, but when they tried to pull them open, the doors jiggled in place.

"Locked!" Galveston backed up. With his gauntleted nub in front, he threw his body against the door. The door rattled under the thud.

Kyen breasted the top of the stairs. Glancing back, he ducked as a spear flew out of the stairwell. It clipped his hair and thudded into the door between Galveston and Adeya.

Adeya paled.

Kyen dashed up and handed the lantern to her.

"Together?" He looked at Galveston.

As one they both backed up and rammed the door together. The doors popped open under the impact. Both swordsmen stumbled out and nearly fell down the steps into the courtyard.

The three fled out the open door as Arold reached the top of the stairs behind.

They sprinted across the courtyard, Galveston leading, towards the gatehouse, but Adeya pulled him aside.

"No, the mine! We have to find the summoner!"

They veered towards the mine, now yawning wide after snowmelt.

Kyen, sprinting off, vaulted the sparring square fence to snatch up their pack and Adeya's spear. He regained ground lost with an extra spurt of speed to rejoin them.

All three ducked into the darkness of the mine.

The amulet blazed to life as they entered. Warm, dank air engulfed them, rich with the smell of old earth. The pounding of their footsteps mingled with the drips of water, an echoing cacophony. They splashed through puddles, and, after a bend or two, the tunnel swallowed up all light from the entrance.

Adeya slowed. All three of them came to a stop to look back.

"Do you think Arold followed us in?"

"More importantly, where's the Kingmaster?" asked Galveston. "Has he followed us from Isea?"

"Or is he after the last summoner?" Adeya's eyes grew bright with fear as she and Galveston looked at one another.

Kyen, having shouldered the pack, offered Adeya back her spear in exchange for the lantern.

"If the Kingmaster takes the last summoner under his power," said Galveston. "There'd be no stopping him."

"The last summoner must be in trouble," said Adeya. "Must be using the mine to hide."

Kyen puffed out the lantern flame, leaving Adeya's amulet to cast a blue glow around them. It threw ripples on the wall like sunlight at the bottom of a clear pool.

"Either way, we'd best hurry," said Kyen. "Would you—" He nodded at Adeya's amulet.

She nodded in reply. Holding up the amulet in one hand and her spear in the other, Adeya set off down the mining tunnel. Kyen and Galveston followed behind.

Chapter 17

The tunnel that swallowed Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston descended into the mountain. Cut rectangular, the smooth stone walls showed no cracks. No rubble or extra rocks cluttered the floor. Every ten paces or so they passed an intersection; two black, angular openings—a passage to the right and to the left—faced each other. When they walked by the sixth such intersection, Galveston spoke up.

"We could get lost down here."

Adeya cast a worried look at Kyen.

Fingering a chip of rock in his hand, he stared absently down one of the side tunnels. A drip hitting his head made him flinch and look up.

"We've only gone straight so far," said Adeya. "We'll just have to remember any turns we take so we can find our way out again."

Deeper and deeper they followed the tunnel down. The air grew warmer and thicker. Sweat stains dampened the front of the swordsman's tunics, and they walked with their cloaks thrown back. Adeya paused at one point to take off her fur-lined jacket and stuff it into the pack on Kyen's back. Her amulet, which at first grew brighter the deeper they descended, began to dim. When the walls grew hard to see for weakening light, Adeya stopped.

"We're going the wrong way. We must have passed the summoner," she said.

Kyen and Galveston parted to let her pass, and the three of them headed back up the tunnel.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, princess?" asked Galveston.

"Of course, I do! I heard my nana talk about it all the time," said Adeya, eyes on her amulet. "And I've read it in books. See?"

She held up the amulet as they walked. With every step they took, the light regrew in brightness.

"We're getting closer again."

"I'm not sure I share your confidence. Your grandmother had training as a summoner that you haven't," said Galveston. "You never mentioned the stone at your neck before. How can you be sure about what it does?"

"Summoner's amulets do many things," said Adeya archly. "Before anything else, they are a summoner's link to the arcangels."

"Link? Seems rather vague," said Galveston. "Don't you know anything more specifically about this summoner's amulet?"

Adeya swelled and stopped to face him. "Yes! What would you like to know? It's a rather complicated topic!"

"To begin" —Galveston crossed his arms—"why are we following it into this hole, staking our lives on its fickle luster, when we could be trusting a map and compass?"

"We don't have a map," Kyen said. "Or a compass."

"Summoners use the amulets to call arcangels down for aid," said Adeya, as if everyone ought to know. "When an arcangel approaches, the stone in the amulet glows so that the summoner knows the call has been answered. The brighter the stone glows, the nearer the arcangel. Arcangels aren't as easy to see as you might think."

"Why are we stopped?" asked Kyen.

The three looked at one another.

Adeya lifted her nose in the air. She twirled on her heel and marched down the passage. Galveston and Kyen, exchanging glances, followed her.

"I suppose the amulet is a sort of compass then, but I still feel uneasy," said Galveston. "There's no other reason it'd glow, is there? You mentioned amulets can do other things?"

"All sorts of things!" Adeya counted on her fingers as she listed off: "They store aura. They channel thoughts between the plains. They shield the wearer against dark influences. Some amulets, depending on the type, have unique abilities beyond even that—purification, conveyance, prescience, manifestation, investiture, invoca—"

"It seems to be dimming again," Galveston interrupted.

Adeya stopped to look at the amulet. The light inside the stone flickered.

A rumble shuddered through the tunnel. The three of them wobbled as the floor shook and the walls trembled. The tunnel stilled.

"What was that?" asked Galveston.

"I don't know." Adeya gazed at the amulet in her hand. "I've a terrible feeling, though."

Without another word, she kept on. The higher up the passage she backtracked, the dimmer the amulet grew.

"We're going the wrong way again!" Adeya whirled around.

Galveston and Kyen pressed themselves to the wall as she strode past. Walking by an intersection, she paused. She backed up a few steps. A tunnel stretched into the darkness on the left and the right.

Adeya bit her lip. She walked a stretch down the left tunnel, came back, and walked a stretch down the right.

"It's this way!" she called back to them.

Kyen, before he followed her, used the chip of rock to scratch the wall; an arrow of white lines pointed towards the exit.

"I'm glad someone here knows what they're doing," said Galveston.

Kyen, without a word or a glance, walked by him to follow Adeya.

"Hurry you two! It's getting brighter!" Adeya called from ahead.

The two swordsmen quickened their step to catch up.

The tunnel leveled out, before bending back on itself and diving to the level below. After a stretch, the passage again bent and descended. It straightened out into a tunnel identical to the one above. Adeya hurried down it, amulet still in hand, breaking into a run with every few steps. The tunnel ended in darkness ahead. Adeya stopped at its threshold.

A rumble shuddered the passage, worse than the first. The shaking threw Adeya to her knees and the two swordsmen for the walls. The amulet in Adeya's hand suddenly flickered out. Total darkness engulfed them.

"What happened?" demanded Galveston.

"I don't know!" cried Adeya.

A shuffle and clink came from Kyen.

Slowly, ever slowly, the faintest of blue glows returned in the darkness. With a click and scrape, a yellow glow joined it. Kyen set the glass over a new flame in the lantern. He held it up as he walked over.

Adeya held the amulet on her outstretched palm. Both Kyen and Galveston came to look at it with her. The luster inside it shown faintly, almost indistinguishable from the natural sparkle of the rock.

"Did we pass it by again?" asked Galveston.

"No," said Adeya. "Something must have happened." She walked with the amulet, her nose nearly touching the stone. At the black end of the tunnel, she stopped. Kyen and Galveston came to a stand behind her. Kyen lifted the lantern high so its yellow light could penetrate the gloom beyond.

A natural cavern larger than Arold's whole keep emerged from the darkness. Orange stalagmites and stalactites, smooth columns, and wall-like formations glistened with moisture. The floor, coated by runoff from the formations, rippled and swirled like pudding solidified. A tiny, underground stream bubbled across its surface through crystal clear pools to spatter weakly down a black fissure.

"In there?" Galveston looked at Adeya.

She gripped the amulet in her fingers and nodded.

Kyen marked another arrow on the wall. He clambered first out of the tunnel onto the uneven floor where he set the lantern down. He held out a hand to help Adeya down next. Then he took up the lantern again as Galveston hopped down with a grunt.

They started across the slick, uneven floor with cautious steps. Galveston kept a hold of Adeya's elbow the whole time while Kyen carried the lantern aloft behind them.

"Be careful not to slip, princess."

"Eek!" Adeya gripped Galveston as her boot slid out from under her. Her leg splashed knee-deep into a pool before Galveston could pull her back up.

"I told you to be careful."

"Aw, my new boot's all wet inside!"

As they crossed the cavern, the yellow light of the lantern fell short of the far walls on either side. The formations looked ghoulish in the gloom, casting deep shadows in their own folds and crevasses. All three kept an eye on the black fissure in the ground. They clambered and walked and climbed as allowed by the strange terrain of the cavern floor. On the other side, they reached a massive column half-formed up against the cavern wall.

"It can't be a dead-end," said Adeya. Her amulet in her hand—though strengthening in its luster—still looked weak.

"We should turn back," said Galveston.

Kyen, stepping over a knoll in the ground, circled to the other side of the pillar. He held up the lantern.

"Here."

A sliver of a dark, angular tunnel remained open underneath the formation of the pillar. Kyen set himself into the crack and with a bit of a shuffle, squeezed through. He reached a hand back through the hole. Adeya took it. She wedged herself into the sliver. She sucked in her stomach and, with a pull from Kyen, stepped through. Galveston pushed himself into the sliver with a grunt. He breathed out as far as he could, and both Kyen and Adeya pulled on his arm, but he stuck fast.

"Can you back out?" asked Kyen, setting the lantern down.

Putting his nub arm against the pillar, Galveston tried to push himself back out. When his body refused to budge one way or another, he gave up.

"This was a bad idea," he said, drily.

Another rumble rattled bits of stone from the ceiling. It flung Kyen and Adeya against the sides of the tunnel. Galveston clung to the pillar.

A massive crack split up the pillar's side.

Wobbling over the shaking ground, Kyen seized Galveston's nub arm. More cracks crawled up the surface of the pillar, the entire formation shifted, leaned away from Galveston.

With a yell from Galveston, Kyen wrenched him through the wedge. The entire base of the pillar began to shatter and crumble.

"Go!" Kyen shoved Galveston into Adeya. They wove from wall to wall as they tried to run, the shaking floor tossing them backwards and forwards.

Kyen, going for the lantern, lost his balance. He dropped to his hands and knees.

The pillar imploded on itself. Chips and fragments of rock sprayed into the tunnel.

Kyen scrambled to his feet, snatching up the lantern, as the crumbling formation collapsed the tunnel behind him. He fled after Adeya and Galveston.

Adeya and Galveston reached the first intersection. They stumbled up against a corner and clung to it and each other. Kyen stumbled into them, and they grabbed him to keep him from falling.

The shaking continued a moment longer before it calmed.

Still the three clung to one another and the corner, breathing hard.

Adeya gripped her amulet in a fist.

Kyen raised the lantern.

The rubble of the pillar blocked the tunnel out.

Chapter 18

"So much for your arrows," said Galveston, tugging his tunic straight.

Kyen said nothing, his brows drawn together.

"There should be more than one exit, shouldn't there?" asked Adeya.

"Or another passage back to the same exit," said Galveston. "But this place is a maze."

"If we find the summoner, his arcangel will help us find the way out," said Adeya.

Both Galveston and Kyen turned to look at her.

The amulet at Adeya's neck blazed out again, so bright Kyen and Galveston stepped back and winced.

"It's close! Hurry!" Adeya whirled around and ran down the passage. Kyen and Galveston ran after her. Intersection after intersection flashed past. Adeya suddenly skidded to a halt. She turned back and dashed down a left-hand tunnel. Kyen and Galveston dashed around the corner to follow her.

The tunnel ended without bend or intersection, cut by a shaft shooting straight up and straight down into darkness.

On the brink of this, Adeya stopped. Kyen and Galveston came up behind her. The three stood squinting at the amulet as Adeya held it up in her hands. The blaze inside the gem grew brighter and brighter, throwing the smooth walls and hard angles of the mine into stark relief.

The amulet blacked out; leaving the yellow of the lantern like a sputtering candle in contrast. Darkness re-enveloped the mine shaft.

A spark of light shot up the shaft past them, leaving a streak like a glowing thread.

Adeya gasped, Galveston took a step back, and Kyen stared.

The spark of light dropped back into sight.

Adeya's eyes widened.

The tiny pinprick of light, like a glowing mote of dust, hung out in the shaft just out of reach. It shed a bubble of clean, pure light over the tunnel walls.

Kyen and Galveston stared at it with wide eyes.

"An arcangel." Adeya touched her amulet with a hand. With the other, she reached out. The arcangel bolted away from her and sped straight up the shaft.

"Wait!" Adeya, grabbing the corner, leaned out into the shaft to gaze up after it.

The arcangel banked sideways and vanished into the wall.

Adeya's amulet at her neck hung cold and dead.

"Wait..." Adeya sank.

Kyen stepped up next to her, lifting the lantern, and looking up the shaft beside her. He turned to her.

"What if you called it?"

"Call it?" Adeya repeated, meeting Kyen's eyes. "Me? I've only read about summoning in books! I've—I've never done it. Nana never showed me how." She looked from Kyen, to Galveston, and back again. Kyen gazed up the empty shaft; and Galveston, crossing his arms, tapped his nub in the crook of his elbow.

Adeya gripped her amulet with both hands.

"I'll try." Stepping back from the edge, Adeya closed her eyes. Her brows drew together and she bit her lip as a long moment passed.

Her amulet flared.

The arcangel shot out of the rock. It dropped through the darkness to stop, hovering, glowing in the shaft.

Adeya opened her eyes, her face lit by the blue glow at her neck.

The speck floated out in front of her, swaying a little in the air, an arm's span out of reach. Slowly, Adeya lifted her hand towards it.

The arcangel drifted forward to meet her then hesitated.

Adeya stepped to the very brink of the tunnel. She reached into the shaft as far as her arm could go. Adeya held her breath as she stretched out her fingers towards the arcangel.

The tiny mote of light drew close. The amulet shone so intensely, it became nearly white. The two bubbles of light met, overlapped, and the arcangel settled into Adeya's palm.

Adeya smiled at it. Looking over her shoulder, she beamed back at the two swordsmen. Kyen smiled a little back, but Galveston frowned.

The arcangel floated down to rest against the skin of her palm where it lingered a moment. Then, it vanished.

The amulet winked out.

Adeya gasped. Snatching her arm out of the shaft, she backed away.

"Adeya?" Kyen held up the lantern, putting out a hand to steady her.

Adeya clutched at her amulet then rubbed her head. Her gaze roved this way and that, and she cocked her ear to one side.

"Princess Adeya?" asked Galveston.

"Sh!" Adeya waved her hands at them. "She's telling me—Oh. Oh no." A worried expression came over Adeya's face. She looked at them, her eyes alive with fear. "We have to get out of here. We have to go! Now—"

The wailing of many voices cut Adeya off, echoing up from the shaft.

Kyen looked over the brink.

A mass of dark bodies and orange glows filled the deep descent and shuffled its way closer. Their chortles and wails reverberated up into Kyen's face.

"Fiends!" said Galveston.

"Go," said Kyen. "Go! Go!"

Galveston and Adeya dashed away with Kyen fast on their tail.

They pelted out of the side passage back into the main tunnel. Their pounding footsteps rang back at them in echoes. The wails of the fiends followed them up the passage.

"She's being chased by fiends!" Adeya panted as they ran. "So many fiends!"

"She? The arcangel?" asked Galveston.

"She's with me," said Adeya. "She's weak. Oh, she's so weak. We have to help her. The fiends are after her. She tried to hide in the mountain but—"

The three of them stopped short. The tunnel ended in a three-way split.

Galveston stopped. "How do we know which way to go?"

"We're already lost! Just pick one!" cried Adeya.

"Didn't you say the summoner could get us out?"

"There is no summoner. It's just her—"

"But I thought you said—"

"I know what I said! She'll die if we don't get her out of here so stop arguing with me!"

"This one. It heads upwards." Kyen dashed between them, holding the lantern aloft.

Galveston and Adeya ran after him.

"Her who?" Galveston demanded.

"Nai. Her name—the arcangel's name!" said Adeya.

"Aren't arcangels supposed to be powerful?" said Galveston. "Why doesn't this Nai just blast the fiends and be done?"

"They can't just blast things. It doesn't work like that! And they need aura to do it with!" cried Adeya.

"That doesn't sound very helpful," said Galveston.

"The arcangels are protectors, not soldiers," said Adeya.

"Can we focus on staying alive, please?" asked Kyen.

Another shaft cut their tunnel off short. Their voices rang back at them up and down the hollow space. Spine-tingling wails rose from the tunnel behind them.

Kyen backed away, and they turned to backtrack.

Behind them, two orange glows appeared out of the darkness. They floated along close to the ground.

Galveston drew his arming sword.

Kyen lifted his lantern high. The beams of lantern light fell on coal-black bodies: two fire dragons. Each the size of a woolly mountain dog. They paused and lifted their reptilian heads towards them—except they had no faces, no eyes, no snout. Two yawning mouths full of sharp teeth shrieked at them.

"Fiends!" Adeya squeaked.

"Run." Kyen pushed them into a side tunnel and dashed in after them.

The fiends darted and scrambled over the rock behind them. Their shrieking calls echoed forwards and backwards through the tunnel.

Kyen ran out in front, holding the lantern high, as they dashed up the tunnel. It led upward at first only to level out. More wails joined the scratching and scrambling behind them. A warm draft shifted the air. A yellow glow of light appeared in the dark depths of the tunnel ahead.

"An exit!" cried Adeya.

The three sprinted for it. They dashed out the opening; but Kyen skidded to a halt, throwing his arms out to stop Adeya and Galveston behind him.

All three stared slack-jawed at the cavernous space ahead, at the orange and black fires licking at the rock, at the bitten-off nubs of stalagmites and stalactites, at the massive coal-black body shifting between the boulders.

Chapter 19

The orange dancing flames played across a thick body of scaled muscle. The thud of its footfall trembled the ground. A fire dragon the size of Arold's keep turned an empty face towards them. A giant mouth of sharp teeth leered. Its breath hissed out, orange and black flames curling around its smile. Flecks of ash and acrid steam blasted past Kyen, Galveston, and Adeya.

The three whirled around to flee back to the tunnel. They stopped short.

Fiend dragons of all sizes crowded the exit, lighting the dimness with their orange bellies. Each lipless grin gnashed teeth, shrieked, and chortled together in chorus. They surged up the passage in a seething horde.

"Fiends!" Galveston drew his sword. "They're all fiends!"

"This way!" said Kyen.

Together the three turned. Led by Kyen they bolted for the open space between the cavern wall and the giant fiend dragon.

The giant shifted. Its massive foot slammed into their path.

Kyen pushed his companions backwards behind him, keeping his face to the dragon. Alone, Kyen feinted a dash to the giant's other side, but the fiend lashed out with its tail, forcing Kyen back.

The giant fiend gusted a hiss at them. Adeya winced in the heat, and Galveston sheltered his face with his gauntlet.

The horde spilled out of the tunnel and spread over the cavern floor. Galveston backed away, pushed up against Adeya and Kyen. Kyen shoved back as the giant fiend thudded another step closer.

"Surrounded!" Galveston lashed out as a tiny fiend encroached. It jumped away from his blade and wailed.

The giant fiend lifted itself up, towering over them.

"I'll distract it," said Kyen, not taking his eyes off the giant.

"Do you have a death wish?" cried Galveston.

"I'm the fastest," said Kyen. "You two look for an exit. Trade?"

Kyen held out the lantern to Adeya. Her aquamarine eyes bright, she took the lantern and passed him the spear.

Hefting it in both hands, Kyen charged the giant fiend. It roared at him, swinging out with its huge claws. Kyen threw himself to the ground, rolled under the swipe, and leapt up ramming his spear into the fiend's breast. The spear-point bounced off its scales.

The giant fiend reared backwards. It slung a claw down. Kyen bolted first to one side, then to the next, the claw slamming into the ground around him. The giant lunged, chest-first. Kyen ran. Its belly smashed into the rock behind him. Its head snapped at the fringe of his cloak. Kyen skidded to a halt out of the dragon's reach, whipping the spear around in one hand.

The giant fiend arose, blustering out another breath—this one tinged with fire—that swept past Kyen.

"Kyen!"

"Kyen of Avanna, hurry!"

The horde encircled Galveston and Adeya, pushing them towards the wall. Galveston smashed his blade into the nearest fiend. Another sprang at him. He smacked the fiend out of the air with his gauntlet and slung it to the ground. Adeya shattered the lantern on its head. Drawing her longsword, Adeya lobbed at three fiends advancing on her. None of her swings landed, but the fiends shied away from her swooping blade.

Kyen fixed his eyes on the giant fiend as it stomped forward. He hefted the spear and charged. The giant fiend dove at him. The massive chomp of teeth snagged air as he jumped sideways. Kyen sprinted away, rounding the fiend's hulking shape. The fiend lashed out at him with its claws. Kyen ducked, but the giant whipped its claws down in a backhanded smack. The blow struck Kyen in the back. He flew then tumbled across the cavern floor. He landed face-down in the dust and laid unmoving, spear still in hand.

"Kyen!" Adeya yelled.

The giant fiend chortled—a low, chest-throbbing sound—and thundered after Kyen.

Adeya started after him, but Galveston grabbed her wrist. As the dragon neared Kyen, a space opened up between it and the cavern wall. The fiend's tail swung back and forth over the gap.

"Run, princess!" Galveston yanked Adeya forward, and they sprinted together.

The giant fiend stopped at the sound of Galveston's shout. It bent its head over its shoulder towards the two fleeing figures. As they ran into the gap, it slung its tail at them. Galveston dropped to the ground, shoving Adeya's down with him, as the tail breezed overhead. Dragging her back to her feet, he pulled her forward with an eye on the giant fiend. The tail swept back from the other direction. Galveston and Adeya ducked beneath it and sprinted the last stretch out of range. They ran for the dark wall that rose at the back of the cavern.

The horde of fiends streamed after them.

While the giant fiend hissed after Adeya and Galveston, Kyen arose. He staggered upright back to his feet. The giant fiend turned with a ground-shuddering step and met a standing warrior.

A grim glint in his eye and breathing hard, Kyen hefted the spear.

The giant fiend drew itself up, hissing in a great breath. It spewed out a stream of black fire.

Kyen fled. The fire carved out a sweep of lava at his heels. The giant turned the stream to chase him. Kyen dove into the shelter of the boulders. Black fire plastered over the rock, fusing boulders together and searing the ground. The dragon snapped off the stream of fire. With thudding footsteps, it approached the boulders. Its head rose over the pile and wove back and forth.

Kyen, crouching in the shadows, crept atop a boulder near the fiend's side.

The clangs of Galveston's sword and Adeya's shouts drew its attention. It turned its face towards them and stepped into the streaming horde.

With a running start, Kyen vaulted off the boulder. He landed at a crouch on the fiend's back.

The giant flinched.

Kyen hung on as a shrug rippled down the scaly back. As the back stilled, he sprang to his feet. He dashed along its spine towards the base of its head. Bringing the spear back full bore, he jammed the spear in a chink between the fiend's scales. The thrust buried the spearhead and wedged fast.

The giant fiend roared. It arched its back.

Kyen leapt off as the fiend slammed its upper body into the roof of the cavern. The rock ceiling jammed the spear through its neck. Fissures burst through the cavern roof.

Kyen hit the ground at a roll and righted himself amidst the charging horde. Whipping out his longsword, he charged with them, slashing and hacking down those nearest him. The fiends shrank away from his blade, wailing. He broke free of the front lines and out-sprinted them to reach Adeya and Galveston.

The giant fiend thrashed its head, roaring, swiping aside and smashing the smaller fiends around its feet.

Overhead, the cracks in the ceiling spread. A mass of boulders and rock broke loose. The debris poured from the ceiling and slammed into the giant fiend. It roared as massive chunks of rock pummeled its body into the ground. The cave-in buried the giant's flailing claw. The fiends nearest Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston drew up short and scattered left and right, wailing and crouching.

A last hunk broke free of the ceiling and crashed atop the debris pile burying the giant.

The three companions halted at the back of the cavern. A sheer rock wall stretched in either direction.

"Exit? Where's the exit?" cried Adeya.

"There isn't one," said Galveston.

Kyen turned back, breathing hard, still gripping his longsword.

"Are you alright?" Adeya asked him.

Kyen nodded; his stormy gaze stayed on the pile of rubble.

A shift inside the pile loosed the topmost boulder. It tumbled to the ground with a thud. The pile of debris swelled upward. Dark scales appeared as the mound shifted apart. The giant fiend burst free with a shake of its head. The fiend horde crawled like black ants as the giant shifted out of the rubble. The spear haft protruding from the giant's neck blackened and sank into its body. The giant loosed shrieking roar that trembled the cavern. Dust and pebbles rained from the ceiling.

The horde of lesser fiends regrouped and swarmed forward. The giant lumbered behind heedless of crushing its own underfoot.

Kyen, Galveston, and Adeya backed away, weapons upraised, until they stood against the wall. Circling them, the fiends chortled to one another. Toothy grins widened.

The two swordsmen pushed Adeya behind them. Galveston pointed his sword first at one fiend, then another, his gauntlet upraised. Kyen's hands clenched his hilt.

Kyen's eyes grew wide. He looked back at Adeya.

She stared, pale, wide-eyed at the horde. Pain suddenly pinched her face.

"No! Don't—" Kyen reached for Adeya.

A deep thrum stopped him. It shuddered up the walls of the cavern.

The horde halted, huddled backwards, and the giant's grin fell.

Adeya clutched at her amulet with tears shining in her eyes.

The rock wall behind them glowed hot.

The companions and fiends alike backed away.

First dull orange, then bright orange, then furnace yellow, the heat in the wall intensified. A wave rippled through the wall. Molten lava broke the surface and gushed onto the cavern floor.

Adeya stared. Kyen and Galveston shielded her, but the torrent parted around them.

It rushed by in surging waves, blasting up heat and raging towards the line of fiends. The horde fled, but the lava swept into them. It swallowed black, wailing bodies, sucking them under the rush of molten rock. The giant fiend roared, backing away as the lava flooded over its claws.

Galveston, Kyen, and Adeya stared at the growing space between their tiny island in the lava and the retreating fiends.

Adeya turned and lifted her gaze to the wall behind them. She whimpered.

Kyen and Galveston looked back, and Galveston's jaw dropped open.

A yawning gap melted from the cavern wall. Inside, lava drained down a molten tunnel that bored up into the mountain. White light burst out its hot yellow end. The three shaded their eyes as the beams broke across their faces.

Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston all stared, opened-mouth.

The sound of crackling stone drew their attention.

The lava at the tip of their island blackened. It hardened and cooled so fast it splintered. The cooling spread to the tunnel's entrance where it shot forwards. The dark path snaked up the glowing hot tunnel towards the daylight.

"Hurry!" cried Adeya. "Nai can't hold it long!"

Kyen ran up the black path first. Adeya followed, pausing to grab Galveston's arm because he stood staring in open-mouthed shock.

The three dashed up the black path towards the surface. Sweat stood out on all their faces as they ran. The tunnel seethed and rippled around them.

A ferocious chorus of wailing rose. They glanced back.

The fiend horde charged into the flows of lava. Several fell, sucked down into the flow. The rest leapt over their bodies. They clambered over each other, scrambling towards the tunnel.

The three turned and ran faster. The path behind them sank back into the hot rock at their heels.

The horde slammed into the tunnel's entrance and crowded up after them.

"Go!" Galveston shoved Adeya ahead. He brandished his sword.

The three dashed the tunnel's last steep incline. The flow of lava slowed around them as they ran and neared the exit. The fiends, shrieking and wailing, struggled and slipped through the lava in pursuit. The mountain around them groaned.

Kyen and Adeya dashed out to level ground, open air, bright daylight.

Galveston hung back, hacking and thrusting at the forerunning fiends.

Kyen turned back. He seized Galveston by the collar, jerking him away as Galveston was mid-swing.

The groan of the mountain rose in pitch and volume. A shudder ran through the moving rock. The tunnel's sides suddenly grew raging hot.

The two swordsmen threw themselves out the last stretch of the tunnel. Behind them, it collapsed in a rush of lava sweeping the screaming horde back into the depths. The mountainside grew orange. Like a living thing, it shifted back together and sealed over the tunnel's exit. The rock cooled, hardened, dimmed to blacks and grays. The mountainside stilled. Dark pebbles tumbled down and clattered to a stop at their feet.

Kyen and Galveston, still laying on the ground where they'd dove, stared at the gash and panted for breath. Adeya wandered over. She looked pale and dazed.

They listened to the groan of the mountain echo through the hills and fade.

Chapter 20

"What in the names of all the great kings of Ellunon," whispered Galveston, "was that?"

"Oh no," said Adeya.

Kyen and Galveston looked back and, seeing her face, rose to their feet.

Adeya cupped her hands.

The speck of light—the arcangel, Nai—floated out of Adeya's chest. It settled into her palms. The arcangel's light waned brighter then dimmer as it hovered in her hands. Its light faded and winked out.

A glimmer rose into Adeya's eyes. She looked up from her empty hands to the swordsmen. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she said, "She gave herself... She used the last of her strength to save us."

"What! Dead?" said Galveston.

"My nana said an arcangel's power is like a glass of water, but the arcangel is the water also. If they do too much, if they pour out themselves too far, then—then—" A sob choked Adeya off. She buried her face in her hands and cried.

Kyen stared at the empty space between them. He looked pale and haggard.

Galveston put a hand on Adeya's shoulder.

"Do not cry," he said. "She died fulfilling her duty as arcangel. She's passed on nobly, princess."

Adeya cried harder.

Kyen, turning slowly, wordlessly, walked away.

"Come, princess. Come." Galveston put an arm around her shoulders and gently ushered her after Kyen.

The three wandered across the mountainside: Adeya still sniffing and wiping at her eyes; Galveston with a face grave and serious, helping her over the rough terrain; and Kyen picking their course a stone's throw ahead of them. He walked with his head hung. Adeya watched him, concern plain on her face, especially when he wobbled over the rocky stretches.

None of them spoke as the Arc sank from the sky, and afternoon grew into evening. They wove across the trackless mountainside. Kyen headed west aligned with the Arc overhead. By arcset, they could see over the shoulder of the mountain. The path they walked up into Denmont now wound its way down into the forests of Varkest. Kyen angled their course to rejoin the path, but as the Arc sank and disappeared behind the mountains, twilight set in.

"We'll stop here for the night," Kyen said in a flat, emotionless voice. He stopped in a hollowed with a tall boulder jutting out over it. The overhang sheltered them from the cold wind rising.

Dropping the pack, Kyen left them and rounded the boulder out of sight. His feet scrambled on rock overhead. Silence fell as Galveston started a fire. Adeya dug out dried vegetables and their water flask to make a thin soup. Soon, the pot simmered over crackling flames. The heat from the fire reflected off the rock, making the hollow snug and warm. Beyond, the dark of night thickened, and the temperature dropped.

"Do you realize we entered the mine in the afternoon but exited at nearly the same time of day?" Galveston ladled himself a bowl of soup. "Who knows how long we were down in that wretched hole..."

"We couldn't have been in the mountain for a whole day, surely!" said Adeya.

"Convince my aching, weary body of that. Time is strange underground, princess."

Adeya ladled herself a bowl and set it aside. She emptied the last of the pot into a third bowl as Galveston continued.

"We have no way of knowing when the blizzards will come again. It'll bode badly to be stuck here if they do."

Looking at the rock overhead, Adeya said, "Do you think I should take him something to eat?"

"Best leave him be. He's got no reason to be so tragic. If we found one arcangel, it's all the more in our favor we will find another, especially with that amulet of yours."

Adeya gave Galveston a long, conflicted look. He tucked into his bowl and ignored all else. She looked into the soup bowl steaming in her hand. All at once, she left the firelight and headed around the boulder the way Kyen had taken.

Adeya, careful not to spill the soup, stepped up the steep incline.

Kyen perched at the tip of the boulder, sitting directly over their camp. He sat with his arms propped on his knees, his head hung low between them. The shadows of twilight hid his face.

Adeya walked up to him.

Kyen remained still, not noticing her presence.

She lowered the bowl to set it next to him. Turning to leave, she took a few steps back down the rock. She paused, fingering her amulet. Then, turning back, she came, sat herself next to Kyen, and drew her knees up to her chest.

"Thank you."

Adeya looked over at Kyen when he spoke.

Kyen drew in a great breath and lifted his head. He let the breath out as a heavy sigh. Picking up the bowl, he spooned the contents around.

"You're welcome," said Adeya, smiling, but it lacked enough heart to linger on her face long.

The silence stretched on between them.

"You're not hurt, are you?" asked Adeya. "After the giant fiend? Nothing broken?"

"I'll be alright."

"You saved our lives. Thank you."

"Nai saved our lives." Kyen spooned up a bit of soup and stared at it.

Adeya hugged her knees and shivered again. "I really don't know what I'm doing."

Kyen, his spoon still suspended, glanced at her.

"Nai told me. There wasn't ever a summoner in the mine," she said. "Only herself. My amulet reacted to her being near. Nai might be gone, but the last summoner—I'm... I'm sure he's still out there." Adeya smiled, but Kyen looked away.

He let the spoon fall back into the bowl and moved to set the bowl aside. "Did she... Did she speak much to you? Nai?"

"Only a little," Adeya shrugged. "Though, I don't know if you'd call it speaking. It's more like I felt her when she was with me. I felt how weak she'd grown, how long she'd been running, how fiends kept cornering her, pulling the life out of her. It'd been years since she'd felt the light of the Nadir."

Kyen paused, his bowl hanging a moment in midair, and asked, "Did she speak of any others? Other arcangels?" His voice came across deadpan, flat. He set the bowl down.

"No."

Kyen heaved another sigh. He turned to her, his face forlorn in the last of the fading light. He looked long at her, eyes unfocused, as though seeing through her.

Adeya blushed, shifted. "What is it?"

"You should go back to the fire," said Kyen. "It's getting cold."

Adeya rose. "You'll come too?"

"In a bit."

Turning, Adeya shuffled back down the boulder and disappeared into their camp.

Kyen remained, his soup growing cold at his side. As night descended around him, he stared off into the distance without seeing it.

Chapter 21

Adeya sighed as she stopped in the shadow of the familiar sign. One board pointed north towards Denmont, the other pointed south toward Varkest.

Galveston stopped next to her, glaring at the sign, his hand and nub on his hips. "Two days! Two days, when it took us only one up. All because we had to cut across the mountainside back to the road."

Behind them, Kyen walked by without noticing.

Galveston's glare followed him. "Counting the time we spent underground, that's four or five days wasted—a necessary evil—" He shot a look at Adeya. "But we're no closer to finding the last summoner. Who knows what the Kingmaster has been up to with his hold on Isea?"

Adeya sighed again and walked away. Galveston followed

"How many days till we reach this town?" asked Galveston. "I say. Kyen of Avanna!"

"What's that?" Kyen looked up with tired eyes.

"I'm speaking to you, man!"

"I'm sorry."

"Never mind."

Kyen blinked at him, uncomprehending, then returned his attention to the forest.

The mountains disappeared behind the trees as they entered the Deepwood. The woods grew tall and wild with trunks like red pillars. Their thick canopy stretched overhead like a vaulted ceiling, leaving the forest floor in a green twilight. A rich scent heavy with damp and ancient forest soil mingled with the spicy aroma of pine. Birdsong or the thudding of beaks on wood reverberated through the quiet. Copses of ferns crowded the highway and brushed against their knees while they walked.

"Is this Varkest?" Adeya's voice sounded small as it carried among the trunks. "It feels completely different from the woods in Isea."

"The loggadders say many of these trees have been standing since the Firstwold," said Galveston.

"Oh." Adeya gazed into the dimness of the forest. She gasped and grabbed onto Galveston's gauntlet. "What was that? I think I saw something move. Over there!"

Galveston gazed in the direction she pointed.

Kyen stopped to look as well.

"Probably a reeking dragon." Galveston smiled and patted her hand.

"Dragon?" She snatched her hand away.

"Oh yes." Galveston rested his nub on his hilt. "Their breath and skin are highly poisonous. Their gaze is said to paralyze. Since the defeat of Varkest in the Black War, the creatures overrun the forest. Are you frightened?"

"Yes!" Adeya cried. "I've had enough of dragons! But don't you dare mention Eope to me."

"As you wish, princess." Galveston smiled to himself.

A chorus of human roars startled them. Three thugs leapt from the trees.

Kyen and Galveston whipped their blades out and lunged to meet them.

Galveston slapped aside the sword of the first with his gauntlet then smacked it backhand across the thug's face.

The thug dropped.

His partner slashed out at Galveston, but Galveston deflected and disarmed him. The thug's sword flew to the ground. Galveston stepped on the fallen thug's throat and pressed the other against the tree with his sword point.

Kyen sidestepped the thug who slashed at him. He smacked his hilt in the thug's face. The thug reeled. Clutching his nose, he lashed back at Kyen. Kyen ducked under the swipe, entered the thug's guard, and tackled him up against a tree. The thug froze when he found Kyen's blade at his throat.

Adeya fumbled to draw the sword from her scabbard. By the time she raised it, the two thugs held up their hands at sword-point while the third gurgled under Galveston's foot.

A knife thudded into the tree beside Kyen's face.

Kyen jumped.

"That's enough," said a voice.

A fourth thug slung an arm around Adeya's shoulders.

She gasped, gripped her sword, but the thug tickled Adeya's throat with a knife point. His arm dangling around her shoulders squeezed her tight, and he smirked.

"These guys are tough, Revel!" said the thug beneath Galveston's blade.

"Of course, they are," replied Revel. "Only talented swordsmen travel without a company of guards. Now gentlemen." He eyed Kyen and Galveston. "If you value your lady, sheath your blades."

Galveston glared at Revel. He shoved himself away from the thug he'd pinned and lowered his sword.

Kyen joined Galveston, regarding Revel with his cool gray eyes.

"Sheath them, if you please," said Revel.

Kyen and Galveston both replaced their swords in their scabbards.

"Very good." Revel smiled. "You, too, my lady."

Adeya, after a moment's struggle to align the point without looking, put her sword away.

His three thugs, rubbing necks, chins, and noses, picked up their swords and staggered over to stand behind their leader.

Adeya looked at Kyen and Galveston, pale, her eyes bright. Revel's dagger point rubbed against her neck.

"Let's make this easy," said Revel. "We're not opposed to travelers—we welcome them! You want safe passage. I want coin. Give me all the coin you have and I'll let you through unharmed." He gave Adeya a little squeeze, pressing the knife into her throat.

Kyen began to search his pockets, and Galveston's fist clenched.

"Just who are you?" Adeya demanded, unable to look at Revel for the knife against her throat. "Can I see your license?"

Revel raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "Uh, pardon?"

Adeya put her hand on her hips. "Don't you need a license to levy road tax? It's law by all the Kingdoms of Ellunon!"

Revel stared at her, open-mouthed. His thugs behind him stifled chuckles.

"Heh! Sorry. I left my license at home. Now, how about that coin?" He nodded at Kyen and Galveston. Kyen turned out empty pockets and shrugged at Galveston, but Galveston glared at Revel.

"I refuse to submit to any road tax without seeing the proper papers." Adeya stuck her nose in the air.

"Oh?" Revel looked bemused.

"You don't want me to report you, do you? As Adeya of Isea, Crown Princess and Sole Heiress to the Throne, it'd be my duty to see you properly punished."

Galveston clapped a hand to his face.

Kyen stood, hand outstretched, mouth opened, all too late.

Revel's smirk broadened. "I thought you looked familiar. Crown Princess and Sole Heiress? Well then, never mind about the toll. We'll take you instead."

"What!"

Revel gripped Adeya tighter into a headlock. He untied her longsword from her belt and took it away from her.

"Gentlemen," he addressed Galveston and Kyen. "Please give my kind regards to the King of Isea. If he'd like his daughter back alive, he'll bring twenty-five bushel weight of gold and leave it at the abandoned town southeast of Isea. And don't think of following us, if you'd like to keep her unscathed."

With a nod to his thieves, Revel set off, dragging Adeya with him.

"Halt! I demand it! You can't hold me for ransom!" Adeya cried.

"My apologies, your highness." Revel shoved her into the center of the group.

Adeya cast a frightened look back.

Kyen and Galveston stood motionless on the road. They watched as the group of thieves took Adeya away into the depths of the forest. They watched until tree trunks hid them from sight, until the sound of their voices grew fainter and fainter, until only the soft whistle of the breeze through the pines remained.

"Let's give them an arcquarter's head start," said Kyen.

"Then we follow them and take her back?" asked Galveston.

Kyen nodded.

"I warned you against bringing Princess Adeya with us," said Galveston. "I warned both of you. If they hurt her, I'm not going to wait for a trial. Or an executioner."

Chapter 22

Adeya glanced back.

Ferns crowded the space between tree trunks. The guffawing and loud talk from the thieves echoed up in the canopy.

A thug jostled her, and she stumbled. Shooting a glare at him, Adeya lifted her chin high and straightened into a regal bearing.

The thug chuckled.

Adeya ignored him.

Revel walked up ahead. A black headband tied a tousle of blond hair out of his eyes. His white shirt boasted puffy sleeves. Two wide belts, lined up and down with throwing knives, crisscrossed his chest. A belt strapped two daggers against his back.

The tallest, broadest of the thugs walked beside Revel. He wore leather arm bracers and a blade—either a short sword or a long knife—belted to his back.

Flanking Adeya, the two remaining thugs kept an eye on her. Chainmail shirts, broad leather belts with longswords, and bulging forearms: the two dressed exactly the same. Even their faces were identical. A topknot on one and a shaved head on the other set them apart.

Topknot pulled a long strip of cord from his belt. He reached for Adeya's wrists.

She slapped his hand away. "Don't you dare tie me!"

Topknot stared at her while his brother chuckled.

"I'm smart enough to know when I'm vanquished," she said. "I won't run away." Adeya glared at Topknot until he lowered his eyes and put the cord away.

"Thank you." Taking both of them in turn, Adeya raised her voice to carry ahead. "Now then. It's money you want? What if I knew a way to get you more coin than any ransom?"

The two brothers grinned at each other.

Revel eyed her for a moment over his shoulder.

"My companions and I are on a quest. Upon it the entire kingdom of Isea depends. Perhaps even all of Ellunon," said Adeya. "Release me, help us achieve our destination, and I will see that your reward is double your asking price."

Bracers spoke without looking back. "And what would stop you from arresting us rather than paying us?"

"As a member of the royal family, I have the power to grant clemency," said Adeya. "Help us. You will be granted clemency and coin. More than you can imagine."

Revel snorted. "I can think of some pretty high numbers."

Bracers asked, "And what sort of quest are you on?"

"To find the summoner near the walls of the Timbered City."

"Summoner!" Revel spat on a passing tree root. "I wouldn't help you for all the gold in Ellunon."

Bracers raised an eyebrow at Revel.

Adeya stared at him, open-mouthed. "But—"

"No, princess. Even if you could offer me the whole treasury of Isea, it wouldn't be enough to satisfy me." Revel smiled back at her, but it didn't touch his eyes.

Adeya shut her mouth. She kept her silence as she followed them onward. Up ahead, several bright beams of light cut through the trees in the distance. Her stomach growled by the time they stepped out of the ferns into a clearing. The shafts of arlight, bursting into evergreen twilight, shined on ruins. Shatters of white stone lay tumbled and half-buried in ferns across the forest floor. Beside them stood a domed ruin. Cracks ran down its curved surface and vines ran up; the ruin looked like a green hill amidst the trees. A dark opening waited at the mouth of a faint footpath.

Revel stopped at the opening. Leaning against the wall, he grinned at Adeya and motioned inside. "After you, my lady."

"It will not end well for you if you don't release me immediately." Adeya glared at him.

"Oh? And why's that?"

"You didn't recognize one of my companions, did you?"

"Which one? Stumpy or the Beanpole?"

"The 'Beanpole' is Kyen of Avanna."

The smiles fell off the thugs' faces. They looked at her with wide eyes, falling silent.

Revel's eyebrows rose.

"That's right," said Adeya. "The greatest swordsman in all the kingdoms of Ellunon. He'll come for me. When he does, you'll be sorry you didn't release me."

"Kyen of Avanna died in the Black War," said Bracers.

"When he comes for me, you'll wish he had," said Adeya.

Revel rubbed his chin. His grin grew wider by the moment.

"I think she's right, Bracers," said Revel. "I've been hearing reports up and down the highway. A swordsman of remarkable skill, thwarting, escaping, and trouncing every highwayman and robber from here to Valeda. I should have recognized him by his description."

"And he's coming for you next," said Adeya. "If you don't let me go."

"Actually, I'm counting on him coming." Revel grinned in her face. "Do you know what it will do for my reputation, robbing the illustrious Kyen of Avanna? In you go now, your highness!" Revel shoved Adeya through the doorway.

Adeya stumbled inside, catching herself before she fell. Blinking in the dimness, she took hesitant steps forward as the thugs crowded inside behind her.

A small fire burned in the center of the dome, and its light, joined by that streaming through the cracks, cast just enough to see. A scrawny man squatted by the fire where he toasted a piece of bread on a stick. Another man sat back in the shadows, his back against a mound of bundles. The scrawny man looked up at them when they entered.

"What took you so long?"

"A lucrative opportunity popped up on road, Ruty," said Revel. "Too good to pass up."

Ruty's eyes found Adeya, and he scrutinized her up and down.

"Take a seat, princess." Bracers nudged Adeya forward.

Adeya stepped up the fire but didn't sit down.

Revel walked up to the man hunched in the darkness. He nudged him with his toe, none too gently. "Hatts! Hey, Hatts! Still under the weather?"

"Hasn't said two words together since you left," said Ruty.

"Knocked you in the head a good one, did they? Stupid lumbergadders!" Revel bent, pushed up Hatts' floppy cap to look him in the face. "Ah, you'll be fine."

"Is he hurt?" Adeya asked.

Revel cast her a sharp look then went to flop down beside the fire; he dropped Adeya's sword on the ground beside him.

"Hatts took a blow to the head last job we were at," said Bracers. "Hasn't been himself since."

"May I look at him?" asked Adeya. "I'm a healer."

"Gonna poison him, no doubt," muttered Ratty.

Bracers looked to Revel, and Revel shrugged.

"She can't make him any worse, can she?"

Adeya climbed to her feet and, with Bracers shadowing her elbow, approached Hatts. She kneeled down beside him.

Hatts didn't stir or look up.

"Can you bring over light?" she asked.

Bracers left to grab a thick stick from the fire and brought its flaming end to hold over them. The flickering light revealed Hatts to be a youth with his first scanty whiskers.

"May I take off your hat?" Adeya asked.

Hatts stared into the space between his knees.

Adeya lifted off the floppy cap. With gentle fingers, she examined his head beneath his curly hair. Even under her touch, the youth neither stirred nor looked up.

"Where was he hit?" asked Adeya.

Bracers pointed.

"Bring the light a little closer."

Bracers lowered the burning stick.

Adeya probed in his hair where Bracers had pointed.

"I can barely even find a bump. Are you sure it was a head injury?" Adeya sat back. As she did, the flickering light fell over a black welt on the youth's neck. Adeya's eyes grew wide when she saw it. With a cry, she leapt to her feet and ran to hide behind Bracers.

Bracers, looking over his shoulder, raised an eyebrow at her.

"A black mark!"

"Can you keep it down? I'm trying to nap over here," said Revel.

"It's the Kingmaster! He's taken Isea. The king, the guards, and he has a hold of Hatts now, too," said Adeya. "I'm in danger. We're all in danger!"

"Danger?" repeated Bracers.

"It's a black weapon, don't you see?" said Adeya. "Please, you have to listen to me!"

"I'm getting tired of this," said Revel. "First summoners, then Kyen of Avanna, then this Kingmaster fellow. I've half a mind to gag you. Put the princess in the corner, Bracers. Rest will put the boy right as a rainbow fish. It's best you let him do so and get to it."

Bracers reached out an arm to grab Adeya's wrist, but she yanked it out of his reach. "I can walk, thank you, if you will show me where you want me to sit."

Bracers pointed.

Adeya marched over to the opposite wall and sat down with a huff. She glared at the whole group of them as Bracers rejoined the others and tossed his branch back into the fire. Her glare faded as her gaze drifted back to Hatts. She stiffened.

Hatts had raised his blank eyes to stare at her. Even in the depth of the shadows, the faintest smile played over his face.

Chapter 23

Kyen dropped down beside Galveston and crouched with him in the ferns. They peered through the fronds together at the green dome where Topknot and Shaver stood at the entrance.

"There're six of them," whispered Kyen.

Galveston growled under his breath.

"All armed with swords, knives, and the like," said Kyen. "Thankfully, I didn't see any polearms."

"If they so much as pluck one hair from her head, I'm going to kill them all." A muscle in Galveston's jaw worked after he spoke.

"Some cracks run through the dome, but nothing large enough to get an arm through," said Kyen.

"Only one way in or out," said Galveston.

They both fell silent as they watched the doorway. Shaver, covering a nostril, blew out his nose on the ground. Topknot cracked his neck.

"We'd be hard-pressed to defeat so many, even together," said Kyen. "What if I challenged the leader to a duel? If I win, they release Adeya."

"And if he wins?"

Kyen's brows drew together as he thought hard.

"These are thieves, Kyen of Avanna," said Galveston. "Honor doesn't bind them to agreements. No. We need to fight these thieves as thieves."

A branch cracked nearby.

Both swordsmen looked up, and they froze.

Curled around the trunk of a tree above, a green serpentine dragon stared down at them with enormous yellow eyes. It issued a soft hiss, green vapors curling up around its fangs.

Kyen wrenched his head away. "Close your eyes, Galveston!"

"Are you insane?"

"Don't look it in the eyes!"

"It's going to spring!"

"Close your eyes!"

Kyen slipped away from him. He snatched a thick, forked stick from the ground even as Galveston reached for his sword.

Galveston bared the blade a fraction when a tremor ran through him. All his muscles seized.

The dragon lunged down on Galveston.

Kyen whacked it out of the air with his stick. The dragon hit the ground with a thump. Kyen pinned its neck with the stick's forked end and forced its face into the ground. The dragon's long body curled over itself backwards and forwards. It hissed like a kettle spewing green steam and tried to claw away the stick.

Galveston jerked back into movement. Giving himself a shake, he glanced at the half-drawn sword in his hand.

"What by the Arc?" he breathed.

"It'll paralyze you if you look at it!" said Kyen, low and urgent.

"They're coming!" Galveston ducked down.

In the clearing, both Topknot and Shaver approached Kyen's and Galveston's hiding spot. They drew their swords and crept towards the hissing ferns.

"You've given us away!" snapped Galveston. "I'm going for the princess." He ducked away into the trees.

"Wait! But—Galveston!" Kyen looked at the thugs then to the dragon squirming under his stick.

Topknot and Shaver treaded softly with blades upraised. They drew within a stone's throw when the ferns rustled. A green object burst upwards with a spray of leaves.

A long, scaly body thudded to the ground in front of Topknot and Shaver. The dragon uncoiled with an angry hiss. It turned its large eyes on the two swordsmen, baring its fangs.

Both men paled and jammed their eyes shut. Half-squinting, half-swinging blindly, Topknot and Shaver chopped and slashed at the dragon. It slithered between them, snapping at their ankles. The blows that landed glanced off its hard scales. The dragon's eyes flashed.

It pushed the thugs into the trees. They yelled, turned, and ran, but the dragon chased after them. As it vanished into the ferns, Kyen darted out from hiding. He stopped in the clearing before the entrance.

"Revel!"

Inside the dome, Revel, Ruty, and Bracers look up at the yells from Topknot and Shaver. When Kyen's shout reached them, Adeya's face lit up.

"Revel!" Kyen's voice sounded again outside. "Face me for the princess!"

A smile crawled across Revel's face.

"Ruty, take Hatts and the princess out the back way. Bracers, guard my back." Revel rose to his feet. He walked out the door with Bracers in his wake.

"Up on your feet, princess," said Ruty. He scurried to a crack in the back of the dome, giving Hatts' foot a kick on the way. "On your feet youngin."

Bracers stopped in the doorway with his arms crossed. His back blocked Adeya's view, but Revel and Kyen's voice carried in from outside.

"So you're the great Kyen of Avanna?" said Revel. He sauntered into the clearing and stopped, putting his thumbs under his knife belts.

"Return Princess Adeya," said Kyen. "And we'll leave you unharmed."

Revel smiled a black, mirthless smile. His hands shot out.

Kyen leapt aside as two daggers stabbed the ground where he'd been standing.

Flipping knife after knife, Revel launched them after Kyen. Steel flashed as Kyen ducked, dodged, and weaved. Daggers thumped into tree trunks, skittered in the pine needles, bounced off rocks all around him. As Kyen evaded, he kept a hand on his longsword but didn't draw.

Kyen veered aside. The knives thudded around him. One clipped his hair. Another sliced the hem of his cloak. Kyen snagged a knife stuck in a tree trunk, grabbed one out of the dirt, sidestepped a flying knife, and grabbed it out of the air as it flew past.

Revel frowned. He launched another volley.

Kyen danced around them, back and forth. At every opening, Kyen threw the knives he collected but not at Revel. They thumped up on the tree trunks high out of reach.

Revel paused his throwing. He twiddled a knife through his fingers. "You're crafty."

Kyen stood in a guard stance, ready to draw his sword, still and calm. His stormy gaze never wavered from Revel.

After contemplating for a moment, Revel smiled. He sheathed the throwing knife in his hand and reached behind his back. Revel pulled out two long daggers—each nearly as long as his forearm. Their blades looked like icepicks with a wicked narrow point.

When Kyen saw these, his eyes narrowed. He drew his sword.

"That's better," said Revel. "Do you like my armor piercers?" He flourished the daggers in his hand. He lunged at Kyen, but Kyen stretched out his longsword and backed away. He jabbed at Revel to keep his distance.

Revel walked one way a few strides then walked back. He sized Kyen up. Revel lunged again, pressing Kyen's guard, but Kyen leapt back. He held the full length of his longsword between himself and Revel. Kyen backed away, stopping when his heels met the base of a tree trunk.

Revel charged Kyen. He knocked Kyen's jabbing sword aside. Kyen's back hit a tree trunk. Revel flung apart Kyen's arms and stabbed at his neck.

Kyen leaned sideways.

Revel's dagger thudded into the tree trunk.

Kyen caught Revel's second dagger hand as he thrust the blade towards Kyen's gut. Kyen twisted Revel's arm. Revel's back arched, and he yelped in pain, staggering into the twist. Kyen forced their places to trade; he slung Revel face-first into the tree trunk.

Revel's forehead rebounded off the wood with a thud.

Kyen reached around to wrench several throwing knives from Revel's belts. Five rapid thuds sounded as he stabbed Revel: one through his puffy sleeve, the other the cloth of his shoulder, the next through a pant leg, the next through his collar, and the final through his opposite sleeve.

Kyen backed away.

Revel wrenched himself this way and that, but his knives had pinned him face-first against the tree.

"What did you—" He jerked around to look at Kyen but couldn't.

Kyen turned away and, finding the dome's entrance empty, jogged towards it.

Revel roared into the tree trunk: "Kyen of Avanna!"

Chapter 24

The clangs of the fight between Kyen and Revel sound outside the dome. Adeya hung back to listen, but Ruty snapped at her.

"Over here! Princess, if you please."

Slowly, Hatts rose.

Eyeing him, Adeya sidled over next to Ruty.

"Hold this." Ruty handed Adeya's longsword to Hatts. The little man probed the crack with skittering fingers. He found a grip and shoved the crack to the side. Stone ground on stone as the wall slid sideways widening until a man could squeeze through.

"After you, princess." Ruty grinned at her. He unsheathed a long knife from under his cloak. "Don't tempt me to draw my bigger one."

Hurrying away from Hatts, Adeya sidled through the opening. She sucked in her stomach and popped out in the twilight forest. The ringing clash of steel resounded from the other side of the ruins.

Behind her, Ruty exited the crack. He wagged his knife at her. "Go on. Ahead."

Adeya started walking. They'd gotten only a span or two when a thud and grunt came from behind her. She looked back.

Ruty lay crumpled on the forest floor. Hatts stood over him with a blood-smudged rock in his hand.

Adeya backed away.

Dropping the rock, Hatts lifted his dull gaze to Adeya. The small smile returned. He drew Adeya's sword from its sheath. In his other hand, he held a black dart.

Adeya snatched up a couple of rocks. She chucked first one then the other at him. The first flew wide, and Hatts grunted as the second one hit him. Adeya stooped to grab another rock. He lunged at her, slamming her up against the tree.

Adeya cried out.

Hatts stabbed at her neck with the black dart.

Adeya grabbed his hand with both of hers. She stopped the dart from piercing her, but her hands trembled against Hatts' the strength bearing down on her. She jerked her knee up, and it took him hard in the guts.

As Hatts doubled over, Adeya broke free of his grasp and ran.

Hatts staggered after her, one hand still clutching his stomach.

Adeya snatched up the knife from Ruttly's fallen form. She brandished it at Hatts. The knifepoint wobbled from her trembling hand.

Hatts, hefting the longsword, slashed out at her. Adeya caught the blow with a wince and a cry. Their blades locked. Hatts shoved her, pushing her back. A root snagged her foot, and she tripped over backwards. Hatts lost his balance and landed sprawling on top of her.

"Princess!" Galveston rushed around the dome. "Get off of her!" Seizing Hatts by the shirt, he flung him off Adeya. Hatts tumbled across the ground.

"Princess, are you hurt?" Galveston helped her up. She clung to his arm, shaking and breathing hard.

"I'm," she said. "I'm unhurt."

"Go, princess! Go!" Galveston pushed Adeya behind him as Hatts climbed back to his feet.

He rounded on Galveston, slashing out with Adeya's sword.

Metal clanged on metal; Galveston blocked the swing with his gauntlet. He seized Hatts sword hand, disarmed him with a deft twist, and flung him back into the dirt.

Adeya stared at them with wide eyes.

"Go, princess!" Galveston pressed her sword back into her hands, but she still didn't move. When Hatts tried to rise again, Galveston kicked him in the face and grabbed Adeya's scabbard from him.

Bracers rounded the other side of the dome. Anger flashed in his eyes as he saw Galveston kick Hatts.

"I'm right behind you. Go!" cried Galveston.

Adeya jumped at his tone. Whirling around, she bolted into the trees.

Galveston drew his arming sword and met Bracers as he stabbed with his long dagger. They locked blades.

Pahff!

Bracers flinched. He and Galveston looked down at his arm. A black dart protruded from Bracers' bicep. All expression drained from his face.

In that moment of opening, Galveston let Bracers' blade slide off his and smacked Bracers hard in the face with his hilt.

Bracers staggered backwards.

Galveston ran into the trees after Adeya. He paused to look back. The sounds of battle from the other side of the ruins had stopped.

Pahff—pahff!

Two black darts flashed down from the canopy above.

Galveston started backwards as one thudded into the tree next to his face.

He turned and ran. Sprinting hard, he gained ground on Adeya running in the forest ahead.

"Where's Kyen?" she called back to him.

"Don't worry about him. Save your breath for running!"

Behind them, back by the ruins, Kyen dashed round the corner. He collided with Bracers as Bracers was rising. The impact flung Kyen backwards, and he landed heavily in the ferns.

Bracers, who'd barely moved from the jolt, turned on him.

Kyen took in Bracers' blank look and the black dart in his arm. Scrambling to his feet, he ran. The last glimpses of Galveston and Adeya flickered between the trunks ahead. Kyen sprinted pell-mell after them.

Bracers stood and stared after them. At his side, Hatts rose to join him. The two looked long after the three had disappeared with eyes void of expression or feeling.

Chapter 25

Deep into the woods Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston ran. Adeya fled between two giant trunks and plunged into the fern fronds. Galveston, tailing her closely, ducked in after her. Kyen lagged a stone's throw behind. He slowed to glance over his shoulder. The woods behind them remained empty. Kyen sprinted hard to catch up.

Gasping for breath, Adeya slowed to a stop. Galveston jogged a few paces past her and walked back, blowing and puffing. He put a fist and a nub on his hips. Adeya collapsed on a log as Kyen trotted up. He doubled over with his hands on his knees. He winced and gasped, casting one last glance at the empty woods behind them.

Galveston stepped in front of Adeya.

Adeya set aside her sword to hang her head in her hands.

"Do you understand now?" Galveston huffed; he picked up her sword and sheathed it. "This is exactly why I advised you to take refuge in Eope!"

Kyen, still hunched over his knees, looked up.

"Those thieves could have killed you—or worse!" said Galveston.

Adeya with tears rising to her eyes kept her head hung.

"Which do you want us to spend ourselves on? Seeking the last summoner or keeping you safe?" Galveston demanded. "I'll tell you which I'll have to choose. I'm not about to let anyone or anything put you in that much peril again!"

Rivulets of tears spilled over Adeya's cheeks. She buried her face in her hands. A single muffled sob shook through her.

Kyen straightened, looking first at Galveston then at Adeya.

As she began to cry, Galveston groaned. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her.

"Forgive me, princess," he said, flustered and red in the face. "I'm not meaning to be hard on you. I just—you're—you're the most precious thing in the world to me. I couldn't bear it if I lost you."

Adeya accepted the handkerchief to wipe at her tears.

"Please allow me to escort you to Eope?" Galveston set the sheathed sword next to her. "We can still cut north through the woods, reach the highway, and be there within a fortnight."

Adeya nodded; she tied her scabbard back to her belt while tears dripped on her hands.

"Come, my princess." Galveston offered his arm. "We should break camp. You, no doubt, need rest after such an ordeal."

Adeya rose, took his arm. She bit her lip as fresh tears coursed down her cheeks.

They walked together in silence while the twilight descended and the Arc set. Kyen found a hollow beneath a great fallen trunk, and there they made camp.

Silence hung between them, broken only by sniffs from Adeya. Tears continued to slide silently from her cheeks. She kneeled in the hollow with flint and tinder to start their fire.

Galveston watched her with his brows draw together.

Kyen wandered the rim of the hollow gathering wood.

Adeya, biting her lip, struck at the flint. It sparked. It caught the tinder. Adeya, wiping away her tears, blew on it. The spark flared. It lifted a wisp of smoke then went out. She bent to strike the flint again.

Kyen approached and set an armful of wood next to her.

Adeya tried to breathe life into a new spark. It flared and died.

The dark deepened around them.

Adeya cracked the flint to the steel, but when none of the sparks caught, she burst out crying. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Galveston and Kyen exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Princess," said Galveston. "Please, be reasonable. There's no need to weep. Your decision is for the best. All will be well."

Adeya kept crying.

"Kyen of Avanna will continue the search for the last summoner while we travel to Eope," said Galveston. "Once you're safe, I will rejoin him."

Adeya cried harder. Her sobs echoed through the trees.

With a noise of frustration, Galveston threw up his hand and nub and strode off.

Kyen watched him stomp off into the trees and disappear down a dip. He looked back to Adeya. Her face screwed up in grief, and she choked on her breath. Kyen fidgeted for a moment. Then he came over to sit next to her.

"Papa was right all along." Adeya wept. "I spent my whole childhood begging papa to let me train as a summoner. He said I couldn't do it. I wasn't bred for questing. I'm a lady and princess, not a warrior. Like you. Like Galveston. I can't even start a fire!" Adeya threw the flint into the tinder. She buried her face in her hands.

Kyen looked at her sadly.

"You've seen Palace Isea," Adeya said, her voice muffled. "Without the summoners, Isea has nothing. All the prosperity is gone. Our people have left. Papa and Mama say I have to marry a Prince of Eope. Or Bishire. Or Veleda. Annexing Isea to another kingdom is the only way to save Isea from disappearing altogether. But—but—" Tears rose afresh in her eyes as she lifted her face and wailed, "I don't love any of them!"

Struggling to breathe through her tears, she choked out, "I mean, have you seen Galveston's arm? And he's so old! I've tried but I can't! I just can't!"

Kyen sighed and looked up at the trees.

Adeya shook from head to toe with her sobs, her face back in her hands.

Kyen lifted a hand, hesitated, then with an expression of deep embarrassment, patted her on the head.

Adeya looked up at the touch. She blinked puffy and red-rimmed eyes at him.

"Adeya, I think Galveston is right," Kyen said.

Adeya bit her lip.

"You're not a swordsman. Or an adventurer. Not even a wanderer. You are a princess. It's too much to expect of you. You don't have the skills—or experience—to survive out here."

Adeya looked at him. A fresh wave of tears threatened to burst out, but Kyen held up a finger.

"I also think," he said. "We have no hope of finding the last summoner without you. You know more about summoners and arcangels than us. In Denmont, you called to Nai and she answered you. Your very first time, she answered you. Doesn't that take a lot of training for most summoners?"

Adeya shrugged a little. "I... I suppose. But I can't—I can't—" Two large tears rolled down her cheeks. "I can't do anything else! I just get in the way. Or I put us all in danger."

"Nobody can do everything," said Kyen. "Galveston is a strong soldier. I may know a thing or two about getting around in the wilderness. And you—you know how to find what we're looking for."

Adeya sniffed, swallowed a little sob. "You—you think I can do it?"

"With help, yes." Kyen leveled a very serious look at her. "I'll have your back. So will Galveston, I'm sure, even if it's grudging. But yes, I think you're the only one who stands a chance of finding the last summoner."

Adeya blushed and turned away. Clutching her sleeves in her fingers, she rubbed at her eyes. "I must look hideous after all this crying. I'm glad there aren't any mirrors out here."

Kyen picked up the flint. "I'll take care of the fire."

"I need to speak with Galveston." Adeya rose to her feet. She walked off into the twilight in the direction that Galveston had taken.

Adeya found Galveston standing a couple stone-throws off in the woods. The new fire glinted between the trunks behind her.

"Galveston?"

He turned to face her. "My princess."

They stood in silence a moment. Adeya opened her mouth, but Galveston overrode her.

"My princess, please hear me out. I know you've long seen my feelings towards you. Tonight, I declared them." He stepped up, took her hand, as his words tumbled out.

"Gal—"

"Your father and mother gave me their blessing before the Kingmaster came. I just cannot keep it to myself anymore. How very deeply, ardently, devotedly I am yours. You have conquered me. I surrender myself to you now and ask you—" Galveston got down on one knee. "Plead with you. Take me as your own for life, my princess. Will you marry me?"

"Galveston, I—" Adeya bit her lip. She took his hand in hers and raised him back to his feet. She looked into his eyes as she said, "You're a very worthy man. A man of honor. Of valor. Of character. But—I'm so sorry, Galveston—I don't love you—"

"But you might!" said Galveston. "Give me the chance to prove myself to you! To win your heart! You will never find a more devoted husband than I. Your every whim shall be my

command and delight! Princess, I..." He trailed off as Adeya shook her head. She pushed his hand back towards him.

"I can't," said Adeya. "I will always esteem you, even call you friend, but I can't ever love you. Not in the way you're asking." Adeya pulled her hands free of his. "I'm sorry." She backed away, and with his gaze following after her, she turned to run back towards the camp.

Galveston stood as if frozen, his hand still outstretched. Slowly, it drifted back to his side. Adeya's running footsteps faded into silence.

His brows drew together with pain bright in his eyes. His hand clenched into a fist. Turning on his heel, Galveston stalked off into the dying twilight.

The fire had died to faint, glowing coals when Galveston returned. Adeya lay curled up next to the warmth, asleep in her cloak. Kyen, bundled in his cloak, sat up against a tree trunk. He raised his eyes to Galveston when he materialized out of the shadows.

Without a word, without a look at either of them, Galveston walked to the side of the fire furthest from Adeya. Kyen watched him as he dropped down with his back towards them, covered himself with his cloak, and lay still.

Kyen, looping his arms around his knees, sighed to himself.

Chapter 26

Kyen stopped with his brows knitted together. He looked left for a long stretch, staring at giant, red tree trunks jutting from a sea of ferns. He looked right to gaze over more of the same. A rare beam of light broke in from above, casting bright, little islands. The rest of the forest disappeared into its own shadow.

Galveston joined Kyen to survey the surroundings. Behind him, Adeya meandered and brushed her fingers through the fronds.

"I didn't know wanderers could get lost." Galveston shot a pointed look at Kyen.

Kyen frowned.

"Are we really lost?" asked Adeya.

"Why else does he keep looking around with that dumbfounded expression?"

"I haven't been in this deep in Varkest in years." Kyen kept walking. "None of this looks familiar."

"We should have reached the last summoner's village days ago," said Galveston.

"We must have veered too far south when we fled from the thieves," said Kyen.

Adeya stared ahead. "That's not the village, is it—"

"I'd say we've gone too far west, maybe overshot the Timbered City completely," said Galveston. "Trees this big and old only grow in the heart of the Deepwood."

"I really think I see something. Look!" Adeya pointed, and Kyen looked down her finger. His brows drew together again.

Spot-lighted by beams, half-hidden in gloom rose a massive wall. Made from trees as broad as towers, the wall formed a tight line that disappeared into the dark canopy overhead.

Kyen tensed.

"What is it?" asked Adeya.

Galveston squinted in the dimness.

"Kyen?" Adeya asked.

"We've gone too far. We have to go back." He turned and walked away.

"Kyen? What is it?"

"I say, Kyen of Avanna!"

Kyen, head down, muttering to himself, strode away at a pace that barely checked a run.

Galveston and Adeya hurried after him.

"What is it?" asked Adeya.

"The Walls. The Walls of the Obsidian," said Kyen. "We are too far south."

"Oh," said Adeya.

"We're at the Timbered City, then!" A smile dawned over Galveston's face. "The home of the Obsidian. Well, this is fate, Kyen of Avanna. Our solution to the Kingmaster—and maybe that without needing a summoner!"

Kyen shook his head, vaguely at first, then more firmly, while Galveston spoke.

"Why not consult the Obsidian?" asked Galveston.

"Consulting the Obsidian is forbidden," said Kyen.

"Restricted, not forbidden. And not for an emissary of Veleda." Galveston stopped. "You mentioned being an emissary, did you not, Kyen of Avanna? You have the papers?"

Kyen, still shaking his head, kept walking. After a few strides, he looked back at Galveston. "I would not consult the Obsidian, Galveston," he said. "Not unless I had no other option. If you insist on going, our ways part here."

The smile faded from Galveston's face.

The two warriors held each other's gazes for a long moment: Kyen's stormy eyes glinted hard and serious; Galveston's eyes narrowed into a glare.

Adeya looked first at one then at the other. "Is the Obsidian dangerous?"

"The Obsidian is only dangerous as knowledge is dangerous, as power is dangerous," said Galveston, not breaking eye contact with Kyen. "The wrong hands are the real danger. Not the Obsidian."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Kyen muttered under his breath. He turned and kept walking.

Galveston looked to Adeya. "The Black War was fought over the Obsidian. Or should I say King Varkest's misuse of it. Since the end of the war, King Veleda is too afraid to use it. Or to let any other kingdom use it. Hence the wall. Many" —Galveston shot a glance at Kyen— "who fought in the Black War carry strong feelings against the Obsidian. Lives lost for nothing gained.

Varkest, the Kingdom of Trees, left in shambles. The capital city abandoned, walled off. None are allowed near the Timbered City anymore for fear of the Obsidian."

"I don't understand. Why do you think the Obsidian could help against the Kingmaster?" asked Adeya.

"King Varkest originally gained the knowledge and craft of the black weapons from the Obsidian," said Galveston. "Perhaps from it, we could also draw the knowledge of how to unmake them. I'm a little surprised Kyen of Avanna is so readily abandoning such an obvious option." Galveston leveled another glare at Kyen's back.

Kyen stopped.

"If Finn were here," Kyen said. "He would tell you himself. He'd rather die than have us go near the Obsidian. Even if it was the last option."

Galveston heaved a sigh. "Very well. Come, princess. Let us backtrack and see if we can find this village of yours."

Kyen altered their course away from the wall. He walked, head down, a grim set to his mouth, and spoke not another word to either of them. Galveston followed, arm and stump crossed over his chest, watching Kyen with disapproval. Adeya looked at neither of them and fingered her amulet.

As the day lengthened, the forest floor began to rise. It rolled and bucked and dropped off rocky bluffs into thickly shadowed crevasses. Kyen picked their path down steep slopes, walked the spines of forested ridges, and navigated through dim ravines. More than once, a sheer bluff wall stopped them. More than once, they backtracked to find another path.

Two days passed, and their journey slowed. The copses of ferns grew higher than Kyen was tall. Vines as thick as trees wound up the massive trunks. Mosses, lichens, and mushrooms coated fallen logs, stuck as misshapen wedges from trunks, or thrust bulbous heads through the loam. Some glowed blue deep within the crevasses and valleys.

As the terrain roughened, so did Galveston. He brooded as he walked, snapped out one-word answers, and glared at Kyen's back. Kyen tried no conversation. Adeya gave up the attempt after a couple curt words from Galveston.

Kyen's tension eased, and Adeya sighed in relief when the gloom ahead lessened. An array of arcbeams broke over a little village, dappling roofs, streaming through ribbons of chimney

smoke, dispelling the forest's shadow. Moss-crusting log cabins—a score in all—collected around a tall standing stone that split into three green fingers.

When Adeya saw the standing stone, she stopped. Her hand rose to the amulet on her neck, and her aquamarine eyes grew bright.

Kyen looked at her.

"This is it," she breathed. "This is the last place my nana wrote about in her journal. This is where she found the last summoner."

Galveston crossed his arms and glowered at the village.

Kyen, smiling a little, motioned for her to go first.

Adeya took in a deep breath. Still gripping her amulet, she started towards the village with Kyen and Galveston behind her.

As they approached, the children stopped playing and the woman halted hanging laundry. A couple elders and a boy sat around a fire at the base of the standing stone. The three rose when they saw the travelers. Despite being grayed and weathered, the elders hefted broad-bladed axes in arms muscled as thick as Kyen was wide. The youth followed in their shadow with a little axe of his own. Scowling—all three of them—they stopped, barring the way into the village.

"What do you want?" asked the elder with a bald, pale head.

"We are travelers, looking for safe haven for the night," said Galveston. "We mean no harm."

"And why should we believe you?" asked the other elder; he wore a patchy beard whiter than his skin.

"You could be thieves!" The boy shouted at them, but one of the elders pushed him back.

"Do you think they mean Revel?" Adeya asked Kyen in an undertone.

"We've also been attacked by thieves. Perhaps the same?" asked Galveston.

"Turn back," said the oldest man. "We've no use nor space for travelers. Not being stripped as we are. Scarce enough food for ourselves."

"Go back where you came from!" shouted the boy over the elder's arm.

"Truly, we mean no harm. Perhaps guide us on our way at least? We're looking for someone." Galveston stepped forward, but the two men hefted their axes. Galveston, laying a hand casually on his hilt, stepped back. While they stared each other down, a young girl dashed out of the nearest cabin. She ran up to the bald elder and clung to his arm.

"Bracken! Bracken! Come quick! Autumn says he's getting worse!"

"Quiet, Ivy! There's strangers," snapped the boy.

"Worse? Is someone sick?" asked Adeya.

"Wounded. When the thieves came," said Ivy.

"I'm a healer of Isea. May I help?" asked Adeya.

Bracken wrenched the haft of his ax in his hands while the bearded elder spoke.

"And what would you charge or demand for trade? Those thieves left us nothing."

"Healers of Isea ask nothing in return. Only for the chance to help," said Adeya.

Bracken kept squeezing and unsqueezing his ax handle. The bearded elder's brow drew down into a furrow of wrinkles. The boy dropped his glare to the ground.

"Please," Ivy spoke up. "This way."

"Yes," said Bracken. "But know we'll watch you like craghawks."

Adeya, taking the girl's hand, hurried off into the cabin with her. Bracken and the boy followed behind.

Galveston let his hand slip from his sword hilt.

The bearded elder eyed them. "And what are you called?"

"I am Prince Galveston of Eope. This is Kyen of Avanna."

The elder's glare took them both in, though his gaze lingered longest on Kyen. The boy, hearing the name, looked back to stare at Kyen as well. Kyen gazed off into the trees without noticing.

"You'd better come then." The elder turned away.

When they arrived on the threshold of the cabin, Adeya already knelt at the cot where a young man lay wounded. A small fire heated water on the hearth. The table, the chairs, the bedside stand: all the furniture had been made of bark-stripped logs nailed together. A willowy, graying lady stood at the other side of the man's bed. She and Adeya were speaking together.

"Do you know what happened to him, Autumn?" asked Adeya as she examined him.

"Cliff came upon the thieves in the night," said the elderly lady. "One of them, one in a hat, took him with a dagger."

Sweat stood out on Cliff's brow as he lay on the cot. He muttered and shifted in delirium. Pain etched a grimace on his young features as he shifted back and forth. Ivy stood in the

doorway wringing her skirts. Bracken stopped at her shoulder, and the boy at her other, both wearing matching scowls.

Adeya lifted the bandage around Cliff's middle. Seeing the wound underneath, her mouth tightened. She exchanged grim looks with Autumn. Without a word, Adeya carefully replaced the bandage. She opened her healer's pouch on her belt and dug inside. She pulled out two bottles—one of clear liquid, one of vibrant green—and a dropper. She uncorked the vial and green vapor wafted out. She reached for the dropper, but Bracken crossed the room in two strides and seized her wrist. Adeya stared up at him, eyes wide in surprise.

"What do you think you're doing? That's reeking dragon venom! You planning to murder a wounded man in his bed?"

"Diluted, the venom is the best painkiller and sedative in Ellunon," said Adeya. "There's little anyone can do for him, but I can ease his pain."

Bracken looked at Autumn.

Autumn nodded.

Bracken released Adeya and stepped back.

Placing a couple drops of the green venom into the clear liquid, Adeya corked it to shake it up. She spooned a little into Cliff's open mouth.

A moment passed.

Cliff's body relaxed. His shifting stilled. He sank into the pillow. The look of suffering faded from his face as his breathing grew deep and easy.

"Let him have a spoon every arcquarter," Adeya said to Autumn. "I'll come back to check on him and mix more if needed."

Latching her pouch closed, Adeya handed the vial to Autumn.

Autumn clung to her hand, pressed it. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry I can't do more," said Adeya as she came to her feet. With head hung, Adeya walked back outside.

Kyen and Galveston waited for her at the door: Galveston leaning against the wall, Kyen gazing up into the canopy. Both caught her downcast look and frowned.

"Not well?" said Galveston.

"He's dying," said Adeya. "Even if we could get him to the Isea infirmary in half an arcquarter, it wouldn't save him. Stomach wounds tend to be mortal injuries."

Kyen looked at her sadly, and Galveston sighed, but neither swordsman said anything.

Adeya's aquamarine eyes blazed bright. She puffed up and clenched her fists, whirling to face them. "A summoner could heal that wound!"

Both Kyen and Galveston stepped back; Kyen put up his hands as if in surrender.

"We have to find the last summoner!" said Adeya. "He's close! I know it! If we find him, we can bring him back and save that man!"

"Did you say a summoner?"

All three looked over.

The young boy stood, arms crossed, scowling at them. "I can take you to him."

Chapter 27

"You can?" Adeya's face lit up. "Will you? Oh, please do!"

Instead of answering, the boy stuck his head back into the cabin. His voice carried to them. "Mom, I'm going to help the foreigners with something."

"Be back by nightfall, Skunk!"

The boy growled back and turned away. He walked a stretch then looked back over his shoulder. "Well? Are you coming?"

"Oh, thank you!" Adeya hurried after the boy.

Galveston cast a dubious look to Kyen, but Kyen only shrugged. The two swordsmen followed after them. The boy led them to the edge of the village. With a head of thick mussy hair, dark eyes, and the pale complexion of Varkest, he looked barely more than a child. The scowl seemed permanently stuck on his face.

"Do they really call you Skunk?" asked Galveston.

The boy whirled on him. "My name is Farrider!"

Ivy hauling water nearby giggled at his shout.

"Don't listen to him!" she called over. "He's Skunk cuz he always looks like he has a bad stink in his nose!"

"At least I'm not called Ivy—stupid, itchy, poisonous weed!" Skunk glared at her until she hurried away laughing at him. He turned again to the forest, put two fingers to his mouth, and whistled. He waited with his fists on his hips as the undergrowth crunched.

Out from the trees trotted an elk. It pranced over with the grace of a deer but had a thicker, more muscular body and a tremendous rack of horns covered in fine velvet. Grays dappled its jet-black coat. Stopping beside Skunk, the elk nuzzled his hair. Skunk scratched its nose while the three others stared.

"Try to keep up." Skunk swung up onto the elk's bare back. The elk pranced beneath him, whirled around, and trotted off into the trees.

Adeya flashed the swordsmen a smile, gathering up her skirts. She dashed into the woods with Galveston on her heels and Kyen lagging in the back.

They crested the first rise to see the elk disappear into the trees with Skunk. Its black coat melded then vanished into the dimness. The clip of its hooves receded.

"Wait!" Adeya called. Reaching the top of a knoll, she stopped, huffing and looking around. Galveston and Kyen stopped next to her.

The undergrowth crunched. Skunk and his elk popped out from the ferns next to them.

Galveston jumped, half-drawing his sword.

"I thought I said keep up?" said Skunk.

"We're trying!" said Galveston.

"Can't you go a little slower?" asked Adeya.

"Come, then." Skunk reined the elk around, and they capered away into the trees. Adeya hurried after them with Kyen and Galveston behind.

Skunk led them deep into the woods. The forest floor jumped and dived, but Skunk picked paths that skirted drop-offs, ridged stone outcrops, and wove between the deep hills and massive trees.

"I can't believe this is actually happening," said Adeya. "I've been waiting all my life for this moment! Skunk? Skunk! Is it very far?"

"Not far."

Adeya scampered after him as he rounded a bend in the hill. She looked back at the two swordsmen trailing behind. "Hurry! Don't lag!"

Kyen and Galveston exchanged glances; they both picked up their pace.

Adeya ran ahead, stopped, and turned back to address the swordsmen. "Do you think he'll teach me? Do you think he'll teach me how to be a summoner, too?"

"You're falling behind!" Skunk called from up ahead, unseen in the gloom.

Adeya started. Gathering her skirts back up, she bound away after the sound of his voice.

The boy and his elk melted out of the shadows as they neared. He waited for them with a deeper scowl than usual. He reined the elk around and plodded on.

"The last summoner of Ellunon." Adeya clasped her amulet in a hand. "Do you think he'll free my parents from the black weapon? And Finn? Oh, how can you look so calm, Kyen?"

Kyen returned a weak smile that faded as soon as she turned around.

"Skunk, thank you so much for helping us!" cried Adeya. "We owe you such a debt!"

"Speaking of which, why are you helping us?" asked Galveston. "The people of Varkest are known for their dislike of foreigners."

"Myself the most of all my village," said Skunk.

"Then why?" asked Galveston.

Skunk looked back at Adeya. "Because you helped my brother."

"Cliff is your brother?" Adeya's face fell, but Skunk's scowl turned on Kyen.

"And because you're Kyen of Avanna, aren't you?"

"Uh, yes, I guess."

"You beheaded that witch of Norgard. She cursed King Varkest and ruined our kingdom," said Skunk. "I help you because all of Varkest owes you a debt."

"Thank you," said Kyen. "I suppose..."

"Keep up. We're nearly there." With a cluck, Skunk trotted his elk off ahead.

Round the base of a bluff, a house appeared. It sat squeezed between two hills like a fat white pot. Ferns and young trees sprouted out of the loam on its flat bark-wood roof. Another flat of bark served for a door.

Adeya froze when she saw it. Her hand gripped the amulet at her neck.

Skunk reined in his elk beside the door and hopped off.

Adeya breathed in a shaky gulp of air.

"Are you alright?" Kyen asked.

Galveston pushed past them, hand on his hilt, as his eyes scanned the hilltops.

"I can't believe I'm finally here. All my life, I'd hoped.... I'm finally here." Adeya whispered.

Galveston clambered up the hillside to circle around the back.

Skunk stood by the ruin, still scowling, stroking the elk's neck.

Adeya glanced at Kyen with bright eyes. He motioned towards the door. She drew in a deep breath and approached.

Reaching out a tentative hand, Adeya knocked.

In the distance, a pine lark sang.

Stones rattled as Galveston clambered down to disappear behind the house.

Adeya knocked again, louder this time. In the silence that followed, she exchanged a look with Kyen.

Kyen stepped forward and opened the bark door. They walked into the summoner's house together with Skunk taking up the rear.

Inside, threadbare streams of light shone through a jungle of roots hanging from the ceiling. An old cot, a cold fire pit, and a sagging chest of drawers stood about in the dirt. A glass pillar, wreathed in roots, rose from the center of the room. A long crack split the cold, dim crystal.

After one look around, Adeya crossed to a bark slab that served as a back door. It crumbled in two when she opened it. She propped the pieces against the wall and hurried out behind the house.

Skunk followed her but Kyen lingered behind to gaze around. He wandered to the chest of drawers, but when he tried to open the top drawer, it stuck. A sharp tug took off the front without moving the drawer. Peering inside, Kyen reached in and took out a stone. He wiped dust from its smooth, crystal surface. A pale bead gleamed from its center. He turned it over in his hands and with a shrug pocketed it.

He meandered out the back door to join the others.

Outside, Galveston, Adeya, and Skunk all stood shoulder to shoulder looking at the ground. Kyen followed their gaze to an uncut stone seated on a mound in the mossy earth.

Adeya crouched next to it. She brushed and picked off moss bits from the stone's surface. Underneath, rough letters became apparent where a hasty chisel had bit them from the rock. It read:

Maesin of Isea

Summoner

Died Year 1, Second Season, The Age of Swords

Chapter 28

"Dead." Adeya stepped back. "All these years—and he's been dead?"

Galveston crossed his arms. He looked unimpressed.

"Of course, he's dead," said Skunk.

"You knew?" said Galveston.

"Didn't you?" Skunk frowned. "I'd visit the summoner with my da sometimes. He could fix things, you know? Or da would ask him questions about the open lands. One day we found his body on the floor, the pillar cracked. He was so old, it wasn't a surprise. So we buried him."

"Dead..." said Adeya.

"I figured you were his family or something—being from Isea and all—come to pay last respects."

"We... We needed his help," said Adeya.

"Take us back to the village," said Galveston. "We've seen enough."

Skunk shrugged and turned back into the house.

Galveston followed him with a huff.

Adeya stared at the tombstone.

Kyen stayed with her. He gazed on the etchings, a faraway look in his stormy eyes

In the distance, a woodbeater pounded a hollow trunk. Its thumps echoed through the forest and faded.

Kyen breathed a deep sigh and put his hands in his pockets. "Oh." He took out the stone.

"Do you know what this is, Adeya? I found it inside."

Adeya examined the stone but with little interest. "It's an arcstone."

At Kyen's blank look, she sighed and turned the stone over in her fingers. "It holds aura, the ether from which the arcangels draw their power. Summoners carried aura in stones or rods. It's no use to us, though, without an arcangel.

Adeya slipped the stone into her healer's pouch. Head hung, she walked away.

Kyen trailed behind her.

Outside the summoner's front door, Galveston and Skunk waited for them with sour looks.

"Are you ready yet?" said Skunk.

Adeya stared at her feet, so Kyen nodded.

Remounting his elk, Skunk pulled the beast around and trotted back the way they'd come.

He rode in the lead—no more dashing into the trees or leaping over the rocks. Adeya, watching the ground pass beneath her feet, said nothing and lagged. Galveston took out his pipe and puffed to himself the whole way. Kyen lingered behind them, hurrying forward once in a while to hand Adeya down the steep rocks.

The dimness of the forest grew into darkness. When they walked back into the village, a fire beside the standing stone lit the villagers' faces and cast the cabins in an orange glow. Ivy waited on the edge of the village with a lantern upheld. Redness rimmed her eyes.

"Skunk, I'm sorry. He... he..." She hesitated. "Cliff was called back to the Lord Keeper of Souls."

Skunk, who'd just dismounted, froze as Kyen, Galveston, and Adeya all looked at him.

"Your brother. I'm so sorry," said Adeya. She put out a hand to Skunk's shoulder, but he shook it off. His hand tightened on the reins, and he didn't turn to face them when he spoke.

"It's fine. We knew he wouldn't outlive the wound from the moment we found him."

"But—"

"It's fine!" Skunk shouted. He leapt up onto elk's back, whirled around, and galloped off into the darkness.

Ivy stood looking after him, lantern upheld. In its light, tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Skunk."

Adeya put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a little squeeze.

The girl scrubbed the tears from her eyes. "Elder Bear would like to see you."

Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston followed her to the fire beneath the standing stone. As they passed Autumn's cabin, a sobbing and wailing issued through the closed door. The white-bearded elder rose when they approached.

He frowned on them.

"Come, then." Bear took the lantern from Ivy and led them away. He took them to the village outskirts under the fringe of the forest. A fire crackled in a pit beside a stack of firewood.

"Sleep here tonight," said Bear. "You've got food enough to feed yourselves? Good. We've none to spare. Be gone first thing in the morning." The elder turned back to the village.

Kyen squatted by the fire and held out his hands to the warmth.

Adeya sighed.

Galveston watched until Bear sat back at the village fire underneath the standing stone. "Such hospitality to be found in Varkest." He eyed Adeya where she stood gazing into the fire, humphed, and slung the pack to the ground. He dug out a journey bread, cast the pack aside, and sat back to eat.

Kyen picked up the pack from where Galveston dropped it. He set out bread, dried apricots, and jerky for himself and Adeya. Then he rose. A brook bubbled away in the trees, and Kyen carried over the water skins.

Adeya sat down with her back to a tree. She stared into the fire until Kyen came back. He offered her the water skin.

"Thank you." Adeya accepted the water but didn't drink.

"You'll lose your strength, princess," Galveston said. "You'd better eat."

Adeya favored him with a half-hearted smile. "I suppose you're right."

Galveston cast the dry edge of his journey bread into the fire.

Kyen plopped down next to his food. Breaking his journey bread in half, he placed the jerky and fruit on it then topped it with the other half. He bit into it. The toughness of the three together stopped his teeth. He tugged at it once, twice, and, finally, with a wrench of his jaw got the bite off. He chewed contentedly as both Galveston and Adeya stared at him. He noticed their stares and, swallowing with difficulty, said, "What?"

"What are you doing, Kyen of Avanna?" asked Galveston.

"A sandwich. Everything is better together than apart." He seized on another bite.

As he wrestled to get the bite off, Galveston made a noise of disgust in his throat. He stood. Tapping his pipe out, he wandered to the edge of the firelight to re-stuff it and relight it.

Adeya sighed. She drooped against the tree trunk. Her food sat beside her untouched.

The faint sounds of grief reached them through the silence that fell.

Kyen took a long draught from the water skin. He eyed Adeya's untouched food. "Are you going to eat that?"

Adeya waved him off. Her eyes shone with unshed tears in the firelight.

Looking long at her, Kyen set his food aside. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"It's been a long day," he said. "We'll figure something in the morning."

"I don't understand!" cried Adeya. "Nana saw the last summoner. She almost caught him—alive! Look—" Grabbing the pack, she dug her journal out and laid it open on her lap. She thumbed through the pages, absently stroking her amulet. She stabbed the page with a finger. "See? It's right here. I just don't understand."

Kyen leaned over to look at the page as he tried to pull another bite out of his sandwich.

"I just don't understand," Adeya repeated, propping her chin on her hand.

Galveston shot them a narrow look, his pipe flaring in the darkness.

Adeya picked up a dried apricot. As her gaze wandered the page, her brows drew together. She leaned closer to the journal and angled it to see better by the firelight. She dropped the apricot. "What was the date?"

"I don't think we packed any dates," said Kyen.

"What date?" Galveston returned to the firelight.

"On—on the tombstone. The date! When did the summoner die?"

Galveston and Kyen exchanged glances.

Kyen shrugged.

"The first or the second year in the Age of Swords, wasn't it?" said Galveston.

Adeya peered close at the journal again.

"It wasn't more than six or seven years ago. Of that, I'm sure," Galveston continued.

When Adeya straightened, a wide-eyed look of realization dawned over her face. "It wasn't him."

Chapter 29

"Speak up, princess. Did you find something?"

"Look! Look here!" Adeya held up the journal, first to Galveston, then to Kyen, her finger on the page's date. "This is nana's last entry. Right before she found the summoner. It's dated Third Year, Age of Swords—from five years ago!"

Kyen counted on his fingers as a look of understanding rose on Galveston's face.

"Whoever is buried underneath that tombstone can't have been the last summoner. He'd already been dead three years when my nana wrote this!" Adeya's eyes shone as she looked from Galveston to Kyen.

"Another summoner?" repeated Galveston, then he frowned. He took the pipe from his mouth and pointed it at Adeya. "Hold up a moment. If that's her last entry—did your grandmother actually find this last summoner before she died? I thought you said your grandmother found him."

"Nana did find him. I'm certain of it." Adeya lowered her eyes, continuing in an undertone. "She died before she could write it down, though."

Galveston's expression hardened. He clenched his pipe in his teeth and walked away, muttering under his breath: 'wild goose chase' and 'jester's quest.' He stalked back. "You mean to tell me—we've come all the way from Isea to Varkest without an actual record that your grandmother found this last summoner?"

Adeya opened her mouth, but Galveston strode away grumbling before she could say anything. His pipe flared embers in the darkness he puffed on it so furiously.

Kyen, who'd sat by watching and eating, swallowed with a struggle. He edged closer to look at Adeya's book. "More than one summoner hid in Varkest? Is that what you're saying?"

"It wouldn't make sense otherwise," said Adeya. "The last summoner is still out there. I'm sure my nana found him. She was so close."

"There are other villages further west. Could we be in the wrong place?" asked Kyen.

"Maybe. She wrote that the summoner fled south once inside the Deepwood. Look," said Adeya.

"Towards the Timbered City?" Kyen frowned.

They both sat with their heads together over the journal.

Galveston, still puffing, shot them a distasteful look.

"There must be something I'm missing." Adeya sat back. "Some detail. Some clue. Something."

"Search all you wish, my lady. I will rest and prepare myself to follow your lead in the morning," said Galveston. "It's still my opinion we should consult the Obsidian." He knocked out his pipe, tucked it into his pocket, and moved to lie down. He was soon rolled up in his cloak with his back to them.

"Are you absolutely sure you're going to eat that?" Kyen pointed at her food. Adeya scowled at him for an answer, and Kyen shrank under the look. "Uh, never mind. Good night." Wrapping up in his cloak, Kyen laid down.

Adeya studied her nana's journal again. Deep into the night, she hunched over the pages. As the firelight grew too weak to read by, she tossed on more wood and stirred the flames back to life. The woodpile beside her dwindled and ran out. The sounds of the village quieted, and the glow against the standing stone dimmed into darkness. Their fire shrank to embers. Adeya still clung to the journal even as the full dark of night swallowed the three of them up.

* * *

In the green morning twilight, Adeya lay fast asleep against the trunk, her journal open in her lap.

A cloaked figure appeared out of the trees. Kyen and Galveston lay asleep, dark bundles on either side of the fire. To Kyen the dark figure crept, stopping over him.

The keen edge of an ax shone as it emerged from the cloak. Gripping the haft with both hands, the figure raised the ax over Kyen's head. He swung down.

Kyen's eyes snapped open—blazing gold. Metal clanged as Kyen's sword flew from its scabbard and deflected the ax.

The dark figure staggered.

Kyen, rolling to his feet, lunged for the figure. They grappled together over the ax wrenching it this way and that.

Awakened by the noise, Galveston propped himself up on an elbow, and Adeya raised her head. She gasped. Galveston leapt to his feet.

The dark figure, freeing a hand, punched Kyen in the face. Kyen went down as Galveston collided with the dark figure.

The figure tried to hack at Galveston but Galveston, in two deft moves, knocked the swinging ax aside with his gauntlet then with the same smacked the figure across the face.

The figure crumpled.

"Kyen!" Adeya ran to kneel beside Kyen as he was picking himself off the ground. "Are you alright?"

"Uh... Ow." Kyen wiped his split lip, looked at the blood that came away on his hand.

"What happened?" asked Adeya.

"I don't know. What happened?" His eyes, gray again, moved from his blood, to the sword in his hand, to Galveston standing over the prone figure.

Galveston hefted the figure up by the collar. His hood fell back to reveal the face of the scowling elder, Bear, his scowl now replaced by the stunned look of unconsciousness.

"I should have known better than to trust the people of Varkest," said Galveston.

"I don't think it was him. Look." Adeya pointed to the black welt standing out on his neck.

"The Kingmaster." Galveston dropped the elder in a heap.

"I could have sworn. He didn't have that welt yesterday..." The last word died on her lips. She straightened to her feet, wide-eyed and pale.

Kyen and Galveston followed her gaze towards the village.

More dark silhouettes approached them from between the log cabins. Autumn, Ivy, and Bracken, the cabin wives and other children, each wore the same blank expression; each bore a black welt on forehead, neck, or arm; each brandished an ax, a hoe, or a carving knife. The villagers formed a circle around the three, closing in tighter as they approached.

Kyen rose to his feet.

Galveston drew his sword, but Adeya put a hand on his arm. He shrugged her off.

"You can't hurt them! They're just villagers," said Adeya. "They're not in control of what they're doing."

"I'm not prepared to die today, princess."

"Kyen, what do we do?" asked Adeya.

"I don't know. They're behind us, too."

From out of the trees, more villagers climbed over roots and emerged from under ferns.

Kyen backed away from them, but couldn't go far before he stood back to back with Adeya and Galveston.

"Draw your sword, princess," said Galveston.

"But, I don't—"

"Draw it!"

Adeya pulled out her sword.

"Stay close," said Galveston. "We'll break through their lines and run. Do you hear me, princess? Run. Don't wait for us."

Adeya swallowed and nodded.

The nearest villager suddenly charged them, swinging his ax in wild swoops.

Galveston sidestepped him.

Kyen ducked out of the way.

Adeya cried out, tripped, fell out of range.

Kyen darted in to deflect and parry the axeman.

Adeya, clutching her sword, scrambled back to her feet.

Another axeman rushed her from behind.

"Princess!" Galveston jumped between them, blocked the axeman's blow. As he did, two more villagers with hoes swung at his back. One hoe caught his sword hand, knocking his blade away; the other cracked across his back. He dropped as they continued to beat him with the hoes' handles.

"Galveston!"

Kyen smacked his hilt into the axman's face, jumped him as he crumpled, charged in to help Galveston, but two other villagers rushed him with axes. Their whipping edges sent Kyen ducking and dodging, unable to get in a counter-swing.

Autumn brandishing a kitchen knife stabbed out at Adeya.

Adeya staggered backwards, caught herself, pointed her blade. The tip trembled as it hung in the air. "Stay back! I don't want to hurt you! Stay back!"

The blank-faced Autumn raised the knife. She stabbed at Adeya again. Adeya sidestepped this time and thrust. Her blade pierced Autumn through the stomach. She dropped her knife. Adeya pulled her sword free and watched her sink to the ground.

Adeya, shaking, pale, held up her sword. Red rivulets of blood ran down the steel.

Two more villagers, one with a spear and one with an ax, crept up behind her.

"Adeya!" Kyen blocked a swinging ax with a loud clang.

Adeya stared at her sword.

"Adeya!" Kyen ducked around the two axemen and lunged for her.

The man with the spear poised to stab.

Kyen knocked Adeya out of the way as the spear point caught him through the shoulder. Kyen grabbed the spear shaft with both hands, clinging doggedly as the villager tried to yank it back. Kyen threw himself against it. His slight weight pushed the bulky logger back a step.

The spearman thrust forward, shoving Kyen back, until the spear rammed him up against a tree trunk.

Kyen gritted his teeth as the spear point pressed deeper into his shoulder.

Two villagers with knives closed in on him. The one with the ax approached Adeya. She sat where she'd fallen, staring wide-eyed and unseeing into space. The two villagers with the hoes had left off beating the still form of Galveston and closed in on Adeya.

Kyen's breathing slowed as he glared at the villager pinning him to the tree. In the space of a blink, his eyes flashed gold.

The ground in their midst exploded. Clods of earth pummeled the villagers, knocking some to the ground. Wood creaked and leaves hissed as a tree burst full-grown out of the ground. Leafy, sprawling branches, like living things, whipped out, smacking down the hoe-wielding villagers, snagging the one with the axe and lifting him into the canopy. The tree stretched itself out and upward while its trunk swelled.

With a yell, Kyen hacked at the shaft of the spear, once, twice. It snapped. He tackled the spear wielder and flung him into the rising tree. A branch snagged him, and he went sailing into the heights above.

Another branch smacked out at the village woman wielding a hoe, and Kyen charged the last man that brandished a knife. Kyen's sword connected with the knife so hard, it flew from the villager's hand. Grabbing the villager by the shoulder, he slung him down and brought his knee

up at the same time. A nasty smack rang as Kyen's knee connected with his face. The villager crumpled from his grip.

The tree behind him slowed growing until it stopped with a last woody creak. It stood in place of their fire pit amidst the stunned and sprawling bodies of the villagers.

When Kyen turned around, his eyes were gray again. Sheathing his sword, he ran to Adeya.

"It's alright. Stand up." Kyen drew her to her feet. She moved automatically, her eyes scanning his face without recognition.

"I killed her," she whispered.

"It's alright," said Kyen, gently. "Come with me." Taking her hand, he led her towards Galveston.

Galveston was groaning and stirring, muttering curses under his breath.

Kyen scooped up Galveston's sword. He bent and lifted Galveston to his feet. He swayed a little under the unsteady weight of the larger man.

"Can you walk?" asked Kyen.

Galveston, pressing his nub to his forehead, shook himself. "I'm fine. I'm fine. See to the princess." He shook off Kyen's grip.

"We have to go. Come on." Kyen drew Adeya after him, pausing to watch Galveston stagger after them. He steadied the further he walked till, sheathing his sword, he joined them.

The three of them hobbled into the trees: Galveston limping, Adeya hyperventilating, Kyen leading them both along. Deep into the woods, Kyen took them, keeping to the gullies and ravines. They made their way as quickly as they could as full morning dawned, still a dim but vibrant green under the trees.

Kyen slowed when they approached the shelter of an overhanging bluff. "We'll rest here a bit."

Seeing the bloody sword still gripped in Adeya's hand, Kyen reached for it. He pried her fingers from the hilt.

She looked at him. Her aquamarine eyes held a haunted look. "She's not going to live." A shudder went through her.

"What do you mean?" asked Galveston.

"I stabbed Autumn in the stomach," said Adeya. "Even if she went straight to an infirmary, stomach wounds are fatal." Her hands started to shake. It began to spread to the rest of her. "I've killed her. She didn't do anything."

Kyen looked at her, his eyes sad.

Adeya sank to her knees, clenching her hands into fists. Her whole body shook with shudders running up and down her. She hugged herself with her arms and doubled over.

"I tried to warn you, princess." Galveston wiped blood from his blade, inspected the edge. "The battlefield is no place for a woman."

A sob choked out of Adeya.

Kyen wiped her blade clean with the edge of his cloak. Kneeling in front of her, Kyen carefully replaced the sword into the scabbard on her belt.

Adeya clutched at his tunic, buried her face into it, and broke down bawling.

Kyen tensed. He looked at Galveston with a helpless alarm.

Galveston scowled back. He seemed to be chewing something distasteful for a moment but then turned and walked away.

Kyen looked sadly at Adeya still crying hard against his chest. He gave her head an awkward little pat or two. "It's alright."

Long moments passed.

Adeya's sobs echoed through the trees.

Kyen, heaving a sigh, watched her cry.

Galveston seated himself on a nearby boulder and took out his pipe. He fixed all his attention on stuffing it.

Still shivering, Adeya cried a last little sob. She pulled away from Kyen, wiping at her face.

"I'm sorry." She patted at the large wet splotches on his tunic.

"It's been stained with worse." He smiled a little.

Adeya flushed and rubbed her nose on her sleeve. Her gaze alighted on the broken spear sticking out of his bloody shoulder.

"I'm so sorry." She sniffed. "You're hurt! And here I am crying like a baby." She opened her healer's pouch.

Kyen looked at the spear sticking out of him as if noticing it for the first time.

"Eh? I guess you're right." He grabbed the broken haft.

Adeya's eyes widened.

"No! Don't—"

Kyen yanked the spear out with a grunt. He looked at his own blood on the steel tip and tossed it aside.

"—pull it out."

"What? I don't think it went very deep." Kyen unlatched and shrugged out of his linen armor vest. He tried to waggle a finger through the hole. "Vest caught most of it."

"Let me see." Adeya moved to look at the rip in his shoulder.

After sponging the blood away, she found a shallow gash where the spear point had barely punched through and cut his shoulder. Adeya put salve on it but no bandage.

"Galveston?" Adeya stood, taking her healer's pouch with her.

Galveston sat on a boulder a short distance away puffing on his pipe.

Adeya stopped at the foot of the boulder, looking up at him. "Galveston? Are you hurt?"

"Only a few bruises."

"May I take a look?"

"What I want to know"—Galveston snatched the pipe from his mouth—"is just what happened back there?" He glared at Kyen who was still trying to waggle a finger through his linen armor.

Kyen looked up and blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Where did that tree come from?"

"What tree?"

Galveston leapt down from the rock and strode up to Kyen. "You very well know what tree. The longer we travel together, the more I feel there's something you're not telling us. What are you hiding, Kyen of Avanna?"

"I'm not exactly sure what you're talking about." Kyen held up his hands as if in surrender.

"The tree came out of nowhere. It was our camp. And now it's a tree."

"I do remember a tree," said Adeya, slowly. "It's like it grew a hundred years in a matter of moments."

"What makes you think it was me?" said Kyen. "The Deepwood is old. Some parts have been alive since the Firstwold. Strange things happen in here. Anyone can tell you that."

"But," said Adeya. "But I thought I saw, right when the attack began, it almost looked like..."

Both Galveston and Kyen looked at her.

"Your eyes looked gold. I could have sworn."

"So could I." Galveston growled the words.

"My eyes gold? Well, you'd know best," said Kyen. "It's not like I can see my own eyes to tell you. There are strange powers in this forest. Stranger than a tree sprouting, let me tell you."

Galveston glared down at him for a long moment, before saying, "I think you act stupider than you are, sometimes."

"Is that an insult or a compliment?" Kyen smiled and winced at the same time.

Galveston, clenching his pipe in his teeth, stalked back to his rock. He slumped down and returned to brooding.

Adeya met Kyen's gaze, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "I could have sworn..."

Kyen shrugged. He turned away to slip his vest back on. "Can we eat? I'm hungry. Then we should keep moving before the Kingmaster catches up to us."

"We're going to the Obsidian," said Galveston. "And I'm not going to put up with any more of your ninnying. It's the best and smartest move. The Kingmaster has been closing in on us since we left Isea. We're no good to your friends if the Kingmaster catches or kills us. This latest attack struck too close."

Kyen looked long at Galveston, concern on his face, but he said nothing. He traded a brief glance with Adeya.

"According to my nana's last entry, the last summoner had been traveling south, also," said Adeya. "It's possible he headed to the Timber City."

Kyen sighed and said nothing.

Chapter 30

Under the growing light of the next morning, Adeya flipped through her nana's journal and sighed.

Galveston booted dirt over the smoldering fire pit.

"Did Kyen say when he's coming back?" asked Adeya.

Galveston stamped down the smoking mound. "He didn't tell you?"

"He'd already left when I woke up."

"As with me."

"He's—he's disappeared?"

"If we intended to consult the Obsidian, he did say our paths would part."

"He can't have left!" Adeya sprang to her feet.

Galveston slung their pack over his shoulder. "I don't intend to wait much longer for him. We're wasting daylight."

"What if the Kingmaster has taken him?" she asked.

"No doubt he's fine, princess."

"Should we go look for him?"

"No."

"Galveston! What if he's in trouble?"

"He can handle himself."

"I'm going to go look for him."

"Look for who?"

Galveston and Adeya turned.

Kyen with his hands in his pockets ambled out of the trees.

"Where have you been?" said Adeya.

Kyen blinked at her. "Was I gone that long?"

"The princess asked you a question, Kyen of Avanna," said Galveston. "Answer it."

Kyen took his hands from his pockets. "I was scouting for signs of the Kingmaster. I don't think he's far."

"We have no idea regarding the range of his dark powers." Galveston adjusted the strap of the pack. "He could be kicking his feet up back at Palace Isea for all we know."

"I don't think so," said Kyen. "Taking control of the villagers was the work of a night. I think he's trailing us."

"And the thieves!" said Adeya. "He fired on you, Galveston, remember?"

"Then why didn't he just dart us in our sleep at the village and be done?" asked Galveston.

"He's trying to kill Kyen," said Adeya.

Both swordsmen looked at her.

"Kyen's immune to the dark darts," said Adeya. "I've seen it. The Kingmaster knows he can't control Kyen, so he's no choice but to kill him."

"Immune? How's that possible?" Galveston's eyes narrowed on Kyen.

"The Kingmaster is shadowing us, Galveston," said Kyen.

"Did I not say we should have consulted the Obsidian?" replied Galveston. "It's the key to undoing the Kingmaster's powers. And what do we do? Dally around the woods while the Kingmaster casts and draws his nets."

Kyen, looking troubled, said nothing.

"We won't be able to draw near the Obsidian now without a fight," said Galveston. "And the chances of another magic tree saving us is slim. I propose we leave Princess Adeya at the gatehouse of the Timbered City, under the protection of the guards."

"No! I will not—"

"I have humored you this far, princess," Galveston cut in. "I will humor you no longer. Not in such dangers."

"All the soldiers at Castle Velda and the Kingmaster still gained a foothold," said Kyen. "A handful of guards won't keep Adeya safe."

"But—"

"The princess is not a threat. We are. We can draw the Kingmaster off," said Galveston.

"We don't know that, Galveston," said Kyen. "The Kingmaster is targeting the royal families in Ellunon. Adeya should stay with us."

"Bringing her will jeopardize everything."

"Ah—" Adeya opened her mouth.

"You saw her fighting," said Galveston. "I doubt she could raise a sword again. She'll end us all."

"She stays with me," said Kyen, growing steely.

Galveston glared at Kyen and rested a hand on his hilt.

Kyen's arms hung loose at his sides, but he returned the look evenly with a stubborn set to his jaw.

"And why's that, Kyen of Avanna?" asked Galveston, his voice low and dangerous. "You're one swordsman. One. What makes you think you're safer than a regiment of soldiers in the battlement of a gate tower? Answer me! What?"

Kyen, a cold glint in his stormy eyes, offered no reply.

Galveston drew himself up in anger.

Adeya swelled. She strode between the two swordsmen, smacked Galveston, rounded on Kyen, and smacked him too. Both swordsmen stared at her in wide-eyed shock, feeling their faces. She turned on Galveston.

"I am Crown Princess of Isea and Sole Heiress to the throne. I will make my decisions for myself!"

Galveston glared at her but couldn't hold it. He averted his eyes.

"Just because I froze in my first real sword fight doesn't mean it will happen again," said Adeya. "It just takes practice."

"Fine." Galveston turned on his heel and stomped away.

Adeya, nose in the air, watched him leave until the tree trunks hid him from view.

Kyen, still rubbing his cheek, blinked back smarting tears. "Why did you hit me, too?"

Adeya whirled on him. "Because you were starting to sound just like Galveston!" She marched away, opposite the direction of Galveston.

Kyen followed her at a distance as she slapped ferns out of her path and tromped around the tree trunks.

"Adeya, I'm sorry."

"I forgive you!" She snapped over her shoulder. "I really do! Galveston just makes me so angry!" She stopped with a huff. "He acts like I'm helpless or—or—"

"He just cares about you."

Adeya sighed. All the anger sagged out of her. She looked back at Kyen. "I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have hit you—either of you. It was unladylike and uncalled for."

Kyen smiled slightly. "I've had worse."

"I don't know where we are," said Adeya. "And I've left Galveston behind."

"He'll catch up by following our trail." Kyen eyed a bent fern frond that had suffered Adeya's wrath. "You're headed south, more or less, which is our path. We can wait for him."

Adeya sighed and sat down on a mossy log.

"Do you know how to find south in a forest?" he asked.

"No."

"Look at the lichens and moss. They all grow on the south faces of the trees."

"So I see that way?" Adeya pointed over her shoulder.

"Angle a bit east, but yes," said Kyen. "You need to be able to find your way home, if something happens to us."

At this, the two of them fell silent for a moment; Adeya broke it first.

"Do you really think it's a bad idea to consult the Obsidian?" she asked.

"Galveston is right." Kyen sighed and sat beside her on the log. "The Obsidian would know. Both about the Kingmaster and your last summoner. It's just a matter of if it will tell us."

"You've been to the Obsidian before?"

"Years ago."

"What happened that makes you so uneasy?"

"It's difficult to explain." Kyen rubbed the back of his neck.

Adeya waited, watching him with a look of expectation.

He shifted underneath her gaze.

"My question, eh, didn't go over well. We didn't part on good terms," said Kyen. "I'm afraid it will remember me. If it does, I don't think the Obsidian will be inclined to answer any of our questions."

"Did you argue with the Obsidian?"

"I'm not sure I'd really call it—eh, well... It was an embarrassment," said Kyen. "I was young and, well..."

"If the Obsidian is as old and wise as Galveston says, it must be above holding grudges."

"You'd think so," said Kyen. "Either way, I suppose a bad idea is better than no idea. Maybe it will answer you and Galveston, at least. You haven't found anything more about the last summoner, have you?"

"No," said Adeya. "I've read Nana's journal backwards and forwards. Twice. I feel sure there's something I'm missing, something she left for me. I just can't find it."

The ferns rustled beside them.

Kyen rose as Galveston stepped back into their midst.

Eyes on the ground, Galveston said, "I apologize for my behavior—towards both of you."

"I forgive you," said Adeya.

"As do I," said Kyen.

Galveston said nothing.

"We've—we've come to an agreement," said Adeya. "I think you're right. The best option is to consult the Obsidian."

At this, Galveston looked up in surprise. He glanced at Kyen, and Kyen nodded.

"It won't be easy," said Kyen.

Chapter 31

Kyen looked grim when, beyond the arcbeams slanting through the woods, the Timbered City appeared.

Two walls of trunks cut through the forest to meet a tree as big as a fortress. Massive roots like fallen towers splayed out from either side. The dark opening of a gateway couched between them. Above, thick ridges of bark rimmed the trunk, overlooking the road. Dark holes and cross-shaped openings filed along the ridges—the arrow slits and murder holes of battlements.

Galveston eyed these uneasily, but Kyen paid them no heed. He walked up together with Adeya to the gateway. A rope pull cord dangled down beside the gate. Kyen pulled it.

A bell, muffled by the wood, jangled inside. It faded into silence, and the three glanced at each other.

Kyen backed away to look up at the battlements.

A head topped by a wide-brimmed helmet appeared over the battlement. He frowned down at them.

"Who rings?"

"An emissary from Valeda to consult the Obsidian!" replied Galveston.

The guard's frown grew into a scowl. He disappeared without a word.

Galveston, Kyen, and Adeya looked through the iron grid of the gate and waited.

A thud sounded inside the tree. Chains rattled as the portcullis began to rise. As it clanked into place above, the three entered the tunnel. Immediately, the gate clanked again and began to lower behind them. The "Boom!" of it closing echoed down the tunnel.

A row of lanterns ran the length of the ceiling to light the tunnel. More murder holes paralleled the lanterns, and arrow slits flanked the walls. At the end of the long tunnel, a second portcullis blocked the exit.

Several woody thumps and a creak announced the rising of another, man-sized gate in the tunnel wall. It revealed a staircase into the gatehouse and, on the threshold, the frowning guard.

"This way." He disappeared up the stairs. The three entered the gatehouse behind him; the gate lowered, shutting with a clank. They climbed up the wooden stairs, steep, narrow, and also lined with arrow slits.

"Stories say no city was better defended than the old capital of Varkest," Galveston called up to the guard. "I see now it's true."

The guard grunted.

They entered a small hall set with a dozen long tables and stools. A handful of corridors and stairs exited the hall in different directions, but over each jutted the iron teeth of a gate drawn up into the ceiling.

Through one of these passages and up more stairs, the guard led them. He stopped outside a wooden door and rounded on them. "Your papers?"

Galveston and Adeya both looked at Kyen.

Kyen gazed back a full moment before the understanding popped onto his face.

"Oh! Right." Digging into his pockets, then into the pack, he pulled out the folded sheets of paper. He held it out to the guard.

The guard snatched them. He pushed open the door, pointing inside.

Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston entered a furnished sitting room with a cold fireplace.

The guard slammed the door shut. Keys jangled, and the lock clicked.

"You'd think we're prisoners rather than guests," said Galveston.

"Comfortable prisoners, at least," said Kyen.

Wooden lounge chairs and end tables surrounded a dining ensemble; each piece looked shaped rather than cut, the grain of the wood running like water. A cold fireplace sat at chest height in the tree wall. Dim beams threw crosses on the floor through a line of arrow slits.

Galveston peered out one of the slits. "Do they expect their guests to also defend their walls?"

"The greater threat is from within." Kyen slumped into a chair.

Galveston gave him a puzzled look, but the expression darkened and he turned away. He paced the breadth of the room, glancing out the arrow slits now and then.

Kyen traced the wood on his armrest over and over with a faraway look in his eyes.

Adeya wandered over to the fireplace and gazed up the chimney. "But, wouldn't..."

"It burn?" Galveston finished. "Firstwold trees cannot be touched by fire, it's said."

"Firstwold?" Adeya gazed around the room with a new wonder.

Galveston and Kyen both sank into brooding—Kyen's forlorn and Galveston's grim. Adeya sat by herself at the table. She opened the healer's pouch at her hip, and, propping her chin on her hand, she gazed inside for a long moment. She took out a clear vial and turned it over, looking at it. Next she drew out the vial of reeking dragon venom. She set them both side by side on the table to gaze at them in thought. The light dimmed as the hour grew late.

"Humph! It'll be too dark to continue our journey today, if they keep us waiting much longer," said Galveston.

Kyen roused himself with a deep breath. He looked at Galveston without comprehending. He was settling back into his reverie when he noticed Adeya looking at her vials. She sat up straight and snatched up the venom with a resolute swipe.

"Eh, Adeya, what are you doing?" Kyen sank in his chair.

"I—" Adeya hesitated, glanced at Galveston. "I don't want to kill anyone else if I don't have to. It's innocent people the Kingmaster has a hold of. I thought—I think—Maybe there's a way to stop them without killing them."

Galveston eyed her, shook his head, and continued his pacing.

"If I dilute this enough,"—she uncorked the venom—"I think it will work."

"Work?" repeated Kyen.

"You'd still have to get them to drink it or scratch them with it," said Adeya. "But a weak dilution could knock someone unconscious. I don't know if it would last very long, though."

Kyen sat back, impressed. "Make enough for all of us, will you?"

Adeya smiled and nodded.

Galveston cast them a sour look.

She set to work mixing the first vial, adding the smallest drop of venom to the clear, carrier tincture. She'd placed the cork on the first vial when keys rattled, and the door banged open.

"The warden summons you." The guard scowled at them.

Chapter 32

The warden tossed Kyen's emissary papers on the desk and crossed his arms on them. A gray scar cut over his cheekbone and around his shaved head.

"You realize this is outlandish?" He scrutinized the three standing in front of him.

Galveston swelled to speak, but the warden spoke first.

"These papers are sealed by ten Princesses of Valeda, Captain of the Guard, and the King's First Councilman," he said. "Why not King Valeda? Or at least the crown prince?"

"The King lay injured when I left," said Kyen. "Prince Finn is in the grip of a black weapon."

The warden frowned. "All the black weapons are locked in the vaults."

"That's why we've come," said Kyen. "To consult the Obsidian."

"The emissary named is Kyen of Avanna." The warden shot Kyen a cutting glare. When Kyen looked at the floor, the captain continued, "Do you really expect me to believe you're Kyen of Avanna? He's said to be a span taller, three times your width, and—not to mention—dead."

"Well, I'm not dead at least," Kyen said with a weak smile, looking embarrassed.

"What proof do you have?"

"Uh... Proof? That I'm not dead?" Kyen blinked at him.

"That you,"—he jabbed the papers—"are Kyen of Avanna."

"The renowned swordsmanship of Avanna would be proof enough in a duel," said Galveston.

"Actually, let's not—" Kyen began.

"I will testify on his behalf," Adeya cut in. "I am Adeya, Crown Princess and Sole Heiress to the Throne of Isea. I give my word that this man is who he says he is."

The warden raised an eyebrow at Galveston. "Surely, you're not—?"

"Galveston, a Prince of Eope." Galveston answered without feeling.

The warden threw back his head and laughed. Kyen shifted his feet, Adeya pursed her lips, and Galveston looked unimpressed. Once the warden regained composure, he smiled at them; it didn't touch his eyes.

"I've had many—all denizens, all stories, all kingdoms—try to claim entrance to the Timbered City," he said. "But never the honor of three royal progeny. This is too fantastical for a falsehood. On that point, I believe I will grant you entrance. That, and the seals and signatures of these papers are no forgeries. That is also certain." He smiled and tapped on the childish scrawl of "Prinsezz Adelaide."

"Oh, thank you!" said Adeya.

The warden's smile faded. "Have you entered the Timbered City before?"

Adeya looked confused.

Galveston frowned.

"I have," said Kyen.

The warden's eyebrow rose. "I suggest you give your companions an idea of your undertaking. While there's still a chance to turn back. Our wards have been quiet these last few seasons, unusually so, but you're no safer for it."

Kyen said nothing.

Sitting forward, the warden scribbled out a note, signed it with a flourish, and handed it to Kyen with his emissary papers. "This will gain you access with the guards at your leisure." With a grim glance at Adeya, he said, "On no account thank me."

Kyen, on accepting the papers, dipped his head to the warden and turned to leave. Galveston and Adeya followed him. They rejoined the frowning guard at the door. In silence he led them back to their quarters, but as soon as the door shut, Adeya broke out.

"Such a lack of courtesy! I've never been treated so disrespectfully in my life. Doesn't he know who I am? Who we are?"

"It was offensive, wasn't it?" said Galveston blandly. He looked at Kyen.

Kyen stood, reading over the note of permission. His stormy eyes looked grim. He folded up the papers and placed them back in the pack.

Adeya followed Galveston's gaze and, seeing Kyen withdrawn, spoke up.

"What did he mean, Kyen?"

Kyen sighed. The moment drew long, too long, and as he moved towards his chamber, Adeya spoke up.

"Kyen? Did you hear me?"

He raised his head, his eyes slow to refocus on her.

"The princess asked you a question." Galveston growled.

"Oh... I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"What did the warden mean?" repeated Adeya. "About the wards being quiet and turning back?"

"I suppose he's right." Kyen walked to the table and dropped into a chair. He drifted into a reverie again, a faraway look in his eyes, his finger tracing the wood.

"I may take a guess," Galveston spoke into Kyen's silence. "Many of the soldiers who fought in the Black War were wounded by black weapons. Slowly being consumed, no word from the archangels, and the healers of Isea powerless to stop it, King Velda brought them here. The Black War had emptied the Timbered City. So King Velda locked them in, them and the black weapons, away from all Ellunon. Those soldiers have been here ever since."

"I don't understand," said Adeya. "Black weapons turn men into fiends eventually, don't they?"

Galveston looked on her gravely as her face fell with the realization.

"You mean all those soldiers—they're all—"

"Fiends." Kyen's voice made them both look over. "Hundreds of them. They infest the ruins of the capital. Every person who's gone to consult the Obsidian and not made it out has only added to their number."

"A foolish idea on King Velda's part," said Galveston. "Ellunon's greatest resource since the summoners, and he's made it inaccessible."

"Each soldier chose this for himself with what mind he had left, Galveston," said Kyen. "They preferred being locked away to becoming a terror to innocent people. Those that did not prefer death."

"Till what? Did not King Velda also promise to find another way to restore them? And what's come of that, hm? Does King Velda even remember them? Where's this restoration he promised?"

Kyen looked at the table, saying under his breath, "King Velda has not forgotten."

"I think it stupid," said Galveston. "It makes our task all the harder." Turning to Adeya he said, "This is why you need to remain at the gatehouse until our return, princess. These dangers are beyond you."

"I'm coming." Adeya glared at him.

Galveston's expression darkened, and he looked down his nose at Kyen. "Kyen of Avanna, you've done this before unscathed. What do you recommend?"

"That we be quick. Quiet. Back before nightfall," said Kyen. "It's half a day's journey to the center of the city where the Obsidian lies. The fiends don't run in packs. Well, most of them. If we encounter a fiend, our best chance is to outrun it or hide. There's no fighting fiends. Not with steel."

"Then we start out on the morrow. At first light," said Galveston. "Prepare yourself, princess."

"But what about the guards?" asked Adeya. "Couldn't they escort us?"

"The only reason I made it in and out is because I went alone," said Kyen. "Speed and silence are easier with fewer numbers."

"Would any volunteer to escort us through—what? A horde of fiends several hundred strong?" said Galveston. "I doubt King Velela pays them enough for that."

Chapter 33

The portcullis closed with a resounding clang at their heels.

The Timbered City loomed into the darkness. Stone ruins, mere outlines of buildings, lay scattered in the gloom between the enormous tree trunks. A tattered web of bridges crisscrossed the dark canopy. Platforms and houses once built around trunks or between branches now hung lopsided and broken open, sagging and rotted.

Adeya and Galveston edged closer to Kyen. They stood on a paved circle outside the gatehouse. The portcullis blocked the way back. Beside it, a stair carved through the wood to the battlements and to a door, but an iron grid barred it. A bell rope hung between.

Adeya drew in a shaky breath and gazed with longing on the rope.

Kyen looked at her then to Galveston.

Galveston rested a hand on his sword hilt.

Without a word, Kyen started at a swift pace. He followed the cracked road into the midst of the ruins. Galveston flanked his side while Adeya, clutching their pack, hurried at his heels.

A stillness pervaded throughout the city; it hushed their footsteps, their breathing, their whispers. The gloom deepened, swallowing up the gatehouse and the wall. They entered a dark world of tree trunks, webs, and broken stone. None of them spoke, except Galveston. He mumbled under his breath about 'bringing lanterns.'

A shadow flitted through the ruins beside them.

Kyen froze. Galveston and Adeya stopped with him. The three stared into the shadows.

With a wave to the other two, Kyen kept moving. Adeya hurried to stay close, but Galveston watched a moment longer before following.

The morning grew late, but the Timbered City grew darker. The ruins, bone-white in the shadows, rose into the skeletal shapes of buildings. Broken ropes dangled from the dark wreckage in the trees.

Another shadow flitted through the murk overhead.

Kyen stopped.

"Is it a fiend?" Adeya whispered.

A rope swayed in the still air.

"Don't stop," Kyen whispered back.

He picked up their pace, breaking into a jog. He led them into the shadows of a ruined wall where he paused to look out.

A falling rock clacked in the distance left, echoing into the stillness.

Galveston gripped his sword hilt as he crouched beside Kyen. "Where are the fiends?"

Without answering, Kyen darted away; Adeya and Galveston hurried after him. He crouched into the shadow of a tree trunk and paused again. He searched the dark ruins, the shadows overhead. When they rejoined him, he dashed across an open stretch of road.

Ahead, another wall of trees emerged in the dimness. The trunks formed a jagged edge, splintered and broken off, marred by teeth marks. Kyen sprinted for its shelter with Adeya and Galveston close behind. When they reached it, the three of them hunched into its shadow.

Kyen crept around the base.

Adeya, out of breath, swallowed hard, and Galveston huffed; but Kyen moved like a lithe panther, not winded in the slightest.

A gate tunnel opened in the wall, and Kyen crept to it. The portcullis lay beside it—a twisted, half-eaten mess of iron. Kyen hurried past without a look, but Galveston and Adeya hesitated a moment to stare. They followed Kyen through the gate tunnel.

Ahead, the Timber City brightened, and when the three stepped out, they shaded their eyes with their hands. Arcbeams broke over a city circle surrounded by ruins and tree trunks. A dark, half-buried sphere waited at the center. Smooth as a gem, its dark surface absorbed the arcbeams that fell across it. A cracked balustrade and a ridge of pushed-up paving stones ringed it.

The three of them stopped.

"The Obsidian." Galveston smiled on the other two before striding over for a look.

Adeya, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

Kyen hung back.

Galveston walked around the Obsidian, admiring.

"How do we consult it?" Adeya's whisper carried through the quiet of the circle.

"Kyen, you've been to the Obsidian once before. Tell us what's to be done," said Galveston.

"I'd like to ask it about the summoners," said Adeya.

"Don't just stand dumb, Kyen of Avanna. You've come all this way," said Galveston. "Come make your request."

"Sh! Do you hear that?" asked Adeya.

They fell silent. The quiet settled back on the circle.

"It's a voice whispering," said Adeya. "You hear it, don't you?"

"I do," said Galveston. "But I don't understand. It sounds like a foreign tongue."

"It's like it comes from everywhere at once."

The silence fell again as Galveston cocked his head to listen and Adeya searched the dim canopy.

"Wondrous!" Galveston gazed on the Obsidian. "Perhaps we should speak to it? Kyen of Avanna, what are you just standing there for? What's the matter with you?"

"I..." Kyen hesitated. "I don't want to come any closer."

"Why not, by the Arc?"

Kyen, brows drawn together, laid a hand on his hilt. His gaze fixed on the black orb.

"It's not going to attack you, man," said Galveston.

Kyen smiled a tight smile, not sparing a glance for Galveston.

"So you'll throw away your chance to help Finn and stop the Kingmaster?" said Galveston.

"I shouldn't—" Kyen began again. A long moment of quiet finished his sentence.

"Shouldn't what?" said Adeya.

"Very well," said Galveston. "I won't fail at this. I shall ask." With a swirl of his cloak, Galveston stepped up to the Obsidian and laid his hands on the balustrade. "Obsidian, we seek your assistance." He waited a moment, exchanged looks with Adeya, then continued. "Tell us how to stop the Kingmaster and free our friends from the grip of the black weapon?"

Adeya, fingering her amulet, glanced at Galveston while Kyen watched the Obsidian.

Galveston's eyes opened wide in surprise, then he cocked his head as if listening.

"Is it speaking to you? What's it saying?" asked Adeya.

"An arcangel. It says calling down an arcangel is the only way to release the grip of a black weapon." Galveston looked at her.

"But we need a summoner to call an arcangel. Let me." Adeya hurried up next to him.

"Obsidian, where can we find a summoner? Please tell me!"

In the silence that followed, Adeya's face fell.

"But they can't all be gone? There must be one!" she cried. But then she sank, gripping the balustrade as if it were the only thing holding her up. "Then what do we do? There must be some... Nothing?" Tears shone in her eyes. She looked first to Galveston, then to Kyen. "It says the Age of the Summoner is ended. The arcangels are gone. None are left in Ellunon who can rival the power of the black weapons."

"We should leave now." Kyen's voice cut across the quiet. The grim look on his face deepened; a hint of something flickered in his stormy eyes.

"Leave?" repeated Galveston. "But we've only just arrived. Think of all the questions we could ask! Such knowledge at our fingertips. How can you speak of leaving?"

"I will not be caught within the walls after dark," said Kyen, his gaze shifting to Galveston for the first time.

At the firm edge in his voice, Galveston drew himself up. He chewed on a reply but never spoke it.

Adeya, wiping at a stray tear, walked to join Kyen. Together, they turned away. Galveston gave one long look at the Obsidian then turned to follow them.

Adeya sniffed as they walked.

Kyen put a hand on her shoulder.

"They can't be all gone. They just can't," she said. "What are we going to do?"

"Let's get safely to the gatehouse. Then we'll figure something out," said Kyen.

Adeya wiped at a couple more tears. "What's the point? The Obsidian knows everything, doesn't it? It said no summoner remains in Ellunon. All have died, been lost, or have lived out the last of their days in retirement. Their powers are gone. The Age of the Summoner is over."

Kyen, letting his hand slip from her shoulder, looked pained at her tears and offered no other comfort. Tears continued to slip down her face, and her soft sniffs mingled with the sound of their footsteps.

Together, the three crossed the circle. As they neared the gate tunnel, a figure stepped out of the shadows.

Kyen stopped the other two behind him.

The Kingmaster halted in their path and clanked his pipe against the cobblestones.

Chapter 34

"I don't want unnecessary bloodshed, Kyen of Avanna." The Kingmaster's cloak shadowed all but a chin fuzzed in gray. His voice sounded gravelly, old; Adeya frowned when she heard it.

"I will still let you free unharmed," he said. "But you must swear never to impede me again."

Armored figures emerged from the streets on either side of them: twenty gatehouse guards carrying spears; another twenty rose from hiding on the platforms overhead. They notched arrows into bows and stood ready to draw. Black welts marked the arms and necks of them all.

The guards lined up in front of the Kingmaster and closed in from either side.

Galveston began backing away, drawing his sword and pushing Adeya behind him.

The guards neared, but Kyen held his ground.

"You have to stop," he said. "The black weapon is going to take you, if you keep using it."

The Kingmaster clanged his pipe against the cobblestones. "Leave me to my plots. I will use whatever means I must to stop you, if you do not surrender."

"You've taken Finn's life by taking his mind," said Kyen. "I'll hunt you until you release him—release everyone under your power—and give up the black weapon."

"That is impossible." The Kingmaster clanged his pipe against the ground a third time.

The bowmen aimed at Kyen and fired. Arrows peppered the ground as Kyen lunged forward. Kyen's sword flew from its scabbard. Kyen busted through the line of guards like a blur, metal clanging, bodies falling. He flashed towards the Kingmaster.

The remaining guards turned on Galveston and Adeya. They backed away as the spears encircled them.

Kyen swung down hard on the Kingmaster. The Kingmaster whipped up his blowpipe like a staff. He knocked Kyen's strike aside with a clang.

Another volley of arrows forced Kyen to dive aside. He sprang in again, slashing out. The Kingmaster jumped back. Kyen's blade cut nothing but open air.

The archers above shifted. Aiming down on Adeya and Galveston, they drew their bows.

"Galveston!" Adeya cried.

Galveston looked up, saw the archers loosing arrows, and ran. He tackled Adeya into the shelter of the Obsidian. Arrows pinged off its surface and ricocheted off the cobblestones around them.

"This is your last warning, Kyen of Avanna." The Kingmaster backed down the street between the ruins. He disappeared into the shadows.

Kyen clenched his sword in his hand, hesitating.

"Kyen! Help!"

Kyen bolted after the sound of Adeya's voice.

Pinned down by archers, Galveston and Adeya hunched in the shelter of the Obsidian. The guards' spears closed in a tight circle around them.

Galveston bunched himself up and, through a break in the volleys of arrows, he charged the spearmen. He knocked aside the spear of the nearest, plowed into the man, and drove him back. He knocked into several of the guards behind, and Galveston went down with them all in a heap.

The other guards turned their spears on Adeya.

Gripping her sword, Adeya stood up from the shelter of the Obsidian. She sidestepped the first thrust, sliced the pole in half, but the second guard speared her in the back. It caught in her pack and stuck, but the force of the thrust shoved her forward. With a cry she toppled into the guard in front of her, and they fell sprawling.

Kyen, with a running start, vaulted off the balustrade, cleared the top of the Obsidian, and hit the cobblestones at a roll. He lunged to his feet in a flash. He cleaved down the guard trying to stab through Adeya's pack. He flew with flashing steel through the guards surrounding her: smashing a spearman in the face with his hilt; slicing aside a thrust and kicking the guard in the gut; whipping a slash above Adeya to fell another. Steel thunked on wood and clanged on armor.

Scrambling up off the guard she'd fall on, Adeya knocked aside a jab from his spear. She slammed her hilt into the guard's face but immediately sprang back, shaking her hand.

Kyen suddenly yanked her down, sheltered her head with his vest.

A volley of arrows rained down on them. A dozen pummeled up Kyen's back and one pierced his arm. The few that missed bounced off the cobblestones around them.

He pulled her backwards. They both collapsed into the cover of the Obsidian.

Galveston struggled in a brawl with the three spearmen. Two grabbed his sword arm and nub.

All the guardsmen Kyen had assaulted rose back to their feet, dented and bruised, but unharmed by Kyen's blade.

The archers hurried across bridges to regain range.

Kyen, breathing hard, gritted his teeth.

Adeya stared at the bloody arrow-tip sticking out of his arm.

They both flinched down as another hail of arrows ricocheted around them.

"Kyen! What are we going to do?"

Kyen shut his eyes. The point of his blade lowered towards the ground.

A guard hefted his spear while two others threw Galveston to the ground and pinned him.

"Kyen?"

"You have to," said Kyen, under his breath.

"What do you mean?" cried Adeya. "Have to what?"

His fingers clenched his hilt. "You have to! There's no other option!"

"Kyen?"

"Don't argue with me! Just do it! Please!" Kyen leapt out of the cover of the Obsidian, dragging Adeya up with him.

From the stone under their feet, an upsurge of moss erupted. It spread as a wave green and carpeted the city circle. Every spear shaft burst alive in leaf and flower. The spearmen dropped their weapons with a start. Arrows banked out of the air, curling branches and greenery. Vines sprang from the ground to loop around the guards' feet. They peeled the guards off Galveston and swallowed them whole in foliage.

Kyen bashed the last guard holding Galveston out of the way. He seized Galveston under the arms and dragged the swordsman upright.

Adeya, staring at the moss, suddenly snapped back into action. She grabbed Galveston by the other arm and, with Kyen, pulled the swordsman to his feet.

"Go!" Kyen snatched up Galveston's fallen sword.

A nearby guard, picking up a bushy spear, charged Kyen.

Behind him, the surface of the Obsidian shivered.

The archers descended and the guards regrouped, all drawing out arming swords.

Adeya hobbled with Galveston towards the gate tunnel.

Vines, crawling like tentacles over the ground, flanked them on either side. The guards charged into the seething greenery after them, but the vines grabbed, tripped, and sprouted in their way. They hacked into the tendrils, the first to break through charged after the three.

Kyen, his longsword in one hand, Galveston's arming sword in the other, skipped backwards to face them.

Three guards attacked him at once.

Kyen deflected two of their sword slashes, kicked one guard in the stomach, and thwacked one on the armored breastplate. The third guard swung at Kyen's back.

A stone pillar burst out of the ground between them. It cracked the guard in the jaw before his blow could land. He staggered backwards and fell.

Another five guards attacked Kyen together.

Vines lashed out, tripping three of the guards. It swallowed two in leaves even as the third scrambled to escape.

Kyen launched himself at the other two with swords flashing.

One of the guards escaped the greenery and charged Adeya and Galveston. Adeya cried out and winced as he lashed out.

A young sapling, sprouting to life between them, punched the guard in the face. Another stout branch felled him to the ground.

Adeya and Galveston hurried towards the mouth of the gate tunnel.

In the middle of the city circle, the Obsidian shifted. A dark mass bulged out of its surface. It lengthened, grew claws, and gripped the balustrade. The rest of its limb swelled and rose out of the dark orb.

Kyen disabled one guard with a deft slash to the leg. From the next guard, he sidestepped a leafy spear thrust. Kyen charged into the guard's face. He cracked both hilts into the guard's head with a clang. The guard staggered backwards. A stone pillar burst up ram him, sending him all the way to the ground.

The dark claw of the Obsidian released the balustrade. It exploded forward through the air. It slammed through the guards, ripped through the vines, and shot claws outstretched towards Kyen.

Kyen's eyes widened. He threw up an arm to shield his eyes and tensed. The dark claws spread wide to grab him.

A blast of light erupted through the circle as the darkness collided with Kyen. Held off by an invisible force, the dark arm smashed against Kyen and shredded. The limb morphed into a surge, crushing down on him, blasting swathes of darkness past him.

Kyen's knees buckled. He dropped to a crouch.

The surge swelled.

Yelling from the strain, Kyen flung his arm wide. A white explosion ripped up the length of the surge. Kyen whirled and ran. Behind, the shreds floating to the ground snapped back into the shape of an arm.

Kyen caught up with Adeya and Galveston as they reached the gate tunnel. The three fled through it together.

The arm of the Obsidian stilled. It hung in the air as all the guards gathered around it. They all lowered their swords and stood watching the three running down the gate tunnel, dark silhouettes on a bright backdrop. They disappeared around the corner.

The arm withdrew. It snaked back into the dark surface of the Obsidian and disappeared. With a ripple, the Obsidian regained the appearance of stone. The city circle stood transformed into a moss-covered, pillar-studded, vine-swathed expanse of green. Like a black bauble at its center, the Obsidian waited.

Chapter 35

Kyen, Adeya, and Galveston fled back into the Timbered City.

A chorus of wailing erupted above them.

Kyen veered off the main road into the ruins of the city. Adeya, pale and gasping for breath, glanced back. Galveston lagged in the rear. Ahead, a small, white dome gleamed out of the darkness.

The keening cries echoed back and forth joined by strange chortles and shrieks. Dark shadows crawled down out of the gloom. Their shapes shimmied down ropes, clambered headfirst down tree trunks, and hopped amid the dark masses.

Kyen pelted towards the stone slab blocking the dome's entrance. He slammed into the slab at a full run, grabbed it, wrenched it sideways.

The stone slid aside.

"Inside!" Kyen yelled.

Adeya sprinted through the doorway.

Galveston, huffing and puffing, sped up and ducked in.

Kyen stepped into the dome. He began shoving the slab shut as the fiends reached the ground. They swarmed towards the entrance. The closing wedge of the stone shut them out as they reached the dome. The slab jolted under the impact of their bodies.

Kyen stumbled backwards. He stood, breathing hard, his back porcupined with arrows. Adeya clutched her amulet in both hands and crept up beside him. Galveston grasped for his hilt but, grabbing air, noticed his blade still in Kyen's hand. Kyen handed it back.

The slab shuddered under a series of impacts.

Furious voices shrieked outside.

Breath puffed dust through the door jamb.

A thud hit the roof, making Adeya jump. Galveston brandished his blade at the ceiling.

"They can't get in," said Kyen. "We should be safe here."

Galveston lowered his blade, and Adeya watched as several thuds shuddered through the dome.

Kyen turned from the door. Behind him, a glass pillar shed soft, ethereal light over the bare dirt floor. Kyen checked the edge of his blade with a frown.

"Kyen?" Adeya stared at the arrows protruding up and down his back.

"Hm?" He looked up.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only a little." He glanced at the arrow in his arm before sheathing his blade. When Adeya and Galveston kept staring at him, he said, "What?" Kyen followed their gaze by glancing over his shoulder. He saw the arrows. "Oh."

"What do you mean 'oh'? You should sit down!" Adeya cried.

"I'm really alright," said Kyen.

Adeya dug into her healer's pouch.

A skittering of claws and wail resounded through the ceiling. The three paused to watch the sound as it crossed overhead. When it stopped, Galveston frowned at Kyen.

"You need to explain what happened back there, Kyen of Avanna." Galveston slammed his sword into its scabbard with a metallic "Clank!"

"This is not a time for questions, Galveston! Kyen—sit—down!"

Kyen thumped cross-legged to the floor.

Kneeling next to him, Adeya took out bandages, a tincture, and her penknife.

Galveston drew his pipe from his pocket. With fidgety jerks, he stuffed it, lit it, and puffed it.

The door shuddered again under another onslaught.

With weary fingers, Kyen unclipped his cloak, but the dozen arrows in his back pinned the garment to him. He undid the latches to his linen armor vest. Wincing, Kyen shrugged it off. The arrows in his back slid off with the vest. He dropped the spiky mess of garments in a heap on the ground.

Adeya, taking his arm, probed around the arrow. It entered his upper arm, pierced the front, and lodged in place.

Galveston watched them both, clenching his pipe in his teeth.

"It missed your blood paths. I should be able to remove it." Adeya took her knife. Gripping the arrow shaft against the blade, she snapped off the point with a deft twist.

Kyen hissed through gritted teeth.

"Sorry!"

Kyen stared doggedly at the far wall.

Adeya slid the shaft out of his arm in a single tug.

Kyen tensed. A muscle in his jaw worked.

Adeya rolled up his sleeve. She wetted two wads of bandage with her tincture. As she did, her bloody fingers began shaking. She bit her lip trying to concentrate.

A chorus of wailing echoed near and far outside the dome.

Kyen looked over at Adeya, noticing her quivering fingers.

The scrape of claws against stone outside made her jump. Placing wadded bandages on the entry and exit wounds, she took up a length of bandage and wrapped the dressing in place. She tried to knot it, but her shaking hands struggled. The knot kept slipping from her fingers.

Adeya pushed back her hair, smudging Kyen's blood on her forehead, and made a frustrated noise in her throat.

"Are you alright?" asked Kyen.

Adeya avoided his eyes. "Yes. I just..."

Kyen waited, searching her face.

A shudder went through Adeya before she said, "It's not easy to get used to battle."

"Adeya—"

"Let me finish!" Adeya set herself to the knot. "Before I can't. And no, I don't need to go to Eope." She shot this last statement over her shoulder at Galveston.

After a few more tries, Adeya got the bandaged knotted. "What about the rest of you?"

"Armor took the worst of it." Kyen nudged the pin-cushioned heap at his knee. "Bruises'll spot me like a field cat tomorrow, but I'll be alright. Thank you."

"And what about you?" Adeya looked at Galveston.

"I'm a little bruised, but no worse." Even as he said this, he rubbed and shifted his shoulder where the brooch pinned his cape.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take a look?" asked Adeya.

"I'd rather have an explanation," said Galveston. "Are you going to answer my question, Kyen of Avanna?"

Kyen slumped back against the wall and stared at him wearily. "What question?"

"Don't use your 'what question' line on me."

Adeya, with a sigh and a shake of her head, put her things back into their pouch.

An onslaught of shrieking and scraping from above overrode any further conversation. Galveston puffed his pipe in the corner, scowling at the ceiling. Kyen rested against the wall with a faraway look in his eyes. Adeya, dragging her gaze from the ceiling, took off her pack to examine the spear hole. She pulled her journal out from inside.

"Oh no, nana's journal," said Adeya. She held up where it'd been pierced clear through by the spear thrust. Its cover hung torn askew.

A scraping sound began to circle the wall outside—claws dragged over stone.

Adeya opened the journal to thumb through it. An identical puncture sliced each page. Reaching the back cover, where the spear's point had entered, Adeya ran her hands over it.

An edge of a paper peaked out from beneath the leather binding.

Adeya's eyes narrowed on it. She fingered it. The paper shifted around beneath the leather. Squeezing her fingers into the slice, Adeya tore the hole bigger. From it she pulled out a fold of papers.

She smoothed them out and read:

Dearest Granddaughter,

I hid these, my final entries. Put them aside instantly or burn them, unless you're willing to take your life in your own hands. What terrible discoveries I made at my journey's end! Any who learn of them risk their lives by reading further.

My last entry described how I nearly caught the last summoner. How I hunted him through Denmont, Bishire, and Varkest! He endeavored relentlessly to obscure his trail or lose me within the forest, but I caught him at last.

Oh, my granddaughter, how do I tell you? What I'd expected—a veteran summoner, a peer of Isea—I found him nothing that I expected. Instead, I caught a youth, hardly more than a boy. A boy! A boy gave me such a chase? Terribly battered and thin at that. (I am too old for this.) A hopeless despair had left him half-crazed. An arcangel alone keeps life in him.

The boy does, indeed, have with him an arcangel. The last arcangel still answering in Ellunon, I fear. The arcangel himself told me as much, for the boy wouldn't say more than two words together. I spoke in length with the arcangel. What he related to me, I cannot reveal here. It is too dangerous. If the great foe, the Consuming Darkness, discovered a last arcangel in Ellunon, it would hunt him and the boy down mercilessly.

I am grown old, Adeya, too old. I am wounded. My vigor fails. I've come face-to-face with an enemy far beyond my remaining strength. But, perhaps where my age and infirmity have failed, your youth and strength will prevail.

Seek out the boy, Adeya. His arcangel will tell you all. He's carrying not only the fate of Isea but of all Ellunon on his shoulders. They leave now, intending to confront the Obsidian in Varkest. If the boy lives, you must find him, Adeya. Help him. He is the key to everything.

His name is Kyen of Avanna.

Chapter 36

Adeya's eyes grew wide as they passed over the last sentence.

His name is Kyen of Avanna.

She lifted her head.

Kyen of Avanna.

He sat opposite Adeya in the dimness. The boy now grown a young man slumped against the wall, staring into space.

"It was you," said Adeya.

Galveston, who'd been watching Kyen, shifted his frown to Adeya.

Adeya crunched the papers against her chest. "How come you never told me you met my nana?"

Kyen's stormy gaze suddenly refocused. He looked up and locked eyes with her.

"Nana says it was you," said Adeya. "You're the last summoner. You didn't get into an argument with the Obsidian. You went to fight it. You and your arcangel."

Kyen's face fell deadpan. He said nothing, even as he held her gaze.

"Magic tree my foot!" said Galveston. "Have you been lying to us this whole time, Kyen of Avanna?"

"I didn't lie to you."

"Yes, you did!" said Adeya. "You told me you weren't a summoner. Well, what was that back there, then, at the Obsidian? Only a summoner could have done those things."

"I told you the truth, Adeya," said Kyen. "I'm not a summoner."

"Then explain to me what happened! Why are we even still alive now?"

Kyen looked away.

"Why don't you say something? Have you had an arcangel with you all this time?" she demanded.

Kyen kept silent.

"What was the point of traipsing all over the forest? This whole journey. My parents. Finn. Why didn't you just heal them yourself?" cried Adeya. "Why haven't you stopped the Kingmaster long before this?"

"You don't understand," said Kyen.

"Well—then—explain it to me!" Adeya glared at him, all bunched up and breathless.

"You've owed us answers for far too long, Kyen of Avanna," said Galveston.

They both stared expectantly at Kyen.

"It would kill him," said Kyen. "Trying to heal Finn."

Galveston looked unconvinced, but Adeya eased back.

"Like Nai?" she said.

Kyen nodded.

"He needs a source to draw aura from," said Adeya. "A halomere or an arcstone or—" She cut off as her wide eyes fastened on the pillar in the middle of the room. "That's why you brought us here, isn't it?"

"Will you speak plainly, princess?" said Galveston.

"Nana always told me," said Adeya. "The strongest poolings of aura could be found in the Firstwold ruins. That's why the fiends keep away."

"Unless they're in mass, apparently." Galveston gnashed his pipe in his teeth. He shifted it from one corner of his mouth to the other before taking it out with his hand.

"Then, the Nadir in Isea, why didn't you?" Adeya asked. "You could have brought Finn and healed him there. There's no deeper pool of aura than the Nadir! Why didn't you..." Adeya stopped when she saw a forlornness descend over Kyen.

"He isn't willing to do it." Kyen looked to the ceiling for a moment. "Or wasn't, he tells me I should say. It would have exposed him. But I won't be able to hide him anymore, now he's revealed himself to the Obsidian."

"Never mind that for now. Why not wait here and lay a trap?" said Galveston. "The Kingmaster will be back for us. Why not draw him near this place? Strike him down?"

"He's already wise to that," said Kyen. "When he attacked us at Isea, he kept his distance from Nadir on purpose. He knows arcangels can't pull aura that far."

"And that's why he's hunting you," said Galveston. "He must have figured out—or at least suspected—you've an arcangel with you."

"The Kingmaster's not going to come within three stone's throws of this place. Not him, nor those he controls," said Kyen. "He's going to wait us out. Strike us down once when we're out in the open."

"Strike you down, don't you mean?" said Galveston. "His designs on the princess cannot rival the attention you will now demand. After the arcangel's little display at the Obsidian, he's in no doubt about his greatest threat. We might be able to use this to our advantage." Galveston chomped down on his pipe and puffed at it. After a moment, he continued, "Kyen of Avanna, I'm sure you perceive the best option as clearly as I do."

At this, Kyen's face fell. "I'm going to make for the gatehouse at dawn. There's another gatehouse east of here. You and Adeya can reach it in a day's journey if you hurry."

"What? No!" cried Adeya.

"The Kingmaster won't expect me to leave this Firstwold ruin so easily," said Kyen. "I'll draw him off. As long as the arcangel is with me, his dark powers won't work on me. You both can make for the east gates and escape."

"You can't go alone," said Adeya.

"I stand the best chance of outrunning him alone."

"But what if he catches you?"

"I also stand the best chance of fighting him alone."

"But—"

"It's about time you considered your kingdom a little more heavily in your decisions, crown princess," said Galveston. "For once, take our advice."

Adeya swelled, her aquamarine eyes bright, but she held her tongue. She crossed her arms and sulked.

"Now that's all settled," said Galveston. "I'm going to try for some sleep. I do believe the fiends have left off. For the moment."

* * *

The morning arrived unnoticed under the unceasing glow of the glass pillar.

Kyen stood, wiggling the last arrow out of his vest.

Galveston, smoking his pipe, stood beside Kyen with his arms crossed.

In the background, Adeya shuffled through her healer's pouch.

With the last arrow out, Kyen's vest and cloak fell apart, the cloak fluttering to the ground. Kyen slung on the vest and began strapping it on.

"If you cut east through the ruins, you'll find a road to take you to the other gatehouse," he said. "The guards won't trouble you. They care about those entering, not leaving."

Galveston nodded.

Kyen swirled his cloak over his shoulders. He worked the latch as he walked towards the door, pausing to grip the stone slab.

"Kyen of Avanna." Galveston's voice made Kyen look back. "Arc's mercy help you."

"Thank you, Galveston," said Kyen, unsmiling. He pulled the stone slab back.

After the dimness of the ruin, the green morning of the forest spilled brightly over the threshold.

Kyen stepped out onto the road still trying to work his cloak clasp. He struggled to get the latch to stick closed.

"I need to get a new one of these. I can never get it to—Ah!—Got it!"

"Kyen!"

He stopped and turned to see Adeya come running from the ruin to catch up to him.

"Take this with you." Stopping in front of him, she held out the arcstone. "I don't know how much aura's left inside, and I doubt it's enough to stop the Kingmaster. But it may help."

Kyen took the stone and, smiling a little, pocketed it. "The arcangel says thank you."

"And this." Adeya held out a vial of green-tinged liquid. "I only managed to make one. Take it."

"Thank you—from me."

"Be careful," said Adeya.

"And you." With a final smile, one that quickly waned, Kyen strode off down the road.

Adeya, fingering her amulet, turned away and walked back to the ruin. Stepping inside, she started to slide the slab back in place. She cast one last look at Kyen as he walked away. She watched him until the shrinking crack closed him off from view.

Galveston stood in the back trying to re-stuff his pipe.

Adeya sat down to close up her healer's pouch and put the journal back.

"Pack up, princess," said Galveston. "We should be leaving as well."

Adeya put on the pouch, slung up the pack, and was rising to her feet when the stone slab ground open. She and Galveston looked up.

"Kyen?" Adeya started to smile, but it faltered.

The black outline of the man against the light was too short for Kyen. He held a bared blade in his hand and wore a dagger on his hip.

Galveston moved to draw his sword.

Pahff!

He jerked to a halt.

A dark dart protruded from Galveston's neck. The hand fell away from his hilt and dropped back to his side.

The Kingmaster stepped around the silhouette of the swordsman. His cloaked face moved from Galveston to Adeya.

Adeya scrambled to draw her sword. She backed away and pressed herself against the wall, pointing the blade at him.

The Kingmaster regarded her for a moment. He motioned with his hand.

Galveston turned on her with a hard expression and approached, drawing out his arming sword. In a single thrust and flourish, Galveston disarmed her.

Adeya's sword clattered to the ground. She shrank back against the wall as the point of Galveston's sword neared her throat.

Chapter 37

Kyen pulled the bell rope. A muffled jangle sounded from inside the gatehouse.

Looking over his shoulder, Kyen searched the ruins of the Timbered City looming beyond the paved circle. The hush persisted.

Kyen frowned and stepped away from the portcullis. He craned his neck back to look up at the battlements. Moving forward, he reached for the bell cord again.

Pahff!

Pahff!

Pahff!

Kyen leapt sideways as darts rained down. He dove into the staircase and pressed himself into its nook. The darts bounced off the cobblestones where he'd been standing. A fine green vapor rose from them as they rolled to a stop.

Kyen leaned out and looked up.

The Kingmaster stood on the battlements, blowpipe in hand. The doorway into the gatehouse stood open beside him. Seeing Kyen, the Kingmaster shifted the angle of his blowpipe and fired.

Kyen ducked back.

The dart slammed into the wood behind him, trailing an acrid green streak.

Kyen drew his sword and bound up the staircase.

Darts thudded into the wood around him one after another as he zigzagged his way up. He ducked a dart, turned the corner, and sliced another out of the air.

As Kyen rounded the last corner, the Kingmaster bolted into the gatehouse. The iron grid slammed shut behind him.

Kyen ran up to the gate in time to see the Kingmaster's dark cloak vanish around the corner with a flap.

Backing away from the iron grid, Kyen took a deep breath. In the space of a blink, his eyes flashed gold. The iron of the grid rusted and disintegrated under his blazing glare. Another blink

reverted his eye color, and Kyen dashed through the opening into the gatehouse. He sprinted down several flights of stairs, down a long passage, into a hall—the hall with the tables and stools. He stepped out, only to duck back as the Kingmaster moved across the hall.

Pahff!

A dart thudded into the wall where he'd been standing.

He stole a glimpse around the corner.

The Kingmaster hung in the dimness of a doorway on the far side. He reloaded another dart in his pipe.

Kyen ducked out, flipped over the nearest table, and hid behind it as a dart whizzed over his head.

"Tell me, Kyen of Avanna," said the Kingmaster. "Your arcangel protects you from my black darts. Will it also protect you from reeking dragon venom?"

"Who gave you the black weapon, Kingmaster?" Kyen called back. "Illeth of Norgard? Beres of Varkest? Who?"

"One who'd be happy to know you're alive. And even happier when I deliver you dead."

Kyen snatched up the nearest stool. In his hands, the wood morphed like putty: one leg shifted into a handle on the back, the seat broadened, the remaining legs bent forward, flattened, joined with the seat into a wooden shield. With it, Kyen dove out of hiding.

The Kingmaster fired on him. Kyen caught a first, a second dart on the wood as he charged across the hall. The Kingmaster backed away into the passage, but Kyen reached him first. He slashed out. The Kingmaster whirled his iron pipe to knock away Kyen's overhand. He stepped deeper into the passage, smacked a lever on the wall, and an iron gate slammed down between them. With a swirl of his cloak, he fled.

Kyen backed up a step. His eyes flashed gold. The iron disintegrated under his gaze, and he threw himself down the passage before his eyes changed back to gray. He chased the Kingmaster down the staircase. Glimpses of his flying cloak revealed the Kingmaster fleeing down the steps below.

They dashed out together into the gate tunnel when the Kingmaster turned to face him.

Kyen slowed.

The Kingmaster dropped his blowpipe with a clank to pull the arming sword from his side.

Kyen cast aside his wooden shield to draw his longsword with both hands.

The Kingmaster began to circle him as Kyen approached.

Kyen hefted his blade, the tip bobbing in mid-air. He lunged for the Kingmaster. The Kingmaster deflected the first two slashes from Kyen and jumped back from the third. They circled one another, both taking care not to be pinned against the wall.

Kyen attacked again. He dove in for a thrust but feinted, slashing instead.

The Kingmaster fell for it.

Kyen's blade caught him in his sword arm, cut him deep.

He staggered backwards out of Kyen's range. He pressed a hand to his arm, blood seeping through the gash.

Kyen pressed forward brandishing his sword, but the Kingmaster backed away into the tunnel.

"I knew if it came down to swords you'd best me. You are"—the Kingmaster bowed his head—"the great Kyen of Avanna."

"Surrender the black weapon," said Kyen. "I won't kill you, but it will do worse. Much worse. Surrender it!"

"You'd better kill me, then." The Kingmaster lowered his sword, leaving himself open.

Kyen leapt into the opening, but instead of dealing a death blow, Kyen smashed his hilt into the Kingmaster's face. The blow slammed the Kingmaster back into the wall, and he slid down it. His sword clattered out of his hand.

Kyen, huffing for breath, stood over him. When the Kingmaster didn't move, Kyen seized him by his collar and lifted him to his feet.

The hood fell back. Sergueo—the old doorman of King Isea—hung stunned in his hands.

Kyen frowned.

A dark welt stood out on Sergueo's neck.

The grid gate slammed shut behind him, blocking the entrance into the gatehouse.

Kyen dropped Sergueo and ran. He dove for his shield. He caught it up as a hail of darts rained down on him from the arrow slits. Kyen crunched himself up against the wall. The wood shield morphed again, widened over him, as a battering of darts thudded into the wood. The wood stretched thin. The points of the darts began punching through. The wood began splitting. The hail stopped.

Kyen peered over the shield to see five black blowpipes withdraw from the arrow slits. Glimpses of black cloaks flitted through them.

Kyen, keeping under the cover of his shield, rose to a crouch.

Several green globes dropped out of the murder holes above him. Glass shattered as they pummeled the ground. Kyen ducked behind the wood again as green liquid splattered all around him. The liquid turned to vapors. The vapors grew into a mist, filling the air.

Kyen coughed. He buried his mouth and nose in his sleeve.

More glass vials dropped from the murder holes, widening the circle of reeking dragon venom around him.

Kyen struggled to his feet. He dashed a few steps only to sink back to the ground. The shield dropped from his fingers, then fell his sword. Kyen curled up on himself, coughing, and starting to spasm as the noxious poison became a thick haze in the air.

Kyen fumbled in his pocket. He snatched out the arcstone and clutched it to his chest.

A massive thud shuddered up the tunnel walls. A whirlwind howled to life around Kyen. It blasted the mist away, sweeping the vapors out either end of the tunnel.

The tunnel groaned as the wooden walls came alive, shifting and reaching upwards. Metal creaked then scraped as the mouth of the gate stretched away from the portcullis. Freed from its runners, it toppled over dragging its chains out with it. The portcullis slammed into the ground with an earsplitting clang. Another smaller clang resounded as the grid blocking entrance to the gatehouse also fell.

The wooden walls settled and stilled.

Kyen, coughing and twitching a little, uncurled. He grabbed for his sword hilt with clumsy fingers. It took him a couple of times before he could grip it. He rose to his knees then, shakily, to his feet. He walked into the gatehouse, keeping one hand on the wall to steady himself all the way. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, his step had strengthened again. He re-entered the hall. A mess of leafy branches swallowed half of the room. In the mass, several limp, cloaked forms hung trapped.

Kyen walked up to them one by one and jerked back their hoods.

Hatts.

Arold of Denmont.

Elder Bear.

The warden of the gatehouse.

A soldier from Veleda.

Kyen frowned at the unconscious forms. As he stood thinking, his frown grew into a scowl. He whirled away and, taking the steps two at a time, sprinted back to the gate tunnel. He ran the length of it, not slowing as he dashed across the iron beams of the fallen portcullis.

He ran out onto the paved circle when a swordsman stepped out. He blocked the road back into the Timbered City.

Kyen skidded to a halt. His eyes widened.

The swordsman stood, blade drawn and raised to fight. His flaming red hair looked mussed and his auburn eyes glared hatred at Kyen. The black welt on his arm had grown nasty; a dark lump with pulsing veins stretched across his skin.

Kyen lowered his sword. "Finn."

Chapter 38

"I will use whatever means I must, Kyen of Avanna," said Finn.

Kyen's fist clenched and unclenched on his sword hilt. His fingers grew white around the arcstone in his other hand.

Hefting his sword, Finn charged Kyen. He lunged, stabbing for Kyen's midsection. Kyen jumped sideways out of the way. Finn whirled on him, swinging hard, but Kyen deflected the blow with a loud clang. Kyen ducked as Finn sliced out at his neck then leapt away as Finn slashed again with a yell. He over-swung, and Kyen dove into the opening.

He tried to smack Finn's face with his hilt, but Finn caught it with a hand. They grappled for control of Kyen's sword, Kyen's two arms against Finn's one. Finn thrust an awkward, one-handed stab at close range.

Kyen, hanging to his sword, bent out of the way. Finn's blade bit into his side as it passed. Wrenching Finn's arm, Kyen used Finn's momentum to sling him backward to the ground. Finn's grip slipped free of Kyen's sword as he fell. He hit the paving stones on his stomach.

Kyen stepped over him, but Finn rolled and lashed out. Kyen deflected the strike, flinging Finn's sword arm to the ground. He stepped on his wrist. The black welt throbbed in Finn's arm next to his foot. Kyen slammed the arcstone against the black welt. The stone blazed alive.

Finn screamed at him. He wrenched his hand free and clawed at Kyen's face. Kyen bent backwards without letting go of Finn's arm, but Finn's nails scraped across his cheek.

The black veins running Finn's arm shrank.

Finn's back arched as he kept screaming.

The light within the arcstone waned. It winked out.

Finn's screams stopped as he fell back limp. He lay there huffing.

Kyen pulled his hand away. The arcstone crumbled to dust in his fingers. Underneath it, the black welt remained.

With a yell, Finn snatched the dagger from his belt and stabbed Kyen in the chest.

Kyen staggered backwards to his feet, the dagger protruding from his vest. He yanked the dagger out, and the tip came out red with blood. Kyen cast it aside. It clattered across the paving stones as Finn chuckled and climbed to his feet.

"Now what, Kyen of Avanna?" He smiled, dark and mirthless.

Kyen backed away.

"How much more can your arcangel do before he overextends himself?" said Finn. "I'm curious to find out."

Still backing away, Kyen reached into his pocket.

"Will you still fight back?" Finn hefted his blade. "One by one. Killing your own friends?"

Kyen drew Adeya's vial from his pocket. He tossed it into the air and smashed it with the blade of his sword. He fell into a stance. The tincture slipped down the blade's edges to drip off the point.

"Finn would rather die than be your slave," said Kyen.

"So be it." Finn lunged for Kyen.

Kyen sidestepped his first slash, his second, then he swung at Finn's head. Finn stumbled backwards; the tip of Kyen's blade clipped his hair and nicked his forehead.

Finn regained his stance, smiled. He touched a hand to his head, looking at the blood that came away on his fingers.

"You missed." He smiled.

Kyen lowered his sword.

Finn frowned at him, beginning to sway where he stood. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he crumpled to the ground.

Before Finn hit the paving stones, Kyen bolted. He took off running down the road, sprinting hard, legs pounding over the cobblestones, arms pumping at his sides. He ran until the gloom deepened, until the ruins rose white around him, until the inner walls appeared like a serrated shadow beyond the trees. He panted in ragged gasps as he veered off the road. The white dome emerged pale from the darkness. Dashing up, he stopped himself by catching the edge of the opened slab.

Inside, the pale glow of the pillar filled the empty chamber.

Kyen, clutching a stitch in his side, stood gazing within while he regained his breath.

"Kyen of Avanna!"

He turned at the sound of Galveston's voice.

Further down the road, Galveston trotted out of an ally between the ruins. He held his blade bared in one hand, looking grim.

"Quickly. It's the princess!" Galveston called then disappeared back into the alley.

Shoving himself off the dome, Kyen ran to follow.

Galveston crouched next to Adeya. She lay slumped and unresponsive against the wall.

"I only left her for a moment," said Galveston. "I don't know if it was a fiend or the Kingmaster or what happened." He rose and backed away as Kyen came forward.

Kneeling next to her, Kyen set his sword aside and took her head in both hands. Her long golden tresses shrouded her pale face.

"What happened? Adeya?" Kyen pushed back her hair as she stirred.

Adeya moaned and winced. Her eyelids fluttered.

Galveston stepped up behind Kyen. With both hands, he raised his sword high over Kyen's exposed back.

Chapter 39

Galveston stabbed down.

Kyen snatched up his sword and twisted, knocking Galveston blade aside. He lunged under Galveston's guard with a flash of steel.

A loud clang resounded as Galveston raised his gauntlet to block. He staggered back into the ally.

Kyen stalked forward, pointing his blade at Galveston, his gray eyes as hard as the steel. "Enough, Galveston."

Galveston, meeting Kyen's stare coldly, gave his gauntlet a little shake.

Adeya raised her head as she opened her eyes. When she saw the two swordsmen standing off, she gasped. "Kyen! Don't—Don't hurt him!" Adeya rose to her feet, wavering, and clung to the wall. "The Kingmaster has taken him!"

"I don't think so, Adeya," said Kyen. "Galveston is the Kingmaster."

"What? No! How?" Adeya turned wide eyes from Kyen to Galveston. "The Kingmaster shot him in the neck!"

"Then where's the welt?"

Galveston made no move to hide his skin unscathed above his collar.

"The black weapon will destroy you, Galveston," said Kyen. "Surrender it before it's too late."

"What do you know of it?" said Galveston.

"Galveston, no! It can't be." Adeya staggered behind Kyen, clutching her amulet.

"I'm already destroyed. The Black War destroyed me. I sacrificed so much—" Galveston waved the stump of his arm. "King Valeda left me to rot in poverty. The whole Great Alliance did. Just as they left you, Kyen of Avanna."

"Galveston," said Adeya.

"The black weapon's hold is too strong already, isn't it?" said Kyen. "You couldn't give it up if you wanted to."

Rage flared in Galveston's eyes.

Five guards with swords stepped into the alley behind Galveston.

Kyen backed away, pushing Adeya behind him.

Galveston drew in a deep breath and lowered his head. His shoulders bunched up as his hand turned white from gripping his blade. The black brooch on his breast grew shiny like ink. It spread little feelers that sank through Galveston's cape. Dark veins throbbed out from under his sleeves and crawled up his neck to grip his chin.

Kyen and Adeya backed out onto the street. Grabbing her hand, Kyen bolted for the dome.

Varkest villagers, Sergueo, and a handful of Isea soldiers stepped out of the ruins. Their swords and knives formed a spiky wall between them and the dome.

Kyen swerved for the alley across the street.

Bracers, Ruty, and a pirate stood waiting at its entrance.

Kyen whirled away from them all to flee down the road.

Several Veleda soldiers and Varkest villagers walled off their retreat.

They closed in on Kyen and Adeya, forming a ring that bristled with blade points.

"Your arcangel saved nothing back when it tried to free Finn, did it?" Galveston sauntered into the circle. His guards moved up to block the alley behind him.

Finn pushed between the guards and strode up to Galveston's side. Blood flowed from the nick on his forehead. It curtained the side of his expressionless face in red.

Under his breath, Kyen muttered to himself, "Leave me here—No!—Just go—"

"Go where?" cried Adeya.

Galveston and Finn closed the distance between them.

"I don't care. We've got to stop him—Fine—Fine!" Kyen shook his head as he shouted the last word.

"Kyen?"

Kyen looked at her, his expression softened. He held out the hilt of his longsword to her.

"Take this."

"But, then—"

"Focus." He leveled his stormy eyes at her. "Trust me."

Adeya accepted the hilt of his sword, biting her lip.

Kyen stepped forward to face both Galveston and Finn without a weapon. The two charged him. Finn lunged for him first, Galveston at his heels. Kyen sidestepped Finn's swing aimed at cleaving his head open. Diving past him, Kyen darted for Galveston, but his slashing blade forced Kyen back.

Finn abandoned the two and closed in on Adeya. She backed away, holding Kyen's sword upraised. Finn swung. Adeya blocked and leapt backwards so far that only the tips of their blades connected.

Kyen and Galveston circled each other. Galveston charged in swinging. Kyen ducked, dodged sideways, then backed away. Galveston pushed Kyen towards the ring of swords. As Kyen neared, Sergueo and several guards stabbed at his back. Kyen jumped away from them, ducking under slash from Galveston, and running past him back to the middle of the ring.

Sergueo and the guards stepped back to reseal the circle.

Finn lunged after Adeya again. Their swords clanged as Adeya deflected his first blow and then ran from his thrust. She backed a wide circle to keep away from the ring of blades and Finn both.

Galveston thrust for Kyen's gut. Kyen sidestepped—Galveston's blade skimmed past his side and punched through his cloak—and he dove into Galveston's guard. He grabbed Galveston by the sword arm. He tried to wrench Galveston's sword away, but Galveston wrenched it back. Kyen hung on as the two swordsmen staggered into each other.

Finn whirled from Adeya. He charged in and struck out at Kyen's back while he grappled with Galveston. His blade swiped through Kyen's cloak, bit into his vest, and slammed Kyen forward. Galveston sidestepped, and Kyen stumbled past him to the ground. Catching himself on his hands, Kyen shoved himself back to his feet before Galveston's blade stabbed him.

Kyen backed away as the two swordsmen encroached on him.

Hefting her sword, Adeya ran at Galveston with a yell. Her swing fell too hard, too wide. Galveston, without giving Adeya a glance, stepped out of the way. Adeya stumbled with the momentum of her own swing. Galveston kicked her all the way to the ground. She landed hard on the road with a cry. He walked past her.

Galveston and Finn circled in on Kyen.

Kyen backed away, breathing hard.

Bracers, the pirate, and Veleda soldiers' swords waited behind him. The ring behind Finn and Galveston tightened inwards. Adeya struggled up to her feet and backed away from them as they encroached.

Finn dove in with a thrust. Kyen dodged, catching a hold of Finn's sword-hand, and jerked him forward. He slammed his knee into Finn's stomach. As Finn dropped, Kyen wrested the longsword out of his grip. He whirled to jab out at Galveston attacking from behind. Galveston stopped in time to bend around Kyen's blade-point.

Kyen launched into an onslaught of slashes, forcing Galveston to block and deflect with his gauntlet.

Behind them, Finn coughed and pulled his hands underneath him.

Adeya ran over. She stepped on the back of his head. He grunted and grabbed at her ankle, but she ground in her heel, squishing his face into the ground.

"Sorry!" Adeya winced.

With his gauntlet, Galveston blocked a blow from Kyen, flinging his blade aside. Galveston's sword flashed into the opening. Galveston stabbed Kyen in the gut but his sword caught fast in Kyen's vest. With a yell, Galveston threw his strength into a thrust.

Kyen lashed out for Galveston's neck.

Galveston ducked, yanking his sword free, to keep from losing his head.

The two swordsmen backed away from each other. Both panted for breath as they stood on guard. Kyen winced. He rubbed where Galveston had stabbed him, checked his hand. Blood smeared his fingers. Galveston flexed his gauntleted nub and flourished his blade.

Behind them, behind Adeya still pinning Finn down with her boot, the ring broke. Several Varkest villagers and guards strode towards Adeya with their swords and knives.

Kyen spotted the break in the ring. He bolted for the opening, but Galveston dashed in to block his way. Kyen tried to bash his way through Galveston. Throwing Kyen's swing off with his gauntlet, Galveston slashed out for Kyen's head. Kyen sprang away, the blade whizzing by his face, snicking his hair. He stumbled backwards and caught himself.

Adeya looked from the encroaching guards to Kyen. Abandoning Finn, she ran at Galveston's back, swinging. Galveston turned to block, and her sword clanged hard on his gauntlet. Kyen flashed into Galveston's open flank. Galveston blocked Kyen's swing with his

sword. Their blades locked for a moment. Kyen slung them together in a rapid circle, and, with a flick, sent Galveston's sword flying from his hand.

It hit the road with a clank a span from Finn.

Kyen jabbed his sword up against Galveston's neck.

Adeya joined him by pointing her blade at Galveston's chest.

The villagers and guards halted.

Galveston raised his hand and nub towards the canopy.

They stood for several moments, all three too out of breath to talk.

"The legendary Kyen of Avanna." Galveston smiled. "I knew you'd best me if we came to crossing swords." He lowered his arms. His gaze shifted to look over Kyen's shoulder.

Kyen's frowned.

Adeya followed Galveston's gaze, and Kyen glanced back.

Behind them, Finn stooped in the act of picking up Galveston's sword. He straightened and, flipping the sword backhand, pressed the point of the blade against his own belly.

Adeya made a little strangling noise in her throat.

Kyen froze.

Galveston pushed their swords aside. "Back away, Kyen of Avanna."

A muscle worked in Kyen's jaw. Lowering his sword, he stepped back. His gray eyes as hard and dark as steel never left Galveston.

"Galveston—" began Adeya, but he smacked her hard across the face with his gauntlet. The blow flung her to the ground. Kyen's sword clattered out of her hand.

"Galveston!" Kyen gripped Finn's sword, took a step, but Galveston snapped at him.

"Not another move from you!"

Finn pressed the point of the sword in deeper.

Galveston bent to grab a hold of Adeya. He hauled the princess to her feet and, ignoring her whimper of pain, seized her in a headlock with his gauntleted arm.

Adeya choked. She grabbed at his arm squeezing around her neck but couldn't budge it.

"How many times did I tell you the princess would compromise you?" said Galveston.

"You're about to discover the wisdom of my counsel."

Galveston drew out a black dart and jabbed Adeya in the neck.

Chapter 40

Adeya looked at Kyen, her eyes alive with fear.

"It's an irony," said Galveston. "All that training you invested in her..."

Adeya's gaze darted once at Galveston then returned to stare hard at Kyen. A hand rose to brush the pendant at her neck.

Kyen's eyebrows drew together.

"Now she's your downfall," said Galveston.

Adeya's arms dropped to her sides. All emotion left her face, leaving only her bright aquamarine eyes.

Galveston released her. She stood, no longer fighting back, her gaze fixed on Kyen. Galveston bent to pick up Kyen's fallen sword, and he held it out to Adeya.

"Kill him," said Galveston.

Adeya's hands rose to take the blade. When her fingers were inches from the hilt, her hands darted past it. She seized Galveston's brooch and wrenched it forward. The force of the pull flung Galveston to his hands and knees as the brooch ripped free from his cape.

All the villagers, thieves, guards, and soldiers lowered their weapons.

With the brooch clutched in both hands, Adeya sprinted away.

Kyen dove for Finn. He seized Galveston's sword, tore it from Finn's grasp and flung Finn to the ground at the same time.

"How did you..." Galveston shoved himself back to his feet. Confusion etched his face followed the next moment by fury. "How did you—!"

"Kyen! The Firstwold ruins! Go!" Adeya passed off the brooch to Kyen.

Kyen ran. He slammed into the ring of people. Those in his way fell sprawling to lay limp like dolls.

Galveston roared in rage. He bent over double. He clenched his fists so tight, his nails drew blood from his palms. The black veins in his arm and neck expanded, throbbed harder.

Kyen raced for the dome.

The ring of people behind him suddenly returned to action. As one, they chased after him. The guard nearest Kyen gained ground fast. He laid hold of Kyen's cloak and jerked back on it, but the clasp popped open. Kyen escaped as the guard stumbled. Kyen's cloak hung empty in his hands.

Reaching the dome's entrance, Kyen slowed to a stop. Over the heads of those running to surround him, he locked eyes with Galveston.

The brooch in Kyen's hand began to seethe.

Kyen dropped it to the ground and backed into the threshold of the ruin.

The whole group surrounded him, scrambling over one another, as Galveston began backing away.

Kyen raised his palm towards the sky.

A tiny speck of light floated up into his open fingers. The speck blazed to the size of an orb, shedding light in the gloom like a tiny Nadir throwing long, dark shadows off the tree trunks. Six wings of white fire unfurled from the orb. The wings burned and danced as they spread, the lowest two embracing Kyen, the highest two pointing up towards the sky.

Adeya shielded her eyes.

Galveston turned to run.

The guards and villagers swarmed Kyen.

The wings vanished into a shock wave. It flattened all the guards and villagers. As the wave burst over them and threw them to the ground, it pulled free their black welts in a shower of sparks.

Ribbons of light exploded out of the blazing orb. They lashed out, seized Galveston around the torso, and snapped taut. Galveston thrashed and wrestled against the ribbons, but they dragged him back towards the dome. Step by step, they pulled Galveston past Adeya, past Finn, past the villagers, guards, and thieves.

As he neared the dome, Galveston whirled on Kyen with a roar. He tackled into Kyen, grabbing for his sword. Kyen wrestled him down while the ribbons yanked him off.

The blazing orb slammed through Galveston's chest. He jerked under the impact. The black veins ripped free of his body and whipped into the air after the orb.

Galveston dropped to his hands and knees, panting, gripping his chest.

The blazing orb dragged the black mass towards the dome. It rippled and boiled in the air, swinging and dipping. The mass exploded out to envelope the orb, but the orb blasted the tendrils back. Power throbbed through the air.

Adeya, still shielding her eyes, watched.

Panting, Galveston struggled back to his feet. He looked up at Kyen. Rage blazed in his eyes. He launched himself at Kyen with a yell. He used his gauntlet to knock away Kyen's sword. With fist and nub, Galveston pummeled Kyen in the arm, in the chest, and in the face. Kyen leaned back out of the way.

As Galveston shifted forward, Kyen kned him hard in the guts. Galveston doubled over with a gasp. Kyen grabbed him by the head and slammed Galveston's face into his knee.

Galveston collapsed into a heap.

Kyen straightened, gazing down at his fallen form.

Adeya smiled in relief.

Overhead, the white orb flared. The aura throbbed in the air. With each throb, the dark mass shrank, compressing in on itself.

Kyen, watching, suddenly swayed. He looked down at his arm.

A single dart stuck out where Galveston had pummeled him; green tendrils of vapor rose from it.

Kyen's legs buckled beneath him. He crumpled to the ground.

"Kyen!" Adeya's scream echoed through the trees. She dashed up the street.

With a trembling hand, Kyen fumbled at the dart in his arm. He managed to yank it out with clumsy fingers. His hand dropped, the dart rolling free. It hit the ground with a clink.

Adeya tripped over one of the guards on the ground, scrambled back to her feet, and kept running.

Kyen convulsed, staring unseeing at the canopy overhead. He grew still. His breath persevered in ragged, uneven gasps.

His breathing stopped.

"Kyen!" Adeya screamed again. She dropped to her hands and knees next to him.

Behind her, the white orb crushed the dark mass to a speck like a dead ember.

Kyen's gray eyes stared blankly overhead.

"Kyen! Oh, Kyen!" Adeya checked him over. She put an ear to his mouth.

"Don't stop breathing. You have to keep breathing."

Adeya cast around frantically. She fumbled with the latch of her healer's pouch.

Her eyes found the dart which had rolled out of his hand.

She snatched it up and stared at the green-smoking tip.

"Reeking dragon venom!" Adeya flung open the healer's pouch and grabbed out a bottle of tincture. She searched his neck, face, arms.

"Stupid man! Why did you have to pull out the dart? How am I supposed to find where it hit you? Help! Please help me!" She yelled over her shoulder.

The orb and the mass floated together, swirling up over the dome.

She soaked a cloth in the elixir.

Spotting the growing welt on Kyen's arm, Adeya pressed the cloth to it.

"Come on. Breathe! You have to breathe!"

Adeya pulled Kyen onto her lap. Supporting his head, Adeya poured the remaining elixir into his mouth.

"Swallow it. Breathe! You have to breathe!"

Kyen lay unmoving, eyes blank, his whole body limp.

Adeya, still pressing the cloth against the dart wound, choked on a sob. "Don't die. Please, don't die." Tears started pouring down her cheeks. She rocked back and forth, still cradling Kyen's head in her lap. Another sob shook her shoulders.

"Please, breathe. Kyen, please..." She sobbed. "Don't die."

Adeya squeezed her eyes shut.

She gripped the cloth against his arm as tightly as she could.

"Please, don't die." She whispered. "Please."

Behind her, the aura radiating off the dome released a shockwave that shivered bones and dulled ears.

The black speck burst into dust.

The brooch on the ground cracked and turned clear.

A spasm racked through Kyen's body. He burst out coughing with a spray of elixir.

Adeya smiled through her tears.

Kyen collapsed back, unconscious, still coughing a little, but breathing.

Adeya cradled him against her. She hung her head. "Breathe, Kyen. Breathe."

Chapter 41

Pristine arclight shone in shafts through the high infirmary windows. Lines of beds, crisply clad in fresh linen, stood in file along the hall. A nurse in white robes stocked shelves at the back. The gentle clink of bottles and her soft footsteps echoed through the space.

Kyen slept in the only occupied bed. Bandages wrapped his arm and crisscrossed his chest. Cleaned of bloodstains and grime, he lay garbed in a white tunic. His mussed black hair stood out stark against the white pillow.

Adeya slumped fast asleep, half in her chair and half on Kyen's bedside, with her head pillowed on her arms.

A shaft of afternoon arclight crept down the walls. Floating moats of dust glowed in it above his face.

Kyen's eyes opened a little. He blinked, staring groggily up at the glowing specks. Drawing in a deep breath, he shifted. His arm brushed up against Adeya's head. He looked down at her.

With a groan, Adeya stirred but didn't wake.

Kyen smiled a little to himself as she mumbled something incoherent in her sleep. He rested his hand on her hair.

Adeya opened her eyes. She started and sat up, flushing.

"Oh! I, uh—I must have—" A large yawn cut her off. Adeya shook her head, blinking wearily.

"Alright there?" Kyen asked with a weak smile.

"Yes, but I'm supposed to ask you that," said Adeya. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible."

"You nearly died."

The smile faded from Kyen's face. He looked away.

Adeya's cheer faded, too.

The gentle clink of jars floated down from the other end of the infirmary.

Kyen's stormy eyes wandered back to her face. "What happened?"

"Your arcangel took care of Galveston, but not before he stuck you with reeking dragon venom," said Adeya. "The arcangel says I saved your life, but I'm pretty sure he did it. I don't think my elixir was taking hold in time. Either way, you're here."

Kyen groaned. "No wonder I feel terrible."

"You've been unconscious the whole trip back to Isea," said Adeya. "You'll need to rest a few days yet until your strength returns."

Kyen stared at the dust motes overhead. "He's gone."

"Your arcangel is with the Nadir," said Adeya. "He used the dome's aura to draw the darkness out of Finn, my papa, everyone under the Kingmaster's hold. But he said it demanded everything."

"Finn is...?"

"Well and whole with his mind returned." Adeya smiled.

Kyen looked at her for a long moment. His eyes found the large purple-yellow bruise on the side of her face. "And you?"

Adeya fingered the edge of the sheets. "My nana's amulet protected me from Galveston's dark dart. For everything else, I expect myself to make a full recovery!" She smiled sweetly, but Kyen didn't return it. His gaze continued to rest on the bruised side of her face.

Adeya blushed, still fingering the edge of the sheet.

His gaze wandered back up to watch the dust motes. Every time he blinked, his eyes opened slower and slower. "How long...for me?"

Adeya smiled as she repeated, "It'll be a few days yet before your strength returns."

Kyen heaved a sigh as his eyelids sank.

Adeya twiddled with the sheet. When she looked up, his eyes had closed. His breathing deepened as sleep overtook him. Adeya smiled to herself and settled into her vigil at his bedside.

* * *

Morning arclight blazed down on Isea's neglected training yard. In the middle of the sparing square, Finn stood stripped of his tunic. He moved through drills, his wooden sword whistling through the air. Finn grunted and yelled with each slash and thrust.

He dropped his guard to wipe sweat out of his eyes. He stood for a moment, huffing. His fingers clenched and unclenched on the hilt of the practice sword.

"Would you like a sparring partner?" Kyen walked up, still bandaged and in an infirmary tunic. He used a practice sword as a cane as he stepped into the square.

"Aren't you afraid I'll try to kill you, too?" asked Finn.

"You wouldn't be the first to try." Kyen smiled a little.

"I can't believe it! I can't believe I almost killed my dad! I couldn't control it. I felt like a puppet, stuck inside, just watching as someone else pulled the strings." Finn gave his limbs an awkward, puppet-like wiggle. He buried his face in his hands.

A resounding smack echoed through the training yard.

Finn leapt away, rubbing his thigh. His auburn eyes blazed in outrage. "OW!"

Kyen stood at the defense, wooden sword up-raised. He shrugged a little, a faint smile playing on his face. "You left yourself open."

"Why did you—Argh! I see how it is!" Finn launched an onslaught at Kyen.

Kyen deflected Finn's strikes with ease. He gave ground, letting Finn push him down the length of the training square and back. The rhythmic clack-clack-clack of the wooden swords filled the air. Furious and not landing a single blow, Finn yelled. He slashed down as hard as he could.

Kyen blocked.

The wooden sword snapped in Finn's hand. The pole clattered to the ground at Finn's feet. He stared at the broken hilt in his hand then burst out laughing.

Kyen smiled and lowered his guard. He watched as Finn doubled over, holding his sides. Finn tried to point at the broken hilt and say something, but his laughter muddled it. After a few moments, Finn calmed himself and tried to regain his breath.

"Feel better?" asked Kyen.

"Yeah."

"You know it's not your fault, right?"

"Yeah, I just..." Finn wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. "I nearly assassinated my father, Kyen! I'd have been executed... and my sisters would then rule the kingdom." Finn grew pale at the thought.

"You would be proud to know how your sisters handled themselves," said Kyen. "Clarissa, Elenora and Leonora. Especially Adelaide. You have Adelaide to thank most of all."

"And you," said Finn. "You saved my skin. All our skins."

"What did I tell you?" Kyen clapped him on the back. "You're not alone in this. So many people have your back, Finn, myself included. With help, you'll make a great king."

"The greatest king in the history of Velede?" Finn grinned.

"Probably not," said Kyen. "But great in your own way."

"And it'd be pretty hard to do much worse once I'm coronated," said Finn. "I could bring down the castle next."

"Or start a war," added Kyen. "One nice, well-placed insult, you know?"

"Or marry Princess Muriel of Nalayni." Finn shuddered.

"Your future prospects are bright, indeed!"

"Shut up." Finn shoved him.

Kyen stiffened. "Ah! Ow. Careful!"

Finn grinned and shoved him again.

Kyen took a crack at his head with the wooden sword.

Finn dodged out of range laughing.

Together, as they started back towards the palace, Finn paused to grab his tunic and cloak.

"I'd like to see Galveston," said Kyen. "Do you know what's happened to him?"

"His hearing is about to start."

"Eh... Just don't tell anyone I'm here."

"You snuck out of the infirmary, didn't you? No wonder you're dressed weird." Finn shot Kyen a narrow-eyed look then tossed him his cloak. "Hide yourself in that. Come on."

* * *

Arclight splayed rainbow colors across the statues of kings in Isea's throne room. At the head of the hall sat King Isea on a white marble throne. Beside him, a step lower but in a gem-studded wooden chair no less imposing, King Velede sat stroking his beard. Finn stood at his side.

The door at the far end opened.

Two guards led in Galveston. Though cleaned and bandaged, he looked disheveled. Scars from the black veins snaked raw and red on his arm and neck. Yet, he walked erect down the hall to stand before the two kings. He stopped if chief among them—as if not shackled ankle and wrist.

The two prison guards stood to attention at Galveston's sides.

"Do you understand why you are here?" King Isea's voice rang through the hall.

Galveston stared at the king.

"Treason against the Great Alliance," continued King Isea. "Attempted assassination in both Veleda and Isea. Manipulation of others against their will. Wielding a black weapon forbidden by all the laws of Ellunon. In Veleda and Isea alike, you merit immediate execution by beheading."

Galveston kept silent, his eyes fixed on the king.

"However," said King Isea. "This court has been presented grounds to extend you clemency."

"Clemency?" repeated Galveston. "Do you mean rotting for life in a prison cell? Is that clemency? No. Execute me. It will be the crowning achievement of all the indignities with which you've rewarded me."

"Your insolence isn't very promising," said King Isea.

Galveston's silence filled the hall.

Finn glowered at him.

King Isea cast a disconcerted glance toward King Veleda.

"I've been in correspondence with King Eope," King Veleda spoke. "He reports there is no prince in Eope by the name of Galveston. Would you care to tell us who you really are?"

Galveston turned his dark glare on King Veleda.

"My name is Galveston," he said, "but of Veleda. I was an officer of the 48th cavalry during the Black War. After that a homeless vagrant, for Veleda finds no refuge for warriors who've sacrificed faithfully in her name."

"You've faced hardship. For that, you have my compassion," said King Veleda.

"Your compassion cannot support a man nor his family, your majesty. You may keep it," said Galveston. "As with your clemencies, keep them as well. I should prefer an appointment with the executioner's sword."

The two kings exchanged glances.

King Isea sighed and shook his head.

King Veleda gave his beard one last stroke. Rising from his seat, he stepped forward.

"As King Isea has deferred your sentencing to my authority, hear my proclamation, Galveston of Veleda," said King Veleda. "This court witnesses that you are hereby sentenced to two seasons of indentured service to Sir Hector of Veleda."

"What?" Galveston's mouth dropped open.

"Food and lodging shall be provided for you. There you will be kept under guard day, night, and through whatever duties Sir Hector assigns to you. A stipend will also be set aside for your use. After the expiration of the seasons, you will have another hearing with me. In consideration of your conduct, your indentured service may be extended or you may be released and granted your stipend to do with what you will."

"I will be nobody's slave!" said Galveston.

"Indeed, you won't." King Veleda smiled. "But you will be served the consequences of your actions. We are concluded." He returned to his seat.

The prison guards took up Galveston's chains. He resisted them long enough to cast a long glare of outrage at King Veleda. He allowed himself to be pulled away.

King Isea leaned over to King Veleda, whispering, "I hope Kyen of Avanna's judgement proves true. I wouldn't have Galveston return for vengeance on Isea. Not for all the Kingdoms of Ellunon."

"Time will clear the blackness from his mind," King Veleda replied. "Until then, we shall keep him. Rest easy, Arleion."

"As you say, Gerard," King Isea sighed.

Further down the hall, the prison guards approached the far door with Galveston.

Galveston noticed the figure of Kyen watching in the shadow of a stone king.

Galveston jerked his guards to a stop and glared. "This is your doing, isn't it? I don't want your pity!" Galveston spat at Kyen's feet.

The guards yanked on the chains and dragged Galveston towards the door.

Kyen, saying nothing, met his gaze evenly.

Galveston cast him a last glare before the guards pulled him through the doorway. The sound of his chains rattling faded into the corridor beyond.

Kyen sighed. He turned and limped into the shadows, supporting himself on the edge of the statue's pedestal.

Epilogue

Under the dark of an unborn morning, a lone figure left the grounds of Palace Isea. Kyen stepped onto the highway, dressed in his slashed-up cloak, his holey vest, and his longsword. He walked slowly, his stormy eyes not seeing the road beneath his feet. The quiet of a kingdom still in slumber blanketed the mist-wreathed trees.

"Finn said you have a habit of leaving without saying goodbye," said a voice from the trees.

Kyen's eyes refocused. He stopped and looked up.

Adeya stepped out of the woods. A shaded lantern cast a warm glow at her feet. She wore her traveling skirt and coat, her linen armor vest, and a pack over her shoulder. Her sword hung belted to her side.

"Adeya—"

"I'm coming with you," she cut him off.

"Adeya—"

"I said I'm coming with you."

Kyen sighed.

Adeya's aquamarine eyes shone with a determined glint.

"Adeya, someone—" Kyen rubbed his forehead. "Eh, how do I help you understand?"

Adeya smiled and crossed her arms.

Kyen fidgeted under her intent gaze. He looked at the ground.

"The archangels didn't fall silent, Adeya. They were captured. Or killed. Or..." Kyen struggled for words. "Something's happened to them all."

"So? That's what I want to find out," said Adeya.

"Whoever gave Galveston that black weapon aimed to draw me out, to draw out my arcangel," said Kyen. "The arcangel knew it. He fought me about it the whole way, but I couldn't help it. Not when they involved Finn and his family. After the Obsidian, he can't hide anymore. They will hunt us, track us from Varkest, to Isea, wherever we go."

"Who're they?"

"I don't know..." said Kyen. "Illeth of Norgard is dead. Beres of Varkest is imprisoned. Whatever master they served, if I had to guess."

"The Consuming Dark."

"What?"

"Nana said that's what the arcangels called it," said Adeya. "Their great enemy, the Consuming Dark."

"Well, whatever hunts me, if it catches me, it will kill you, too, if you come," said Kyen. "Please reconsider staying at Isea."

"To what?" Adeya frowned. "The next courtier my papa summons to woo me? I'd rather be dead! I'm coming with you. I'm not afraid of the Consuming Dark."

"You're the only heiress to the throne of Isea, the crown princess. What would your parents say?"

"That's why I'm coming. Papa won't do anything. So it's my responsibility as crown princess to restore Isea to prosperity. To do that, I need to find the arcangels," said Adeya.

"Did you tell them you're leaving? They could think you've been kidnapped."

"I wrote a note saying I left of my own accord." Adeya snuck her nose in the air.

"Adeya, you just can't." Kyen shuffled back and forth. "As a young princess and a lady, you can't travel alone, unchaperoned with me. Think of your honor, of my honor. Don't you realize what people will think? You'll ruin your future prospects."

Adeya kept her nose in the air, and Kyen grew serious.

"If you're not going to protect your reputation, I will," he said. "Don't think I can't lose you in the wilderness."

"Are you threatening me? You sound like Galveston again," said Adeya. "I'm not stupid! I said in my letter that I eloped."

Kyen's paled to the color of paper. He opened his mouth, hand upraised, but nothing came out. Finally, he managed, "You... WHAT?"

"I didn't say it was with you!" Adeya's cheeks pinked, but she crossed her arms and put her nose back in the air. "I didn't say who I eloped with."

Kyen buried his face in his hand. Turning, he started to walk away.

Adeya hurried down the road after him.

"You're Kyen of Avanna," said Adeya. "In the Black War, you defeated Illeth of Norgard. You're the best swordsman in Ellunon! You said yourself that I'm safer with you than in a guarded tower."

"That was different." Kyen sighed. "Please, think about this more seriously, Adeya. You just can't."

Adeya seized a chain underneath her coat and pulled out the summoner's amulet. "What about this?" she said.

Kyen eyed the pendant. The aquamarine gleamed in the dim morning.

"Finn said he and you scoured Ellunon for three years looking for the other arcangels. Three years! How long did it take to find another arcangel with this? Less than a week." Adeya thrust the pendant out at Kyen.

Kyen pushed it away.

"Besides, if it is the Consuming Dark hunting you, this will protect me," said Adeya. "It's what summoner's amulets are made for. You saw how it made me immune to the black darts. I'm at least as safe as you are."

Kyen's brows furrowed together.

"We're looking for the same thing. Let me help you," said Adeya.

Kyen stopped and faced her down, his stormy eyes serious.

"No, Adeya," he said. "Just—no. I don't want you coming. Go back to the palace." Turning away, Kyen kept walking.

Adeya sank where she stood. Tears rose to her eyes. Clutching her skirts, she watched him continue down the road.

"You know what else Finn said?" Adeya called after him. "He said he wished you'd take your own advice."

Kyen stopped.

"You have Finn's back. You've had my back. Who has yours, Kyen of Avanna?" said Adeya. "Will you let anyone watch out for you?"

Kyen's shoulders slumped. He hung his head.

When he wouldn't answer, Adeya kept going, "You and your arcangel won't succeed in finding the arcangels by yourselves. Not without help."

Kyen sighed at the sky.

The arc had risen. Its light peeped through the pines. He looked over his shoulder at Adeya.

"Finn's told you a lot about me, hasn't he?" He waved vaguely and kept walking. "Well, come on, then."

Adeya gave a little hop and squeal of joy. She hurried up alongside him. "Thank you! I knew you'd see reason."

"This still doesn't sit well with me," he said. "Traveling alone with a woman is against my honor."

"You're not traveling alone. There IS three of us. Does the arcangel count as a nobody?"

"I can't argue that," said Kyen. "Seems like I can't argue much of anything right now."

Adeya, smiling sweetly, said nothing.

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Continued in Book 2!

Prince of the Fallen Kingdom

About the Author

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