

## ABSTRACT

The Rising Fall of the Imperial Order

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For my honors thesis, I wrote a fantasy novel that reimagines the era of Nazi Germany and explores issues of morality and prejudice alongside the themes of bravery, trust, and loyalty. Drawing from fantasy and dystopian novels as well as from the scholarly works of great fantasy writers such as Tolkien, Lewis, and Madeleine L'Engle, my thesis argues that fantasy and story have the ability to ask deep questions about human nature and provide a meaningful commentary on our society. The fantasy world of Almaen is oppressively ruled by an immortal Imperial, whose reign will last forever unless he is killed by a blood relative. Jaemar Ralour, a sixteen-year-old boy who has never known a life outside the Order, discovers that he is the Imperial's nephew and thus one of the last alive who can end the Imperial's life. Forced to become a pawn among the larger forces in Almaen, Jaemar must fight to remain true to his own beliefs while deciding whether to become a victim or a sacrifice.

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THE RISING FALL OF THE IMPERIAL ORDER

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

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Waco, Texas

May 2014

## Dedication

*To the real Inklings and those who have been my Inklings*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Power and Purpose of Fantasy: Behind the Lines of the Imperial Order

*Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.* –J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*

*By nature, human beings search for ways to make sense and meaning out of their lives and their world. One way that we make meaning is through the telling of our stories. Stories connect us, teach us, and warn us never to forget.* –Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow*

Stories have always been central to our connection to the world and our understanding of human nature. A mounting trend in modern society is the rising popularity of story in the form of Hollywood blockbuster films and best-selling novels. Since cinemas have become major sites of entertainment, moviegoers have become movie critics and connoisseurs of film in their own right. In 2013 alone, movie ticket sales reached 1.34 billion and the revenue for the film industry was \$10.90 billion. In the book industry, with the publication of J. K. Rowling's fantasy *Harry Potter* series, a whole generation of consumers has returned to reading for pleasure, and the total profit in 2012 was \$27.12 billion. Thus, although narratives in the most basic sense have always

been focal points of human culture, current society seems to suggest that story is now more important than ever.

One question that must be asked is “why?” Why has story remained such a powerful force in human minds and hearts throughout history and why do we as humans yearn for story? What is it about a story that draws our emotions and pricks our consciences through an often fabricated medium? A common belief is that stories provide an escape from both the drudgery and horror of real life, but such an answer has led to the criticism that all literature, and especially fantasy literature, is “escapist.”

In responding to the “escape” theory in his critical essay “On Fairy-Stories,” British philologist and author J. R. R. Tolkien argues that “escape” does not necessarily have to carry a negative connotation. He explains that stories, and especially the fantastic *Faërie* stories, portray worlds that may be more “real” than our present one. They can present truths in a truer, simpler way and can reawaken passions or beauties in our minds that have been dulled by overuse or underuse.

Tolkien writes, “Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your hoard” (374) and make you see your own world with fresh eyes. We may appreciate nature if we happen to notice it around us, but story has the power to remind us of the wonder of a flower or the grandeur of a mountain. Fantasy stories do tell of magical beings such as fairies and dragons, but they also contain “the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted” (Tolkien 322). This enchantment is not disillusioned escapism but rather the gifted ability to see the world the way it was meant to be. Although Middle Earth or the

Wizarding world may provide the example, the fact that *mortal* men engage these worlds shows that it is our world that has the potential to be more than it is.

In this way, fantasy allows us to leave our own world in order to better understand it and improve the lives we have been given. In her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, Madeleine L'Engle, author of the *Time Quintet* series, writes, “it was through story that I was able to make some small sense of the confusions and complications of life” (55). Our lives have their own struggles; and while our daily conflicts may not involve epic duels with dragons, we can connect to the difficulty of maintaining honor, love, loyalty, goodness, friendship. These are the “simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting” (375) in fantasy stories.

Many of these fundamental things have been subverted or lost in our modern society, and L'Engle agrees with Tolkien that art comprises some of the remedy. She writes, “In art...we are helped to remember some of the glorious things we have forgotten, and some of the terrible things we are asked to endure” (11). She rightly defines art and story as the vehicles that connect us to the past and provide building blocks for the future. In story, we remember and retain what is good and forego what is evil. For example, we can understand and experience friendship in our world, positively or negatively, but witnessing the deep and self-sacrificial friendship between Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger in J. K. Rowling's fantasy series can remind us what true friendship should look like—even in an imperfect world.

Many of the characters authors create also recognize story as a powerful tool that speaks into our lives. In one pivotal scene of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*,

Samwise Gamgee urges Frodo Baggins to think of stories as a way to encourage him into being hopeful about his own heroic journey.

It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. (Peter Jackson, 2002)

As Sam realizes, stories have a power beyond simple entertainment. They can provide hope in dark times and inspire us to persevere through struggles and to endure suffering. They teach us that something better awaits us on the other side of the night. Of course, not all stories offer these types of positive gain, but Sam defines these redemptive stories as the “great” ones. The “great” stories do not have to necessarily be happy or neatly resolved at the end, but they become great by connecting to our own world and speaking into our lives. They “stay” with us and “mean” something in a way that affects us either immediately or in ten years.

Few will argue against the importance of story, but some might question the value of fantasy as something beyond simple entertainment. Even more would criticize a fantasy story's attempt to be considered academic or intellectual. However, well-known fantasy writers and the popularity of fantasy stories prove that the reverse is true.

Hundreds of scholarly essays and books have been written *about* the works of fantasy authors such as Tolkien, Lewis, Rowling, and L'Engle. Each of these academic texts seeks to unravel the themes and symbolisms of their fictional sources in a way that

makes the subtle meanings more obvious than they are in the original plot. While these types of secondary works are helpful and instructive in understanding what lies beneath the surface of a traditional narrative, they exist only because of the original stories and have been prompted by scholars' reflection about the stories. Alone, fantasy works force readers to delve into the story for themselves to find hidden meanings and messages.

Since fantasy has to be subtler than scholarly non-fiction, fantasy writers are usually faced with further challenges. They must make their stories both rich and meaningful while simultaneously getting their message across in a realistic style that is accessible and enjoyable to the general public as well as to academic circles. Fiction authors writing outside the fantasy genre also experience this struggle, but fantasy writers have the added difficulty of imagining and constructing a whole new world in which to set their story.

For this reason, Tolkien ascribes the name "sub-creator" (336) to fantasy writers and explains that a sub-creator must make "a Secondary World which your mind can enter" and relate the truth as "it accords with the laws of that world" (351). In other words, an author can create a world where the sun is green and rain rises from the ground rather than falling from the sky, but such "laws of that world" must remain consistent and believable within their context. If readers find themselves adjacent to the story rather than inside it, the sub-creator has failed. Explaining the story to readers is not enough; the writer must allow them to experience the world in a way that "re-enchants" them to what is "fuller and deeper and more real" (8), as Dr. David Calhoun explains in his critical paper "Magic, Fantasy, and Imagination."

But what does this argument prove? Fantasy is not necessarily intellectual just because it is as difficult as writing a scholarly work and carries its own set of challenges. If arguing a point in an academic paper is easier than first creating a world in which to prove the point, then why bother with fantasy at all?

A short answer is that fantasy is usually more accessible and considered more popular than academic texts. However, because fantasy stories are concerned with human characters and things that—as Tolkien argues—are often more real or true to their actual nature than their counterparts in our world, fantasy also claims the powers of emotional impact, *metanoia*, and imagination. Imagination can be spurred by scholarly writing, but imaginative insight is the target of fiction, and especially fantasy. Furthermore, imagination awakens us to the things that we have forgotten or failed to notice, even though they usually lie right in front of us.

In form and genre, *The Rising Fall of the Imperial Order* is first and foremost a fantasy, or “fairy-story” as Tolkien calls it. The world of Almaen, along with its geography and various races, has been created from the imagination of the author. And, as Tolkien explains, it is about the adventures “of *men* in the Perilous Realm [and] upon its shadowy marches” (322, emphasis added). Even though “magical” creatures exist in this world, the story primarily concerns humans, a theme which Tolkien thinks is paramount to the fantasy genre. With humans as the main focus, readers can identify with the characters’ human struggles, emotions, and victories even though the setting is fantastical.

Although the format is fantastic, *The Rising Fall of the Imperial Order* can also be labeled as history retold or as a historical myth. The background of the story is largely

founded on the historical events of Germany's Third Reich. In addition to relying on Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* as well as nonfiction narratives of the time period, the story borrows themes and situations from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which has its own subtle connections to Nazi Germany, and several dystopian novels, all of which deal with life in a totalitarian society.

In his "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien writes, "History often resembles 'Myth', because they are both ultimately of the same stuff" (344), and he explains how King Arthur, though a real historical figure, became "legendized," as it were, when boiled in the pot of mythology and Faërie (342). According to Dr. Michael Livingston's theory in "Tolkien's Creation by Edition: The Medieval Origins of the Hobbit," Tolkien himself used history and myth to create *The Hobbit*. Livingston suggests that *The Hobbit* fills the gaps in the original *Beowulf* manuscript and that it is thus a revision of the past and a construction of a new mythology.

Adopting Livingston's view, *The Rising Fall of the Imperial Order* also becomes a revision of history in that it uses fictional characters in an imaginary setting to reconstruct the world of the Third Reich and the actions of the real people who lived beneath its Nazi regime. History books provide the general structure of the Nazi government and a broad description of its atrocities and devastating, worldwide effects, but stories—including those in the fantasy genre—can offer a closer view and a higher impact.

The number of Holocaust victims listed *en masse* in a textbook is less affecting than the firsthand account of a survivor. Hitler's belief that Aryans were the "master race" becomes starker for modern audiences when they see Hermione Granger ostracized

and even abused by members of the pure blood class of wizards. Furthermore, the presence of a totalitarian party in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* becomes more terrifyingly close and real when experienced by one of Big Brother's victims, who wonders whether "the dominion of the Party would not endure for ever" (Orwell, 23).

In the same way, *The Rising Fall of the Imperial Order* provides a focused view of life beneath a totalitarian regime from the perspective of Jaemar Ralour, a young man who has never known a world outside the Order. Almaen's Order is similar to Germany's Third Reich (though set in more of a medieval time period) but one large difference between the leaders of the two regimes is that, unlike Hitler, Imperial Anzigar Hurreich of Almaen is immortal. Because of this, his cruel reign has no foreseeable end.

The majority of the plot and Jaemar's greatest struggle hinge on a revision of history: what if one of the plots to assassinate Hitler had succeeded? In Jaemar's experience, this question is overshadowed by a far more personal conflict. He finds out that he is Hurreich's nephew and one of his last blood relatives. Since Immortals can only be killed by those related by blood, Jaemar is forced to hear these words: "Imperial Anzigar must be destroyed, and if you do not do it, there will be no one left who can" (Calhoun, 68).

Jaemar's ensuing struggle of whether or not to become an assassin reflects Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*, or superman, and Raskolnikov's moral debate in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In Dostoevsky's novel, the main character, Raskolnikov, commits a murder and spends the rest of the story increasingly consumed with guilt. At one point, he engages in a debate with some colleagues about the ethics of crime. Using the idea of an *Übermensch*, he explains, "an 'extraordinary'

man has the right...to step over certain obstacles, and then only in the event that the fulfillment of his idea—sometimes perhaps salutary for the whole of mankind—calls for it” (259). His own motives for being driven to murder were activated by his despair about whether or not he was an “extraordinary” man who could bypass the law—for instance, laws against murder—for the benefit of humanity. Of course, the outcome of both the debate and his own guilt-ridden struggle is his realization not only that is he not extraordinary but also that his crime did not help anyone.

The question of assassination, though some might argue is more justified than murder, also presented moral quandaries for Germans living beneath Hitler’s Reich. Multiple plots were organized, and some even came close to success. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German writer, theologian, and martyr for his faith, struggled to define for himself the difference between murder and killing for a good cause. He eventually decided to join an assassination plot and became a spy working undercover against the Reich. Although the decision ostracized him from many of his family and friends and ultimately cost him his life, he believed he had done what was right. Jaemar’s internal battle, though fictional, is much the same.

In addition to facing the internal struggle of choosing whether or not to be an assassin, Jaemar also suffers from a lack of agency, is exposed to Almaen’s prevalent prejudices, and experiences feelings of isolation and betrayal. Once Jaemar’s identity as the Imperial’s nephew is discovered, several groups race each other to claim him for their side. He is wanted by armies, kings, and tyrants—all for different reasons—but few see him as having a will of his own, and part of Jaemar’s story is realizing that he does have agency regarding his own life and actions. He has to learn to not allow others to control

him or his beliefs about the world, which he finds harder to defend as more of Almaen's darker sides are revealed to him.

One of the darkest realities he discovers is the rampant prevalence of prejudice and racism, a primary thread of the story. Due to his foreignness and mysterious background, Jaemar is forced to endure the prejudice that others harbor against him. He is accused of being loyal to the very forces which he later has to stand against alone. But the prejudice he experiences is only a small sampling compared with what he discovers on his journey south.

The Imperial has decreed that certain people are subhuman, untouchable, and unworthy of life, a sentiment which reflects Hitler's own doctrine about anyone below the master race. Nazi military commander Heinrich Himmler edited and propagated the propaganda pamphlet, *Der Untermensch*, which signifies the exact opposite of the *Übermensch*. The pamphlet, which was widely distributed and translated in several languages, states the following.

Just as the night rises against the day, the light and dark are in eternal conflict. So too, is the subhuman the greatest enemy of the dominant species on earth, mankind. The subhuman is a biological creature, crafted by nature, which has hands, legs, eyes and mouth, even the semblance of a brain. Nevertheless, this terrible creature is only a partial human being....Inside of this creature lies wild and unrestrained passions: an incessant need to destroy, filled with the most primitive desires, chaos and coldhearted villainy....Not all of those who appear human are in fact so.

The presence of something like this in Almaen is shocking and horrifying enough without knowing that it was publicized and held to be true in our own world. In Almaen, Jaemar meets rebels against the Order, Morgskalls, Romeiran, and people with physical defects. All of these living creatures are deemed "unfit to live" just based on what they are.

Although overt racism like this is mostly a thing of the past, dividing lines and prejudice still exist today even in first world countries. The motives for tension can lie between differing ethnicities or socio-economic classes. One of the major problems with this type of prejudice is that it has become so common that nearly everyone accepts and practices it. From the playground to the office high rise, people can be judged and discriminated against due to their gender, family history, or social class.

Having been subjected to this type of prejudice for most of his life in the north of Almaen, Jaemar refuses to support it when he notices it affecting others around him. When a friend's loyalty is called into question because of a defining mark on his skin, for better or worse, Jaemar chooses to trust what he knows of his friend's character rather than reject him because of his revealed ties to the Order. When other friends disapprove of his decision, he feels both conflicted and bitter.

In the same way, Jaemar undergoes a sense of being pulled in opposing directions by those who should be united by their common fight against the Imperial Order. Both the Resistance and the Luceri want freedom from the Order, but the two groups live by opposing principles and want to claim Jaemar for themselves. Surprisingly, even Adolf Hitler recognized the danger of a failure to unite under a common interest and work together. In his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, he writes, "The tragedy lies in the fact that these men strive for the same goal in entirely different ways...and...with the highest faith in their own mission, consider themselves obligated to go their own ways without consideration for others" (510). Thus, a large part of Jaemar's hesitance to go through with the assassination of his uncle lies in the fear that his action will change nothing in

Almaen. Different groups will still despise each other, and wars will still be waged, making room for new tyrants to rise to power.

Of course, another doubt in Jaemar's mind revolves around the thought of becoming a killer himself. Despite the villainy of his target, he agonizes over the damaging effect that murder will have on his own soul. In a moment of hopelessness, he admits, "I don't know if I could take a life" (Calhoun, 222). As a reward for expressing his fear, he is told, "If you absorb the life...from the Immortal, your soul will become as black as his" (227).

J. K. Rowling employs this idea in her *Harry Potter* series to explain Voldemort's journey to soulless "un"-humanity. To gain his much desired immortality, Voldemort commits a series of murders and thus splits his soul into eight pieces. Just as Harry fears that he may become like Voldemort, Jaemar fears his connection to his uncle and wonders how easily a man can become a monster.

The character of the Imperial is largely influenced by Hitler's portrayal of himself in *Mein Kampf* as well as by the answer to the question of how a man becomes a tyrant. With horrifying and often gruesome detail, Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* shows that, although no one is born a monster, a person can become one. Both Hitler and Hurreich began as bright young men with sympathetic beliefs and personal battles of their own to face. They were both embittered by and estranged from their fathers, and they both grasped what it meant "to be forced to fight for one's nationality" (Hitler, 11).

For Hitler, he lived under the fear that Austria would eliminate Germanism. He watched as more and more Germans became unemployed in the economic downturn and

were forced to suffer a slight version of the persecution that he would later inflict upon millions of people. Angry at what he saw, Hitler decided to act, knowing that “the oppressed people’s instinct of self-preservation remains the loftiest justification of their struggle with every weapon” (96). For him, fighting back and forming a military was not an act of war at the start; it was a way of proving a race’s ability to survive.

However, even at the beginning, he began to build boundaries between those who were chosen and those who were not.

What we must fight for is to safeguard the existence and reproduction of our race and our people, the sustenance of our children and the purity of our blood, the freedom and independence of the fatherland, so that our people may mature for the fulfillment of the mission allotted it by the creator of the universe. (Hitler, 214)

This rousing call for his countrymen to stand and defend their freedoms sounds reasonable and even just. Careful readers might note warnings within this speech, but for many Germans living in poverty and oppression, all they could see was hope for the future. If they did sense something sinister, they turned a blind eye, wanting a better life for their children, and hoped they were wrong.

In the same way, Haurreich watches as his father’s policies benefit the Morgskall race while destroying many of his own people. In response to the growing problems and injustices they see around them, both Hitler and Haurreich dedicate themselves to restoring justice to their respective countries. In a proclamation which chillingly seems to hearken back to a statement in America’s “Declaration of Independence,” Hitler writes, “A man who knows a thing, who is aware of a given danger, and sees the possibility of a remedy with his own eyes, has the duty and obligation, by God, not to work ‘silently,’ but to stand up before the whole public against the evil and for its cure”

(364). At the beginning, Hitler sounded more like a hero challenging the cruelties of an oppressive government than a man seeking to bring down his fist upon a whole nation. However, although he and his fantasy counterpart started out with good values, the danger came when they went too far.

For both Hitler and Hurreich, they found a solution to their world's injustice in the creation of a Reich and an Order, respectively. And initially, Hitler even insisted that he did not want a government in which one man had all the power. Instead, he claimed, "as a freedom-loving man I could not even conceive of any other possibility of government, for the idea of any sort of dictatorship would...have seemed to me a crime against freedom and all reason" (76). However, as he and Hurreich grow in power, they forget their original motives and begin to cling too much to the idea of the institutions they formed. Any kind of opposition to the Reich or the Order is no longer tolerated: "obstacles do not exist to be surrendered to, but only to be broken" (Hitler, 20). Whether their initial intentions were based in truth or fabricated as excuses for later actions, reason lost its place to the allure of power.

Furthermore, the people they initially sought to protect and defend become little more than necessary sacrifices. As an excuse for recognizing that his cause cannot include everyone, Hitler writes, "Our own painful struggle for existence destroys our feelings for the misery of those who have remained behind" (23). Later, he goes even further and says that loss of life is no longer just a result but a necessary sacrifice in the achievement of his goals. He writes, "The sacrifice of personal existence is necessary to secure the preservation of the species" (151), and the height of one's character is known by "the ability and will of the individual to sacrifice himself for the totality" (152). Of

course, such proclamations are even more cruel and hypocritical coming from Imperial Haurreich, whose immortality ensures that he will never have to pay a sacrifice with his own life.

With similar tyrants ruling them, the countries of Germany and Almaen also share several correlations. Propaganda is stamped on walls and windows in every city, and uniformity of language and behavior is insisted upon. Marriages are regulated to maintain blood purity, and the streets in both Reich and the Order cities are scrupulously kept clean by purging them of the orphaned and homeless. Regular demonstrations and exhibitions of terror are organized in each city and require attendance. As in Orwell's *1984*, the sense of total control is maintained by the implicit understanding that the "leader"—whether Big Brother, the Nazi Party, or the Imperial—is always watching.

One of the worst results of both the Third Reich and the Imperial Order is the effect on the traditional family structure. Children, who already parrot the beliefs of their elders, are required to join government-controlled groups. In Almaen, older children must be part of the Imperial Youth, and younger children are encouraged to join the Nark League.

Hitler, who believed it was a crime "to withhold healthy children from the nation" (404), stated "self-confidence must be inculcated in the young national comrade from childhood on...to give him the conviction that he is absolutely superior to others" (411). In his satirical essay on education, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis explains that educators wanted to "fortify the minds of young people against emotion" (699). Even though this was the goal behind a Nazi education, most children did not realize it or chose to ignore it. Young people in both Germany and Almaen often saw only the

attraction of the Youth factions and thrilled in the games, uniforms, and authority the groups offered them.

For many parents who realized the truth behind Nazi lies, the Hitler Youth was a terrifying presence. If they refused to allow their children to be indoctrinated in Nazi beliefs, the government could take the children anyway and raise them in proper Nazi fashion. However, even if parents consented to their children's involvement in the Youth, they might face even worse dangers. Stories exist of children as young as eight-years-old turning their parents in to Nazi authorities. The same could happen to children if they disagreed with their parents' loyalty to Hitler. Thus, many families disintegrated or grew distant as the levels of trust crumbled away.

Fortunately, many Germans realized what was happening and chose to stand up against Hitler and everything he stood for, often risking their lives in doing so. As the Sorting Hat warns in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, they knew they "must unite" or "crumble from within" (Rowling, 2007). Often the acts of rebellion were small and unnoticeable, such as hiding in basements and pressing ears against the radio to hear the BBC broadcasts. Bolder individuals hid Jews or enemies of the Reich, and some even printed and distributed anti-Nazi pamphlets. One story tells of a whole community that rallied around a priest who had spoken out against Hitler and his Nazis, and another speaks of a town that fought against the practice of euthanasia on children.

A good description of what these brave Germans hoped to accomplish is summarized in Lewis's *Abolition of Man*: "He who sets to work on a different strand destroys the whole fabric" (697). Even though many would brand them collectively as "Hitler's people," they did what they could to keep the shadow from spreading further.

Although many of these heroes remain unsung, their stories can live on, even in fantasy and fictional characters such as Aden Caygio.

Telling the stories of heroic Germans and describing the realities of life under Nazi rule are only part of the reason behind the creation of *The Rising Fall of the Imperial Order*. This book also delves into deep questions of virtue and the soul. It emphasizes the continued presence of racism and prejudice in the world and the damaging effects they can have. It proves how the art of fantasy is multi-layered in both creativity and scholastic themes. Finally, writing fantasy is also an expression of Christianity and the relationship between Creator God and his created beings.

Fantasy authors L'Engle and Tolkien agree that writing fantasy is a way of co-creating with God. L'Engle explains that art and Christianity are the same thing for her, and she writes, "God is constantly creating, in us, through us, with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling" (88). Not only are we able to create with God, but we are also meant to do so. Tolkien expands on her claim by saying, "Fantasy is a natural human activity" that allows us to "make still by the law in which we're made" (370). Furthermore, as philosophy professor David Calhoun writes, "the enchantment of fantasy...depends" on a "desire for the Unseen" (9), which gives fantasy almost a divine power of raising readers to a higher spiritual awareness. Thus, in creating worlds of our own in fantasy, we can draw closer to God and better grasp the wonder of His creation.

In conclusion, story is a beautiful gift from God that allows us to connect with Him and with each other. Stories have the power to give more life to a legend than to the ones who inspire it. Stories help us remember what is good and teach us how to guard against what is evil. They force us to question ourselves and our world. And, as L'Engle

so succinctly writes, it is in story that we discover “flashes of that truth which makes us free” (56). As long as fantasy continues to reveal truth, we can remain free from the shadows.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Shadow of the Order

*One blood demands one Reich. –Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf*

“The Imperial still lives! Twice defies death!” a young news runner shrieked from the middle of the dusty, sun-baked street.

Jaemar Ralour, bearing a sackload of newly sharpened knives, jumped at the suddenness of the news runner’s voice. Readjusting the pack on his shoulder, he glanced over at the barefoot hawker, frantically waving a sheaf of parchments as though the words they carried offered the freshest novelty Ayzornia had ever seen. The young boy continued to rant through the specifics of the Imperial’s nearly fatal assault, but with a shake of his head, Jaemar redirected his steps toward the trade store and tuned out the hawker’s voice.

He had lost count of the number of times Anzigar Hurreich, the Imperial of all of Almaen, had barely escaped death. The man seemed invincible. Already seventy years had passed since Anzigar’s father had been mysteriously murdered and he had assumed the Imperial throne, yet he continued to live as well as though he were still in his youth. With him as its leader, the Imperial Order had grown in strength every year, but most of its power lay in the south, far away from Ayzornia.

As Jaemar approached the door to Mason's trade store, a weathered parchment pasted to the store's outer wall caught his eye, as it often did whenever a breeze caught its frayed edges.

*Do not allow the Order's shadow to fall over you. Protect your home. The Imperial cannot take Almaen if even one man still stands against him.*

Jaemar squinted at the edict and wondered how many travelers had seen it as they made their way into Thornskern, the small Ayzornian village he had moved to with his mother over three years ago. The edict itself looked as though it too were seventy years old. The scrawled words were faded, the parchment worn, the wooden frame weathered gray and rough. Despite its ancient and forgotten appearance, Jaemar thought the edict exuded some kind of inner strength. Its staying power had made it as much a part of Thornskern as the trade store itself.

The jingle of the shop door jolted Jaemar's focus away from the edict, and he slipped around the corner of the rough-hewn building, slouched against the worn wood, and tilted his head away from the street. The attempt was worth it, but the effort proved to be useless. Even as Jaemar ducked his head lower, he heard with sinking heart the scuffling of halting footsteps in the dirt-packed street ten feet to his left. The feet began to move toward him, but Jaemar didn't look up until he heard his name drawled out in the voice he had come to loathe.

"Jaemar Ralour."

"Grish Vantak." Jaemar tried to hide his wince.

The name "Vantak" connoted wealth and high-standing in Thornskern, and Grish had obviously let the power of high status go to his head. And against Jaemar, he was far

more impressive to look at. While Jaemar was tall for his sixteen years, Grish rose almost a head higher and boasted the fairer hair and skin common to the northern countries. Jaemar, possessing a tanner complexion, wore his dark, reddish-brown hair shorter. Although his eyes were as blue as those of a native northerner, Jaemar was still an outsider.

“What are you doing skulking around the back of Mason’s?” Grish demanded, folding his arms across his expansive chest. “Can’t be anything good, I warrant.”

Jaemar looked from Grish to the four burly youths behind him and quickly realized what was about to happen if he didn’t play to his strengths well. He readjusted the load of knives, bows, and traps slung over his shoulder and made no effort to downplay the clanging noise they made when they struck against each other.

“I’m just delivering a shipment to Mason. Nothing criminal in that.”

Grish threw a meaningful glance at the boys behind him. “If you ask me, armory repair is not a real source of work, and the fact that it’s your mother’s and not your job reflects badly on you, I must say.”

Jaemar tightened his grip on the leather strap across his shoulder, his knuckles whitening. “And if you ask me, insulting a person while he is carrying a load of newly repaired weapons does not betray the best kind of intelligence. Especially when that person didn’t even have to use weapons the last time.”

Grish reddened.

Jaemar looked past him at his accomplices again. “Tell me, is that why you brought reinforcements this time?”

Grish's jaw clenched and cracked his knuckles. The youths behind him stepped closer, choking the passage from the alley to the street.

Jaemar was just trying to figure out how he could manage all five with the least amount of injury to himself when the sentry bugle announced the arrival of horses. Three times it sang. Once was for the changing of the guard; twice was for travelers; three times meant...

Jaemar took a step back. "Grish, that was three times."

"Cyrgoz," Grish cursed.

His friends had already turned to look down the road leading past Mason's and out of Thornskern. Seconds later, before any of them could move, someone took up the cry.

"Imperial Youth!"

Nearby citizens shrieked or simply sprinted for the nearest shops or houses, and doors and shutters slammed shut. In the building panic, Grish's friends vanished into the fleeing crowds.

Before Grish followed them, he turned back to Jaemar, his eyes narrowed to slits, and spoke with the voice of a judge announcing a death penalty: "You did this."

"Grish!" yelled one of his companions. "Mason's is stocked with anti-Order contraband. We don't want to be anywhere near when they hit it!"

Throwing another scowl Jaemar's way, Grish turned and fled down the street, leaving Jaemar to contemplate his accusation, but he did not contemplate it for long. He was alone on the street with a pile of incriminating weapons on his back, and the Imperial Youth were about to ride right past him. With a guilty look directed toward Mason's

front door, Jaemar sprinted toward the town center, distancing himself from association with Mason's anti-Order property. He tried not to think about the fact that he had sold Mason some of that property.

His bag of weapons thudding against his back, Jaemar criss-crossed through the streets and skidded into the main square. A boy, who had just strung the black and crimson flag of the Order onto Thornskern's founding pillar, shimmied down the jagged stone. He jumped the last few feet and landed on the stone platform at the base of the monument just as Jaemar reached it.

The boy took one look at the load on Jaemar's back and asked, slightly out of breath, "You know how to open it?"

"Yeah, I've done it before. You should get out of the street."

As the boy scampered away, Jaemar squinted up at the crimson flag, emblazoned with the black silhouette of a creature with a lion's body and a dragon's head, wings, and tail. A black iron ring enclosed the serreone, whose wings were stretched out to either side, and a cord with the words *May the Immortal Order Reign* written on it snaked around the serreone's body. Jaemar had seen that insignia too many times in his life.

He circled the pillar until he found the loose stone in the platform. Jerking it open, he threw the weapons into the hole and fitted the stone back over the hiding place. He could already hear the clapping of the horses' hooves on the next street as well as the strange accents of the Imperial Youth as they shouted to each other. After a quick survey of the stores fronting the town center, he decided to run for one of the taverns. He had almost reached the door when he heard the sound of horses entering the cobbled square. Against his better judgment, he turned to look over his shoulder and immediately wished

he hadn't. One citizen of Thornskern had yet to vacate the street, and the Imperial horsemen were headed straight for her. One glance was enough to tell him who the lone figure was: expensively colored dress, long red hair, hand cane extended and madly tapping the street.

Gemma Vantak, Grish's younger sister.

Jaemar only hesitated for a fraction of a second before pelting across the square diagonally toward her. While he ran, the horsemen in his periphery, his mother's admonition echoed loudly in his head: *Never be caught by anyone belonging to the Imperial*. But if they were a danger to him, the threat to Gemma was unspeakable. She was young, she was a girl, and she was blind.

Without breaking his stride, Jaemar reached out and grabbed Gemma around the waist, swinging her around with a force that would be jarring enough for a person who could see. Gemma cried out in terror, but Jaemar didn't stop or waste a breath to explain. He imagined the horses bearing down on him and trampling over the both of them, and he willed his legs to move faster. He could hear the hooves smashing against the cobblestone and the Youths' taunting jeers being hurled against his back. Grabbing the first door he could reach, he flung it aside and shoved Gemma through the door before yanking it shut behind him.

Sucking air into his lungs, Jaemar barely noticed the tear-stained face of Gemma, shaking on the floor with her knees up to her chest, or the frightened people around him whispering approval for what he had just done. All were silenced, however, as the door began to rattle and shake with what seemed to be the fists of two dozen Youth, their voices screaming insults that brought shudders and even quiet sobs of terror.

Of course, the Imperial Youth had no intention of entering the tavern. They had never entered a Thornskern building before, but what they did do was arguably worse. The unlatched door continued to shudder on its hinges, but the hushed room began to echo with the additional crashes of swords against the exterior walls. All but the rashly brave shrank back against the far wall, and seconds later, a window was shattered, exploding glass shards onto the tavern floor. Someone screamed, and the Youths laughed raucously.

The barman lifted a pitcher of water from the counter and held it ready, as though he expected a Youth to throw a torch through the broken glass. However, the Youths left off terrorizing the tavern's occupants and began racing around the square, nailing parchments into walls, hanging up Imperial Order insignias, and smashing several other windows. One of them found a bucket of tar and smeared insults and Imperial slogans across the faces of Thornskern edifices. After breaking into a bakery and carvery, the Youth strewed the foodstuffs across the square and hurled some at upper-story windows.

The demonstration lasted only a few minutes, but it was long enough.

Even after the Youth disappeared, it was some time before anyone would venture out of hiding. When Jaemar neared the door to exit, Gemma approached him, led by one of her friends.

"Is this him?" Gemma asked, her blank eyes turning inquiringly to the friend beside her.

"Yes."

Gemma shifted her cane to her right hand so that she could hold out her left to Jaemar. Jaemar regarded the extended hand with some surprise. Offering the left hand

was a show of the utmost respect, especially for a girl belonging to one of Thornskern's upper crust families. He took her hand.

"Thank you." The fear had not yet left her voice or her eyes.

"Sorry it was so rough. I didn't think to warn you."

"You thought to rescue me. That matters more. What is your name? I do not recognize your voice."

"Jaemar. Jaemar Ralour."

"Well, thank you, Jaemar Ralour. I hope we meet again."

Jaemar couldn't help but note the irony in the situation as Gemma and her friend moved away. He grinned slightly and shook his head before finally managing to squeeze out of the doorway into the square.

As it turned out, he was not the only one to hide something beneath the pillar, and he had to wait in line before he could retrieve his goods. Once he had them secured on his back, Jaemar hurried back to Mason's. The streets were still mostly empty, but Jaemar passed a boy with a bloodied and limping dog and saw more than one slaughtered goat. When he reached Mason's, he didn't notice that three horses stood out front or that the door was open. He almost strode straight through the door before he realized that three Youths were leaning against the counter and talking to the storeowner.

"...still haven't taken down that sign like we told you to last time we were here," said one of the Youths.

Highly aware of the incriminating weapons on his back, Jaemar backpedaled past the horses and around the corner of the building, this time circling all the way to the back. His heart pounded in his throat at the close call, and his mother's words rang in his ears.

*Never be caught.* He allowed the weapons to slide down to his feet, and he leaned against the back wall of the store. There were only three of them, and he had considered fighting five earlier, but a fight with the Youths would most likely end in capture or death, especially if they signaled more of their forces to join them.

“He shouldn’t have left that edict up there,” Jaemar muttered. Any desire to help the storeowner was beaten down by the sound of his mother’s admonition in his head.

He had resolved for the fifth time to enter the store without his delivery when he heard the Youths leaving. Their voices drew nearer, and he heard the door close with its distinctive jangle. He crept around one side of the store, keeping flat against the boards.

“Stubborn, isn’t he?”

“It’s those like him that think more of themselves than of the community.”

Jaemar didn’t realize that he was holding his breath until he heard the horses begin to trot down the road. He waited until the sound of their hooves had all but faded before leaning out to watch the last of the horsemen disappear around the sentry’s bluff.

He started toward the door before he realized that his pack was still at the back of the store. Retracing his steps, he shouldered the weapons and returned to the front for what seemed like the fifth time that day. Without pause, he shoved open the door and strode to the counter. As he shrugged his load onto the counter and waited for Mason to appear from the back, he glanced around the store, relieved to find himself the only customer.

“Mason?”

The second it took for Mason to respond sent a small shockwave of panic into Jaemar's chest, but it was instantly dispelled as the storeowner emerged from the back room behind the counter.

“Another shipment already, Jaemar?” the grizzled man said, contorting his features into the only smile he knew. Mason reminded Jaemar of the edict posted on the outside wall. Both had definitely seen better days, but underlying the gray and weathered exterior was an iron tenacity.

Jaemar only grinned in response. Mason had greeted him that way for the three years they had done business together, and Jaemar had long since stopped trying to explain his weekly schedule.

Mason slipped a few knives out of their sheaths for inspection. This too was routine. Simnara's work was always flawless. As Mason pretended to test the elasticity of a bow, Jaemar cleared his throat.

“I saw the Youths were here.”

Mason never looked up from the bow he was handling. “Yeah. They think they know so much, those boys, just because they've been given an Imperial-issued uniform and the soldier's authority that goes with it.” He leaned down to hang the bow on a hook beneath the counter. “I'm still holding out for the moment they wake up and realize they're only boys trussed out for a parade.” His eyes traveled to a stack of new parchment on the counter, and Jaemar followed his gaze.

*Imagine what becomes possible when the youth of Almaen are willing to sacrifice everything for the ideals of the Order. Every boy becomes a man in the Imperial Army.*

Jaemar did not read any further. “Do you think they read their own pamphlets? Or do they just not think about what it might mean to ‘sacrifice everything’?”

Mason looked up from the dagger he was polishing and set a jar of gleaming white rocks, mined from the mountains behind Thorskern, on top of the stack of parchment. “They can’t think about what it means. Thinking for themselves is something they leave off when they go through all that training to master themselves, or whatever they call it.”

The dagger disappeared under the counter, and Mason reached for another one. “For part of the time they were in here, I forgot I was actually talking to humans. Who knows. Maybe humanity is another casualty of the Order’s leeching.”

Jaemar shook his head in disbelief. “It’s a wonder anyone volunteers.”

“Not really. Most of that kind of education begins at home, and if they don’t get it there, they learn it at those new teaching houses. You should know; didn’t you come from the South?”

Despite the simple question, Jaemar felt the heat rise up the back of his neck. Experience had trained him to dread that question because of the usual consequences that followed.

“I was never trained in one of those houses.”

Mason shrugged and reached for the last weapon on the counter, a sword whose hilt Simnara had had to replace. “Well, I don’t know for sure what they teach children at those places, but from the way those Youths talk, they seem to believe they’ll get to share in the power of the Order if they grow up to serve the Imperial.”

With a snort, Mason slid the sword back into its scabbard and traced his finger along Simnara's decorative carving on the leather. "Even if they survive, that power will never belong to them. They're giving up their freedom and their humanity, all for an Imperial who cares for no one but himself." He shook his head, seeming to forget that Jaemar was there, before he turned to bring the sword into the back room.

When he returned to count out Jaemar's payment, Jaemar said, "You've given it a lot of thought."

Mason grunted. "Thought's got nothing to do with it. I've been around a long time, and I've seen a lot. More than I care to see." He nodded toward the door. "You best be getting home. Night's about to fall, and I hear there might be a firestorm tonight. Anyway, you know Grish is never in good spirits after a Youth visit."

An empty house greeted Jaemar, but he called for Simnara all the same. When no one answered, he muttered, "Gone again" and took the steps two at a time to Simnara's room. After spilling the coins from Mason into the box under Simnara's bed, he locked the door behind him and crossed the yard to the small house behind the smithy.

Garrett, the blacksmith, was just coming from the smithy, and he met Jaemar at the door of his house.

"Saw you lock the door again. Are you worried about Grish breaking in?" Garrett asked. Although he rarely smiled, his gray eyes often twinkled with amusement, especially when he was teasing Jaemar.

Jaemar shook his head. "Just habit, I guess."

Garrett didn't say anything more as he turned the handle on his own unlocked door. The aroma of venison stew, mixed with the warm smell of freshly baked bread,

met Jaemar in the doorway, and he felt a twinge of guilt as he wished that these smells greeted him in his own home. His eyes swept the small, familiar kitchen, and he saw that everything was where it always was. The pot bubbled over the fire, the table was set for three, and Brenn was hunched over a book in the corner. The blacksmith's daughter had her father's eyes and dark hair, which she kept short, but her grin was all her own. Tearing her eyes from the page as Jaemar and her father walked in, she flashed them both a smile before returning to her book.

“Brenn, please,” said Garrett, but only half-heartedly.

“Just one more page. You can go ahead and start,” Brenn replied from behind her book.

Garrett rolled his eyes and shared a knowing look with Jaemar. Nonetheless, the two of them ladled stew into their own bowls and settled themselves at the table. By the time Brenn joined them, they were still discussing the Imperial Youth.

“Their visits here are becoming more frequent,” said Garrett. “I’m afraid Thornskern is no longer too far north for the reach of the Order.”

“I suppose we’re fortunate to have kept our freedom this long,” said Jaemar, tipping his bowl to spoon out the remaining broth. “If you think about it, the Imperial wasn’t interested in the northern countries until now, or he would have taken them forty years ago.”

Garrett nodded. “It’s a clever game he’s playing. He retreated after his father’s death, and many of us thought he’d died himself. But then he started buying up the land around Geresdain.”

“I don’t see why no one realized what he was doing,” said Brenn. “It’s not like the Order was created overnight.”

Garrett frowned at her, whether from the subject matter or his daughter’s interest in politics, Jaemar didn’t know.

“People embraced the Order at first. Some still do. It promised security and bread on the table, which is more than most people are used to in the south.” Garrett leaned his chair back, tilting the front legs off the floor. “But now that the Order’s darker sides are coming out, it seems it’s too late for anyone to do anything.”

Brenn reached for a slice of bread and dunked it in her stew. “You’re forgetting the Resistance. Father, tell Jaemar what that man from Demuscan told you yesterday.”

“Demuscan?” asked Jaemar, his eyebrows raised. “What was a Trakaan doing this side of the border?”

Garrett shrugged. “Trakaans often travel abroad without hindrance. Unfortunately, they hate us more than we hate them. And he was only passing through, heading to the western ports, I think.” He emptied his mug of mead and set it back on the table. “Apparently, he wants to get out of Almaen before the Order has a chance to spread.”

“Yes, but what did he tell you?” insisted Brenn.

“He told me the Resistance has resurfaced in Demuscan and is taking on new volunteers.”

“The Resistance?” Jaemar said the word as if it were a fantasy out of a fairy tale, which it almost was for someone of his sixteen years. “I thought Imperial Haurreich

himself crushed it over twenty years ago. He killed the Resistance leader with his own hand in the last—”

“No, no, Jaemar, listen.” Brenn’s eyes shone with excitement. She looked like a child waiting to hear the happy end of a story she knew by heart.

Garrett leaned forward in the manner of one with a great secret to share. “Marcus Greyhardt is alive.”

Brenn looked from her father to Jaemar to see his reaction and seemed pleased by his shocked silence.

“The man who told me said he and several others personally saw Greyhardt at an underground rally in Demuscan, not a fortnight ago. He’s back, and he’s gathering new troops and old to finish what he started.”

Brenn, unable to control herself, dropped the rest of her bread in her bowl and took up the story. “There are rumors going around that whatever is prolonging Anzigar Haurreich’s life accidentally passed to Greyhardt as well when Haurreich stabbed him. Maybe it’s true, or maybe Greyhardt only feigned death so that he could disappear into the shadows, as Anzigar did after he killed his father.”

“Brenn!” Garrett said forcefully, glancing at the door as if he expected the Imperial Youth to charge through it.

“I’m sorry,” Brenn said quickly. “Slip of the tongue.”

“Which is exactly what any Imperial interrogator will be looking for if you ever get caught.”

“But—”

“I think we’re done with this conversation for the night,” said Garrett firmly. He turned to face the flames in the hearth, his eyes burning with something that caused Jaemar’s throat to tighten.

When Brenn rose, awkwardly silent, to clear the table, Jaemar quickly stood to help her. “Thank you for sharing your dinner again.”

“It’s the least we can do after all the work your mother does in the smithy,” said Garrett, his gaze never turning from the fire.

Brenn cleared her throat as she set the empty bowls on the washboard. “Anyway, you shot the deer, so the stew was more yours than ours.”

“That was payment for the tools we had to use last week,” argued Jaemar. “And I should tell you, the order for Mason next week should be larger than usual, since more people are starting to worry about the Youth, and I might need—”

The door crashing into the wall cut short the rest of Jaemar’s request, and Garrett leaped to his feet, knocking over his chair. They all jerked their heads toward the gaping entryway, half expecting to see the Imperial Youth storming into the house. But it was only a boy. Jaemar recognized him as the boy who had tied the Imperial flag to the pillar in the center of town. He apparently had not stopped running since then, for he was still breathless.

As he leaned against the doorframe, gasping for air, the relief those in the house had felt at not seeing the Youth rose again into tense anxiety. The boy pointed to Garrett.

“Elder Marse said for you to come quickly. The Imperial Youth returned for a raid, and they’re in town now, but a lot of people came onto the streets to fight.” The boy gulped hard. “They hit Mason’s first.”

Garrett was already halfway to the door. The boy moved out of the way as the blacksmith brushed past him, calling over his shoulder, “Brenn, give him something to drink and keep him here.”

Jaemar dashed out of the house after Garrett and watched him enter the smithy. A glance toward his house showed Jaemar that Simnara had still not returned. The windows were dark and the paddock held only his horse. Brenn appeared at his side, the boy trailing behind her.

“You can’t make me stay here,” the boy panted. “I practically run this town, and it’s more my home than anybody else’s.”

Jaemar and Brenn ignored him, and they all saw Garrett emerging from the smithy, carrying a sword and tucking an axe into his belt. In unspoken agreement, Jaemar, Brenn, and the boy raced after him.

Darkness had fallen, but as they neared the center of Thornsfern, they saw the town lit up by scores of fires. The sounds of curses and clanging iron roiled through the burning air. Smoke drifted through the air, stinging eyes and making it difficult to tell what was going on. Jaemar spotted a few Youths fighting hand to hand with Thornsfern citizens, but he saw that many other people were simply trying to control the fires.

In the confusion, Jaemar lost Garrett and even Brenn and the boy, but he didn’t think about that. There was one place he had to get to, and he didn’t need help finding it. Shoving his way through the blurred mass of people and coughing the smoke out of his lungs, Jaemar finally reached Mason’s storefront. Despite the chaos around him, his focus went first to where the edict had hung on the wall. It was gone, and in its place hung a new sign. In the dancing light of the flames, Jaemar read only the first line:

*One Order demands complete Unity.*

Looking down, his eyes fell on the ancient edict, finally defeated and trampled on the ground. The parchment had been ripped and crumpled, and Jaemar could only see the words “Order’s shadow” through the broken folds. His heart pounding in his chest, he reached for the door and froze in his tracks at the marks he saw there. The Imperial insignia of the serreone in the ring had been branded into the wood, and a hand-scrawled notice had been nailed beneath it.

*Traitors to the Imperial Order do not exist to be reasoned with, but only to be broken.*

Jaemar’s throat seemed to close up entirely, and he struggled to keep his hands steady as he forced open the door. In his current state of shock, he didn’t even notice that the familiar jangle did not sound. The interior of the store was in complete disarray: paper and shattered glass littered the floor, and whole shelves had been knocked off of the walls. Crossing to the counter, Jaemar saw that the mess extended to the storage space at the back of the store. He vaulted over the counter and entered the back room, where his heart seemed to stop altogether.

On the floor lay the body of Master Mason, as broken and forgotten as the edict outside.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Serreone's Mark

*What are you willing to do to prevent such a shadow from falling over you? —Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow**

The air felt too thick to breathe, but Jaemar found himself unable to move. He couldn't take his eyes away from Mason, as if staring would change reality or at least help him face the truth. Had it only been hours before that he had spoken to him over a regular delivery inspection? And now he was nothing but a crumpled shell, his humanity stolen by those who had none of their own.

Jaemar shuddered, the hairs on his skin raising as though a cold breath of air had just swallowed the room. He twisted his head around to look under the counter, but the weapon stash that used to be there was gone. Keeping his eyes away from the stark reminder of the Youths' brutality, Jaemar picked his way through the debris, searching to see if the raiding Youth had left any of the weapons. They had been extremely thorough. Most of the parchments littered on the floor were Imperial Order credos. The darkly printed words seemed to throw taunting insults into the air, scarring Mason's memory.

*Imagine what becomes possible when the youth of Almaen are willing to sacrifice everything....*

Jaemar surveyed the destroyed room again. If boys were capable of causing this kind of atrocity, what else was possible?

Kicking aside a broken jar, Jaemar stepped back into the front room and headed for the door. Through the broken windows, he could see shadowy figures grappling with each other through the veil of smoke. Lit by the dying fires, the battle for Thornskern seemed to have turned into some kind of perverted dance.

When he emerged from the store, Jaemar bent down to retrieve the crumpled edict and stuffed it into his pocket. Looking up, he saw that the Youth were everywhere. Either they outnumbered the people of Thornskern ten to one, or most Thornskern citizens were too afraid to leave the relative safety of their homes.

Jaemar barely had time to notice the ratio of those scuffling in the street before he spied three uninhibited Youths smashing the window of the miners' guild across the street. By the time Jaemar reached them, one was already climbing through the gaping hole into the building.

Without really thinking, Jaemar grabbed the back of the Youth's shirt and yanked him away from the window so roughly that he fell prostrate onto his back. Leaving that Youth dazed on the ground, Jaemar turned toward the other two, who by this time had noticed his intrusion. Jaemar avoided a punch from one and threw a fist of his own before wrestling the other and shoving him through the rest of the unbroken glass.

Before he could turn around, something jaggedly sharp sliced down across his left shoulder, ripping his sleeve and cutting a deep gash down his arm. He whipped around to see that one of the first two had recovered and stood armed with a long shard of broken

glass. The boy with the glass knife lunged for Jaemar, who threw himself to the side and collided with another Youth.

A cry of alarm echoed in the distance, its lone voice rumbling into a wave of fear that swept down the street. As the wave rippled across the flagstones, fighters on both sides turned their heads with widened eyes and hesitated for a fraction of a second before evacuating the street. A farmer and a Youth crashed into each other but picked themselves up and dashed away without a second look at the other.

Jaemar, backed up against the weathered stone of the mining guild, was facing two bloodied and seething Youths. A piece of glass dipped in red glinted above Jaemar's head. A silhouetted poster of black and red advertising the new slogan of the Imperial Youth: *Take a life. Become a soldier.*

Jaemar saw it first. Streaking the sky behind the hulking forms of the Youths before him. A childhood nightmare and an adult horror, and yet, somehow, his salvation.

Firestorm.

Jaemar's flinch and rounded eyes caused one of the Youths to turn. He shouted a word in the tongue of the Order and gripped his comrade's shoulder. Shoving himself away from the wall, Jaemar stood beside his enemies and gazed skyward to see long tongues of flame gleaming against the roiling sky. All three froze until the wave hit them as well, forcing them into a mad dash for cover.

Leaving the Youths behind, Jaemar sprinted across the street to a low-hanging tin awning and crouched beneath it. He could feel the heat increasing on his face as he realized that the other Youth had followed him. The space beneath the narrow roof was barely large enough for two, especially two who had just been trying to kill each other.

Jaemar pressed himself against the wall, trying to find the exact middle point between the two dangers.

The street, a frenetic scene just moments before, was eerily silent and empty as the first flames hit the ground. A small fire sprung up near Jaemar's foot, and he stretched out his boot to stamp it to ashes. When he retracted his foot to safety, he glanced over at the Youth and saw that he was staring at Jaemar's shoulder in curiosity. Jaemar instinctively reached up to cover his long black scar that twisted down his upper arm and was usually concealed under his sleeve.

The two of them exchanged suspicious stares, and Jaemar searched the Youth's face for signs that Mason had been right about his lack of humanity. He couldn't see it. The determined anger and hatred burning in the Youth's eyes seemed to suggest that his was the home being invaded and destroyed. Jaemar was even more shocked to discover that the Youth looked younger than him. Despite the situation, Jaemar shook his head in horrified disbelief at the monstrous measures the Imperial had taken in his drive for power.

Something new, something hungrily inhuman, suddenly glinted in the Youth's eyes, and Jaemar became acutely aware that his own face was being read. He looked away.

"This is right," said the thickly accented voice.

Jaemar turned his face from the fire raining down to the Youth hunched beside him. He looked pleased, dangerously so. Rain began to drum against the tin roof over their heads; the firestorm was almost over.

“What have they told you to make you think this is right?” Jaemar asked. “How old are you?”

The Youth twisted the corner of his lip upward and crouched on his feet. “May the Immortal Order reign.”

Rain fell in earnest now, but the last of the flames still darted down to earth as the Youth bolted from his shelter and disappeared into the hazy darkness.

Jaemar waited a minute more, his scar a constant reminder of the dangers posed by even the end of a firestorm. Once the torrential rain started to beat against the fizzing fires, Jaemar unfolded himself from the shelter, his cramped limbs moving slowly as he tried to make sense of what had just happened.

A few people began to appear on the street, but none of them were Imperial Youth. Either the storm had driven them away or they had completed their purpose. Jaemar lifted his hand against the driving rain and squinted into the dark. Even though the Youth seemed to be gone and the rain was taking care of the fires, the citizens of Thornskern did not appear to be going home.

“Jaemar!”

He turned to face up the street and could barely make out a figure running toward him through the haze.

“Jaemar!” He recognized Brenn’s voice.

She reached him seconds later and held out a long, thin object in both hands. Her dark hair was plastered to her face, and a cut traced the side of her cheek.

“Here. I nicked this from one of the Youth. His arms were too full of other stolen property to do anything but glare at me.” She gestured for him to take it. “Isn’t it one of your mother’s?”

Jaemar took the object and instantly realized it was the sword he had delivered to Mason only hours ago. Simnara’s signature pattern was traced along the sheath.

Jaemar ran his hand down the smooth leather. When he spoke, it was more to the sword than to Brenn. “Mason’s dead.”

Brenn’s eyes rounded in horror. “What? They never—I didn’t think the Youth killed anyone on these raids.”

Jaemar fastened the sheath around his waist. “Things are changing, and not for the better.”

“Does anyone else know? About Mason?”

Jaemar shrugged and wiped wet hair out of his eyes. At least the rain showed signs of slackening.

“You have to come to the town council and tell everyone,” said Brenn, tugging on his arm.

“What, now?” Jaemar tried to pull his arm back.

“Yes, now. People aren’t just going to go home and sleep soundly after a raid like this.”

“No, they have to gather and argue about it for hours.”

Brenn grinned. “Yes, well, they have to feel like they can control something, you know. Come on.”

Consenting to follow Brenn, Jaemar jogged alongside her to the central square, where they found throngs of people gathering in front of the great hall. More people seemed to have turned out for the council meeting than had been defending Thornskern against the Youth. The number of torches held aloft made the square look as though it were aflame again and that this time no amount of rain would be able to put it out.

By the time Jaemar and Brenn neared the doors to the hall, most of the crowd had already disappeared inside. As Jaemar set his foot upon the first step, an unwelcome voice drifted from out of the shadows.

“I wouldn’t go in there if I were you.”

Jaemar and Brenn both looked toward the sound and watched as Grish lit a torch and descended the steps as though he wanted to chat or attack them or both.

“Not after all that’s just happened.”

“And what do you mean by that?” asked Jaemar through gritted teeth.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed the signs, Jaemar. You and your mother shouldn’t have tried to hide them.”

“If you have something to say, Grish, spit it out,” said Brenn, taking a step forward.

Jaemar noticed the ring of Grish’s friends behind him, and he held out a hand to restrain Brenn.

“That’s right, Brenn,” said Grish coolly. “You’d best think twice before you throw in your lot with him. He can’t win any fight he starts in this town.”

“I’ve beaten you plenty of times,” said Jaemar, his blood starting to boil. “You know it’s true, because you’ve had to bring friends with you this time.”

Grish's narrowed eyes glinted in the torchlight. "I think it's only fair, seeing as your friends just trashed half of Thornskern."

"What?" Jaemar exploded, his hand whipping unconsciously to the sword at his belt.

"Grish!" Brenn cried, horrified by the accusation.

Grish ignored her. "Odd, isn't it, that the first Imperial influence in Thornskern occurred only days after your arrival three years ago? And that the first Imperial Youth set foot in the town center only days after that?"

Grish moved one more step down, his fury building as he closed in on Jaemar. "You'd barely been here six months when Elder Marse convinced the council to fly the flag of the Order from our honored ancient pillar out of fear for our own safety. And tonight. Tonight's was the fifth raid in three years. Do you think I don't know what's going on?"

Grish was two steps above Jaemar.

"You come up from the south as spies for the Imperial and infiltrate our peaceful towns and countries so that his iron hand can reach farther."

Grish was practically screaming, and Jaemar felt Brenn's nails digging into his arm.

"Ever since you marched in here with your Order-issued clothes and your weapons master mother, Thornskern has been under the eye of the Imperial Order. And I've had enough. I can't touch Anzigar Haurreich, but I can at least kill one of his own!"

Grish lunged at Jaemar, his eyes wild with rage, but Jaemar was too quick and dodged the assault. Stumbling on the steps, Jaemar hesitated to draw his sword.

“Grish, you’re not thinking straight, as usual,” he said. “How could you believe that I would ever serve the Order?”

“I’ve just told you,” Grish said, recovering himself and starting to circle Jaemar so that Jaemar became pinned between Grish on one side and Grish’s friends on the other. “But if you want more reasons, I’ll give them to you. You show up from the south with no father to speak of and a mother who’s more than willing to work a man’s job.”

“Grish, stop it!” Brenn shouted.

“You must have earned her quite a prize when you were born. Tell me, whoreson, what prize did he offer her in exchange for spreading his Order further north?”

Jaemar’s sword flew out of its sheath almost of its own accord, and Grish flew at him with the torch in one hand and a knife in the other. A few of Grish’s friends rushed to help, and Brenn screamed. Blind with fury, Jaemar did not know what was happening until strong arms were pulling him to his feet. The same person seemed to be shouting angrily, but Jaemar’s head pounded too loudly to hear what the person was saying.

As the hall steps came back into focus, Jaemar saw that Garrett stood towering over Grish, who could not help but pale at the blacksmith’s heated diatribe being flung against him. His ears still ringing, Jaemar stopped trying to hear what Garrett was yelling, and he surveyed the rest of the scene. Most of Grish’s friends had fled, but a few loitered near enough to be called loyal but far enough to avoid accusation. Brenn, a few feet away from Jaemar, stared at him with fear welling up in her eyes.

When he met her gaze, she flung herself at him, and her voice came slowly out of a fog.

“Are you all right? That was horrible.”

“I’m fine,” said Jaemar, looking toward Grish.

Garrett stopped ranting and turned to face Jaemar.

“Are you sure? You look terrible. Those are some bad bruises,” Brenn said.

Garrett joined them and asked his version of Brenn’s question with his eyes.

Jaemar nodded.

“Take Brenn home,” said Garrett. “Now.”

Although he usually tried to avoid fights, Jaemar wanted nothing more than to stay where he was and finish what he started. However, a second unspoken command from Garrett convinced him to turn away. As he started toward home with Brenn, he glanced back and saw Grish glaring at him with his best attempt at a look that could kill.

The moon splashed murky pools of light across the ground, its full light struggling to free itself from the iron-colored clouds. After the screams of terror and the shrieks of shattering glass, the silence in the air between Jaemar and Brenn was close to eerie. The town hall and the smoldering fires were far behind them before Brenn chanced a furtive look at Jaemar’s face. Biting her lip, she dropped her eyes to the shadow-painted ground in front of her.

“Not everyone thinks of you and your mother as Grish does.”

Jaemar snorted. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? He’s a Vantak. The whole town could disagree with him, and he would still get what he wants. That’s never been my luck.”

“Yes, but he’s never had to deal with the Order until now. From what I understand of your life before Thornskern, you’ve always had to face the challenges and persecution resulting from disagreement with the Order.”

“And I have nothing to show for it,” said Jaemar, spitting the words out of his mouth as if they’d been the source of a bad taste for years. “We move to a new town; we set up our trade; the Imperial follows; we leave and start the process all over again. We can’t run from the Order forever, not unless we leave Almaen completely. I don’t know why we haven’t done that. We’re about to run out of land if we keep going north.”

“Do you think you will move again after what’s just happened?”

Jaemar shrugged. “Will you? Will anyone in Thornskern? Why is it always just my mother and I?”

“Because you’re cowards who refuse to build loyalties and fight for them,” said Grish, coming alongside them.

Jaemar whirled around, pain and fury etched on his face. “You have a lot of nerve following me right now.”

Grish smirked and crossed his arms as casually as if he were discussing the latest shipment of mining tools. “What? Are you going to call your blacksmith bodyguard to protect you again?”

“How dare you, Grish Vantak!” demanded Brenn. She started toward him, but Grish forced her back with a flick of his arm.

“Grish, I don’t know what got you thinking that I serve the Order, but no one in my family is loyal to it. Look.” Jaemar yanked his sleeve up his arm to reveal the underside of his wrist. “No mark of the Order. What else can I do to prove that?”

“The Imperial Youth are always begging to prove themselves. Apparently, they have to pass certain tests of bravery in their training, but you could tell us more about that.”

The tips of Jaemar’s ears reddened. He couldn’t deny it.

“Oh, shut up, Grish,” said Brenn. “In the three years he’s lived here, Jaemar’s never tried to hide the fact that he was part of the Youth when he was younger. Joining was common in the place he lived in at that time. But he and his mother got out when they realized the truth behind it all.”

Jaemar dug the toe of his shoe into the ground. He, Brenn, and Grish all knew that Jaemar had tried to hide his past involvement with the Youth when he’d first arrived, but that it had come to light anyway.

Grish looked at Brenn, his condescending expression conveying his disapproval of her. He turned back to Jaemar as though Brenn were not worth another second of his time. “Listen, Jaemar. I don’t care what you’ve gotten the Smiths or anyone else to believe about you and your mother. And know this. Garrett will get what’s coming to him for the way he treated me.” Grish leaned closer, his face inches from Jaemar’s. “You may have all of them fooled, but I know where your true loyalties lie.”

The hair stood up on the back of Jaemar’s neck. Something in Grish’s tone seemed to suggest a darker truth behind the words. Jaemar tried to ignore the uneasy feeling and put on a bold front. “You don’t know anything.”

“Don’t I?” Grish smiled. “Why else would an Imperial Youth call you by name when asking where you live?”

Jaemar's eyes rounded, but words were either no longer necessary or no longer possible. He sprinted toward his house, leaving Brenn behind to say, "Grish, you didn't."

His feet pounding against dirt, Jaemar fought to convince himself it wasn't true; it couldn't be true. He wouldn't find in his own house what he had found in Mason's store. It wasn't possible.

His house came into view, sitting dejected and lonely behind the smithy. A light shone through one of the windows in his house. Without breaking his stride, Jaemar sped straight up to the front door. Only then did he stop, frozen in his tracks.

The ringed serreone, the insignia of the Imperial Order, the sign branded onto Mason's store front, was emblazoned on the wood of his door.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Blood Ties

*It is the ability to choose which makes us human. –Madeleine L'Engle, Walking on Water*

Jaemar opened his mouth to shout for Simnara but bit his tongue the next instant. The danger was too great. Crying for an answer might quickly choke the question, depending on who came bursting through the door.

Grasping the sword hilt with his right hand, he eased open the door and slipped into the dark interior. A crack of light from the next room stretched across the wooden floorboards, throwing Jaemar's shadow into sharp relief. Footsteps creaked against the loose planks in the room to his right, and Jaemar's knuckles whitened around the sword at the sound of shattering glass followed by a muffled voice.

Stepping carefully to avoid the well-worn creaks in the floor, Jaemar reached the second door, his body blocking the seams of light sliding underneath it. His breath tight in his chest, he ran his tongue over his upper lip and pushed the door open an inch further. No sooner had he done so than a dagger flashed past the thin opening at his eye level. The hand wielding the dagger drove it into the doorframe with a force that splintered the wood. A chain stretched taut from the end of the handle effectively prevented Jaemar from moving the door any further.

Before he could react, a drawn arrow, aimed directly at his face, appeared in the slit spanned by the door chain. Bright green eyes glinted behind the bow.

“Whoa, it’s me!” Jaemar shouted, stepping back and lifting his hands into the air. “Would you put that down?”

“Jaemar!” Simnara exclaimed, the irritation evident in her voice.

She lowered the bow and removed the makeshift bolt before flinging the door open. Hands on her hips, Simnara stood with her dark brows furrowed into a frown and her green eyes glowing fiercely like a cat’s. Her sharply penetrating eyes and long, tangled black hair made her look mad, if not slightly murderous.

“What do you think you’re doing, sneaking around in here like that?” she demanded.

He scowled. “I thought you might’ve been captured or killed. Didn’t you know the Youth were here?”

Simnara turned to hang the bow back on the wall. “Yes. I saw the light of the fires on my way back down the mountain. Is everything—”

“No,” Jaemar cut her off, striding into the room and scanning its shadowed corners. “Did you know they were *here*? At our house?”

“They weren’t,” Simnara said, circling around the desk, which was strewn with maps and other parchment. She knelt to pick up the broken pieces of an inkbottle. “As we can attest from your entrance,” she glanced up at him with raised eyebrows, “I would have heard them.”

Jaemar crossed his arms. “Check the door.”

Cradling the broken glass in her palm, Simnara stood, her exasperated expression implying that she had better things to do than follow up on superstitions. Jaemar remained rooted to the spot. With a sigh, Simnara dropped the remains of the bottle into a jar and crossed to the door.

Jaemar followed her to the front room and stood beside her as she slid back the latch. The door swung inward, and the light from the room behind them shone directly on the dark wood, illuminating the Imperial insignia. Simnara stiffened.

“Jaemar, pack what you need to travel. We have to leave now.”

The spoken words seemed to restore her ability of movement, but they paralyzed Jaemar. After Simnara leaned outside to check the area, she bolted the door shut and turned to find that Jaemar hadn't moved.

“Come on, Jaemar, we have to get out of here.”

She hurried into the next room and began rolling up some maps and parchments with practiced speed. Jaemar trailed after her.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Simnara asked, opening a cabinet on the back wall and yanking out several sacks.

“Why do we have to leave and why is *that* on our door?”

Simnara paused midway between throwing another sack onto the floor.

“Maná, look at me and tell me what is going on!”

Simnara slowly turned around and resumed her map rolling, stuffing each one into a sack as she finished it. Her eyes remained on her work. “You already know. Your

father served in the Imperial Army, but he betrayed his company to the Resistance. He was killed, and—”

“—and you and I have been marked as traitors ever since,” recited Jaemar. “Yes, that’s what you’ve always told me, but I think we both know that isn’t the truth.”

Simnara’s hands stopped rolling, but she didn’t look up from the table. “You’ve never questioned it before.”

“Well, I was thirteen the last time you used that story to convince me to move. I didn’t really have another option.”

Simnara’s head jerked up, her eyes burning with a dangerous look. “Just because you came of age this year does not mean you can challenge me regarding the Order.”

“Maybe not, but it does mean I have a right to know.”

Simnara chewed her bottom lip, her gaze darting back down to the table. “Jaemar, we don’t have time for this.”

“Exactly. We never have time.” Jaemar slammed a hand onto the desk, forcing Simnara to meet his eyes. “That’s why we’ve never lived anywhere for more than two years until Thorskern.” He began pacing in front of the desk. “It’s why our only friends are blacksmiths and weapon traders. Why we’ve never really belonged anywhere. Why I’m better at packing and running than staying and handling questions. It’s enough! I’m done.” He stopped pacing and turned to face her. “I can’t do it anymore. Not without knowing the truth.”

Simnara sighed and slumped back into the chair behind the desk. Her eyes wove around the room, as if trying to find a way to escape the situation. Her gaze fell on the

black scar winding down Jaemar's shoulder, exposed because of the torn sleeve. Her lips parted as a look of horror spread across her face.

"How did that happen?"

Jaemar looked down at his torn sleeve as if he had forgotten it was there. On top of the old scar was the fresh glass cut. "The fight against the Youth."

Simnara shoved her chair back against the wall and reached Jaemar's side in three strides. She ran her finger over the dried blood, a brief look of compassionate sorrow flitting across her face before being replaced by something closer to anger. "Did anyone see it?"

Jaemar shrugged her hand away and tugged the ripped sleeve up to cover his scar.

"Jaemar," said Simnara, her voice a warning, "did someone see your scar?"

"No," he said, averting his eyes. "Well, maybe, but why does it—"

"Jaemar, who saw it?" she demanded. "I need you to be completely certain."

He hesitated before admitting, "One of the Youth."

Simnara's eyes widened.

"It was an accident. We had to find shelter during the firestorm, and he saw it."

Jaemar paused, noting Simnara's furious expression. "But he ran off, and I didn't see him again."

"But now we have the Order's symbol on our front door."

"What does that have to do with—"

"Everything! He recognized your scar and found out where you live."

Jaemar's eyes rounded. "Grish told me a Youth had known my name and asked where I live."

“Oh, Jaemar, no.” A shadow of anguish darkened her features, and Jaemar took a step back toward the doorway.

“What? Why does my scar matter? It’s only a burn from a firestorm. You said—”

“No.” She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. “No, you’re right. It’s time you knew everything. Probably past time.” She shook her head, and Jaemar furrowed his brow in confusion. “Go saddle the horses. We’ll leave as soon as we’re ready.”

“But where are we going?”

Simnara replied without looking up. “To Demuscan. We’re going to join the Resistance.”

“The Resistance? Are you out of your mind?” Jaemar exploded, upsetting a stack of books perched precariously on a side table.

“Yes and no,” Simnara replied, scooping up two of the books and slinging the half-packed sacks over her arm. As she headed for the kitchen, she called over her shoulder, “The horses, Jaemar.”

Disregarding the command, Jaemar hurried after her. “But Demuscan is in Traka. We’re not welcome there. No one is. The Trakaans will murder us!”

Simnara began stuffing various cheeses and breads into the bags on the counter. “Maybe, but we’ll have to take that chance. It’s better than being killed by the Order or tracked alone.” She stopped her packing to look up at him. “Believe me, we need the Resistance from this point on. It’s a relief they’ve finally come out of hiding.”

Jaemar didn’t ask how she knew about the Resistance; she had probably known before Garrett and Brenn. “I didn’t think a person could just join the Resistance. Doesn’t

it involve more than a desire to volunteer, especially if all we want from them is protection?”

“I think we’ll interest them enough to gain acceptance,” said Simnara, a sly smile curling the corner of her mouth. “Besides, your father had some friends in the Resistance. Even if we don’t meet them, we’re bound to find some connections.” She tightened the straps of one pack and started for the loft ladder. “No more questions until we’re on the road. Now go saddle the horses.”

The night outside was darker than it had been before. All traces of the milky moon had been banished by the unrolling blanket of clouds. Waves of exhaustion, previously ignored, now threatened to pull Jaemar into welcome unconsciousness, but he shook his head and blinked several times to adjust to the starlight.

Philo and Nerra were not exactly thrilled at being disturbed, and Jaemar had to wrestle both of them into their bits after he’d saddled them. It was common practice to walk them before their cinches could be secured, and Jaemar had had one place in mind ever since Simnara had told him they had to leave Thornskern. Coaxing the horses out of the barn, he led them across the yard, casting a guilty look back at the house as he did so. A few extra minutes wouldn’t make much of a difference.

Without thinking about the lateness of the hour, Jaemar banged his fist against the Smiths’ door several times. A flurry of winged creatures whipped out from beneath the eaves and flew screeching into the night, causing Jaemar to retract his hand and jump back. He was still calming the horses when he heard the door behind him open.

The house was dark, but Brenn stood holding a lantern in one hand and a book in the other. Her battleworn appearance betrayed that she had not been sleeping, and an

anxious line creased her brow. She looked at the pair of horses Jaemar was leading and turned her head toward his house. A look of understanding crossed her face.

“I heard shouting,” she said, her mind clearly on something else. “After I left Grish, I followed you home and saw the sign on the door, but I heard you and Simnara arguing, so I went home.”

Jaemar pressed his mouth into a tight line and pulled down on Philo’s reins. “Is Garrett here?”

Brenn set her book down on a small table and adjusted the lantern in her hand. “No. He’s still with the town council. I was waiting for him.” She seemed to be avoiding Jaemar’s eyes.

Jaemar shifted his feet, and Nerra stomped the ground with impatience, apparently ready to ride now that she had been so rudely forced from her stall.

“Brenn...”

She finally met his eyes. “You’re leaving again, aren’t you?”

Jaemar opened his mouth, shut it, and nodded.

Brenn blew out a long breath. “I figured as much. With all that’s been happening.”

“Yeah.”

“So where are you going?”

“Demuscan. We’re going to join the Resistance.” He added the last part with a half-joking tone, but Brenn’s eyes widened.

“The Resistance?” She closed her eyes and groaned. “Oh, you have all the luck.”

“Are you serious?” Jaemar asked, spreading a hand toward his house.

Cocking her head, Brenn twisted her lips together but didn't agree out loud. "Well, I always thought you did." She shrugged. "You were different from everyone else, anyway."

A moment of silence passed between them, and Jaemar took a painful step backwards. The movement startled Philo and Nerra, and Jaemar turned to settle them down. When they were quiet, he looked back at Brenn and found her squinting down the road toward Thornskern.

"What is it?" he asked, following her gaze.

"I thought I heard...never mind. It was nothing." She looked back at him and used her free hand to rub her shoulder. "Well, stay safe."

"I will." Jaemar took another step back, moving as if every step sent a dagger into his feet. "Tell Garrett."

Brenn nodded, and Jaemar began to turn toward his house.

"Jaemar!"

He whirled around to face her again.

"This will all end, and when it does...come back."

Jaemar grinned. "Don't worry. My best and only friend lives here...and I might miss his daughter too."

Brenn rolled her eyes and hugged herself with the hand that wasn't holding the lantern.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, and Jaemar raised his hand in farewell. Brenn lifted hers in reply, and Jaemar yanked a little too harshly on the reins to

guide the horses home. When he reached his own door, he looked back and saw that the lantern still shone from the Smiths' door.

“Jaemar, where have you been?” Simnara’s voice jolted Jaemar back to the present. She looked past him to the smithy and saw the lantern disappear inside. “Oh.” She hesitated a moment before strapping the packs onto the saddles. “I packed a few things for you and left the bag in your room. See if you want anything else.”

Jaemar dashed upstairs and tore around his small room, throwing various articles into his bag. The knife from under his mattress, the darts from his desk, a compass and flintlock from a drawer, a coil of rope, and a leather-bound packet of sketches—drawings that constituted the only tangible things stringing his scattered life together. After he tightened the straps on his pack, Jaemar crossed to a loose board in the wall and pried it open. From the hidden compartment, he pulled a bow and sheaf of arrows. He slung both on his back, picked up the bag from his bed, and swept his room with one final glance. It had served a purpose as all his other rooms had, but it had never been a home. Not like Garrett’s.

When Jaemar left the house, he found Simnara already mounted on Nerra and holding Philo’s reins. Wordlessly, he performed the actions he could do in his sleep: fastening his pack onto the saddle, swinging onto Philo’s back, and urging him into a gallop. Simnara spurred her horse alongside his, and they rode northeast into the night, never speaking until the lights of Thorskern had long since vanished behind them.

By the time they slowed to rest the horses, they had been riding hard for several hours. It was long enough for Jaemar. Settling Philo into a brisk walk, he leaned back

and threw an expectant glance at Simnara. Her face was contorted into a painful expression that betrayed internal torture.

She took a deep breath. “What I have to say is not going to be easy for you to hear.”

“I’m ready.”

Simnara shook her head. “I’ve trained you your whole life to make you prepared, but I don’t think it could ever be enough.”

The first rays of the sun had spread across the sky, tinting the clouds orange and warming the color of the air. In the growing light, the sorrow in Simnara’s eyes looked tangible, the dark memories of the past clouding her features. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, the look was gone.

“The first thing you must know is that your last name is not Ralour. That was my father’s name, and I took it again after your father died.”

“Then what is our—”

“Jaemar, I’ll tell you everything. Just let me get through it my way.”

Jaemar shut his mouth.

Simnara took a deep breath. “I met Adamar, your father, at the Imperial Guard training barracks.”

Jaemar’s jaw dropped open in shock. “You served in the Imperial’s personal guard? Did you ever see him?”

“Your father and I were both instructors, and yes, we saw Anzigar Haurreich. That was back when he was not as reclusive as he is now.” A distant look veiled her face as she continued. “Long hours of training brought us together almost constantly, and we

became quite attached. By the time I received my commission, the first and only woman to ever do so, our relationship had become even stronger. Adamar had been married once before—a match made by his father—but she had died years before we met. With me, he got to choose.” Despite herself, Simnara allowed a smile to flit across her face. “His father had also died, but he wanted his brother’s consent. His brother gave it, but I ended up losing my commission...for my own safety, and then yours.”

The sun had risen completely, and Simnara’s troubled expression was unmistakable. Now that it was fully light, she began looking over her shoulder at frequent intervals, as if she expected them to be followed.

“But I didn’t care. I was happy...for the first time in my life, I think.”

The look in her face seemed to betray that she had never been happy since.

“You had not yet reached your second year when everything changed. One of your cousins had just died a few days before when your father tried to kill his brother.”

Simnara paused and seemed to be watching the whole scene again as if it were happening in front of her. Something unknown and unspeakable haunted her voice, whose dark, low tone suggested that a part of her had died, perhaps long ago.

“He failed.”

“Why is that so—”

But Simnara began to speak as if the words had been unleashed and couldn’t be held back anymore.

“Although his action solidified many friendships for him and thus for us, it also earned him many new enemies. Since he was gone, you and I were marked for death. One of his friends helped me escape, and we have been on the run since then.”

She stopped speaking, but in a way that suggested she had something else to say. A knotted feeling had formed in the pit of Jaemar's stomach. He didn't want to unravel it and find out the secret he'd been missing for sixteen years. But somehow he already knew. It was pushing at the back of his mind, demanding for him to acknowledge it. Even as he began to shake his head in slow denial, Simnara took a long breath to prepare herself.

“Your father, Adamar Haurreich—”

“No...” Jaemar breathed.

“—was the brother of Anzigar Haurreich, the Imperial of Almaen.”

The world stopped for Jaemar, and his heart seemed to stop with it. Whatever explosion knocked all the air out of his chest also left his ears feeling muffled and useless. Terror like he had never felt wrapped its thin fingers around his neck and squeezed, but he wasn't breathing anyway.

“Jaemar! Jaemar!” Simnara's voice sounded faint behind the ringing in his ears. He vaguely noted the urgency in the way she shouted his name, but he couldn't seem to drag himself back to the body he'd left on a horse walking near the border between Traka and Ayzor.

“Jaemar!” Simnara shook his shoulder, almost throwing him off of his mount.

He shook his head in a weak attempt to clear it and realized that panic had replaced the sadness in Simnara's face.

“Jaemar, hurry! They're after us!”

She pointed behind them, and Jaemar looked to see a line of horses kicking up dust in the early morning light. He still felt paralyzed, but years of muscle formation took over, and his heels dug into Philo's sides, spurring him into a run.

"Ride hard! Ride fast!" Simnara shouted from beside him.

Looking over his shoulder to see their pursuers, Jaemar decided that if he was going to die, he was going to know why. He bent closer to Philo's neck and yelled, "So they're trying to kill us, because my father failed to kill the Imperial and got himself killed in the process? Are they afraid I'll try to avenge him?"

"It's more than that," Simnara shouted back. "Quick! We're almost to the gorge! We can lose them over the bridge!"

"You've been this way before?"

Simnara didn't answer. The shouts behind them were becoming more distinct, and she glanced back. Jaemar saw that the hills on either side of them were closing in to form a narrow valley straight ahead.

"The path is going to narrow," Simnara said. "Get ahead of me."

Before he could comply, she had slowed her horse to get behind him. He shot through the gap between the two rising hills and raced up the path, the walls closing in on either side until he could have reached out and touched stone with both hands. The rocky path began to climb up at a steep incline.

"Go, Jaemar, go! We're almost to the bridge!"

If Jaemar expected a real bridge to span the gap from the gorge to the opposite ridge, he was severely disappointed. Philo skidded around a large boulder in the path, and a rope-bridge with missing wooden planks came into his view. Philo reared at the

base of the bridge, and Jaemar almost forgot the Guards behind him and the rickety bridge before him in his effort to hold on. Simnara rode up beside him.

“Jaemar, what are you doing?” she cried. “Get across! You’ll have to lead him.”

Jaemar slid out of the saddle and coaxed Philo onto the first wooden board. The horse shied away at first, but Jaemar finally convinced him to move forward. Focused on keeping Philo calm, he had reached the middle of the bridge before he realized that it was swaying. He looked down and felt his stomach drop the distance his body could fall if he took one wrong step. When he raised his eyes, he saw that Simnara still stood on the opposite side.

“Maná, come on! You can’t wait there!”

“I have to. The bridge can only hold one.”

“I’m coming back.” He started to turn, but Philo blocked his path.

“Just get across, Jaemar!”

“Leave Nerra and come on!”

She shook her head. “Go!”

Desperate to get across so that she could follow, Jaemar doubled his focus and speed. The nearing shouts of the Guards bounced against the rocks in the canyon under his feet. He didn’t realize his legs were shaking until he set foot on solid ground once again.

Dropping Philo’s reins and gripping the sides of the bridge, Jaemar leaned forward and yelled, “Come on! Just leave Nerra and get across!”

The glinting flash of a sharp pike appeared above one of the rocks for an instant. The Guards were upon them. Simnara wouldn't be able to make it across without getting attacked from behind.

Jaemar extended himself further over the gorge, as though willing Simnara to try anyway. But her eyes revealed the truth. She had no intention of crossing the bridge. Perhaps she never had.

In her hand, she held a long knife. For one frozen moment, she stared across the bridge at him. The moment was cruelly broken by the motion of her hand, which sent a blow into Jaemar's chest. She sliced the ropes from their stakes, and the bridge fell away from her side.

Jaemar must have yelled; he could feel his throat burning, but no sound seemed to come out. Simnara waved at him to go, and he dove behind a collection of stones as the armor-plated Guards swerved around the corner. His heart pounding in his ears, Jaemar looked around. Philo had already disappeared over the eastern ridge.

As he strained to listen, Jaemar realized that Simnara was speaking to the Guards in the tongue of the Order. His years in the Imperial Youth had served him well, and he understood everything that was said. None of it was good.

“Where is the boy?” one of the Guards asked.

Jaemar's foot twitched, and he would have leapt out of his hiding place, but Simnara's words stopped him.

“Boy? What boy?” Simnara responded, her voice betraying no hint of fear. “The only person I've seen around here is the old man who just stole one of my horses and ran across that bridge.”

“The bridge is broken on this side. And you have the knife.”

“Well, I cut the rope. Anyone could see that.” Simnara sounded bored, irritated even. “I didn’t want him coming back here to steal another one when he finds out that one is destined for carrion.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s a good thing, then, that belief is not a requirement for any relationship we have together.”

“You are trying my patience, wench.”

“Enough of this! Kill her.”

At the sound of a blade being drawn from a sheath, Jaemar’s heart beat as though it were trying to break out of his chest.

“Long live the Resistance, and may Aiyān—” said Simnara, her words coming out in a rush.

A loud, strange voice crushed the end of Simnara’s prayer, and then Jaemar heard the sound that felt like a sword being plunged in his own heart. He shuddered and rocked himself behind the boulder, burying his face in his knees to keep from crying aloud and clutching his stomach even as it tried to turn itself inside out.

The Guards might have remained there for minutes or days. Their clanking armor and their harsh voices echoed in the canyon and were amplified in Jaemar’s ears. Between the sputterings and curses of the language that had killed Simnara, Jaemar heard more talk of “the boy” and one word that yanked him back to reality: Demuscan.

When the Guards left, taking their noise and Simnara’s body with them, Jaemar unfolded his cramped muscles and dragged himself to his feet. He leaned back against

the rock and inched his way out from behind it, as though every step took all the air from his lungs.

The broad daylight seemed unnatural, and Jaemar staggered like one blind until he crested the ridge and saw Philo grazing several feet down on the slope. He stumbled toward the horse but almost instantly stopped. Someone was watching. His hair standing up on the back of his neck, Jaemar turned to face the gorge and the broken bridge.

A mannish creature stood there, stock-still but conveying the appearance of movement as the sunlight caught the fish-like scales covering his dark green skin. A prominent jaw and a ridged spine from his flat nose to his forehead made him seem like he was more bone than muscle, though his sinewy arms flexed with the pull of his bow. Black eyes glittered behind the arrow, leveled at Jaemar.

Such creatures appeared only in stories meant to frighten children. Even Jaemar with his unconventional education had heard them. Agile, cunning, and ruthless hunters with one intent, one prey. Their name was a curse, and the sight of one in the living day was enough to make Jaemar's blood run cold.

*Morgskall.*

Jaemar tripped backwards, but the Morgskall lowered his bow, his gaze never wavering. Jaemar didn't move, didn't breathe. The Morgskall stepped back. A second later, Jaemar blinked, and the creature was gone.

In the old tales, the sight of a Morgskall meant death. Jaemar was the Imperial's nephew. His life was over anyway.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Brother-Son's Purpose

*“Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” –Benjamin Franklin*

The city of Demuscan rested in a valley bordered by a steep ridge on the western side and forested hills in the east. The ridge offered a commanding view of the whole valley and the trade road that twisted down from the northern hills and stretched toward the south in a thin, hazy line. Here and there, dark spots cropped up along the road, signaling small towns or outposts.

Despite the extensive panorama, Jaemar couldn't take his eyes off of the walled city hunched below him, its turrets peeking over the grey stone like slit-eyed sentinels. Dark chimney smoke curled skyward, giving the colorless city the appearance of a sleeping stone giant.

Jaemar swallowed hard. Philo snorted, impatient at the delay.

“Well, it's all right for you,” Jaemar said. “You don't carry a nationality and will be treated better in Demuscan than at home. The Trakaans are wealthier than Ayzornians by a long shot.” Jaemar rubbed Philo's neck. “Just don't get used to it.”

Taking Philo by the bridle, Jaemar led him down the steep slope. Both of them slipped more than once on the loose gravel, but Jaemar would rather have trekked down

the ridge for eternity rather than reach his destination. His spirits worsened as he neared Demuscan and watched the walls rise higher with each step.

Swinging back into his saddle, he tried to create what he hoped was a bold front. A tremor ran through Philo's body.

"It's all right, boy," said Jaemar, more to himself than to Philo. "Neither of us look anything like Ayzornians."

Either out of fear or foresight, Jaemar circled away from the city and joined the road at a point further south. To anyone watching from the walls, it would appear that Jaemar had ridden from another Trakaan city along the trade road instead of from across the border.

By the time he reached the city gate, the sun had dipped behind the ridge, its final rays streaking weakly across the purple-tinted sky. A cool breeze blew from the east. Night was approaching, and Jaemar was alone on the road.

The iron gate had locked its jaws for the night, but a guard door was open on one side. A smattering of cart vendors and traders eyed the lone rider, gauging his potentiality as a customer. The youth lost their interest as a handful of miscreants swarmed around his horse, and they resumed the business of closing their carts for the night. A few of the beggars held out wilting flowers, but most of them just stretched out empty hands. When Jaemar showed no signs of providing free handouts, they drifted away one by one, some to huddle against the outer city wall, others to disappear entirely.

A sentry on the wall above the gate announced Jaemar's arrival, and echoing voices seemed to repeat the message throughout the city.

A wave of unease shuddered through Jaemar's body, but he was quickly distracted by the prying fingers of a cloaked beggar woman. He didn't even try to decipher her mutterings and shoved her off of his sleeve just as a troop of soldiers marched out of the wicket. Their silver armor made them indistinguishable from each other, but one soldier shoved his way to the front.

"Dismount and approach, and then state your name and your business in Demuscan." The man spoke in Trakaan, and Jaemar leaned forward as if that would simplify the translation.

The last of the beggars slouched away, and Jaemar scrambled to slide out of Philo's saddle. Leading his horse closer to the half-circle of Trakaan soldiers, he went over in his head the speech he had memorized on the way down the ridge.

"My name is Grish Ralour, and I have come here to meet some friends of my father," he recited.

Simnara's lessons passed the test, for Jaemar received only the briefest of suspicious looks and then another question.

"Who are those friends, and what is your business with them?"

A sudden impulse to blurt out his desire to join the Resistance threatened to ruin his pretense, but Jaemar bit his tongue and started again.

"If it pleases you," he said in broken Trakaan, "I'd like to keep my personal matters where they are, or is it custom to check every traveler?"

The soldier frowned. If he wasn't wearing armor, he might have crossed his arms. "It doesn't please me, and it is the custom here to interrogate anyone begging passage into our capital after dusk, especially those with your appearance."

Jaemar caught only a few scattered words of the rapid foreign speech, but he heard the insult. Before he could come up with a response, the soldier slammed another verbal roadblock in front of him.

“You’re not of this country, are you?”

Gauging that his only options at this point were defensiveness or stupidity, Jaemar decided to go with the latter. “And I thought my Trakaan was flawless. You can’t really expect to only take in—”

“You wouldn’t be from the south, would you? One of the Order’s countries?”

Jaemar started to shake his head.

“Because we’ve already had some of them try to come through here.”

The breath froze in Jaemar’s throat, and his heart began to race.

“They didn’t take too kindly to our questioning either.” The soldier glanced at the quiver Jaemar had slung across the saddle. “Tried to start something.”

Holding up his hands, Jaemar began, “I don’t want any—”

“Stop abusing the Trakaan tongue. Speak your own, if you have one.”

Lowering his hands slightly, Jaemar said in Ayzornian, “I don’t want any trouble. Just a bed for the night.”

The soldier lifted a gloved hand and signaled two of his comrades to come forward. Switching to Ayzornian, he asked, “What happened to the friends of your father? Changing your story?”

Jaemar took a step back. “No, I just—what are you doing?”

The soldiers had grabbed his arms and were in the process of rolling up his sleeves and yanking the hair back from his forehead.

“Checking for marks of the Order,” said the soldier as he checked the immaculateness of one of his gloves.

“You won’t find any,” Jaemar said, trying to shove the soldiers off of him.

“Nothing here,” said one of the men holding him.

The soldier in charge narrowed his eyes and said, “Bring him inside.”

It was what Jaemar had originally wanted, but his arms were still restrained.

“Do you mind?” he demanded, standing his ground.

“We have further questions for you,” began the soldier. “There are—”

“Harq.” The female voice floated out from the shadow of the city walls. With a sweep of her cloak, she stepped forward, blocking the only entrance into the city.

Jaemar’s head swiveled toward her, but her rapid Trakaan was too quick for him to decipher. She paid him little attention, focusing instead on the soldier in charge, the one she’d called Harq. They spoke in quiet, rapid-fire Trakaan for several minutes, their words accompanied by vague gestures and glances toward Jaemar. He felt his hair prickling the back of his neck, and the fear traced its way down his arms. Any moment now, they were going to signal the Imperial Guards to come out of hiding. The same ones that had killed his mother. They were going to be the last faces he saw.

The woman suddenly stiffened. She took another step toward him, leaving the obscurity of the shadows completely, and cast her silvery blue eyes on him intently. Perhaps it was the blue cloak or the pale skin or the black wavy hair spilling past her shoulders, but the woman looked like someone Jaemar had seen before. Before Jaemar could figure out why she looked so familiar, the woman’s expression twisted into an

angry glare. Her lips curled into a cruel grin, and she said something in such a low voice that Jaemar doubted that even Harq was supposed to hear it.

The soldier stumbled forward, his voice and knitted brows demanding answers. Keeping her gaze fixed on Jaemar, the woman gave Harq an answer but began moving toward Jaemar as if he were an ensnared animal.

Perhaps the two of them were speaking in a Trakaan dialect or perhaps his mounting fear had shocked his brain into emptiness, but Jaemar couldn't understand a word either was saying. He tried to take step back, but the soldiers behind him had formed a wall. When Harq and the woman were only a foot away, Jaemar drew himself up and stared defiantly at his accusers. He wished he hadn't. Thick lines of hatred etched into Harq's war-beaten face were unmistakable. It was as if Jaemar had just killed Harq's family before his eyes.

His mouth dry, Jaemar watched as the woman lifted her hand and pointed to his left shoulder. He realized what they meant to do the second before one of the soldiers behind him grabbed his sleeve. Jaemar tried to jerk his arm free, and he rammed his elbow into the soldier's face, but the second soldier managed to wrench both of Jaemar's arms behind his back. Harq produced a knife, and Jaemar shrunk back against his captors. He fought the impulse to shut his eyes, to look away from the glinting steel treading softly toward him.

The knife fell, and Jaemar felt something brush his arm. His sleeve dropped, revealing the black mark that twisted down his arm from his shoulder. The woman looked satisfied, Harq stupefied. Their voices began again, but Jaemar's heart was pounding too loudly in his ears for him to try to hear what they said. He became vaguely

aware that he was being half-led, half-dragged, and by the time he recovered his senses, he found himself inside the city and in the woman's possession.

She began to pull him away from the soldiers. He tried to plant his feet and pry her fingers loose, but the woman's hold on him would have given Grish and his friends a run for their reputations. Just as he was trying to decide whether or not a kick to the shins would be helpful, they turned a corner and a hulking shadow loomed across the wall in front of them. Before he could react, a pair of strong hands slapped a cool cloth over Jaemar's face. The pungent smell gave way to an intense feeling of suffocation and then sickness, but all passed away as quickly as it had come, and Jaemar found himself drowning under a flood of darkness.

Darkness gradually gave way to nightmares. He was trapped in a labyrinth, and a colossal firestorm thundered over his head. The flickering light cast gruesome shadows that seemed to flit between shade and flesh. A voice was calling him, and a dark figure with red eyes peered around every corner.

Jaemar broke through the surface of unconsciousness and gulped in great lungfuls of air. With a groan, he tried to lift himself up onto his elbows, but a wave of nausea washed over him. He forced himself to take even breaths for several minutes before he realized that his eyes were open without seeing anything but darkness. His heart began to race with the horror that he had lost his sight entirely, and his newly steadied breathing became quick and shallow again.

Standing was a lost cause, but Jaemar settled for pushing himself back until his shoulders contacted a wall. Pressing himself against it, he tried to make his eyes cooperate. His panic had almost reached an unbearable level when he saw it. Them. Two bright yellow eyes glittering in

the darkness. Memories of his nightmare flashed through his mind, but they were banished by the sound of a low growl. The bodiless eyes stalked toward him.

Jaemar's hand scrabbled against the floor, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. His fingers came into contact with a rock that must have come loose from the wall. Judging that he only had one chance, he lined up the shot and exhaled slowly, actions he had done a million times when practicing archery.

"Please don't kill my fox," said a male voice, as calmly as though he were asking Jaemar to keep his arms off the table. Jaemar almost dropped the rock entirely.

"Chaisee, stand down." The man was speaking Free Speech, the trade language known and used by nearly every people north of the Order's realm. "If you wouldn't mind, it would be greatly appreciated if you put down that rock before you hurt someone. Throwing stones in the dark is not exactly a safe pastime."

The rock clattered to the floor, and Jaemar squinted to see the owner of the voice. In the dark a few feet above and in front of him, he saw a pair of eyes glowing orange with a center of blue, like coals in a fire.

"You seem to have an advantage over me," said Jaemar. "I can't see in the dark."

"Yes, well. I usually have the advantage when it comes to that, but I think I can even the board for you."

A ball of flame appeared below the man's eyes. He took a step forward and bent down, as though looking for something. From that position, Jaemar could see that the speaker looked like an ordinary man, except for the fact that he was holding a ball of fire in his hands.

"What are you?"

The man looked up. “Stop right there, and think before you try that again. Is that really how you want to start off a conversation? No friendship will happen if you do.”

The man found a shallow bowl in the corner and dropped the fire into it. To Jaemar’s amazement, it continued to burn in a spherical form. He looked up and saw that the man was watching him with amusement. His eyes, which must have been the spots of orange light, had faded to a deep blue like the inside of a flame. Half of his red hair was pulled behind his head, and the rest hung down to his shoulders. His rough beard and faded green and brown clothes gave him the appearance of a hunter or woodsman. In fact, they looked like he had worn them all his life.

Jaemar didn’t reply but let his eyes travel to the animal curled on the floor beside the man. The orange and white fox, obviously enjoying the light of the flames, had wrapped her fluffy tail around her lean body. Her eyes, leveled steadily on Jaemar, promised to pounce on him if he did anything unexpected.

“Sorry about her,” said the man. “She doesn’t take kindly to strangers...or people in general.” He stroked the fox’s back with a calloused hand.

Jaemar’s eyes glazed over as he watched the hand, but he decided to go with a safer question. “So who are you?”

The man grinned. “That’s better. My name is Reahn and this is Chaisee. She’ll get...well, you’ll get used to her, at any rate.” Reahn shrugged in an attempt at an apology. “We and Ravenna are with the Luceri, so you shouldn’t worry.”

His suspicions fulfilled, Jaemar drew his legs protectively up to his chest, shielding his left shoulder. “If you mean the woman outside the gate, I’m not so sure I should trust you.”

“Oh, that. Was it really bad?” Reahn looked more annoyed than anxious. “I offered to go, but she said I would foul things up.”

“What do you mean?”

Reahn reached into the bowl with his finger and scooped out a small flame. “We’d heard you’d be coming this way eventually, but we weren’t the only ones. Imperial Guards showed up a few days ago—not for you, but for the new Resistance movement.”

He studied the flame on his finger as though it were nothing more than a swipe of dust he’d collected from a shelf. When he finally licked it off, Jaemar blinked and let his legs slide down a few inches away from his chest.

“The Guards promised to leave Demuscan if its Resistance fighters and sympathizers were banished from the city. It’s a good thing most of them had already fled, because those who were left were captured or killed.”

Chaisee’s head shot up, and she sniffed the air. With a bolt, she nudged her way through the door and out of the small shed. Reahn appeared to take no interest.

“Once all traces of the Resistance were gone, the Guards left.” He leaned over the fire toward Jaemar. “Or at least seemed to. There are dozens still here, hiding throughout the city. Ravenna and I think the Guards chasing you warned them you were coming.”

His stomach was threatening to start a civil war, but Jaemar said, “Seems a bit excessive.”

Reahn narrowed his eyes and slid an unreadable expression across the space between them. “We didn’t think we could get in or out unnoticed, and waiting on the road was too risky.”

Jaemar wrapped his arms around his chest and leaned forward. “So that stunt she pulled out there was a way to get me out of their hands and into yours?”

Reahn didn't miss the hint of an accusation in the question. "Yes, but I didn't know how Ravenna would handle it. She doesn't like people. Thinks they're untrustworthy."

"That's comforting."

"It should be," said a woman's voice from the doorway.

With a start, Jaemar looked up and recognized the woman with the blue cloak and silver eyes. She spoke Free Speech, and there was not even a trace of a Trakaan accent.

Without turning around, Reahn prodded the fire and said, "Back so soon, Ravenna?"

"Some of us do not wish to linger here," she said to the back of his head. Turning to Jaemar, she narrowed her eyes in a judgmental glare. "I would have thought you of all people would understand the dangers of trust, Jaemar Haurreich, but I must have been mistaken."

The insult passed unnoticed. Jaemar's ears were buzzing with the strange name instead.

Ravenna frowned. "By Aiyan, you're nothing but a child."

Reahn stood and faced her. "So did you get them?"

"Yes. Yours took a bit of convincing."

"I've trained him well then. Don't want him trusting anyone too quickly."

Ravenna shot him a withering look. "Stop wasting time. Your pet is waiting by the rope."

"She's actually guarding it, like I told her to," said Reahn.

Without answering, Ravenna drew her hood over her dark hair and swept from the shed.

"Come on, Jaemar," said Reahn, crouching to extinguish the fire.

Using the rock wall as a support, Jaemar eased himself into a standing position. He wasn't recovering as quickly as he'd like. With chills running down his back, Jaemar asked, "Where are you taking me?"

“To the Luceri in Litairne.” His eyes looked up, but his face was impossible to read in the now dark shed. “Few outside the Luceri have ever been admitted entrance, so you should count yourself fortunate.”

Jaemar had a lot of words for his current situation, and fortunate was not one of them. His head was swimming again, but he tried to keep his voice steady. “I’ve never heard of the Luceri or Litairne, and I didn’t come here to join them.”

“Why did you come here?”

Jaemar hesitated, but Reahn had been the first one to bring it up. The truth slid out of his mouth as though each word was being extracted against its will. “To join the Resistance.”

Reahn furrowed his brow and tilted his head. “That’s now impossible, at least from here.”

Ravenna blew through the door again, her eyes flashing in anger. “What are you doing? Don’t you realize the danger if we stay here?”

Reahn waved his hand toward Jaemar, still leaning against the wall as though it were the only solid thing in his crumbling world.

“You have to give him something, Ravenna. Especially since you just lectured him on the dangers of trusting.”

She scowled. “I’ll explain everything just as soon as we get out of here.”

“I’ve heard that before,” interrupted Jaemar, “and I didn’t get to hear everything.”

Ravenna’s face took on the expression Grish had whenever Jaemar insulted him, but she drew her cloak around her and asked, “What can I tell you now that will satisfy you until I can reveal the rest?”

“Are you against the Resistance?”

The question seemed to catch both Reahn and Ravenna off guard.

“We are not *with* them,” said Reahn, “but we want the same thing, and like them, we are against the Order.”

“Reahn!” Ravenna shouted in a whisper. She leaned her head out of the door, as though afraid Guards had heard him and were about to come storming into the shed.

“Would you have listened if you didn’t know that much for certain?” demanded Reahn.

“I suppose not, but now we should really get out of here.”

“Wait,” said Jaemar. He fixed his eyes on Ravenna. “You still haven’t answered a question.”

“You’re trying my patience, Jaemar—”

“How did you know about my scar?”

She hesitated and then lifted her chin. “It is the purpose of the Luceri to study and know all the secrets of Almaen, including and especially yours.”

“I hardly think getting burned in a firestorm qualifies as a great secret of Almaen.”

Jaemar heard Reahn sigh and saw the silhouette of him putting his hand to his head. Ravenna’s expression was still shrouded in darkness, but her voice had changed drastically to a tone too condescendingly similar to Grish Vantak’s.

“So. You know as little of yourself as you do of us. Did your mother tell you nothing?” She turned to Reahn. “Go outside and stand watch. I’ll make this quick.”

Reahn at first didn’t move, but he finally slid past Ravenna and out the door.

Jaemar turned his attention back to Ravenna’s silhouette. He could more feel than see her eyes on him.

Ravenna's voice drifted through the darkness toward him, softer than he had yet heard it. "I told those soldiers that you were an escaped Ayzornian slave." She shifted her feet, and Jaemar could hear the cloak rustling on the floor. "I didn't want to reveal your scar, in case any of them should know its meaning, but it is one of the only defining characteristics the Luceri have of you."

Jaemar was liking less and less of what she was saying, and he hated to think that the mark on his arm was his identifying mark in a culture of which he'd never heard.

"Thanks to the grace of Aiyana, none of them knew what your mark means, but now I see that you don't either.

Jaemar frowned, sensing another jab at his mother's failure to tell him the truth.

Ravenna continued. "You and four others were given that mark to identify you as blood relatives of Anzigar Hurreich. Three of those others are now dead. I suppose you can guess who gave each of you the mark."

"The Imperial," said Jaemar as the wall began to crumble in his fingers.

"Anzigar, yes." Ravenna took a step nearer to Jaemar. She was not used to showing empathy. "Do you know why he would want to give his blood kin an identifying mark?"

"Does it have something to do with my father's assassination attempt?" Jaemar's throat felt like sandpaper.

Ravenna responded with another question. "Do you know why the Imperial has lived so long?"

Jaemar remembered Brenn mentioning that whatever prolonged the Imperial's life might have passed to Greyhardt. "I don't know. I didn't think he was very old."

"He has been alive for more than a century, Jaemar. He's an Immortal."

“An Immortal?” Jaemar laughed, whether from exhaustion, madness, or disbelief at such a ludicrous suggestion, he didn’t know. “If he’s an Immortal, why would my father even try to kill him?”

“Has your mother even dishonored his memory?” Her words left Jaemar cringing like a target pinned to the wall. “Do you not know the rules of Immortal life?”

Jaemar dug his fingers into the crevices in the rock wall, suddenly deciding that he didn’t want to know the answer to that question or anything else.

Ravenna sighed, as though resigning herself to a difficult task. “An Immortal can be killed. The weapon must be a sword made of seramite, and the wielder must be one of blood relation.”

The lingering effects of the drug vanished in an instant. Jaemar’s head cleared, and strength flowed in his limbs again. He pushed himself away from the wall. He had never been more aware of the throbbing pulse of blood in his fingers.

“Anzigar killed his father, his brother, and one of his sons. The other son is one of his best captains, so there is little hope for us in him.”

“What are you saying?” the demand marched out of clenched teeth.

Before Ravenna could give the answer Jaemar didn’t want to hear, Reahn pushed the door open and leaned halfway into the shed. “Done with your conversation or not, we have to get out of here. Chaisee just warned me that a patrol is going through the streets and is headed our way.”

Ravenna whipped around, her cloak flying. “Guards or Demuscan soldiers?”

“If you wait right here, I’ll just run find them and ask. Don’t wait for me if I don’t come back.”

“Sometimes I wonder how you got accepted by the Luceri,” said Ravenna as she turned to follow him out of the shed.

Jaemar didn’t move.

“Jaemar, come on!” said Reahn.

“Jaemar, you can’t stay here,” said Ravenna. “Whoever’s in that patrol, you’re either an escaped Ayzornian slave or the boy with the Imperial’s mark.”

“I have you to thank for half of that,” Jaemar seethed, but he brushed past her. He and Ravenna followed Reahn down an alley that had definitely seen better days.

“What happened to Chaisee guarding the rope?” Ravenna asked.

“Next time she tries to warn me about oncoming danger, I’ll tell her to go back to her post,” said Reahn.

“You can really talk to that fox?” Jaemar asked, throwing his whispers in with the others.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” muttered Ravenna.

Reahn turned right onto a slightly wider, fresher-smelling alley. Jaemar could see the city wall at its end. Wordlessly, the three of them raced down the street, passing dark houses and piles of trash. When they reached the wall, Chaisee appeared in a narrow crack between the wall and a house. Reahn scooped her up in his arms and turned sideways to fit into the crack. Following Reahn’s lead, Jaemar squeezed himself into the narrow opening and tried not to think about the accumulated waste beneath his feet.

“The rope’s here,” said Reahn.

Voices and the chinking of armor alerted them that the patrol was near.

“Come further, Jaemar. Ravenna, you go first.”

Jaemar slid along the wall of the house and passed the dangling rope so that Ravenna could reach it. She grasped it with both hands.

“Are you sure you want to go last? You didn’t know how to manage the rope last time, and this time we have to take it with us.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’ve got it handled,” said Reahn drily. “Hurry and get over.”

Ravenna began to climb and, when she was about twenty feet above their heads, Jaemar turned to Reahn, who held the rope to weigh it down.

“I’m starting to get the feeling she doesn’t get along with anyone.”

“Trust your feelings,” said Reahn, with his eyes on Ravenna’s progress. In the darkness, she was nothing more than a shadow. “She might be dedicated to the Luceri, but she tolerates fewer people than Chaisee does...and that’s saying something.”

Ravenna had reached the top of the wall but she seemed to have stopped there. After a moment, the rope swayed back and forth.

“All right, it’s safe,” said Reahn. “You go on. I’ll be right behind you.”

Jaemar took the rope in his hands and began to climb. Since the two walls were so close together, the going was easy. When he reached the top, he pulled himself through the crenellation and started down the outer side of the wall. Reahn’s weight on the other side kept the rope taut.

Despite the recent heat, the air was cool and the stars shone coldly. Whether it was the breeze coming up from the forest behind him or the remaining chills from the drug, Jaemar began to shiver. He hadn’t gone much further when he felt that someone

was watching him. He almost looked over his shoulder but stopped himself as images of the red eyes flickered across his memory. He had seen them somewhere before...

With hands shaking, Jaemar slid the rest of the way down, ignoring the burning sensation in his palms. He was relieved to feel the ground beneath his feet once again.

Three horses grazed in the thinly spread cover of trees, and Jaemar could hear Ravenna talking to one of them in a voice too low to understand. When Reahn's figure topped the wall, Ravenna joined Jaemar and began untying the rope from where it was secured around a low branch.

"What are you doing?" asked Jaemar.

"He needs the length of the rope to get down. Now, is that your horse?" She pointed to the nearer of the three.

Jaemar followed her hand and recognized Philo instantly. He hadn't expected to see him again.

"How did you—"

"Good, I thought it was. Let me tell you, it has more sense than Reahn's."

They both looked up to see how far Reahn had come. He had sat astride the wall and fed the inside rope down the outside, so that one of the crenellations acted as the anchor. Taking one side of the rope in each hand, he had walked backwards down the wall. By the time they looked up, he was halfway to the ground. He jumped the last few feet, and Chaisee, strapped to a makeshift sling on his back, barked at the sudden jolt.

As Reahn began to coil the rope around the length of his forearm, Ravenna headed toward her horse. Jaemar trailed behind her.

"Yes?" she asked, tightening the cinch on her saddle.

“What you were saying before...”

When he paused, she looked at him, her eyes shining as coldly as the stars above them. He waited for her to clarify his situation, but it was clear that she wanted him to ask.

He cleared his throat and tried again. “Why are we going to Litairne?”

She turned back to her saddle and adjusted the pad beneath it. “The seramite sword is there, and you’ll be trained there in how to use it.”

Visions—the black and red Imperial flag, propaganda parchments, a Imperial Youth’s hard facial features and old eyes, the serreone branded onto his door, Mason dead on the floor—filled Jaemar’s mind, parading one after the other in a never ending cycle to the tune of Simnara’s final cry. The man responsible for all of this, himself faceless, stormed into Jaemar’s imagination and brandished a sword above his head. In his split-second fantasy, Jaemar realized that his own hands were empty.

The one word barely tripped past his tongue. “Trained?”

Ravenna’s hands fell from the saddle, and she turned to face him, the finality deadening the brightness in her eyes. “Imperial Anzigar must be destroyed, and if you do not do it, there will be no one left who can.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### First Resistance

*Those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is...the greater the understanding, the greater the delusion: the more intelligent, the less sane. –C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man*

For the inexperienced rider or unpracticed woodsman, Shadoak Forest was impossible to navigate, especially on horseback. Fortunately, Reahn seemed to have grown up in the woods, and he held up a flaming fist to guide their way. Jaemar barely noticed. If the horses could match the speed of his thoughts, they would have already been to the Imperial's palace in Geresdain and back.

The closeness of the trees eventually forced them to walk the horses, and Jaemar was able to straighten his aching back and explore his surroundings. Everything he could see was due to Reahn's light, for the thickly entangled branches above him allowed no starlight or moonlight to filter through to the mossy forest floor. At the same time, Jaemar couldn't decide if he was grateful for Reahn's fire, for it cast elongated shadows that fluttered across thorny bushes and gnarled tree trunks, causing an effect that made the whole forest seem alive with movement.

Reahn turned in his saddle. "Do you think that put enough distance between us?"

Jaemar looked at Ravenna to see her answer. “There could never be enough distance between us, but Tânseren said their camp was further north from where we climbed down the wall.”

“Whose camp? Who’s Tânseren?” Jaemar asked.

With her features reflecting Reahn’s light, Ravenna scowled in a way that made clear she didn’t want to reply. Reahn obliged.

“The Resistance. At least those that escaped from Demuscan before the Guards found out about them.” He paused. “And Tânseren is Ravenna’s horse.”

“She talks to her horse?” Jaemar asked incredulously.

Ravenna’s frown deepened, and Reahn leaned closer to Jaemar to whisper, “Don’t ask.”

“Well, why are we trying to get away from the Resistance?” demanded Jaemar, frowning accusingly at Ravenna. “They could help us.”

“Or they could hinder us,” said Ravenna, her expression unflinching. “Besides, they are a large force, and we’ll move faster and more inconspicuously with just the three of us.”

“Wouldn’t a larger force be safer if we run into any opposition?” asked Jaemar, crossing his arms.

Ravenna’s knuckles whitened around the reins, and she spoke through gritted teeth. “They are the opposition.”

“So I thought,” said Jaemar icily, spurring his horse nearer to hers. “What do you have against the Resistance? And don’t make Reahn answer for you this time.”

Reahn conveniently quickened his horse's pace, taking most of the light with him. Jaemar decided he didn't mind the strange shadows so much.

"It doesn't matter what I have against the Resistance." Ravenna's voice came from out of the dark. "You'll still have to get to a seramite sword and learn how to use it against the Imperial."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not be constantly reminded of that," said Jaemar. "Believe me, I won't be able to forget it."

"Good. If that is true, then I hope you won't need to be reminded that the Luceri can provide more useful instruction than you would ever get at the hands of the Resistance."

"What if I don't need instruction? My mother may not have told me the truth about many things, but she didn't hold back on teaching me how to fight."

"Physical strength and skill will not be enough," Ravenna insisted, the distance of her voice implying that she wasn't looking at him in the darkness. "It couldn't save your father."

She might as well have driven a dagger into his chest, and he clenched the reins in his hands until his nails dug into his palms. But Ravenna wasn't finished.

"If you joined the Resistance, they would give you armor and march you to Geresdain at the front of their army as though you were nothing but a signal banner. And then they would throw you at Anzigar and expect all the glory for the Imperial's death in the unlikely event that you succeed."

In his shock, Jaemar was forced to swallow any rebuttal he might have come up with for her slur about his father. There was nothing he could say. His mother was dead,

and he was about to die in the same way his father had. The darkness seemed to close around him, and Jaemar became aware that he had never before felt so lonely in his life. Not when he had first arrived in Thornskern with his mother or when he had nursed a black eye after his first fight with Grish.

“That’s enough, Ravenna,” Reahn’s voice came out of nowhere. “He may be young, but he doesn’t have to be treated like a child.” He drew his horse in between the others. “All the training the Luceri can give him will be useless if it’s been pounded into his head that he’ll fail.”

Ravenna flashed him a murderous look, her face looking fiercer in the dancing light of the flame. “I’m only trying to let him know what might happen if he joins the Resistance. Do you disagree with that?”

Reahn sighed and looked at Jaemar. “Listen, Jaemar. Before I joined the Luceri, I was in the Resistance. I won’t say they’re the incompetent warriors Ravenna believes them to be, but I do think the Luceri are the best help for you now.” He shot a question to Ravenna. “Does that satisfy you?”

Neither Ravenna nor Jaemar replied, but both complied in resuming their journey forward. Ravenna took the lead, her head held high, and Jaemar hung back with Reahn.

They rode for some time before Jaemar broke the silence. “You were with the Resistance?”

Reahn nodded, lowering his hand to take a bite out of the flame.

“Reahn!” Ravenna shouted from in front.

“Sorry,” Reahn called back around a mouthful of fire. He lifted his torch hand again, illuminating the path ahead.

Wrinkling his brow, Jaemar tried not to stare at the way flashes of firelight shone through Reahn's teeth as he did something akin to chewing.

"So...when you were in the Resistance, did you ever...meet my father?"

Reahn looked sideways at him. "No. The Resistance's days were numbered by the time I was old enough to join. I was about your age, maybe younger. Your father had already been killed by then."

Feeling as though another door had been slammed in his face, Jaemar dropped his eyes to the saddle horn, his mouth sealed in a tight line.

"I did meet your mother a few years before that, though."

Jaemar's gaze jerked toward Reahn, who grinned, warm light shooting out from the cracks between his teeth.

"She had you with her, actually."

Jaemar's lips parted in astonishment. "How old was I?"

"Not very old. She had just left Geresdain and was fleeing north. One of your mother's friends told my father she would need help in Resden. My father had to leave Resden suddenly, but he left me with the charge of providing her with a fresh horse and supplies." He shook his head at the memory. "I had never seen anyone like her. She looked made of stone, like nothing could break her."

"She's dead now." The words fell out of Jaemar's mouth but seemed to float along in the air beside him.

Reahn closed his eyes and turned his head. "That's what we feared when you arrived alone."

"How did you know we were coming to Demuscan in the first place?"

Reahn shrugged. “Some kind of communication between Ravenna and your mother. I think your mother knew Ravenna had access to a seramite sword, not that Ravenna was just going to hand it over and sit back and watch while you joined the Resistance.” He laughed.

“Was Ravenna in Thornskern? How could she speak to my mother?” Jaemar leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Does this have to do with her talking to horses?”

Reahn nodded. “Yeah.”

Jaemar cocked his head. “How?”

“Your mother never told you? She was one too, you know.”

“No. What?”

Reahn sighed and made an attempt at lowering his voice. “An Allspeak.”

“A what?” Jaemar asked a little too loudly.

“I think we’ve gone far enough for one night,” said Ravenna, her horse suddenly facing them. “We’ll stay here until first light.” She looked at Reahn pointedly. “I’ll take the first watch.”

She leaned down and whispered something to Tânseren, and he galloped into the shadows.

“Yeah,” muttered Reahn, dismounting and leading his horse to a tree.

Jaemar slid off Philo and yanked him after Reahn. “What’s an Allspeak?”

Reahn spoke slowly as though he wanted to pretend he didn’t know. “Oh, someone who...knows all tongues of men and beasts. She can even speak to trees, and some think Allspeaks can talk to stone.” He hoisted the saddle off his horse’s back.

“Does Ravenna ever talk to Chaisee?” Jaemar asked with a grin as he unbuckled Philo’s bridle.

“She tried once, but Chaisee ignored her, and Ravenna’s never tried again,” Reahn said, a mischievous glint in his eye.

“And my mother was one.” Jaemar said, more to himself than to Reahn. He looped Philo’s halter onto a branch next to Reahn’s horse. “She always did get frustrated when she was trying to teach me a new language.”

“She taught you?” Reahn froze in the act of removing Chaisee from her pouch.

“What’s wrong with that?”

Reahn shrugged. “I didn’t think Allspeaks could teach the art of language. After all, they don’t really know the difference between languages themselves. It just comes naturally to them. They could walk up to someone who had made up their own language and start talking to that person in their invented language before they knew what they were doing.” He frowned. “Was your mother born an Allspeak?”

Jaemar frowned back. “Is there any other way to be one? Besides, how should I know? I didn’t even know what an Allspeak was until now.”

“Hmm.” Reahn knelt and set Chaisee on the ground. She immediately shot off into the dark.

Jaemar looked not after her but in the direction Ravenna had gone. “Is there something wrong with being an Allspeak?”

He turned to Reahn and saw that he was clearing ground to make a space for the fire he still held in his other hand.

“Reahn?”

“Well, there didn’t use to be. But as is the case for many ever since Anzigar created his Order, Ravenna’s identity as an Allspeak puts her life in danger.”

Jaemar dropped to his knees beside Reahn and started helping him dig the hole for the fire. “Does he have something against Allspeaks?”

“You’ve probably heard the mantra—*One Order, one People, one Tongue, one Imperial*. A person with the ability to keep alive languages other than the Order’s threatens that goal.”

“So he wants to hunt them all down?”

Reahn dropped the fire into the pit and looked across the flames at Jaemar. The flickering light reflected in Reahn’s eyes intensified the anger in them.

“Isn’t that what he always does?”

Jaemar let out a breath and sat back on his knees. He didn’t answer. He could only shake his head at the state of the world he’d been pushed into.

Reahn nodded in agreement and looked back at the fire. Leaning over it, he blew as though to coax it to larger life, but instead flames rushed out of his mouth and joined the fire on the ground. Jaemar watched in fascination. Finding a stick on the ground, Reahn put it over the flames until the end had successfully caught fire, and then he bit off the end before relighting it. Jaemar stared, unsure if he should be horrified or fascinated. After Reahn had eaten almost half of the stick, Jaemar couldn’t stand the mystery anymore.

“We’re already having a conversation,” he said, “and I think we’re already past the point of no return on being friends.”

Reahn grinned and snapped off another piece of bark with his teeth.

“So, really,” Jaemar said, watching Reahn lick a loose flame off his finger, “I feel no shame in asking what you are.”

Reahn laughed. “I suppose I’m being a bit unfair.” He flicked the rest of the stick into the fire and snapped his finger into flame. “Ever heard of a Furore?”

Jaemar grinned. “Only in stories.” He pulled himself to his feet. “Was your father a Furore?” He crossed to Philo’s saddle and rummaged in one of the bags until he found a loaf of bread and some dried venison.

Reahn adjusted his position so that he was reclining on his elbow. He shook his head. “No. He was an Ellendar.”

“A magician? One who can control the elements?”

“Only those he knew the true name for.”

“Does he control fire?” Jaemar looked back into the bag, trying to decide how much he could ration to eat. He watched enviously as Reahn began roasting another stick.

“He did, but he doesn’t control anything anymore.”

“May Aiyan guard his soul,” murmured Jaemar, pulling his hand out of the bag and touching his forehead out of respect.

Reahn nodded his gratitude but then shrugged as Jaemar returned to his seat by the fire. “It’s been about fifteen years, but I rarely spent much time with him before that anyway. He served in the Imperial palace in Geresdain.”

Jaemar nearly choked on a piece of dry bread. “Why didn’t you tell me before? Did he know my parents?”

“I doubt he ever met them, but he knew several of those who served your parents, as I told you before.” Reahn’s glazed eyes were fixed on the fire, and he looked more solemn than Jaemar had yet seen him.

Jaemar let out a breath. “An Allspeak who talks to horses. A Furore with a fox and an Ellendar father who served in the Imperial palace.” He paused. “And me.”

“The nephew and bane of the Imperial. I thought you said you didn’t need reminding.” Reahn sat up.

“I don’t.”

“Then don’t sell yourself short. Others will do that often enough. Just think, the Luceri sent their best to escort you. They don’t often do that.”

Before Jaemar could reply, Reahn stood up and bird whistled. Chaisee soon came scampering into view. Reahn bent low to stroke her back, and Jaemar could hear him speaking softly.

“Nothing stirring, except Ravenna, but she stays quiet,” Reahn said. “If you want to get any sleep before Ravenna gets us going again, you’d better get it now.”

While Reahn settled himself next to the fire, Jaemar pulled a blanket from the back of the saddle and unrolled it. Reahn was already asleep with one hand in the fire, and Jaemar grinned and shook his head. He felt like he had just closed his eyes when a hand was roughly shaking him awake.

“Reahn, I thought you could see body heat from a long distance.” Ravenna’s voice came from directly above Jaemar’s head, confirming his fears.

“A quarter of a league is a long distance,” argued Reahn with a touch of annoyance in his voice.

“We need more than that between us. Get up, Jaemar!” She shook him again, but then her voice moved away. “I have a feeling that being caught by the Resistance will also mean getting caught by someone else.”

Jaemar shook himself awake to a wood lit by the foggy light of morning. Hidden insects buzzed infrequently, and somewhere distant a lone bird was calling. Ravenna was saddling the horses, and Reahn was destroying all traces of their having been there. Jaemar untangled himself from his blanket and hurried to make himself useful. It wasn't until he'd stood and stretched his limbs that he realized just how uncomfortable a forest floor could be.

“What did I tell you, Jaemar?” asked Reahn.

Ravenna, fitting a bridle onto Reahn's horse, glanced over her shoulder at Jaemar. Inclining her head, she said, “You'll need to cinch up your horse. I've put the saddle on, but that's as far as I got.”

Jaemar rushed to comply.

Still focused on her work, Ravenna called, “How far now, Reahn?”

“They've barely moved since the last time you asked,” said Reahn. “Remember, they're traveling with a large force, and they don't know these woods like I do.”

“All the same,” she made one final adjustment, “let's go.”

The three of them were mounted and riding before Jaemar fully comprehended what was happening or was even fully awake. The cool air whipping past his face somewhat helped his awareness, but his aching muscles, still recovering from yesterday's flight and last night's position, had not accommodated well in the sudden transition from ground to saddle.

Barely a quarter of an hour later, Reahn drew his horse up sharply. Not seeing the little orange fox, Jaemar at first wondered if Reahn had forgotten her and wanted to go back.

“What is it?” asked Ravenna.

Reahn leaned forward to peer ahead, his eyes burning as though on fire.

“Reahn?”

The Furore pulled his reins to the left so that his horse turned around and faced the way they had been coming. Jaemar wondered if he was just imagining the heat he could feel from Reahn’s gaze.

“There are wolphaks ahead, and they seem to be headed our way.” He turned in his saddle to look behind him again. “And they’re leading a troop of Burucs.”

Ravenna followed his gaze, even though the quiet forest revealed nothing of the coming danger. “Is it possible for us to go around—”

“With wolphaks on our trail?” Reahn shook his head. “We could try to circle them by twenty leagues, and the wolphaks would still pick up our scent and catch up to us before we got halfway.”

“So we have to fight them?” asked Jaemar.

Instead of answering, Reahn looked at Ravenna. “This is the time to put away your prejudice for the Resistance. I’m not one to shy from a fight, but I doubt we want to risk a three on—” he glanced south again, “fifty battle. And the wolphaks are getting closer. I think they might have caught our scent.”

“Yes, I can hear them now,” said Ravenna, turning Tânseren. “Come on.”

They spurred their horses to a full gallop, flying north over their old trail. Reahn surged ahead to lead the way. Just as Jaemar drew pace with Ravenna, he saw a flash of orange coming towards them. Chaisee barked loudly up at Reahn even as he sped past her.

“Yeah, I know,” he shouted down to her. “And I don’t want you getting involved. Those dogs are a lot bigger than you.”

But she had already darted off again.

“How much further?” yelled Jaemar.

“They’re just ahead,” said Reahn. He threw a glance over his shoulder. “And we’ve put some distance between us and the wolphaks. Maybe they don’t know about us yet.”

A few seconds later, Reahn said, “Prepare yourself, Ravenna. We’re about to hit their advance guard, and unexpected noises often get shot at.”

He slowed to a trot and allowed Ravenna to move up beside him. “Start talking. We’ll be able to tell what they are by what language comes out of your mouth.”

“Soldiers of the Resistance,” she said loudly, her use of Free Speech catching both Reahn and Jaemar off guard, “we are friends approaching, and we are pursued by a pack of wolphaks led by an army of Burucs.”

“Free Speech? I should have known,” said Reahn.

He joined Ravenna in addressing the Resistance troop, and Jaemar watched as one soldier appeared from behind a tree as they passed him. Two more joined him, and they began to chase after the three riders.

“Ten to one they circle us with spears despite our greeting,” said Ravenna.

“Oh, that is inevitable,” said Reahn.

They were surrounded, as he had said, almost before they knew what was happening. Philo pranced nervously, and Jaemar tried to calm him down, even as spears were leveled in his own face. Ravenna was beside herself with fury. Apparently she had good reason to hold a grudge against the Resistance.

“Do you never listen?” she fairly exploded, undaunted by the tipped iron aimed at her chest. “I’ve just told you we have a herd of wolphaks behind us, and they’re followed closely by a section of Burucs.”

“We heard you, but words are so often misused today that they have become worthless,” said one of the soldiers. “Actions mean more, and, under the circumstances, we will settle for the sign of the rebellion.”

Jaemar didn’t know what the soldier meant, but Reahn and Ravenna hastily brushed two fingers against their forehead and then brought that arm onto the other to make something like a cross, both hands in fists.

“There really isn’t time for this,” said Ravenna, while her hands were still moving. “Will you help us or not?”

Jaemar scanned the crowd of faces glaring from behind the spears and held his breath.

“Well, well. I’d know that face anywhere,” the soldier said, causing Jaemar, Reahn, and Ravenna to wildly search the crowd around them for the speaker.

A soldier broke through the ranks and stepped into the circle. Although his armor was similar to the rest of the assembled fighters, the deference the other soldiers showed him as he passed marked him as some kind of captain. He looked to be about Reahn’s

age, but his dark hair and beard were flecked with grey and heavy lines creased his rough face.

As the soldier approached Ravenna, Jaemar felt a mixture of surprise and relief that the man had not come towards him. Ravenna's posture stiffened noticeably.

“Maximus?”

“Ah, Ravenna,” he smiled. “I thought it was you.” He looked past her to Reahn, and then his eyes fell on Jaemar. If he knew Jaemar's identity, he didn't show it.

“All right, men, you heard her!” he raised his voice. “Form a pike line and get some archers into the trees. Try to pick off the wolphaks before they get anywhere near us.”

From his vantage point, Jaemar realized that there was no Resistance cavalry. His focus was drawn back to the captain when he heard his name. He looked down to see Maximus regarding him with interest.

“Yes, this is Jaemar Hurreich,” said Ravenna. “We're taking him to Litairne.”

Maximus swiveled his eyes onto her. “The Luceri sanctuary? What good is he going to do anyone there?”

Ravenna, who had obviously been ready for this, leapt out of Tânseren's saddle so that she could better accost Maximus. “You are not going to stop us. He needs the training the Luceri can give him.”

“But they have no army, and the Resistance does,” said Maximus, spreading his arm toward his soldiers to prove his point.

Ravenna narrowed her eyes. “That may be true, but you do not have a seramite sword, and we do.”

A ghastly howl, whose moaning cadence sent chills up the spine, cut across Maximus's answer and reverberated through the wood. All three horses broke into a frenzy, and Reahn jumped to the ground so that he could take control of both his and Ravenna's. Philo reared, and Jaemar leaned forward to keep from sliding off.

"You'd better get off him," said Reahn from the ground. "No matter how trained a horse is, one wolphak scream is enough to turn it wild."

Jaemar slid out of Philo's saddle and tried without success to steady him. Howls increasing in number and volume made the effort pointless. With nostrils flared and eyes wide with terror, the horse reared again and nearly crushed Jaemar beneath his hooves. Another howl shuddered through Jaemar's body as he dodged Philo's left hoof.

"We'll have to argue this later," said Maximus with a pointed look at Ravenna.

As he headed toward the front line, Ravenna laid one hand on Philo's neck and the other on Jaemar's arm. "Jaemar, are you better at the bow or the sword?"

"I'm good at everything," Jaemar said almost unconsciously, using both hands and all of his focus to restrain Philo. "My mother made sure of that."

Resting a hand on Philo's flared nose, Ravenna spoke softly to him, and Philo immediately began to relax. Jaemar stared at her in wonder, but Ravenna only flashed him a rare smile and rejoined Reahn.

With Philo consenting to stand still, Jaemar adjusted his bow and quiver and reached for his sword, strapped to the saddle. In the distance, some of the shouts became more frantic, but Jaemar did not register them until he heard a nearer voice screaming, "Hold there! Take him down!"

Jaemar whipped around just as Ravenna cried his name in alarm. A beast, larger and faster than any wolf Jaemar had ever seen, was loping straight for him with long, powerful strides. His thickly matted hair seemed to be impenetrable to the countless arrows showering down on him. The yellow eyes bored into Jaemar with an almost human intelligence, but he saw nothing but the sharp fangs.

Drawing his sword, Jaemar let the sheath fall to the ground and prepared for the impact of the charging monster. He counted the strides, took even breaths, and waited for the opportune moment. Through his veil of focus, he vaguely heard an inhuman shriek behind him and then something hit him with the force of a falling tree. The shock of pain knocked him to the ground and forced all of the air out of his chest.

He tried to get to his feet, but he only made it halfway before the wolphak bowled him over, shoving him onto his back. His head reeled with confusion and the contact with the ground, but it did nothing to numb the excruciating jolt of pain as the wolphak's teeth clamped down on his left shoulder. His throat burning with a yell that never reached his own ears, Jaemar tried to reach his sword with his right hand.

It felt like an eternity, but it was really only seconds before Reahn and Maximus tackled the wolphak from the side. Oblivious to the blur of teeth and steel just to his right, Jaemar gasped for breath and reached his right hand to his left shoulder. A thin but strong hand stayed his hand, and Ravenna's face appeared above him, her brow creased with worry.

“Don't touch it. Wolphak bites are poisonous, and he's left a tooth in. I have to pull it out.”

Jaemar didn't fully grasp the meaning of her words until he felt a sharp pain like a sword cutting off his arm. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the wickedly long fang in her hand, and the sight of his blood staining its end was enough to make his vision swim.

"The poison's starting to take effect."

Jaemar closed his eyes and clenched his teeth together in an effort to block the pain shooting up and down his arm. Someone dropped to their knees on his other side, and Jaemar opened his eyes to see Maximus, breathing heavily from his fight with the wolphak. He met Jaemar's eyes and then looked across him at Ravenna. She was doing something to his wound, but the spreading numbness in his arm kept Jaemar from feeling anything.

"I've never seen a wolphak go for one person like that," said Maximus. "All the time we were fighting it, it kept trying to break away." He glanced down at Jaemar. "And its skin. It was as if our blows kept glancing off."

Reahn rushed up to Ravenna's side but remained standing. "It's as I feared. They've got a Wyrdiac with them, Ravenna. He must have done something to that wolphak so that he would be shielded and go only for Jaemar."

"A Wyrdiac? They don't ever take sides," said Ravenna. "Unless—"

"Anzigar has one faithful Wyrdiac, and it looks like he's now been charged with one task."

"Gehzbenak," said Ravenna. "We have to get Jaemar out of here." She looked at Maximus, and he nodded.

“We’ll try to hold them off, but I must warn you. None of my men have ever faced a Wyrdiac in battle before.”

Ravenna set her jaw in a hard line. “I have. I’ll stay here and do what I can to distract him. Reahn, you’ll have to take Jaemar on horseback if you can get away.”

“I can, if no other mad wolphaks slip through. But should you—”

Ravenna cut him off before he could finish the question. “You need to take him to—”

“Yoscan, I know,” said Reahn with slight irritation, as he bent to lift Jaemar. Maximus took his other side.

Ravenna stood and followed them to Reahn’s horse. “The healer there is a friend to the Luceri.”

“If you don’t meet us there in seven days, we’ll see you in Resden,” said Reahn, pulling himself up behind Jaemar. He nodded toward Philo. “And use your gift to talk to him. He’s spooked enough without being responsible for Jaemar’s fall.”

Ravenna gave a stiff nod as Reahn adjusted his hold on Jaemar so that he could take the reins.

“Be careful, Ravenna. He may have come for the Imperial’s nephew, but I’m sure he wouldn’t mind settling for an Allspeak.”

Fitting an arrow to her bowstring, Ravenna turned away, acting as though she hadn’t heard the warning. Reahn shot an unspoken message to Maximus, who nodded and hurried after Ravenna as Reahn and Jaemar turned and left the battle behind.

## CHAPTER SIX

### In the Castle of the Kings

*Our consolation is that all men die and that justice eventually comes to the tormentor. –*

*Unknown, I never saw another butterfly*

Red eyes followed him again, but this time he couldn't hide. Scores of snarling beasts appeared in every direction, cutting off his escape. He backed away and turned to run the other way, but the red-eyed man—if he was a man—towered behind him. Approaching him with the slow deadliness of a serreone stalking its prey, the man withdrew a long, jagged knife and directed it toward Jaemar.

“Hold steady, Jaemar. This will not take long.”

Jaemar thrashed away, but the grip on his arm held fast.

“Jaemar, hold still! Grab his other arm.”

Spindly fingers scrabbled against both arms, stretching his skin. The cool grips froze his fevered body, and he jerked at the scrape of a fingernail.

“Jaemar, you're all right. Listen to me!” The voice sounded familiar.

Jaemar froze and forced his eyes open. He was lying in a bed with a wooden roof over his head, and all he could see at first were two faces hovering over his. One of the men, white-haired and wrinkled, was squinting behind lenses of glass, but the other was Reahn.

Jaemar tried to speak, but he quickly discovered that catching his breath was enough of a challenge. As he tried to regulate the heaving of his chest, he vaguely noticed light streaming into the cramped room from somewhere. He would figure out where as soon as the furniture stopped undulating across the shifting walls.

“You must tell him to relax,” said the strange man, moving out of Jaemar’s sight.

“Hey, Jaemar,” said Reahn with a grin.

A boy appeared above Jaemar and frowned down at him. Jaemar barely had time to note the tousled state of the white-blond hair before both the boy and Reahn slid out of his focus. Dizziness forced his eyes shut.

“Where are we?”

The response drifted toward him as though through a fog, and Jaemar decided he would have to ask again.

“Where are we?”

He opened his eyes. To his surprise, neither the strange man nor Reahn was in sight, and the light in the room had changed. Ignoring his vertigo, Jaemar propped himself up on his elbows and surveyed the room. Reahn sat in a chair against the wall, whittling a block of wood and eating it as nonchalantly as if it were an apple.

Without looking up, he replied, “Yoscan. We haven’t moved since the last thirty times you’ve asked.”

“What do you mean?” Jaemar asked, pushing himself against the headboard for support.

Reahn jerked his head up. “You gonna stay awake for the answer and a second question this time?”

“How long have I been out?”

“Just a day, but I guess it’s felt like longer to you.” He returned to chipping off chunks of the wood. “The healer says that wolphak poison makes its victims lose all track of time. You’ve been waking up fairly often, demanding to know the day and our location, even if it’s only been minutes since you last asked.”

Jaemar slumped against the pillows. “You think it’s over?”

Reahn set aside the wood and slipped the knife back into his boot. “This is the longest you’ve been conscious since it happened,” he said, rising to his feet, “but I’ll get the healer all the same.”

When he opened the door, something small and orange burst into the room and began chasing circles around Reahn’s feet. Jaemar sat up straighter and tried to peer over the foot of the bed. Chaisee began to bark all the air out of her lungs, and the sound grated in Jaemar’s pounding head.

Reahn bent down to soothe the fox, and Jaemar could hear him speaking.

“She’s come from Shadoak. Maximus sent her,” Reahn told Jaemar.

“What happened?” Jaemar lunged forward, and something like daggers shot from his shoulder to the rest of his body. He ignored it.

“The Resistance defeated the Burucs, but...” Reahn paused as Chaisee continued barking. When she at last became silent, Reahn stood up and turned his head toward Jaemar. “Gehzbenak took Ravenna.”

“Alive?” The buzzing in Jaemar’s head demanded attention.

“Yes. For now.”

Rising to his knees, Jaemar said, “You have to go after him. He’ll kill her. She’s an Allspeak.”

“Jaemar, I—”

“They’ll kill her, like they killed my mother,” Jaemar insisted, trying to climb out of the bed. His legs didn’t seem to want to function.

“What’s all this?” the white-haired man strode into the room. Noticing the frenzy of his patient, he dove for the side of Jaemar’s bed and tried to wrestle him back to a reclining position. “What have you done to him?” He glared over his shoulder and caught the flash of orange out of the corner of his eye. “Why is there a fox in my house?”

At a loss of what to say or do, Reahn lifted his hands but instantly dropped them.

“Tell him—tell him he’s got to go back—he’s got to find her!” Jaemar gasped, nearly elbowing the healer in the face.

“What is he on about?” the healer fumed.

“One of our friends is in trouble,” said Reahn.

“Well, whatever it is he wants you to do, do it, before all of my work is undone!” Placing both hands on Jaemar’s chest, the healer shoved him down onto the bed. “He can’t get this excited. The poison will spread to his heart, and he’ll kill himself!”

Jaemar strained against the arm pressed like a crossbar against his chest. Locking both of his hands around the healer’s arm, he tried to shove it away from himself.

“Don’t let them kill her! You have to stop them!”

He kicked his legs furiously, forcing one of the blankets to slide to the floor.

“Who are they going to kill?” the healer demanded.

His brow furrowed, Reahn stepped to the side of Jaemar's bed. "He thinks it's his mother, but she's already dead."

"Well, tell him you'll do something about it, then!"

Staring at Jaemar's fevered expression and glassy eyes, Reahn said, "I'll go, Jaemar. I'm going now. You have to rest, and I'll get her and come back for you."

He and the healer continued speaking, but their words faded into muffled sounds. The dream was returning. Jaemar fought to escape it, but at long last, he was pulled under.

By the time he woke up, the room was empty, but the pain in his head and shoulder was gone. Even so, the shortness of his breath proved that his latest vision had been just as vivid as all the others. While he recovered his breath, he surveyed the room. Quiet with midday light streaming through the window.

"Hello?" he called.

When no answer came, Jaemar peeled back the sheets and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Their unsteadiness forced him to make several attempts at standing, let alone walking. Once he had managed it, he stumbled to a basin and splashed water on his face and neck. A sudden dizzy spell came over him, and he gripped the edge of the table until he had recovered enough to straighten. With shaking hands, he rubbed his skin dry with a towel, nearly falling over twice. Dropping back down onto the bed to steady himself, he stripped off the garment the healer had given him and pulled on his own clothes, which had been tossed onto a chair in the corner.

After sitting still long enough to recover from his recent exertion, he decided to chance leaving the room. With one hand to his head, he found his way down a hall and

into a front room. He was checking out the busy street through the window when he heard a voice behind him.

“What are you doing out of bed?”

Jaemar whipped around to find a young boy, whose face he only vaguely remembered as being something he’d seen between visions. The child, fair-haired and blue-eyed, had to be younger than twelve.

“Father says you have to remain in bed and mustn’t be disturbed,” the boy continued, his brow in a stern line he must have learned from an adult.

Jaemar offered him a smile. “I feel all right now. What I really need is to be out of bed. Where is everyone?”

The boy looked around the room as if he expected to find them in there. “My father went out for some more supplies. He should be back soon.”

“And my friend?” Jaemar had a dim recollection of telling Reahn to go somewhere, but he couldn’t remember where it was or why he’d been so insistent.

“Oh, he left yesterday,” said the boy. “He had to save your other friend, and father told him he’d take care of you while he was gone.”

Memories of what had happened rushed back into his mind, and Jaemar frowned. He barely noticed the curious stare the boy gave him.

“Are you really Jaemar Haurreich?”

The name snapped Jaemar back to attention. He shrugged. “That’s what they say.”

The boy grinned. “And you’re here in father’s healing house.”

Jaemar shrugged again, wondering if he would ever enjoy anonymity again.

“I’ll be right back,” the boy said, rushing out of the room with a gleam of excitement in his eye.

Jaemar grinned, shook his head, and turned to look out of the window again. Shoppers and vendors clogged the street, and two mule-carts seemed to be causing some kind of road jam. The drivers’ profuse arguing melded into the rest of the street noise, and Jaemar turned his attention to a group of children chasing each other. One of them shrieked in delight, and they all began running after something. Jaemar leaned farther out the window and saw a flash of orange ahead of them. It couldn’t be...

Forgetting the healer’s son, Jaemar stumbled out of the door and emerged onto the dusty, overcrowded street. Craning his neck over the tangled carts, Jaemar saw the pack of children turning down a side street. He started to jog after them but immediately had to slow to a walk when his legs started shaking. Putting a hand to his sore, bandaged shoulder, Jaemar tried to settle for a brisk walk.

Of course, the children and whatever they were chasing were moving much faster, and they had disappeared by the time Jaemar reached the side street. Driven by curiosity, Jaemar turned down the side street, which spilled out to a larger thoroughfare. The drivers on this street seemed to know how to keep their carts out of others’ way, but Jaemar noticed that all of them were yielding to a group of black-clad knights.

Jaemar flattened himself against a wall with a few other pedestrians as a pair of the horsemen, their steeds as huge as draft horses, paraded by. One of the knights glanced down at Jaemar, who turned his face away, an uneasy feeling rising in his stomach. The girl next to him had her head down, as well. When he looked up again, the horses had passed.

“There have been more Kazicmer knights than usual, these days,” an elderly woman said to the girl.

Jaemar positioned himself so that he could hear her answer.

“Are they fighting for the Imperial?”

“No, but you mustn’t speak so loudly.”

Jaemar leaned closer.

“Are they not afraid of him?” the girl said more quietly, though she obviously didn’t understand the properties of a whisper.

The older woman snorted. “They’d like us all to think that, for there’s nothing they want more than to take back their old power. After all, the Imperial was the one who—”

“Silence, woman!” a grizzled man hissed. “Don’t you see the Youths over there?”

Jaemar and the woman followed the man’s hand toward the street corner, where a mob of excited children had gathered around an Imperial Youth station. The Youths were handing out parchment, and the children were staring wide-eyed at the uniforms. One of the children held an orange cat in his arms.

Feeling a strange sense of loss, Jaemar backtracked down a side alley but came out on the wrong street. He judged that he could return to the healer by that way, and he headed up the road. The crowds were thinner, and Jaemar had a clear view up to the top of the street, which he hoped connected to the street with the healer’s house.

He had struck out for the crossroad and had his eyes fixed on it when four Kazicmer knights stormed around the corner and barreled down the street. Pedestrians

and shop owners scrambled to get out of the way, a movement which did only a few of them any good, for the knights split off from each other and began to weave in and out of the crowds, as though looking for someone.

With the buildup of tension from the previous days, Jaemar felt his heart rise in his throat. People shrieked, some in fear and others in indignance, and others threw themselves through doorways or simply away from the danger of being trampled. Jaemar, his heart pounding and his shoulder suddenly throbbing again, could only shrink against a storefront. As some of his dizziness returned, he fought to keep his knees from buckling.

He lowered his head, and the first knight shot past him. Allowing himself some measure of relief, Jaemar glanced up. Nearby, an irate shopkeeper muttered something not so forgiving about a prince. Driven partially by the desire to appear unassuming, Jaemar made his way over to the store entrance, where the man stood.

Nodding his respect, Jaemar asked in Free Speech, “Know what all the trouble is about, master? I’ve just arrived a few days ago, and I’ve never seen the Kazicmer this active.”

The store owner, keeping his narrowed eyes on the knights combing the street, barely acknowledged Jaemar. “It’s only a bit of local trouble we’ve had often enough. No doubt it has to do with that cursed rebel son of one of the Kazicmer kings.” The man turned his eyes onto Jaemar and looked him up and down. “Keeps escaping, he does. Can’t seem to get it in his thick skull that you can’t run from home when your father controls guards such as the Kazicmer knights.”

The clattering of hooves behind Jaemar caused both him and the man to turn. A knight, his massive horse snorting and stomping the stone street impatiently, gazed down at Jaemar. Jaemar glanced nervously over his shoulder, but the storeowner had disappeared, abandoning Jaemar to whatever fate he would get.

Jaemar had heard stories in addition to Simnara's about the Kazicmer knights' cruelty and lack of humanity, but those seemed now as like to the real thing as dogs were to wolphaks. The knight seemed to be made of black vapor rather than flesh, as though he were constantly in blurred motion, but Jaemar knew that was due to a trick of the eyes that only occurred when the knights were mounted. As the knight turned his black eyes on Jaemar, Jaemar felt like the air in his chest had been squeezed out of him. And if he dared breathe in more, he would die. The knight appeared to be more than human, but his very glance seemed to dehumanize Jaemar.

To Jaemar's relief, the knight finished his inspection and rode away without a word. Moments later, the rest of the knights had galloped out of sight. As he continued on his path and marked the unnatural way people returned to their business, Jaemar realized that the knights had conducted their search in complete silence. Apart from the horses' hooves, they had not made a single sound or uttered a word.

With a shudder, Jaemar turned the corner and recognized the street. Ahead, he could see the sign over the healer's door. He was only two houses away when he stopped, his eyes fixed on what he saw before the door.

A dozen Guards were clustered in the street in front of the door, and, as Jaemar watched, two more marched the healer out of the house. Jaemar took a step back. The guards holding the healer moved farther into the street, and then Jaemar saw something

that chilled his blood. The boy, the healer's son, speaking to one of the Guards, who had bent down to listen to the child's words.

The healer began to shout and strain at his captors, trying to reach his son. The boy stiffened as though he had heard, but he remained stationary, facing away from his father. The Guard speaking to him rested a hand protectively on the boy's shoulder. Jaemar's horror intensified as he realized the truth of the situation.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the surreal scene, Jaemar had only taken two more steps back when it happened. The boy, scanning the crowd to look at everything but his father being led away, chanced to rest his eyes on Jaemar. Both of them froze, but the second was too short for one of them and too long for the other. Before Jaemar could react, the boy tugged on the Guard's sleeve, pointed at Jaemar, and shouted, "That's him! There's the other traitor to the Imperial!"

More than the Guards turned their heads to look at Jaemar. The Guards had barely taken the first step in the chase when Jaemar bolted down the street back the way he had come. However, his legs became his greatest enemy, and before he had reached the first side street, he could hear the Guards' booted feet pounding the stone behind him.

"Stop him!"

With that command, Jaemar received a true sampling of the Yoscan citizens. While one made a grab for him, another threw a punch at the would-be assailant, and a vendor steered her vegetable cart into the road behind Jaemar. Nonetheless, the news had spread between the Guards throughout the town. Jaemar had just skidded around a corner when he saw another patrol racing toward him. Swiveling mid-run, Jaemar gave a burst of speed in the other direction.

What adrenaline had propelled his legs began to slow down, and the pain in his shoulder started squeezing his heart. Worst of all, each street Jaemar came to was emptier than the last. Apparently even the braver citizens knew the danger of openly inhibiting the Order. Jaemar stumbled onto a deserted street, and with rising panic threw himself into a narrow alley, hoping for concealment. As he gasped for breath, he heard a door open somewhere behind him.

“Jaemar!” a voice hissed. “Jaemar Hurreich, friend of the Resistance, this way!”

Jaemar whirled around. A bearded man with silver hair and a black cloak beckoned him from a house just a few paces away. Jaemar hesitated, but he heard the Guards’ shouts echoing down the street he had just left.

“Quickly, now!” the man urged in a deeper, more insistent voice. “I can offer you protection!”

The Guards would pass the alley and see him at any moment, and Jaemar made his decision. With his last burst of energy, he sprinted toward the man, who stretched out a hand, grabbed Jaemar’s shoulder, and thrust them both inside. The door slamming shut seemed loud enough to be heard from the healer’s house, but Jaemar had no time to wonder if the Guards would discover him. His unknown savior rested his hands on Jaemar’s shoulders and guided him to a door. Reaching around Jaemar, the man flung it open and hurried him over the threshold. The force of the man’s shove sent Jaemar to the ground, and he turned to see Guards entering the house just as the man slammed the second door, hiding the Guards’ shocked faces.

Scrambling to his feet, Jaemar said, “They’ve got us trapped! Where do we—”

“Take a look around you, Jaemar. They can’t follow us here.”

Jaemar didn't even think to ask how the man knew his name. It seemed to be common knowledge now. Instead, he scanned the room. He had to admit that the grand stone walls draped with tapestries didn't fit with the damp alley or the dingy room he had first entered. The high ceiling reminded Jaemar of Thornskern's two-storey great hall, which would fit in this room with room to spare.

"I didn't see any tall buildings like this in Yoscan," he said, turning to the man.

"That's because there aren't any," he said, whipping his cloak from his shoulders to reveal robes of a deep forest green. "We aren't in Yoscan, but about seventy leagues to the south. I apologize, but it seemed the only way to help you escape from the Guards." He hung his cloak on a peg by the door.

Gazing at the ceiling, Jaemar turned a slow circle before letting his eyes fall back on his rescuer and the door behind him.

"How?"

The man closed one eye as though in thought. "Some of the power left over from the old days, which are fast becoming nothing more than a memory."

His eyes glazed over, somehow allowing him to see the lost days as clearly as he could imagine them in his mind. Feeling safe enough to put up his guard, Jaemar studied the stranger and tried to judge the potentiality of a threat. His silver hair and beard were artfully trimmed, and though his face showed the signs of age, something about him—perhaps the severity of his nearly black eyes—suggested some kind of power beneath the surface.

“Your pardon, sir,” he began with the tentativeness of prodding a dragon with a sword. “You did just save me from the hands of the Order, and you seem to know who I am, but—”

“You would like to know who I am,” the man finished.

They were interrupted by a door banging open at the far side of the hall. A second man, sporting wild black hair and a garish orange toga, trounced into the room, two young boys dressed in black scurrying after him as though they were concerned he would do himself harm.

Jaemar’s rescuer groaned. “Why am I always left with him?”

“Gerasim!” the second man whimpered. “Where have you been? I can’t—” he stopped, noticing Jaemar for the first time.

Gerasim spread a robed arm toward Jaemar. “Look who I picked up in Yoscan, Zhury.”

Zhury’s eyes widened as he crept around Jaemar to get a good look at him. “Is it really him?”

Jaemar shifted his feet and folded his arms to his chest.

“Imperial Guards practically chased him into my hands,” said Gerasim, eyeing Jaemar with something like a hungry look.

A shiver traced itself down Jaemar’s spine.

“The Guards are helping us now?” Zhury asked in an absent voice. He lifted a finger toward Jaemar’s left sleeve.

“Don’t touch him!” Gerasim’s order froze Zhury’s hand in midair and nearly caused Jaemar to jump out of his skin. To Jaemar’s further surprise, Gerasim shouldered

in between him and Zhury and shoved him away with both hands. “My patience with you ran out seven years ago, and I swear to you I will kill you if Demyan hasn’t returned by sunset.”

Zhury’s tottered backward, fear and pain cracking the crazed look on his face. Jaemar could come to no other conclusion than that he was a madman.

When Zhury had backed away a safe distance, he suddenly threw his arms over his head and shouted, “But he’s gone! He’s gone for good this time, and I can’t—I don’t—”

Gerasim whipped a dagger out of his belt and pointed it threateningly toward Zhury. “I stopped caring about your worthless son long before I lost patience with you, and if you don’t have the self-respect to stop dragging him back here after he’s run away twelve times, I wash my hands of both of you.”

With the air of a man whose world is crumbling around him, Zhury sunk to the floor and rocked his body back and forth as though trying to comfort himself. “My son. Oh, my son. Why do you want to leave me?”

“That’s the mystery of the age,” said Gerasim under his breath.

Jaemar turned his gaze toward Gerasim. The first traces of an idea as to who these men were formulated in his mind. His concentration broke as Zhury ceased his rocking and peered at Jaemar through his fingers. In one swift movement, he uncurled his body to form a strict L on the floor, sitting straight up with his legs stretched out before him.

“Gerasim...is that—”

“Slow on the uptake, aren’t you?” said Gerasim sardonically, rolling his eyes and sliding his knife back into his belt. “And you really are doing your utmost to give a stellar first impression.”

As if to prove his point, Zhury leaped to his feet and sprinted, robe flailing out behind him, to stand in front of Jaemar. Jaemar took a step back and threw an uncertain glance at Gerasim, but the other man seemed to have given up his attempts to rein in Zhury.

Lifting and dropping his hands as though he had to consciously force himself to keep from touching Jaemar, Zhury managed to keep himself at a respectful distance. “So when is he going to do it?”

The question spiked Jaemar’s panic to a new high. Glancing at the mysterious door, he wondered what his chances were of reaching and using it successfully. Low, at best.

“We’ll wait until Demyan returns to discuss it.”

“He’s out looking for Zerhard,” said Zhury, his voice dreamy as he continued to gape openly at Jaemar.

“This is the last time your son is going to waste either Demyan’s or my time.” He looked at Jaemar. “Especially when we have more important things to do.” His voice changed as he addressed Jaemar again. “My apologies. You are probably still wondering who we are.”

Jaemar shook his head once. “No. I know who you are.”

“Do you?” smirked Gerasim.

“You are the ancient Kazicmer kings of legend.” Jaemar paused and looked from one to the other. “I thought there were more of you.”

“There were seven of us,” said Gerasim, glancing at Zhury, who had taken to twirling the frayed ends of his sleeve and staring at the corner of the ceiling. “Now there are four dead, one mad, and two living out a dying existence.”

“Not dead!” Zhury shrieked, snatching both Jaemar’s and Gerasim’s attentions toward him. The crazed king crossed his legs and glared up at Gerasim. “Alkaev is not dead.” He turned solemn eyes onto Jaemar and pointed at him. “He will save him.”

Gerasim flicked out his knife again, tossed it in the air, and caught it. “Another outburst from you, and my knife will fly on its own.”

When Zhury lapsed into silence, Gerasim turned back to Jaemar. “As you can see, the golden age of the Kazicmer was over long before your time, but you have doubtless heard tales of our reign in Almaen. Seven brothers, seven kings, seven kingdoms, but unity throughout the land.”

Jaemar had never heard anything about unity in the stories of the Kazicmer, but he said nothing.

“Of course, all of that changed with the arrival of the first Haurreich.” A distant look came into Gerasim’s eye. “We Kazicmers are blessed to live for hundreds of years, but even our power dimmed in the shadow of an Immortal ruler. He defeated us and destroyed our long established kingdoms, but he recognized the usefulness of our power.”

Gerasim fixed Jaemar with a cold stare. “He allowed us to keep our castles and some measure of our rule, but we were doing everything for him. Splitting victories

seven ways is not so easy after the land has been reduced to less than half of its original breadth by a distant southern tyrant.” He hurled each word into the air like a curse.

“Still, he had given us more freedom than anyone else in Almaen, and we haven’t ignored that.”

He turned his head, and Jaemar followed his gaze to see Zhury standing up and pacing circles around himself.

“We were not so wise to think it would last,” continued Gerasim. “Anzigar is not so lenient or willing to share power as his father was, and his sudden assumption of the Imperial throne upset our position in Almaen forever.”

Jaemar realized where the story was leading, but more than any other reaction or emotion, he felt disgust. The Kazicmer kings hated Anzigar, but not because of his crimes against the races. They envied his power. They were no better.

“Our brother Alkaev was in Geresdain for trade when the old Haurreich mysteriously died and Anzigar took control.” As Gerasim watched the pitiful spectacle Zhury was putting on, the corners of his eyes sank into wrinkled creases.

“Alkaev never returned. We sent knights but were told that Alkaev would only be released if we abided by the new Imperial’s every command. It didn’t take us long to realize that the Imperial had gone back on his word. That he had never intended to return Alkaev.” He looked at Jaemar. “I suppose the saying is true: ‘A supreme ruler works not well with his advisors.’”

He paused before saying, “We fear—”

“Alkaev! I’ll do it! I will!” shrieked Zhury suddenly.

Jaemar jolted and Gerasim groaned and covered his eyes. “Not again.”

The page boys lunged for the distraught king, who seemed to be trying to tear his hair out.

“Zhury has never been the same since that night,” said Gerasim, shaking his head. “It was as if he knew the moment it happened.” His eyes shifted back to Jaemar. “He was meant to have gone south that time. Our sojourns to the Imperial capital were taken in shifts, and he should have been there when the changeover occurred. I don’t think he’s ever been able to forgive himself for being alive while Alkaev is dead. There is little hope for him, even if Anzigar were to be defeated.” He raised an eyebrow.

“You would ask me to do this for you,” said Jaemar, his expression unchanging.

“You are not surprised,” said Gerasim. “I assume others have charged you with the same task.”

“Rest assured, of all the requests that have been made of me, yours is the least tempting.”

Gerasim set his jaw in a firm line, the ever-present anger in his eyes threatening to shoot daggers. The knife twitched in his hand.

“Even if I kill my uncle, I will not do it for you.”

The stare Jaemar sent back to Gerasim began a silent battle of wills, broken only when the door to the hall was again thrown open. As the crash of wood against stone echoed in the spacious hall, both Jaemar and Gerasim jerked their heads toward the entrance. Two armored Kazicmer knights, standing like sentinels in the doorway, shoved a man forward so roughly that he fell to his knees. His hair was black and even had some of the wildness of Zhury’s, but he looked to be only a few years older than Jaemar and his tan skin did not have the faded appearance of the kings’.

As the youth sprang to his feet, Jaemar noted that the fierce anger in his eyes was enough to make even Gerasim proud.

“You may go,” said a deep voice.

The two knights stepped out of the hall, revealing Demyan, by far the tallest and strongest of the three kings. Still outfitted in his black cloak and armor, the only color visible on the intimidating figure was his brown hair and beard. He stood, emotionless and unflinching, as all eyes turned to the prince.

Zhury had ceased his writhing and become as still as a stone statue when the prince had been shoved into the hall, but he finally broke out of his stunned state when the knights were dismissed. Uttering a cry, he flung himself toward the youth and clung to him, seemingly without the intention of ever letting go.

Gerasim strode forward, and Jaemar wandered behind him.

“How far?” Gerasim asked Demyan.

“Only half a league further than last time,” said Demyan, “but he was going north.”

“You know,” managed Zerhard as he struggled to disentangle himself from Zhury, “you don’t always have to speak of me as though I’m not here.”

“You rarely are,” said Gerasim, throwing him a withering look. “Unless you’re unwanted in a particular situation. Then we can’t seem to get rid of you.”

“Looks like we’re all destined for unhappiness then,” said Zerhard as his eyes traveled past the kings to Jaemar standing behind Gerasim. “What’s this?” he smirked.

“Hiring more servants from little villages again?”

Keeping one hand on Zerhard's arm, Zhury stepped back. "You must speak with respect, Zerhard. See who has come to the great hall of your fathers!" He began to drag him across the floor, Zerhard only slightly resisting. As the prince drew nearer, Jaemar could see that his right hand was missing the last three fingers and that a pale scar traced its way from his lip, cut across his left eye, and disappeared beneath a band of cloth tied around his forehead.

He forgot the prince's disfigurements as the kings gathered around him, making him feel like little more than a trussed up exhibit. Crossing his arms, he concealed his right hand so that he could use it to hold his left sleeve down. But by clapping his hand over Jaemar's left shoulder, Gerasim unknowingly hid the scar himself. Jaemar bit his tongue to keep from wincing at the blow to the bite wound.

"Demyan...and my most noble nephew," began Gerasim, bowing in mock respect to the scowling prince, "hope for the Kazicmer dynasty has returned. I give you the last bane of the Imperial."

Demyan's eyes rounded and he leaned forward. "So it is true."

Looking past the kings, Jaemar watched as Zerhard, now free of Zhury, dropped his arms and his scowl. Jaemar could not interpret the look on Zerhard's face, but he somehow knew that he had met someone else who had his own motives for using the bane of the Imperial.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Other Prisoner

*Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.* –George Orwell, 1984

“You do know you’re a prisoner here, no matter how much they pretend you’re not.”

The voice broke into the crackling of the fire. Jaemar lifted his head from the pillow and saw Zerhard leaning against the doorpost, his arms crossed. His nonchalant posture of condescending judgment was emphasized by his narrowed eyes. Jaemar tried to see past the lowered brows and slight frown to guess what the Kazicmer prince thought of him. *Wanting*. Hiding his own scowl, Jaemar leaned back and stared back up at the ceiling.

“You have my thanks. I might have gotten too comfortable here otherwise.”

Zerhard strolled into the room with his hands clasped behind his back. “Careful. Someone might think you’re being serious.”

He reached the end of Jaemar’s bed and pulled out a splinter in the wood. His focus shifting to the hand missing three fingers, Jaemar pushed himself higher against the headboard.

“I’ve just come from the kings’ meeting hall,” began Zerhard in a conversational tone. “Uninvited, obviously, but when has that ever stopped me.” He paused and raised an eyebrow as though he expected an answer. When Jaemar refused to acquiesce, Zerhard asked, “You don’t want to know how they’re deciding your fate?”

“No.” Jaemar shoved his back against the headboard and crossed his arms. “If given the option, I’d rather not know, but unfortunately, I already know everything.”

Letting his hand fall to his side, Zerhard blew out so that his hair rippled over the band on his forehead. “Well there’s that secret gone.” He dropped into a nearby chair and picked at a strip of peeling wood on the armrest. “You’ve barely known me three hours, and you already know how to ruin the little pleasures I have.”

“Well here’s one,” said Jaemar, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, putting his back to Zerhard. “You can go tell the kings that I won’t do it.”

“What, you don’t want to kill the Imperial?”

Jaemar stared at the cracked stone floor. Some of the stones were coming loose. “I don’t think ‘want’ has anything to do with it. I’ve got to do it, and I will if I have to, but not for them.” The words were directed at the floor, but he could not decide whether he was trying to convince Zerhard or himself.

Zerhard grinned at the armrest. “As much as I appreciate your giving me the message, I’m not sure I want to be in charge of that particular gem.”

Jaemar glanced over his shoulder. “You can add that all their plans for me will come to nothing if they don’t have a certain sword.”

“Seramite?” Zerhard looked up. “They’ve got one of those. One of the only three in Almaen, actually.”

Jaemar stood up so that he could face Zerhard fully. “How’d they get one? They’re supposed to be rare.”

Zerhard smirked. “Yes, on account of their taking years to make. But the kings have been planning their revenge against the Imperial for decades. Don’t you think they would have thought of a detail as important as that?”

Jaemar studied Zerhard’s mischievous expression, trying to gauge his motives. The light from the wall sconces and fireplace cast Zerhard’s scars into sharp relief. “I guess. They do seem ruthless.”

With a grunt, Zerhard went back to peeling the lacquer off the wood.

Just as Jaemar opened his mouth to ask Zerhard about his scars, Zhury appeared in the doorway. His wide eyes betrayed that he was in his usual state of shock. He looked from Jaemar to Zerhard, apparently forgetting why he had come in the first place.

“Zerhard, what are you doing in here?” he asked. “You shouldn’t be here.”

With a sigh of annoyance, Zerhard pushed himself to his feet.

Stealing a glance at Jaemar as though he hoped he weren’t listening, Zhury continued, “You know what Gerasim and Demyan said about leaving our guest alone. Do you want to get in trouble again?”

Inclining his head slightly, Zerhard said, “My mistake. Father.”

Zhury looked sadly at him for a moment before turning to Jaemar. “As for you, I’ve been sent to collect you. We thought we’d give you a run with the sword before we make further plans. After all, you’ve got to be able to use it.”

Jaemar frowned in confusion but started to follow Zhury out of the room. Taking two long strides, Zerhard blocked him at the door.

“Just remember, Jaemar. If they treat you well, you’ll know you’re doing something wrong.”

Before Jaemar could reply, Zerhard slipped into the hall, heading away from Zhury, who waited expectantly.

Trying to banish the image of three missing fingers from his mind, Jaemar consented to follow Zhury. The king led him down a network of stone hallways and four flights of stairs to a chamber where the other two kings stood. Gerasim held a sheet of silk on which rested a white-bladed sword. Demyan had a hand resting on his own sword hilt.

Gerasim spoke first. “Few have handled and even fewer have mastered a sword of seramite, but you will have to learn the art and skill of its use in less than half the time required. Are you prepared for the task?”

Jaemar looked from Demyan’s hand flexing on his sword hilt to Gerasim before replying slowly. “I know how to use a sword.”

“I think you will find this one unlike any you have handled. Come and take it.” Gerasim raised the sword in invitation.

With a sideways glance at Demyan, Jaemar approached and wrapped his fingers around the handle as though he expected it to burst into flames. When nothing happened, he lifted it off of the sheet and held it up to inspect it. He barely had time to notice the intricate markings on the white blade before he felt it. Vibrations tingled in his fingers, and the odd sensation began to slither up his arm.

His eyes lifted the question to Gerasim.

“The blade studies you as you study it.” Demyan replied. “Did you not know that seramite carries a life of its own?”

Jaemar shook his head, too uneasy about the tremor in his arm to say anything. He began to move the sword away from his body.

Gerasim opened his mouth to speak, but Demyan interrupted by drawing his sword.

“Enough with half measures.”

He advanced on Jaemar with his sword raised, and Jaemar took a step back, throwing a look of terrified confusion toward Gerasim.

“Let’s see how fast you learn,” said Demyan, adjusting the hilt in his hand.

Before Jaemar knew what was happening, Demyan had used both hands to swing his sword at him from the side. Jaemar barely had time to lift the christye sword before the two blades met with a ringing clash. The impact jarred Jaemar’s arms and reverberated like an earthquake through his body. He felt as though Demyan’s sword had cut through his the seramite and passed through his body. Blackness invaded the corners of his vision, and the sword fell from his hands.

He took a step back, trying to keep the stern faces of the kings in focus, but he knew it was useless. The last thing he knew was that he had somehow fallen to the floor.

“Jaemar! Get up! Quickly!” The urgently rasped whisper shattered the peaceful darkness.

Jaemar blinked his eyes open but was forced to squint at the bright light in his face. As he lifted his arm to shield his eyes with his hand, he became aware of what felt like bruises all over his body.

“Hurry! Get up, get up! We mustn’t tell!”

Jaemar managed to push himself into a sitting position. His eyes adjusted enough to tell him that the light was a candle being held in his face. When he leaned back against the headboard, the person holding the candle straightened, taking the candle away from Jaemar’s face and illuminating his own.

“King Zhury?” The hoarse state of his own voice surprised Jaemar, and he absently wondered when he had last had any water.

“Yes, yes. It’s me. Now hurry!” He lifted the candle higher and flapped his other hand in a beckoning motion.

Still half-asleep and disoriented, Jaemar slid out of the bed hesitantly and stood, weaving on his legs more than he would have liked.

“Hurt much? You fell pretty hard.”

Jaemar felt his shoulder. If he was going to tell the truth, the wolphak bite felt like someone had poured boiling liquid on it, and the rest of his body was as stiff as dry leather, but he decided not to say anything.

At Jaemar’s shrug, Zhury nodded once. “Follow me.”

He reached out and grabbed Jaemar’s arm with a surprisingly strong grip. Biting back a wince, Jaemar allowed himself to be pulled out of the dark room.

Once they had reached the hallway, Zhury continued his one-sided, whispered conversation. “That was a nasty spill you had. I warned them. I said you wouldn’t be

ready, but would they listen?” He shook his head. “Gerasim had some words, some dangerous words, for Demyan, and then Demyan started threatening to kill you, and Gerasim starting swearing that he was going to kill me.” He sighed, as though the whole situation was a lost cause. “I think they expected more of you.”

Jaemar frowned. He had had enough condescension to last him a lifetime, but somehow it was worse coming from a man who was closer to the mad side of things.

They reached an open courtyard, and Zhury transferred the candle to a lantern hanging on an iron hook in the wall. Stars blinked overhead in a dense canopy, and Jaemar craned his neck toward them as he inhaled lungfuls of the cool night breeze. The fresh air cleared his mind somewhat, and as Zhury dragged him along the passage, Jaemar looked across the courtyard and saw high walls and a tower. Dark shadows of distant mountains blocked out the stars near the topmost walls.

Jaemar tripped on the uneven flagstones, and Zhury tightened his claw-like hand around Jaemar’s wrist.

“Too loud. Can’t let them hear. They’ll stop us.”

Before Jaemar could ask what Zhury meant, the king stopped in front of a wide archway that gaped over a pitch black tunnel. Realizing that Zhury intended to bring him down there, Jaemar ripped his arm out of Zhury’s grasp.

“Where are you taking me? What’s going on?” He took a step back, feeling the broken flagstones crack beneath his feet.

“Quiet!” Zhury hissed. “You must not ask questions.” He hesitated but then made a motion to grab for Jaemar again.

Jaemar backed further away. “What are you doing?” he demanded in a low voice, more induced to a whisper by the pressing silence of the night than by Zhury’s urging.

Zhury curled and uncurled his fingers into a fist in an agitated yet absent-minded manner. “Where is he? He won’t come. What can I tell him?”

Jaemar’s frown deepened, creasing his forehead. “Who are you talking to?”

Zhury was silent for a moment, but when Jaemar started to ask again, he said, “We must save Alkaev. I told him I would. I told him I would bring...” he stopped as though afraid he had said too much.

A dim idea of the truth flickered in the back of Jaemar’s mind, and he continued his backward pace, holding his hands out behind him to feel for the wall.

In a sudden movement that seemed impossible for a man of Zhury’s age and mental state, the king lunged forward and, with trembling hands, pointed a knife at Jaemar’s chest.

Jaemar could not decide which was more terrifying—the shaking weapon or the crazed look in the man’s eyes.

“You will come with me, or he will kill Alkaev. I promise—” he swallowed hard, “I promised him.”

The situation was clear enough to Jaemar, and his decision was clearer. In a quick motion, Jaemar’s hand whipped up to take the knife, but Zhury must have expected that. In a flash, he yanked the knife out of reach and brought the handle down sharply on Jaemar’s left shoulder. Jaemar winced at the blunt blow against the wolphak bite, and Zhury used the advantage to refasten his grip on Jaemar’s arm.

Jaemar tried to twist out of the vise-like grasp, but the old Kazicmer king had more strength than he appeared to have. He succeeded in dragging Jaemar through the archway, despite Jaemar's frantic attempts to pull himself free. They were halfway down the dark passage when Jaemar looked up and noticed in the lamplight that a huge wooden gate blocked their path. What surprised both him and Zhury was the presence of a lone silhouette standing between them and the gate. Zhury skidded to a halt and started muttering unintelligibly in a panicked voice.

"Going somewhere, Father?" Zerhard moved into the lantern light. He held a long object wrapped in canvas in his hands.

Zhury pulled Jaemar closer, sinking his fingers painfully into Jaemar's skin until Jaemar felt the pressure against his bone. He gritted his teeth and tried to jerk his arm free.

Zerhard continued to approach in a slow and casual gait, as though Zhury were a prey he was trying to lull into a false sense of security. It seemed to have the opposite effect.

Zhury's mutters increased in pitch, and he pressed Jaemar closer to his body so that Jaemar could feel the point of his knife against his side.

Zerhard stalked closer, keeping his eyes on Zhury. "What, did you give the knights the evening off? I thought I was just lucky, but the complete absence of the usual patrols can't possibly be an accident. How did you get rid of them?"

"My son, you should not be here." The knife rattled against Jaemar's ribs.

"From the looks of it, neither should you. I trust your brothers don't know you're taking their prisoner on a tour."

Zhury kept his eyes on Zerhard's feet, as though he were afraid to meet his eyes.

"Stand aside, Zerhard. Alkaev needs me."

"You're trading him for Haurreich's nephew? Quite a bargain for him, I would say."

"The Imperial," Zhury insisted loudly as Jaemar redoubled his efforts to escape, "will be generous. And Alkaev will live. We will be strong again once we are together. We will have no need of the Haurreich boy." He shook Jaemar's arm as if he were merchandise being bartered.

Zerhard drew himself up to his full height. "I see," he said slowly. "So it is to be a complete betrayal of the Kazicmers." He lifted the wrapped object in his hands. "Is that why you hid this by the gate?"

Zhury's head jerked up, and Jaemar felt the king's grip tighten on his arm. He had to twist his body away from the point of the knife.

"You must give that to me, Zerhard, or he will be angry. I told him I'd give him the boy and the sword." He dragged Jaemar forward. "Give it to Jaemar."

Zerhard studied the canvas-wrapped sword in his hands. "I think not."

"Zerhard—"

"No," he looked up. "I think I'll go with you. Should be entertaining."

Zhury took a step toward Zerhard, dragging Jaemar with him. "You can't—"

"Try and stop me, and I'll rouse the other kings and alert the knights."

The threat forced Zhury to pause and consider, his brow scrunching in concentration.

Jaemar seized his opportunity. Ramming his elbow into the king's stomach, he twisted out of his captor's hold and started to sprint back up the passage toward the courtyard, hoping his feet would not catch on any loose stones. Unfortunately, he had barely cleared the archway before he was tackled to the ground from behind. His body was pounded into the flagstones, and Zerhard rolled on top of him. Jaemar tried to throw him off, but Zerhard pinned down his arms. Using his advantage against Zerhard's two-fingered hand, Jaemar managed to free an arm and throw a fist at his attacker's face. Zerhard's head flew back at the blow, but he pressed Jaemar harder into the stones and leaned down to his ear.

"You don't really want to stay here," he hissed. "Work with me. I'm trying to get both of us out of here."

He stood and hauled Jaemar to his feet. Winded, Jaemar pressed a hand to his chest and watched as Zhury's lantern tottered toward them. He had to take the risk.

"I can't be turned over to the Imperial," Jaemar whispered.

"You won't be," Zerhard shot back quietly, "but this is a rare chance of getting out of here. Trust me." He yanked Jaemar's arm forward and raised his voice to address Zhury. "It looks like you'll be needing my help."

Zhury held the lantern in one hand and the sword in the other. His face betrayed the agony he felt at not being able to have both Jaemar and the sword at the same time. When the king failed to answer, Zerhard shifted his feet so that he stood between him and Jaemar.

"I'll wake the whole castle. You know I can do it, and you know I will."

He looked more ready to break down and cry, but Zhury nodded and motioned with his head for them to precede him back through the archway.

Still keeping a tight hold on Jaemar, Zerhard marched ahead of the king, retracing his steps to the gate. When they reached it, Zhury handed Zerhard the lantern and produced a key to unlock the wicket on the right side of the gate. After they passed through to the outside, Zhury locked it behind him and took the lantern back from Zerhard.

They started down the road at a brisk pace, the lantern light bobbing across the ground in a wide circle in front of them.

Zerhard cast a sidelong glance at Zhury. “How far do you plan to go? I see you didn’t bring horses.”

“He’s meeting us not far from here. I couldn’t be gone long, or they would notice.” Zhury cast a nervous glance over his shoulder at the castle walls, looming huge and black in the darkness. “They will be so angry. Gerasim will kill me for certain. But I have to save Alkaev. They’ll see.”

“Father,” Zerhard began slowly, “you know that Alkaev—”

“Alkaev is alive! Alkaev is alive!” Zhury insisted. “He’s been living in a dark and cruel dungeon for all these years, but I won’t let him stay there! I can’t.”

“Fine, whatever you say,” Zerhard said, holding up his two-fingered hand in surrender and at the same time tightening his other hand’s hold on Jaemar. “But just out of curiosity, when you say ‘he is meeting us,’ you don’t mean—”

“Not the Imperial, no,” said Zhury. “He is very busy with his Order and the war in the south. But he knows I mean to honor his wishes, and he respects me—more than my brothers do. He’s sending his trusted Wyrdiac advisor to manage the exchange.”

The word “Wyrdiac” triggered a memory in Jaemar’s brain, but he could not quite figure out why it sounded familiar. Zerhard, however, seemed to have no trouble in recognizing the implication of the name.

“A Wyrdiac?” he cried in disbelief. He planted his feet so suddenly that Jaemar’s arm nearly tore out of its socket at the jolting stop. “Yeah, I think this is far enough.” Zerhard glanced back to check their distance from the castle walls. “Jaemar and I are parting ways with you here.”

Zhury whirled around from a few steps ahead, the lantern swinging in his hand. He lifted the seramite sword, seeming to forget that it was still shrouded in canvas.

Zerhard’s eyes stole to the weapon. “Don’t be fool enough to try to use that, especially after what happened to Jaemar.”

Keeping a stubborn hold on the sword with one hand, Zhury drew his knife and held it out with as much of a threat as he could muster in his terrified state. “You can go, Zerhard, but Jaemar must stay with me.” He swallowed and creased his eyebrows. “Do you realize what he’ll do to me if I don’t bring him the boy?”

“You should have thought of that before you made such an alliance,” said Zerhard, drawing Jaemar behind him.

The hand holding the knife fell to the king’s side, his face drawn in the sorrow of defeat. “Zerhard, my son...my child, what have I done to you to deserve this? Why are you doing this to me?” His voice, like his spirit, was broken.

“You know what you’ve done,” said Zerhard, the bitterness in his voice thick enough to be cut. “Once a child is taught hatred and fear, once he is shown the cruelty and dishonesty of man, he is no longer a child.” He began to back away, pushing Jaemar behind him.

They had barely taken three steps before a horrible change came over Zhury’s face. He lifted his arm and hurled the knife through the air. Zerhard shoved Jaemar to the ground and threw his hands in front of his body. By the time Jaemar had rolled once and risen to his knees, the fire in the lantern had somehow jumped from the candle to the front of Zhury’s toga.

Jaemar’s lips parted in shock as the blaze spread across the screaming king’s clothing, but Zerhard snapped his attention by grabbing the back of his shirt and lifting him to his feet.

“Come on, Jaemar, run!”

With the image imprinted on his mind of the king flailing his arms to put out the flames, Jaemar turned and dashed after Zerhard without a second glance back. The sudden burst of motion after days of inactivity nearly caused him to stumble at first, but adrenaline quickly kicked in and carried him across the field that lay stretched out before the Kazicmer castle. The dim moonlight showed him Zerhard’s back in front of him, and he ducked his head down and focused on breathing.

They left the field behind and splashed across a river, the cold water sprinkling their clothes and hair with glistening drops. A painful stitch seared across Jaemar’s side and spread through his chest to the wound in his shoulder. Pressing a hand against his

side, he bit the inside of his cheek and forced himself to keep running. They sprinted through a sparse copse of trees and stumbled through a hedge of shoulder-high bushes.

Only when they were concealed in a thick grouping of trees did Zerhard allow them to stop, both of them panting for air.

“Well,” Zerhard gasped between breaths, “that worked out surprisingly well.”

Jaemar peered through the trees to see if anyone was following them. He sucked air in through his teeth. “Will he die?”

“No.” Zerhard straightened and craned his head over Jaemar’s shoulder. “Did you see how small that fire was? We’re fortunate enough that it flared up in front of his face.”

Jaemar looked over his shoulder at him. “What did you do to him?”

Zerhard shrugged and stepped away. “Nothing he didn’t deserve.”

“But he’s your father,” said Jaemar, turning around.

“Not anymore.”

Frowning, Jaemar again tried to read past Zerhard’s bitter expression, but the Kazicmer prince turned and began climbing through a bush.

Jaemar hurried after him, intent on getting some answers. “But the fire. You did something. How did it get from the lantern to his clothes like that?” Jaemar caught up to him and forcibly turned him around by grabbing his shoulder. “I thought you were on the ground next to me.”

“After a knife had been lobbed at my head? Yes,” said Zerhard, twisting out of Jaemar’s grip and facing forward again. “The fire thing is just an old trick I know.”

He climbed through another bush and disappeared. Jaemar shoved his way through it and again jerked Zerhard around to face him. Zerhard half-turned, his mouth pressed into a tight line.

“Are you a Furore?” Jaemar demanded.

“A Furore? No, but can you imagine how cracking that would be?” he grinned.

His hand still on Zerhard’s shoulder, Jaemar raised his eyebrows, waiting for a more useful answer.

Zerhard rolled his eyes. “Fine, you caught me. I’m an Ellendar, but don’t go spreading it around.” He smirked. “After all, I’m not that good yet, and I wouldn’t want to disappoint anyone.”

Jaemar’s hand slid off Zerhard’s shoulder. “An Ellendar?” he repeated in disbelief, remembering Reahn’s father. “So you can control the elements?”

“Yes, do I have to prove it to you? Now come on. I was much further than this the last time I got caught.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### A City beneath a City

*Here again we have a touchstone of a race's value—the race which cannot stand the test will simply die out, making place for healthier or tougher and more resisting races. —Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf*

The Betae crossroads were an important juncture near the heart of Almaen. At a strategic point between rocky hills and wooded forests, the land leveled out into a plain where the north-south and east-west trade roads could meet and pass each other in safety. Both roads could seem empty and desolate for miles until they collided here, at which point a slog of carts and wagons were forced to fight their way out of the open and back into the lowlands.

From the relative vantage point of a slightly raised outcropping of boulders, Jaemar crouched and inspected the line of travelers. He noticed a marked difference in the faces of those going south and those moving north. The southward travelers guarded their faces behind expressionless solemnity. The others looked more relaxed, but even some of these could not help but cast anxious glances at the southern road behind them. The dichotomy confirmed his fears about what lay in the south.

“Are you sure you want to go to Resden?” Zerhard’s question caused Jaemar to jerk his head around so suddenly that he almost lost his footing and fell forward. Zerhard dropped his hand from shading his eyes but continued to squint south.

Rising to his feet, Jaemar raised his chin as though the extra few inches would help him see farther down the road.

“Because for someone who doesn’t want to be handed over to the Imperial, you’re tempting fate to come this close to his realm in Harodrac.”

Jaemar took a deep breath and chewed his lip in thought. “I don’t know where else to go. One of my friends said we could meet there if anything went wrong.” He turned toward Zerhard. “You don’t have to go.”

“You’re the one who’s afraid of the Imperial, not me,” said Zerhard, leaning forward to gauge the possibility of an easy descent to the road.

“But weren’t you trying to go north before they brought you back?”

Zerhard shrugged. “Let’s just say I changed my mind.” He placed a foot on a lower rock and allowed himself to skid a few feet downwards on the loose gravel. “I think I’ll chance my fortunes with you. At least for a while anyway.”

Jaemar began to climb down after him.

“You may have some trouble finding your friends though,” Zerhard called over his shoulder.

Jaemar slid on a broken rock and grabbed for a prickly weed to keep from falling. “That’s if they’re still there,” he said under his breath.

They managed to reach the bottom with nothing more than a few scraped palms. Joining themselves to the tide of travelers, they forged their way through the crossroads

and fell in with the stream going south. To his confusion, Jaemar counted a handful of Guards making their way north. All of them traveled alone, and most seemed to be constantly looking over their shoulders.

As they passed a fruit cart, Zerhard snagged an apple from one of the overflowing baskets. Jaemar looked at him in shock, but Zerhard only grinned and bit into the juicy fruit. He rolled his eyes at the delicious taste in his mouth.

“Stealing?”

Zerhard shrugged. “A man’s got to eat somehow.”

“Well, there are better ways than that.”

Zerhard snorted. “Such as?” He used the back of his two-fingered hand to wipe some juice off his chin.

They were at that moment beside the man driving the fruit cart. Jaemar squared his shoulders and called up to him.

“A good day to you, sir.”

The fruit vendor grunted and barely glanced at Jaemar.

“Would you be willing to trade for one of your apples?” Jaemar asked.

“Not unless you’ve got Order currency,” said the man, his voice hardly making it past his tangled white beard. “Anything else is not worth much to me.”

Jaemar frowned, his shoulders falling in defeat. Zerhard laughed as they continued past the man.

They had not been walking long when the rush around them came to a standstill. Skirting around the halted wagons and carts, Jaemar and Zerhard soon discovered the reason for the road block.

At the narrow point where the road dipped out of the level plain into a rocky canyon, two carts had collided, and the red-faced drivers were trying to disentangle their horses and right the fallen wagon. The cart coming from the south had remained on all four wheels, but Jaemar noticed that several burlap sacks had cascaded out of the back when he rounded the accident.

He stooped to pick one up, and Zerhard joined him, grunting as he swung the heavy bag onto his shoulder. As they stepped toward the bed of the cart, the driver appeared on the side and blocked their way, a furious expression on his face.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Just helping clear the road, sir,” said Jaemar, trying to go around him. The bag was about to slip from his fingers.

“I know what you were doing,” said the driver, shouldering Jaemar away from his wagon. “Stealing, that’s what.” He jerked the bag from Jaemar’s hands and dropped it carefully into the cart’s bed.

When he moved to take Zerhard’s bag, Jaemar grabbed another sack. He approached the cart to hand the sack to the driver, but the man was so intent on the precise placing of Zerhard’s sack that he didn’t turn around until Jaemar was standing right next to him. His eyes drawn to the movement of the man’s hands, Jaemar peered into the back of the cart. He saw a flash of movement and then a pool of something red that shimmered in the rays of the noonday sun.

“What did I say about keeping your light fingers out of other people’s business?” the gruff voice shoved Jaemar back two steps, and he tripped on another one of the fallen bags.

Zerhard caught the back of Jaemar's shirt and held him up at the same moment as the driver snatched away his precious wares from Jaemar's hands. As Zerhard steadied Jaemar, the driver leaned into his face.

"Get away from my cart, or I'll raise the cry." Jaemar could feel the man's warm breath in his eyes. "Two thieves on the road don't have much of a chance when there are this many witnesses."

The fingers of Zerhard's left hand closed around Jaemar's arm and pulled him backwards. He turned and, keeping his head down, followed Zerhard until they had disappeared back into the regular flow of the crowd.

"Zerhard," said Jaemar, his heart still hammering in his ears, "did you see into the back of the wagon?"

"No," Zerhard scowled. "I was too busy getting my eyes clawed out by the driver. What? Did you see something?"

"I thought I saw blood, but now I'm not sure."

"Are you saying it wasn't potatoes in those sacks?" Zerhard asked, a look of disgust crossing his face.

Jaemar shrugged. "I don't think it's what was in the sacks. I think he was using them to hide something, or..."

"Or what?" Zerhard gave Jaemar a sharp look.

"I don't know. Now that I think about it, it must have been just his shadow moving over the sacks."

"What did you see?" Zerhard demanded, but Jaemar was frowning at the road ahead.

“There are no more travelers coming from the south.”

Zerhard didn't seem to care. “What do you think you saw in the cart?”

Jaemar turned his head to face Zerhard's inquiring look. “A hand.”

Zerhard threw a glance over his shoulder before staring ahead again. “So they're smuggling people out, and now no one is coming from that way. Seems your friends choose interesting meeting places.”

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of Jaemar's stomach. He knew it had nothing to do with the fact that he'd only eaten foraged food for the past five days.

The road gradually widened as the shaded canyon gave way to dry, rocky terrain. A fork in the path sprung up on the left, and the travelers divided down the separate ways. Jaemar and Zerhard abandoned the southern road and turned onto the road leading east, which rose gradually in the shadow of jagged cliffs. Only a handful of travelers and traders surrounded them now, the rest disappearing down the road to Geresdain, the capital city of Harodrac and the Order.

The beleaguered knot of travelers had not long been separated from the main road when the walls of Resden appeared over a rise of the cliffs. They were still some distance away from the front gate when they passed a patrol of Guards.

“Maybe that apple had been in the sun too long,” said Zerhard, eyeing the Guards as he moved past, “but I'm starting to get the feeling that this is a trap. Have you ever been here before?”

Jaemar nodded, remembering Reahn's story about meeting Simnara in Resden when she was fleeing north. “But I was too young to remember.”

Near the front gate, their road joined with one coming from the south, resulting in a bottleneck as vendors and merchants vied to gain entry into the city. Jaemar almost lost his footing as the pressing mob drove him through the arched gate. As he freed himself from the wrestle of shoving arms and legs, Jaemar found himself standing in a large piazza. Flags imprinted with the serreone flanked the main archway and flew from some of the buildings, and an imposing marble statue of the Imperial graced the center of the plaza.

Zerhard appeared at Jaemar's elbow and nodded up at the statue. "Is it a true likeness?"

Jaemar shrugged. "I didn't think anyone really knew what he looks like."

A shout near the gate caused him to turn away from studying the statue.

"What do you mean no one else can leave?" a man near the archway demanded.

He stood at the front of a small mob of people pressed against a line of half a dozen Guards. They weren't blocking the steady stream of newcomers into the city. But no one was going out through the gates.

"Zerhard—"

"I know, I know," said Zerhard. "Follow me. We should get out of the square."

As they crossed the open space and neared the statue, Jaemar's eyes were drawn to its base. A hastily fashioned board had been fixed to the stone, and Jaemar stepped closer to read the scrawled words, hoping they were some act of defiance.

*How will you act if you know the Imperial is watching? Help extend the reach of the Order by volunteering to become part of the Imperial's eyes and ears...*

Jaemar stopped reading and hurried to catch up with Zerhard.

They left the plaza and the argument by the front gate and turned onto the right side of a wide street. People on the left side were walking toward the front square in what appeared to be ordered rows. The street itself was lined with inns, taverns, and merchant stores, most of which had residences above them. Jaemar tilted his head back to look at the three- and four-storey buildings and could not help but feel that he was back in the canyon. The stamp of feet echoed off of the high buildings, but there were no voices to mingle with the sound.

Order flags stamped with the serreone hung from several windows, and many storeowners had fixed Order-decorated signs in their windows. As he passed a narrow building with a line of people coming out the door, Jaemar leaned closer to the window to read the parchment plastered to it: *Maintain national pride by advancing the unity of one language. Apply inside for instruction in the tongue of the Order.*

“Jaemar, look.”

Turning from the sign, Jaemar’s eyes followed Zerhard’s pointing finger to the other side of the street, where a group of uniformed children marched in two lines.

“Those aren’t the Youth, are they?” asked Zerhard.

Jaemar shook his head. “They don’t look old enough to be in the Youth. Unless they’ve started accepting them younger.”

A woman in front of him turned around and glared at them. They avoided eye contact and remained silent until she faced forward again.

“Have you noticed?” Jaemar said under his breath. “No one is talking.”

“I’m starting to think it was a mistake to come here,” Zerhard whispered back.

“Come on,” he said, darting into a side alley.

They traced their way through a second silent street and hurried up another string of alleys until they emerged onto a small square. At the center, a crowd had clustered around a pedestal with a stone serreone on it. A man stood next to the winged creature and was addressing the people below him.

Jaemar shot Zerhard an inquiring glance. "At least somebody's talking."

Zerhard shrugged. "At least they're not standing in rows."

They edged toward the crowd and listened as the man continued his speech.

"...education we have previously received has left us unable to properly meet the changes overtaking Almaen. They have made us satisfied with less, and the result is that few of us have reached the fullest of our potential as beings of life."

Jaemar looked at Zerhard and raised an eyebrow.

"I say, 'no!'" the man thundered, raising his fist in fury. "Instead of focusing on the mere inoculation of knowledge, we must demand the instruction necessary to create healthy bodies. Otherwise, the character and will of our children will rest in the hands of one teacher armed with scrolls and stories."

The crowd rippled with a murmur of indignant agreement. Jaemar frowned.

"In the wise words of our great Imperial," the speaker went on, "'personal cowardice lies in physical weaknesses,' and both must be destroyed if we are to create a truly strong and united nation."

Sensing a slight motion to his left, Jaemar glanced over as Zerhard slowly slid his mangled right hand into his jacket. He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head, but the scar on his face was not so easily hidden.

“The Order offers freedom from such limitations!” the speaker cried. “It promises your child strength as well as wisdom in a community of his peers. Enrollment in either the Imperial Youth or the Nark League is not yet required for children, but we should not wait for it to be.” The man clamped his hand around the serreone’s dragon mouth and used the leverage to pivot around the beast and face the other side of the crowd. “We should consider it a crime to withhold healthy children from their own advancement and the Order’s glory. Let us make Resden a city where all children freely volunteer to serve. Such a distinction would surely bring recognition from Imperial Haurreich himself.”

Someone near Jaemar grunted in a way that suggested disgust, and Jaemar turned to see who had made the sound. A line of enraptured faces watched the speaker in captivated attention, and Jaemar was about to turn his head away when he noticed a dark-skinned man at the back of the crowd. He wore a short black beard and a gold earring. His brown arms were folded across his expansive chest, and his face was drawn into a fierce glower. He had a red serreone tattooed around one arm, but he didn’t seem to be enjoying the Imperial propaganda the man on the statue was spouting.

The sharp peal of a bell shifted Jaemar’s attention back to the speaker, who looked across the rooftops toward the sound before raising his hands.

“Everyone make your way to one of the exhibition plazas!” he urged the crowd. Even across the distance, Jaemar could see the malicious grin spreading across his face. “As you know, this morning’s events will make today’s demonstration particularly... inspiring.”

The responding silence caused Jaemar to think that most of the crowd either disagreed or were too afraid to say anything. However, he and Zerhard had not yet decided which group to follow when a man's voice rang from somewhere in the crowd.

“The common good!”

Several voices echoed the sentiment, and then another voice cried, “Those who break the common trust must pay with their lives!”

“Death to all untouchables and outsiders!”

Zerhard's hand closed around Jaemar's arm, but Jaemar was too intent on keeping the tattooed man in sight to notice. He watched him slip behind a row of closed vendors' stalls. Ignoring the biting feel of Zerhard's fingers digging into his skin, Jaemar lunged after the man and weaved his way through the now sparsely spread crowd.

“Jaemar, wait!” Zerhard hissed behind him.

As they whipped behind the stalls, they heard the sickening cheer rise up in the square: “Long life the Imperial, and may the Order reign forever!” The answering roar seemed to shake the ground, and a tremor juddered up Jaemar's legs and through his chest. He shook Zerhard's grip off and quickened his pace.

“Jaemar, what are you doing?” Zerhard called as they entered an alley.

Jaemar didn't answer. Ahead, he could see the man turn a corner, but Zerhard grabbed Jaemar from behind and prevented him from following.

“Let go of me!” Jaemar tried to jerk his arm free.

“Where are you going?” Zerhard demanded, refusing to lighten his grip.

Jaemar twisted his head around, but the man had vanished. “I think he can help us.”

Zerhard didn't relinquish his hold. "You really want to risk that?"

"It's my own life I'm risking. You can come if you want."

Reluctantly, Zerhard let go. Without giving him a second glance, Jaemar raced to the corner and stopped. He looked both ways, but the man with the earring was nowhere to be seen. Of those people Jaemar did see, most crept along the shadows of the shambled buildings or scurried from one dark passage to another.

As Jaemar let out a breath in disappointment, Zerhard came up next to him. He threw a sweeping glance over the panorama and gave a low whistle.

"Well this is new."

Resigned to the fact that the man was gone, Jaemar refocused on the street to see what Zerhard meant. What he saw made him keenly aware of how clean the rest of the city had been. Refuse was clumped against the walls and clouded the puddles and gutter rivers on the street. The houses looked ready to collapse where they stood, and most entrances yawned doorlessly agape.

A rat skittered across the broken stones in front of them, followed by what might have once been a cat. Just as the rat squeezed under a half-fallen fence, a grubby-faced child in tattered clothes appeared and dashed after the two animals with outstretched arms.

"So this is the real face of Resden," said Zerhard.

Before Jaemar could reply, they heard the rumble of splintering wood smashing onto the stone ground. The cascade of sound ended in a woman's shriek. People were vanishing off the street into houses and alleys. Zerhard and Jaemar looked at each other.

“I think it came from down there,” said Jaemar, pointing to a cross street just up a few blocks from where they stood.

Wordlessly, both of them sprinted across the empty street toward the woman’s repeated cry. The street they came to was desolate, and the sound of their feet slapping the loose stones echoed against the blank walls as they raced down the block. At the end, they stopped to listen again.

Jaemar turned to look down the right side of the street and saw a small huddle of people standing in a haze of chalky dust. He nudged Zerhard’s shoulder, and the two of them hurried toward the scene of destruction. Their footsteps slowed, however, as a commanding voice drifted out of the cloud of rubble.

“Do you see what happens when a house is not built on the foundation of the Order? This could happen to all of Resden. Don’t you understand?” The voice had become soft, almost pleading.

Jaemar listened for an answer, and he vaguely detected the broken sound of weeping.

“Silence!” The speaker seemed to remember that his role was to persuade, and he lowered his voice again. “Listen. You are saved from your blindness and can return to the community of the Imperial. Do not weep for the death of those who break his trust. They pay for their crimes with their lives, and their sacrifice allows the rest of the city to remain whole.”

Jaemar turned a silent look of horror to Zerhard, whose expression mirrored his own. Pressing his right shoulder against the wall beside him, Jaemar inched further along the street, squinting into the settling dust. A woman in a green and white dress knelt in

the middle of the street with her head down, her red hair rippling over her shoulders and hiding her face. A man had lowered himself to his knee before her, and three figures stood behind him, two of them holding wooden beams.

The woman looked up. "Please let me go in. They need my help."

As Jaemar watched, one of the figures stepped forward and pushed the shoulder of the man kneeling. As the first man stood, the second yanked the woman to her feet and shoved her against the wall behind her.

"You have betrayed the Imperial by harboring untouchables. Do you admit it?"

Before she could reply and before Jaemar or Zerhard could react, a glinting object spun toward the last two figures, whistling over their heads as they jerked to avoid it. Jaemar's head swiveled in all directions to figure out where the weapon had come from.

A deep voice issued from somewhere above him and to his left. "Imperial Youth have no business crossing the boundary into the haven of those who reject the Order."

All eyes turned toward the imposing figure of the man Jaemar recognized from the square. He swung from a roof to a second storey and then vaulted to the ground. Rising to his full height, he began to stalk toward the Youth, twirling another throwing star in his hand. The muscles contracting in his arm made his serreone tattoo look as though it were alive.

Two of the Youth took an almost imperceptible step back, but the one restraining the woman turned his head and snarled. "Aden Caygio. I might have known." He pressed the woman harder against the wall but spoke over his shoulder to the man with the serreone tattoo. "Those who reject the Order don't deserve a haven, Aden, just as untouchables don't deserve life."

When Aden did not reply, a thick silence crouched over the scene, and Jaemar suddenly heard young, muffled voices coming from the rubble of the sabotaged house. His heart chilled in his chest as he realized what the Youth had done.

“Please,” the woman said, the one word weighted by anguish.

The Youth holding her turned his head and nodded to the first Youth. “Do it now.” He looked back at Aden. “If you try and stop us, nothing will stop me from killing her.”

The first Youth struck a flame and lit a torch, holding the brand above his head. Jaemar felt his throat constrict as the Youth took a step toward the collapsed house.

“No! There are children in there!” the woman screamed.

The Youth holding her looked from her to the house and back again.

“There are no beings of life in there.”

Zerhard brushed past Jaemar, who saw the man called Aden flick his hand at the same time. Unaware of these small movements, the first Youth drew back his arm and lobbed the flaming torch at the broken house.

Jaemar heard Zerhard form a whispered word, and the burning torch was extinguished as though a breath of chance wind had carried it away. As the torch clattered harmlessly onto the pile of rubble, the Youth restraining the woman collapsed, a throwing star lodged in his forehead.

Before Aden had taken another step, the remaining three Youth deserted the street, and the woman stepped over their fallen comrade and rushed to the rubble. Starting forward automatically, Jaemar found himself by her side.

“How many?”

Without looking at him, the woman knelt by a beam and began to lift it. “Five.”

Aden gave a long whistle, and then he and Zerhard joined the search. Others soon appeared, adding their hands to the effort of digging out the trapped children. Two of them were quickly pulled out, and they could hear a third calling for help.

Jaemar circled around to the back of the house and found Zerhard kneeling by the wreckage with his two-fingered hand reaching out in front of him. Near Zerhard’s outstretched hand, Jaemar saw something white sticking out from under the dark wood. A child’s arm, at the end of which was a hand missing three fingers.

Zerhard’s fingers touched the lifeless ones of the child, and he murmured to himself, “The touchstone of a being’s value.” His tone seemed to convey that he was reciting something he had heard before. “Those that cannot endure adversity or survive challenges will simply die out, making place for those that are healthier, stronger...better.”

The words burned themselves into Jaemar’s mind, and he felt something sharp stir in his chest and burn his lungs.

“Shouldn’t we—”

Zerhard rose abruptly. “There’s no point, Jaemar.”

Clenching his fists, he crossed his arms and began to walk away. Jaemar heard someone behind him call out, “Over there! They’ve found another one.” He saw the woman rushing toward him, and he hurried after Zerhard before he would be forced to watch her discovery.

He caught up to Zerhard at the next block. “Zerhard, what—”

A voice from behind startled them both. "I would ask to know why you were following me, but your actions have earned you the first question."

Jaemar and Zerhard turned around to see Aden staring down at them from his impressive height. He raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"We saw you at the gathering in the square," Jaemar began slowly, before he decided to ask the question burning on his tongue. "Are you part of the Resistance?"

"Do you know the sign?" Aden asked.

With a glance at Zerhard, Jaemar repeated the action he'd first seen performed by Reahn and Ravenna, first touching his forehead with two fingers and then making a cross with his fists.

The man nodded. "I'm Aden. Aden Caygio. Most of us here in the unmarked region are for the rebellion, but we've been betrayed before." He eyed them closely. "By the way, which one of you is the Ellendar?"

Jaemar looked at Zerhard before he realized that Zerhard might not want his identity revealed. He looked away again, but Zerhard was already speaking. "That would be me."

Aden studied his face and nodded slowly. "It's been a long time since any of us have seen something like what you did."

"Because they've rounded up all the Ellendars?" Zerhard's voice was bitter.

"Yes. They were some of the first to disappear."

"Disappear?" repeated Jaemar.

Aden's dark eyes shifted to Jaemar. "One of the first messages proclaimed when the Order came to Resden was equality." He looked down at the throwing star in his

hands. “Those who had lived in jealousy and fear of their more,” he glanced at Zerhard, “gifted neighbors finally had the push they needed. Claiming obedience to the Order, people turned in friends, neighbors, and even relatives they deemed overly superior or simply different.”

“Aden!”

All three of them turned to see a skinny boy with an awkward gait limping toward them and towing a stringy-haired girl behind him. The pair of them stopped beside Aden, and the boy looked up at him while the girl dropped her eyes to the ground, hiding her tear-stained cheeks with her hair in the same way the woman had.

“Aden, we’re supposed to go back with you.” The boy’s voice was tight in his attempt to sound brave.

Aden reached down and lifted a child into each arm as though they were as light as parchment. He looked questioningly at Zerhard and Jaemar, who spoke for them.

“We’ll go with you.”

Aden stepped in front and continued to lead them away from the destroyed house. He spoke softly to the little girl before taking up his story again.

“The Ellendars disappeared with everyone else who was suspected of rising above his rank. They were either drafted into the Imperial’s service or eliminated altogether, and those who had betrayed them took their places, often claiming the abandoned houses and belongings as their own.”

He stooped under a low beam, cradling the little girl’s head in his shoulder, and waited for Jaemar and Zerhard to follow him into the narrow passage. They emerged onto a small square, in the center of which rested an Imperial statue on its side. Due to

many cracks and broken pieces, Jaemar guessed that it had been set up and knocked down again several times. A notice had been affixed to the Imperial statue's raised hand.

*Just as the night rises against the day, the light and dark are in eternal conflict. So too, is the subhuman our greatest enemy. Although it has features similar to a human, the subhuman is lower than any Morgskall or animal. Inside of this creature lies wild and unrestrained passions: an incessant need to destroy, filled with the most primitive desires, chaos, and coldhearted villainy.*

*Not all of those who appear human are in fact so. Woe to him who forgets it! The Imperial Order forever!*

With a shudder, Jaemar turned his eyes away from the knife-like words and looked at the graffitied walls around the square. His attention was immediately caught by an angrily scrawled message painted in what looked to be blood.

“But the fight against the Ellendars is long since past,” said Aden. “We now have new messages to resist.”

Jaemar squinted to make out the words slashed on the wall.

*All rebels, traitors, and untouchables are unfit to live.*

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Might of the Order

*“Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own?” –George Orwell, 1984*

As Jaemar scanned the makeshift “enemies of the state” list, his eyes fell on blocky letters that spelled out Aden’s name. After a further search, he saw other specific names, some of which had been crossed out.

Aden marched over to the fallen statue and leaned over the notice. The girl was sleeping, but the boy wriggled out of Aden’s arm. While Aden ripped the parchment from the statue and crumpled it in his free hand, the boy staggered toward the wall of names as fast as his lame leg would allow. He turned his head in all directions, as though looking for something, before turning somber eyes back to Aden.

“They don’t have my name up there yet.”

Even as the child spoke, Jaemar saw a collection of descriptions painted under the heading “defective” and hoped the boy didn’t know how to read yet.

Zerhard stepped forward and placed his right hand on the boy’s shoulder. “They’ve got a fairly narrow view of things,” he said, laying his good hand flat against the wall. “If they keep this up, the Imperial will have no one but himself to rule.”

Aden grunted in disgust, and shifted the sleeping girl higher on his shoulder. “That reminds me. Both of you have proven yourselves, but you also have the look of those

from the southern realms, and one can never be too careful these days.” He glanced at Jaemar with something close to a plea in his bronze eyes. “I’m not accusing you, but I need to know who you are and why you are in Resden.” After a pause, he added, “You understand?”

Jaemar looked at Zerhard, who shrugged, before replying. “I’m Jaemar Ralour, and this is Zerhard Vantak. We were supposed to meet some friends here a few days ago, but we were delayed. I don’t know how we’re going to find them, or even if they’re here.”

“Well, they aren’t letting anyone leave the city,” Zerhard pointed out, letting his hand slip off the wall.

“That’s been happening more often recently,” said Aden. “Usually after a riot. Today’s caused the death of seven civilians, but the Guards were angrier that one of their men was wounded and two Youths were killed. It was one of the worst fights we’ve seen in a while.” He shrugged in a way that almost made his last statement an insufficient representation of the truth. “I guess a lot of people got scared and tried to leave, but the Guards closed the gates.” He shrugged again and shook his head. “They’ll open it in a few days.” He narrowed his eyes as though trying to remember something. “You said you have friends here?”

Jaemar nodded.

“I haven’t seen anyone new in days, but if they’re here, there’s a chance one of us has seen them.” He motioned for them to follow him. “Come on, Sasha.”

Sasha reached up, took Zerhard’s two-fingered hand, and began pulling him after Aden.

“One of us?” Jaemar asked, jogging to catch up.

Aden grinned. “You’re about to meet the real face of Resden. I know we look like sold-out supporters of the Imperial, but the truth is, you won’t find a group of rebels more dedicated unless you join the Resistance.”

Jaemar and Zerhard looked at each other behind Aden’s back, but they wordlessly followed him down a flight of stairs and then turned single-file down a dank alley whose aromas of rotten food and sewage nearly knocked Jaemar off his feet. Aden stopped in front of a rough oaken door and knocked three times. The knocks echoed before being swallowed by the dead silence of the alley. When the door finally swung open, Jaemar was momentarily blinded by the bright firelight inside.

The silhouette of a tall, thickly-built man slowly came into focus as Jaemar’s eyes adjusted to the light.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

Jaemar ignored the strangeness of the man’s tone and instead studied him through squinted eyes. He had the tan skin of the southern realms, along with the black hair. He took a step forward, illuminating red bands on his upper arms and a black-hilted sword at his side. But Jaemar’s focus was drawn to the image burned into the man’s leather tunic. It mirrored the serreone tattoo on Aden’s arm.

Aden took a step back before a desperately gasped warning came from behind the man in the doorway.

“Aden, it’s a trap!”

Jaemar turned to run back down the alley but found the way blocked by a wall of serreone shields. The sight forced him back so suddenly that he barreled into Zerhard and nearly knocked him and Sasha to the ground.

Aden, who still stood before the door, had not flinched. The girl in his arms lifted her head for an instant before burying it back in his chest, as though she thought hiding her face from what she saw would make it all go away.

The Imperial Guard in the doorway crossed his arms and sized up the rebel leader before him. "So. This is the ex-Captain of Resden's Guard." He nodded his head once. "You're not what I thought you'd be."

He took another step forward and nodded toward the girl in Aden's arms before also noticing Sasha peek out from behind Zerhard's legs.

"Who are the children?"

Jaemar felt the metal of a shield press against his back, and he instinctively wrapped a hand around Zerhard's arm.

"They are not who you want," said Aden in a low voice. "Let them go."

"I will be the judge of that," the Guard replied coolly. He jerked his chin upwards as though making a signal. "Take them."

Jaemar felt himself being grabbed from behind, and he heard the struggle of feet against pavement as he and the others were dragged backwards out of the alley. The Guards took little care of their prisoners, and Jaemar's head knocked into the wall and shields more than once.

With his head throbbing and his arms nearly twisted out of their sockets, Jaemar tripped up some stairs and stumbled into a small plaza. He looked up and saw again the

graffitied walls and the overturned statue, but the square was no longer empty. Knots of rebels stood sullenly under the watchful eyes of their captors, and more were being herded up the stairs behind Zerhard and Aden. To Jaemar's surprise, Aden still held the little girl tightly in his arms, his hand pressing her head into his shoulder as though he wanted to protect her eyes from what he could see.

Sasha limped just behind Aden, his crooked gait forcing him to struggle to keep ahead of the spear point at his back. As Jaemar watched, Zerhard dropped back and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder to urge him forward.

The leader of the Guards shouldered past both of them and planted himself beneath the scrawled inscription labeling those unfit for life. Directing his attention toward a group of Guards nearby, he nodded toward the fallen statue. "Tell them to raise it."

Before Jaemar had fully translated what the Guard had said, he was shoved toward the statue along with several other rebels. With his head reeling, Jaemar joined the line of men straining to right the statue. His muscles burned, and he gritted his teeth in the effort. As the stone Imperial gradually rose over them, Jaemar caught a glimpse of the notice in the stone hand. Subhuman. They had not been born that way, but it was what they were being forced to become.

"An incessant need to destroy. Coldhearted villainy."

Pressing the full weight of his body against the dark stone, Jaemar glanced over his shoulder to see which of the Guards was speaking, but the voice echoing through the plaza did not belong to a Guard. A young rebel with a ragged band wrapped around his head took a step toward the leader of the Guards, but his eyes fixed on the statue.

“Not all of those who appear human are in fact so,” he recited. Raising a hand, he reached into his jacket. “Woe to him who forgets what true humanity is!”

The statue thudded into place, and the rebel youth leapt onto the Guard’s back and brandished a dagger over his head. Before the leader of the Guards could react, the rebel had driven the dagger into his chest. Someone shouted in alarm, and the rebel rolled off of the Guard’s back, but Jaemar could not tear his eyes away from the hilt of the dagger, which was lodged in the center of the *serreone* on the Guard’s breastplate.

Jaemar flattened himself into the crowd around the statue. The Guard didn’t move, and Jaemar gaped at the dagger sticking out of his chest.

Another Guard stepped toward his commander. “Captain Hurreich—”

But the captain held up a hand to stop him. The name rang in Jaemar’s ear like the execution bell that had earlier sounded through the city. The only one alive to share his fate. Ravenna’s words sifted through his memory. *The other son is one of his best captains, so there is little hope for us in him.* The realization wrapped itself like an iron hand around Jaemar’s throat, and he barely noticed the captain lifting his hand to the knife in his chest. He grasped the handle and slowly pulled it out. Jaemar saw something black glint on the blade before the captain let it fall to the ground. An Immortal.

Two Guards rushed to restrain the rebel and a third drew his sword, but the captain stopped them again with a wave of his hand.

“Bring him with the others.” He turned to face his attacker. “If Resden does not see its danger, this evil will grow.”

“No!” Aden’s protest broke the chilling silence, and Jaemar leaned across a burly rebel beside him to see what was happening.

The little girl had been wrenched from his grasp, and it was taking the combined efforts of three Guards to hold Aden back. Her own shrieks drowned out his cry, and she stretched tiny arms helplessly toward him as the distance between them widened.

“Captain!” A Guard yanked Sasha back by his hair and used the other hand to draw his sword.

Haurreich’s son started toward them.

“Leave them alone!” Aden demanded.

Haurreich ignored him. “What is this?”

“The boy’s defective. Not fit for the Nark League or the Youth.” Sasha tried to pry the man’s fingers out of his hair, but the Guard shook him. “What should be done with him?”

Aden stopped struggling against his captors and leaned forward to hear the captain’s answer.

Haurreich hesitated before speaking. “Take him and the girl to the House of Correction. We will see how much they can learn.”

Aden threw himself forward with a strangled cry, but those holding him jerked him back. He was wrestled into line with the other rebels as the children were carried in a separate direction.

“Aden! Don’t let them take us! Aden!”

Jaemar squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t know either of the children, but the girl’s sobs and the boy’s cries for help pierced his ears and cut their way through every fibre in his body. Their lost voices continued to reverberate in his mind long after the procession had left the unmarked region behind and entered the city proper.

“Never again,” Jaemar heard Aden whisper to himself beside him. “I promised myself I would never hear that again.”

“Aden,” a Guard sidled up next to them. “Poverty has not been kind to you. Look at what the rebel life has done to you!”

Aden didn’t look up from the marching feet in front of him. “And yet the Imperial life has blinded you so much I’m surprised you can even recognize me, Navok.”

“Blinded me?” returned the Guard in shock. “It has opened my eyes.”

“It has made you forget,” said Aden to the backs before him.

Navok continued as though he hadn’t heard him. “The truths of the Order have made me see the world and life for what they truly are. The weight of the past has been lifted from me.” He laid a gloved hand on Aden’s shoulder. “I am free, and it is still not too late to free yourself.”

Aden brushed his hand away. “I freed myself when I left the Order. If freedom from the past is the only thing the Order has given you, you only strengthen my resolve against it.” He lowered his head. “You might have chosen to forget your family for the sake of the Order, but the memory of my son is the last thing they will take from me.”

Jaemar looked at Navok and saw confusion in his face. “I never had a family. And your son...well, after you accept the Order, you will realize that your son never existed.”

“He did, and he would be alive still if the Order had not taken his life.”

The line stopped, and Jaemar looked ahead to see high walls broken only by gaps of barred windows. Craning his neck, he saw that the rebels were disappearing one by one into the narrow opening at the wall’s base.

“You still haven’t learned,” Navok said with a hint of sadness in his voice. “The Order takes nothing that is not already its own.”

Aden finally lifted his head to look at his old friend. “And you have not learned that anything or anyone that belongs to all really belongs to no one. I have seen and experienced what the Order is, and I want no part of it.”

They were two steps from the door, and Navok stopped. “You were one of the best Guards in Resden, but I see now what you really are.” He lifted a hand. “Farewell, Aden.”

If Aden replied, Jaemar did not hear it, for as they passed by the son of Hurreich and entered the prison, Zerhard appeared on Jaemar’s other side and nudged him with his elbow.

“Did you know the Imperial’s son was Immortal?”

Jaemar averted his eyes from the captain and waited to reply until they had stepped into the dim hallway inside the prison.

“No. I didn’t expect to see him here, either.”

“Seems Resden is more important than we thought.”

They were herded along with several of the other male rebels into a large cell with barred walls on two sides and stone on the others. After a sweeping glance, Jaemar came to the conclusion that prisoners held in this cell were only meant to be temporary.

As the door shut them in with a clang, several voices entreated the Guards outside the cell with questions as to their fate.

“You’re to wait here,” one offered helpfully. “Captain Hurreich will come soon to give you the sentence of the Order.”

The Guards left, taking the light with them, and Jaemar slumped against one of the stone walls. He heard the anxious rustle of pacing and people trying to settle themselves as comfortably as a jail could allow. The darkness seemed to have swallowed all speech until one defeated voice shuffled out into the open.

“They’re going to make an example of us, aren’t they?” It was a young voice, or it had been before it had been brought into a prison.

When no one spoke for a full minute, Jaemar thought no one was going to answer at all. But another voice, more embittered than hopeless, finally responded.

“Someone has to tell him.”

“Quiet!”

“No! He deserves to know his own fate.” He raised his voice, as though announcing to the whole jail. “You’re going to die, boy. As soon as the sun rises and they gather a crowd large enough, they’re going to—”

“Enough!” Jaemar recognized Aden’s voice. “None of us know what tomorrow will bring.”

“Perhaps not, but we at least know for certain that it will bring a tighter hold around our necks,” the first man shot back. “I don’t know how we ever thought we could challenge the Order. It will never be destroyed by any force we possess. It is an idea, and force is useless against it.”

“Only if you have already accepted the idea,” said Aden. “If we die fighting them, that will be freedom enough. But if we give up on each other now, the Order will not have to kill us. We will end up betraying each other until we are all dead.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re dead anyway.”

A few voices tried weak attempts at silencing him, but a low murmur began to spread between the cells. If the fearful whispers near Jaemar were any indication, Aden had not won the argument.

“Maybe they’ll grant us a pardon if we swear allegiance to the Order,” said a man near Jaemar’s right shoulder.

“How can you say that?” another hissed back.

“You have to remember that it’s not just our lives at stake. Some of us have families to think about. What will the Imperial do to them?”

With a shudder, Jaemar crawled over to where he had heard Aden’s voice coming from. He found him after interrupting three conversations.

“Aden?”

“I’m here. Is that Jaemar?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t find your friends.”

“I just hope they’re not in here.”

Zerhard’s voice drifted between them. “You’ve got a determined group of rebels here.” He grunted. “If we don’t watch our backs, we’ll be outnumbered by new allies of the Order.”

Aden sighed. “I really don’t blame them. We’ve seen too many public executions to hope for a different outcome.”

“Then why even try?” demanded Jaemar. “If it’s hopeless, why would anyone try to challenge the Order?”

Even in the dark, Jaemar could feel Aden's eyes on him. "Defying the Imperial is our last act of freedom. If we surrender to it and content ourselves with just being alive, we do not deserve even that."

Reaching through the dark, Aden rested his hand on Jaemar's shoulder. "Even if they kill us, that does not mean victory for the Order or the end of the Resistance. The Imperial has chosen an eternal war, and at some point, even his Guards will realize that they don't want to fight anymore."

"Your friend doesn't seem to agree."

"Navok will soon become the exception. People will see through the veil and realize they want freedom instead of control." His voice grew softer. "And they won't be killed for choosing it."

He lapsed into silence, and before Jaemar could phrase a question, the grating noise of the cell door screeched across the floor. Torchlight threw dark shadows against the walls and illuminated the throngs of terrified faces.

Jaemar turned to see Hurreich's son standing in the entrance. For a brief instant, he remembered that this man was his cousin, and he tried to find something in his appearance that might connect him. If there was anything, the Order had shrouded it.

With a sweeping glance at the huddled prisoners, Hurreich stepped further into the cell. A dozen armed Guards fanned out behind him.

"You are all guilty of treason against the Imperial Order and should be sentenced to death for your crime." His eye fell on Aden. "However, the Imperial is a merciful ruler and is willing to forgive those who will swear allegiance to him. No harm will come to you if you do."

Jaemar's attention was drawn to the Guards behind Hurreich, all of whom had one hand on their swords.

Hurreich bent forward and placed one of his hands on the head of a boy who looked to be no more than ten or twelve. The boy cringed but didn't try to shake off the captain's hand.

"Think of your children and their future." He lingered before slowly raising himself to his full height. He addressed the whole room again. "A Giver of the Mark has come to Resden, and any who so choose may go to him now." He stepped to the side and waved a hand to the open door behind him and the wall of Guards.

For a moment, no one moved. Jaemar wondered if anyone would step forward. A Guard near him shifted, his armor clanking together. Feeling his throat go dry, Jaemar imagined the captain loosing all of his Guards on the prisoners to massacre them if no one spoke up.

A man near the back wall stood and picked his way silently forward. Jaemar didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. More rebels followed the first, including a man who dragged the ten-year-old boy behind him.

As more people moved forward, Jaemar felt a sickening horror rising in his stomach. He was witnessing Aden's words come true. The rebels were being divided, betraying each other to the point that they would soon no longer pose a threat to the Order.

A man shouldered into Jaemar as he moved past him. He threw a glower over his shoulder as though Jaemar were the one who had betrayed him.

"What are you doing?" demanded the youth who had stabbed the captain.

He started forward, but Aden caught his eye and shook his head once. The young rebel frowned and crossed his arms.

Jaemar studied the faces around him and tried to decide who looked more terrified—the ones who chose the Mark or the ones who refused it.

When a little less than half of the rebels remained, the captain surveyed them once more. “This will be your only chance,” he said.

This time, no one moved. Jaemar could hear water dripping from the ceiling, and somewhere a rat skittered across the stone floor.

“So be it,” said Hurreich. “The execution will be at dawn.”

The words lingered long after the Guards had left and shut the remaining prisoners back in darkness. Unable to bear it any longer, Jaemar finally interrupted the words echoing in his head.

“Maybe we should have chosen the Mark, Zerhard. I can’t die here.”

Zerhard smirked. “Don’t worry.” Jaemar heard him scooting closer. “I didn’t escape from my father’s house just to be killed by the Order.”

“Can you...can you *do* anything?”

“What, you mean as an Ellendar?” he said in a low voice. “Probably not. I’m useless against swords, and if I tried, they would kill me for sure.”

“I think we’re all going to be killed for sure,” came Aden’s voice at Jaemar’s right. He moved nearer to them. “You don’t need to worry about being singled out.”

“Looks like you were right, Aden,” said Jaemar. “About people choosing life over freedom. Makes fighting against the Imperial seem pointless.”

“So just because you saw some people give up on the resistance means you’re ready to do the same?” asked Aden.

“No.” Jaemar paused, thinking about his task of killing the Imperial and wondering if he could trust Aden with the secret. “I just...don’t know if I should risk my life for people who are just going to choose loyalty to the Imperial anyway.”

Aden laughed. “Risk your life for them? Why is it up to you?”

Jaemar pressed his lips together and didn’t answer.

“That’s why you can’t base your actions on the choices of other people,” said Zerhard, something close to bitterness tainting his tone. “If you know what’s right, you do it for its own sake and not for the sake of those who will be affected by it.”

Jaemar looked toward Zerhard, whose glittering eyes were barely visible in the dark. He saw determination in them as well as what looked like recognition.

With a brief glance at Aden, Jaemar took a breath. “You remember I told you I couldn’t be taken by the Imperial.” He hesitated.

“Seeing as you’re his bane, I can see why you’d take that stance,” said Zerhard.

Jaemar opened his mouth and shut it before shaking his head. “We have to do something. There has to be a way out of this.” Lowering his voice, he whispered as though only to himself. “I cannot die here.”

He looked up again and found Zerhard staring at him. There was suspicion in Zerhard’s eyes, but he said nothing.

After a brief silence, Aden sighed. “I have never broken out of an Imperial prison, but I have helped others escape before.”

Both Zerhard and Jaemar looked at him.

“There may be a chance that we’ll receive help from outside.”

“And if we don’t?” asked Zerhard.

“We’ll come up with something.” Aden stood. “And now you should get some rest if you can.”

As he walked away, Zerhard leaned closer to Jaemar. “He seems too relaxed for a man about to be sent to execution. Do you think he knows something we don’t?”

Jaemar shrugged before he realized that Zerhard might not be able to see him. “I don’t know.”

Jaemar stretched out on his stomach and rested his chin on his arms. One of the loose flagstones stuck into his chest. Feeling like someone was watching him, Jaemar looked up to see Zerhard’s eyes on him again.

“What is it?”

“Are you going to tell me why it’s so urgent for you to get out of here?”

“Maybe I don’t want to die.”

“Maybe you were already on your way to kill your uncle before the Kazicmer kings took you into their hands.”

Jaemar said nothing. He let out a long breath.

“It’s all right,” said Zerhard. “I’m not going to turn you in.” He leaned closer. “Maybe I want the same thing that you do.” He stood. “Get some rest, Jaemar.”

Jaemar rolled over onto his back and crossed his arms. If his thoughts or the uneven ground would let him sleep, it would be a miracle. Despite everything, he soon found himself drifting off. The last thing he heard was Aden and Zerhard whispering together somewhere near him.

Footsteps and keys scraping open a lock were the first sounds that found their way into Jaemar's dream. His eternal fate was being decided. Which place would lie behind the door? A bright light washed over his face, causing him to squint and then blink his eyes open. He tried to remember where he was, if he was already dead.

Pushing himself up, he realized that a shaft of light from the window high in the wall had fallen across his face. The light filled the cell with a dawn-red glow. Jaemar cast a glance around the prison and saw Zerhard dozing against one of the walls. He lifted his head as their cell door opened and a line of Guards marched inside.

"On your feet," one of them ordered.

Throughout the cell, the prisoners slowly climbed to their feet. Several Guards advanced and broke the larger groups apart as they guided them to the door. Jaemar hung back and waited for Zerhard.

"Move it," a Guard pushed him roughly. Jaemar could smell his stale breath. "Don't want to keep your crowd waiting."

The wave of people shoved Jaemar forward, out of the cell and down a long hallway flanked by more Guards. He had never seen so many at once. Zerhard wove through the flow of people and attached himself to Jaemar's side.

"Sleep all right?"

"Under the circumstances?" Jaemar murmured back just as someone elbowed him in the ribs.

The procession ascended a flight of stairs and entered a wide hall at the end of which stood huge brass doors. Other than the perimeter of Guards in the room, a small

cluster of men dressed in official garb of the Order and of Resden stood near the doors. The son of Haurreich was among them.

A man wearing the crest of Resden looked up as the prisoners were paraded into the hall.

“How many?” he asked as casually as though he organized the same proceedings every day.

“Seventeen,” answered a Guard, “not including a group of prospective Youth we left downstairs.”

“Good,” the same tired voice recited. “We’ll send them out in groups of five, five, and seven.” He straightened his robe and approached the doors. Two Guards pushed them open before him. “I’ll let you know when to send out the first five.”

Jaemar squinted as the early light flooded the marble hall with blinding brilliance. He lifted his hand to shade his eyes just as a prisoner near him jostled into him. Jaemar stumbled but kept to his feet only to be rammed to the floor by someone else. As his hands slapped against the cold marble, he heard a voice droning on above him.

“One, two, three, four, and five. Step forward.”

With heart pounding, Jaemar pushed himself to his feet. He craned his neck over the crowd to see the five chosen men trudging toward the open doors. Beyond, on the portico outside, Jaemar could see the mayor of Resden along with a line of sword-bearing Guards.

“Stay close.”

Jaemar whirled around to see Zerhard standing behind him. Aden, a few steps further, gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

“What’s going on?” hissed Jaemar.

Zerhard shrugged, his eyes on the five prisoners by the door. “A chance.”

Some kind of noise rose from the crowd outside, and the men were shuffled through the doors and out onto the portico.

Jaemar swallowed dry air, which felt like it were disintegrating into sand in his throat. He watched as the prisoners were separated and each one made to stand before a Guard. They were all forced to their knees as the mayor began to read out a list of their crimes.

Throwing a look over his shoulder, Jaemar saw that Aden’s face was pale and that his lips were moving noiselessly. As though someone’s hand had physically forced him to turn back around, Jaemar faced forward and stared in horror as five swords were raised behind the kneeling men.

He failed to see the actual blow. His eyes squeezed shut at the last second, but the sound struck his ear and dug itself deep into his own chest. A single, quiet sob broke the silence behind him, and he opened his eyes in time to see the Guards dragging the bodies off to the side and out of sight. He couldn’t breathe, and he could feel his stomach trying to fight its way up his throat.

“You.”

The captain faced the remaining prisoners and signaled the first of the next five to step forward. A Guard reached into the crowd and pulled out a man with graying hair.

“Two...three,” continued Haurreich’s son, pointing out to his Guards which prisoners to take next.

Haurreich’s eyes fell on Jaemar, and Jaemar thought his heart had stopped.

“Four.”

He could see a Guard approaching him from the side, and he felt his mind begin to spin in a dizzying tumult. A blind girl in a square, broken glass, a fistfight on the town hall steps, a serreone on the door...Simnara's face across a canyon that was rapidly widening. This was where it all led. This is where it had to lead. Where it would have led eventually.

He felt a hand wrap itself around his arm, and he took a deep breath.

“Get off me! He picked you, not me!”

Jerking his head sideways, Jaemar recognized the youth who had stabbed the captain the day before. For some reason that Jaemar could not quite comprehend, the youth was glaring at him.

“What?” he managed weakly.

“I saw him point at you,” the youth practically yelled. “Don't touch me!” he cried, flinging off the grasp of the Guard behind him. “I refuse to go before my time.” The Guard began to pull him away even as he continued to struggle. “I said, take your hands off me!”

By the time Jaemar realized what had happened, the next five had already been chosen and ushered to the front door. He choked back several gasping breaths before he realized that Zerhard had been the fifth. He saw him look back as he was pushed over the threshold behind the youth who had taken his place.

Seven Guards approached to take hold of the stragglers still huddled in the center of the hall. One of them placed his hand on Jaemar's shoulder. He strained to see past

the doors. The prisoners had been forced into a line. Jaemar's heart seemed to be trying to kill him itself.

Midway during the pronouncement of the crimes committed, an imposing figure stepped out of the shadows on the side of the hall. Turning his head, Jaemar watched as the figure crossed into the line of light pouring through the door. His breath caught in his throat, and he involuntarily stepped back. He would know that face anywhere. Memories of a sickening feeling, of an arrow pointed at his chest, of Simnara's final cry flooded into his mind as he stared at the Morgskall.

He only became aware of the whispers around him when the Morgskall began to approach the small knot of prisoners. The grip on Jaemar's shoulder tightened, and Jaemar realized that the Morgskall was coming towards him.

When the Morgskall was only an arm's length away, the Guard restraining Jaemar broke. "Captain Hurreich, what is this?"

Hurreich, who had been facing the open doors, looked over his shoulder.

The Guard threw his hand angrily in the creature's direction. "A Morg? I thought the Imperial had restricted them to Cyrgoz. What is it doing here?"

The Morgskall swept his glittering eyes toward the captain, as though waiting for him to answer.

"He is acting as Giver of the Mark. General Jornault was kind enough to spare him." He started to turn back towards the portico.

The Guard, however, faced the Morgskall. "The general's personal beast." He grunted. "I've heard of you. They say you've even got a name."

“And more manners than you, apparently,” said the Morgskall, his deep voice accented by thick guttural sounds. He took a step closer.

Jaemar leaned back slightly. The Morgskall was a full head and a half taller than him.

“I certainly hope the general hasn’t neglected his duties in training you,” the Guard shot back.

“Silence!” ordered the captain. “Hold your rank!”

“Why he even allows an animal like you to remain in his presence is beyond me.”

“I said keep your peace!” shouted the captain, shoving through the men to stand before him.

The Guard whirled around to face his captain. “How can you of all people say that?” he demanded. “A Morg has no place among living men. You should know. The laws of the Order—”

“Do not quote the laws of the Order to me unless you are willing to follow them yourself,” ordered Hurreich.

The Guard stared at him defiantly before spitting at the Morgskall’s feet.

In the next instant, Hurreich’s sword had been drawn and driven into the Guard’s chest. Jaemar stumbled back in shock. Hurreich extracted his sword, letting the dead Guard crumple to the ground. As though he could not believe what he was seeing, Jaemar gaped blankly at the body.

“Captain—” began the Morgskall.

“Do not address me,” said Hurreich, sheathing his sword. “He defied rank. You—”

“Long live the Resistance!” The shout came from somewhere in the crowd, but it was repeated by one of the rebels kneeling on the portico.

Everyone in the hall froze and turned wide eyes toward the door. A low rushing sound, like a wave breaking upon a cliff, rumbled somewhere in the distance. Jaemar searched the platform for Zerhard and saw one of the Guards fall.

“To arms!” Haurreich shouted, bounding toward the portico. “Kill them now!” he called back over his shoulder.

Jaemar’s whole body jerked as he tore his eyes away from the door and watched the Guards around him draw their swords. He drew back toward the huddle of other rebels even as the Guards formed a circle around them. The clash of the fight outside sounded muffled and distant in his ears. One thought flitted through his mind. This was the closest he had ever been to death. He was about to die, and yet he had never clung so closely to life.

He heard a shout behind him and turned to see Aden trying to wrench one of the Guard’s weapons from his hands. At the same instant, a voice burned deeply in his ear.

“You’re dead.”

A sharp blow landed on his back, and he fell to the floor, waiting for the slicing pain of a sword or the coldness of lost blood to come over him. Nothing. Before he had mustered enough courage to move, he felt himself being lifted off of the ground by strong, scale-hard arms. His carrier began to walk, and Jaemar chanced opening one eye. Through the blur, he saw the face of the Morgskall.

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Signs of Prejudice

*“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* 1 Corinthians 15:26

Jaemar’s heart pounded in his head as the Morgskall carried him away from the sounds of the clash in the front hall. He didn’t know what was happening to himself or to his friends, and he didn’t know if he dared try to help them. He kept his eyes tightly shut for what felt like an eternity until the Morgskall finally stopped. A door opened, and Jaemar could see daylight trying to pierce through his eyelids.

As the Morgskall broke into what felt like a trot, Jaemar began to bounce limply in his arms. Perhaps his sense of hearing was heightened with his eyes closed, but he could again hear the sounds of a battle in the distance. The dull roar of human voices swept away by the ear-piercing ring of iron against iron. A shuddering scream broke through the lifeless clanging before being cut into silence.

Jaemar was so focused on listening that he didn’t realize he was being put down until he felt his feet against the ground. His eyes flashed open. He stared up at the Morgskall, taking a step back as he noted that the Morgskall was staring back at him.

“What—what are you doing?”

The Morgskall lifted his chin.

Jaemar's eyes shifted to where the Morgskall's hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

"I did what was needed to get you out of there."

The words made Jaemar remember the blow to his back, and he suddenly was aware of something warm and wet that was causing his clothes to stick to his skin. Keeping his eyes on the Morgskall, he reached his arm around to his back and touched the spot. It was sore to the touch. He pulled his hand forward again and saw on his fingers what he dreaded to see. Blood.

"It is not your own," said the Morgskall.

He stepped closer to Jaemar, who eyed him as suspiciously as though he were the Imperial himself.

"We cannot stay here," the Morgskall continued. He reached out a hand. "You must follow me."

Jaemar shied away. "How can I trust you? What happened to my mother?"

The Morgskall froze at the demand and retracted his hand. Averting his eyes, he murmured, "I do not know. She—"

Persistent shouts and an earthshaking rumble drowned the rest of his unspoken words. He turned his head toward the sounds coming from the square, his expression reminding Jaemar of the bucks he used to hunt.

"Come." The Morgskall lunged forward, thudding past Jaemar and heading down the street.

The ground shook again beneath Jaemar's feet. He instinctively reached out for the wall next to him to steady himself. Turning his head, he took a deep breath before running after the Morgskall.

As he shot past an alley, he glanced down it and saw the tumult in the main square. He caught only a glimpse of the portico before he lost the window of view. He ran another two blocks before he was able to catch up with the Morgskall's long strides. As they neared another corner, a figure careened around it from the direction of the square and nearly barreled into them.

The Morgskall threw his arm out in front of Jaemar, who crashed into it and almost fell backwards. When he recovered his footing, he looked up to see the Morgskall holding Zerhard at sword point. The dagger Zerhard had managed to procure looked worthless by comparison.

Zerhard's eyes shifted from the Morgskall to Jaemar and back again.

Realizing how the situation must have appeared to him, Jaemar leapt forward and used his full body weight to pull the Morgskall's arm back.

"Stop! He's a friend."

The Morgskall relaxed his arm but did not sheath his sword.

"What's going on, Jaemar?" Zerhard demanded, keeping his eyes leveled on the Morgskall.

"I—" Jaemar began before he realized that he actually didn't know. He changed his tack. "What happened to you?"

"We do not have time for this," said the Morgskall, finally sliding his sword back into the scabbard on his back. "We have to keep moving."

As he broke into a run, Zerhard shot Jaemar a look, but Jaemar only shrugged in return. At a loss of what else to do, they chased after the Morgskall. They had not gone far when another rumble shuddered over the ground, though its force was less intense than before.

“What is that?” asked Jaemar.

“I don’t know,” said Zerhard, throwing a glance over his shoulder. “But whatever it is, it cut a huge hole in the square back there.”

“The Imperial’s Wyrdiac has been assisting the work of the Order’s engineers,” came the Morgskall’s voice from in front of them. “And there are worse things coming than their earthshakers. We must hurry.”

As he pounded away from them, Jaemar caught hold of Zerhard’s arm to hold him back.

“What did you do back there?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I wasn’t chosen by Hurreich, and when I was, someone took my place.” Jaemar fixed Zerhard with an accusing stare. “You said something.”

Zerhard shifted his gaze to the flagstones. “Aden already knew there might be a rescue attempt.” He shrugged. “I just told him you had to escape and survive, and he agreed to make sure you stayed alive as long as possible.”

“But what did—”

“Quickly!” the Morgskall hissed from ahead of them. “Unless you want to explain yourselves to the Guards.”

They ran in silence for some time, cutting through alleys and side streets whenever they caught sight of Guards on the road ahead. Twice, they were forced to hide behind barrels and crates when a large squadron of Guards went past.

“Seems the whole city is heading for the main square,” whispered Zerhard, leaning out from his hiding place to see if the way was clear.

“All the better for us,” said the Morgskall, rising and clambering out from behind the barrels. “Hurry. It’s not much farther now.”

“To where?” Zerhard said under his breath as they resumed their run.

“Maybe he knows a way out of Resden,” said Jaemar pointing up ahead of them.

They both looked up and saw the top of the city’s outer wall rising above a row of roofs.

“Who is he?” Zerhard asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know. I saw him once before,” said Jaemar. “The day my mother was killed.”

“So why—” began Zerhard, but a gasp from Jaemar cut him off.

“Look!” he pointed ahead at a flash of orange whipping around a corner. “Did you see that?”

“What was it?”

Before Jaemar could respond, the Morgskall stopped and turned back to look at them as they caught up and halted beside him.

“Where are you taking us?” panted Jaemar.

The Morgskall swept an arm toward the line of houses facing them from across the street. “These houses are backed by the city wall.” He hesitated, turning his head

from one side to the other, as though trying to remember something. “One of them has a door to the outside, but...”

He started across the street and studied each of the houses in turn. “If only I—”

“There!” said Jaemar, thrusting his hand toward a house with what looked like an orange cat curled on the doorstep.

Without waiting for the others, Jaemar lunged forward and raced to the house, reaching it just as someone opened its front door. Jaemar’s eyes traveled from the fox to the person holding open the door, and his lips parted in shock. Ravenna.

“How did you—” he began.

“Come inside, quickly,” she said, stepping aside to usher him through the door. She looked past him. “All of you.”

Jaemar turned to see Zerhard and the Morgskall standing behind him before he followed Ravenna into the house. When she closed the door behind them, Jaemar let out a relieved sigh, suddenly feeling as though he had been holding his breath since the moment Hurreich’s son had opened the door of the rebel hideout.

The furnishings of the house in which he now found himself were plain but comfortable, evidence of a simple lifestyle. As his eye scanned the bare wood and stone walls, the dark wood furniture, and the patchwork rugs and curtains, he caught a glimpse of several rag-tag children peeking out from behind corners or chairs.

Ravenna crossed the room to a doorway, where two older children lingered, shyly observing the newcomers. She spoke softly to them, and they left the room.

Jaemar’s attention was caught by a bookshelf near the corner. Some rolls of parchment were stacked on one of the shelves, and the two shelves above it were lined

with books bearing the stamp of the Order on the binding. Stepping closer, Jaemar traced a finger along some of the titles and left a trail in the fine layer of dust.

“So are they friends or something?” Calling Jaemar’s attention back to the moment, Zerhard nudged his shoulder and nodded his head toward Ravenna and the Morgskall.

Jaemar turned his attention toward the pair of them. The Morgskall stood with a hunched neck to avoid hitting his head against the low rafters. He was leaning slightly forward with his eyes fixed intently on Ravenna, who looked more relaxed than Jaemar had ever seen her. The two of them were conversing in a rapid tongue riddled with inhuman sounds.

The two older children re-entered the room, one of them carrying a tray of bread, cheese, and fruit, and the other trundling a heap of clothing.

“Help yourself to food,” Ravenna said with an air of distraction. “There’s also a fresh change of clothes for you.”

Jaemar gratefully scooped the proffered clothes into his arm and stuffed a piece of cheese into his mouth as he followed a young boy to one of the empty bedrooms. As he stripped his own over-worn clothes off and pulled on the new ones, he noticed that this room was also simply furnished. The atmosphere of the whole house seemed to be purposefully constructed, though he was starting to get the feeling from the bare décor that no one actually lived there.

Tucking his old clothes under an arm, he made his way back to the main room, where he found Ravenna and the Morgskall still deep in their foreign conversation. He

dropped his clothes in a corner and picked up a bunch of grapes. Ravenna turned around as he sucked the first one into his mouth.

“Ah, Jaemar.”

The Morgskall twisted his head in what looked like an uncomfortable sideways position to look at him.

“Forgive me.” He closed his eyes briefly and inclined his head toward him.

“Long has it been since I last spoke the language of my people.” He glanced at Ravenna. “I thought I had lost it forever.”

“Who are you?” Jaemar blurted before he realized that a direct approach was probably not the most tactful. He opened his mouth again, but the Morgskall waved his apology away. Still forced to maintain his somewhat hunched posture, he tried to turn more fully toward Jaemar.

“I know my appearance in the hall must have surprised you. You were right to be suspicious. I am Drahzac Kyz’rhuin,” he announced as Zerhard came back into the room. “I am a Morgskall, but my loyalty, be it concealed, lies with the Resistance.” He nodded at both of them. “You can trust me.”

Ravenna’s eyes traveled from him to Jaemar and Zerhard, and her face seemed to harden. “And who is this?”

Jaemar was caught off guard before he remembered that she did not know Zerhard. “Oh, Ravenna, this is Zerhard, a Kazicmer prince. I was captured by them, and he helped me escape.”

The distrustful, cold expression had returned to Ravenna eyes, and it looked more unforgiving than it had when Jaemar had first met her. “What is he doing here?”

Jaemar started to speak, but Zerhard cut across him. “I can speak for myself.” He leveled defiant eyes on Ravenna. “Helping Jaemar get out of the Kazicmers’ hands was an escape opportunity for me as well. We happened to choose the same path as far as Resden, and then we were captured.”

“I see,” said Ravenna coldly. “Yet now that you are free again, you follow him still.”

Zerhard squared his shoulders. “I have seen enough of a world ruled by Kazicmer kings and the Order. I want to fight for the Resistance.”

“Then join them. Our journey is not the path you seek,” said Ravenna.

“But—”

“The horses are packed and ready whenever—” Reahn strode into the room but stopped short when he saw Jaemar.

His gaze swiveled around the room. Jaemar couldn’t tell for certain, but he thought he saw the Furore’s jaw clench when his eyes fell on the Morgskall. Reahn remained speechless for what felt like a whole minute before he threw his arms wide and strode across the room toward Jaemar.

“Where have you been?”

He squeezed his arms so tightly around Jaemar that Jaemar thought he heard his bones crack. He released Jaemar and looked over his shoulder at Ravenna. She shot him a scorching look. He hunched his shoulders as though to ward off her look.

Rubbing the back of his head, he said, “You really shouldn’t run off like that.” He leaned closer and whispered, “Really. Don’t do it again.”

“What are you talking about?” Jaemar furrowed his brow. “You left me there and went after Ravenna.”

Both he and Reahn looked at Ravenna, but Reahn quickly turned back to Jaemar. “I never left Yoscan.”

“But you...” Jaemar’s voice trailed off as he remembered that it had been the healer’s son who told him Reahn had gone. At a loss, he switched his focus to Ravenna. “How did you escape from the Wyrdiac?”

Ravenna lowered her eyes and didn’t speak.

“He didn’t try to kill you, did he?” Jaemar pressed.

“Killing me was not his objective,” Ravenna said softly. “Not yet.” She shook her head as though trying to erase a bad memory. Raising her voice, she said, “Maximus followed me, but Drahzac appeared before he could attempt a rescue. But then Gehzbenak, the Wyrdiac, just let me go and disappeared.”

“That must have been when he came after us,” said Zerhard. When all eyes turned onto him, he looked uncertainly at Jaemar. “Isn’t he the Wyrdiac Zhury was going to meet that night?”

Jaemar nodded but turned back to Ravenna as a new thought struck him. “Did Maximus stay with you?”

In reply, Ravenna faced Drahzac. “Did you see Maximus on your way here? We can’t wait much longer for him.”

Drahzac shook his head.

“Oh, so he is coming?” asked Reahn, a glower crossing his face as he glanced at Drahzac.

Ravenna glared at him, her eyes threatening a storm. “He insists that someone from the Resistance accompany us to Litairne. He did agree to leave his men here in Resden, though.”

“I don’t have a horse for him,” said Reahn, his tone slightly distracted as he noticed Zerhard for the first time.

Zerhard, who had been picking through the food tray, glanced up at the mention of having enough horses.

Noticing his concern, Jaemar asked, “How many horses do we have?”

Ravenna scowled. “The three we started with, along with one pack horse for supplies. We can divide the provisions and give Maximus the pack horse, but I can’t do anything for...” she eyed Zerhard with a judgmental stare, “your friend.”

“Please, Ravenna,” begged Jaemar. “He’s come this far, and he’s in as much danger here as the rest of us are.”

“I doubt that,” Ravenna said, dismissively turning back to Drahzac.

Zerhard slammed a piece of bread back onto the metal plate, causing it to rattle against the table. All eyes turned to him in surprise.

“I may not be the nephew of the Imperial,” he pointed at Jaemar, “or an escaped captive of a Wyrdiac,” he glared at Ravenna, “but I have enough troubles of my own.” He hesitated, as though trying to decide how much he could reveal. “I’m an Ellendar. I can help you. If you will let me.”

A pause followed his statement. Reahn’s eyes widened in awe. “An Ellendar?” he murmured to himself.

“He helped me escape from both the Kazicmers and the Order,” said Jaemar.

“Which means there are probably more people looking for him than we need on our tail,” Ravenna shot back.

“Ravenna...” Reahn cautioned.

“He saved my life!” Jaemar practically yelled. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him.”

His outburst was succeeded by an uncomfortable silence. Ravenna and Drahzac stared at Jaemar while Reahn kept shooting glances at Zerhard, whose eyes were riveted angrily at the room’s far corner. Finally, Ravenna spoke.

“You trust him?”

“Yes.” He continued to frown at her. “If it’s impossible to obtain another horse, Philo can carry us both.”

Ravenna looked ready to object, but Reahn stepped between them. “They can take Haseld. He’s—”

Urgent pounding on the door interrupted him and sent everyone into a stiffened state of panic. Their fears were quickly lessened when they recognized Maximus’s voice.

“It’s Maximus! Open the door!”

Reahn, who was nearest, unlatched the door and threw it open. Maximus bolted inside and slammed the door shut behind him.

“What—” began Ravenna.

“We need to leave now,” said Maximus. “I was followed.” He shot a look of regret toward one of the children. “I’m afraid I might have compromised the house.”

“It’s all right,” said Ravenna, sliding the remnants of the food into a cloth. “They know what to do.”

She nodded toward the child, who vanished instantly into another part of the house. Twisting the top of the food cloth, Ravenna motioned for the others to follow her to the back door. When she met Drahzac's eye, he shook his head once and stepped toward the front of the house.

Ravenna froze with one hand on the doorframe. "You're not coming with us?"

The Morgskall hesitated while Maximus and Reahn passed Ravenna and vanished through the back part of the house.

"I cannot. General Jornault and his daughter need me still." He looked down. "And I need them. For now my path lies with the Order." As he backed toward the front door, he lifted his head and threw a glance at Jaemar. "There is something I must do. May the road be clear before you. If I can, I will try to buy you some time."

Ravenna's mouth twitched but she bit back whatever protest she had prepared. Turning her head toward the floor on the other side of the door, she said, "Then farewell. And may Aiyan guard your way."

Jaemar watched Ravenna's face as Drahzac ducked under the doorframe and closed it behind him. He didn't look back. She stared at the closed door.

In the thick silence, Zerhard cleared his throat and followed Reahn and Maximus. Jaemar drew near the door but did not go through it.

"Ravenna?"

She looked at him with what looked like hatred and quickly passed through the door. Jaemar followed her wordlessly and found one of the children holding open a trapdoor. A rug was crumpled on the side, and Zerhard's head was just disappearing into the hole in the floor.

Ravenna jerked her chin toward it. “You first, Jaemar.”

Feeling like he’d just received a harsh admonition, Jaemar avoided her gaze and approached the trapdoor. He peered down and saw a ladder disappearing into the darkness behind Zerhard’s shoulder. He felt a light touch on his arm, and he jerked his head up to see not Ravenna but the young girl holding the trapdoor. When he met her eyes, she looked quickly at the floor and extended a small cake toward him.

Speaking to the floor, she said, “I know it’s not much, but take it for your journey.”

Jaemar lifted a hand and slowly accepted the offering. “Thank you.”

She forced her head up and looked at him. Her eyes told a story too full of darkness and sadness to read. “Go with Aiyan.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “End this.”

Jaemar’s lips parted, but he could only nod. Tucking the cake into his satchel, he placed a foot on the ladder. His head was almost level with the floor when he said, “Thank you for everything.”

The words felt inadequate, but he left them floating in the air as he descended further into the darkness. He had not gone much farther when he heard Ravenna on the ladder above him. The door closed with a shudder, shutting them in total darkness. Pressing himself closer to the ladder, Jaemar used his feet to feel for each lower rung and tried not to think about how far the empty air extended below him.

When his foot finally touched solid ground, he breathed a sigh of relief. Wondering vaguely how Reahn had gotten the horses down here, Jaemar turned around and noticed a soft glow somewhere ahead. He started toward it, and as he drew nearer,

he heard low voices. Ravenna appeared beside him, and they listened as the voices grew louder and more insistent.

“That’s Maximus,” said Ravenna.

“And Zerhard,” said Jaemar. “It sounds like they’re arguing.”

At that moment, they rounded a corner and entered a tall cave connected to their tunnel. Jaemar immediately saw Reahn holding his hand up like a torch while cinching one of the saddles. When he noticed Ravenna and Jaemar, he threw them a confused look and jerked his head toward Zerhard and Maximus, who looked ready to come to blows.

“What’s going on?” Ravenna demanded, rushing forward and forcing herself between them.

“He can’t come with us,” insisted Maximus, shooting Zerhard a dark look.

“You’ve a lot of nerve deciding who can and can’t go to a place you’ve invited yourself into,” said Reahn, keeping his eyes on Haseld’s saddle.

“It’s different,” argued Maximus. “Ravenna, when I was trying to get out of the square to come join you, I saw him,” he threw an accusing finger at Zerhard, “attacking one of my men who was fighting a captain in the Imperial Guard.” He frowned at Zerhard. “Whoever he told you he is, he’s an imposter, probably spying for the Imperial himself.”

“I’m not a spy!” Zerhard shot back. “That wasn’t me you saw.”

Maximus narrowed his eyes. “I think I can remember if one of the condemned prisoners on the stage suddenly threw himself against his rescuers.”

Seething, Zerhard spoke through his teeth. "If you're referring to when I pushed one of your fool soldiers out of the reach of an Immortal's sword, yes that was my doing. But that was me doing you a favor."

Ravenna stiffened. "The Imperial was here in Resden?"

"No, but his son is," said Jaemar. "He's an Immortal as well. We saw it."

"I've heard that about Haurreich's son," said Reahn, starting on another saddle. He snapped his fingers to get Maximus's attention and pointed him toward one of the horses. "Toss me one of the supply packs. We'll have to evenly distribute them."

With a scowl, Maximus unfastened a pack from the saddle and threw it to Reahn. "I know what I saw."

"Why would Zerhard try to defend the son of the Imperial?" Jaemar argued. "He's an Ellendar, which makes him a direct enemy of the Order."

"Exactly," said Reahn. "At least he's not a Morgskall, which are direct enemies of the Resistance."

Ravenna, who had been transferring a sack to Tânseren's saddle, flung it to the cave floor in a gesture that showed she had had enough of the arguing. "Reahn!"

"His kind can't be trusted, Ravenna, no matter what you may say," Reahn said obstinately. "They've only ever served one master, and they don't turn."

"I've known Drahzac for a long time," said Ravenna, stooping to retrieve the discarded sack. "He's different. Besides," she paused to attach the sack to her horse's saddle, "he helped us track Jaemar."

"Morgs only track what they kill, Ravenna. I don't trust him."

Ravenna shot him a warning look and took Tânseren's reins in her hand. "I don't care. All that matters now is getting Jaemar to the Luceri. If any of the rest of you want a chance of gaining entry, you will learn that one's side is not always what matters."

Clicking her tongue, she spoke softly to Tânseren and led him to the extremity of the cave. The two of them slipped through a narrow fissure in the wall that Jaemar had not noticed before. Maximus frowned at Zerhard before taking the reins of the pack horse and following her. Reahn swept his free hand forward, indicating that Jaemar and Zerhard precede him.

Taking Philo's halter, Jaemar guided him through the crack in the wall and squeezed along the narrow passage. The sounds of the horses' hooves and Zerhard's breathing seemed magnified in the small space. Light soon illuminated the air ahead, and in another ten steps, Jaemar emerged from the rock and found himself standing on a narrow ledge above a steep slope. A thin trail wound down from the cliff into the rocky hills below.

He gazed over the seemingly endless stretch of grey landscape before him and couldn't help but feel the weight of his task settle more firmly on his shoulders. A glance behind him and upwards revealed that Resden backed onto a cliff. The secret passageway had led them under the city walls.

Zerhard trudged past him and started down the slope after Ravenna and Maximus, keeping a fair distance from the latter. As Reahn drew beside him, Jaemar leaned toward him.

"Is something wrong with Ravenna?"

Frowning, Reahn watched Ravenna guide Tânseren around a boulder in the mountain path. “Something happened to her when she was a captive of Gehzbenak.”

“What was it?”

Reahn turned his head toward him. “Wyrdiacs have a way of getting inside your head. There’s no telling how much he had tortured her before Maximus showed up.”

“But she didn’t say anything?” Jaemar pressed.

“No, but Maximus told me that he heard the voice of the Wyrdiac before it disappeared to go after you.” A haunted look clouded Reahn’s eyes. “He said the very sound of it made him want to die himself.”

“What did he say?”

The coal blue eyes of the Furore pierced Jaemar as he replied. “He told her she is going to die before the next full moon.”

Jaemar’s eyes widened, and he looked from Ravenna below him back to Reahn.

“Can it be prevented?”

Reahn shrugged and tugged on Haseld’s reins. “A Wyrdiac is rarely wrong, and Drahzac appeared right after Gehzbenak’s prophecy.”

“What do you mean?”

Reahn threw a scowl over his shoulder.

“Morgs are always heralds of death.”

At Jaemar’s look of confused horror, Reahn went on. “There’s a saying that if you aren’t born Immortal, you can still attain immortality by killing a Morgskall. It’s the only sure way we have of defeating death itself.”

Jaemar sifted Philo's reins through his calloused hands and chewed on his bottom lip. Life by death. It sounded like a fitting description of who the Imperial was.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Face of Death

*Goodness is something chosen. When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man. –*

*Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange*

The craggy mountain passes gradually gave way to rolling terrain as they distanced themselves from Resden. The prevalent grey of stone and gravel paths were left behind as vistas of golden hills and sweeping valleys spread before them. The wind rippled across the sun-baked grass and filled the travelers' lungs with fresh air. Jaemar thought that the world had finally remembered to breathe again.

He crested the top of a hill and sucked the brisk air into his lungs as he surveyed the seemingly endless stretch of hills before him, one rising after another until they disappeared into the blue haze of mountains somewhere on the horizon.

A voice at his shoulder startled him. "I've been meaning to ask you. How is your shoulder?"

Jaemar turned to see Maximus standing beside him with the reins of the pack horse in his hand.

Unconsciously touching his hand to his shoulder, Jaemar said, "Healing."

"Not many men could have borne such an injury," the Resistance captain said seriously.

“Thanks,” Jaemar mumbled into the wind, not quite sure what he was supposed to say.

Maximus started to say something, closed his mouth, and opened it again. “Your father would be proud of you.”

Jaemar looked sharply at him. “Did you know him?”

Maximus shook his head and turned to look into the distance. “Not many on the Resistance side knew him because of who he was.” At Jaemar’s confused look, he added, “It would have been dangerous if anyone could connect the Imperial’s brother to the Resistance.” He let out a long breath. “So no, I never met him, but I know what kind of man he was. From what he did.” He looked sideways at Jaemar. “From what I see in you.”

Jaemar felt his skin beginning to tingle, but he quickly shoved the feeling aside. Looking away, he said, “You don’t have to convince me of the merits of the Resistance. I would have joined, but I think—”

“Jaemar, you have to learn something. Yes, I am devoted to the Resistance, but I’m not going to try to take you away from the Luceri. I left my own men behind in Resden so that I could come to Litairne.” Resting a hand on Jaemar’s shoulder, he continued, “Like Ravenna said earlier, one’s side is not as strong as a common cause, and you are the common cause that binds the Resistance, the Luceri, and all free peoples of Almaen together.”

Jaemar frowned at him wordlessly, and Maximus let his hand fall. “Listen, I know you’ve heard it more than you care to hear, but there is a lot riding on you. You

alone. Some of us can help you, but in the end it has to be only you. Many will expect you to fail, because of your age and because no one has succeeded before.”

“I suppose you think I will fail.”

Maximus regarded him silently before replying. “No. I think your advantage is your youth and seeming...inexperience.”

On the slope behind them, Jaemar could hear Reahn arguing with Ravenna. He glanced back and saw Zerhard approaching him and leading Philo.

“You have been underestimated, most especially by the Imperial,” said Maximus. “And my hope is that that will be his undoing.”

Jaemar looked back at the Resistance captain, whose furrowed brow betrayed a want to say something more.

“He may not think me a threat,” said Jaemar, “but he won’t ignore me.”

“No,” agreed Maximus, glancing over his shoulder at Zerhard, who was only a few paces behind them. “And that is why you must be on your guard. I fear he will play on your trust and attack you from within.”

Following his gaze, Jaemar said, “Perhaps. But he doesn’t know that I understand the difference between blind trust and blind prejudice.”

Maximus’s eyes swerved back onto Jaemar, but his reply was left on his tongue as Reahn galloped past Zerhard and reined Haseld beside them.

“Jaemar, take Philo. You’re going with Ravenna.”

Jaemar glanced at Zerhard, who still had Philo’s reins. “Why? What’s going on?”

“We’re being tracked. Chaisee just brought me word,” said Reahn, shifting in his saddle so that Jaemar could see the fox’s ears behind him. He looked over his shoulder.

“Zerhard, hurry. You’re going to have to let Jaemar have him.”

Zerhard jogged the rest of the way to them and passed the reins to Jaemar.

“What’s happened?” he asked as Ravenna guided Tânseren up to the group.

“Chaisee and Reahn can see someone following us,” said Ravenna, her tone icy.

“Jaemar and I will ride ahead. We can’t go fast enough with an extra rider,” her eyes tactfully avoided contact with both Maximus and Zerhard.

“Should Reahn go with him then?” asked Maximus. “If he can track whoever’s behind us?”

Ravenna opened her mouth to speak, but Reahn cut her off. “No! She’s in just as much danger as Jaemar.” The coal blue of his eyes had burned into a deep orange. “The three of us will follow and try to hide our tracks.” He pointed a finger at Jaemar, who was still on the ground. “Go, Jaemar. You need to get as far as you can before nightfall.”

The world seemed to start spinning, as though the wind had increased to a whipping gale that forced the grass to lie flat and the clouds to roil in the sky. Feeling rooted to the ground, Jaemar felt that he were watching himself swing into Philo’s saddle more than actually performing the action himself. Zerhard, whose scowl betrayed his feelings about the situation, tossed him the reins.

“We’ll see you in a few days,” Jaemar said, forcing himself to sound more hopeful than he felt.

“Yes, we’ll follow you,” said Reahn. “Go on, now.”

“Come on, Jaemar,” said Ravenna, and she clicked her tongue to spur Tânseren into a gallop.

Jaemar dug his heels into Philo’s sides and shot across the hilltop beside Ravenna. Just before they dipped below the ridge, Jaemar threw a glance over his shoulder at those left behind. Reahn lifted a hand in farewell, and then all three of them passed out of sight.

Jaemar and Ravenna rode hard into the night, charging up hill after hill and bracing themselves down the opposite slopes. When all traces of the sun had finally dissolved into the star-lit canopy above them, they slowed their horses to a walk but kept a steady pace eastward until daybreak.

“We’ll rest them awhile,” said Ravenna, sliding off Tânseren’s back. “We should be only half a hard day’s ride away from Litairne.”

Jaemar dismounted, rubbing Philo’s foamy neck and feeding him a handful of grass. As he stooped to pull up another mouthful for Philo, he cast a sideways glance at Ravenna, but her face was turned towards her horse. When he realized that the two of them seemed to be in a deep conversation of sorts, he contented himself with walking in silence.

After more than an hour, Ravenna finally broke the quiet.

“I suppose you’ve heard about the Wyrdiac’s prophecy.”

“The one he told you?” Jaemar chose his words carefully.

Ravenna took awhile to respond, and when she did, it was as if she hadn’t heard Jaemar. “The strange thing is, I think I knew before he told me.” She wasn’t looking at him. She might not have even been talking to him. “We’re all going to die someday.”

Shaking her head, she lowered her voice into a more determined tone. “Death does not so easily frighten me.”

His stomach twisting uncomfortably, Jaemar grasped for a way to change the subject.

“How do you know the Morgskall? Dra—Dar—”

“Drahzac,” Ravenna finished for him. She sucked in a breath. “I don’t. Not really. I only met him the day we escaped from Gehzbenak. He told us his general had told him to find us and help you. When he realized you weren’t with us, he offered to lead us to you.”

“And you trusted him?” The question was more hopeful than demanding.

“I realize it’s harder for the rest of you,” she admitted, stroking Tânseren’s nose absently, “since you can’t speak to him the same way I can. I can speak his language and read the story in his eyes.” She turned to Jaemar with such intensity that he was tempted to look away. “He’s telling the truth, and since he is, he’s in almost as much danger as you. The Imperial does not tolerate betrayal, as you must know.”

Jaemar stared into the sun ahead, trying to feel the loss of the father he had never known, but he knew it was impossible for him to remember the man people around him kept mentioning. His eyes started to water at the brightness of the sun, and he blinked and looked away.

“It’s still strange to think that a Morgskall of all beings could ever—”

“Be good?” Ravenna asked, fixing him with a weighty stare.

Jaemar swallowed his unsaid words, tasting the guiltiness of them as they slid down his throat. “No. Just that they could ever betray someone like the Imperial.”

She gave him the sad smile that made him feel like he was twelve again. “Such is their tragedy. Too many of them have become so known for evil that now we think none of them are capable of goodness. We decide that they will fail, and so they will.”

Jaemar flexed his hand around the leather reins, wondering if everyone in Almaen had already decided that the bane of the Imperial would fail, since no one had ever succeeded against him.

“They can’t ever succeed unless we give them our permission to try.” The corners of her lips pulled upward, a genuine smile. “Like what you did for your friend.”

Before Jaemar could answer, Ravenna stopped and stepped into one of Tânseren’s stirrups.

“Come on,” she said and clicked her tongue.

They rode at a gallop until the sun was nearing its zenith in the sky. As they climbed another slope in the endless string of hills, Ravenna called, “We should be nearing the gate.”

Jaemar leaned closer to Philo’s neck and spurred him the last few feet to the crest of the hill. Reining Philo to a stop on the ridge, Jaemar surveyed the view before him. The base of the hill met an expansive plain stretching across an open space of two or three miles. At the other side of the plateau was a craggy cliff with a waterfall cascading down its face. A silver ribbon traced its way along the base of the cliff and wound southward.

Ravenna rode up beside him. “Litairne,” she breathed, her voice tinged with relief.

“That’s the gateway to Litairne?”

“Yes. The Romeirans, Almaen’s ancient race, delved deep into the earth to build their city. The waterfall conceals the entrance from unfriendly eyes,” said Ravenna absently, glancing over her shoulder.

“The Order hasn’t claimed the river as a resource?”

“Not yet,” Ravenna said, her voice soft.

Jaemar glanced at her and saw her frowning in concentration as she stared at the hills behind them.

“What are you—” he started to look back, but Ravenna’s eyes widened and she cried, “Ride, Jaemar!”

He threw a fleeting glance behind him before he shot down the slope after Ravenna, but the one look was enough. A lone rider had just appeared over the last ridge and was tearing down the hill at an unimaginable speed toward them.

As he flew down the last hill on Philo, Jaemar was tempted to shut his eyes. The wind whipped against his face, and more than once he felt as though he were going to be thrown from the saddle. Through some miracle, they reached the plain and began to streak across it. His heart pounding in time with Philo’s hooves, Jaemar chanced a look back and saw the rider already halfway down the last slope.

“Faster, Jaemar!” Ravenna cried and stretched her hand toward him as she yelled something Jaemar could not understand. Philo, however, responded to the words with an extra burst of speed, nearly leaving Tânseren behind.

Jaemar glanced back again. The strange rider was closing the distance between them. They would never reach the gateway. As the cliff face blacked out the sky ahead of him, Jaemar heard the hooves of the pursuer’s horse behind him. The sound filled his

ears so completely that he barely registered Ravenna's shouts. He heard her shout again, and Philo skidded to a halt, the jolt nearly throwing Jaemar to the ground. He recovered quickly from the shock and turned around. He had to squint against the sun, but he could see that Ravenna had stopped and was facing the approaching rider.

"Drahzac!" Ravenna called, flooding Jaemar with relief. He urged Philo toward her. "I thought you had gone south. What's happened?"

"I've been tracking you for two days," he said, reining his giant horse in front of them. "I saw the Furore's fox and thought you would know I was coming." His black horse continued to stomp the ground restlessly as he looked from Ravenna to Jaemar in an almost accusatory manner. "I passed your friends last night, but they tried to ward me off, and I had to go around them."

Color rose on Ravenna's pale cheeks. "The darkness probably confused them, and Reahn has never had reason to trust Morgskalls."

"Well he's not going to trust them hereafter." He turned in his saddle and waved his hand toward the south. "An Imperial army has been sent up this river to test its use for the Order, but they have been met by the Wyrdiac." He settled his piercing eyes fully on Jaemar. "Who is coming for you?"

"I know," said Jaemar.

"They won't find us," said Ravenna. "The Luceri have remained hidden for centuries."

Drahzac looked up at the cliff behind them and nodded slowly. "I hope your friends make it in time." He looked back at Jaemar. "But there is something I must tell you before I return."

Something buzzed past Jaemar's ear, and Drahzac's horse seemed to throw him backwards at the same moment. He straightened in his saddle and pressed a hand to his chest. A white-feathered arrow had lodged itself in his chest.

"The Luceri," Ravenna murmured. She whipped around and starting shouting commands in a language that seemed to be dominated by vowels.

"Jaemar," Drahzac said, calling his attention back to him.

Jaemar's eyes strayed to the arrow, but Drahzac shook his head. "Leave it." He took a painful breath. "I have seen your mother."

Jaemar's eyes snapped onto the Morgskall's face.

"She is alive," said Drahzac. "General Jornault convinced the Imperial that she could be useful. She is being held at the palace in Geresdain, and the Imperial is planning to—"

Another arrow rammed into his left shoulder, jerking his whole body back. Ravenna's shouts increased, but when Jaemar turned around, he could see no sign of the shooter.

Wincing, Drahzac ripped the arrow out of his chest, emerald-colored blood spattering his hands. His massive chest heaved with gasping breaths. He lowered his head, as if filling his lungs was the only thing he could concentrate on.

Speechless, Jaemar extended a hand toward him but let it drop.

"You saved her, didn't you?" asked Jaemar, trying to help in the only way he could. "You stopped them from killing her."

The Morgskall's eyes flitted up to him from under his eyebrows. "Listen to me, Jaemar," said Drahzac, his features contorted in pain. "You must be careful. The Imperial will try—"

"Stop!" Ravenna shouted in the clear tongue of Free Speech. "He's on our side!"

Jaemar turned his head. A tall woman with violet-colored skin, her black hair twisted with braids and leaves, was approaching them with her bow raised. Behind the nocked arrow shone luminescent blue eyes beneath fiercely lined eyebrows.

"No!" Jaemar put out his hand at the same instant the woman released the arrow. It shot through the air, whistling past Jaemar and finding its mark behind him.

As the strange woman lowered her bow, Jaemar twisted his body back around, dragging his eyes toward Drahzac. The third arrow had penetrated his heart, and his lips moved noiselessly as a shudder contracted his body. He lifted his eyes to meet Jaemar's, and Jaemar found himself wishing he could understand the words in an expression the way Ravenna could. But it was only a glimpse, a fleeting recognition that this was what it was to die.

Somewhere behind him, a hundred leagues away, Jaemar heard Ravenna's furious yells fade into an ear-numbed silence. He reached toward Drahzac with a shaking hand, but Drahzac never saw it. His muscles relaxing into a forced sleep, he sank toward the neck of his horse. So this was what it looked like to win immortality. Jaemar's hand tightened into a fist, and he retracted it back towards his own chest.

The sound of a male voice joining the two female voices behind him caused Jaemar to turn around. The female archer, her bow hand hanging limp, was swiveling to face the approaching armed man.

Ignoring both, Jaemar prodded Philo closer to Drahzac's horse and rested his hand gently on the black stallion's nose. Even though its rider had slumped forward on the horn, the horse had not moved.

"Take him," Jaemar murmured to the horse. "Take him away from here. Bring him back to his general."

Straightening, he pulled Philo's head left and guided him at a walk toward the others. He heard the low thud of receding hooves behind and tried to block it from his mind.

As he came alongside Ravenna, she was saying, "...won't say that it's not a pleasure, but why do you have a Romeiran fighting for you?"

His lips parting in shock, Jaemar switched his attention from Ravenna to the archer. Now that he was closer, he noticed that her face and arms were covered in darker patterns, as though the sun filtering through the leaves had permanently dyed her skin into shadows. Her face was long and angular, and she walked barefoot.

He was trying to decide whether he should ask if Romeirans really did descend from trees when the Romeiran spoke.

"We may choose our loyalties, as other races do," she stated regally, shifting her eyes onto Jaemar.

Ravenna glanced from the Romeiran to the gateway in the falls.

"Why did you kill him?" Jaemar asked, his voice sounding hoarse.

Her eyes shot through him as though his question had dishonored her. "He was a Morgskall."

Jaemar gritted his teeth and was about to argue when the armed man behind the Romeiran stepped forward and put a hand up in a gesture of surrender.

“More than that, I gave her the order to shoot.” He shook his head. “It is unfortunate, but we had no way of knowing.” He stretched his hand toward the plain. “When we saw him chasing you across there, we could only assume that you were in danger.”

The man, who looked to be a few years Maximus’s senior, had thick, curly hair and a full beard and mustache that had finally agreed to be a permanent dirty brown after years of fighting in the wild. His face was heavily scarred, looking as though it had been badly mended many times, and only one of his brown eyes showed. The other was hidden behind a patch.

“Jaemar, this is Marcus Greyhardt,” said Ravenna, introducing them in a tone that suggested she found no pleasure in doing so.

Greyhardt inclined his head to complete the introduction, but Jaemar could only stare. He found it difficult enough to keep his mouth from dropping open, much less speak at all.

“What are you doing out here?” Ravenna demanded.

“It is not us alone,” said Greyhardt, shifting his eyes to the Romeiran. “My men are positioned on this cliff,” he pointed, “and some are behind its ridge just through a pass up there,” he gestured to a point north of the waterfall before turning back to Ravenna. “Our spies have informed us that an Imperial army is headed this way, and we wanted to do what we can to protect the river.” He grinned, accentuating a scar near his upper lip.

Jaemar squinted up at the cliff's ridge and saw several archers silhouetted against the sky.

"And you just thought you'd shoot anything in sight?" Ravenna asked icily.

Greyhardt frowned. "The times are dangerous. But where is Maximus? I was told he would be traveling with you."

"We came on ahead when we heard about the Imperial army," said Ravenna.

"You'll be safe with us," said Greyhardt. "I know how you feel about the Resistance, but we can help you."

From what he had seen of the Resistance so far, Jaemar wondered if Ravenna had been right all along.

"Thank you," said Ravenna, "but we have someone to meet." She lifted her reins. "If you do see Maximus, tell him we've gone on ahead."

He nodded. "I will. But if the two of you don't plan on staying, you need to distance yourselves from this river. The Imperial army will be here before dark."

Ravenna nodded and motioned for Jaemar to follow her. Greyhardt lifted a hand in farewell and winked at Jaemar. "I trust I will be seeing you again."

Still speechless, Jaemar merely nodded.

He galloped after Ravenna toward the river at the base of the cliff. He did not look back until they had reached it. Marcus Greyhardt and the Romeiran had vanished.

"Marcus Greyhardt. So he is alive," said Jaemar, more to himself than Ravenna, who was busy trying to find a place to cross.

"Yes, he's just as proud of himself in real life as he is in the stories," muttered Ravenna.

She dismounted and guided Tânseren across the river, Jaemar following close behind.

“Does he know about the Luceri?”

“Of course he knows they exist. They’ve existed much longer than he has.”

They reached the opposite side and had to press themselves close against the damp wall of the cliff to avoid walking in the river as they approached the waterfall.

“But does he know about the gateway to Litairne?” Jaemar had to raise his voice to be heard over the pounding water.

“No, and that’s just what we need. The leader of the Resistance knocking on our door.”

The path ended, and she stopped. They were close enough to feel the mist of the falls.

With an exasperated sigh, she said, “But there’s little we can do about it. You’ve been in the open long enough. Just two more steps and I can finally breathe again.”

Jaemar felt a pang of guilt, realizing the extent of the responsibility she felt for keeping him safe. Before he could say anything to the matter, she pointed to a narrow stretch of rock that jutted out from the cliff face and vanished beneath the spray. It looked damp, unsecure, and highly treacherous.

“You first, Jaemar. Just walk right into the falls.”

He looked at her as though she’d gone mad.

“Go on. It’s quite safe.” She smiled encouragingly, but Jaemar could tell she was enjoying herself.

Shaking his head, Jaemar yanked on Philo's reins and squeezed past Ravenna. As he placed his foot on the wet rock, he heard Ravenna speaking what sounded like a chant behind him. Taking a deep breath, Jaemar planted his foot firmly and took another step.

After a few more uncertain steps, he quickened his pace and didn't stop until he realized that he couldn't feel the mist anymore, even though he was almost completely behind the waterfall at that point. He spied a gap in the rock and slipped through it, being forced to drag Philo after him.

He passed through what felt like a thin ripple of wind and suddenly found himself standing in a dry, well-lit cave, whose blue shimmering walls and ceiling gave the effect of being underwater. A long thin waterfall on the wall behind him seemed to come through a hole in the ceiling and disappear into the floor. While he was staring at it, Ravenna stepped through with Tânsereen behind her, both of them completely dry.

"Welcome, Ravenna Allspeak," came a regal voice from behind him.

He turned to see an age-less looking woman approaching them. She had silver hair and stern grey eyes, and she was flanked by four golden-haired guards.

The woman's eyes came to rest on Jaemar. "And this is the Imperial's bane. The last hope of the prophecies."

Jaemar shifted his feet and tried to avoid her gaze, which was more unreadable than Ravenna's.

"Follow me," she said.

They left the guards at the gateway and passed beneath a high-arched tunnel, also lit by the same bluish glow. In the rippling light, Jaemar could see scrollwork and ornate designs carved into the stone.

At the end of the tunnel, they emerged into a huge, cavernous space, where a brilliant sight met Jaemar's eyes. The heart of Litraria rose before them in a city of glass, light, and greenery. Twisted spires of stone and glass spiraled toward the dome high above them. Points of glittering light were strewn across the dark space above like so many stars, and a white orb near the western side seemed to be the sun trying to penetrate into the underground world.

"You should consider it an honor that the Lady herself came to welcome you to Litairne," Ravenna whispered in Jaemar's ear as they reached the end of the bridge.

Too enraptured by the sight of the city, Jaemar could only nod as they approached the high-arched gate to the city, delicately crafted to look like two ivory trees reaching their thick boughs toward each other. Once they had passed through the gate, lined with more of the golden-haired and white-robed sentries, a city of white light, emerald trees, and silver pillars met their eyes. Jaemar first noticed that the pavilion-style stone buildings seemed to emit a light of their own before he was struck by the emptiness of the silent streets. He couldn't decide whether the whole atmosphere was peaceful or eerie.

The Lady led them down a tree-lined avenue and stopped in front of a white structure, supported by vine-carved pillars. Jaemar peered down the long archway and saw a green courtyard at the structure's center.

"You will stay here," said the Lady. "Ravenna, you are welcome to resume your old quarters or remain here as well."

"I will see to it that Jaemar is comfortable," said Ravenna, bowing her head.

"Very well." She fixed Jaemar with her emotionless stare. "Your training with the Teacher will begin tomorrow."

Jaemar thought he had only just fallen asleep when Ravenna woke him the next morning. He was more exhausted than he had been before, and the light in the city had not changed from its silvery glow. Dragging himself out of bed, he pulled his tunic over his head and sleepily followed Ravenna out of the house. She led him through the quiet streets, the few people they passed either giving them silent nods or ignoring them completely.

Exhaustion coupled with the ethereal glow of the city, causing Jaemar to feel as though he were walking in a dream. He barely noticed when Ravenna stopped in front of a circular structure with two sentries posted by the arched entrance. Without so much as a glance, Ravenna swept past them and hurried up the archway to the courtyard.

The expansive green lawn was dotted with trees and stone benches. Groups of armed Luceri were scattered around the enclosure, practicing alone or fighting mock duels. Ignoring all of them, Ravenna wove through the courtyard and brought Jaemar to a corner staircase that spiraled deep into the earth.

Rubbing his eyes to force himself awake, Jaemar peered down the steps. “I didn’t think this city could go any deeper.”

“This is the Core,” said Ravenna, starting down the white stone steps. “It is the only mine in the city, but it has long since been bled dry. The Teacher wanted it for his training house.”

Placing his foot on the first step as though he were afraid the whole staircase would collapse, Jaemar trailed Ravenna down into the earth. The air around them grew warmer, and the stairwell increasingly narrow. Jaemar was relieved when the steps

spilled out onto a wide veranda overlooking a long open room. Crossing the veranda to look over the balcony, Jaemar scanned the rows of robed students practicing with each other or receiving instruction from people garbed in black.

“Do the Luceri have an army?” he asked Ravenna without taking his eyes off the scene below him.

“No,” said Ravenna firmly. “We are not the Resistance.”

“Then why all of this?”

“The Luceri believe in equipping their messengers. Both Reahn and I trained here. There are also others here who are not Luceri. They come great distances to learn from the Teacher.” Her voice took on a soft, mysterious air. “Some say distances in time as well as space can be crossed in the Core.” She nodded toward a black-robed instructor approaching them. “Here is the son of our host. He will take you to the Teacher.” She leaned closer to Jaemar. “It is said the Teacher has Fitendur blood in him. Be cautious.”

Before Jaemar could ask what that meant, the Teacher’s son stopped in front of them. “Lady Ravenna,” he said with a slight bow.

“Burk, this is—”

“Yes, I know. The Teacher is expecting him.”

The man’s grey eyes roved Jaemar from his travel-worn shoes to his face. Jaemar tried to hide his exhaustion.

“Come with me.”

“I’ll be waiting at the front archway to lead you back, Jaemar,” Ravenna said.

Jaemar merely nodded, his stomach twisting into knots as he wondered what he was about to face. Squaring his shoulders, he followed Burk down the wide steps to the training floor.

As they crossed the room, two sparring duelers broke between them. One of them knocked into Jaemar and then ducked to avoid his opponent's blade. Jaemar sidestepped the swordsman and hurried after Burk. As he caught up to him, he heard the fighters taunting each other.

“That all you got, Ansi? You told Norganah you were undefeatable.”

By the time they'd reached a door in the opposite wall, Jaemar was glad to have escaped with his life. Burk ushered Jaemar inside and shut the door behind them.

The room looked as though it had been cut out of the earth itself. The walls were grey stone crisscrossed by veins of a silvery metal. The only light came from the ceiling, which rippled in the same blue as Litairne's entrance halls. The room had three doors, and as Burk and Jaemar came through one, a blue-robed man with white hair appeared in the frame of another. He looked like he had been battling old age for hundreds of years. He carried a gnarled staff and his wrinkled face was half hidden behind bushy eyebrows and a long white beard.

The old man barely looked at Jaemar. “Burk, any news on the Crenoar invasion?”

“Not since I last checked,” said Burk, who didn't sound at all interested in the subject.

“Go check and bring me back a report,” barked the Teacher.

With a sigh that implied he had expected this, Burk rolled his eyes and left the room.

Jaemar, who had never heard of a Crenoar in his life, stared at the Teacher in curiosity. The Teacher seemed to have forgotten the matter entirely. Walking toward the center of the room, he swung his staff forward and caught it lengthwise in both hands.

“Now, Jaemar, what drives your fear?” The Teacher planted his feet and set his eyes fully on Jaemar’s face.

Jaemar blinked, every thought in his head scattering as he tried to come up with an answer.

The Teacher set his staff’s end back on the floor. “I can see that you have allowed the voices of others into your head. What are they saying?” He raised an eyebrow, as though he had caught Jaemar in a trap.

Increasingly feeling as though he were failing some secret test, Jaemar hesitated to reply.

“Let me guess. That you are too young to complete your assigned task?”

“Some believe that.”

“And do you?”

Jaemar ran his tongue over his lip. “My fear is more driven by the task I face.”

A slight smile curved the corner of the Teacher’s mouth. “You are afraid you will die, since so many others have failed before you.”

Jaemar opened his mouth but quickly closed it again.

The Teacher chuckled and swung his staff again. “And does your opponent know your fear?”

“The Imperial?”

“I didn’t ask who he was. It doesn’t matter who he is. What matters is if he knows you.”

Jaemar gaped at the old man as though he had just asked why the sun was necessary. Noticing that the Teacher was still staring at him, Jaemar stuttered a reply. “I don’t know. I don’t think he fears me.”

“Perhaps that is because you do not fear the right thing.” He cast Jaemar a sideways glance. “Tell me, what do you fear more than death?”

The readiness of his answer surprised even Jaemar. “That I will fail.”

The Teacher looked pleased. “Good. So you want to succeed. I can work with that.”

“But I am also afraid to succeed,” Jaemar spoke before he knew what he was saying. “Succeeding means murder.”

The Teacher fixed Jaemar with a stern eye. “You call it murder, but let me remind you that you must decide for yourself why you are doing this. Virtue, like evil, can always be chosen, as can revenge or bloodlust.” He tilted his head. “If you lack the desire to kill, perhaps there is a reason you are the only one who can.”

The words settled over the room but were shattered against the wall as the door was flung open.

“The Crenoars have taken over the northern regions,” Burk announced.

“Are they contained for the present?” asked the Teacher.

“No.”

“I see.” The Teacher seemed inwardly torn. “Do what you can. You can practice with Jaemar later.”

As Jaemar gaped at the Teacher, Burk gave his father a mock bow and saluted Jaemar before marching from the room.

“Excuse me a moment,” said the Teacher, hobbling over to one of the side rooms.

After he passed through the door, Jaemar glanced at the third door, which had remained closed. A moment of indecision passed, and Jaemar reached for the handle.

“I would not advise venturing where uninvited,” rumbled the Teacher’s voice behind him. “Closed doors can often lead to unexpected places, and we should remain in the present moment to avoid getting lost in the past. Forgetting this has ended more than one life.”

Jaemar snatched his hand back and whirled around to face the Teacher. A long wrapped bundle was tucked under his arm. Leaning his staff against his shoulder, the Teacher pulled out the bundle and rested it in the palms of his hands, letting the silk wrappings drape to the floor.

The sight of the sword was enough to send a shock of pain to his head and a wrenching feeling to his stomach.

Cocking an eyebrow, the Teacher slowly extended the sword. “Do you dare?”

“The last time I handled a seramite sword, it didn’t end well,” said Jaemar, swallowing hard.

The Teacher’s mouth widened into a grin. “Because I was not there to show you how it’s done.” He lifted the sword higher. “Take it.”

Shuffling forward, Jaemar stretched out a hand and touched the edge of the hilt. He could feel the faint vibrations in the metal coupled with the weight of the Teacher’s eyes. With a deep breath, Jaemar tightened his fingers around the hilt and felt a magnetic

pull that seemed to suction his grip to the metal. His heart beating in rhythm with the strange vibrations, he held the sword up so that it reflected the bluish light of the ceiling.

The Teacher backed away from him. “How does it feel?”

Jaemar twisted the sword so he could see its other side.

“Alive.” His voice sounded distant and dazed.

“Nothing else?” the Teacher asked, his voice fading slightly.

Before Jaemar could answer, a figure flashed in front of him as clearly as though the man were standing before him. His skin was deathly white against his long black hair. Jaemar’s eyes traveled up the figure’s body and met its red eyes. A sneer crossed the pale face, and Jaemar felt the sword leaden in his hand.

As the blade began to fall, the red-eyed man spoke.

“There is no chance for heroism, Jaemar Haurreich. Only death.”

The vision and fall of the sword were both interrupted by a sweep of the Teacher’s staff. As the sword clattered across the stone floor, Jaemar stumbled back and gasped for breath.

Bending forward to rest his hands on his knees, he nodded toward the sword, lying innocently several feet away from him. “What possesses it?”

His head turned toward the sword, the Teacher looked at Jaemar out of the corner of his eye. “You know seramite is alive. It carries a will of its own.”

Still trying to calm his racing heart, Jaemar looked up at the Teacher.

“You will have to fight against its will,” said the Teacher, “or it will kill you.”

“I have to fight an Immortal with a sword that could kill me?”

The Teacher frowned. “You should know that seramite must find an outside source to sustain itself when it is removed from its natural place in stone.”

Jaemar straightened and shot the Teacher a questioning look.

The Teacher leaned on his staff and passed Jaemar a look that showed his unwillingness to be the bearer of this knowledge. “Seramite does not just kill. It steals life.” He raised his eyebrows. “From those who wield it and those whom it is used against.”

Jaemar lowered his eyes to the ground, trying to silence the buzzing in his ears.

“That is why it is the only blade that can kill an Immortal. It takes the Immortal’s life into itself and grows stronger. That is why seramite swords are so rare. They are difficult to make and can be used safely only once.”

Silence followed the Teacher’s words. Jaemar could feel the old man’s eyes on him, but he did not want to look up.

“That is all I will teach you today. Return tomorrow.”

Jaemar waited until the steps faded and he heard the sound of a door closing before he looked up. Finding himself in an empty room, he slowly turned toward the door to the main hall. Before he could reach it, four young men, none of whom paid any attention to Jaemar, shouldered past him and headed straight for the third door.

“If you ask me, Lord Hurreich’s new strictures don’t fit his own policies,” said one of the youths. “Allowing the Kazicmers a share in his power.”

“They even say he’s secretly hired Morgs to do his dirty work,” said another, jostling a third one’s shoulder. “What do you say to that?”

The four passed through the door and closed it behind them, shutting out their voices from Jaemar's ears. He was still frozen in the doorframe, arguing with himself about whether or not to follow them, when Reahn appeared seemingly out of nowhere and wrenched him around by his arm.

“What—you're back—”

“You must come quickly,” interrupted Reahn. “Zerhard's in the dungeon. They found the mark of the Order on his arm and his forehead.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Revelation from the Past

*Even if you can't stay alive, at least stay human. –C. S. Lewis, Abolition of Man*

Jaemar and Zerhard sat across from each other, twisted bars of white stone between them. The Luceri dungeon was lit by the same bluish glow as the rest of the city, but the effect was less like moving water and more like frozen ice. Jaemar shivered and scooted closer to the bars.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” As much as Jaemar had wanted to voice the question, the silence felt heavier after he had said it.

Zerhard’s frosty eyes glared at him from behind them.

“What would you have done?” he demanded.

“I tried to tell them about your father, but they wouldn’t listen!” Jaemar insisted. “Did he and the other Kazicmers force you to take the mark?”

Zerhard shot him a dark glower before lowering his eyes to the floor. “I should never have come here.”

Jaemar watched Zerhard chafe the underside of his right wrist, where the Order’s mark was imprinted. The skin was raw, and Jaemar thought he could see blood, as though Zerhard had tried to scrape the mark off with his fingernails.

“I’ll get you out of here,” Jaemar promised. “Reahn believes me.”

Zerhard snorted in disbelief. “Not much he can do. Not when I’m in the hands of the Luceri.”

Before Jaemar could respond, a Luceri sentry appeared in the hallway.

“The lady Ravenna sends for you,” he said to Jaemar.

His eyes slid disapprovingly toward Zerhard, as though he were offended by the very sight of him.

Zerhard crossed his arms and turned so that he could lean against the wall and not have to be under the sentry’s glare. Jaemar opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came. With a sigh, he pushed himself to his feet and followed the sentry out of the hall to the marble stairs.

On his way up, he was confronted by the Romeiran who had accompanied Marcus Greyhardt and killed Drahzac. In surprise, he took a step back and had to grasp for the railing to keep from falling. She met his stare but quickly looked away as though embarrassed.

“I was going to visit your friend,” she said to the wall. “He—he saved my life.”

Jaemar noticed that her lower torso was tightly wrapped in a binding with dark splotches on it. It matched her patterned skin and blended in with her clothes.

“He and the two others arrived near the end of our fight against the Order,” the Romeiran continued speaking to the wall. “I was already wounded and wouldn’t have survived another...” She bit her lip.

“What are you doing here?” Jaemar demanded.

She cringed, sinking closing to the wall. “General Greyhardt told me I was better off coming here than dying of wounds up there, and he asked the Resistance captain to

bring me with him.” She lowered her head and her voice even further. “But now I feel as trapped as your friend.”

“Zerhard.”

She looked up, her eyes welling with tears. “Yes.”

Jaemar felt a pang of guilt as a tear slipped down her violet-colored cheek.

“He was good, wasn’t he? The Morgskall I killed.”

Jaemar’s lips parted, but he could say nothing. She nodded as though she already knew and gave him a sad smile. “I suppose if they kill me here, it will be no less than what I deserve.” She eased herself past him on the narrow stairs. “The Luceri despise Romeirans almost as much as the rest of Almaen hates Morgskalls.”

As she glided away from him down the steps, Jaemar finally found his voice.

“What’s your name?” he called.

She looked over her shoulder, a hopeful smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Emeryl.”

“I’m Jaemar,” he said.

The relieved grin spread fully across her face. “Thank you, Jaemar.”

She continued down into the dungeon, and Jaemar turned and ran up the remaining steps to the city.

Ravenna was waiting for him in the street. She wore her usual disapproving look. A spark of fury rekindled in Jaemar’s chest as he remembered her part in Zerhard’s arrest.

“How could you—” he started, but Ravenna stopped him.

“You cannot visit him anymore.”

“You can’t—”

“It’s too dangerous,” she snapped. “The Order’s mark is a serious sign of loyalty, and an influence like his is the last thing you need right now,” she said firmly.

“He didn’t choose it,” argued Jaemar, “just like I didn’t choose to be the Imperial’s bane.” His eyes burned, and he wondered if they were sparking like Reahn’s. “If Zerhard had wanted to kill me or sell me to the Imperial, he would have done it before now. He had multiple chances, but he chose to risk himself to save me instead.”

Fierce anger rose in Ravenna’s eyes, but Jaemar saw something else there that reminded him of his mother. “He is not the only one to have risked himself for you, and he won’t be the last.” She leaned closer, towering over him so that he had to bend backward to see her face. “And he won’t be the only one trying to deceive you.”

Jaemar frowned, clenching his teeth together.

Ravenna sighed and looked away. “I’m sorry, Jaemar.” She rested a hand on his shoulder. “I wish for you that this wasn’t your fate.”

Shooting her a glare, he shrugged her hand off. “I don’t wish that.”

Ravenna stared at him in surprise.

“I have seen enough to know that I wouldn’t be able to just stand by and watch, even if I wasn’t the brother-son of the Imperial.”

As Ravenna raised her eyebrow in interest, a series of his reasons flitted through his mind. Gemma’s sightless eyes, the healer’s son who betrayed his own father to the Order, Zerhard’s fingers touching the disfigured hand of a dead child, bloody words of disfiguring a wall, a row of rebels waiting for execution, death in the eyes of a Morgskall. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Darkness has fallen over Almaen, and not all of it is caused by the Imperial.” He raised his head so that he could look Ravenna squarely in her eyes. “I don’t want to kill my uncle. But more than anything, I want to fight to protect what my father saw in Almaen, and what my mother saw in me.”

Ravenna took a long breath, a brow arched quizzically on her forehead. “Well then, you have work to do.”

A fortnight later, as Jaemar stumbled alone toward the Core with his eyes half-closed in sleep, he almost collided with Emeryl, who had planted herself in his path.

“Where have you been?” she asked, tilting her head to see if he was actually awake. “I couldn’t find you yesterday.”

“I was at the Core until late.” He massaged his temples. “I might as well have slept there.”

A pair of Luceri sentries glided past them, eyeing them suspiciously. Emeryl stepped closer to Jaemar.

“I won’t keep you long. I just wanted to tell you that I’m still trying to help Zerhard escape.”

Jaemar’s eyes flew open. “How is he?”

Emeryl bit her lip. “Not well, I’m afraid. Being locked up for so long is putting a strain on him.”

“How are you?” Jaemar asked, nodding toward the binding around her abdomen.

She shrugged. “I hardly notice it now, but I promised Zerhard I wouldn’t leave until I could be sure of him getting out.”

A group of other students filed into the Core's entrance, catching Jaemar's eye.

"I'd better go," he said, "but I'll try to find you later."

At a nod from Emeryl, he darted toward the Core and made his way to the training hall. As he approached his room, he heard Burk and the Teacher arguing.

"I've subjected myself to some of your craziest ideas, but this is where I draw the line," insisted Burk as Jaemar closed the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, but it has to be done," replied the Teacher calmly. "I would never survive it, and Jaemar needs to see it happen for himself."

"*You* wouldn't survive—"

"Needs to see what?" Jaemar asked.

The Teacher and Burk looked up suddenly. The Teacher smiled, as though he and Burk had just been reminiscing about days gone by.

"Ah, Jaemar, I'm glad you're here. I have something important to show you today." He whipped the seramite sword out of the folds of his robe and pointed its tip at Burk, who hastily backed away with his hands raised.

"Keep still, Burk," said the Teacher. "This is the only way he will learn."

Burk opened his mouth to protest but quickly clamped it shut. Rolling his eyes, he stepped toward the tip of the blade and pricked his forefinger against it. Jaemar watched as his body convulsed once and the Teacher lowered the sword. Burk lunged away, sucking on his finger while throwing the Teacher a dark look.

"Didn't I tell you? No harm done," said the Teacher with a malicious grin.

He extended the sword to Jaemar, who reflexively took a step back.

"What did you do?" Jaemar asked slowly.

“I just stole a piece of Burk’s life.”

“What!” Burk shouted at the same moment that Jaemar asked, “You can do that?”

“The art is highly complex,” said the Teacher, ignoring Burk, “but you must learn it if you are to use the sword at all.”

Jaemar took the sword in his hands as though he were afraid it would burst into flames. His arms buckled under the weight that had grown steadily over the past several days. The sword now felt heavier than the weapons pack he used to deliver to Mason’s store, which now felt like five hundred years ago.

“Now, I only stole a part of life Burk’s already lived. A memory, if you will.”

“And you had no right—” Burk snarled.

“The sword has been doing the same thing to you over the course of your training,” said the Teacher, “but at a much slower rate than it would had the blade actually pierced your skin.”

“But does it...can it take more than memories?” asked Jaemar, eyeing the sword distrustfully.

“Of course,” said the Teacher, sounding rather disappointed, as though Jaemar should have known a fact as simple as that. “It is a sword after all, and a live one at that. Thus, I expect you to take great care when you try it on Burk. It will be difficult for me to intervene once the three of you are connected.”

“No,” Burk said decidedly. “Once was enough.”

The Teacher barely looked at him. “I would have thought you would consider this task an honor.”

Burk responded through gritted teeth. “Being born into this family is honor enough, I can assure you.”

The Teacher ignored him. “Once you’ve seen a moment of Burk’s life, release him. It will happen very quickly, though time will seem to slow for you.”

“Just look at the way he handles the sword,” Burk objected, distracting Jaemar, who had leveled the blade towards Burk. “You shouldn’t let him do this. He’s not ready.”

“Stop interrupting and keep still, Burk,” the Teacher said as though Burk were a small child. “He’ll release it before he kills you.”

“What?” Jaemar demanded, lowering the sword.

The Teacher straightened Jaemar’s arm so that the sword once again was directed at Burk, who was, in effect, pinned against the wall. “This is not something I can teach by degrees. It’s all or nothing. And besides, it’s only his finger.”

Feeling as though he had just been sentenced to an Order’s execution, Jaemar took his stance in front of Burk, who appeared little happier with the situation. With a groan, Burk stomped forward and pressed his finger to the blade’s tip.

Jaemar first saw nothing other than Burk’s face in front of him, but then an ocean seemed to wash over his vision, and he saw Burk swimming toward an island he’d never seen before. That image was quickly replaced by one of Burk clashing his sword against a three-legged, horned creature Jaemar had never even heard of in legends. When the scene faded, Jaemar saw Burk lift a chain out of his shirt and whisper something to the locket at the end of the chain. Jaemar blinked, and he suddenly found himself looking at the locket from Burk’s perspective. Before he could read what was written there, he

found himself kneeling beside the Teacher, who was sprawled lifelessly on the floor.  
Dried blood caked his mouth.

Something heavy hit him from behind, and he stumbled back. As the vision of the Teacher's body dissolved into darkness, he could see the red-eyed man laughing in front of him.

"Seems I didn't need to use wolphak poison against you," he sneered. "You will destroy yourself, and I and my master will live forever."

The echoing laughter faded, and Jaemar's eyes flashed open. He found himself on the floor looking up at the shimmering ceiling. Despite the leaden weight in his arms, he was able to push himself to a sitting position on the cold stone. The Teacher was gone, but Burk stood hunched against the nearest wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I see you have seen fit to rejoin us," he said without much interest.

"What happened? Where's the Teacher?"

"You held me for too long, and the sword started to drain both of us. The Teacher had to hit you in the head with his staff." Burk pushed away from the wall. "You could have killed me, you know that?"

"Where's the Teacher?"

"He made sure you would live before he left to put the sword away for another hundred years."

Jaemar ignored him. "I saw a Wyrdiac. He spoke to me."

"What did he say?" Burk asked, picking at the cut on his finger.

"That I would destroy myself and that he and his master would live forever."

“Sounds like a Wyrdiac. They tend toward the dramatic.”

“I’ve seen him before,” said Jaemar, his voice distant. “Never in person.”

“In dreams or visions, then?” asked Burk, putting the side of his finger to his mouth. At Jaemar’s nod, he dropped his arm and said, “Well, he probably serves your opponent. Wyrdiacs can connect to people in a way the rest of us can’t. Your opponent must be using him to attack your mind.”

Jaemar’s eyes widened, and he swallowed hard. “How much will he know about me?”

Burk shrugged. “The only thing you can do is kill your opponent. Wyrdiacs bind themselves to a master, and its life will end when its master’s does. Must be why he chose an Immortal master.”

Jaemar looked down to his feet. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Succinctly put for someone who almost killed himself,” said Burk. “But don’t worry. The Teacher’s lessons are all eventually learned.”

“It’s not even that,” said Jaemar, still speaking to his feet. “I don’t know if I could take a life.”

Burk looked sideways at him. “You’ve never killed anyone before?” When Jaemar didn’t answer, Burk took a breath and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Killing a living being is never an easy thing, whether it’s the first time or the seventeenth. But we should remember that justice serves all things, now or in a hundred years, by our hands or those of someone greater.” Jaemar looked up, and Burk met his eye. “All men will die.”

“Not if they’re Immortal,” said Jaemar, lowering his eyes again.

With a sigh, Burk started toward the door to the Teacher's chambers. "True enough. But think of this. Why can't Immortals be killed?"

Jaemar jerked his eyes toward Burk, who looked back over his shoulder. He had one hand on the door.

"Perhaps your Immortal opponent isn't a living being anymore."

The suggestion waited for Jaemar to pick it up long after Burk had vanished through the door. Jaemar finally dragged himself to his feet and was about to leave when the third door, the one the Teacher had told him to leave alone, suddenly flew open. One of the youths he had seen before staggered through the opening, flung the door shut behind him, and pressed his back up against it, as though to keep someone from following him. Now that Jaemar saw him up close, he thought the youth looked to be about the same age as himself. His chest rose and fell in agitated rage, but his expression was torn by something closer to grief.

Jaemar was about to say something when someone on the other side of the door starting pounding on it. The youth looked straight ahead, his eyes wide with fear, and Jaemar realized that the youth was looking straight through him without seeing him.

"Ansi, open the door," came a male voice through the wood. "It's me."

The youth closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Ansi, I need to talk to you."

"And what will you say?" Ansi demanded. "Words have no more use here."

"What did he do to you?" came the other voice.

Ansi closed his eyes again, and Jaemar saw his whole body begin to tremble. His knuckles were white against the dark wood of the door.

“Did he hurt you?”

Ansi took a shaky breath. “He showed me that I can’t be hurt.”

“We already knew that from when you fell off your horse.”

“This was different,” said Ansi. The next words came in a murmur, as though he was still reliving what had happened. “He stabbed me.”

There was silence on the other side of the door. Jaemar waited, barely breathing.

“He stabbed me through the heart. And when Norganah tried to stop him...”

Ansi trailed off, his gaze frozen on a point past Jaemar, somewhere far away.

“Ansi?” said the man on the other side of the door.

“He killed her.”

Ansi looked dazed. He blinked, and the blissful trance was gone. His face screwed into an expression of complete brokenness. “Norganah’s dead.” He slid down against the door until he was sitting on the ground. “And all he said was, ‘You needed her too much.’”

The door budged forward, pushing Ansi with it. He didn’t seem to care enough to push back.

“She looked at me, and what I saw in her eyes reminded me of our mother. What has he done?” Ansi drew his knees up to his chest and buried his face in his arms.

A man a few years older than Ansi stuck his head through the door and squeezed himself through the opening. He looked back through the slit before closing the door behind him. Jaemar studied the newcomer, noting his reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. He frowned as an idea pricked the back of his mind.

For a moment, neither youth spoke. The older one knelt and rested a hand on Ansi's shoulder.

"Ansi—"

"I'll never forgive him," Ansi interrupted, throwing his brother's hand away.

His brother stood up again. "You must be careful. He's very powerful."

Ansi's dead eyes stared ahead of him at nothing. "He can't do anything else to me."

"Listen to me," said the older brother. "With the Kazicmer alliance and the Morgskall mercenaries, nothing will ever be the same anymore. Even though he's our father, he will not tolerate any act of defiance from either of us." He dropped to his knees so that Ansi had to look at him. "He will find ways to stop you, and if he can, he will not hesitate to kill you."

"Then I disown him," said Ansi. "He cares more for himself and his foreign armies than for the lives of his people."

"Ansi—"

"No, Adamar," said Ansi, leaping to his feet.

The name hit Jaemar's ears like a blow from the Teacher's staff. He gaped at the men before him, trying to understand how what he was seeing was possible.

"Remember what the Teacher always says," Ansi continued. "If a man knows what is evil, recognizes the darkness around him, and sees the possibility of a remedy with his own eyes, he has the duty and the obligation to take a stand before all and fight against the injustice for its cure." Ansi glared at his brother with the full release of his pent-up fury. "Even if it means destroying that darkness."

Adamar frowned and took a step back. “He’s an Immortal. You know what will happen to you if you try to defy him.”

Ansi scowled at him and grasped the door handle, but Adamar blocked the door with his hand.

“Killing him will do nothing to his soul, but yours will be destroyed.”

Ansi shot him an angry glare and threw off his hold on the door so that he could open it. Adamar stepped back but grabbed Ansi’s shoulder as his younger brother passed through the doorframe.

“Do not lose yourself in murder. Death is better.”

Ansi froze in his tracks, and Adamar pressed his case further.

“You might live for eternity, but you will not be alive if you have lost your humanity.”

Ansi hesitated, but his voice finally came over his shoulder. “He needs to be reminded of his.”

In the next instant, both were gone, and the door had been shut behind them. Jaemar gasped for breath, realizing that he had forgotten to breathe. He had just had a glimpse of his father and the Imperial. Despite the Teacher’s earlier words of caution, Jaemar felt a deep longing to go after them, but the Teacher’s sudden emergence from his chambers stopped him.

“Why are you still here, Jaemar?” he grumbled. “You need rest before you make another attempt.”

Jaemar didn’t move. “Teacher.”

The old man looked up at him.

“You told me that a seramite sword is unusable after it is used to kill an Immortal, but what happens to the wielder of the sword?”

The Teacher said nothing.

“Does he become as untouchable as the sword?” Jaemar pressed.

“Killing anything takes its toll on the wielder,” the Teacher began slowly, “but it is true that taking an Immortal life has more lasting consequences.”

“What will happen to me?” demanded Jaemar.

The Teacher hesitated and placed his hand back on the door to his chambers. “If you absorb the life the seramite steals from the Immortal, your soul will become as black as his.”

Jaemar staggered back as though he had just suffered a physical blow. “How— how do I keep that from happening?”

The Teacher straightened his shoulders and stepped backwards into the doorway. “You cannot learn that until you know how to guard against the seramite’s force. Come back tomorrow, and we will see if you are ready.”

With a scowl burned onto his features, Jaemar stormed out of the Core and made his way blindly home. By the time he stumbled into his pavilion, the courtyard was dark, but white stones glittered in the rock ceiling high overhead. In the far corner of the courtyard, Jaemar saw the telltale glow of an orange flame.

Reahn glanced up as Jaemar approached. “Rough day?”

Jaemar just shook his head. He did not want to think about it, much less talk about it. “Why are you up so late?”

Reahn studied Jaemar for a moment more before lowering his eyes to the flame he was rolling around in his palm. “Cyrgoz,” he muttered. “It’s kept me awake on many nights.”

Jaemar sat up. “I have heard that name used as a curse. What is it?”

Reahn stood and wandered over to an unlit torch. “Something that should have been left in the past,” he said, “but has been strengthened and protected so that it is even worse than it was before.”

He cupped his hand over the torch so that it caught flame. In the burst of light, Jaemar could see Chaisee’s eyes glowing from beneath the bench. With the torch lit, Reahn snapped his hand shut over the fire in his hand, snuffing it completely.

“It is a place in the south. A prison, where the Imperial sends his enemies and the traitors to his cause.” He lowered his head. In the firelight, he looked to be nothing more than a shadow. “He sends them there to work and to learn loyalty to the Order, but the only thing they learn is how to die.”

The faces of the orphans in Resden flashed across Jaemar’s vision, and he bit his lip. “How did he capture you?”

Reahn trudged back to the bench and slumped down onto it. Chaisee whipped out from beneath it and scampered up his leg onto his lap. Jaemar watched his rough hands slide slowly across the fox’s back.

“I was young and foolish.” He smiled grimly. “That’s how he caught me.” He focused his eyes on Jaemar, still sitting on the grass. “You remember I told you that my father, Roidan, served in the royal palace in Geresdain?”

Jaemar nodded.

“He belonged with them more than I ever belonged to him. And what did it all lead to?” A spark flared in his hand, sending Chaisee diving to the ground. Reahn didn’t seem to notice. He continued to stare ahead, as though remembering something long lost in the past. “Death by a Morgskall blade.”

Jaemar gaped at Reahn in horror before dropping his eyes to the ground. He pulled some of the grass loose. “What did you do?”

“What any right-minded fifteen-year-old boy would do,” he smirked. “I tried to avenge him. I was fortunate they only sent me to Cyrgoz, though I didn’t see it that way at the time.” He let out a long breath and considered the new flame flickering in his hand. “The same creatures that had killed my father became my masters there.” He cleared his throat. “That is why—well, you understand now. Drahzac might have been good, but I couldn’t separate him from the monsters that destroyed my childhood.”

Jaemar looked up and chanced another question. “How did you escape?”

Reahn tossed the fire into his mouth and brushed his hands off on his trousers. Flashes of light came through his teeth. “The same way I got in there. By fighting.” He leaned forward and turned his head to look at Jaemar. “Too many men in Almaen are like me. We make our living by fighting and killing until it becomes the only thing we know. And not all of us are soldiers.” He stretched his hand out and gripped Jaemar’s shoulder. “Enough of them will try to make you the same way, but don’t let yourself be persuaded. Having the strength to take a life is not always a sign of courage.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Jaemar asked, drawing slightly back in confusion. He wondered fleetingly where Reahn had been spending all of his spare time. “You know my task is to take a life.”

“And so you must,” said Reahn. “But you are not a killer or an assassin.” He looked away. “That is why this task is meant for you alone.”

His hand fell away from Jaemar’s shoulder, and he rose to his feet.

“I don’t understand,” said Jaemar. “Why should someone who’s never killed anyone be the only one fit for something like this?”

“I don’t know.” Reahn started to walk away, and he whistled for Chaisee to follow him. With his back facing Jaemar, he called over his shoulder, “But I have no doubt you will find out for both of us.”

Jaemar nodded slowly and drew his knees up to his chest. Ever since he had found out who his father was, he had tried to block from his mind any scenario that could occur between him and his uncle. But after his training with the Teacher and his conversation with Reahn, Jaemar found himself imagining the confrontation that he feared.

He closed his eyes and watched the Imperial flicker to life before him. The great man looked at him and laughed. Jaemar knew he would never succeed. And if he did, he would become like his uncle.

The red-eyed Wyrdiac, Gehzbenak, suddenly appeared and reached long white fingers toward him. Jaemar jolted as they grabbed his arm and began to roughly shake him. He jerked awake and looked up to see Emeryl’s silhouette over him. The torchlight illuminated her violet skin.

Pushing himself up onto his elbows, Jaemar blinked rapidly, realizing that he had fallen asleep in the courtyard. He opened his mouth to speak, but Emeryl put a finger to her lips. She straightened to her full height and motioned for him to follow her. Despite

his grogginess and confusion, Jaemar scrambled to his feet and hurried after her through the front archway.

She turned a corner and yanked him roughly by the arm to pull him out of the main street.

“What the—” he began but stopped himself as Zerhard stepped out of the shadows and pulled a hood from his head. Jaemar’s eyes widened. “Zerhard, how did you—”

“Quiet, Jaemar!” Zerhard hissed. “Unless you want me back in chains.”

Jaemar lowered his voice. “What’s going on?”

“I had to get out, Jaemar,” said Zerhard, his eyes darting nervously around. “You don’t know what it’s been like for me. I’ve been trapped for too many years to accept another prison, and an Ellendar is not meant to stay between four walls.” His eyes pleaded with Jaemar to understand.

“It’s not safe,” Jaemar protested. “If they find you, they’ll be less likely to believe—”

“They weren’t going to believe anything,” Zerhard said with a frown. “Emeryl overheard the sentries talking. Whatever council there is in this place was going to try to convince the Lady to have me killed tomorrow.” His jaw clenched, and he shook his head.

Jaemar looked from him to Emeryl and back. “But how did you get out?”

“It was all Emeryl,” said Zerhard, shooting her a grateful grin. “She managed to distract the sentries long enough for me to escape.”

“We’re not out yet,” said Emeryl. She turned to Jaemar. “We need your help.”

Jaemar took a breath before nodding. “Anything.”

“It’s impossible to escape using the main gateway,” she said. “The tunnels are well-guarded, and only the Luceri can open the waterfall door. But there is another way.”

Her eyes shifted from one to the other.

“My people built this city long ago, and traces of our old power still remain beneath the influences of the Luceri.”

She focused her attention on Jaemar.

“There is a door in one of the deepest recesses of the city that will get us out.”

“The Core,” Jaemar murmured.

Emeryl nodded. “Very few such passages still exist in Almaen. Doors that lead to places far beyond the next room.”

“I’ve been through one,” said Jaemar, glancing at Zerhard.

Zerhard nodded. “The Kazicmers maintain control of several.”

“Why do you need my help?” asked Jaemar.

“You can guarantee our entry into the Core,” Emeryl replied. “You go there every day. No one will stop you.”

Jaemar hesitated for only a fraction of a second before he stepped toward the street and motioned them to follow.

Even though he had traveled the path to the Core multiple times, the walk had never seemed so lengthy. At every corner, Jaemar sucked in his breath, fearing the appearance of a sentry or someone who could recognize them. By the time they reached the Core, Jaemar’s heart was pounding enough to tear a hole through his chest.

They met no one on the stairs and crossed the veranda without being stopped. On the floor of the main hall, a few dedicated students glanced up from their fights, but no one spoke to them. It wasn't until he reached the door to the training room that Jaemar remembered the Teacher. He would never be able to hide anything from him.

He glanced over his shoulder at Zerhard and Emeryl. "Let me check first."

He cracked the door open and peered inside. It was empty, the only motion being the blue light rippling across the walls.

"We're safe for now," Jaemar said, ushering Zerhard in front of him. "Hurry."

The three passed through the door and raced across the room to the door out of which Anzigar and Adamar had come. Jaemar kept shooting glances at the door to the Teacher's chamber.

Without hesitation, Emeryl threw open the portal door and waved her hand at Zerhard, urging him to enter. Not needing to be told twice, Zerhard sped through the dark entrance and disappeared.

With his eyes still on the Teacher's door, Jaemar said, "Go ahead," meaning for Emeryl to follow Zerhard. When he didn't hear her move, he turned around to see her staring at him, one of her violet hands still on the handle.

"What's wrong?" Jaemar hissed.

Emeryl lifted her chin and arched her brow. "You must understand, Jaemar, that this is not my fight. This one period of Almaen's history is only a blink in my life. You and your kind would do well to remember that." Her eyes sparked angrily.

"What are you talking about?" Jaemar demanded.

Before he could react, her hand shot forward and clutched his arm in a biting grip.

“It was your life or my brother’s, and I have more loyalty to him.”

Jaemar couldn’t believe what he was hearing, and he tried to pry her fingers loose.

“He will let me go now. I have brought him two instead of one.” Her lips brushed against Jaemar’s ear. “Your people will destroy each other, and the Romeirans will reclaim Almaen.”

“Stop!” he cried. “You can’t do this! You don’t—”

Ignoring his protests, Emeryl threw him through the doorway. He stumbled over the threshold and fell onto his hands and knees. The door clanged shut behind him. He leapt to his feet and furiously turned the handle. It swung open, revealing a small chamber cluttered with bent shields and rusted axes.

He waited in motionless silence, waiting for and fearing what would happen next.

“Zerhard?” he called softly.

Footsteps echoed somewhere nearby, and Jaemar backed up against the wall. It was dark, and he had to blink several times to adjust his eyes.

As he pressed his hand against the cool stone wall behind him, he saw the glow of a lantern thrown against the opposite wall. He began to inch toward the shadows, but the torch bearer rounded the corner before he could run.

It was a woman who looked to be near Zerhard’s age. Her red hair was closely cropped to her face, and her dark green eyes seemed to fill with disappointment when she saw Jaemar. The look vanished in an instant, and she advanced nearer, holding the torch closer to Jaemar’s face. He pressed himself against the wall.

“Who are you?” she demanded, her voice toned with the deep accent of the southern regions.

When Jaemar failed to reply, she looked around. “Did you follow someone in here? I heard footsteps.”

Her bearing carried the attitude of complete distraction, but Jaemar’s failure to answer forced her to address him with more vehemence.

“I asked you your name!”

She reached for him with her free hand and caught his sleeve just as he jerked away from her. As he yanked himself away, the cloth ripped, and the narrow slit revealed a section of the black mark on his arm.

The woman’s eyes traveled from the mark to his face. Jaemar met her eyes and saw that she knew.

“You’re the brother-son of the Imperial. The one he’s been looking for.” She shoved him against the wall. “Who brought you here?”

Jaemar stared back at her but refused to speak.

She prodded him again with the palm of her hand. Her eyes were fierce. “Was it a Morgskall?”

Jaemar’s eyes widened in surprise, and he spoke before he could stop himself. “Drahzac?”

The woman released him and stepped back in shock. “You know him?”

“I—I saw him die.”

The woman’s shoulders fell, and she lowered the torch to her side. The muscles in her face contracted, as though something inside her had been broken.

“He’s dead.” The whispered words were more of a statement than a question.

“I am sorry,” Jaemar said. “He was a friend.”

The woman's eyes jerked back to Jaemar's face. "You are not safe here."

"Where are we?"

She squared her shoulders and lifted the torch again.

"The Imperial's palace in Geresdain."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Son of the Imperial

*A movement that wants to renew a world must serve, not the moment, but the future. –*

*Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf*

Jaemar pressed himself harder against the stone, as if that would allow him to melt into the wall and disappear forever. How had this happened? He knew Geresdain was the one place he was supposed to go to, yet it was the last place he wanted to be right now. As the woman stared him down, Jaemar wondered if she had seen Zerhard.

When she said nothing, he asked, “What are you going to do to me?”

Her eyes looked like sparks as they reflected the torchlight. They studied Jaemar intently, and her chest rose as she took a breath.

“Nothing. That is, I’m going to help you.”

“What, you mean help me find the shortest way to the chopping block?” His fingernails scraped against the wall. “Don’t trouble yourself.”

“No.” She sounded irritated. “I’m going to help you get to the Imperial and kill him.” She lowered the torch again and shot him a questioning look. “That is why you’ve come, is it not?”

Jaemar glared at her. The pain of Emeryl’s betrayal was too sharp in his memory for him to lower his guard. “Who are you? How do I know I can even trust you?”

She raised her chin. “My name is Izra Jornault.”

“Jornault?” The name sounded familiar, but Jaemar couldn’t place it.

“Yes. My father was the Imperial’s Krech general. That legacy has now passed to me.”

Her words sent a cold shiver through Jaemar’s body, and he cringed against the wall.

“But do not fear.” She lifted the torch. “Not all who share the Imperial’s country share his beliefs.”

“Why would you help me? You say you serve him.”

“I’ve seen too much of what he can do to ever wish to help him do it.” The sadness in her eyes seemed to entreat him until she let her gaze fall. “It was a lesson my father learned too late.”

Without answering, Jaemar looked back at the cluttered store room that should have been the Teacher’s training room.

“It won’t work from this side,” said Izra. “Not for us.” She beckoned him with her free hand. “Come with me, and I can help you.”

Jaemar shied away from her, sliding along the damp wall. He froze as he heard a distant rumble of voices mixed with the fatal sound of armor clinking together. Izra stiffened into the posture of one listening closely, but she kept her hand extended toward Jaemar.

“They’re coming for you,” she said softly. “The Imperial must have known you would be here.” She took a step closer. “Trust me or don’t, but if you do not come with

me now, they will find you, and neither your life nor your mother's will have any more value."

Snapping his eyes onto her face, Jaemar pushed himself away from the wall.

"She's here?"

Izra nodded impatiently and beckoned to him again. The noise of oncoming soldiers in the corridor increased. Jaemar inched toward Izra, watching her closely as though he expected her to pull a sword on him at any minute.

"You'll take me to her?"

Izra grabbed his wrist and began to drag him down the opposite corridor. "If I wanted you both dead, then yes, I would." She had lowered her voice to a hiss.

Jaemar opened his mouth to reply, but voices close behind him caused the words to disintegrate on his tongue.

"I've never liked doing rounds near this place," said one soldier in the language of the Order. "I've heard too many stories."

"Quiet! The Wyrdiac said it had to be here."

"I don't know why he didn't come himself..."

Their whispered argument died away in the recesses of the passage as Izra led Jaemar away from the door and through a network of musty corridors. Whether because he had decided to trust her or because he had no other choice, Jaemar did not try to escape but merely allowed himself to be pulled up one passage and down another.

Izra seemed to know the underground maze as well as the Luceri knew their underground haven, but after several minutes of uninterrupted walking, she took to pausing at the foot of some of the staircases they passed. She would stop and use an arm

to hold Jaemar behind her as she tilted her head toward the stairs as though listening intently. Once or twice after these episodes, she would double back the way they had come.

It wasn't until the fourth time she did this that Jaemar finally chanced a softly-spoken question. "Are you lost?"

"I've lived here my whole life," she shot back over her shoulder, seemingly offended by the very suggestion. "These tunnels are the old catacombs. They run under the whole length of the palace and some of the city. I used to explore down here for hours when I was a child."

As the image of a little girl wandering through the dark with a candle in her hand blinked across his mind, Jaemar asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"The Imperial's private treasury," she replied, tugging him past the staircase and taking a left turn. "I've only been there twice before, once on accident and once with the Imperial. That's when he told me that my father had fallen."

Jaemar couldn't see her face, but the bitterness in her voice was thick enough to cut.

He cleared his throat. "And one of these staircases leads up into it?"

"No. There is only one door into the treasury, and we can only reach it from the Imperial's private quarters." She paused before adding. "The treasury itself is guarded by two sentinels."

"Then how—"

Izra pulled him up suddenly before another staircase. She threw her hand back to silence him, and Jaemar clamped his mouth shut. After waiting longer than she had at

any other staircase, she began to glide silently up the stairs, motioning Jaemar to follow. The process was painfully slow, and Jaemar counted twenty-five steps until they stopped at the top. A small black door impeded their progress.

With one ear straining toward the door, Izra slid the torch into a sconce and doused the light with an iron cup hanging beside it on the wall. As the darkness fell around them, Jaemar became aware of the cold updrafts blowing steadily from the lower passages.

“Listen to me,” came Izra’s voice. “These doors lead up into the palace. None of them will get us into the Imperial’s suite, but this is one of the closest that also happens to be unguarded.”

“What do you want me to do?” Jaemar whispered back, sliding his feet away from the step’s edge.

“You’ll have to stay behind while I go and get the sword. It’s too dangerous to bring you into the palace, and I think you’ll be safe here.”

Jaemar almost choked as he sucked in a lungful of air. “So he has a seramite sword?”

“He’s had it for years. It was the one Adamar tried to use against him right before the Resistance fell.”

“My father fought with it?” He asked the question with whispered reverence.

“And died by it. The Imperial turned it against him in their last duel.”

Fear slid through Jaemar’s chest like a knife. He could hear Izra’s hand feeling for the handle. Without thinking, he reached out and grabbed for her arm. His fingers closed around her wrist.

Her arm stopped moving. She was waiting for him.

The only words that formed in his head sounded childish, but he had to say them.

“You’re not—you’re not going to betray me, are you?”

Her free hand gently peeled away his grip. The door latch clicked, and a sliver of light appeared at the top of the doorframe.

“You have to trust me. Wait here.”

Without another word, she cracked open the door and slipped out through the shaft of light before shutting Jaemar back in the dark. He pressed himself against the wood and listened as her footsteps faded. As silence engulfed him, he felt the small nail of fear twisting and widening in his chest. Before he could stop them, images and voices began to float around him in the dark.

*Do no allow the Order’s shadow to fall over you....The Imperial cannot take Almaen if even one man still stands against him.*

“Your father was the brother of Anzigar Haurreich, the Imperial of Almaen.”

Even though he knew she was alive, Simnara’s scream still echoed in his ears. He ground his teeth and dug his fingernails into the wood, ignoring the splinters that pricked his skin.

“Imperial Scorzac must be destroyed, and if you do not do it, there will be no one left who can.”

Ravenna’s words were interrupted by the flashing red eyes of the Wyrdiac. Jaemar squeezed his own eyes shut and clenched his hands into fists against the door. The city of Resden opened before him, unwilling to be shut out, and he seemed to be

flying over the buildings as in a dream. The Order-rich propaganda of the city faced him at every turn, and in the distance, he could hear the execution bells.

He saw a mangled child lying in front of him. Zerhard's words trickled back through his memory. "The touchstone of a being's value."

But a screaming crowd drowned out his words with cries of "Unfit to live!" and "The Imperial Order forever!"

"We're all going to die," Ravenna said, shooting Jaemar a sad smile as if she knew something he didn't.

Zerhard appeared and glared at her, his hands absently scraping the skin away from his wrist.

"Killing him will do nothing to his soul, but yours will be destroyed."

*Yours will be destroyed.*

"It's been destroyed! The treasury was broken into!"

The second cry was enough to break through Jaemar's thoughts and yank him forcefully back to where he stood leaning against the door into the Geresdain palace. He blinked and shoved his ear harder against the wood, willing the speaker to explain himself.

"What's happened?" another voice granted Jaemar's silent plea.

"Someone broke into the Imperial suite and attacked the sentinels guarding the treasury."

Jaemar shrank against the wall.

"Neither of the guards are fit to speak yet, but Captain Detrans already ordered a search of the palace. The thief can't have gone far."

Footsteps drew nearer to Jaemar's hiding place, and he sucked in his breath.

"What, he stole something?" the second speaker seemed to be following the first, and their voices came from just the other side of the door.

"Seems so, but the captain didn't say what. Never seen him so angry, though."

"Is he certain it's just one person? How could one man get past those sentinels? They terrify even me!"

"You didn't see the damage," said the first soldier. "That door was burnt right off its hinges. Looks like we may have a monster in our midst."

The voices died away, leaving Jaemar in the thickening darkness. He clutched at the rail in support. If the whole palace was under search, how long would it take to find him? What had happened to Izra?

As panic built up in his throat, Jaemar shakily dropped down a step, both hands inching along the iron rail at his back. He had not descended half of the stairs before he heard in the corridor below him the clatter of chainmail rustling against shields. His breathing became shallow, and his palms felt slick against the rail. He was still locked in the darkness at the middle of the stairs when he heard a shout from the palace above.

"Izra!" A pause separated the second cry from the first. "Izra! Where have you been?"

With the clanking soldiers fast approaching from below, Jaemar scuttled back up the stairs and waited breathlessly behind the door.

"Have you heard what's happened?" the voice continued. "I couldn't find you, so I told your soldiers to start a search."

The deep male voice sounded oddly familiar to Jaemar. He didn't remember liking it.

"Yes, I heard. I saw it myself," came Izra's voice.

"Did you see what was taken?"

"Yes. You should go warn your father. He'll want to know."

Jaemar's throat clenched. He could see a soft glow of torchlight increasing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

"To join the search," replied Izra. "I want to find the thief myself. The Imperial will kill me if that sword's not returned."

"Izra." The male voice drew nearer. "Don't worry. I'll speak to my father. He can't blame you."

"But he can, Detrans! He can, and he will." She sounded terrified. "You know my life will mean nothing if that sword is not returned. It means more to him than even—" She stopped herself abruptly, or perhaps Detrans did.

"Than even me," he said.

"Detrans, I didn't—"

But Jaemar never heard the rest. He was suddenly distracted by the heavy tramp of booted feet coming up the stairs, the lights from the Guards' torches casting their shadows high on the stone walls. Shrinking down to a crouched position in the corner of the top step, Jaemar waited, his hopes shriveling into nothingness as the shadows loomed larger on the ceiling above him.

The forward Guard was five steps below when his torchlight illuminated the terrified face at the top of the stairs. With his shout of victory, the Guards lunged forward with greedy eagerness. Before he knew what he was doing, Jaemar leapt up and threw himself against the door, flying out of it and nearly spilling over Izra and Detrans, whose soft conversation had drawn them together just outside the passage entrance.

As Jaemar slid across the slick marble floor, inlaid with gold and silver, he caught a glimpse of Izra's and Detrans's surprised expressions. He half-wanted to run directly to Izra, but he remembered himself just in time and skidded to a halt. Behind him, the troop of Guards poured out of the passage, hemming him in on the other side.

Swiveling his head wildly, he sought Izra's face and tried to find rescue there. Either she was playing her part very well or she had betrayed him, for her icy expression told him nothing.

The Guards formed a half-circle around Jaemar to prevent his escape as one of them, presumably the one most forward in the procession, bowed to Izra and said, "My lady general, we have found your thief."

"But I haven't stolen anything!" Jaemar protested even as strong arms restrained him from behind.

"Hold!" Izra said in a commanding tone, holding up one hand as she crossed to Jaemar. The Guard took a step back but kept a tight grip on Jaemar's arm, wrenching it backwards, as Izra committed a search on Jaemar herself. When she was satisfied, she stepped back.

"He doesn't have it," she said, her voice suddenly weary. "Captain, you must inform the Imperial."

Instead of doing as she suggested, Detrans strode over to Jaemar, pushing his way in between him and Izra.

Jaemar flicked his eyes up to Detrans before quickly returning his gaze to the floor. His heart beat frantically, hoping the suspicion he had seen in the captain's eyes had not been recognition.

“Who are you?” Detrans demanded. “What were you doing in the passage?”

On Jaemar's other side, Izra grabbed his arm and cinched her fingers around the rip in his left sleeve. Giving him a rough shake, she said, “You have been asked a question.”

Keeping his eyes focused on the floor's golden veins, Jaemar opened his mouth and stuttered the first thing that came to his mind. “I—I'm a servant of the Imperial. I serve in the palace s—stables.” He swallowed, but his throat felt as rough as sandpaper. “Wh—when I heard about the thief, I hid behind the first door I saw.”

Detrans narrowed his eyes at him. “Stable boy.” He made a sound to show his disbelief in the story. “We shall see about that.”

His hand shot forward, and Jaemar thought for a second that the captain was going to strike him in the face. Instead, Detrans seized a handful of Jaemar's hair and wrenched his head back. With Jaemar's head tilted fully back, baring his neck, Detrans used his free hand to brush away the hair from Jaemar's forehead. He twisted Jaemar's arms around and found the same thing on the underside of his wrists. Nothing.

“An Imperial servant without the mark,” said Detrans with a slight grin. “It seems we have a spy on our hands.”

He shouldered Izra aside and practically carried Jaemar out of the circle of Guards. As Detrans began to drag him down the ornately decorated hall, Jaemar tried subtly to tuck in the ripped part of his sleeve. He could hear Izra trotting along behind them.

“He doesn’t have it, Detrans,” said Izra breathlessly. “I’ve told the Guards to continue the search. You’ll be wasting the Imperial’s time with this boy.”

Detrans kept his eyes firmly ahead. “You know the law as well as I. Anyone without the mark can be branded for treason.” He looked down at Jaemar in disgust. “I’ve no idea how he managed to get into the city, much less the palace.”

“I agree, but should we really trouble the Imperial with every unmarked citizen?” asked Izra. “Even now, my dungeons are full of them.”

Jaemar felt the captain pause for a fraction of a second between steps, but the moment of hesitation was quickly overridden.

“Today is different. A valuable weapon has been stolen.” Out of the corner of his eye, Jaemar could sense the captain studying him again. “Besides, something about this boy troubles me. It is almost as if I have met him before.”

Tucking his chin deeper into his chest, Jaemar slowly released a breath half-mingled with a silent prayer.

“Detrans, listen to me,” pleaded Izra. “He’s just a boy. I will see to it that he pays for refusing the mark, but if you send him to the Imperial now, you sentence him to the worst fate.”

“No, I save him from it,” said Detrans. “The worst fate is life.”

Izra did not object again, and the three of them continued further into the recesses of the Imperial palace, each step crushing another of Jaemar's hopes. Still not daring to raise his eyes, Jaemar only noticed the floor. The veins of gold and silver seemed to shimmer as he stumbled over them, giving the appearance of tiny rivulets of living metals. Every few paces, he would pass over a red, black, and gold carpet or an etching of a serreone in the marble. Whenever they crossed a field of black marble, Jaemar could see their shadowy reflections floating beneath them.

When Detrans finally came to a halt, Jaemar picked up his feet and straightened slowly, lifting his eyes along the length of an iron-carved door. Images of battles and flags and cities had been hammered into the heavy masonry, and the top of the door towered six feet above Jaemar's head.

Detrans was addressing the sentries posted at the doors, but something seemed to have closed around Jaemar's ears. He could only stare blankly at the doors, feeling nothing as they slowly swung inward. A long hall accented with Order-signed tapestries between the black marble pillars materialized in front of him. A blood-colored carpet had been rolled out like a scroll from the entrance to the dais on the opposite end of the room. Jaemar could see the dark outline of a figure on the elevated chair, but his eyes couldn't seem to bring it into focus.

Someone began to march him forward, and Jaemar felt rather than made his legs respond. His whole body felt numb, and he seemed to watch himself trailing down the hall from a vantage point on the high-arched ceiling. The door thudded shut, and the shadows of the hall reached out to greet him. He clenched and unclenched his empty hands.

A voice deep inside him was screaming for him to run, pounding on the inside of his eyes to force him to some sort of action, but Jaemar shoved it away. This was it.

There was nothing to do, and soon there would be no one left to do anything.

The soft echo of hushed voices at the end of the hall slowly entered his awareness, and he blinked his eyes into focus. A brown-robed figure was hunched beside the Imperial seat, his tangled black hair falling in front of his face. The Imperial's head was turned toward him in a posture that signified attentive listening.

Jaemar's foot struck the base of the dais. Detrans made a slight bow, but neither figure on the dais moved or made any motion that signified their awareness of a disturbance to their private council. As Detrans began to climb the black, rounded steps, Izra swept her cloak in front of Jaemar and gently eased him back. Leaning around her shoulder, Jaemar got his first glimpse of his uncle, Anzigar Haurreich.

To Jaemar's surprise, the Imperial lacked the thick eyebrows, smouldering eyes, and white scars that seemed to dominate most of the likenesses Jaemar had seen drawn on parchment or scribbled into books. With his short curly hair and finely chiseled beard, there was nothing remarkable about him. He had the characteristic dark hair and leathery skin of most southerners, making him a perfect token of Order standards. A gold ring glinted from his earlobe, and his black eyes seemed to flicker as Detrans reached the top step.

Without turning away from his councilor, the Imperial spoke. "I thought I told you never to interrupt unless I had sent for you."

Detrans hesitated before explaining himself. "Someone broke into your treasury. The sword has been taken."

Both Anzigar and his councilor shifted their eyes to Detrans, and Jaemar shrank behind Izra in fear. The councilor had tamed his hair and abandoned his orange toga, but the face of Zhury was the same. Whether or not he was here for Zerhard, he would recognize Jaemar.

“Then unless you have found it, I do not know why you are standing here before me,” said Anzigar, his black eyes flashing.

“The Guards are searching—”

“And when they find the thief, he must be put to death,” said Anzigar, rising from the chair. His towering height seemed inhuman. He leaned over Detrans as though he was about to devour him. “You will join them, and if it is not found, you will feel my wrath yourself.”

Detrans looked back at Jaemar and seemed to hesitate. Jaemar watched him with bated breath. If Detrans brought him forward, Zhury might recognize him. Lowering his head, he searched the designs on the floor for any way of escape.

“It shall be done, my lord,” said Izra.

“I expect nothing less,” said Anzigar, never turning his glare from Detrans’s face.

After a pause, Detrans backed toward the steps. On the third step, he raised his head and met Jaemar’s eye. Jaemar saw it again, stronger than the first time.

Recognition and anger. Detrans swiveled on the step and faced his father, now a full three heads higher than him. Jaemar felt his mouth go dry.

“Father—”

Shouts and a sudden clanking of armor broke through the sacred silence of the great hall. Jaemar turned and saw that the doors had reopened. A lone figure, pursued by a bevy of Guards, was striding down the thick carpet, a red cloak billowing behind him.

Two Guards rushed from their posts on the dais and barred the man's path.

"Out of my way! I must see the Imperial!"

Jaemar recognized Zerhard's unmistakable arrogance and peeked around Izra's back.

"What is the meaning of this?" Anzigar thundered.

"Remove these men, my lord," commanded Zerhard, trying to brush past them.

The Guards following him slowed their steps as they neared, but they drew the smoldering attention of the Imperial.

"How dare you allow anyone to enter my hall unannounced?"

"Your pardon, my lord," said one, almost bending in half to show his reverence.

"He bears the marks, and he says he knows about the thief."

Zerhard scanned the scene with defiant eyes. When he noticed Jaemar huddled behind Izra, he smirked.

"Explain yourself," barked Anzigar.

"I will do more than that," said Zerhard. Nodding at Jaemar, he said, "I will give you your thief and force him to restore what belongs to you."

All eyes turned slowly toward Jaemar, and Izra clamped her hand around his wrist. When the eyes of the Imperial met his own, Jaemar's heart seemed to stop.

"My lord," continued Zerhard, "may I present to you the final bane of the Order."

Tearing his eyes away from the Imperial, Jaemar gaped at Zerhard in horrified shock. The muscles in his arms and legs began to burn, and his chest felt constricted.

“Here is your nephew. Right within your grasp.”

Zerhard passed Jaemar a scornful look, and Jaemar looked helplessly from him to Zhury before it all started to make sense. Any anger he might have felt was instantly dispelled by the pronouncement of the Imperial.

“Bring him to me.”

Izra stepped aside as the two Guards blocking Zerhard swept toward her. They took hold of Jaemar’s arms and hauled him toward the dais. As he was dragged past Zerhard, he shot him the most scathing look he could manage under the circumstances, but it was met by only cool aloofness. Detrans regained the top of the dais and followed Jaemar with his eyes as he passed.

“You,” he murmured before turning his attention to something past him. “She knew.”

Jaemar caught the whispered words just before he was shoved to his knees before his uncle. He plastered his palms to the cool marble and stared at the imprint of a serreone from between the fringe hanging off his forehead.

Something hard and cold, like a scepter or a rod, brushed against his left arm and flicked away the ripped cloth, revealing a section of the jagged mark.

“He doesn’t have the sword,” came Detrans’s voice from beside the Imperial.

“We already searched him.”

“He would have tried to use it had he been given the chance,” said Zerhard from somewhere behind Jaemar.

Despite himself, Jaemar gritted his teeth and wished for a sword, or a knife, of any kind.

“Look at me.” The cold scepter touched the bottom of Jaemar’s chin and forced it upwards.

Screwing his face into one of fearless defiance, Jaemar resigned himself to face the Imperial. The black eyes glittered down at him like a cat’s in the dark.

“So,” began Anzigar, “you have come to kill me.”

Jaemar ground his teeth together. “If I did, it would be nothing less than you have done in causing the suffering of so many people.”

The Imperial threw him a sardonic smile, and Jaemar’s skin prickled with fury.

“Suffering is harm done to rational creatures, and since I have always protected the rights of the rational, I can only assume you are confused as to what makes a living being.”

Jaemar clenched his hands into fists at his sides, but the pointless gesture went unnoticed. To his surprise, the Imperial’s face softened.

“You know, I do pity you. You have been galled into believing the lies of the narrow-minded. You do not realize that a movement that wants to renew Almaen must serve, not the moment, but the future. And my Order is creating the future.” He rested his serrone-topped scepter flat across his palms. “It is building unity, solidarity, strength, and peace. People like you,” he paused and looked down his nose at him, “who try to harm those I protect, who refuse to be unified, have been deceived by the selfish ideals of the past.”

Someone brushed lightly up against Jaemar's back, narrowly missing stepping on his foot.

"Zer—my lord, forgive me," blurted Zhury suddenly, rushing forward. "But this is my son!"

His tone, though incredulous, was nothing like that of a crazed or deluded man. He gestured toward Zerhard, and Jaemar tilted his head to the right and realized that Zerhard was standing right beside him. Jaemar silently cursed himself for being taken in by both of them.

"This is your son?" asked the Imperial. "I was not aware of a Kazicmer prince."

"He has been reluctant in the past, but this pleases me greatly, my lord," said Zhury, extending a hand toward Zerhard to invite him closer.

"And me, as well," said Anzigar. "It seems I am indebted to you."

As he inclined his head, Detrans, standing on his right side, glanced from the Imperial to Zerhard. Stepping past Jaemar and the Guard who was restraining him, Zerhard lifted his left hand to accept Zhury's greeting.

"What is your name?" asked Anzigar.

Zhury spoke hastily. "His name is—"

"It's Zerhard," interrupted Zerhard, his arms suddenly arcing down to his right hip. In one fluid motion, he pulled a glistening sword from a hidden sheath and swung it forward. "Zerhard Haurreich."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### The Beginning of the End

*To die hating them, that was freedom. –C. S. Lewis, Abolition of Man*

Even before the name was spoken, Anzigar reacted. When the seramite sword sliced through the air, he fell back a step and threw Detrans in front of him. As the Imperial drew back into the shadows, his son stumbled forward and fell on the sword inches from Jaemar's face.

Jaemar felt his breath being torn from his lungs as he watched the blade sink into Detrans's chest. Detrans collapsed to his knees in front of Jaemar, and their eyes met for a second that felt like an eternity. He stared into the face of the dying man and was reminded instantly of Drahzac.

The life flowed out of Detrans in a different way, though. It was almost tangible. His wide, staring eyes filled with blackness, and he dropped his head to his chest. He pressed a trembling finger to the wound in his chest and raised it slowly to his eye level. Even as Jaemar watched, the ebony blood on his finger lightened to a deep red, as though a dye was beginning to permeate it.

Before the change was complete, Izra had thrown herself to her knees beside him and used her arms to support his shoulders. Detrans looked at Jaemar, the recognition

still there, before rolling his head toward Izra. His eyes seemed to lose their ability to focus, and it was difficult to tell what he was looking at.

In the next instant, Jaemar knew he saw nothing at all, for his body slumped against Izra, who shuddered and let out a shaky breath. The moment was over almost before Jaemar could note it.

“Treason!” the Imperial’s voice boomed across the hall.

Not realizing how silent the hall had been up until that moment, Jaemar jumped at the sudden outburst.

Letting Detrans crumple to the floor, Izra rose and pointed to the four Guards scrambling up the steps of the dais. The other two were already wrestling the seramite sword away from Zerhard.

“Remove the Imperial to the inner sanctum!” she commanded. “Guard him with your lives. No one is to enter.”

The Guard left holding Jaemar didn’t move, but Izra directed him to Zhury, who was edging toward the Imperial.

“Restrain him. He was trying to help the assassin.”

In the blur of movement, Jaemar was jerked to his feet. He heard the sword clatter to the floor, and he spied a Guard bending to retrieve it. Izra’s grip tightened on Jaemar’s arm.

“Return the sword to the Imperial at once. And tell him I will see to the assassins myself.” She lifted her chin toward Zerhard and Zhury. “Bring them to the eastern holding cell.”

As the Guards hurried to comply, Izra forcibly turned Jaemar toward the steps and ushered him down to the marble floor. Pushing him in front of her, she sped him along the carpet to the front doors. From the grating sound of metal against metal, Jaemar guessed that the Guards escorting Zerhard and Zhury were trailing behind Izra. She paused in the doorway and motioned for the Guards to go ahead of her.

Turning to the sentries posted at the door, she said, "The Imperial has been attacked, and his son is dead. See to it that the healers remove the body at once."

The sentries said something in return, but Jaemar was too focused on the retreating figures of Zerhard and Zhury to hear them. Zerhard twisted around in the Guards' arms, and for a brief instant, he met Jaemar's eyes. His face was pale, and his eyes looked hollow. He staggered and fell into the arms of the Guards, who carried him around a corner.

Jaemar felt a tug on his arm and turned as Izra passed him a furtive look. One of the Guards had disappeared, but the other was staring at him in a way that made Jaemar feel as though he had been the topic of conversation. Dropping his eyes to the floor, Jaemar consented to be led away by Izra. She escorted him down one marbled hallway after another. He didn't dare look up until he heard a door shut behind him, followed by the click of a lock.

Raising his eyes, he looked around the simple room. Decorative armor and weapons hung on every wall, and a thick carpet muffled the sound of his and Izra's footsteps. A table draped in a red cloth stood against the far wall, and two chairs were stationed in the corners beside it.

“This is one of my father’s old armoring rooms,” said Izra after securing the lock.  
“You’ll be safe here.”

As Jaemar studied the battle scene painted on the ceiling, she crossed the room and lit one of the candles standing on the table. The warm light drew Jaemar’s attention.

“Why are you risking your life to help me?”

She hesitated, her hand still holding the lit match.

Jaemar knit his brow together. “How do I know this isn’t all some trick?”

With her back still to him, her answer drifted toward him through the dim light.  
“I was there when my mother died. She was a healer, and I had been helping her organize her supplies. Since we lived in the palace, Guards were always around us, but that night things were different.”

He heard her let out a shaky breath, and the candlelight wavered.

“When she heard them in the hall, she forced me into a closet and made me swear to stay hidden. I was only seven.”

Jaemar’s pulse pounded in his temples, and he took a step forward before stopping himself.

“I heard them come in and charge my mother with healing untouchables and others unworthy of life. They dragged her out, and I never saw her again.” She glanced over her shoulder. “My father raised and sheltered a Morgskall, and I knew of other things that would have ended his life quickly had the Imperial known.” She lowered her voice. “I know he caused the death of both my parents and probably Drahzac as well. And now Detrans...” Lifting her eyes to meet Jaemar’s, she said, “You will understand that I have little love or loyalty to the Imperial.”

He opened his mouth, closed it, and tried again. “So...what will happen to the others?”

She wrinkled her brow in confusion. “The Kazicmer king and his son? They will be kept in my holding cells until they are tried.”

“That can’t be his son,” said Jaemar. “He’s a Hurreich. You saw him kill an Immortal. They must be related by blood.” The stated words settled something that had long remained tangled in his mind. “He’s the son of the Imperial.”

Izra leaned back on the table, her hands gripping its edges. Biting her lip, she said, “My mind does not want to believe it, but I know it must be true.” She nodded her head slowly. “The lost son.”

“Did you know him?”

“We were both just children,” she said, her eyes glassy in the candlelight. “I remember playing in the armor yard with him and his brother. Just flashes of memories, like blinking at a picture.” She lifted her hand and twisted the last three fingers of her right hand in the fist of her left. “Zerhard was missing three fingers. He was born that way. Detrans and I would make fun of him, but he never seemed to mind.” She frowned. “One day, Zerhard showed up in the armor yard with a black eye. That wasn’t unusual. He would get into fights all the time. But when I asked him about it, Detrans told me to leave him alone. We never talked about his hand after that.”

Jaemar winced, remembering the facial scars that had dominated his first impression of Zerhard. “So he grew up here in the palace?”

Izra shook her head. “He disappeared shortly before my tenth birthday. I remember, because Detrans gave me his crossbow. For the longest time, I thought he had died. Detrans never mentioned him, and my father forbade me from asking.”

She pushed herself away from the table and walked to the room’s only window, leaning close to the pane to look out.

“My father told me later what had happened. Anzigar never liked Zerhard. I don’t think he wanted Detrans to have a brother. He was also afraid of what people would think if they knew the Imperial had a deformed son.”

Turning away from the window, she faced Jaemar and wrapped her arms around herself. “When he ordered my father to kill him, my father couldn’t do it. He secretly took Zerhard to one of the royal tutors, an Ellendar called Roidan, and told him to take Zerhard away to the north. Somewhere his father couldn’t reach him.” She shook her head. “And now he is returned.”

Her eyes, shining in the candlelight, seemed full of pain, and she turned to face a shield on the wall behind her. Jaemar didn’t notice. Her final words rang in Jaemar’s head, and he could hear Reahn’s voice as he told him about his father. *You remember I told you that my father, Roidan, served in the royal palace in Geresdain?*

“I must go speak to him and the Kazicmer king,” Izra said suddenly, her voice sounding tight, as if she were trying to keep from crying. “And somehow I’ll have to get the sword back. I would have taken it myself in the throne room, but I didn’t want to rouse the Imperial’s suspicions.”

“What should I do?” asked Jaemar.

“Stay here and stay hidden.” She swept her hand toward a tray of cheese and fruit on the table. “Help yourself to any food you see. I’ll return before morning.”

She stepped toward the door, but Jaemar stopped her before she could turn back the lock.

“I know you can’t go through the portal door, but I may have friends that know about it.”

Izra nodded. “I will check if I can. Lock the door behind me.”

Jaemar tried to eat something, but his nervousness made anything he ate feel like dust in his mouth. He eventually resorted to pacing, crossing and circling the small room a hundred times before losing count. Then his mind turned to imagining the scores of outcomes the next day could bring. Death seemed to stand like a closed door at the end of every one. With the grim thoughts came heat rising up the back of his neck and sweat coating his palms. His breaths came shorter, and his head began to pound.

He stared at the serreone patterns on the floor, the armor adorning the walls, the moonlight streaming through the window. None of it seemed real. How had he gotten here? Why was a boy from the northern outlands trapped in a palace armory plotting the assassination of the country’s Imperial? As had happened so many times since he had first seen Mason dead at his feet and the serreone branded on his door, Jaemar felt himself leaving his agitated body and almost watching himself from outside. Why was this happening? Why had this happened to him? He could have been anyone. Anyone else.

The moon was high in the sky before Izra returned. Jaemar opened the door for her and waited anxiously as she bolted it behind herself.

“Well?” he asked breathlessly.

“I’m afraid it’s nothing good,” she said. “The Imperial won’t part with the sword, and I didn’t want to press him.” She clenched and unclenched her fists at her sides. “And while I was speaking to him, King Alkaev arrived and interrupted us with demands that his brother, the other Kazicmer, be released.”

“Alkaev is alive?” Jaemar asked. “The other kings thought he had been killed by the Imperial.”

Izra smirked. “He would sooner have me killed. Alkaev has faithfully served the Imperial for longer than I can remember. My father hated him, and now I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to replace me as Krech general.” She dropped into one of the chairs. “When I went to release the Kazicmer, I saw Zerhard.” Lifting her eyes to Jaemar’s face, she said carefully, “I don’t know that he’ll last the night.”

“What? Why?” Jaemar demanded. “What happened to him?”

“He did it to himself. Taking an Immortal life,” she paused, looking at her hands, “is not an easy task.”

“What do you mean?” Jaemar asked slowly, not certain he wanted to know the answer.

“There are black lines all over his skin, like his veins are now on the outside of his body.” She rubbed her hand on the polished arm of the chair. “My father told me seramite blades conduct lifeblood from the dying to the living. Zerhard must have taken his brother’s.”

“So is he Immortal now?”

Shaking her head, Izra rose from the chair. “It doesn’t work that way. Immortals are born, not made, though it seems the Imperial gained more power after he had killed two other Immortals.” She lifted a shoulder, as if at a loss of what to do. “The Immortal blood overpowers Zerhard.”

Jaemar sunk down into the other chair and stared into space. “So even if you did get the sword from the Imperial, and even if I was able to use it against him, I would die.”

For a moment, Izra didn’t answer, but Jaemar could hear her breathing on the other side of the room. Finally, she said, “When the Imperial gave me the news that my father was dead, he told me that the preservation of Almaen rests on the ability and will of the individual to sacrifice himself for the totality.”

Jaemar turned his head to look at her.

“I don’t agree with the Imperial on what the totality is, but I see some truth in what he said. I doubt either of us will see the world we are fighting to bring, but maybe someone alive now will be able to enjoy it in peace.” She offered him a small smile. “We can at least cling to that.”

Taking a deep breath, Jaemar pushed himself to his feet. “Do you have a plan?”

Izra massaged the back of her hand. “I might.” Stepping toward a wall, she lifted down an Imperial helmet and shield and held them out to Jaemar. “The Imperial will review the Guards tomorrow in celebration of the victory at Relence. He usually addresses them from a platform, but he will also be rewarding ten Nark League members for showing his Guards a way into the city.”

Jaemar reached out to accept the armor, still uncertain as to what Izra’s plan was.

“If I station you near enough, there is a good chance you will be within striking distance of the Imperial.”

Jaemar looked from the shield to the helmet as though they were made of leaves and dried twigs. “But that won’t be of any use if I don’t have the sword,” he said.

Izra frowned. “Yes, I know. Our one hope is that I can somehow get it from him tomorrow when I help prepare him for the ceremony. Though I’m not even sure he’ll think it’s safe in the vaults.”

“He hasn’t ordered Zerhard’s or my execution yet?”

“Zerhard’s dying anyway, and I think I managed to convince the Imperial that we were wrong about you. I told him the mark he saw on your arm washed away with water, and he didn’t question me. But I fear he will demand to see you, and Zerhard if he’s still alive, after the ceremony tomorrow.” She met his eye. “Even I can’t hide you forever.”

“No,” said Jaemar, spinning the shield absently at his side. “But I don’t want to hide anymore.” He leaned the shield against his legs and began to inspect the helmet. “Did anyone else come through the portal?”

She shook her head.

Jaemar nodded once and continued examining the helmet. Still holding it in his hands, he allowed his feet to carry him around the room. Izra watched his circular progress with a mixed air of amusement and pity.

After a moment, she said, “You can do nothing for several hours yet. You might as well get some rest while you can.”

“Because I won’t be able to do that in a prison cell or when I’m dead,” Jaemar muttered to the helmet.

Izra waited until he passed her and snatched the helmet away. “There are better ways to prepare yourself.” She pointed to one of the chairs. “Get comfortable. I’m going to explain to you the layout of the palace and the rules of conduct among the Imperial Guards, and if that doesn’t put you to sleep, I don’t know what will.”

When Jaemar felt himself being shaken awake, his first thought was surprise that he had slept at all. The sun was streaming through the one window, dust particles floating aimlessly in its golden shaft of light. Squinting through bleary eyes, Jaemar straightened in the chair and immediately wished he hadn’t. Sleeping in a half-slumped, sitting-up position had not treated his neck or shoulder muscles kindly.

“What’s happening?” he asked groggily, dragging his hand across his eyes.

“We have two hours before the ceremony, so we have to get you ready,” said Izra.

Jaemar forced his eyes wide open in an effort to make himself feel more awake. He pushed himself from the chair with a groan. “Did you get the sword?”

Izra held up a mail shirt between them and closed one eye to size it to Jaemar’s torso. Letting it clink to her feet like so many coins falling, she picked up another and repeated the process. “No. Alkaev was in the Imperial’s armory almost the whole time, so I didn’t have the chance to ask about the sword.” She offered him the mail shirt. “I think this will do.”

Jaemar accepted it from her and slipped it over his head, feeling the weight of the chains drag his shoulders down like the weapons pack he had once carried to Mason’s.

“And then the Imperial made a point of asking me to arm him with the seramite sword.” She shrugged. “I suppose it’s a good thing I didn’t ask.”

She handed him a leather hauberk to fit over the chain mail, and Jaemar felt his spirits drop as he took it. Instead of putting on the hauberk, he let it hang at his side.

“Then what’s the point of all this?”

Izra twisted her hands together. “I might try once more before the ceremony starts, and I don’t think there will be any harm in having you in a good position.” She bent down to sift through an assortment of boots. “Anyway, you’ll need the disguise to help you escape once the ceremony’s over.”

“What?” Jaemar demanded. “What are you talking about?”

Sinking to her knees, she kept her eyes on the tumble of shoes. “The Imperial wants to interrogate you and Zerhard, marked or not, immediately following the ceremony. And when he does, he’ll know.” She dragged her eyes upward. “He’ll kill you.”

His brow darkening, Jaemar opened his mouth to speak one of the hundred responses darting around in his mind, but none of them came out. He looked from her tightly-lipped expression to the hauberk in his hands before finally letting his eyes rest on the window. It looked smaller than it had last night. In fact, the whole room felt smaller.

“I can give you a map of the city. You can—”

“No.” He let out a shaky breath and swiveled his eyes back to hers. Shaking his head, he said, “No. It’s too dangerous for you. Besides, I haven’t come all this way just to—”

“But it’s not that simple,” she interrupted, rising to her full height. “The distance traveled means nothing if you don’t get a fair chance. And your life means more than

mine.” She rubbed her arm. “Who knows? He may fail to trace your escape to me. No one needs to know about your disguise.”

“But the prison Guards must know that I was never held there,” Jaemar protested, jerking the hauberk over his head. “I need to get back to the portal door.” He kicked off his shoes and began to shuffle through the pile of boots on the floor. “Do you think this disguise will get me safely there?”

“I—I don’t know.” Her voice sounded strained. “You need to get into formation before the Guards leave the northern courtyard.”

“There’s still time,” said Jaemar, yanking on a pair of boots. He reached for the belt Izra had brought him. “Another seramite sword lies just beyond that door. If I can get through...” he pulled himself to his feet, “then there’s still a chance.”

He stared Izra down, daring her to contravene his plan. The nervous wringing of her hands and her furrowed brow betrayed her inner turmoil, but when Jaemar made a determined step toward the door, she held out her arm.

“Wait.” She took a deep breath. “If you manage to get through the door, how do you know you’ll be able to come back?”

He grinned. “That’s the least of my worries. If it works differently on that side, I know someone who can get me through.” He lifted a hand but hesitated before he rested it on her shoulder. “I’m not going to leave you. I will return, with the sword if I can.”

She gave him the small hint of a smile, but it was quickly lost in the shadow that crossed her face. “There’s little left now for me to live for...especially since Detrans...” she shook her head. “We should go.”

Jaemar fitted a helmet onto his head and accepted the spear and rectangular shield that Izra held out to him.

“Do what you can to get the Imperial’s sword, but don’t endanger yourself,” said Jaemar as she slid the bolt on the door back. “I’ll go to the portal and meet you in the northern courtyard before the squadron leaves.”

Izra looked ready to protest, but Jaemar spoke first. “You explained the layout of the palace. I’ll be fine. Besides, you’ll attract attention wherever you go, which I don’t need.”

After a pause, she nodded. Without another word, she opened the door, and they slipped out through her quarters to the outer hall. She gave him a final look before trotting briskly to the right while he turned to the left.

As he marched down the hall and up another, he felt his heart beginning to beat faster and tried to take even breaths. Whenever he passed another Guard or servant, his body experienced a shock of heat, so that by the time he reached the door to the tunnels, he was covered in a layer of sweat beneath his Imperial armor.

Once he was back to navigating the underground tunnels, he allowed himself to breathe a little more easily.

“You’re going to be fine. No one’s stopped you yet,” he muttered to himself as his steps echoed in the narrow passage.

As much as he tried to encourage himself, the fact that he didn’t know how to open the portal door pricked the back of his mind.

*I don’t remember it being this far.*

He shivered, the cool dampness of the tunnels making his skin feel clammy.

When he reached a point where the passage split in two different directions, he hesitated, racking his memory for the correct route, and lifted his torch higher. As the light illuminated a greater portion of the left tunnel, he heard a low growl. He froze, the torch still lifted halfway, and strained his ears to hear a repetition of the sound. It came again, from his right. Swiveling by inches, he swung the torchlight onto the right-hand passage, and his heart crawled into his throat at the sight of two yellow eyes peering out at him from the darkness.

For a moment, he didn't move. He could only stare at the unblinking eyes that seemed to float somewhere below his knees almost fifteen feet down the passage. He had half a mind to simply continue down the left tunnel, but he knew he wouldn't be able to bear the thought of whatever-it-was coming behind him.

With bated breath, he advanced cautiously down the passage, keeping the torch raised in front of him like a beacon. He had taken half a dozen steps before he realized that the creature was moving back with him, step for step, so that it never got any nearer to the light.

“Come on,” Jaemar murmured nervously. “What are you?”

The pitch darkness behind him seemed to propel him deeper down the tunnel, causing the hairs on the back of his neck to tingle.

He bit his lip and suddenly lunged forward, throwing the creature into the light for an instant before it shot away like an arrow down the passage. But Jaemar had seen enough. He knew he would recognize that flame-colored fox anywhere.

“Chaisee?”

He broke into a run, forgetting to be silent as his Imperial boots crunched against the dirt and loose stones. About a hundred yards later, he reached a corner and barreled full into a tall, deep-chested man with red hair. He stumbled back and pointed his spear as the man whipped his sword from its sheath. Jaemar's eyes traveled from the sword to the man's face.

“Reahn!”

The cry of relief came out louder than expected, but he almost didn't care. Dropping the spear and torch and forgetting himself entirely, he threw himself into Reahn's arms and clung to him tightly.

“Jaemar!” Reahn said, his tone equally surprised. “What are you doing here? And in that get-up?”

Before Jaemar could answer, he heard voices coming from behind Reahn.

“Quiet, Reahn!” a female voice hissed. “Need I remind you again of where we are?”

“It's all right, Ravenna,” said a nearer male voice. “He's found Jaemar.”

Reahn released Jaemar and stepped past him to pick up the torch as Maximus and Ravenna appeared. Their faces looked pale and grim in the flickering light, but Jaemar had never been more glad to see them. He did, however, restrain himself to a relieved smile.

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“It took a while,” said Ravenna.

Jaemar's eyes traveled from her face to an oblong object wrapped in canvas in her hands.

“But we found Burk and the Teacher tied up in one of their training rooms. The Teacher was barely conscious, but Burk told us what he knew. The absence of you, Zerhard, and the Romeiran told us the rest.”

An uncontrolled grin splayed itself across Jaemar’s face. “And you have the sword?”

She nodded and started to extend it toward him, but a voice from behind Jaemar stopped the motion halfway.

“You won’t be keeping the sword, I assure you.”

Jaemar whirled around to see Zhury grinning proudly with a sword in each hand. Reahn lunged toward him, but four Guards appeared from the darkness behind the Kazicmer king and shoved the Furore against the wall. The torch was knocked from his hand, and it fell to the ground inches from Jaemar’s boot.

“Give me the sword,” said Zhury, “and I will grant you deaths befitting a soldier.”

“And if we refuse?” Reahn managed as he struggled against the two Guards pinning him to the wall.

Zhury chuckled. “Let’s say we shall be a bit more...experimental.” His gaze shifted to Jaemar. “Thought your disguise fooled everyone, did you?”

Jaemar could only gape at him in horror.

“It was nothing like my disguise,” Zhury continued. “I kept up the pretense of lunacy for years, waiting for this chance.” He stepped nearer and traced one of his sword tips along the serreone imprinted on Jaemar’s hauberk. “You don’t know how much I wanted to kill you myself, but it would have given me away, and the Imperial claimed the privilege anyway.” He lowered the sword. “So I’ll be bringing you to him alive.”

Jaemar glanced at the spear, lying uselessly where he'd dropped it, and inwardly cursed himself. He ground his teeth and was about to respond when he noticed another light coming from behind him. Seeing Zhury's gaze move over his shoulder, Jaemar glanced back. Behind Maximus and Ravenna, another man had appeared, bearing a torch in one hand and a sword in the other. One of his eyes was covered by a patch.

"Greyhardt!" Ravenna murmured at the same instant the renowned name shot through Jaemar's mind.

He didn't know how the famed Resistance captain had gotten there, but he didn't care to ask.

"Ah, Alkaev," said Zhury, "you received my message."

The words shattered the sudden relief that had inflated Jaemar's chest at the sight of the Resistance captain, and he jerked his head around to Zhury before looking back at Greyhardt.

The man called Greyhardt nodded. "Indeed, brother. The Imperial will be pleased."

"But—" Jaemar blurted. He glared at Alkaev. "You're not Greyhardt?"

"Marcus Greyhardt is dead," Alkaev said flatly.

Maximus made a choking sort of gasp, and Jaemar felt as though the earth had fallen out from under him. A flash of Brenn's excitement and shining eyes over a dinner table conversation burned across his vision.

"He has been for twenty years," continued Alkaev.

*Prepare yourself, Jaemar.* Ravenna's voice came suddenly into Jaemar's head.

A sly smile slid across Alkaev's face, and he spread his torch arm to the side. "Welcome to the new Resistance."

Ravenna and Maximus suddenly sprung at Alkaev and attacked him on both sides as though they'd choreographed the whole thing. Without knowing what else to do, Jaemar drew his sword and spun around just in time to lock blades with Zhury. The Kazicmer king drove Jaemar back two paces before ramming the hilt of one sword into Jaemar's helmet.

Stunned, Jaemar collapsed to the ground and blinked up as two blades were pointed at his face.

"You're lucky the Imperial has my loyalty," sneered Zhury. "But just so you don't go anywhere..." He stabbed one of his swords into Jaemar's right leg, above the knee.

Jaemar cried out in pain and bent over his leg as Zhury stepped over him and stalked toward the three combatants behind him. With shaking fingers, Jaemar scabbled the chain mail farther up his leg so that he could investigate the damage. Already a pool of blood was spreading across his pant leg.

With several uneven breaths, Jaemar rotated his head to the right in time to see one of the Guards fighting Reahn fall to the ground. Ignoring the searing pain shooting up his leg, Jaemar staggered to his feet but fell before he got halfway. He looked up in time to see Reahn spin a ball of fire into the face of one of the Guards. His head throbbing, Jaemar pulled himself across the ground and wrapped his hands around a Guard's ankle just as he came within striking distance of Reahn. Jaemar used the

Guard's forward thrust and yanked him backwards, causing the Guard to crash to the floor.

Pushing his helmet off, Jaemar slid shakily to the wall and slumped against it. He watched blearily as Reahn shot another ball of flame at a third Guard and then drove his sword into the one Jaemar had felled. With all four Guards down, Reahn skidded over to Jaemar and dropped down beside him. Jaemar winced as Reahn inspected the leg wound.

"The mail saved you," he said. "The bone's not broken, but your leg will need to be treated."

A cry of pain grabbed both his and Jaemar's attention, and their heads shot up toward the battle raging a few yards away. One figure was on the ground, but the three others were in fierce combat. Because of the flickering light from the torches, the fighters were as difficult to distinguish as a blur of shadows.

Grabbing his sword, Reahn bolted to his feet, but before he could take a step, the tallest of the figures was overpowered and forced to the ground. Jaemar leaned around Reahn's leg and clearly saw Maximus and Ravenna standing right before Ravenna slowly sunk to the ground.

"Ravenna!" Reahn cried, sprinting toward her.

Using the wall as a support, Jaemar climbed to his feet and hobbled painfully after him. In the back of his mind, he noticed that both Kazicmer kings were dead. He collapsed beside Ravenna just as Maximus was cradling her head in his arms. Blood was sprinkled across her pale face and glazed across both hands. When she saw Jaemar leaning over her, she reached for something to her right.

She managed a smile. “What did I tell you, Jaemar?” she asked in a whisper. “We’re all going to die. Everyone does.”

She dragged the canvas-wrapped sword across her chest, and Jaemar took it gently from her.

Fixing Jaemar with her bright blue eyes, she nodded once and said, “Even Immortals.”

Jaemar’s lips parted in horror and sympathy, but he said nothing. It was only after her eyes became empty and her hand slid off the sword that the words came. He closed his mouth, instantly regretting that they would forever remain unsaid.

Maximus leaned over and kissed Ravenna’s brow, and Jaemar turned away, still not believing what had just happened. Not wanting to accept that another friend lay dead before him. A ripping noise caught his attention, and he turned to see Reahn holding a thick strip of fabric.

“I can bind your leg, but we have to get you out of here,” he said, his voice sounding oddly strained.

As he began to wrap his leg, Jaemar’s senses returned.

“No.” His fingers tightened around the seramite sword.

Reahn finished tying off the wound and looked up in confusion.

“I’m not going back yet, and I’m not being taken anywhere.” He winced as he stumbled to his feet. Holding the sword to his chest, he said, “This is going to end now.”

“But you can’t—” began Reahn, but Jaemar interrupted him.

“Take Ravenna back,” he insisted. “I can slip through more easily if I’m alone, and both of you would stand out up there.”

Without giving Reahn a chance to reply, he staggered past him and retrieved his helmet and spear. He grit his teeth against the pain throbbing in his leg. Reahn appeared beside him.

“I’ll walk you to the door.”

Jaemar nodded and accepted Reahn’s supporting shoulder as he retraced his steps through the tunnels. They walked in silence, Jaemar’s labored breathing the only sound. By the time they reached the stairs, most of Jaemar’s leg felt numb, and Reahn practically dragged him up to the door.

“Just hope there are no stairs between here and the Imperial,” said Reahn with a gasp as he leaned against the wall on the top step.

“Thanks,” said Jaemar, lifting a hand to the door.

“Wait,” said Reahn, rummaging in the leather satchel at his side. “Eat this. It should help with the pain for a while.” He offered him a pungent-smelling herb.

Jaemar swallowed it and tried to ignore the bitter taste. Reahn squeezed his shoulder.

“If I were Ravenna, I’d have some inspirational speech for you.”

“Just tell me you’ll see me after.”

Reahn mustered a grin. “I’ll see you after.”

Jaemar pushed open the door and checked for movement before sliding out into the hall. Shutting the door behind him, he took a deep breath and started toward the northern courtyard. This time, he met no one, and he guessed that most had gathered outside for the ceremony. He quickened his pace, too terrified of missing the squadron to even consider what he was about to do.

By the time he reached the courtyard, the procession of Guards was about to march out through the gate into the city. The pain in his leg reduced to a dull throb, Jaemar managed to jog the last hundred yards to the back of the line. A few of the other Guards threw him curious glances, but none of them dared break formation.

Before Jaemar had caught his breath, Izra appeared and roughly pulled him from line.

“If you defy time restrictions, you get the front,” she barked, pushing him along the line in front of her.

To Jaemar’s surprise, they passed a row of children, all of whom were decked out in the full array of the Nark League. The noble heroes to be rewarded by the Imperial.

Izra shoved Jaemar into position just in front of the Narks and continued ahead to lead the procession out into the city. As the procession began to march down the streets to the exhibition plaza, Jaemar bit down on his tongue to fight the pain in his leg. While keeping his head forward, he glanced to the sides as much as the helmet would allow and saw what he could of the city. Like in Resden, the streets were pristine and adorned with Order flags and paraphernalia.

He saw no people until they reached the plaza, where the roar of a mob met his ears. He filed along with the other Guards to the near side of the plaza. The lines divided to form a broad avenue from the eastern gate of the palace to a raised platform near the center of the square. Jaemar found himself near to the palace gates, and he watched out of the corner of his eye as they were drawn open. A triumphal fanfare began to play, and the Imperial himself paraded out of the archway.

*He'll come down the line of Guards first, and then he'll make a speech at the platform, Izra had said. If our plan works, he'll never make that speech.*

Jaemar took a number of shallow breaths to keep himself from shaking, and he blinked away the image of Ravenna's bloodied face in an effort to focus on the line of Guards standing at attention across from him. His palm felt slick, and he lifted his fingers to the hilt of the seramite sword before remembering to keep his arm straight. Turning his head slightly to the left, he saw the Imperial approaching slowly down the ranks. He paused every few feet to inspect a Guard's stance or shake an officer's hand.

His eyes strayed to the row of honored Nark League members, their chests proudly thrust forward to display their shining serreone medals. They stood immobile, looking like miniature toy soldiers next to the Guards who stood behind and before them. One of them held an Order-emblazoned flag, whose serreone looked alive as it fluttered in the breeze.

The Imperial reached the first Nark and paused to stoop down to the child's level. Forgetting to look straight forward, Jaemar turned his head and watched the Imperial rest his hand on the boy's shoulder and speak softly to him. He tried to imagine what the Nark's future would be. *I doubt either of us will see the world we are fighting to bring, but maybe someone alive now will be able to enjoy it in peace.*

The Guard beside him cleared his throat, and Jaemar jerked his eyes forward again. Sweat dripped from his brow, but the rest of his body was tingling with shivers. Once the Imperial cleared the row of children, he would only be three steps from Jaemar. His success was almost certain. Jaemar no longer feared that he would fail. His fear was now much more human. He was afraid to die. Either the Immortal life would destroy

him as it had done to Zerhard, or the masses of Guards surrounding him would rise up together and crush him. Even though his head felt like it was on fire, his heart was like ice.

The Imperial saluted the last child.

*Breathe. Breathe. As if every breath were your last.*

His heart began to warm again, madly pumping the blood through his veins as though in a desperate effort to convince him to reconsider. *Live.*

The Imperial hesitated in front of the Guard to Jaemar's left. Jaemar inched his hand up to the seramite sword hanging from his belt. The Imperial's shoulders turned away from Jaemar as he stepped forward to pass him. He wasn't even going to stop in front of him. He wasn't even going to look at him.

Something hard and bitter rose up in Jaemar's chest, burning his lungs like acid. For once the words that rang in his head were not from someone else; they were his own. *Look back and take notice, Jaemar silently demanded. See the destruction you have created, and stare into the eyes of the survivors.*

As the Imperial drew parallel to the right side of Jaemar's body, Jaemar stepped forward, his arm robotically reaching for the sword on his left hip. Noticing the movement, Anzigar turned his head halfway, as though only vaguely interested. With his left hand, Jaemar clamped down on his uncle's shoulder and twisted him around, at the same time driving the seramite blade into his chest.

Anzigar's gaze locked on him, filling Jaemar's vision first with the contours of an Immortal face and then with the murkiness of death clouding eyes that had once looked on eternity. Scenes from the Imperial's life began to play themselves out in front of

Jaemar, who felt as though he were watching them through a veil. Young Anzigar falling from a horse. Chasing Adamar down the palace halls. Sitting with a pretty girl on a courtyard bench at night. Hunting with Adamar. Watching his father kill a man.

The visions changed so that Jaemar felt as though he were seeing them through Anzigar's eyes. The pretty girl, Norganah, died in his arms, and his own black blood dripped onto her face. He clashed swords with Guards in the palace and then stood over his father with a sword in his hand and watched him die. Speeches and raids on cities followed. He watched an army salute him from beneath a serreone flag. He faced his brother Adamar and thrust a seramite sword into his heart.

With a jolt, Jaemar shook his head and stepped back. People were shouting, and he could vaguely feel something pressing into him from the blur of shapes around him, but the only thing he could see was the face of his uncle, dying in front of him. He was suddenly aware of a searing pain burning its way up his sword arm. Swinging his eyes from the Imperial to his arm, he saw that the skin from his fingers to his elbow looked scorched from the black blood of the Imperial. It was spreading from the seramite blade into his body. For some reason, he was still holding the sword. When he tried to release the hilt, his fingers seemed to be cemented to it.

*This is not you, he reminded himself. Remember why.*

The Imperial's face dissolved into a slideshow of the figures and ghosts that had haunted Jaemar for the past several months. In an instant, he released both them and the sword. When the hilt fell from his hands, it was as though he had been cut loose from an anchor. But instead of floating to the surface of reality, he found himself tripping

backwards. The glare of the armor-filled square rushed back, and before he could hit the ground, a strong knot of arms and hands had grabbed him.

“Treason!”

“The Imperial’s been attacked!”

“Murder!”

The screams and curses berated Jaemar from every side, threatening to tear him apart more quickly than the web of armored hands that had fastened themselves to his body.

“Silence! Attend to the Imperial!” Izra’s voice cut across the deluge of jumbled voices, commanding respect. “Restrain the prisoner but leave him alive for trial!”

A small break appeared in the wall of sun-tinted armor barring Jaemar from the rest of the world, and he caught a glimpse of the Imperial—sunk to his knees with the sword still hammered into his chest. Guards had clustered around him, but their attention had been seized by the mobs of enraged and terrified citizens, trampling each other in an effort to witness for themselves what had happened. The Imperial knelt alone, silent and unmoving, as though a circle had been drawn around him that kept him isolated from any human reach or interference.

Jaemar felt himself being hauled backwards, his heels scraping numbly against the flagstones. But just before he lost sight of the Imperial, Anzigar lifted his head, and his gaze reached through the maddened rush toward Jaemar. A rush of air filled Jaemar’s lungs, and he could suddenly hear the loudness of the noise around him, as though he had only been watching the scene from underwater before and had just broke through the surface.

Just as his hearing was fully restored, a black hood was yanked over his head, cutting off his sense of sight. The new darkness amplified both the roar around him and the image of what he had last seen.

*This is the end, Anzigar, he thought. The end for both of us.*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### One Year Later

*All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be as like and unlike the fallen that we know. –J. R. R. Tolkien, On Fairy Stories*

The grating sound of sliding metal jarred Jaemar out of what had finally become a somewhat restful sleep. Opening one eye, he blearily saw the sideways image of an iron-barred door, still closed. He swung his legs off the side of the bed and arched his back to release the muscle tension caused by a night spent on the thin mattress. Squinting up at the block of orange light in the window, he rubbed his jaw, his beard scratching against the skin on his fingertips. He had actually slept through the whole night.

The sound of footsteps in the outer corridor attracted his attention, and he turned his head toward the barred door in expectation. Out of habit, he reached his left hand toward his right arm, which ended in a stump just past his elbow. Cupping it in his hand, he frowned as he tried to hear what the whispered voices in the hall were saying.

Moments later, he heard a key twist in the door, and it swung open. A young, red-haired woman dressed in armor stepped inside and said something to the Guard outside the door, who then closed it behind her. She turned, a tray of food in her hands,

and lifted one corner of her mouth in an effort to look hopeful despite her outward exhaustion.

“Izra.” He smiled gratefully as she passed him the tray. “Anything new?”

“Actually, yes,” she said, dragging a three-legged stool closer to the bed. She sat down.

Jaemar spooned a mouthful of stew into his mouth and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

She took a deep breath before launching into her story. “As you know, Maximus’s admittance into the high council three months ago was a major step forward. There is still fear everywhere, but some are deciding to take a stand now.” Leaning forward, she said, “You have to understand that Almaen is still a long way from recovery. Ethics and ideas instilled over a period of over seventy years are not so easily forgotten.”

Jaemar nodded, casting his gaze into his bowl. “I know.”

It had been one of the worst moments of his life when he realized that killing the Imperial had not ended the Order. He had spent hours huddled in the corner of his cell, rocking himself and waiting for the Guards to come and take him away to be executed. The news that Zerhard had survived had brought Jaemar some measure of comfort, but it was tainted by the fact that many of the old supporters of the Order were trying to use him to replace his father. Jaemar remembered thinking that they either didn’t know or had forgotten that Zerhard had tried to kill his father.

“But Maximus, Zerhard, and I, and a few others, have finally forced the rest of the council into a decision about you.”

Jaemar's head jerked up, causing the tray to rattle. Izra's green eyes looked intently into his, as if trying to make him understand.

"They agreed that it would be too dangerous to release you, both for your own sake and the stability of the new government."

Jaemar's shoulders sagged as he bit back his hope.

"Even if you went home," continued Izra, "we can't guarantee there wouldn't be riots or even attempts on your life."

She sighed and Jaemar clenched the edge of the tray until his knuckles turned white.

"So," she folded her hands and stared down at them, "we have agreed to send you out of Almaen into exile. For a few years at least." She lifted her eyes to watch his reaction.

He let out a long breath and tried to smile. "So I'm finally getting out of this place. Didn't think that would ever happen unless they killed me first."

She gave him a wry grin. "I'll be glad to have the use of this cell back. It's the best one, you know."

Jaemar laughed but quickly fell back into silence. "Did they say when I could come back?"

Izra bit her lip. "It will take some time. Probably years."

He nodded slowly, stirring the spoon in the stew thoughtfully. "I gave up my life for this. And now I'm being thrown out of my own country for it." He forced himself to meet Izra's stare. "Do you think it meant anything?"

Izra didn't answer right away. She toyed with a ring on her finger. Jaemar glanced at it, wondering if it had been Detrans's, or if he had given it to her.

Through the window above him, Jaemar could hear orders being shouted. The routine of the Order seemed uninterrupted. Where one power fell, another would always rise to take its place.

"I think it's like what you've told me about Marcus Greyhardt," she said finally. "You said that his very name was enough to inspire you with hope that things would one day be different." She twisted the ring around her finger. "Now, I know he didn't turn out to be who you thought, but the real man—the one who died heroically—will always be a legend." Reaching forward, she gripped his arm. "You did something great, and I think that once people forget to be afraid, they will see the light you have left behind."

Jaemar contemplated the empty bowl in front of him and tried to convince himself to believe what Izra had said. To believe that the recovery Almaen hadn't seen in years would finally replace the Order so that he could come home. Not that he really had a home anyway. Exile wouldn't be much different from what he'd always known. But then, one small piece of him had hoped that after all of this, things would have been different. He would have been able to make a normal life in Thornskern, maybe even with Brenn.

Izra took a breath as though she were about to say something, but a tap on the door stopped her. Rising to her feet, she crossed to the door and knocked on it. As it slid open, she looked over her shoulder at Jaemar, still hunched numbly on the edge of the bed.

“The council also gave permission for you to receive visitors. If you don’t mind, I’ll show them in now?”

Jaemar had only half raised his head when a dark-haired young woman burst into the cell and rushed toward him. In the half-second it took for her to cross the cell, memories of hunting, books, and fireside dinners washed over Jaemar. Brenn. He barely had time to pull himself to his feet before she threw herself into his chest. As she buried her face in his shoulder, Jaemar wrapped his arm around her head and drew her more tightly against his body, as though he were afraid she was a vision that would vanish. Closing his eyes, he inhaled the smell of her hair and felt more than ever the loss of his right arm.

He didn’t know what had happened to her in the almost two years since he’d seen her. He didn’t know how she’d gotten to Geresdain. But none of that mattered in that moment. All he wanted was for it to last forever.

“Jaemar,” a strangely familiar voice said softly from over Brenn’s shoulder.

Jaemar’s eyes flew open, and Brenn pulled herself away, drawing the back of her hand over her eyes. Looking past her, Jaemar saw his mother standing in the doorway. Izra had told Jaemar that she had been released shortly after Jaemar was imprisoned, but even though she had been free for almost a year, Jaemar could still see a difference from the mother he had known. The months of strain showed in the lines on her face, and she looked thinner and paler. Strands of hair fell in wisps around her face. She was holding a small bundle in her arms.

“Manà,” Jaemar murmured and crossed the cell in three paces.

When he threw his arm around her bony shoulders, he noticed that the bundle was a child. Stepping back, he looked from the child to Simnara, who met his eyes before nodding at Brenn. He swiveled around to face her, his mouth partly open in a wordless plea for an explanation. Brenn hesitated before answering, and he noticed that her once twinkling grey eyes looked far older and more solemn than he had ever seen them.

“He’s mine,” she said quietly, twisting her fingers together. “Part of the Imperial’s strictures called for boys to become soldiers and girls to become wives. They rewarded a woman for every child she could give to the Imperial Order.” Her voice sounded rougher, as though all the laughter had gone out of it. “Landar was more of a boy than a soldier. I actually pitied him. I think being a Guard terrified him.” She let out a shaky breath. “He was killed in the Thornskern revolt.” Her eyes found their way back to Jaemar’s face. “By Grish Vantak.”

Jaemar turned to look back at the child, sleeping peacefully, unaware of the world’s turmoil around him. For one brief moment, a surge of hatred roared up inside Jaemar’s chest. This child was a product of the Order and its laws. But he quickly checked himself. There was nothing “untouchable” about this child, and now the Order could not touch him. He reached a finger up to touch the tiny fist and felt Brenn beside him.

“I didn’t name him after his father,” said Brenn. “I named him after yours.”

Four days later, Jaemar stood on the deck of a trading sloop bound for an island over two hundred leagues to the south of Almaen. Leaning against the rail, he filled his lungs with the fresh sea air and gazed down at the pier below him. Seamen and

merchants were mixed together in the organized process of loading the sloop's hulls with goods to barter and sell.

Jaemar closed his eyes and listened to the distant cries of seagulls. The warm sun soaked into his skin, browning it after his months of isolation. He felt Brenn interlace her fingers in his left hand, and he squeezed hers. Both she and Simnara had refused to be left behind, and both had packed up their small lives and stowed them away on the sloop.

“Thought I had you beaten.”

Jaemar's eyes flashed open, and he turned to his right to see Zerhard with a lopsided grin on his face.

“What are you talking about?”

Zerhard rested his elbows on the rail and hunched his shoulders. “Well, I thought I could get to my father before you could, but then you become the hero and lose half an arm in the process.” He eyed his disfigured hand as though he disapproved of it.

“You almost lost your life,” Jaemar pointed out. “The Immortal blood could have killed you.”

“That's true.” Zerhard nodded and flicked a stray seagull feather off of the bulwark. The grin vanished from his face as he watched the feather drift lazily toward the water.

Jaemar watched him and hesitated before speaking. “I'm sorry about your brother.”

Detrans nodded and squinted out at the pier. “I didn't really know him. Not anymore.” He paused, and Jaemar saw him dig his fingernails into the peeling wood of

the bulwark. "I just wish..." He trailed off and turned to look at Jaemar. With a shrug, he lifted a corner of his mouth in a half-grin. "Wish I were going with you."

Jaemar shook his head but couldn't help but smile. "It would have been just like when we trekked across half of Almaen together."

Zerhard frowned at him. "I don't want to go because of you. You're taking Reahn and Chaisee with you, and I just don't see the appeal of Geresdain without them."

Brenn leaned across Jaemar toward Zerhard with a mischievous look in her eye. "Don't worry. I'm sure Izra can protect you."

Zerhard rolled his eyes. "And Chaisee will protect you."

"You should have tried to kill your father in a more public place," said Jaemar. "Then everyone would have known and would have tried to throw you out instead of giving you a position of power."

Frowning, Zerhard shouldered Jaemar in the arm. "Don't gloat. It doesn't suit you."

The ship's bell began to ring, and Zerhard craned his neck back to gaze up at the white sails. "You may not agree, but I think you got the better end of the bargain."

"All ashore who're going ashore!" came the cry of the captain from the quarterdeck.

"I suppose this is it," said Zerhard, pushing himself away from the rail.

He offered his left hand to Jaemar, who gripped it firmly.

"Don't take after your father while I'm gone."

Zerhard grunted. "Little chance of that. I'm getting out of Geresdain as soon as they let me."

He thumped Jaemar on the back and embraced Brenn before he headed down the gangplank. As Jaemar watched him go, he took Brenn's hand. Simnara appeared holding Adamar and wordlessly passed him to Brenn, who balanced him on her hip.

"Farewell to Almaen, eh?" said Reahn, coming up behind them. He lifted a hand in farewell to Zerhard. In his arms, Chaisee lifted her head and sniffed the air.

"For now," said Jaemar, "but we'll see it again."

The sloop drifted away from the pier, where Zerhard stood with a hand raised in farewell. For several moments, the deck was astir in the excitement of guiding the sloop out of the harbor. Sailors shouted back and forth in the rigging, and a few traders left on the shore raised their voices in a vain attempt to continue their conversations with those on board. A distant bell rang in the city, birds shrieked above the sails, and foamy waves lapped gently against the hull.

Wrapping his arm around Brenn's shoulders, Jaemar watched the land grow smaller on the horizon. The eastern sun shone fully upon it, banishing all shadows in its golden glow. Jaemar breathed in the salty air, tasting in it the freedom he hadn't known for over two years, or perhaps ever. The nightmares would still be with him, visions of what he had imagined or seen, and voices that had been silenced forever would still ring in his head. But the things that had caused them were falling away, and soon even the dreams themselves would fade into nothing more than dark memories. It was over, and as long as it might take, a new world would dawn. A world with a hopeful future. *The Imperial was no more.*

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