

CHAPTER ONE

Everet was going to be absolutely *livid* once he returned from Vasque and saw the state of his Holdhelm.

Lir of Bantam scanned the foyer, trailing silently after the new steward who'd replaced Ainsley as the face of Eizenthley, and fought to keep his lip from curling in disgust at the sight—it was *atrociously* gaudy.

In the six months since King Vizick had commandeered Eizenthley as his new Crown Hold, effectively banishing her former Holdmaster to the far reaches of Vasque, he'd stripped the walls bare and taken up most of the carpeting, draping the entire place in his own palette, which didn't suit at *all*. Everet's colors had been soft champagnes and rich wines and aubergines—light and airy with only the occasional dark accent for contrast. There'd been an open simplicity to the Holdhelm, something Lir looked back upon with no small measure of nostalgia, as he'd been in and out so frequently over the years he might as well have set aside his claim to Bantam and taken Eizenthley for his name.

The King, by contrast, favored strong primary colors that demanded attention and had traded the heraldry and portraits of Everet's kin for relics of Royals past, salvaged from the wreckage of the late Crown Hold. There was pomp and stricture now, a severity Lir was not accustomed to within these walls, and an uneasy shudder rippled down his spine as his boots clomped loudly over the cold tile floors that now welcomed guests into the receiving parlor in lieu of the dark plush carpeting he'd earned many a rug burn atop on prior visits.

A shame those days seemed bygone history now.

Change was coming swift to the dry, desolate plains of Oresa, sweeping through Layton and riding thermals up into the heavens to buffet the Holds high above. Eizenthley's

Holdhelm was far from the only site nigh unrecognizable these past few months; Vizick had more than made good on his vow to bring the Holds back to earth, and construction proceeded apace earthside as teams labored from dawn to dusk digging pits vast and deep enough to house the massive tracts. Anheim would be the first down, set to be lowered into place by winter's end, and with the chill of fall singing in the air as summer loosened its grip, it was finally sinking in for the populace that this was *happening*. They would be turned out of the Fellfire summer into the harsh reality of life below, forced to intermingle and play nice with one another, snakes and swine alike.

Ysme of Anheim had, in her own way, triumphed—and those who'd rallied behind her banner, silent or otherwise, would reap the rewards of her treachery.

Or, that was how Lir heard it in the gossip parlors of the Jenevier and Bantam nobles. He had no taste for politics himself and generally felt tongues could be put to far better use than wagging in cacophonous discourse on the supposed “good of the people”. Let the Royals deal with the riff-raff as they pleased, let Everet fly to the far corners of the continent to bow and scrape to foreign dignitaries. Lir was above the fray, in most every sense of the phrase, and simply ducked his head, swallowed his objections, and placed himself at the pleasure of his King.

Which brought him here, scaling the grand staircase of Eizenthley's Holdhelm with one hand on the banister while the other held back a bored yawn, silently critiquing the garish decor Vizick had somehow thought *regal*. The Hold would likely have been better off if they'd just scrapped her for her Starfell. The whole place had been robbed of life and love when her Holdmaster had abandoned her, and had Lir any other choice in the matter, he might have kept his distance as well.

But a summons from the King could not be ignored, and try as he might to worm his way out of his duties, he *was* still Crownswatch and at Vizick's disposal. Plus, these days, any excuse to flee Bantam for more than just an errand was a welcome one. His own Holdhelm was, if at all possible, even more dreary than Eizenthley's, with the whole of the staff still in low mourning spirits even months after Bernise's passing. His cousin Ilsa had been hastily shuttled into the vacant Holdmistress' position and had held her own for a moon or so, but a recent downturn in her health had inspired talk—only whispers, but enough to unsettle—of making *him* Holdmaster, and that was precisely the very *last* thing he wanted to deal with. He'd never once envied Everet the

responsibilities of his station, and that hadn't changed in the past half-year.

Perhaps Vizick would grace him with a suicide mission; certain death was starting to look like a far more attractive opportunity than the burden of being Holdmaster at this point.

"Lir of Bantam, Your Majesty, at your summons," the steward announced in a high, breathy voice, standing straight-backed and stiff at the threshold to what had once been Everet's private study but had since tragically been refurbished, all of the lovely convenient flat surfaces laid into storage somewhere.

Lir plastered a polite smile on his lips and nodded his thanks to the steward as he stepped inside, stifling a jolt of surprise when the double doors slammed shut behind him, effectively trapping him with his King.

"You were meant to be here two bells ago," Vizick called from the other end of the room, hunched over a desk that dwarfed him and nose buried in a pile of paperwork. "Care to explain yourself?"

Lir stepped closer, keeping his pace leisurely and glancing about the study with feigned interest. "My apologies, Your Majesty. Something...came up."

Vizick glanced up, lips pursed and gaze flinty—an expression which said he had a rather good idea which parts of Lir had been *up*. Lir let the look pass without comment; better to be assumed a lascivious layabout than to be thrown into the furnaces for direct insubordination. "I *do* have better things to do than wait for you to deign to grace me with your presence, you realize."

His tone had taken on a hard edge, and he'd straightened in his seat and set aside his quill—cues that he was rapidly losing his patience and that, if Lir did not want to endure an acidic upbraiding, he ought to at least *pretend* remorse for his tardiness. "Naturally, of course—it shan't happen again." He crossed an arm over his chest to touch his shoulder, dipping a sharp bow. They both of them understood this to be little more than theatre, but it would at least smooth Vizick's ruffled feathers.

Vizick huffed in irritation, shoving the reports he'd been poring over to the side of the desk and beckoning Lir closer. "Sit down—you've wasted enough of my time this

afternoon already.”

Lir crossed the distance remaining between them in three long strides, quietly slipping into a chair upholstered in plush, quilted fabric without further lip. “Any word from Everet?” he asked, hoping to change the subject to something lighter.

Vizick waved at the stack of papers. “Nothing of note. He’s still alive, if that’s what you’re after, but talks are slow to progress so long as our borders remain closed—and I mean to keep them closed until we’ve resettled. I’ll not have traders and travelers streaming in and out of our lands while we’re still struggling to find our own arses.” He sighed, shaking his head. “But that’s nothing our Ambassador can help; his job for now is to keep us in good standing with Her Grace—which he seems to be handling well enough.”

“Everet did always have a rare talent for diplomacy.”

“That he did—which is precisely why he is in the Vasque Capitole and not here, manning his Hold.” He held Lir’s gaze, speaking deliberately. “I know well the talents of every member of my Crownswatch, Lir of Bantam—and I employ them where I feel they can serve me best. I did not take away your toy out of spite, so do not think to *punish me* by flagrantly flouting my authority and swanning into my Holdhelm whenever it suits you. Everet of Eizenthley may have found your impertinence charming, but rest assured I do not share his inclinations.”

Lir kept his features blank, burying deep the urge to wince as Vizick’s tone rose with his mounting ire. After a moment’s pause, taking care to inject as much sincerity as possible into his tone, he softly said, “...Understood, Majesty.”

With a stiff nod, Vizick breezed into the topic at hand. “Now—I had you summoned here today because...I’m in need of a good Runner.”

Lir straightened in place, always receptive to a compliment or ten. “I’m honored, then.”

Vizick laughed, a rough derisive little snort. “Not likely—and I’ve no love for false modesty, so don’t waste your breath.” He leaned forward, crossing his arms. “We’ve lost a Fell Mage.”

Lir arched a brow. “Lost...?”

“Fiona of Anheim; she’s a border agent assigned to monitor a corridor of the Izador, and it seems she’s gone missing—hasn’t reported to her squad leader in nearly a month despite being reliable as a water clock thus far. We’re worried she might have been captured by Ruzian forces, or perhaps be penned in and in need of rescue.”

A rescue mission near Ruzian territory—that explained why Vizick was sending a Runner. If worst came to worst, a Runner could at least retreat to higher ground, where any other Oresian might be forced to stand and fight or flee and likely be cut down or captured. Lir mulled this over. “...Not that I’m not *flattered* beyond comprehension to have been your first choice, seeing as I’m far and away the most adept at using my Gift in your retinue—” Vizick grimaced, and Lir could tell this rankled, being that the King was a Runner himself, “—but why not send an Anheim Runner? Surely one of her fellows could track her more easily than I?” An Anheim Runner would be able to dowse for this wayward Mage using the shared Starfell in their rings—something Lir, hailing from another Hold entirely, couldn’t do.

“I would, if I thought it might do any good, but all of our border agents give up their rings before going on duty. Hold rings are a dead giveaway that the bearer has a Gift that might be exploited.” A reasonable precaution, Lir agreed; if this Mage *had* been captured, she might at least be able to pretend Lay status. Assuming she hadn’t yet been tortured into confessing otherwise.

Her lack of a ring presented a rather sticky problem, though: “How am I expected to find her, then?” She evidently wore no ring they might dowse for, and Lir doubted the area she’d been assigned to monitor was any small expanse—and what if she’d been taken into Ruzian territory? She might be *anywhere* by n— “Oh!” He hit upon the only other option. “She’s a twin!”

“Indeed she is,” Vizick confirmed with a nod, barely managing to stifle a rare smile. “And her brother has kindly agreed to join you in your search.”

Twins were a treat; where most Oresians were deaf to the call of all Starfell save that filling the great furnaces keeping their own Hold aloft, twins shared such close proximity in the womb that they were able to sense one another’s Fellfire well into adulthood, as keenly as any Dowser even. Suddenly the task ahead didn’t seem quite so daunting, knowing that Lir would have a capable guide pointing the way.

“Dare I hope his Gift will be useful?” A Fell Healer would be best, in case they ran into any scrapes, but he certainly wouldn’t turn down a Firestarter. So long as it wasn’t something ridiculously mundane like a Seiner or someone who’d be useless against anyone without Fellfire in their blood, like a Siphon.

Vizick’s expression went serene, a knowing grin blossoming across his lips, and Lir felt his stomach sink as foreboding crowded in, weighing heavy on his shoulders. “You’ll need to ask him that; he goes by the name of Finnian. Finnian of Layton.”

Lir’s face went slack, and he slumped back against the chair, arms flopped over the side and legs splayed out before him. “You...surely you must be joking.”

“Indeed I am not.”

“A *Lay* man? You expect me to—with a *Lay man*?” His voice went a bit shrill as he sputtered in indignation. This was the *worst* possible option—no Fell gifts to speak of, *nothing* to offer in aid! He’d be dead weight, nothing but a drag on Lir if they ran into trouble, and Vizick had the *gall*, after the debacle back in the spring, to ask Lir to rush headlong into danger clapped to the side of one of the traitors who’d murdered the entire royal family? “There *must* be another way—”

“If you have any suggestions, then by all means, do share.” Vizick spread his arms, brows lifted in anticipation. “But to my mind, this is our only option. We need him to find Fiona of Anheim and return her safely behind our borders—she could be anywhere, and the longer she’s unaccounted for, the greater the chance that she will *never* be rescued.” He tapped the pile of paperwork. “Twice in as many months we’ve had reports of Ruzian soldiers straying within a league of our Starfell mines, violating our borders; if they lay hands on this Mage, they won’t *need* Starfell—she’ll be a living weapon in and of herself. We *cannot* abandon her and must employ every tool at hand to see her safely home.”

Lir met his gaze, unflinching. “...And if this *tool* should prove unfit for the job?”

Vizick sighed heavily, turning to gaze out the window—evening was setting, and the skies to the east were beginning to wash over in cobalts and lavenders. “...The Ruzians cannot be allowed to control a Fell Mage.” It was a tacit order that Lir heard loud and clear: if Fiona of Anheim could not be recovered in one piece, then she would have to be

put down. There would be no second rescue mission. “She’s Crownswatch; she knew the risks when she accepted the position.”

Lir certainly hoped so; he didn’t want to have to be the one to explain the situation to her in the field. “And her brother? He knows those risks as well?” Fiona of Anheim might go quietly, but he didn’t trust this Finnian character to sit idly by and let his sister return to the Stars without a fuss.

“...If you don’t want to find out, I suggest you simply ensure she needn’t be dispatched.” And that was not really an answer. “You’ll join up with Finnian in Layton at two bells tomorrow.” He waved a hand, shooing Lir away, and turned back to his reports. “You’re dismissed.”



Lir squinted up into the heavens, shading his eyes from the glaring sunlight with a hand to his brow—two bells was far too early for any respectable sorts to be up and about, he thought, and the curious glances he was earning from the servants milling about the Bantam Holdhelm’s great courtyard did little to change his mind. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, biting back a yawn, and heaved a great sigh as he reached down to sling his pack over his shoulder.

The supple leather bag bulged, packed tight with enough field provisions to last him at least a fortnight, assuming he rationed responsibly. Lir was hardly accustomed to roughing it, being absent Everet’s wilding nature, and this excursion promised to well test his endurance and tolerance. He didn’t find the idea of tromping through the forests bracketing the Izador distasteful, though; indeed, he might have even looked *forward* to the mission and its promise of adventure, had he any choice in his traveling partner.

For what felt like the fiftieth time since leaving Eizenthley the previous afternoon, Lir grimaced at the thought of what awaited him earthside: days on end, strapped to a hundred stone of horseflesh, reliant wholly on the directions of a man who, quite frankly, wouldn’t likely be able to differentiate the call of another’s Fellfire from a goat’s fart.

Using his Gift, he could have made the border in a day, day-half. On horseback, though, the journey overland would take at least thrice the time, if not longer. Such a duration, effectively grounded with his life forfeit should he indulge in his Gift, would be

trying indeed—not since receiving his approbation at the Academy on Tremayne had he passed more than a few bells tethered to the ground. He'd already had to remove his Hold ring, tucking it away in the plush velvet folds lining an antique *châsse* atop his bureau; having to give up Running as well was like cutting off a limb.

He suddenly felt a wave of sympathy for Fiona of Anheim, trapped with no way to defend herself without inviting torture and no hope of rescue beyond a Runner with clipped wings and a useless Lay argentsmith.

An argentsmith he was now late to meet.

With an indignant sigh, he adjusted the fit of the strap across his shoulder and then hopped off the edge of the Hold, toes pointed downward and directing his descent. He let himself fall in a wide, lazy helix, doing his level best to stave off this unhappy meeting for as long as possible.

It still galled that the success or failure of this mission lay in the hands of someone who might just as likely sell out his own flesh and blood as save her, if it meant dealing a cutting blow to his betters. Lir had never had any particularly strong feelings one way or another regarding Lay folk, having had next to no interaction with them for the bulk of his life save when delivering the odd message to Layton, but after the downing of Crown Hold back in the spring, seeing what Lay folk could pull off with will and a way... Rebels or no, it was clear that a chasm of resentment had opened between the Holds and Layton, and he wondered idly if Finnian had been one of Ysme of Anheim's many sympathizers.

He'd well learned his lesson, though, and would not let his guard down again; he would wield this tool he'd had shoved into his grip—but only because he had no other choice, and he would happily toss it aside the moment it lost its usefulness. He half-*hoped* he'd need to dispatch Fiona of Anheim in the field, as at least then he might be able to cut loose the tether linking him to her brother sooner.

But these were uncharitable thoughts, and Lir made a face of disgust with himself—he was behaving ridiculously, letting this Lay man get under his skin so early in the mission. He'd done his mourning, sent a prayer up to the Stars for the lives lost as so much chaff to assassins, and moved on. Surely his King had far more right to mistrust Lay folk than Lir, and yet he was willing to set aside those suspicions and grudges for the

safety of his kingdom. If Vizick could stomach entrusting state security to the very embodiment of his family's murderers, then Lir could surely bear a few days camped alongside one.

Plus, Fiona of Anheim could hardly be faulted for the alleged actions of her Lay brother—after all, who was to say they had even kept in contact? She was a trusted member of the Crownswatch and in need of assistance, and he was—*they* were—her only hope for a safe return to the safety of Orexa's borders. Lir would have to set aside any distaste he might have for Lay folk—even if they were a rats' nest of ungrateful, traitorous murderers—and focus on fulfilling the mission. He would promise himself, here and now, that cutting down the poor girl was not an option. If he had to scoop her up and run all the way back to Eizenthley with her in his arms, he would. And if it parted him from Finnian of Layton's company sooner, then all the better.

A gust of wind buffeted him off-track, forcing him to pirouette as he shifted the bag at his shoulder to redistribute his weight. Everet would likely have laughed himself sick, seeing Lir in his present predicament. He'd always taken twisted delight in seeing Lir discomfited—he'd nearly torn a muscle, wracked with stifled guffaws, when Lir had gotten himself stuck on the ceiling of the grand cathedral at the Academy showing off his newly honed Running skills, unable to properly bank his Fellfire and find his way back down again. Lir had been mortified, refusing to speak to Everet for a week out of spite—but he'd given in less than halfway through the self-imposed break, too lonely by half and jealous of Everet's ever-widening circle of friends.

He cast his gaze eastward, where the horizon stretched wide and flat in the distance. Somewhere out there was the Vasque Capitole—and Everet in it. Vizick had reassured him that talks were proceeding as well as could be expected, with correspondence continuing regularly between the Capitole and Eizenthley, so he supposed Everet hadn't been spit-roasted and strung up outside the city walls. But months had passed now since Everet had marched for the border, without so much as a weather report by carrier pigeon. Lir was hardly one for maudlin displays, but surely a letter or three wouldn't have been remiss. A simple *Food is terrible — Serr What's-his-face has a growth on his prick — Miss you dreadfully*. He didn't need a *treatise*; he just would have liked some manner of reassurance that Everet was...well, happy.

Though in truth, he really didn't need any letters or missives to confirm *that*. Everet

was out adventuring, traveling beyond Oresian borders as he'd always dreamed: of *course* he was happy. So happy he likely hadn't the time to plop his arse in a seat and draft notice to his best friend that he'd eloped with a foreign national. Never mind that he'd absconded without even a by-your-leave let alone a farewell, halfway to the border before Lir had even *heard* that—

He took a sharp dip, wobbling uncertainly with breath lodged in his throat before tipping sideways at a dangerous angle as his control over his Fellfire lapsed momentarily, and the shift in weight caused his pack to slip as he nosed forward without his lift properly distributed, head down and arse up in free fall. The strap caught on his arm, tugging him down as deadweight, and he scrambled to right himself, fighting the innate urge to panic and calling down focus to properly reorient the lift in his limbs.

His descent gradually slowed, his angle adjusted, and soon he was rightside-up once more, the blood rushing back into his extremities and sending a wave of dizziness washing over him. He floated in place for a few moments, securing the strap of his pack and regaining his bearings. He pushed fingers through his hair—less a ruggedly ruffled mess now and more chaotic windswept disarray—and took several deep, ragged breaths.

He could feel his heart, thumping loud and bracing against his ribs—pathetic. A moment's impassioned distraction, and he'd nearly given himself a stroke. He slapped his cheeks, muttering a few choice curses under his breath in self-beration, then primly pointed his toes downward once more and cut his Fellfire, dropping in a sharp, controlled descent. The wind screamed around him as he arrowed for the ground, the roofs and paddocks of Layton looming ever-larger in his vision, but still he kept his lift banked, waiting until even Anheim was a speck in the skies above him. He was a Runner—Runners didn't get spooked by a tumble, and he was perfectly in control. This, he demonstrated to himself and any onlookers by forcing all the lift burning in his blood, at the last possible moment, into the soles of his feet. He braced, muscles clenched tight with effort, and felt his innards rise up into his throat as everything came to an abrupt stop—then hopped down light and limber to land only a few paces from the Layton launch, where even this early in the morning several transports were already lined up, waiting to carry cargo from the nearby warehouses to the Holds high above.

He tugged sharply on the lapels of his rumpled jacket, tipping a nod and offering a grin to the dockhands eyeing him with no small degree of irritation. Did no one appreciate a

flashy entrance anymore? “Fair morning, Serrs.” Their stares lay heavy across his shoulders as he strolled away from the launch, but he troubled them no further, keeping his pace and carriage relaxed as he exited the launch district.

Layfolk tended to frown when one dropped in unannounced in the middle of the mercantile district, so all visiting Runners or transports were requested to arrive and exit through the launch. Given that the docks were located at the far southern end of the township, this left Lir with something of a walk ahead of him—and where that might have been lovely had he been passing under the verdant gables of Jenevier’s courts or sauntering through the ancient arches choked with Beezilbud vines on Tremayne, here in Layton it was a dreary, dusty trek.

The main thoroughfare was sliced through at odd angles by crossing paths and lacked any sort of cobbling or bricking. Once the rains returned to Orexa, as Vizick claimed they would, the whole stretch would likely turn into a muddy, Stars-forsaken morass. The stink of horses was prominent, and a thick black curl of smoke snaked into the air over an open-faced building that Lir took to be the blacksmith, given its proximity to the stables serving the launch. He considered for a moment rousing the horsemaster and proceeding in some measure of style, but he’d be spending much of the foreseeable future in a saddle already, so he quickly reconsidered.

The facades of all the shops were faded and dull, a town of nothing but sandy sepias and dark ochres save for the gaudy flash of the boutique district where fine goods imported from the Holds were sold at prices no Lay folk could afford. Thirty paces in, and already Lir was longing for the relative charm of Anheim—how *did* Lay folk stand it here? He could but be grateful he was generally only charged with delivering messages between Holds and had little cause to stoop this low with any regularity.

A clock tower tolled the time from atop a multistoried building that looked to be an inn given the drawn shades on all its windows—two and a half bells; well past the appointed meeting time. By now, the town was beginning to wake, and the main lane was crowding with householders scurrying off to the green grocer and bakery for the morning shopping while working folk streamed around him. Lir struggled against the flow as what felt like half of Layton made for the manufacturing district with its dying flour mills and empty loom stations.

At the first chance, he hopped out of traffic, keeping to the shelter of the awnings and

wide porches fronting shops, and frowned. He hadn't liked that—being penned in and grounded, forced to fight his way through a sudden swell of people. He hadn't liked it at all. At least up on Anheim he could make his way by Running as he pleased and avoid the crush of humanity; here, he was effectively trapped.

Ahead, another narrow side street branched off from the main thoroughfare, and just on the opposite side, Lir made out a sunbaked, faded sign hanging over a set of double doors marking the building as the general store. A pair of horses both nearly as tall as himself at the shoulder stood lashed to a hitching post, already saddled and bags fat with supplies. These would surely be their mounts, and Lir silently chose the more handsome of the two for himself, approaching with lazy consideration as he ran a hand over its—his, he checked—rump and down the hindquarters.

The stallion shifted at the touch, whickering in seeming indignation at Lir's audacity, and from the other side of the animal's great barrel of a belly came a soft *Oof!* followed by a strained, "Shove off, you dirty beast—or I'll have you turned into jerky."

A stablehand had his shoulder wedged into the stallion's ribcage to keep it from knocking him over as he adjusted the length of the rein, and he acknowledged Lir's approach only with a shift of his gaze before returning to his task.

"Take care to check the cinch is good and tight," Lir reminded the boy, slapping the seat of the saddle. "I don't want to go rolling off as soon as I mount up."

The stablehand only snorted, a sharp huff that rang of disgust, and tugged gently on the rein to be sure the buckle held. "Check it yourself; I'm not your squire." Irritation speared through Lir's chest at the blatant cheek, and he opened his mouth to deliver a scathing retort with aspersions cast on the supposed goodwill of Lay folk, when the stablehand turned around, crossed his arms over his chest, and raked Lir with a bored gaze. "I don't suppose I need to ask who you think you are, ordering a total stranger about." His lip curled. "You must be Lir of Bantam."

Ugh. "...Finnian of Layton, I take it." It wasn't a question—for there could be no mistaking the man—not a boy, not at all—before him as anyone other than his esteemed guide.

His sleeves had been rolled up as he worked with the tack, revealing sturdy forearms

and a broad chest that seemed more fit to a blacksmith than an argentsmith, who generally busied themselves with crafting jewelry and cutlery. His hands were covered in calluses, and specks of dirt had worked their way under his nails—he would never be mistaken for a high-Holded dandy, that was for certain. He looked every bit the stablehand Lir had momentarily mistaken him for, even down to his hair, cropped far shorter than was fashionable on the Holds and a shade too dull to have ever been exposed to the Fellfire summer. Lir could have marked him as Lay with his eyes closed.

Finnian clucked softly to the stallion, running a hand over his neck in a soothing gesture as he stepped around to the front to check the bit. “Do they not have bells on Bantam?”

“Bells?” Lir frowned.

“Yes; great clanging things, they make a rather lot of racket when they toll the time. Given you’re arriving a half-bell later than agreed upon, I assume you just don’t use bells at altitude.” He cut a glance over to Lir, rubbing the stallion’s velvety nose. “You really must try them; they’re ever so useful.”

Another burst of irritation heated Lir’s cheeks, and he opened his mouth, invectives ready on his tongue—

“Oh! You’ve arrived! Excellent, excellent, I was beginning to worry something might have happened to you on the way down.” A squirrely young man came barreling out of the store, sending the rickety front door snapping back to slap loudly against the siding. A roaring admonishment echoed from within, and he whirled around, bending sharply at the waist with a stream of apologies flowing forth, before straightening once more with a huff and an embarrassed grin on his lips. He slinked forward, brows raised hopefully as he wrung his hands in nervous habit. “Lir of Bantam, I presume? I’m afraid I haven’t yet had the pleasure of making your acquaintance.” He tipped his head in a nod, touching his forehead in greeting. “I’m Henrick of Layton, Captain of the Layton Townswatch.”

Finnian snorted derisively, and Henrick shot him a worried glance, as if he feared he’d said something off. So—a rude little prick *and* disrespectful of his local Watch. Lir drew himself up, now wholly intent on presenting a pristine front; Henrick might be Lay, but he was polite, and that merited similarly genteel discourse. “An honor, Captain; my

apologies for my belated arrival—I had a bit of last-minute business to attend to on Bantam, and it delayed my departure.” It was horse shit of the highest quality, but he did enjoy the way Finnian’s eyes practically rolled out of their sockets in exasperation at the reminder of just how high a Hold Lir hailed from.

Henrick, though, was well impressed. “Not at all, not at all!” He extended a hand to the horses. “We took the liberty of getting you all squared away; I see you’ve brought your own provisions, so between your pack and the saddle bags—and of course our Finnian’s hunting skills—I think you won’t want for food on your quest.” His eyes sparkled on the word *quest*, and Lir suspected Henrick very much wished he were going along with them. Perhaps Everet wasn’t the only one around with an adventurous spirit.

“That’s a comfort, then; traveling on an empty stomach has never been a hobby of mine.” He rubbed his midsection ruefully, regretting not pilfering a few sausage rolls from the kitchens before leaving the Holdhelm.

“Oh—would you like to come inside and rest for a bit before setting out? Traveling all that way from Bantam—and you’re a Runner, I hear? That must be exhilarating! I’m sure we can ask the hostess to fire the griddle again and—”

“We really should be on our way, Henrick,” Finnian interrupted with a sharp look, lips pursed tight, and Lir felt half grateful he’d cut Henrick off before he tripped over his own blubbing, fawning prattle. How the man had risen to the rank of Captain with such a high-strung, nervous nature baffled; perhaps Layton was even worse off than it looked, if this was the pride of the local Watch. Even Anheim, derelict and despondent, had a competent if rather foul-mouthed Firestarter heading the Holdswatch who had been known to employ corporal punishment to keep her contingent in line. Fiona of Anheim would have served under her, now that Lir thought about it.

“Yes, yes of course, quite right.” Henrick drew himself up, taking a deep breath as if to fortify himself. “Now then, to final business before you depart—Serr Lir, I don’t suppose you need any reminding, but please do be sure to use your Fell Gift as little as possible, particularly as you near the border. We have several eye-witness reports of border guards wielding sableore-alloy weaponry, which as I’m sure you’re aware can easily incapacitate any Fellfire user, so take care not to give them any tempting targets, all right? Ruzians can be a brazen, ambitious lot along the Izador, but they generally stick

to their own territory unless provoked into action.”

“I’ll heed your warning and try my very best to be less...*provocative*.” Henrick tittered merrily at this, and Finnian muttered something rude under his breath, placing his back to the both of them as he adjusted the stirrups on Lir’s mount.

After he recovered his composure, Henrick continued, one hand on the neck of the nearer horse. “The horses should serve you well until you hit the treeline, a couple days’ journey west, but from there you’ll likely need to continue on foot. We’ve set you up with a pair well accustomed to long journeys with hunting parties, so just turn them loose once you hit the thickening brush and they’ll find their way back here easily enough on their own.

Lir frowned. “We’re to abandon them? Are there no predators? Or—I don’t know, bandits or brigands or some such? They won’t be stolen?”

Finnian huffed, shaking his head. “What sorts of stories *do* they concoct about the hinterlands up on the Holds?”

“What Finnian means to say, I’m sure, is that no—there’s no danger to the beasts. We haven’t had problems with bandits in a generation or more—not enough steady trade to make it a worthwhile profession, I suppose. And the most ferocious creature you’re likely to encounter on the plains would be your partner.” Henrick nodded to Finnian, chest puffed with pride. “That’s quite a bodyguard you’ll have at your side.”

“*Henrick—*”

“Won’t you reconsider taking a musketoon? It’ll be ever so much safer and more efficient than a blade.”

“And ten-fold as loud when it pops off.” He turned and clapped a hand to Henrick’s shoulder, giving it a reassuring little shake. “This is meant to be a mission of stealth. Besides, I’m more than prepared to fight my way through most anything we might come across—including a Ruzian cohort.”

Indeed, now that Lir gave him a better look, he seemed practically armed to the teeth—from a short sword sheathed in a belt fastened loosely at his hip to a hunting knife mounted in a shoulder holster to a gambler’s dagger stuffed into one boot to the

reichwood takedown bow sticking out of his pack. And those were just the *visible* weapons. “We’re only meant to rescue your sister, you realize—not storm the hall at Korraviche. Stars, do you really need all of those blades?”

Finnian bristled defensively. “We’ll be traveling close to hostile territory—perhaps even crossing into it. Being equipped to defend ourselves may mean the difference between seeing friendly faces again and bleeding out on the grime-slick floor of a Ruzian torture chamber, so I’ll hedge my bets if it’s all the same to you.” He rested a hand on the hilt of the sword at his belt. “You’re a Runner, but I’ve nothing save my wits and skills to keep me from being run through or captured, and if you think my sister’s captors will let her go with a few pretty words and a by-your-leave, you’d best disabuse yourself of that fantasy.” He brushed past Lir, taking care to bump shoulders as he did so. “We can’t all be blessed with the ability to flee to higher ground when things get difficult.”

Lir started after him, hackles rising at the prospect of a fight. “Are you calling me a *coward*?” He’d tolerated Finnian’s unwarranted foul mood and biting comments quite long enough; Lir had, by his measure, *far* more reason to dislike a Lay man than the other way around, and he was quite happy to explain as such.

Finnian twisted on his heel, gravel crunching beneath his boot, and Lir had to scramble backwards to avoid the two of them going down in a tangle of limbs. “That depends—do you see retreat as cowardice?”

Henrick rushed in, hands raised placatingly. “Gentlemen, gentlemen! Let’s save a bit of that energy for the long road ahead, shall we?”

Lir frowned to himself, having lost the thread of the argument and not entirely sure if he’d been insulted in the end or not—but he most definitely felt like a fool, being so openly ruffled. He took a step back at Henrick’s urging and mentally collected himself. Emotional outbursts were one of his poorer habits, and it was doing him no good stooping to Finnian’s level. He would have to be the better man, it seemed, and avoid confrontation.

“Mount up,” Finnian barked, unhooking Lir’s stallion from the post—and then swinging up into the saddle himself and turning the beast in a tight circle that kicked up dust into Lir’s face before he could protest. The stallion grunted in triumph, prancing in place and seeming delighted in this small victory over Lir—perhaps he and his rider

were suited for one another after all.

Lir turned sourly, meeting the doe-eyed, watery gaze of the remaining nag—then grimaced as she lifted her stringy tail and deposited a pile of droppings at his feet by way of greeting. He stared down at the steaming heap of excrement. “...Yes, that about sums it up.”

CHAPTER TWO

Lir of Bantam was everything Finn had heard through the gossip channels and more: haughty, quick-tempered, snide, and exasperatingly beautiful.

This last point, Finn had to remind himself at regular intervals, did nothing to mitigate the former three—in fact, it made him all the more insufferable, as it was entirely too easy to forget what an irritating prick he could be when he was busy stealing the very breath from one's body.

But he would have time aplenty to grow accustomed to Lir's handsome face over the course of their journey, he reasoned, and more than a few opportunities for a harsh reminder that beauty truly was only skin deep.

How in the Stars' names he was going to get through this ordeal hitched to the side of a Holded man was beyond Finn. If he'd had his druthers, he'd be halfway to the border already, having set off two days ago when he'd first been informed of Fiona's predicament. Instead, he'd had to cool his heels, wasting precious time waiting to meet up with a partner he didn't need for a mission he could have easily accomplished alone. Lir of Bantam didn't have the drive he did to rescue Fiona—he would be nothing more than dead weight, slowing Finn down when speed was of the utmost importance. One thing he knew for certain: had the situation been reversed, Fiona certainly wouldn't have waited a half-bell for a puffed-up Runner to saunter in. She'd have been out the door and headed full-tilt across the plains in a heartbeat.

They were all each other had, after all.

Fiona was the only family he had that had ever been worth anything—worth even *calling* family. He had a mother, he had a father—both still alive, last he'd heard, in the heart of Anheim's third ward and doing reasonably well for themselves, getting by without substantial difficulty. But they weren't *parents*. He'd stopped thinking of them

as such long ago—right around when they'd all but thrown him off the side of the Hold themselves after the Seer had pronounced him Lay.

Fiona meant the world to him, and he the same to her—she was the only one who hadn't turned her back on him, the only one who'd *fought* for him, for all the good it had done in the end. So he would walk to the ends of the earth if it meant helping her, and it spoke to how very much he loved her that he was willing to put up with the likes of Lir of Bantam to see her safely home again.

He simply needed to keep his head down, ignore his tag-along, and try to focus as he'd been instructed by that Dowser fellow to track down Fiona. The revelation that he could sense Fellfire despite being Lay himself had come as something of a shock, but he *had* always felt a bond to his sister he couldn't quite explain. He'd initially chalked it up to their being twins, or even just romanticized longing, all in his head. Learning that it was a real gift, and something he must now employ to save her, had filled him with a renewed sense of purpose.

He didn't quite understand how it worked, only that as they pressed westward, he could feel the tight, warm pulse in his chest grow stronger, like a fire burning hotter and higher as he approached. They could but follow this signal and pray that Fiona waited at the other end of it—and still in one piece.

They pressed hard the first day, the road long and boring but blessedly silent, as they both seemed more than happy to ignore each other in their westward trek. He'd half-worried that Lir would be a jabbering dandy, eager to fill the silence with the sound of his own dulcet tones, but thankfully that had not been the case. Instead, the only sounds around them were the soft muffled thuds of the horses' hooves against the dusty sod, the calls of meadowbirds, and the whistling rustle of the wind through the scrub grasses.

So quiet was the road that first day that they found no cause to speak at all after leaving Layton until the sun brushed the horizon and Finn suggested they use the last of the light to set up camp. Lir complied without protest, though given the way he pursed his lips and eyed the path before them, he didn't seem happy with their progress. Finn felt they were making decent time, despite their late start, and Lir clearly had never ridden a horse further than around a paddock, so he would thank Finn in the morning for making a relatively short day of it to allow his muscles time to unclench and his thighs to

forget the wide barrel of the docile mare he sat atop.

They hobbled the horses and unpacked their bedrolls, each dipping into their own trail mix stores for dinner as there was too little brush to burn out on the dusty plains to make much of a fire. The weather was clear enough that they didn't need to set up tents, but that would quickly change once they exited the shadow of the Holds and entered territory far enough removed from their influence that storms still spilled rain on the parched earth. They could spare a watch for now, saving their strength, but when they hit the river, they would need to start sleeping in shifts, alert for any Ruzian parties passing close by.

The next day and the one after that were a tedious cycle of rising with the sun, wolfing down a mealy breakfast, and charging westward, eating lunch in the saddle and riding until nightfall forced them to make camp. By the third day, Lir could no longer hold his tongue, and when Finn had caught him during their lunch stop staring longingly at the horses slurping down the precious little water they could afford to carry with them, he'd mused wistfully, "It's times like this I wish I were a Seiner..."

"We have plenty of water in our canteens; we're not going to go thirsty."

"Not to *drink*." He'd tugged at the hem of his jacket, holding the fabric with only his fingertips, as if he could scarcely stand to touch it. "To bathe."

And of *course* a pampered Bantam priss would be lost without his daily rub-down and arse wiping, unable to tell front from back without a half-dozen servants near at hand to point out his prick. If he'd been worried at all that his initial impression of Lir in Layton had been inaccurate, such fears had surely long since been allayed.

Finn had just shaken his head, biting back a scoff, and climbed back into the saddle. He could no longer spare the energy to be baffled by Lir—he needed to start planning ahead. In another bell, they would hit the treeline—he could just make it out in the distance, a dark blur riding on a sea of gold. From there they would have to turn loose the horses and consolidate their belongings to only that which they could bear on their backs, a compromise which would drastically slow their progress.

They'd made decent time thus far, a straight shot from Layton west, but they'd already had to cut from the beaten path, leaving behind the ancient wheel ruts that marked

trading routes used generations back when travel among the three nations had been more frequent and striking out instead into the taller, thicker brush. The call of Fiona's Fellfire was still strong, but she was not leading them through easy country.

"*Shit—*" Finn cursed when his stallion stumbled, tripped up by a tangle of branches, and he braced himself to go down—but the horse managed to keep its feet, shaking its head nervously and blustering in protest. The scrub was getting nigh impassable now, with the occasional thatch of saplings warning that they should expect more ground debris as they moved from the plains to the forested western borderlands. He glanced about, meeting Lir's curious gaze, then sighed. "...I think this is as far as we can safely take the horses."

Lir drew up alongside him, glancing down to confirm the damage done with his own eyes, then nodded once and dismounted in a motion so smooth Finn wondered if he hadn't used his Gift to help him along. After a few reassuring pats to his stallion's neck, more to soothe his own nerves than the animal's at this point, Finn climbed down and began to sort through the saddle bags, separating necessities from niceties.

"You're certain the horses will be fine?"

"They're hunting mounts, well accustomed to extended getaways and bred with an excellent homing instinct. They won't starve, and while water is scarce in the hinterlands, it does exist. We aren't abandoning them to their doom, if that's what you're worried about." And indeed, this did seem to have been Lir's concern; he clearly hadn't been impressed with his mount initially, but Finn hadn't missed the way he'd been sneaking her the odd apple rind or palmful of trail mix. From another, it might have been endearing—on Lir, it felt discordant, mismatched. Like an ill-fitted overcoat that didn't suit him at all.

He squinted in the late-afternoon light at the dark blot of the tree brake now just a stone's throw away. Even if they'd wanted to chance bringing the horses along, it simply wouldn't have been feasible. Navigating the thick of the forest as two men would be difficult enough; carving a way through large enough to accommodate a pair of fully grown animals the size of their steeds was a task they simply couldn't afford to waste time with. They could travel lighter and faster under their own power at this point, though they'd still be making only half the time they had over the plains.

He cinched his pack tightly closed and slung it over his shoulder, turning to remind Lir what did and didn't count as a necessity—only to find him standing, looking quite bored, with his own horse already tended to and pack settled comfortably at his waist.

“Done yet?”

Finn peeked around him, staring dubiously at his mare munching on a clump of wilting yellow dandies. “...You already repacked?”

Lir clapped the bulging belly of his bag. “Last night, while you were off taking a piss.”

An uncharacteristic display of forethought, Finn admitted, and snatched up his horse's reins to lead him back the way they'd just come, unhooking the lead and urging him on his way with a sharp slap across the rump that sent him trotting into the brush. Lir did similar with his mare—though not without giving her one final nibble of apple and whispering something into her ear with a lewd smile that suggested it had been dirty.

“You'll spoil her,” he chided when Lir strolled back over.

“She's the only lady I've ever let between my legs; I thought I ought to treat her well.”

Finn took point again as they entered the forest, hacking away at overzealous brush with his short sword in lieu of a good machete. The already failing light was nearly snuffed out by the encroaching canopy above, but Finn forced his way onward, Lir quick on his heels, until a familiar and all too welcome sound brought them to a halt: the burbling, sparkling laughter of running water.

“Oh *Stars*, I've never heard anything so lovely in all my life,” Lir breathed, a smile in his voice, and he scrambled to tug off his pack, nearly pulling his jacket and tunic off with it.

“Wha—where are you going?”

“We're camping here, aren't we?”

Finn glanced around; with dry, high ground and enough brush nearby to make a decent fire, it was the best they would find for now. He'd hoped to make the hunting lodge by nightfall, but that would require at least another bell or two of tromping

through dark, dangerous forest. "...I suppose. But—"

"Excellent." He then promptly dropped his pack on the ground and whipped off his jacket, leaving it to crumple in a pile on the forest floor. One hand was already fidgeting with the clasp of his belt as he gingerly picked his way through the brush in the direction of the stream. "I call first bath," was the last thing Finn heard before Lir's whooping, relieved laughter grew too muffled to make out, lost in the forest.

Irritation welled up as he glanced back and forth between Lir's retreating form, his abandoned gear, and the empty clearing. No offer to help set up camp, no suggestion to work out a bathing schedule in advance, no consideration whatsoever for Finn, who clearly had been left behind with the expectation that he would pitch their tent and start working on their dinner.

Very well, then; if Lir had no interest in arranging his bedroll or helping gather firewood for a cookfire, he was welcome to go gallivanting off to wash up. So long as he didn't return expecting a cozy tent for two and dinner warm and waiting when he finished.

Finn quickly gathered any burnable materials he could scrounge together from the deadfall, carving out a little pit in the earth and marking it off with a handful of stones. After shearing off a swatch of his horse's blanket for tinder, he took a flint to one of the stones and struck until one of the sparks finally caught, quickly blossoming into a fine little conflagration.

He then fashioned several stiff twigs into a makeshift grill and began toasting slices of hard tack and salted, tough-as-leather ham for a sandwich, his first hot meal in days. It was a luxury they wouldn't be able to afford soon, so best to enjoy it while they were still far enough from the border that they could chance a fire-cooked meal.

While shaved slices of ham sizzled at the end of a stick positioned just where the flames could lick but not burn, he began building a wedge tent from his horse blanket. Had Lir not run off to explore the stream, they might have worked together to build something roomier and unlikely to topple at the first stiff breeze, but as it was, Finn had been forced to deal with the sleeping situation himself. Lir could pitch his own tent, or sleep open to the elements and at the mercy of whatever nocturnal creatures chose to use that

ragged mop of hair of his as nesting material.

He'd just finished stringing a length of twine between two saplings and was about to drape the horse blanket over it when Lir dragged himself back into camp, wavy curls limp against his scalp and drops of water snaking their way down his cheeks and neckline, glinting in the flickering firelight. His eyes snapped immediately to the meat roasting over the flames, and he got two steps before he froze in place—his approach abruptly arrested by the dagger Finn had thrown at his feet in warning.

“Touch my dinner, and I’ll gut you in your sleep and dig it back out of you.”

Lir glanced back, one white brow arched in challenge, then lazily mopped at his hair with what looked to be the remains of an undershirt. “...Testy, aren’t we? Is the concept of sharing so very foreign to Lay folk?” He then kicked aside the dagger and took another step forward—and Finn was on him in a flash, hunting knife tight in his grip and the flat of the blade pressed just firmly enough against Lir’s windpipe to make him freeze in Finn’s arms.

“Did you think I was joking?”

Lir swallowed, and the bob of his throat caught on the spine of the knife. He forced his voice out through grit teeth, gone stiff and still. “Let me go.”

“Are you going to try and eat my food again?”

Lir released a sharp huff. “Stars, man—fine, fine keep it.” Finn released him with a rough shove across the shoulder blade, and Lir staggered forward, rubbing ruefully at his neck and casting about the campsite. “Where’s my portion, then, since you’re worse than a dog with his bone?”

Finn slid his hunting knife back into its holster, prodding his seared ham and sniffing experimentally to determine if it was done to his liking yet. “Still in your pack, I imagine.” He jerked a thumb behind him. “Over there, where you dropped it.”

“Wha—you didn’t make enough for the both of us?”

“You opted for a bath over dinner preparations, remember?” He shrugged to himself, unfazed. “I can’t be held responsible for your poor decisions.”

“*You* could certainly stand to have opted for a bath over dinner preparations as well, if we’re being perfectly honest.”

Finn drew himself up straight, turning on his heel and marching forward. He had width across the shoulders on Lir, but not the height to intimidate, so he’d have to let his bearing and demeanor do the work for him. “Why start using pretty words now? Let’s have it out—honesty, by all means!”

“My brand of honesty employs a vocabulary not fit for virgin ears, I’m afraid.”

Finn barked in harsh laughter. “Ah yes—Lir of Bantam and his characteristic brand of crude, diverting humor. A quick and easy way out of an otherwise distasteful conversation.” He’d receive no straight answers from the likes of Lir, who’d been born and bred in the gossip parlors and back rooms of the rumor-mongering high-Holded. His type didn’t deal in honesty and openness—they preferred to practice sly, subtle secrecy, driving knives into one another’s backs all while flashing glittering smiles to the face. They were rotten and fetid to the core, having never done a day’s honest work in their lives and snidely looking down upon those they deemed broken, defective. *Lay*.

Lir’s fists clenched at his side, and he bit his lip as if physically swallowing down any righteous tirades he might have bottled up. “We’re meant to be a *team*, working together—as commanded by our *King*.”

“No,” Finn snapped. “I’m meant to be tracking down my dear sister, and if I’d known she was missing sooner, I would have set off to find her alone. Because, as you can see—” He spread his arms out, taking a step back. “I’m quite capable of defending myself and navigating the hinterlands. I don’t *need you*.” He paused, feeling his cheeks heat with banked rage, and took a steadying breath. “We aren’t a team; we just happen to have a mutual goal. I am not your squire, not your huntsman, not your cook, not your servant to order about as you please.”

“*You—*” Lir rounded on him, shaking a finger in his face, “—ought to be *weeping* with gratitude to have been trusted with so sensitive a mission as this. You’re *only* here to be my compass, to point me in the right direction. You’re here, because I need you to find Fiona of Anheim. Your sister is a precious asset to the Oresian crown, whereas you...you, my friend, are quite *expendable*.” He spit the word, eyes narrowing. “And if it’d been up to me, you’d be hanging by your thumbs with the rest of the traitorous lot who took

down Crown Hold.”

Ah, so now they came to the root of Lir’s misplaced resentment. So very typical of a Holded man to see a group of radicals, lashing out in cruel but understandable violence against their oppressors, as representative of the whole Lay population. “I had *no part* in that—”

“But would you have accepted one, had it been offered? Would you have ducked your head and scuttled under Ysme of Anheim’s thumb when she clicked her heels and called you and your Lay brethren to her side?” He raked Finn over with a cold, measuring glance. “I find it difficult to believe the whole of Layton isn’t rotten to the core with disdain and resentment.”

“Can you blame them?” Finn laughed gruffly, mirth stripped away by ragged irritation.

“You can be sure of it!” He thrust a finger into the heavens, drawing close and dropping his voice to a harsh rasp. “People died up there—*good people. My people.*”

“Then perhaps, having tasted the bitter gall of tragedy, you can sympathize with those of us who—”

Lir scoffed, cutting him short. “Those of you who *what?* The worst any Lay folk ever suffered was being told where to live! You justify the murder of innocents as a proportionate response to what amounts to *housing restrictions.*”

Disgust clawed at his chest, a red-hot rage building up that ate away at his better senses. “Spoken like someone who’s never had the very ground beneath his feet pulled away, torn from everything he held near and dear.” He blinked back unbidden memories—his father beckoning his mother and sister away, Fiona’s screeched protests as she fought against his grip and wept for her brother, pouring everything she had into uncontrolled frenetic little bursts of Fellfire that couldn’t have singed the Registrar’s nose hairs. The dark confines of the transport and that long, silent journey to Layton—alone. Everything had changed in an instant, ousted from the warmth of what he’d thought was a loving home into the cold and unforgiving world beyond the bubble of the Fellfire summer.

Housing restrictions, indeed.