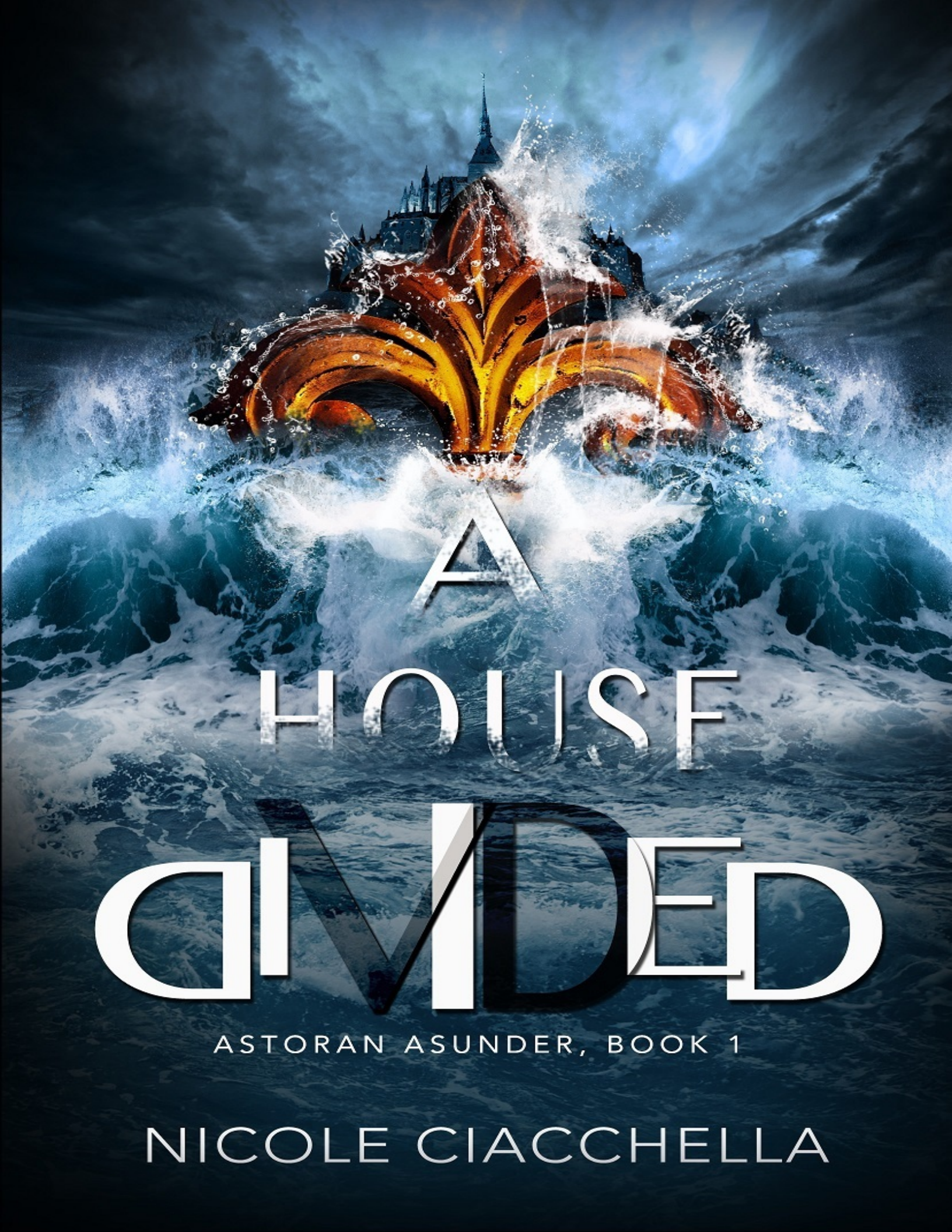
A
HOUSE
DIVIDED
ASTORAN ASUNDER, BOOK 1
NICOLE CIACCHELLA

Contents

Title Page
Dedication
Want Free Books
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33

Chapter 34
Astoran Asunder Series
Want Free Books
A Note from Nicole
Books by Nicole Ciacchella
About the Author
Book Description
Copyright

A House Divided

Astoran Asunder, Book 1

by Nicole Ciacchella

For my family. I love you all more than words can say.

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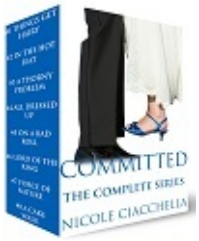

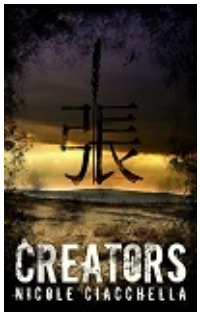

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Chapter 1

"Begging your pardon, miss, but you have a visitor," Vivie said, entering Cianne's sitting room with her head bowed. She kept her eyes lowered in what Cianne felt was undue deference, but, then, Vivie was nothing if not proper. Perhaps Cianne ought to have been pleased that Vivie's deference was genuine, unlike the false solicitousness of most everyone else in House Staerleigh.

"I'm not expecting anyone today," Cianne said, smoothing her skirts so they concealed the stiletto she'd been oiling. It wasn't the dagger Elder Borean had given her for her sixteenth birthday, the customary gift presented to all members attaining the age of majority. Blade emblazoned with the House crest of a ship tossed about by a stormy sea, the dagger was a distinctive weapon meant to mark the bearer as a member of House Staerleigh. While it wasn't unusual for House members to carry other ornamental yet functional weapons, it would have struck them as unusual for Cianne, particularly seeing as how hers were far more functional than ornamental.

"And yet someone is here all the same," said a familiar voice, much to Vivie's chagrin. The maid opened her mouth as if to protest, but then sank into a low curtsy and slipped from the room.

"Lach, you know how Vivie is," Cianne chided. Fluttering one hand in an imitation of the discomposed Vivie, Cianne concealed her other, slipping the stiletto between the cushions on her settee as she rose. She made plain the amusement behind her words. "She'll spend the next two hours berating herself for such a breach of protocol."

"I imagine she'll recover," Lachlon said, stepping toward her, green eyes twinkling.

Cianne knew very well what effect those twinkling eyes had on most of the eligible members of House Staerleigh—and even on some of the ineligible members. Long was the House's history and proud its many illustrious members, but Lachlon was a favorite. One of the most gifted of all Seafarers in recorded history, a favorite House jest was that Lachlon wasn't so much the son of Moiria and Toran as he was the son of Cearus, Lord of Water.

Indeed, everything about Lach seemed heaven-touched. From his abundant

waves of windblown chestnut hair to his burnished skin to his deep green eyes, the same shade as the mysterious depths of the sea, Lachlon's appearance struck even the most resistant of eyes. His face was chiseled in a manner that recalled classical works of sculpture, making him almost aggressively handsome. Tall and broad, his size was imposing as well, a product of time spent mostly at sea, the strenuous work providing him with a taut layer of muscle that might have been the envy of any Battle Master.

Lachlon's gleaming smile widened as Cianne studied him, and she averted her gaze. "Taking me in?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"It's been nearly three months. I wanted to be sure the salt hasn't eroded you yet," she replied, keeping her tone light. Dear though her friend was to her, her feelings for him didn't extend beyond friendship, yet it seemed she was doomed to always be provoking false hopes in him. "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you weren't due back for another fortnight."

Lowering his eyes, he gave her a sheepish smile and she smiled back.

"Sea-blessed. I should have known," she said, to which he responded with a modest shrug. Lach was well aware of the strength of his gift, but he didn't parade it about as did some of the others, which was just one of the things Cianne liked best about him. House Staerleigh—like most Houses, really—tended to be populated by the ambitious and boastful.

"I brought you something," he said, producing from behind his back a package wrapped in salt-stained brown paper.

"Another addition to my collection?" she asked, her eyes lighting up. She extended an eager hand toward the gift, but he lifted it out of her reach with a grin.

"Using your height advantage over me is hardly fair. Surely you can do better than that, Lach. You've been using that same trick since we were children," she said, planting her fists on her hips. His eyes trailed her movements and uncomfortable heat flushed through her.

"Payment, please," he said in a prim tone.

Sighing, she made a show of rolling her eyes. "Very well. Three hundred seventy-six and counting."

"As many as that already?" he asked, his surprise genuine.

"Yes, as many as that already. You've been four years at sea on your own ship now," she reminded him.

She couldn't help but be proud of him. As was standard practice in Astoran, Lach had begun his apprenticeship at the age of sixteen. Because of the promise he'd shown during his testing, he'd been assigned to Captain Riorn's ship, where he'd swiftly distinguished himself. Riorn was a gifted Seafarer, but Lach's innate

skills had dwarfed his, and the boy had quickly become invaluable to his captain. When Lach's two years of apprenticeship were up, his reward had been to be named captain of his own vessel, a first in the House's history. It had been small, true, but it had been a vessel of his own, and each year he had been rewarded with a larger one. At twenty-two, he was captain of the largest ship in the Staerleigh fleet, the youngest member ever to have been awarded such an honor.

"Four years," he said, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe it, even though Cianne was certain he had vivid recollections of every last moment he'd spent at sea. She understood the subtext underlying his words. He had been patient with her, not wanting to push her, but he would expect an answer soon, and the thought filled her with dread.

He wasn't alone in expecting it. Her father had canvassed the subject many times over the years, and each time he brought it up a little more of his subtlety was lost. Daerwyn expected his daughter to marry Lach, and why wouldn't he? Even if she and Lach hadn't been bosom companions since childhood, he was inarguably the most desirable of all prospects in House Staerleigh, and if there was one thing Daerwyn prized above all else, it was the power of connections.

"May I see it now?" she asked, extending a hand with a smile that wanted to waver. She tried so hard to avoid the topic, but she knew she couldn't avoid it forever.

Everyone expected them to marry. Tongues had wagged since before Lach had all but declared his intentions by making a point of returning to Cearova expressly to attend her eighteenth birthday celebration. Their strong bond, the depths of their friendship, had become public laundry for airing and inspection. Several other families resented Cianne for the power they felt she exerted over him, something she found laughable, considering she had not the least desire to marry him. Were it possible for her to rid herself of the power she held over his heart, she would do so gladly.

Throughout their teenage years she and Lach had joked about everyone's expectations, and she had thought his feelings for her were the same as hers for him: beginning and ending at friendship. But at her eighteenth birthday celebration he had overindulged in the strong wine he had gone to Leonovia to procure for her gala, and he had confessed his love for her. All color had drained from her face, her expression telling him everything he had needed to know. He hadn't spoken a word of his feelings for her since.

She had mentioned to him more than once that she thought it might be better if she didn't marry. Devoid of any Adept abilities herself, she had nothing valuable to contribute to the House bloodlines. Wasn't that what everyone whispered behind her back, thinking her too oblivious to know? She had

overheard them speaking with spiteful pity about how unfortunate it was that the gods had seen fit to grant Daerwyn and Annalith, two such gifted House members, with a daughter who wasn't gifted.

She had grown to suspect that Lach had latched onto her insecurity over her lack of Adept abilities as an explanation for why she didn't consider herself in love with him. He seemed to have misattributed her unwillingness to marry him to a highly developed sense of House devotion on her part. He hadn't acted as anything more than her friend for the past four years, but she knew he had never stopped harboring the hope that he might one day win her.

"I suppose you've proven yourself worthy," he said, depositing the package in her hand, his fingertips brushing over her palm.

Had she tried hard enough to convince him she had no feelings for him? Sometimes she doubted herself. And sometimes she found it difficult to resist the powerful allure of acquiescence. Refusing to marry him would make her life even more difficult than it already was, would likely lead to her being even more ostracized. What place could she hope to find in the House without him? She wasn't alone in lacking Adept abilities, but positions of prominence were reserved for those who were gifted. Those who weren't, like Vivie, were told they were valued by their House and could serve it in other manners, an honor that was couched in shame.

Could she live with the disdainful whispers, with the cold, unforgiving eye of her father, who let her know in all manner of ways how disappointing he found her, his only child? Why not marry Lach? She was fond of him, and there were far worse fates she could suffer. The whispers wouldn't stop, but he would shelter her, provide her with a security she could never hope to gain on her own.

Disgust curdled her stomach. How could she even contemplate something so mercenary? It would be beyond reprehensible of her to betray Lach by living such a lie, knowing that every time he spoke words of love to her she would see another's face in his place.

Years of covert practice had taught her to control her emotions, to gather them and stow them away where they could not interfere with the actions of her body. Thus, despite the troubled state of her mind, her fingers were steady as she unwrapped the gift, her smile eager with anticipation.

"Oh, Lach, how lovely," she said, her throat tightening.

She traced the glass bauble's form with a careful fingertip. At every port he visited he purchased something made out of glass for her, though she wasn't certain why he had chosen such a theme for his gifts. No matter how many times she asked him, he demurred with a secretive smile. Depending on the port, these objects were sometimes as mundane as a crude wine glass, but his latest gift was

anything but mundane.

"Shaper-made," he said, though the intricacy of the object made his words unnecessary. He had brought her back some very fine glass made by non-Adept hands, but the unsurpassed skill of a Shaper gifted with powerful abilities was immediately recognizable in every minute detail.

"It's extraordinary," she said, turning it in tiny increments so that she could better study it. It felt almost as insubstantial as air in her fingers, yet she suspected that if she dropped it on the gleaming parquet floor it wouldn't shatter.

Shaper-formed glass was highly sought after, the palace in Vyramas the only household known to serve its meals entirely on Shaper-formed crystal and ceramics. It was prohibitively expensive, even for the wealthiest families in Astoran. The one vase Cianne's family owned had been passed down for generations, treated with reverence by her mother and given a place of prominence in their manor by her father, the better for guests to notice it.

"Do you truly like it?" Lach asked, sounding uncharacteristically anxious.

"It's the most exquisite gift you've ever given me," she said, giving him a truthful answer even though it made her stomach clench. Soon. He would ask her soon.

How funny, then, that he had chosen this particular figurine. The bird was so finely wrought that every detail of its feathers and tiny beak was uncannily lifelike. She could have sworn that its minuscule, glittering eyes were staring at her, seeing through her. Fashioned of azure glass, it looked as if it might come to life at any moment and try to twitter around the room like an affluent woman's pet.

It wouldn't get far, though. Enclosing it was a delicate, filigree cage, also made of glass, but gilded to look like metal. Trapped, the poor bird was. Just like Cianne.

Chapter 2

Kila took in the sights, sounds, and smells of Cearova. Nine years had passed since he had last set foot in the city, and things had changed, though only on the surface, he wagered. Several new buildings had been erected, and the House enclaves boasted new decorative sculptures, lush gardens, and updated façades.

Typical, he thought. *Even as the rest of the realm founders, the Houses must flourish.*

He could pinpoint exactly when he had become so cynical: the day he had left the city, at the age of nineteen. It had come as a surprise to him when he had been sent to Cearova in the first place. After all, he wasn't a native of Astoran, and that fact alone was enough to garner him plenty of suspicious glances. He had been young and eager to prove himself, an innocent incapable of seeing the truth of the matter, at least until he had been forced to leave. At that point he had come to understand that they had chosen him because they had thought he would be easy to control. When he had proven that he wasn't, he had been banished to a backwater corner of Astoran.

The past nine years in tiny forest towns hadn't been a total waste as he'd continued to hone his skills, but they certainly hadn't done much to advance his career, given that he'd been operating in obscurity. Crime had been low, so his Enforcer abilities hadn't been much in demand, but he couldn't turn his abilities off at will. He doubted there was a villager in that part of Astoran whose secrets he didn't know. He was no Intentionist; he was still mostly as clueless as the next person when it came to deciphering the motivations behind others' actions, but he had become very good at putting together the tiniest of clues until he managed to form a larger picture. Had he been less scrupulous he could undoubtedly have put all of this information to good, lucrative use, but that was contrary to his nature. Instead, he had settled for becoming far more intimately acquainted with his various neighbors than he would have liked.

If nothing else, his free time had been abundant, for which he thought perhaps he should be grateful. It had provided him with an unprecedented opportunity to continue his study of the deshya, his people's martial form. He

had no hope of holding his own against a gifted Battle Master, of course, but he had a fair chance of giving a middling one a run for his or her gold.

And now he was back again. Frankly, he still couldn't quite understand why he had agreed to take the post. Yes, it would offer him more career options than he'd had up to this point, but with the exception of one aspect of the city, he hadn't thought of Cearova without bitterness for even one day.

Pure curiosity, no doubt. Liable to get myself killed because of it.

Chief Enforcer Luwin Meara had died a year ago, and Symone Flim had been chosen to take over the position. The news had surprised Kila when he had heard of it, months after the fact. Flim had been his partner in Cearova, and while her work as an Enforcer was solid and aboveboard, she was a careful and circumspect woman, unlike Meara, who had been an outright House bootlicker. Kila wouldn't have thought it possible for someone not in the pocket of the mighty trade Houses to manage to rise to the position of Chief Enforcer.

Yet times had changed, there was no denying it. Ever since the royal family had been assassinated almost twenty years ago, the realm had been in a near-constant state of upheaval. The regents were ostensibly holding the realm together, and between Astoran's martial might and the trade Houses' economic power, the other realms gave all appearance of keeping their distance, but the fractures had done nothing but widen. Things would come to a head soon if a new ruler wasn't chosen, but no one could seem to agree on whom that ruler should be. The obliteration of the royal line had been almost absolute, and now the realm was down to examining the claims of fifth cousins twenty times removed. None of them in particular struck anyone's fancy.

Fortunately for Kila, he was considerably less naive than he had been during his first tenure in the city. It had been a pit viper's nest then, and he had no doubt that it had become even more of one during his absence.

Spurring his horse, he continued on from the city gates to Enforcement headquarters at the city's center. The building looked as if it too had been renovated in the recent past, and Kila wondered how much compromising with the trade Houses Meara had done to get the building in such shape. The man had never shown the slightest distress at the grievous wounds turning such a blind eye had inflicted on his character. Kila had been convinced that of all the men in Cearova, Meara was likely the one who had slept the soundest.

Kila left his horse at Enforcement's stables and headed into the building, smoothing his travel-rumpled uniform as he went. His was old and undoubtedly out of fashion. The uniform he'd worn as a Cearovan Enforcer no longer fit him, though, and even if it had it would still have been hopelessly outdated. Such matters weren't of a very pressing nature in the places where he had been

serving, but they would be here. He didn't like walking into the building looking like a bumpkin as it would leave a decidedly uninspiring first impression on the others, but there was nothing he could do about it.

The chief was conferring with senior staff, he was told, and he was invited to take a seat and wait for her. The young clerk made no secret of his examination of Kila, which lasted no more than a moment before Kila was summarily dismissed. Apparently the clerk had deduced him to be no one of any great importance, and an unexpected grin broke out over Kila's face, which he did his best to conceal.

Ah, Cearova. The entire realm may change, but you will go down with your ship like a true Staerleigh.

He didn't know how long he sat there while he waited for the chief. Time had lost most of its meaning for him, and he had learned to spend it in a myriad of ways. The bustling Enforcement offices offered him abundant distraction, and he made the most of taking mental notes about the comings and goings in the office. He might be the newest officer, but he had no intention of being the most clueless.

"Kila an Movis," the chief said, a broad smile on her face as she strode toward him. She extended her hand, and they clasped wrists in a hearty shake.

"More likely than ever to break my wrist with that greeting," Kila said, a smile spreading over his own face. He was surprised she had come to greet him herself rather than send one of her underlings, and he had to remind himself that the way things had run when Meara had been chief would probably not be the way they would run with Flim as chief.

"Never thought I'd see your hide back here."

"Never thought my hide would ever be back here."

Gaze darting around the room, Flim jerked her head to the side. "Walk with me."

Back when they'd been partners, he and Flim had developed a secret language of sorts. She hadn't always allowed him access to what was on her mind, but she had used a variety of subtle gestures and facial tells to clue him in when she wanted to share with him. He found it happening as they walked through the corridors and she pretended to give him a tour of the building. He studied the other officers as they passed, sorting them into those he'd known his first time in Cearova and those that were unfamiliar. Later he would comb his memory and retrieve as many details as possible, but at the moment he was finding the building too full of bustle and confusion. He hadn't realized how small and quiet things had been in the forest villages, but the point was driven home quite forcefully for him now.

They reached Flim's office, and she closed the heavy door, palm pressed to the wood, her back to him for a moment. Squaring her shoulders, she turned to face him, her expression cautious.

"Why am I here?" he asked, deciding to get straight to the heart of the matter.

Flashing a wry smile, she moved behind her ponderous desk—the same one Meara had used, Kila noted—and gestured that he should take a seat.

"Your leaving wasn't my choice, you know," she said, studying him with care.

"I deduced as much," he said in a mild tone.

Sighing, she ran a hand over her tightly coiled ebony hair. Six years his senior, she was still a young woman, but the strain of the years had left visible marks upon her. Furrows marred her brow, and fine lines radiated out from her eyes and mouth.

"I'm taking a risk here," she said. Picking up a quill, she twirled it between her fingers. She was jittery with nerves, and Kila was taken aback. Flim had been good at concealing her feelings in the past. It was what had kept her in a place of prominence in Enforcement, and probably what had enabled her to become chief. Most everything was a game in Cearova, and she excelled at playing. "And yet I'll be blunt: I need allies. I need people in my corner that I know I can trust."

Leaning forward, Kila met her eyes. "The Houses?"

Dropping the quill, she twisted her mouth in disgust. "Hasn't it always boiled down to them in the end?"

She'd never shown any particular loyalty to them in the past, but she had been good at appeasing them. He hadn't thought her a sycophant like the former chief, but he was surprised to realize he had thought her a sympathizer, at the very least.

Something about his expression must have given him away, because she graced him with a cynical smile. "Surprised you, did I, old partner?"

"Yes, you did," he said, seeing no reason to dissemble.

Flim exhaled in a huff and leaned back against her chair. "The problem with you was you never knew when to keep your mouth shut."

He opened it to protest, realized what he was doing, and snapped it shut again, making her smile and shake her head.

"See what I mean?" she asked. "That mouth got you into trouble the last time around, and it will again if you're not careful. Difference is, this time I'll also take the heat for it."

"So why did you risk bringing me back?" he asked, perplexed.

"As I said, I need people in my corner, and I'm sure it comes as no surprise to you that I'm hard-pressed to find them here."

With a rather rueful shake of her head, she paused. Lifting her lips in a grim smile, she said, "Damn, but this all makes me sound mercenary. By Vyram's flame, I swear I never once forgot you all those years, Kila. I would have saved you if I could have."

"You don't owe me an explanation," he said, unable to stop himself from biting off the words. He hadn't blamed her, not really, but it had stung that she hadn't stood up for him. True, they hadn't been partners for long, but they had been partners.

"I think I do," she said. "I'm not proud of it, Kila, the way I let the bodies pile up. But the fact of the matter is that I knew Cearova needed someone looking out for the city as a whole, rather than just looking out for the Houses. I've lived here all my life. Cearova is my home."

"I remember."

"Then hopefully you understand why I had to do what I did. I had to keep playing the game to ensure the safety of the city's unconnected citizens. Trust me, it was bitter medicine to swallow. And if you think I've had it easy these past nine years, you're mistaken. I'm exhausted." Her face collapsed as she spoke, and she looked every bit as exhausted as she claimed she was.

"I do understand."

He did, as much as he could. He had never had much of a home, moving from place to place with his parents as a child, and then with the upheaval that had resulted as a consequence of his two years in Cearova. Even so, he did understand what Flim was fighting for. He too had devoted his life to upholding justice and pursuing the truth, despite the little good it had done him.

"I still don't know how I can help you," he said. "I have no connections that will be of any use to you, and House members have long memories for words spoken against them, so I don't see how I can be anything other than an additional problem for you to handle."

"They will remember you," she acknowledged, her face pinched. "But with luck they will also think you chastened by your spell in the forest and eager to look out for yourself, lest you end up there again.

"Still, I owe it to you to inform you that I'm asking you to take a risk. For now I'm maintaining the appearance that everything is normal in Cearova, but the Houses have become too powerful for me to sit on my hands any longer. I have to take a stand. The Houses need to know that Enforcement is no longer entirely in their pocket.

"Please, Kila, help me defend the defenseless. I don't think you can

abandon them any more than I can."

A face rose in his mind, the memory of a young urchin, a girl who'd skulked through the streets on her own late at night. She'd had no one to look out for her, that much had been obvious when she'd stumbled into his scrap of a garden. He'd taken her under his wing as much as he'd been able, showing her the basic moves of the deshya, hoping his feeble attempt would be of at least some assistance to her.

How many others were there like her in Cearova, children without anyone to look after them, children forced to grow up far too fast? The Houses were more than capable of looking after their own, and they didn't care if protecting their own interests could only be done at the expense of everyone else.

Locking his eyes with Flim's, they stared at one another for a long time. Her gaze didn't waver, and he watched the lines on her face slowly ease.

"Reporting for duty, Chief Flim," he said, saluting her.

The lines disappeared completely as her face relaxed in relief.

Chapter 3

"I'm told Lachlon paid you a visit already," Daerwyn said when Cianne joined him for dinner. She wasn't surprised that he knew. He had many sources for information, which was why she had made it a point to uncover every one of them. Her father had to believe that he knew everything there was to know about her, and she took great pains to maintain the ruse.

"Yes, he did," she said with unflappable composure as she lowered herself into her seat and spread her napkin over her lap. "It was a shock to see him so soon, but he seemed in good cheer, so I take it his trip was profitable."

"Very," her father said in a tone of deep satisfaction. "It's a shame you did not invite him to stay to dinner. I should have liked to see him."

I'll bet you would have. Must make certain we're securing our interests, mustn't we?

"He promised his parents he would dine with them."

"Pity he didn't invite you along, then."

Cianne wore her mask well. Her smile didn't indicate to her father that anything was amiss. His hints had become so heavy-handed of late that, like this hint, they could hardly be called by that name.

"I'll see him tomorrow, at any rate," she said, slipping a morsel of roasted pheasant into her mouth, more so that she would have an excuse not to speak to him than because of any real sense of hunger.

As they often did, her eyes strayed to her mother's empty chair. Though she had died shortly after Cianne's twelfth birthday, Cianne had still never gotten used to the idea of her mother's being truly gone. Before Annalith's death, Cianne had been able to count three amongst those she knew loved her and would protect her: her mother, Lach, and Lach's kindly father, Toran.

That Moiria, Lach's mother, didn't much care for her went without saying, but Moiria wasn't a woman to look a gift horse in the mouth either. Cianne might not be up to Moiria's standards for her son, but a union between Cianne and Lach would bring undeniable connections to the family, what with Daerwyn's being on track to become an Elder. Such a union might dilute the bloodlines, but Moiria placed so much stock in her son's Adept abilities that she was confident the

strength of Lach's blood would offset the weakness of Cianne's. From time to time, even two non-Adepts could produce an Adept child, so surely even Cianne's polluted blood couldn't diminish the strength of Lach's line. Besides, Daerwyn was such a useful man, and such a dear friend of Moiria's.

Cianne knew all this because she'd read all of Moiria's diaries and correspondence. Twice. She wondered if Lach had the first idea about the true substance of his mother's character.

"Yes, the dinner party at Elder Borean's manor," Daerwyn said with obvious relish. He'd worked hard to ingratiate himself with Borean, and his efforts had paid off richly.

"I was thinking of wearing my yellow gown. Elder Borean complimented me on it the last time I wore it."

"A good choice," her father said with an approving nod. He and Cianne butted heads with regular frequency, but she was careful not to do anything that threatened his grasp on power. Daughter or no, Daerwyn wouldn't stand for Cianne's disrupting his grand plans.

"I'm glad you think so, Father," she said, hoping her deference and sly change of topic would be enough to make him forget about Lach. They weren't.

"You're twenty-two, Cianne," he said, as if imparting some knowledge on her that she herself was lacking. He surveyed her over the rim of his goblet. "You will need to announce your intent soon."

"Father, you know of my fears," she said in a quiet voice. She lowered her eyes and blinked several times, wanting him to think her on the verge of tears.

Lately, she'd had the sense that her marriage to Lach played into some plan her father was hatching, but she hadn't been able to uncover the nature of the plan, and that disturbed her. Daerwyn was a circumspect man who kept nothing untoward in their home. Cianne had searched time and again to no avail. This struck her as odd. Experience had taught her that no one was as clean as her father. Everyone had their secrets. Wasn't she living proof?

Could her father be moving to seize power from the Elders? No matter how much she tried to push the thought aside, it continued to assert itself in her mind. She tried to tell herself that it was ridiculous, that Daerwyn had spent his life doing everything the House asked of him for the express purpose of protecting the House, but she couldn't force the suspicions from her mind. Something strange was going on.

"While it's noble of you to worry about the dilution of his line," her father said, his annoyance ill-concealed, "I counsel you not to give your fears too much sway. Think, Cianne, of the advantages to yourself. If you were to marry Lach, you could embark on his voyages with him."

Yes, that temptation again. Her father was fond of dangling it in front of her, and the problem was that it worked. He knew full well that she would like nothing better than the chance to get out and see the world, but she had no means of doing so on her own. Only Adepts were permitted to crew House Staerleigh's vessels, and only House Staerleigh's vessels were large enough to ply the open seas. The House controlled all major sea trade routes in Astoran, while the Caravanists controlled all major overland routes.

Plenty of Astorans resented this arrangement, but they hadn't much of a leg to stand on. No one was outright forbidden from conducting their own trade, but the Houses' Adept abilities made their routes far more profitable and far safer. A few smaller companies in other cities stubbornly persisted, and some had achieved modest success, but they couldn't hope to match the prowess of their House counterparts. One of them might delight in hiring a defector from House Staerleigh, but Cianne would have to renounce her House and everyone in it. She wouldn't be the first House member to do so and undoubtedly wouldn't be the last, but she wasn't yet prepared to take such a drastic step, not without a backup plan in place.

Thinking about it caused a wrenching pain in her chest. Cianne knew a great deal more about life outside the House enclave's walls than anyone else could imagine—even Lach—but she had no illusions about such a life being easy for her. Having grown up surrounded by privilege, she had few practical skills. The best she could hope for would be to one day hire herself out to a mercenary company, and despite that she chafed behind the walls of the enclave, she had no real wish to become a mercenary either.

"I know, Father, and I know I must make my intentions clear, and soon. I promise to think on it."

"So you've promised me many times before," he said, his voice taking on a sharp edge. "I'm beginning to doubt the sincerity of your promises, Cianne. It's time for assurances."

"What kind of assurances?" she asked, fighting to maintain her deferential tone.

"You have six weeks to make a final decision. Should you decide not to marry Lachlon, I will find a suitable position for you."

The finality in his voice brooked no argument, but she wasn't about to start one. She knew better than to press her father and risk his keeping a closer eye on her. At any rate, she couldn't vacillate forever, and she was aware that was what she had been doing. The time had come for her to declare her intentions once and for all.

"Very well, Father," she said, wiping her eyes and straightening her spine.

They exchanged little conversation after that point. Cianne's mind was whirling as she sorted through her options and tried to determine what course of action to take. She waited until a just barely civilized time to excuse herself and then fled to her quarters. Claiming exhaustion, she hid her impatience while Vivie laid out her night things, then she wished the maid good night.

Alone and safe in her room at last, Cianne barred the door and leaned against it, rubbing her forehead. Tumultuous emotions swirled through her, but she wouldn't allow herself to be pulled into their current. Taking deep, slow breaths, she stilled her thoughts.

Lach's latest gift sat on her chest of drawers, and she picked it up, turning it delicately in her hands and examining it. She hadn't noticed before, but the bird's cage had a tiny latch, and with a fingernail she nudged it, surprised when it slid to the side and the door fell open. The bird inside was poised on its perch as though it were about to take flight, soaring up and away from its bonds forevermore, and she stared at it for a long moment.

Cutting off a length of fishing line, Cianne wove it around the bars of the bird's cage, tying a perfect knot with deft fingers. Every child in House Staerleigh grew up knowing how to tie knots; they could all make them in their sleep. Satisfied that the knot was secure, she looped the line around several of her fingers, the ornament dangling, and climbed on top of her bed frame, balancing on one foot on the narrow edge of her carved headboard. Tilting her head back, she gazed up at her ceiling.

Her rooms were in the round tower at the southeast corner of the manor. Her sitting room was on the third floor, the uppermost floor of the manor, but her bedroom was at the top of the tower. The other three towers were used for various purposes, but none of them were bedrooms. They hadn't been built with that intent, but she had begged and begged to move her room there after her mother's death, until her father had finally relented. He had dismissed the eccentric request as the unfathomable whim of a grieving child and been done with it. The move seemed to ease Cianne's pain, saving him from the necessity of attempting to deal with her grief.

He hadn't been unaffected by his wife's death. More than once Cianne had heard him giving vent to his own grief while eavesdropping on him, but her father had never had much skill in dealing with other people's emotions. He had enough trouble dealing with his own.

The truth of the matter was that she had longed for the solitude of the space, but she had also chosen the tower room because of its ceiling. Beams and struts held up the pointed roof, like the spokes spiraling out from a nautilus's shell. The effect was lovely, if somewhat dizzying, but that hadn't been its main

attraction for Cianne, who had recently begun a covert second life about which her father still knew nothing. Those struts and beams offered her a place to practice, away from prying eyes. When Lach had begun bringing the glass trinkets back for her, she had quickly determined that they made perfect additions to her practice regime, adding new challenges to familiar routines.

Another thing all House Staerleigh children grew up with was a familiarity of ships. Boldly clambering up the masts and riggings, racing one another to the crow's nest, was a favorite game of House Staerleigh children, a pastime their parents encouraged. After all, while some of the children would spend most of their lives on land, serving House Staerleigh in other ways, the majority of them would be at sea. Thus, it had struck no one as odd that Cianne had taken to climbing up into the rafters and dangling her many glass objects from them.

What they didn't know was that she darted, danced, and swung around those rafters, sometimes with a weapon and sometimes without, depending on which skills she was focused on practicing. The glass baubles presented her with a plethora of obstacles to dodge past and duck under, and the more she added the more challenging her practices became. Her skills had grown to such an extent that she rarely broke any of them anymore, even though the space she could navigate kept decreasing. Luckily for her, she was small, slight, and light on her feet, and her upbringing guaranteed her a certain amount of dexterity. But it was her dogged determination and her focused discipline that had led her to develop skills far beyond what any of the House Staerleigh trainers could have taught her. No one had any inkling of what she was capable of doing, and she intended to keep it that way.

Skimming swiftly over a beam that was only a bit wider than her foot, Cianne found the perfect spot for her bird. She wound the line around the beam and took extra care with the knot, mindful of the value of the gift.

She spent the next hour practicing her forms, flowing from one to the next. That finished, she drew her rapier and went through the forms again, the weight of the weapon forcing her to adjust her lines and balance. The blade flashed in the candlelight as she slashed right then left, darting her weapon in between the dangling lines and baubles, tumbling and ducking and rolling without brushing against a single one of them.

When she finally shimmied down from the rafters, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her arm, the birdcage door still hung open.

Chapter 4

A mere four days passed before Kila was called to action. His new uniforms had arrived just that morning, and the cut of the high collar was different, chafing him. He might have looked the part of a Cearovan Enforcer, but he certainly didn't feel it. He forced himself not to pry his strangling collar away from his throat as he hurried to answer the Chief's summons.

"Have a seat," she said in a brisk voice, and he hastened to obey. She closed the door behind him before perching herself on her chair. Her rigid posture and tense face told him that something serious was happening.

"How are you settling in?" she asked.

"Well enough," he said, nonplussed by the direction of the conversation.

"Have you surveyed the lay of the land?"

"I have," he said, the purpose of the conversation beginning to dawn on him.

Flim hadn't assigned him a partner yet, instead instructing him to study their current open cases. He had also taken the opportunity to study his fellow Enforcement officers. Some showed such obvious signs of favoring the Houses that he was able to quickly pinpoint them. Others were cagey enough that he knew he'd best be wary around them. Each House had a formal Enforcement liaison, and it was a given that these men and women would be in the Houses' pockets, or as good as. Even if they hadn't begun their posts with the intent of acquiescing to the House's every whim, it was a fair bet that the Houses had found a variety of ways to purchase their loyalty. For all he knew, it was entirely possible that some of them were of unimpeachable character, but for the time being he felt it more prudent to outright eliminate them as possible allies.

The pensive look on his face made her nod. "Yes, I had a feeling that spending some time observing would prove very educational for you."

"I've come to some conclusions," he said carefully. "But it might be more efficient if you were to give me some guidance."

Shaking her head with a sigh, she pinched the space between her brows, deepening the furrow there. "Trust me when I say it's best at this point if you don't know."

"Because you don't trust me? Don't take that as a criticism. You'd be wise not to trust me."

Giving him a crooked smile, she said, "That may be a factor, but it's not the entire reason. The less you know the less anyone can extract from you, either by covert or overt means."

It made sense, but he didn't like the idea of not having at least one ally in whom he could place his trust. He and the chief shared the same sense of urgency when it came to maintaining a deliberate distance between Enforcement and the Houses, but he couldn't be seen in the chief's office with any regularity. A close relationship between the two of them would raise eyebrows, and neither of them could afford that.

"Very well," he said, settling back in his chair with a frown.

"I'm asking you to take a lot on faith," she acknowledged. "This is a delicate dance we're doing. I'll help you as much as I'm able, but I'm afraid I'll have to throw you into the middle of things with very little information. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the city over the next couple of days. I'll tell you some spots where you and I can meet if necessary, and also secure locations where you can leave messages for me."

"Answer this for me at least: is someone fomenting rebellion against the Houses?"

She looked disturbed but not shocked. "Not as such," she said, choosy with her words. "In fact, I'm rather hoping it won't come to that."

Scrutinizing her, he decided he'd pushed her far enough for the time being. He had spent years away from the city and still had a great deal to learn about the changes time had wrought. Asking someone to try to explain to him the complex organism that was Cearova wouldn't get him very far. He would simply have to immerse himself in the city and learn as much as he could on his own.

"Will you assign me a partner soon?" he asked instead.

"That's why I called you in here. I've given it a great deal of thought and decided you would work best with Ailena Burl."

"Burl?" he asked, brows rising. "House Staerleigh's liaison?"

"Yes," Flim said, her eyes meeting his. "Burl's partner recently left us, and though she's been working with Hyden in the interim, I learned this morning that he's about to be relocated."

Kila said nothing in response to this, though he had a sneaking suspicion the chief might have had something to do with Hyden's reassignment.

Pairing Kila with Burl made sense. Of all the Houses, he had dealt the least with Staerleigh during his prior term in the city, which made it the best one for him to keep his eye on. His lack of connections would ensure the House

members had fewer preconceived notions about him. His ignorance as to how cooperation between the House and Enforcement worked would lead to his questioning everything, and his not knowing what to expect should make it easier for him to spot any untoward conduct between Burl and the members.

"Have you spoken with Burl about this?" Kila asked.

"I have," the chief said, nodding, "and she's none too pleased, but then Burl is abrasive on her best days."

"Charming," he said in a dry tone. "I so appreciate you ensuring I sail in smooth waters as I adjust to this new posting."

The chief grinned. "Come now. I seem to remember you rather enjoy a bit of excitement."

"So much so that it landed me in the deepest, darkest forests of Astoran."

She sobered. "You might not thank me for rescuing you from that obscurity."

"Well, you know me. I'm a man of action. I've never been much of one for sitting back and watching while the world burns."

"Let's hope you're not the rare person who feels that way," the chief said, her brow furrowing again. "At any rate, you should go talk to Burl. I believe there's an assembly at the Staerleigh enclave tonight that she's expected to attend."

"Which means I'm invited as well. How delightful."

"I'm doing my part to keep things from being too dull for you."

The chief rose from her seat and Kila followed suit. She escorted him to the door but hesitated before opening it.

"Be careful," she said at last. "I'm afraid I may be sending you straight into the fire by putting you in such close contact with the Houses."

"I will," he promised.

With a curt nod, she jerked open the door and he headed out into the chaos of the officers' hall. While pleasing to the eye, the soaring vaulted ceiling and tall, grand mullioned windows ensured that the open space was quiet only later at night, when the skeleton crew remained behind to man the station. During the day the space buzzed with officers chattering about cases, citizens stopping in to lodge formal complaints, and the occasional ruckus caused by criminals.

Heavy iron chandeliers hung from the ceiling, the guttering candles providing plenty of light. The officers' area had been much smaller when he'd last been in the city, the desks hidden behind partitions, which had made the already dank space seem even darker and more forbidding, giving it all the charm of a dungeon. It had also been heated by a massive fireplace that had belched smoke out at the officers, guaranteeing that every last one of them

developed deep, throaty coughs during the winter. The fireplace was gone, but the space was still warm, despite the early spring chill. When Kila had asked, one of the veterans had told him that the building had been gutted five years earlier, and the interior completely redesigned by some of the most gifted Adepts in the city's Building Masters' Guild. Their masons had developed an ingenuous form of construction that entailed spaces left between walls so that warm air from basement furnaces would rise up, heating the rooms above without the smoke troubling the inhabitants.

"But the cost must have been exorbitant!" Kila had blurted in surprise.

"The trade Houses funded the renovations as a public works project. They've been doing a lot to develop the city over the past five years," the veteran had responded in a stout tone, a hint of reprimand lurking in his words.

Kila had kept his opinion about that to himself.

Now, though, he had to admit that the renovated station, while rather noisy, was a great deal more pleasant than it had been before. The lack of partitions also made it a much easier matter to determine which officers were in the station and which weren't, and this provided him with plenty of opportunities for observation. He'd spent some time watching which officers each House liaison spent time with, so he had some inkling of who Burl's cronies might be. One of them, the soon-to-depart Hyden, was leaning against Burl's desk as Kila approached, and his heavy-lidded eyes flicked over Kila appraisingly.

"Burl, it would appear you have a visitor," Hyden drawled. The sour expression on his face made Kila doubt he was thrilled about his imminent departure.

"What do you want?" Burl asked in a brusque tone, sifting through a sheaf of parchment.

"To introduce myself," Kila said in as deferential a tone as he could muster. "I'm Kila an Movis."

Abandoning the parchment, Burl crossed her arms over her chest and scanned him from head to foot, her lip curled. "My new partner," she said, biting off the words.

"Yes," Kila said, deciding brevity would suffice. He didn't know enough about Burl yet to determine how best to deal with her, but he felt—perhaps perversely—that her hostility was preferable to friendliness. The guise of friendliness could conceal many things, while open hostility was meant to be repellent rather than invite confidences. He wondered if Burl had any idea how much of a tell this was. He wondered if she cared.

"Fresh from the country," Hyden added with a smirk.

"I am," Kila said, the comment rolling off him. What was the point of

being offended by the intended slight? "Though I did spend some time in Cearova earlier in my career."

"Earlier in your career," Hyden echoed, his tone heavy with disdain.

"Green as the wood you just came from," Burl said.

"Eager to learn," Kila said.

Burl and Hyden exchanged a glance. They were welcome to think he was a bumbling dullard. It would simplify his task if Burl didn't know enough to see him as a potential threat.

"I'm between cases at the moment," Burl said, her mouth tightening. Kila had a sneaking suspicion she was entertaining the thought of marching to the chief's office to instigate an argument, but she restrained herself.

"Chief Flim says we're to attend an assembly at House Staerleigh tonight," he replied, deciding to let her know exactly where she stood. He wasn't about to allow her to attempt to shut him out.

"Yes," she said, her lips compressing even more. "At seven o'clock."

"I'll be there promptly. Do you have need of my assistance? If not, I shall look through the archives and learn all I can about House Staerleigh."

"You do that," she said, staring at him as if he were an insect she would like to flick away.

Hyden snorted and made a very flimsy attempt to cover it up with a cough. Kila offered them a bland smile. It would take a lot more than these two to make him lose his composure.

Casting a significant gaze at the desk next to Burl's, which was covered with what he assumed was Hyden's detritus, Kila said, "I'll also see about moving my desk today, shall I?"

"Oh, please do."

"Lovely. I'm at your disposal if you should have need of me," Kila said. He turned to Hyden. "Delightful to meet you."

"Likewise," Hyden said, the word trickling from his mouth with all the haste of tree sap in the dead of winter.

Kila knew they were talking about him as he walked away. Let them. Hyden would soon be irrelevant, and Kila was determined to be as bland and polite with Burl as possible in the hopes that she'd begin to see him in much the same way she saw her own nose: ever present, but not something about which she bothered to spare much time for thought.

Chapter 5

I will find a suitable position for you.

Cianne rubbed her aching head, permitting her lids to close for a brief moment. Grains of sand seemed to scrape over her eyes, and she winced as she passed her hand over them before forcing them open again. She had hardly slept since her father's ultimatum a few nights earlier. No amount of training could quiet the worries in her mind, no matter how hard she pushed herself.

Lach seemed oblivious to her plight, which both pleased and saddened her. While the confirmation that she was successful at managing to conceal her distress and exhaustion was reassuring, knowing that Lach didn't notice drove home for her how ill-conceived a union between them would be.

Daerwyn didn't appear to be so easily deceived, however. Whenever she chanced to pass her father, his penetrating gaze honed in on her with merciless insistence.

Yet as much as she chafed against the restrictions he'd placed on her, she had to acknowledge that he wasn't being entirely unreasonable. If she didn't make a decision about her life soon, her behavior would cease to be considered an oddity amongst the Council of Elders and would begin to become a concern. Every member of the House was meant to function like a well-oiled cog, and Cianne had long been the catch in the gears. As a child she had routinely skipped her lessons, even though it drove her father to distraction and even caused her mother to frown at her in disapproval, but thanks to the esteem of her father's position, she hadn't suffered the way other young members of the House might have. It was characteristic that, even as she chafed against the bonds placed on her by her father's prominent position, she also saw fit to use it to her advantage when it suited her.

Her unwillingness to study had not been due to her having lacked the drive to learn, it had been due to her utter lack of interest in what they had wanted to teach her. House Staerleigh education focused primarily on the areas of interest to the House: their storied history; economics and how to negotiate with the Coin Masters; religious instruction on all five gods, but with a particular focus on Cearus; vessel design and construction; and aquatic sciences. All of these

topics were of critical importance to the House, and Cianne had often chided herself that if she'd had more foresight when she was younger, she might have understood that her studies could have offered her an alternate avenue. House Staerleigh didn't build their own ships, of course; that task was entrusted to the Building Masters, Ore Masters, and other Adepts who could shape materials to their will. However, the shipbuilders worked under the oversight of a House representative, and Adept skills weren't required for the position, though a good working knowledge of how to manipulate the sea helped. Still, considering her father's position, it would have been a simple matter for her to secure a position with the shipbuilders.

The truth of the matter, though, the truth that she wouldn't let herself think about let alone accept, was that she didn't want to have much of anything to do with the House. Some of that was born of pure spite. She had never fit in, and she doubted most members of the House would lift a finger to help her. Why should she help them? She had no illusions about what would become of her if something were to happen to her father. She would hold the rights to his property, but she'd be a House member in name only. The others would exclude her, and she would end up living a life of hostile seclusion in the enclave.

Were she the romantically mercenary sort, she still couldn't hope to escape House Staerleigh through an outside marriage. Marriages between members of different trade Houses were rare, and unions between Adepts were prohibited, no matter how weak their skills. The other Adept clans weren't as picky, but the trade Houses jealously hoarded their Adept members, refusing to allow the possibility that another House might benefit from their Adepts' skills.

There were the occasional unions between non-Adepts—provided the marriage suited both Houses' interests, of course. Even these were exceedingly uncommon, and someone of Cianne's standing within the House would never be permitted to marry into another. No one would even think about suggesting it as to do so would be considered a grave and unforgivable insult against her father.

The one option left to her would be to strike out on her own, and that wasn't without risk either. House Staerleigh guarded its secrets closely, and they wouldn't wish her well and send her on her way. She would have to disappear in the dead of night, taking whatever she could with her before striking out. Staying in Cearova would be impossible. Were she to find someone sympathetic to her plight, they still wouldn't risk hiring her or taking her under their wing for fear of incurring her House's wrath. There were criminal elements that would be glad to have her, due both to her secret skills and the prospect of exploiting her House knowledge, but Cianne was no criminal. She'd borne plenty of witness to the evil deeds people committed against one another, whether they were committed with

physical or psychological violence, and she wanted no part of it. No, she would have to leave the city and try to disappear elsewhere in Astoran. She had no other choice.

Letting out a breath that was half sob, she splashed some more water on her face, hoping it might do something to soothe her burning eyes. She dabbed her face dry with the lavender-scented towel Vivie had left for her, crushing it between her hands when it occurred to her that she'd never given much consideration to what it was like to be Vivie. The maid bore an air of perpetual cheerfulness, but what other choice did she have? She was also a non-Adept, but unlike Cianne she had no powerful parent to shield her. Instead, she'd been destined for her role since the day she was born.

The fact of the matter was that there was no escape for any of them, not even Lach, though he was both blind to and content with his own confinement.

Feeling ill, Cianne took care to place the towel neatly next to her washbasin. She had to pull herself together. Lach would arrive at any minute as they were to spend the day together. Solitude had often weighed heavily on her, but between the prospect of spending the entire day with Lach, concealing her distress from him, and having to put on a good show for the assembly that night, she longed to be alone.

Taking in a slow, deep breath, she closed her eyes and centered herself. Picturing the simple line drawings she'd pored over the previous night helped, and her breathing calmed. Once she was in her day dress, hair coaxed into a simple twist, she felt calmer.

"You look lovely," Lach said when he arrived, drinking her in with obvious appreciation.

"Thank you," she said, forcing herself to smile at his words. She didn't doubt their sincerity, but it was past time she acknowledged that she couldn't ignore their significance. "What did you have in mind for today?"

"Ah, now, that is an interesting question, one that offers some distinctly fascinating possibilities." Giving her his best mysterious grin, Lach offered her his arm, and she took it.

Despite the disquiet state of her mind, she couldn't resist his enthusiasm. He was like a child whenever he was particularly pleased with himself. "Something tells me you have a plan in mind."

"I have uncovered a most interesting bit of information."

"Care to share it with me?"

"That would spoil the surprise, wouldn't it?"

"A surprise!" she said, delighted. He excelled at devising wondrous surprises for her, and her spirits rose.

They achieved new heights when she saw the carriage waiting for them. Getting outside of the enclave's walls held great appeal. Lach helped her into the carriage and climbed in after her, settling into the seat across from her. His eyes sparkled, and he brushed hair back from his forehead with a hand clad in a kid glove. He wore a fine frock coat of gray-blue wool with thick silver embroidery along the edges and buttonholes, and black breeches that hugged his well-muscled thighs. His knee-high black leather boots were polished to a glossy shine. His apparel spoke of an outfit assembled with a critical eye, and she knew he had taken such care because he was spending the day with her.

Pain pierced her. She wished she could find the words to end his affection for her without destroying their friendship. She wished she knew what to say that would make him see her the way she saw him, instead of gazing at her with that softness in his eyes.

His face warm with contentment, he smiled at her. "While in Vyramas, I struck up a conversation with a fellow in a tavern. Turns out he was a Performer who was supposed to travel to Cearova to meet up with the rest of his troupe."

"A Performer?" she asked, her curiosity piqued, making her forget about her sorrow for a moment. She adored watching Performers, and though there were some in residence in Cearova, and troupes passed through the city on a regular basis, she hadn't had much opportunity to see them. Daerwyn considered such amusements mere fripperies. What use were such Adept abilities, he had wondered. Surely the gods were better served by those who could work the land, ply the seas, and build impressive structures to their glory than those who had a talent for prancing about singing and pretending to be someone other than themselves.

"A Performer," Lach confirmed, his smile widening. Her response pleased him, as it had all their lives. Her attention had long been his currency, but she wasn't quite certain when his feelings had shifted from childish pleasure at having astounded a companion to romantic pleasure at feeling he understood her better than anyone else.

"What happened?"

"He had arranged to travel with a caravan, but a lamed beast delayed their departure for so long that the caravan had to reroute. By the time the fellow found out, it was too late for him to arrange alternate overland passage."

"And so you took him aboard your ship?"

Lach's teeth flashed as he nodded. "He was hesitant to accept at first, said he didn't want to offend Cearus. In truth, I think he feared the sea but didn't want to admit as much to a Seafarer. I assured him that Cearus is best pleased when happy sailors pay homage to him and said I would consider it a personal favor if

he were to join us aboard and entertain my crew during their off-duty hours. What could he do then but agree?"

"So you becalmed the seas in order to make his passage as smooth as possible," she said, unable to resist teasing him.

With a modest shrug, he said, "Cearus favored us. We didn't run into a single squall on our way home, and the winds and currents were favorable without much urging on my part. Perhaps it was the offering you made to the Lord of Water."

His words weren't in jest. No Seafarer or fisherman took the whims of Cearus lightly. Lach was a devout follower of the god, ever aware of the favor Cearus had shown him by gifting him with such considerable Adept abilities.

Cianne, on the other hand, couldn't help but regard the god with some measure of cynicism. For what purpose had Cearus decided that she, daughter of two respected Adepts and resident of a House that set all its store by the Lord of Water, should not be so gifted? She knew the bitterness in her heart that prevented her from paying the god his due deference was evil, but she couldn't seem to overcome it. She still paid a dutiful visit to Cearus's majestic temple to make an offering whenever Lach set out to sea, but she did so more for his sake than out of any sense of religious devotion.

"Or perhaps you so pleased Cearus that he saw fit to reward your efforts, which is the more likely case," she said.

"You always turn it back to me, but your dedication means a great deal to me," he chided gently. "I wish you would not undermine the important role you have to play in the House. Loyalty and devotion are what Cearus requires of us, and in serving our House faithfully you are certain to please the Lord of Water.

"Whatever the case, I delivered Auron Raxford safely to his troupe, and by way of thanks he asked if I might be interested in an advance peek at his troupe's performance."

"A private performance?" she asked, her eyes widening.

"Not only that, it's a new show. You and I shall be the first to see it."

"Oh, Lach, that's brilliant!" she exclaimed, throwing herself forward so that she could embrace him.

She heard his shuddering intake of breath as her arms circled his neck, and it was all she could do to prevent herself from pulling away from him at once. How she hated moments like this, when it seemed she would lead him on without having the least intention of doing so. She should have been able to embrace her friend without fearing it might appear as something more.

It would be better for him as well if I left.

Chapter 6

"You are punctual," Burl grudgingly acknowledged when Kila met her at the front gate of the Staerleigh enclave. Her tone suggested she intended to hold this against him as well, and he spared a moment to puzzle over what would have pleased her, not because he cared one lick about appeasing her, but because it was such a perplexing conundrum. Surely she would have been vexed had he arrived late. Did that mean she would have preferred him to be precisely on time, or fifteen minutes early rather than ten?

"I do my best. I wouldn't wish to offend anyone."

Her lip curled, as if his very existence offended. "That's wise. The Council of Elders takes social consideration quite seriously."

He wondered why she was being helpful but then decided she must have deduced that it might not reflect so well on her if he were to offend anyone. No doubt she had no intention of bringing him into her inner circle, but she had to be anxious about protecting her reputation. Enforcers' pay was modest at best, so chances were she was hoping for Staerleigh patronage to help ease her through her golden years. Kila hadn't forgotten the lavish homes of the former liaisons who had succeeded at ingratiating themselves with their House.

"I shall follow your lead," he said.

"Do."

Showing him her back, she headed through the gates, and he trailed along behind her.

The Staerleigh enclave was impressive, but then they all were. All three trade Houses had enclaves in the city, each in a prime location. House Staerleigh was closest to the coast, of course, but their enclave was set well away from the wharves, the better to enjoy the sea air and the view without being troubled by the dirtier, less savory aspects of the docks. House Mallay's enclave was closer to the gates, spread out over a low rise that gave the impression that they were looking down upon the rest of the city—which might very well have been the case. The House's proximity to the gates and their vantage allowed them a bird's-eye view of the comings and goings of their caravans. House Rolland's enclave was located in the center of the city, not far from the Enforcement headquarters.

They would hardly consider the Enforcers illustrious company, despite that Enforcers were as gods-gifted with Adept abilities as the Coin Masters were, but their situation placed them squarely in the heart of the city's thriving business district.

Other Adept Houses were represented in the city as well, but their landholdings tended to be smaller, single grand manors instead of sprawling miniature cities within cities consisting of multiple glittering homes. The trade Houses liked to think of Cearova as the dazzling jewel of the realm, an attitude that didn't much endear them to the residents of the other four main cities in Astoran.

The other Houses comforted themselves by whispering that the trade Houses would be nothing without them. After all, what reason could the Seafarers have to brave the waves if not to carry other House-made goods to far-flung locations? What reason would the Caravanists have to send their carts, wagons, and beasts of burdens out onto the roads if not to distribute throughout the realm the bounty of the Agromancers' labors? What would the Coin Masters count without the Ore Masters and Distillers to craft goods that commanded such a high price?

But wait! How could any of them hope to exist without the Battle Masters' prowess to ensure they were all safe to engage in their fabrication, their performing, their trade?

Bored. That was how Kila felt whenever conversation amongst Adepts degenerated into these tired, worn out squabbles. He had no idea if the Adepts of Myrsha, his native land, had put together a better system, but he didn't much care. Adepts in general seemed to overlook the fact that, special though some of them might be, they would be nowhere on their own. What would the Coin Masters eat? Gold? Who would the Battle Masters beat into a bloody pulp? One another? The fact of the matter, as Kila saw it, was that they were all tied together, Adepts and non-Adepts alike. The world as a whole was a codependent organism, and everyone would be the better for it if they would wake up and realize this.

It wasn't a view he shared with many.

Following a couple of steps behind Burl, Kila took in the elegant stone and marble abodes of House Staerleigh. The structures were light and graceful, their façades appearing to consist of layer upon layer of lace, so elaborately worked was the stone. Every last one boasted a balcony or two with balustrades of iron wrought by the Shapers, but each was unique. One home's bore a woodland scene, while another's depicted a flower garden, and still another's brought to mind a sky replete with stars. The main gates had been wrought into the forms of

crashing waves that gave Kila the creepy sensation they were about to sweep him away, and the farther they proceeded into the enclave, the more he felt like he was being sucked into a current.

Burl came to an abrupt halt and gestured curtly to the building before them. "This is the Council Hall," she said.

It was the tallest building in the enclave thanks to the spire that soared up into the sky, piercing the inky darkness. The outside of the building bore carving upon carving of figures, and Kila was willing to bet the Hall was meant to tell the history of House Staerleigh. Ships and roiling waters figured prominently, and looking at them made him queasy.

"And those homes?" he asked, pointing to the five largest.

"Council members' homes," she said. Was her tone naturally that clipped or just when she talked to him, he wondered. "I haven't the time to tell you whose is whose, but tomorrow we will study a map of the enclave and you will memorize the location of each home and to whom it belongs."

"Stellar," he murmured, and pushed an expression of utmost innocence onto his face when she frowned and examined him.

Don't get cheeky, he told himself when she finally looked away. *You don't know the extent of her gifts, and it would certainly behoove you to determine that.*

His own gifts were quite strong, a fact that he liked to keep mostly to himself. Then again, it could be that he thought so because his former colleagues' performance hadn't been much more impressive than that of very discerning non-Adepts. During his previous tenure in Cearova he hadn't had much opportunity to develop an informed opinion of the extent of his colleagues' gifts, and he hadn't been in the city anywhere near long enough this time around to form anything like an accurate picture. He could imagine one of two scenarios, and it would be to his benefit to uncover which theory, if either, was true. Did the trade Houses do their best to keep the most gifted Enforcers in Cearova, believing it was in their best interests to populate their department with those who would be most capable of controlling the criminal elements in the city? Or did they prefer to send away the most gifted in order to maintain a firmer grasp on the less able, more controllable Enforcer Adepts?

Kila followed Burl into the Council Hall, which was no less impressive inside than out. A beautiful fresco depicting Cearus's benevolent reception of offerings from the faithful covered one wall. It was one of the most exquisite frescoes Kila had ever seen, so lifelike that he half expected Cearus to step out of the wall and begin mingling with the guests. Squinting at the signature, Kila made out the name of one of the most celebrated Composers in history and was

duly impressed. Even the palace in Vyramas could boast only a few small paintings created by the same Composer.

Tapestries lush with vibrant colors covered the other walls, interspersed between the graceful arched windows. The intricate hangings were a testament to the skill of the Weavers, as were the wondrous garments worn by several of the ladies and gentlemen present at the assembly. Stunning silver chandeliers with faceted crystal drops twinkled with hundreds of pure, white tapers, casting a warm, burnishing glow over the room.

Smell the gold perfuming this rarefied air, he thought, resisting the urge to inhale deeply.

His gifts kicked in, making him pick up subtle details that would escape the notice of most who lacked Enforcer abilities. Seemingly disparate elements coalesced in his mind, cluing him in to the identities of several of the Hall's occupants, as well as things they might mistakenly believe secret.

A semi-concealed jewel winking from one woman's bodice hinted at an assignation with someone other than her spouse.

The scuff marring another man's boot suggested either his valet was lax or he was trying to appear wealthier than he was. No, Kila decided, the man was wealthy, but he likely had a gambling problem exacerbated by drunkenness, as indicated by the still-small broken capillaries lining the man's nose, the slight ruddiness to his complexion.

Focusing, Kila wrestled his abilities back under his control, ignoring the extraneous details. The manner in which Enforcers experienced their abilities was some indication of the extent of their powers. Some described the flow of information as a trickle while others experienced a flood. Kila experienced his more like a sudden plummet into a lake. Getting his feet wet didn't affect his perception much, but sometimes information inundated him like water closing over his head. Crowded places typically brought on the plummet.

A short distance to his right, a diminutive young woman stood conversing with a handsome, tall man. The medals pinned to the man's coat, the pale highlights streaking his hair, and his tanned skin indicated that he was a Seafarer of rank, probably a captain, if Kila had to hazard a guess.

However, it wasn't the man who had captured his attention, it was the young woman, though he couldn't say why. Scanning her, he took in her delicately embroidered sage green silk gown, the froth of dark curls crowning her head, the candlelight catching on the strands of red threaded through them. Something about the shape of her mouth, the violet hue of her deep blue eyes, stroked at his memory with elusive fingers. She wore matching silk gloves, and the turn of her wrist struck him as familiar. Frowning, he averted his gaze before

she caught him staring. His gift tugged at him, urging him to take a closer look at her, to tease out what it was about her that made him feel as if he knew her.

"That man over there is Captain Lachlon Stowley, the youngest captain in House Staerleigh history," Burl said, pointing at the man talking to the woman who had caught Kila's attention. He slanted a glance at Burl, wondering if she had noticed him examining the woman, but if she had she gave him no indication. Cursing himself, he vowed not to be caught off guard in front of Burl again.

"Over there, to the right of Captain Stowley, is Elder Borean, and he's speaking with Daerwyn Wyland," Burl said, skipping over Stowley's companion. Continuing in a circle, she pointed out other illustrious personages to him, and he tried to commit them all to memory.

She had just finished when Daerwyn Wyland approached them with a welcoming smile. "Officer Burl," he said. "How good of you to come."

"I was honored by the invitation," Burl said, giving him a short, stiff bow, which Wyland returned.

"I'm not acquainted with your companion," Wyland said, his eyes flicking to Kila.

"This is my new partner, Officer Kila an Movis," she said. "Kila, this is Daerwyn Wyland."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," Kila said, mimicking Burl's bow.

"Likewise, I'm sure," Wyland said, sounding as though he were chewing the words.

"I see Captain Stowley has returned safely," Burl said.

The comment pleased Wyland, who beamed. "He has indeed. That's my daughter, Cianne, he's talking to." His tone was so pointed that Kila didn't need to be an Intentionist to catch his meaning.

"Ah, yes, Miss Wyland," Burl said. "She looks well. Might we pay our respects to her and to Captain Stowley?"

"Of course," Wyland said, looking even more pleased, if that were possible.

This is a man of ambition.

Taking note of Wyland's attire, Kila filed the information away for future reference.

"Cianne, Lach, you remember Officer Burl?" Wyland said.

"Yes, of course. How do you do?" Stowley asked, bowing to Burl.

"Officer Burl," Miss Wyland said, with a slight incline to her head.

She doesn't like Burl. Interesting.

"Allow me to introduce my new partner, Officer an Movis."

The expression lasted a split second, but Kila caught it. His name made Miss Wyland's face go rigid, and when she turned to look at him he could see her fighting for control. Her uncanny blue eyes were wide, but she covered up her discomposure with a tepid smile.

"Officer an Movis, it's a pleasure to meet you," she said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Miss Wyland, Captain Stowley," Kila said, bowing to them both.

"If you'll excuse us, I should introduce Officer an Movis to the Elders," Wyland said to his daughter and Stowley.

"Of course," Stowley said. He didn't seem to mind at all. As it was, his eyes had barely strayed from Miss Wyland, though he had been very civil with both Kila and Burl.

Kila could have sworn he felt eyes on the back of his neck as Wyland ushered them away. Venturing a glance over his shoulder, he saw Stowley talking to Miss Wyland in animated tones, her attention focused on the captain. But Kila could have sworn he had seen her eyes dart away just as his landed on her.

Chapter 7

Heart seizing, Cianne tried to beat back the wave of dizziness that swept over her. Her pulse pounded, her blood roaring in her ears like Cearus's wrath. Over the years she had become good at marshaling her emotions, concealing her thoughts, but the shock of seeing Kila was so great that all her training had gone out the window as she was catapulted back into the skin of her twelve-year-old self.

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Her nightly forays into the city began shortly after her mother's death, her need to escape overruling all sense.

Daerwyn treated her as if she were an unwelcome stranger. Overwhelmed by his grief and his need to control it, he put on a good show outside of the manor, projecting an image of dignity and strength to the other House members. Inside the manor, he had no room for his daughter's pain, unwilling to offer her anything to help her navigate it.

Coupled with his grief was the bewildering challenge of determining how to raise her on his own, a child he already found so unfathomable he didn't quite know what to do with her. He had counted on Annalith to be there for him, to see to it that Cianne didn't become the wild, feckless creature he feared would disgrace him and their whole House.

Lach was more than kind, though. Annalith had been like a second mother to him, and his affection for her had been genuine. His sense of loss was keen, if not quite as keen as Cianne's. For the first few days after Annalith's death they had spent the bulk of their time together in one another's arms, sobbing over their broken hearts. But no matter how hard he tried, no matter how desperately he wished he could do so, Lach was unable to help her find her way through her despair.

House members crowded the manor, demanding recognition for their own suffering, and she wasn't merely beyond being able to accept the possibility that they were hurting too, she was indifferent to their pain. Who were they to lay

claim to her mother? What did they know of her? What did they know of the hole her mother's absence had punched into the universe?

Annalith's funeral was lavish, and Cianne felt in her bones that her mother would have hated it. Clad in the customary deep green, the color of the sea at its most forbidding, every member of the House had crammed into the Council Hall. Funerary rites were read, offerings were made to Cearus, and many House members took their turn to say some words about Annalith, but Cianne was aware of none of it. Her eyes were fixed on the empty, gilded casket, as if they might catch sight of that beloved face one last time if only they could bore through the wood.

She never would see her mother's face again, no matter how hard her eyes strained. Annalith had been swept away while at sea, during a violent storm that had left her vessel severely damaged and Cianne's life destroyed.

When the casket was carried to the sea to be borne away on the waves, Cianne collapsed. Her world had fallen in on her, and she was powerless against the pain.

Her mother's casket was long gone by the time she woke. Cianne regretted that she hadn't been able to watch it disappear, to imagine Annalith being carried out to Cearus's embrace. Perhaps the peaceful image would have cured Cianne of her nightmares. Every time she closed her eyes, she watched the greedy waters swallowing Annalith's lovely, kind face, her silken ebony curls.

The walls of the manor pressed in around Cianne, threatening to crush her, making her skin crawl with the need to get away. Outside the enclave walls she could be alone with her thoughts, could probe the pure, jagged edges of her grief without fear of witness.

She waited until her father locked himself in his room and the servants had gone to bed before she crept down the stairs. She and her mother had made a game of sneaking up on one another, and so Cianne had long since learned which steps to avoid so that she wouldn't make a sound. Slipping through the door of the manor was child's play, and avoiding the night guards wasn't much more difficult. She loved climbing and snuck away to do it whenever she could, so although scaling the enclave wall was a challenge, it was not an insurmountable one.

Skulking through the city streets alone at night was dangerous, she knew that, particularly in the sections of town she preferred to haunt. She didn't much care. A sense of recklessness seized her, and she had to choke back hysterical laughter as she spirited her way along the docks, pausing every so often to peer into the unsavory taverns lining the street. She watched a group leave one house hung with lurid red lanterns, catching a glimpse inside of both men and women

wearing shockingly few clothes.

She walked for hours without anyone noticing her, though this was probably more a testament to the extreme levels of their inebriation than it was to Cianne's evasive skills. Still, she was small and able to slip into tight nooks and crannies, which was a decided advantage.

At last, she found herself ghosting along a row of modest rough stone houses. An uneven wall of jumbled stone closed the dwellings off from the street, and when Cianne tested it she found it had excellent hand- and footholds for someone whose fingers and feet were as small as hers were. She began climbing. The wall was higher than she had thought, and when she reached the top and stood staring down at the street below, her heart raced, the first non-grief burst of emotion she'd felt since her mother had died. Vertigo kicked in as her eyes measured the ten feet down to the ground, and she swayed a bit.

"Whoa there," a soft voice called from below.

Whirling toward it, Cianne teetered again, this time coming much closer to falling. Her arms shot out perpendicular to her sides and she didn't draw another breath until she'd managed to steady herself.

"What are you doing up there?" the voice asked. She could tell it belonged to a man, though she couldn't see his face. He was standing too close to the wall, and the shadows obscured his features.

"Climbing," she said, her voice cracking. She tried to remember the last time she had spoken to another person and couldn't. Even with Lach her responses had become mostly non-verbal.

"Obviously," he said in a droll tone. "However, you seem rather unsteady on your feet, so perhaps climbing isn't the best thing for you to be doing at the moment."

Crouching, Cianne lowered her bottom onto the uneven surface of the wall. Stones poked into her rear, but she ignored the discomfort. Dangling her legs over the edge, she braced her hands on the stone, scraping her palms for her trouble, and leaned out over the wall, trying to see the man below her.

"Why don't you come down?" he suggested.

Like any cautious parent, Cianne's mother had warned her about strangers. It didn't matter that this man sounded nice, he was someone she didn't know, and the prudent thing to do would be to go back to the enclave and return to her bed, where she belonged. With any luck, she might even manage to do so without anyone noticing she'd left in the first place.

But something about talking to someone she didn't know felt good. This man didn't know her mother had died. He didn't know that she angered her tutors by skipping her lessons. He didn't know that her father had averted his face at the

announcement that his daughter had failed every aspect of her Adept test, trying to conceal the mingled disappointment and disgust that had curdled his mouth, though not quickly enough. He didn't know that ever since then, and especially now that her mother was gone, her father could barely stand to look at her.

She was as much a stranger to this man as he was to her, which meant he knew nothing at all about her. After spending the last week around people who thought they knew everything there was to know about her, this realization was oddly comforting.

"I shouldn't," she said, not wanting to give the appearance that she had caved so readily. "My mother told me never to talk to strangers."

"That's wise of you, and you're right to listen to your mother. I am a stranger, that's true, but I'm also an Enforcement officer."

An Enforcement officer. Cianne chewed her lip, her stomach twisting. It was good, because it meant that he was a safe stranger, but it was also bad, because it meant that if he found out who she was, he would have to report her to her father. The last thing she wanted was for her father to find out what she had been up to, not so much because she feared the punishment that would ensue, but because she knew discovery would make it impossible for her to ever sneak away again. Her father would see to it that every guard in the enclave was on the lookout for her, and her one means of escape would be cut off forever. She wouldn't be able to endure that.

"Prove it," Cianne ordered, hedging, trying to buy herself some time.

"All right, I will. Don't go anywhere," the man said. She could hear the reluctance in his voice, and he moved slowly away from the wall, heading toward a cracked door that was spilling a thin sliver of yellow light out into what she now saw was a garden.

It was a small garden, and the light illuminated his face when he opened the door wide enough to pass through it. He glanced back at her over his shoulder, watching to see if she would run away, so only his profile was visible, but what she could see of it looked kind. His thick, shoulder-length dark hair was pulled back into a tail. His eyes appeared to be dark too, though in the low light of the garden it was impossible to tell. Judging his height from her vantage was difficult, but when he went through the door she could see his head passed beneath its frame with just a few inches to spare, which told her he was rather tall. Something about his appearance made him distinct, and his voice—his accent, to be precise—gave away the fact that he wasn't from Cearova.

He disappeared into the house for a moment and Cianne began worrying at one of her nails with her teeth, another habit of hers that drove her father to distraction. What to do? Should she try to slip away while the man was getting

his badge, disappear down a dark alley never to be seen by him again?

But it had taken her several moments to scale his wall, and she had a feeling that if she tried to flee he'd simply go out through his front door and catch her in the act. She didn't want to risk that.

At any rate, would running away make her seem timid or would it make her seem criminal? What if he thought she was a thief who'd climbed the wall to better case the residences? As an Enforcement officer wouldn't he feel obligated to chase her down and take her to the Enforcement station for questioning? She couldn't suppress a shiver as she imagined her father arriving to pick her up from the station. That scenario wouldn't do at all.

She was still debating when the man returned. He left his door wide open, and a wedge of light illuminated a portion of his garden as well as his figure, though it cast shadows that made it difficult to see his face again. He held one hand out, palm up, so that she could see it was empty, and in the other hand he held aloft something that caught some of the light.

"This is my badge," he said, lifting his hand higher. His movements were slow and deliberate, which made her feel more skittish. He was treating her like he would an edgy criminal, she was certain of it.

Afraid to focus on any one part of him for fear that he would be moving before she could react, she darted several quick glances at the object in his hand. It did appear to be a badge, but she had no intention of getting any closer to him to find out for certain.

"I should go," she said, not moving, waiting to see how he would react.

"It is late," he said, lowering his badge but keeping his other hand up.

"You're not going to follow me, are you?" she blurted, angry with herself for showing him her hand.

He didn't say anything for a moment, deliberating, and she could hear the conflict in his voice when he said, "It's dangerous for you to be out on the streets alone at this time of night. I could escort you home, see you safe."

"No," she said, the word coming out sharper than she had intended. Taking a breath, she tried to calm herself. "Thank you, but I'll be fine. I know the streets very well." It wasn't entirely untrue. After several days of exploring, she knew them much better than she ever had before.

He was quiet for another moment. "Even so, I think it best if—"

"No," she said again, more forcefully this time. "Don't follow me." Tears sprang to her eyes and she spoke through gritted teeth.

Heedless of caution, she yanked her legs up in a flurry of movement and scooted to the other side of the wall. Scrabbling down more rapidly than she had ascended wasn't wise, thanks to her shaky legs, and she ended up falling the last

couple of feet. Letting out a muffled cry of pain, she picked herself up and pelted down the street just as the man emerged around the corner of his wall.

"Wait!" he called out, but she ignored him. He ran after her, but she ducked and dodged, paying no attention to direction, taking whichever alleyways she could find, the darker the better, and he either lost her or gave up after a short chase.

Escaping had been her only thought, and when her legs began to give out and she was forced to stop, she was surprised by the pounding of her heart, her heaving breaths, her tear-soaked face. Sinking to the ground in the safety of a dark corner of a shop's alcove, she buried her face in her knees and allowed herself to sob.

She made it home, slipping into her room just before the sun rose. No one bothered her the entire day, and she wasn't certain whether she should be relieved or hurt.

I am invisible.

But the man last night had made her feel as if she weren't so invisible after all.

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"Cianne?" Lach asked, his face creasing. "Are you well?"

"I-I'm fine," she said, flashing him a quick smile.

"Are you certain?" he asked. Worry knitted his brow and his eyes were alight with concern as he stared at her, and she realized it was the first time in years that he'd witnessed her truly losing her composure. She shared more with him than she did with anyone else, but even with Lach she had her mask to wear, and she usually wore it very well.

"Yes, I am." Gathering together the frayed edges of her composure, she unleashed the full force of her smile, feeling a stab of guilt at knowing that she was manipulating him. He never could resist her when she turned on the charm, and at the sight of that smile his shoulders relaxed. "I realized I'd forgotten to do something for my father."

"Ah," Lach said, the understanding on his face making her feel even guiltier. "Do you need to—"

"No, it's all right, I promise," she interrupted. "I'll explain it to him, and he'll understand. Please don't worry about it. I think you deserve to celebrate tonight."

He still didn't look convinced, but she continued to smile up at him and he relented. "Very well, but you must promise to tell me if you need to leave, or if

there's anything I can do to help you."

"I promise," she said. She would have loved to leave, but the last thing she could afford at that moment was to call any attention to herself. No one could know that she had been so unsettled, least of all Kila.

Chapter 8

Arriving home was a relief. Kila had learned a great deal that evening, and he wanted some time alone to sort through all the pieces, to make notes and try to put together a picture. He had noted a lot of details and was able to make some educated guesses based on them, but that was all he could hope to do for the time being. Were his partner an Intentionist, they could have worked together to create a much more accurate picture. Kila would have been able to make sense of the physical clues, and his Intentionist partner would have been able to read the gestures and expressions of their subjects to gain insight as to the subjects' states of mind.

But even the weakest of Intentionist Adepts were snapped up by the wealthy and powerful. They were perhaps the rarest of all Adepts, and Kila was under the cynical impression that no one wished to create a crime-fighting team with as much accuracy as would result from the pairing of an Intentionist and an Enforcer. Not to mention that the wealthy had no real interest in controlling crime any more than was necessary to keep the lower classes appeased. It was much more to their benefit to use the Intentionists to spy on their enemies and protect their own interests, and even the most idealistic of Intentionists would be hard-pressed to deny a wealthy patron. Those in the employ of the powerful were less than forgiving of anyone who tried to upset the system.

Stripping off his formal uniform, Kila pulled on a loose tunic and a comfortable pair of breeches. His new lodgings were slightly larger and quite a bit nicer than the old, as another aspect of the trade Houses' public works project had been to arrange for Enforcers to be able to obtain better housing in more desirable districts at a discounted rate.

Like slipping so many sweets to small children.

He couldn't argue with the benefits, though. His needs were modest, but his lower rent coupled with the slight increase in his wages would allow him to live more comfortably, and it was difficult to quibble with that. He was certain there was something to it. Large, lavish gifts were nice, but something told him that it was the small touches that were more prone to increase one's sense of gratitude and, therefore, one's sense of indebtedness.

Leaving his bedchamber, he went into the room he had set up as an office. His quarters also included a privy room that was large enough to accommodate a stone tub, and a large common room that served as kitchen, dining, and sitting room. The fireplaces in his bedchamber and the common room worked well enough, and the lodgings seemed as if they'd be relatively cozy in the winter, but he found himself thinking longingly of the modern system at Enforcement headquarters, and he shook his head. Reeled in already.

One wall in his office was covered with scraps of parchment that he arranged and rearranged at will, helping him to sort the information he'd gathered as he tried to establish links. Lengths of string extended from some bits to others, forming connections wherever he found them. Writing with a brisk, sure hand, he jotted down his new additions and added them to the wall. Stepping back, he stroked his chin and squinted, turning his head this way and that. Sometimes the answers leapt out at him, but at other times they were coy. He had made several leaps during the course of the assembly, but nothing of serious concern. Such personal information might prove itself useful at some point in time, but as of yet everything he'd gleaned was of a petty, unimportant nature.

Rolling his head around on his shoulders, he shook out his arms. Exercise would help. Allowing his mind to work through the knots while he focused on something else often resulted in his most useful discoveries, and he had learned to walk away whenever he began to feel stymied.

His new quarters also included a walled garden, but it wasn't any larger than the old. The previous tenant hadn't been much of a gardener, judging by the jungle-like growth in the yard, nature reasserting her claim. Kila frowned in distaste, but the physical labor would provide him another avenue for quieting his conscious mind, so it wasn't all bad. He liked to cultivate herbs, but more important to him was that his garden was in good order, laid out in lines that were pleasing to the eye and soothing to the mind. He would have his work cut out for him with this garden, but he would wrestle it into submission in due course.

He had just transitioned from the first to the second form of the deshya when someone pounded on his door. Concentration shattered, Kila stared at his garden door with a frown. Who could be calling at this hour?

The pounding grew more insistent, and he hurried through his house to his front door, surprised to find Burl on the other side.

"There's been a problem at the enclave," she said, the words clipped. He had the distinct impression that she was not happy to have had to stop and pick him up, and that instilled a sense of urgency in him.

"Let me change into my uniform," he said, ushering her into his lodgings. He would have invited her to have a seat, but she stopped a few inches from the door, crossing her arms, her face tight, and he decided not to bother with pleasantries.

He was back in uniform within minutes. Burl's eyes flicked over the neat tail of his hair, his shiny uniform buttons, and his well-polished boots, and he would have wagered she was disappointed not to find anything she could criticize.

"Let's go," she said. "I've a carriage waiting outside."

Hurrying after her, he waited until the carriage door was closed and they had set off with a jolt before asking for details.

"A prominent House member has committed suicide," she said with a whiff of disdain.

His stomach sank. Suicides were sadly fairly common, but not as prevalent amongst the members of the upper class. Burl's tone indicated she saw such an action as due to either a weakness or a character defect, and Kila wondered if her indignation was personal or if she considered the occurrence an affront to the House.

"Who?"

"Toran Stowley."

"He was at the assembly," Kila said, conjuring up a picture of the man's face. He remembered Toran laughing with his son, who strongly favored him, and casting fond glances at his son's companion, Miss Wyland. Kila had been an Enforcer long enough to know that appearances could be deceiving, but he was nevertheless surprised to hear the name. No one had seemed particularly depressed at the assembly, but based on the bits he'd gathered he could think of several others he might have deemed more likely candidates for suicide.

"Yes, he was," Burl said, her stony gaze fixed on him.

"Did anyone witness the incident?"

"I've told you everything I know."

Nodding, Kila said nothing more, but something nagged at the back of his mind. Several indelicate questions begged to be posed, but he hadn't the first idea how to address them with Burl. He wouldn't have hesitated to let them fly with Flim, who had encouraged her junior partner to question everything, but he knew Burl wouldn't appreciate such conduct, especially since she might interpret his questions as casting aspersions on House Staerleigh. Instead, he kept them to himself, deciding that following her lead would give him an excuse to keep a close eye on her.

"It's not my place to question anything. House Staerleigh knows and trusts

you. I am at your—and their—disposal," he said.

Her response was a curt nod, though her eyes didn't leave his face. He found her reaction intriguing. That she intended to intimidate him went without saying. What interested him was the motivation behind her intentions. Plenty of officers made a sport of tormenting their subordinates purely for the fun of it, but he didn't think that was what was driving Burl. He had to be careful lest any preconceived notions crept in, but his first instinct was to chalk her intentions up to an attempt to keep him as in the dark as possible, at least until such time as she decided she could trust him, if ever. He wondered how far his deception should go. Making her aware of his shrewdness didn't seem advisable, even though she might admire it and wish to make use of it. Playing the ignorant was easy enough now, since he was still so new to her, but maintaining such a ruse would be no easy feat. Whatever Burl was, he was quite certain she wasn't a fool.

They arrived at the Stowley manor, which was blazing with light. Guards flanked the front entrance, directing surly gazes at Burl and Kila, even after they'd shown identification. Their reaction came as no surprise to Kila. Doubtless the House would be quite concerned about how to handle this matter.

As if to prove his point, they found several members of the Council of Elders assembled inside, along with Daerwyn Wyland. Refreshments covered one long table, but there were no servants in sight, and Kila presumed they had been banished.

"Officer Burl," Elder Borean said, stepping forward to press her hand between his. His long face was mournful, his eyes watery with tears.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Burl said, pressing the man's hand in return. It was the first time Kila had seen her show any semblance of warmth, and it took him aback. Perhaps she wasn't as hard-hearted as he'd believed.

"It's a tragedy," said Elder Vorfarth. She dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. "Toran was… Such a good man. I can't believe he'd do such a thing." Pressing her lips together, she abruptly stopped speaking, and wiped her eyes with more vigor.

"Where might I find Advisor Stowley?" Burl asked in a gentle tone.

"In Toran's study, with Chief Flim," Elder Borean answered, his voice thick. "I'll take you to them."

Kila was surprised that the chief had beaten them there, and he wondered what Burl would make of it. He couldn't discern her reaction. Her expression remained unchanged, her sympathetic eyes fixed on Elder Borean.

"Thank you, Elder Borean."

The older man shuffled down the corridor, and they left behind the muffled

sounds of low chatter and sniffling. The corridor was deserted, and Kila wondered if the servants were all up in their quarters, huddled together and mourning or gossiping. Servants were an excellent source of information, when one could get them to talk. He had a feeling luck wouldn't be on his side in that regard this time around.

Elder Borean left them at the door of the study, and they entered to find Moiria Stowley slumped in a chair, a glass containing two fingers of amber liquid dangling from her limp hand. Chief Flim was crouched next to Toran's body, which bore no obvious signs of the means of his demise.

"Chief. Advisor Stowley," Burl said in a very low voice. Even so, Moiria startled, the liquid sloshing around in her glass. She juggled it for a second before setting it down on the large, ornate desk, a fat amber bead trickling over the glass's side.

"Officer Burl," Moiria said, moving to rise, but she collapsed back in the chair.

"Please, don't trouble yourself," Burl said gently.

"He was… I had no idea that… Toran," Moiria whispered, her voice breaking on the last word.

Burl exchanged a look with Flim. As Burl turned back to Moiria, Flim acknowledged Kila with a brief nod.

"Advisor Stowley, perhaps you would be more comfortable—" Burl began, but Moiria cut her off.

"No! No, I won't leave him!"

With a jerk of her head, the chief summoned Kila over to her while Burl crouched before Moiria's chair, talking to her in a low voice. Kila squatted next to the chief, who silently pointed to a few details before gesturing at a tea cup on the desk, an empty vial lying alongside it, its stopper cast off to the side.

Kila wondered what had been in the vial, but he thought it best not to sniff it or examine it until Burl convinced Moiria to leave the room, which she succeeded in doing a moment later. The new widow leaned heavily against Burl, who'd wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders, and they left.

"Self poisoning?" Kila whispered to the chief.

"There's a note on the desk," she muttered, her lips all but motionless.

"Suspicious?"

"No."

Frowning, Kila examined the body, taking note of the crushed pile of the plush carpet, the curl of the man's fingers. Whatever had killed him appeared to have worked quickly. A slight grimace marred Toran's face and he'd vomited a bit, but his body was prone, not curled in on itself as if he had suffered.

Something more was going on here. Chief Flim hadn't shared all the details with him. He supposed the argument could be made that her actions were prudent. Setting aside her assertion that it was better if no one knew too much, keeping him ignorant made sense. Enforcers' skills weren't infallible. They were as human as the next person, and their personal prejudices could influence the conclusions they drew. Abundant evidence went a long way toward making them comfortable with their convictions, but they could make mistakes like everyone else. The less Kila knew about the chief's suspicions, the less he could shape the evidence to fit them. He didn't like being in the dark, but he could grudgingly admit it might be best for him to remain there, at least for the time being.

Burl rejoined them just as Kila was thinking about examining the note and the vial, but he stilled himself. Chief Flim rose, brushing her hands over her breeches, and joined Burl at the desk.

"You should look at this as well," Burl said, crooking her finger at Kila. All three bent over the note.

My darling Moiria and Lach,

Please know that you are not the cause of this. There's nothing you could have done. The one thing that might have stayed my hand was the fear that you would blame yourselves, but this pain has become unbearable. I hope you'll understand, and I hope you'll forgive me.

With everlasting love.

The note bore no signature, but parchment was scattered over a good portion of the desk's surface, and the handwriting on several pieces signed by Toran matched the suicide note's handwriting.

"What does he mean by the pain is unbearable? Was he ill? Was he despondent over something?" the chief asked.

Burl shook her head. "I don't know. I have no knowledge of any illness nor could I say if he was despondent, but the Houses are very private."

So Burl was claiming some ignorance as to the goings-on in the House. Kila could believe it. Chummy as the trade Houses might be with their Enforcement liaisons, they were still an insular group. They were co-dependent on one another for their livelihoods, but each House still barely trusted the others, let alone outsiders.

"Moiria Stowley is in too much shock to answer many questions at present. I've arranged for the body to be taken back to headquarters, so that our Healer

may examine it," the chief said. "All signs indicate that this was a suicide, so I don't anticipate that the Healer will find anything contradictory."

"Either way, we'll need to follow up, whether it's to close the case or to further the line of inquiry," Burl said.

Flim nodded. "Captain Stowley is in his quarters, with Cianne Wyland. He accompanied her to her family's manor after the assembly. His mother sent for him when she found her husband."

That explained Daerwyn's presence at the manor, as well as the Elders. Daerwyn must have sent for them. Nothing was unusual about that. The death of any House member, even a lowly one, was a matter of ceremony for the Elders, who were the first to visit the family and offer their condolences. Considering the Stowley family's position within the House Staerleigh hierarchy, the Elders would have paid the visit with even greater promptness than usual.

"Have you spoken with the captain?" Burl asked.

"No, but I think it's time," the chief said. Sighing deeply, she pinched the bridge of her nose and led her officers from the study.

Chapter 9

Cianne had never seen Lach in such a state, and the force of his grief felt as though it were tearing her to shreds. He was inconsolable, barely coherent, and unable to respond to any of her questions, leaving her feeling more lost and helpless than she could have imagined possible. His mother had entered the room a short time ago, taken one look at her son, burst into tears of her own, and fled.

"Father," Lach said, his voice so small and broken he sounded like a child.

Tears streamed down Cianne's face. The pain she felt at Toran's passing was a ponderous weight, but she could have borne it if not for Lach's pain. She felt it almost as her own, and though she shed numerous tears for Toran, many of them were due to Lach's agony.

"How could he?" Lach demanded, over and over. "How could he do this to the House?"

Cianne also wondered how Toran could have done it, though she was far less concerned about the impact his death would have on the House than she was about the impact it would have on his son. She hadn't seen any sign that he was even contemplating taking his life. Toran had seemed his usual cheerful self at the assembly that night, teasing her and heaping kind compliments on her. Sometimes she wished he weren't such a lovely man, as the thought of disappointing him by not marrying his son made the whole affair so much worse for her. It would have crushed Toran to learn he couldn't count on having Cianne as his daughter-in-law, unlike Moiria, who probably would be relieved.

"My mother will look after him," Cianne whispered, wishing she could offer Lach something more comforting. She had no doubt that Annalith would guide Toran into Cearus's embrace, but what good would that do? They were both of them gone forever, and no amount of wistful thinking of them being with their Lord would ever lessen the pain of the loss.

"How?" Lach asked, raising his tormented, tear-streaked face to her. The torture in his eyes nearly undid her, and she wrapped her arms around him, holding herself together as fiercely as she was holding him together.

"I don't know," she admitted, her voice cracking. "I wish to Cearus I did."

"Captain Stowley?" a respectfully hushed voice asked as the door opened. "I'm so sorry to trouble you at this time."

"How could he do this?" Lach demanded, his voice rising into a howl that made Cianne wince.

"Leave us. He's in no condition to talk," she said, surprised by the ferocity in her own voice. She knew the Enforcers were just doing their job, but rage filled her all the same, reminding her of how she'd felt when her mother had died. Why couldn't everyone go away and leave Lach in peace? If he'd asked her to leave, she would have gone too, but he wanted her there. He shouldn't have to deal with anyone he didn't want.

"My apologies," the voice said, the door closing with haste.

"How could he?" Lach asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Closing her eyes, Cianne held onto him, his face pressed against her chest. She rocked him like a child, but his wild sobbing didn't cease, and she was relieved when Elder Borean entered the room, the House Apothecist trailing in his wake. Lach turned away from them, burying his face in Cianne's shoulder, and she lifted her eyes to Elder Borean.

The Elder said nothing, but pain limned his features as he gave Cianne a slight nod, which she returned. Tears poured over her cheeks, blurring her vision, and she tried to blink them back. The Apothecist parted her lips as if to speak to Lach, but Cianne stopped her with a vehement shake of her head. Elder Borean put his hand on the woman's shoulder and nodded at her.

Handing Cianne a small vial, the Apothecist mouthed, *All of it.* Cianne nodded to indicate that she understood, and the other two withdrew from the room.

"Lach," Cianne said in the gentlest voice she could muster. "Will you drink this?"

She had thought it would take some coaxing, but he seized the vial from her with alarming eagerness and downed its contents. She stayed with him, stroking his hair as he lost consciousness. Carefully, she lifted his head from her shoulder and settled him in his chair. Getting him into his bed without assistance would be impossible, and she didn't bother to make the attempt. Either the servants or her father and the Elders would see to it.

Rising on unsteady legs, Cianne mopped her face with her handkerchief and blew her nose. She was bone-weary and loath to leave Lach by himself, even though grief seemed to infest every corner of the room, threatening to overcome her with reminders of things best left forgotten. She would be there for him, though. She would do that much for him.

How can I ever turn him down now? she wondered in despair, then

despised herself for the selfish thought.

"I'll be back soon," she whispered to him, in case he wasn't insensate enough not to hear. She didn't want him to think she'd abandoned him.

As she made her way to the door, she realized she was parched. The tears seemed to have pulled every last drop of moisture from her body, and she longed for a cool glass of water. Her temples pulsed gently, a warning that a headache was approaching, and she pressed her fingers into them, trying to alleviate the pressure.

"How is he?" Elder Borean asked when she joined them. Moiria was there too, sitting in a chair and staring at nothing with dead eyes as the other Elders attempted to persuade her to eat or drink something.

"He's sleeping," Cianne said, her voice rough. Her throat ached. "I couldn't lift him out of his chair, so—"

"Don't fret, child," the Elder said kindly. She couldn't remember the last time he'd sounded so nice while speaking to her. "We'll see to him."

Her father wound his arm around her shoulders and led her to the refreshments, as if sensing her thirst. "You can't abandon him in his hour of need," he whispered.

She stiffened. Fighting off the urge to push him away was almost impossible, and she clenched her jaw. "I'm his friend. I'd never do such a thing to him," she hissed back, though she knew full well that wasn't what he had meant.

Cearus plague him! And to think I felt badly for my errant thought while my father has no qualms about exploiting Toran's death to his own purposes.

No shame crossed her father's face. He tightened his arm about her shoulders, and she was glad for the excuse to shrug him off when she reached the refreshments and could pour herself a drink from one of the pitchers. She didn't bother looking at the liquid; she simply needed to get something cool and wet into her dry throat immediately, and she almost choked when she tasted the lemonade. It slid down her throat in a bitter rush, tasting like bile. Her stomach curdled, and she set the glass down with a thud, wiping her mouth with the back of her wrist.

"Water?" her father asked, his eyes taking everything in as he handed her another glass.

"Thank you," she forced herself to say. Turning away so she wouldn't have to look at him, she drained the glass in one long swallow.

"Moiria, why don't we get you to your chambers?" Elder Vorfarth asked, trying to help Moiria from her chair. "The Apothecist is here, and she has something for you to take, to help you rest."

"I don't want to rest," Moiria said, pushing Elder Vorfarth away with such

force that the woman staggered. The Elders exchanged a look and Daerwyn swooped in.

"Moiria," he said, crouching before her and taking her hands in his.

"You know, Daerwyn. You know what this is like," she said in a hollow voice, staring at his face desperately.

"I do," he agreed. "Come with me, please."

"Yes… Yes, I will." She rose, her face blank, and Daerwyn put a steadying arm around her, guiding her from the room.

Leave it to Father to come to the rescue. Doubtless the Elders are impressed with his smooth handling of the situation.

Her mouth tasted bitter again and she turned back to the table to pour herself another glass of water. The nastiness of her thoughts was unforgivable. Moiria was right, Daerwyn was the only person in the room who understood what she was going through, and he might be cold and unyielding, but he wasn't cruel. Surely Cianne didn't believe that of her own father.

"Where are the Enforcers?" she asked the Elders, who blinked and stared at her as if they'd forgotten her presence.

"They're taking Toran away," Elder Vorfarth said, pressing her lips together. Elder Borean chided her with a glance.

"They would like to speak with you once they've seen to Toran," he said.

"Me?" Cianne asked, her mind racing. She knew why they wanted to speak to her, so that wasn't the reason for her question. Dread coursed through her as she thought about which officers might be in the manor. Her mind was in enough turmoil without having to come face-to-face with Kila again.

"Yes, Cianne, dear," Elder Borean said. He took her hand and led her to a chair. "Are you up to speaking with them?"

"Yes, I think so," she said in a faint voice.

"Very good, my dear. This is a horrible tragedy, and we fear for Moiria and Lach, but it comforts us to know you will be here to console him."

"Poor Lach," Cianne said, her face crumpling. She didn't need to feign her distress.

Elder Borean patted her hand and made soothing noises, offering her his handkerchief so that she could wipe away the tears that had begun to roll over her cheeks again. It was clean but smelled stale, and she dried her face with it, twisting it between her fingers as she forced a smile.

"Thank you, Elder Borean."

He was about to say something else to her when the Enforcement officers appeared. Behind them, several Enforcement staff passed, carrying a litter with a white sheet drawn over it. Officer Burl saw where Cianne's gaze was fixed, and

she drew the folding doors closed.

Cianne wasn't alone in having noticed. The Elders had ceased speaking, a pregnant pause descending on the room. Elder Vorfarth paled and pressed her hand to her mouth, and Elder Borean moved in front of Cianne, as if to shield her.

"Might we have a moment alone with Miss Wyland?" Chief Flim asked.

Cianne knew who the chief was, though they had never been introduced. She commanded her gaze not to seek comfort, forced it not to stray to Kila.

"Cianne?" Elder Borean asked.

"It's all right," she said.

"We'll be in the next room if you need us." With that they withdrew, leaving Cianne alone with the three Enforcers.

"We're sorry to trouble you, Miss Wyland, but we'd like to ask you a few questions. I'm Chief Flim. You know Officer Burl, and this is Officer an Movis."

"Yes, we've met," Cianne said.

"At the assembly," Burl told the chief.

"Ah, of course. Miss Wyland, I understand Captain Stowley went to your manor after the assembly ended?"

"Yes," Cianne said, wondering where this line of questioning was leading. "He escorted me home and stayed to chat."

Nodding, the chief scratched at a notebook she'd produced. "Did you know Advisor Toran Stowley well?"

"I did," she said, nodding. "Lach and I have been friends since we were children, and I spent a great deal of time here."

"Did you notice anything unusual about Advisor Stowley's state of mind as of late?"

Perplexed, Cianne stared at Chief Flim. "No, I… I don't think I did, but Advisor Toran didn't confide in me. As far as I could tell, he seemed normal."

"Normal?"

"Advisor Toran was a cheerful man," Cianne said, looking at her hands, her eyes welling with tears as memories of him inundated her. "I'm sorry, but why are you asking me these questions? You don't think—"

"These are procedural questions, nothing more," Officer Burl said.

The chief shot a look at her but didn't say anything. Closing her notebook, she tucked it away in her jacket.

"Sorry to trouble you. Thank you for your assistance," the chief said.

Casting a sidelong glance at Kila, Cianne watched his eyes slide from her to the chief to Burl.

I think it's past time he and I had a talk, she thought, eyes lowered as they

left. Under cover of her lashes, she peered at Kila's back as it disappeared through the door, and her heart did something it had no business doing.

Chapter 10

Morning wasn't far off by the time Kila returned to his lodgings, but he was too keyed up to sleep. Changing back into his looser garb, he stepped out to his garden to finish what he had started before Burl had knocked on his door.

He had accompanied the chief and Burl back to the station, where they left Toran Stowley's body in the care of the Healers. Incongruous as the name sounded when it came to those Healers who worked with Enforcement, their unsurpassed knowledge of human anatomy was an indispensable tool in the Enforcers' mandate to fight crime. If anyone could pinpoint the exact cause of death, it would be them, though their preliminary examination didn't turn up any evidence contradictory to the established narrative. Krozemund, the Chief Anatomical Examiner, assured Chief Flim that he would consult with an Apothecist as necessary to confirm the nature of the substance in the vial, but he said he could typically discern what someone had ingested by the effects it had on the body.

Krozemund had headed the team of Healers since before Kila's first tenure in Cearova, and Kila had never heard anything untoward about the man. All signs pointed to his feeling no particular loyalty to anyone. Healers weren't incorruptible, but their accepted collective ethos demanded that they treat all victims of ill health or injury, regardless of the person's social status or economic means. Most of the Healers Kila had known took this vow very seriously, considering themselves duty-bound to serve Aima, Lady of Life, and their sense of mission meant that they were renowned for their resistance to corruption. He was confident they could trust Krozemund's judgment.

Burl had left shortly after the Examiner shared his initial impressions, ordering Kila to report for duty bright and early the next morning. She was obviously anxious to close the case, and Kila couldn't entirely blame her. He hadn't the slightest idea of her agenda, but no matter what it was she hoped to achieve, the undeniable truth was that she would be under immense pressure from the House Elders to wrap this up and quickly. Kila imagined they would hunker down in their Council Hall all night in order to strategize as to how they intended to handle the news of Toran Stowley's death and its disbursal through

the city.

Kila had lingered at the station, wondering if the chief might approach him, but she had done nothing more than nod in his direction when she also left.

Transitioning from position three to position four, he considered everything that had happened that night. Was he seeing sinister intent everywhere he looked? Nothing about this case seemed immediately out of the ordinary, as sad as that fact might be, but something about it bothered him. The necessary parts were all there, neatly laid out in the proper order, and he wasn't certain whether he ought to read into that.

"The position of your left hand is a bit off," a soft voice floated down to him from his garden wall.

Startled, he dropped form, snapping into a defensive stance. It had been a long while since he had felt he ought to be on his guard at all times, and he found the reminder unpleasant. Why had he wished to be back in this wolves' den?

"Might you extend the courtesy of making yourself known?" he asked, fixing his eyes on the small, dark shadow at the top of his wall.

"Best if we don't do this here," the voice responded. "I mean you no harm, but I don't expect you to trust my word."

He said nothing in response to this, waiting for her—he had discerned that the voice was female, if nothing else—to show herself.

She landed on his lawn without making a sound. Rising from a crouch, she slowly started toward him, hands held parallel to her shoulders, palms facing him so that he could see she was unarmed. However, he wasn't willing to trust that she didn't have a weapon hidden about her person, and he maintained his position.

A rippling shadow, she moved over toward his lodgings, not heading for the door but for the light spilling from one of his windows. Illumination washed over her, exposing her slight form. She wore a tight, black leather vest laced all the way up to its high neck. Black breeches covered her legs, tucked into fitted black leather boots. A hood was attached to her vest, and she held her hands up until he nodded, then she reached to push back the hood, revealing her face to him at last.

"Miss Wyland?" he asked. Confusion swept over him, followed closely by a sense of wariness.

At the sound of her name, her eyes darted around the garden as if she feared enemies might be lurking behind his feral rhododendron. She jerked her head in the direction of his lodgings, raising her eyebrows inquiringly. He gave up his stance and went to the door, opening it and beckoning her in.

"I wasn't aware that the Houses were so well-versed in the positions of the deshya," he said, his sense of wariness increasing.

Few foreigners were familiar with the fighting style native to his homeland. Battle Masters' gifts were such that they could never have any real inherent advantage over a Battle Master opponent from another land, so each realm had developed its own distinctive fighting style to compensate.

Myrshan Battle Masters had created a style for their sole use, and non-Adepts were prohibited from using it under penalty of imprisonment. Legend had it that the deshya had evolved from the Battle Masters' form, developed by a young man jealous of his sister's powerful Battle Master gifts. Decade after decade he had practiced, tooling and retooling the deshya, until he honed skills so unknown to her that he bested her in a duel to the death.

The legend was a load of bollocks, as far as Kila was concerned. Ordinary people could certainly learn how to fight and become very skilled at it, but no matter how fancy their fighting style they could never hope to be a match for a highly gifted Battle Master. In his view, it was a story the non-Adepts amongst his people told in order to reassure themselves that they weren't completely at the mercy of their Adept counterparts.

"The House knows nothing about it," she said, watching his face.

"Last I checked, you're a part of the House."

"So you've now discovered."

Frowning, he stared her directly in the eye. Why the song and dance, he wondered. It had been a long night, and he would have preferred her to just come out with it.

"You're the Enforcer. Assemble the pieces," she suggested.

Pressing her hands together, she lowered her head so that her chin rested on the tips of her fingers. Inhaling deeply, she parted her hands, her right extending out to her side in a fluid motion as she bent her left at the elbow. The fingers on her left hand splayed elegantly, weaving patterns through the air as they came to rest near her side. Her feet were shoulder-width apart, and she rotated her upper body, simultaneously sliding her right leg behind her while bending her left at the knee, her upper body twisted so that she faced left.

Misdirection. Anyone unfamiliar with the dancelike movements was liable not to notice what she'd been doing with her right hand. She pointed her dagger at Kila's chest, and he could tell from the look in her eyes that she knew he would be able to disarm her, if he so desired. Moving with catlike grace, she stood upright again, sliding the dagger back into the sheath concealed up her sleeve.

Her form, it was so familiar. Closing his eyes, he watched the scenes

playing out behind his lids. A little, pert face screwed up in determination as she tried to imitate his movements. That same face beamed with delight when he praised her for a perfectly executed kick. She had hungered for his approval. Like a wilted flower exposed to the sun at long last, she had directed her face toward him, eager to bask in the light.

"Annalith," he said. "That never was your name, was it? I thought as much, though I didn't want to press you on the point. You were a skittish creature as it was."

"It was my mother's name," she said, and he heard the catch in her voice.

Wonder filled him as he opened his eyes and beheld the grown woman before him. She hadn't grown much taller since he'd last seen her, and her frame was almost as diminutive as it had been then. He estimated her height at five feet, which made her more than a foot shorter than him. Her deep, deep blue eyes studied him as he studied her, and he could have kicked himself for having failed to recognize the distinctive color. But, then, his gifts weren't foolproof. Perhaps the greatest danger to an Enforcer came about when they forgot that they couldn't see the clues if they didn't look.

He did remember, though, that those eyes hadn't been quite so thickly fringed by such long, black lashes when she'd been younger. Her hair was pulled back in a functional knot, and it was difficult to see the color clearly in the dim light of the room, but it seemed darker than it had been when she was younger, the shade now closer to mahogany. Her features were delicate, her cheekbones more prominent, her nose more defined than in her youth. Had he examined her long enough, he would have noticed the similarities. It had been many years since he had last seen her, but he had never forgotten about her.

Though he had to admit it was jarring to try to reconcile the sweet, fragile, innocent child he remembered with the lovely woman who stood before him.

"I didn't think you would return," she said, and he detected a note of hurt.

"Neither did I," he said. "And my departure was rather more sudden than I might have liked."

"Where have you been?"

"Here, there, and everywhere that doesn't have a name," he said, the tang of bitterness on his tongue.

That was indiscreet of him. He didn't know this woman, hadn't even really known her when she had been a girl. Oh, he had known she was lying about her identity. Despite its rumpled and patched state, her clothing had always been far too fine for that of a street urchin, and he had suspected the name she had given him was a fake, but he'd had no idea she belonged to House Staerleigh, and he could tell by her face that she had wanted it that way. But why?

"I didn't get the chance to say goodbye," she said.

Studying her, he took in the controlled expression, the determined set of her mouth, and knew that this was a woman who had spent many years disguising her feelings. She had been vulnerable when they had met, and he hadn't wanted to exploit that vulnerability. Prudence had told him to send her away, to not get involved, but she had seemed so alone that to ignore her would have been another cruel blow, and he hadn't been able to countenance it. He knew what it was to feel alone in the world.

"You didn't come before I had to go, but I did leave a message for you."

"I never got it," she said, the pain in her voice as fresh as if the parting had happened the day before rather than almost a decade ago.

"I'm sorry for that, I truly am."

"No, you needn't apologize," she said, turning to gaze out the window, hiding her face from him. She seemed about to say more, but then she abruptly changed the topic.

"I need to talk to you about what happened to Toran Stowley," she said.

"What *happened* to Toran Stowley?" he asked, finding her choice of words odd. She made it sound as though something had been done *to* him rather than his death having been self-inflicted. "Do you have information to share?"

He wasn't certain how to play this. She appeared to be seeking his assistance, but he had no idea where she fit into the bigger picture of the political situation in her House. All indications were that she and Captain Stowley were quite close, and yet here she was, skulking to Kila's lodgings under cover of night, seeking a covert conversation with him. What was her angle?

"No," she said, then she shook her head and amended her statement. "I don't know."

"You're not giving me much to go on. I can't be of assistance without understanding the nature of your concern."

With a frustrated sigh, she turned back to him. "I don't know how to feel about this."

"About what?"

"This trust I seem determined to place in you," she said, surprising him with her forthrightness. "I was a child when you knew me last, and so many years have passed since then, yet… When I saw you at the assembly, I felt like I had finally found someone in whom I could confide."

He watched her struggle with her emotions. Her words should have put him on his guard all the more, and yet her confusion seemed so sincere. Utilizing only the subtlest of physical clues, a scrap of paper here, a vase put back two inches from where it should have been, a blade that had been cleaned with just a

bit *too* much care, he could determine how a crime had been committed. Putting together human cues and signals was not his area of expertise, and he had long ago learned to rely on what he saw, not what he felt. Feelings were for Intentionists. Cold, hard facts and evidence were for Enforcers. Yet here he was, wanting to place stock in feelings.

"You can confide in me," he said, and even as he spoke the words he felt as though he were being pulled into a vortex. Whatever this was he was doing, it seemed he was determined to do it by leaping in with both feet.

Chapter 11

Kila's words lifted the weight of the enormous burden Cianne had been carrying for the past several years, and she sagged with relief. She was no fool, and she trusted that her instincts were decent, but knowing this and trying to square it with her emotions was something different. Despite that she had long felt like an outsider, ostracized by those who looked down on her because she wasn't an Adept, Staerleigh was still her House. The loyalty that had been ingrained in her since birth tugged at her, crept into her thoughts when she least expected it, made her question everything she observed and heard. She had written her worries off for years, telling herself that her House was simply doing what it had always done: working to secure its position. But things felt different of late, and she couldn't shake the impression that she was on the cusp of uncovering something monumental, that what she had learned about House Staerleigh thus far was but a small portion of what lay hidden beneath the surface.

Before Kila's return, she had lacked an ally with whom she could discuss her suspicions. Before Kila's return, she had lacked a great many things about which she had tried and failed to train herself not to think. She knew she ought to be cautious, but she was so very tired of feeling alone, and with him she had never felt alone.

"It's a long story," she told him, rubbing her weary eyes. Sapped of her tension, it would seem she had also been sapped of her strength, and she felt so tired she longed to curl up and sleep and sleep. She wasn't certain she had truly felt the impact of her new reality yet. Toran Stowley was gone, forever.

"Please, sit. I'll make us some tea."

A faint smile lifted her lips. "I always was fond of your tea."

He smiled in response. "But not my attempts at cooking."

Laughter burst from her, taking her by surprise. "Not that, no," she agreed.

She watched him move about his kitchen, eyes drinking in his graceful motions. As a child she had spent hours marveling over his fluidity, wondering if she would ever learn to move as he did. It was as if he were preternaturally aware of everything in his surroundings, which she supposed was the case, given

his Enforcer abilities. Even so, she'd never thought Burl particularly graceful. Canny, deliberate, and exceedingly difficult to deceive, yes. Graceful, no.

The years appeared to have been kind to him, if not mentally at least physically. He had been tall when she had known him before, his body lean and solid. He had filled out more in the intervening years; though he wasn't as bulky with muscle as a Battle Master, his power was evident in his taut arms, his controlled movements. He wore his sable hair longer than he had in the past, but he still tied the wavy strands back in the familiar, neat queue, which now hung between his shoulders rather than brushing over them. His eyes were even darker than his hair, a deep black that could be soft and warm or penetrating at turns. Tawny-skinned, he had high, strong cheekbones, an aquiline nose, a nicely formed mouth, a somewhat prominent brow, and a square chin. She had contemplated these features many times as a twelve and then thirteen-year-old, her initial girlish admiration for him blossoming into something that had confused her.

His face was the same and yet different. Age had improved his features, leaving them more chiseled than they had been when he was eighteen, as if he hadn't been fully formed then. She supposed she hadn't been either.

That face had filled her dreams and many of her waking moments for the last nine years, though the inexorable passage of time had eroded away the details until she'd been left with no more than an impression. She'd had no likeness of him as an adult other than what she had carried in her head, and her eyes were eager, hungry to fill in the blanks left by time.

"You've continued practicing the deshya," he said as he came to sit across from her, setting down a tray bearing his teapot and two cups. He'd added a plate of grapes, a few slices of cheese, and some olive-studded rolls. Her stomach growled, making her aware that she was famished.

"I have," she said. Unable to stop herself, she reached out and ran her fingers over his teapot. He'd told her once it had belonged to his mother. The cobalt glaze was smooth to the touch, pebbled by the stoneware underneath it.

"I've managed to keep it in one piece all these years," he said, noticing her gesture.

"It's strange, seeing you again," she said, the words slipping out.

He nodded and looked self-conscious. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

With a soft smile, she said, "I'm not, not entirely. There's a reason why I never gave you my true name. I didn't want you to know who I was. And it's understandable that you didn't recognize me. I wasn't much more than a child the last time you saw me. I've changed."

"Yes, you have," he said, the words unreadable. "Why didn't you want me

to know who you were?"

"For once I wanted to be someone other than Cianne Wyland of House Staerleigh. I wanted to just be me. I was tired of my role in the House defining me."

He seemed uncertain what to do with her blunt words. She was taking a leap of faith with him, trusting that what she said wouldn't get back to the Elders. It might be foolish of her, but if she was going to talk to anyone, he seemed the best candidate.

"Why did you come to me?" he asked. He poured the tea but kept an eye on her as he did so.

Accepting the cup he handed her, she wrapped her hands around it, warming them. "You're an outsider. You've been away from Cearova and the trade Houses' influence for some time, and even when you were last here, you weren't subject to their influence."

"How do you know?" he asked, seizing his turn to be blunt.

She would give him the truth, all of it, even if it didn't paint much of a flattering portrait of her. "I followed you. I listened. I went places I wasn't supposed to go."

"And still do, I'd wager." He lifted his brows.

"Yes, I still do," she admitted. "And that's why I'm here. I don't have any evidence to lay at your feet, but something is off. Something has been off since before Toran's death." Her voice cracked as she said his name, and she swallowed. Sipping her tea, she tried to collect herself. The scent of it, the fondly remembered spice and vanilla flavor, helped soothe her.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't believe Toran would have done this to himself. He showed no signs of any such inclination. Things were going well for him. The Elders put great stock in his advice. He made it his business to learn everything there was to know about trade conditions. He developed advantageous connections within House Mallay and House Rolland, gathering all the data he could find. His recommendations as to which goods our ships ought to carry earned Staerleigh—and, by extension, the other Houses—a great deal of money."

"Professional success doesn't equate with happiness," Kila said. He wasn't questioning her, but he was challenging her to consider all the angles and to offer proof to back her argument, making it clear she had his full attention.

"No, it doesn't, but I mean to illustrate that he had no reason to be despondent on that point. All indications were that his star would continue to rise."

"Very well. But what about his personal affairs?"

"Again, I can think of no reason why he might have been depressed. He was almost universally loved in the House, and not just because of his business acumen. He was one of the kindest people I knew, and he was blessed with the type of disposition that prompted him to find the bright side of every situation, and the good in everyone. Moreover, Lach had just returned from a long voyage."

"He was close with his son?"

"Yes, very. Lach's return was a surprise. He wasn't due back for a couple of weeks, but he said conditions were favorable and he had a very profitable journey. Toran would have wanted to celebrate that fact with him. He was delighted to see his son and thrilled about Lach's success, which he cared more about than his own."

"He had aspirations for his son?"

"Everyone does," Cianne said, her voice tightening. "Lach is House Staerleigh's golden son."

"I was under the impression you were friends with him," Kila said, studying her.

"We are, I think. I don't know. It's a complicated situation," she said. To her horror, she felt her cheeks blaze. How could she possibly explain the situation to him? It was awkward beyond endurance, and she hadn't managed to make sense of it herself.

She didn't love Lach, that she knew, not in the passionate, all-consuming manner of lovers. As a friend, yes, but she was devoid of any physical or emotional desire for him.

That wasn't the case for him. Cianne knew he desired her, and the knowledge of it was a constant torment. He cared for her, of that she was certain, but she wasn't certain his feelings for her could survive the blow she would have to deal them. He carried a blazing torch for her, everyone could see that, and she didn't know how he would react when she extinguished it. She desperately wanted to believe the best of her friend, desperately wanted to rest in the assurance that, like his father's, Lach's heart was too pure for bitterness to corrupt him. Yet whenever she dared to test the waters, to dip her toe in, the depth of the hurt on his face was enough to tell her that refusing his suit would devastate him. What would she do if her best friend grew to despise her rather than love her?

Wasn't it selfish of her to delay the inevitable because she dreaded finding out?

Kila's presence in the city was dangerous, far more dangerous than he knew. Not only was she asking him to take on the Houses, she was doing so

while cherishing feelings she shouldn't have. She had told herself time and again that her adoration of him had been nothing more than a childish infatuation. She had never believed herself.

"Do you and Captain Stowley have an understanding?" Kila asked.

Gods, but having to speak to him about this was excruciating. Still, he would hear it one way or another, and she would rather he heard it from her.

"Everyone expects me to marry him. He hasn't asked me to be his wife, but he's made his wishes plain. I won't marry him, though," she said softly, staring down at her hands.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry into your personal life."

"You didn't," she said, shrugging a shoulder. "And all this may seem irrelevant, but I don't think it is. You should know what the situation is like in House Staerleigh, and I suspect my relationship with Lach factors into it."

"How so?"

"As I said, I've no real evidence. But I have noticed some things. For instance, the presence of the Elders at the Stowley manor felt odd."

"Isn't it standard practice for the Elders to visit the family in times of loss?"

"It is, but they arrived at the manor even before Lach, my father, and I did. The moment we received the news, we raced to his home. As you've seen, the manors are all close to one another, so it isn't inconceivable that they could have reached the manor before we did, but it was still odd."

"Do you know what time it was when you received the news?" Kila asked, his face suddenly intense with concentration.

Cianne thought carefully. "Lach and I left the assembly at around eleven. I remember because it was somewhat rude of us, but allowances are always made for Lach, and he wanted to catch up with me away from the crowd. He was supposed to report to the Elders in the morning to discuss his next excursion, and his mother told him not to be too late because he would need his rest."

"Do you get along with his mother?"

"She despises me," Cianne said baldly. She tried to keep the bitterness from her tone. "She's never thought me good enough for Lach. I have no Adept abilities and no position of any prominence. Were my father not as powerful as he is, I would likely be relegated to second-class status within the House."

"Would she approve of a match between you, then?"

"She would to secure an alliance with my father."

His face pensive, Kila rubbed his chin. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to interrupt you. Please continue with what you were saying."

Concentrating, she did her best to pinpoint a time, which was difficult as she hadn't consulted a clock and could do no better than estimate. "We had

finished tea, but Lach hadn't yet said anything about leaving. It was perhaps midnight, or a quarter past."

"Was your father at the manor with you?"

"He was, but he was in his study. The messenger didn't say that Lach's father had died, but he said there was an emergency of a dire nature, and Lach should return home immediately. Lach was alarmed, and there was a commotion as I called for servants to bring his things. My father came out of his study, and Lach told him about the message, at which point my father said he would come with us."

"He said he would come with you? Or Captain Stowley asked him to come along?"

"He said he would come. Lach was concerned only with getting out the door as quickly as possible."

Kila's face was pained. "Annali—Miss Wyland, is it possible that your father is connected to whatever you think may be going on in your House?"

"Yes," she said. It was a betrayal, and she knew it, but she wanted to find the truth, even if it implicated her father.

Or especially if it implicates him?

No, she refused to believe that. She and her father had their differences, but she wasn't acting out of malice. She wouldn't allow either guilt or a misplaced sense of duty to dissuade her.

Kila accepted the information without saying anything more, though his eyes were sympathetic. "How long do you think it took you to get to the Stowley manor?"

"No more than ten minutes from the time we received the message."

"So in order to have beaten you there, the Elders would have had to receive the message at around the same time you did, if not sooner."

"Precisely. Which raises many questions, at least for me. Moiria would have wanted the Elders informed, but shouldn't her first reaction have been to inform Lach, then the others?"

"It does seem odd," Kila conceded.

Glancing out the window, Cianne saw that the night was fleeing. She had best get back to the enclave. "I must go. I know I haven't given you much to go on. I have more to tell you, but it will have to wait for another time. No one in the House can know that you and I are meeting privately."

"Not even Captain Stowley?" he asked, evaluating her.

"Not even Captain Stowley," she confirmed. "I assume it goes without saying that I'm asking you not to speak to Officer Burl about this either."

"I give you my word."

"One last thing," she said as she stood. "After Lach was sedated and I went into the sitting room with the Elders, Elder Borean gave me this to dry my tears. I noticed it smelled strange, but I didn't think much of it at the time."

His eyes followed as she tugged a pouch from the pocket at her hip, and it made her fingers tremble. She handed it to him and watched as he opened it, pulling out Elder Borean's handkerchief. Raising it to his nose, he sniffed it, his eyes widening.

"It smells like the substance Advisor Stowley used to commit suicide."

She might have been tired before, but now Cianne was exhausted. "I suspected as much."

Chapter 12

True to his word, the next day Kila said nothing to Burl of his meeting with Cianne Wyland. Even had Miss Wyland not extracted the promise from him, he wouldn't have said anything. The handkerchief could connect Elder Borean to the incident at the Stowley manor, or it could not. Either way, Kila didn't trust Burl with such information. If Toran Stowley's death hadn't been a suicide, if someone had, in fact, killed him and staged it to make it look like a suicide, Kila couldn't trust that they'd done it without assistance. The Elders would have known that Burl would arrive at the scene, but they couldn't have trusted that she would be the sole Enforcement officer to arrive.

He mentally went over the scene in Toran Stowley's study again. He had thought things seemed very neat there, but he couldn't allow himself to pursue that train of thought without solid proof. Determining that the evidence didn't fit based on his personal view of what a suicide scene looked like was a real, dangerous possibility for him.

Curiosity ate at him. He was certain his conversation with Miss Wyland had barely scratched the surface, and he wondered what more she had to tell him.

For the time being, he had decided to also withhold the information from Chief Flim. Yes, Miss Wyland had asked him not to tell anyone, but perhaps she didn't know that there were Enforcers who were skeptical about what was going on in the Houses. Chief Flim could be a valuable ally, but he would wait to establish a connection between her and Miss Wyland until he had a better idea of what was going on.

Exactly how many sides was he playing, he wondered. Enforcement had been his life, necessitating subterfuge from time to time, so he didn't feel guilty about keeping things from his chief or from the House, but he did feel guilty about keeping them from Miss Wyland. He didn't know why. Perhaps it was because he sensed she might see it as a betrayal if she found out. Perhaps it was because she seemed desperate to believe that someone could be working *with* her instead of alongside her. What she had said of her relationship with the captain, of the interplay between her father, Moiria Stowley, and the Elders, indicated

that the poor woman was surrounded by machinations and searching for someone she could trust not to manipulate her.

Is she at that? Or are you being taken in by her? You think members of the Houses are incapable of forming their own agendas, agendas that might not mesh with those of the rest of the House?

The doubt chafed at him. He remembered those earnest eyes, that lovely face, her delicate form. But he also remembered the fluid grace of her movements, the skill with which she'd produced the dagger. He'd been expecting the move, but he had been impressed nonetheless. Testing her would be the wise thing to do, perhaps even asking her to practice with him as she once had. She might only have perfected the first form, but even executing that with the level of skill she'd displayed would have taken a great deal of practice. When coupled with her skill at sneaking up on him, leaping from the wall and down to his garden without making a noise, he felt it was safe to assume that Miss Wyland had plenty of useful skills. The question was, were they truly a secret from the rest of the House as she had claimed, or were they solely a secret from select members of the House? After all, what she had told him of the good captain suggested the man would be willing to do just about anything for her.

Kila would have to observe her. She wanted to meet with him again to give him more information about the House, and he would encourage that. Spending time with her would help him draw a conclusion about her motives, and it would give him a chance to match what she told him against what he was able to observe himself and gather from his work with Burl.

"An Movis, with me," Burl said, crooking her finger at him.

"The Healers have a report for us?" he asked.

"Yes, then we're scheduled to meet with the Elders and the Stowley family at the enclave."

"Will the Stowley family be up to speaking with us?"

She cast a sidelong glance his way, and he thought he might have detected a hint of approval at his delicacy with regard to the family. "They'll have to be. Word about the advisor's death won't stay secret for long, and the Elders will want to ensure that no misinformation is spread about."

It was a rather ridiculous statement. She knew as well as Kila that it wouldn't matter how carefully the House managed the message. Rumors could and would spread throughout the city. If the situation were remotely like the chief had suggested, the rumors were likely to be of the vicious variety. Kila didn't place much stock in rumors as a general rule, but he would keep an ear to the ground. Something of use might find its way into the grapevine.

"Officer Burl, Officer an Movis," the chief said, inclining her head at them

as she fell into step beside them. Burl's mouth turned down at the corners, but she could hardly protest. Given the sensitive nature of the incident and Stowley's high-ranking status, it would have been odd for the chief not to be involved in their inquiry.

"Chief Flim, Officers Burl and an Movis," the Chief Anatomical Examiner greeted them, nodding. He looked weary, and Kila suspected he'd been there the whole night conducting his examination.

"Good morning, Maxim," the chief replied. "What do you have for us?"

"I'm ruling it a death by suicide," the examiner said, not wasting any time. "I found no signs of trauma or struggle, nor any injuries inconsistent with the minor abrasions the victim would have suffered as a result of his fall. Death was caused by sophoria overdose. The internal examination provided evidence consistent with this diagnosis, and the Apothecist confirms that the vial contained sophoria."

Sophoria was a common enough plant extract that was often used to treat severe and persistent headaches. They would have to look into the advisor's health, but Kila was certain they would find that Stowley had suffered from headaches and had been advised by his personal Healer to use sophoria to relieve his symptoms.

That does nothing to support murder suspicions, but, then, poisoning the man with a drug he was known to have used would also be a clever way to cover up the crime.

"Thank you, Maxim," the chief said. He grunted and didn't bother hiding his yawn. "Go home and get some sleep."

Krozemund waved a hand at them as he disappeared into his office, and the chief led them to the stairs.

"We'd best get to the enclave," she said. "We can wrap this up by this afternoon, leave the House in peace."

"The Elders will appreciate that," Burl said.

"Terrible business," the chief commented.

They didn't say anything more as they took a carriage to the enclave. Burl appeared satisfied with the information they'd received. Kila couldn't tell how the chief felt about it, but she hadn't tried anything even as small as catching his eye, so she was either satisfied that this was a suicide or she was keeping her doubts to herself.

A gray drizzle had descended on the city, as if even the skies were mourning Toran Stowley's passing. For all Kila knew, they were. "Borne in by the waters and borne out by the waters," was a famous Seafarer expression, and perhaps the only people whose faith for the Lord of Water was as devout as that

of the Seafarers' was the Agromancers'. Both groups lived, died, prospered, or failed at the whim of Cearus, so it was not inconceivable that Cearus himself might be mourning the passing of one of his most faithful.

The cobbles were slick with rain, and it was slow going through the streets. They reached the enclave without incident, and the stone façades that had struck Kila with their gracious beauty the day before were now rendered somber. Rain was no deterrent to House Staerleigh, a good number of whose members spent most of their time in some degree of dampness, so the weather alone wouldn't have kept them indoors. Judging by the drawn curtains, the empty streets, and the strange quiet of the enclave, it would seem that word was already out.

They arrived at the Stowley manor and were admitted by a butler. Several people sat in the drawing room, the widow amongst them, but Captain Stowley was nowhere in sight.

"Chief Flim, Officers," Moiria said. She appeared more composed and alert than she had the previous night, though her eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, her face and lips colorless. She wore a green gown so dark it was almost black, without any adornment, making the pallor of her skin stand out in stark relief. Her hair was in a severe knot, pulled so tightly against her head that it tugged at the skin of her temples.

"Might we speak in private?" the chief asked her.

Moiria nodded and excused herself from the others in the sitting room, leading them deeper into the house, into a small library.

"I appreciate your discretion," she said as she closed the doors behind them. "They're all members of my family and Toran's, but I should prefer to break the news to them myself."

The chief nodded. Hearing about a loved one's suicide from a family member or friend was difficult enough, let alone hearing it from an Enforcer.

"We're sorry to trouble you," the chief said. "We need to ask you a few more questions so we can complete our report. The inquiry will be closed later this afternoon, your husband's death having been definitively ruled a suicide."

Moiria's composure rippled, her face crumbling. "How am I to feel about such news? Is it possible to be relieved that a loved one died by their own hand rather than by that of another?"

"I wish I could answer that for you, Advisor Stowley," the chief said gently.

"Advisor, did your husband have any illnesses or other chronic conditions?" Burl asked.

"He began suffering from headaches a few years back. His Healer said they were brought on by stress and overwork, and that there was nothing physically

wrong with him. She suggested he use sophoria to ease the effects whenever he found the headaches debilitating. Our Apothecist made the powder for him. I know that's what he took to— I recognized the vial."

"We're very sorry," Burl said.

Taking a shuddering breath, Moiria nodded. "I hope he finds in Cearus's embrace the peace he sought. Will my husband's remains be returned to us soon, so that we might bury him?"

"I've made arrangements for him to be returned in a few hours' time," the chief said.

"Thank you."

"Please give our condolences to Captain Stowley as well," Burl said.

"Thank you, I shall," Moiria said, with a tremulous smile. "I'm afraid he's indisposed at the moment."

"We shan't trouble you further," the chief said.

"I'll show you out."

Back in the carriage, the chief said, "Burl, I won't assign you and an Movis any new cases for the next few days, in case House Staerleigh should have need of you."

"Yes, Chief," Burl said, nodding.

The chief left them at the station doors, and Kila trailed Burl back to their desks. "Anything in particular you need me to do?" he asked her.

"No. I'll handle the report. You should take the time to continue to familiarize yourself with House Staerleigh and our current cases."

Summarily dismissed. Burl's wanting to handle the report didn't surprise him. No doubt she would see to it that the wording was done so delicately as not to offend House Staerleigh in any way. Still, he would have to make a point to get his hands on it, to go over everything in minute detail, try to determine if anything stood out.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Kila remained at his desk after Burl left, scheming to devise a way he might get hold of the report without Burl's hearing about it. Try as he might, he came up with nothing and reluctantly left an hour later.

Turned out he needn't have bothered. He was about to head down his street when someone hissed at him from an alleyway. Glancing about to ensure no one was watching, he slipped into its shadows.

"Chief Flim," he said, surprised. He'd expected to see Miss Wyland.

"The report on Stowley's suicide," the chief said, handing him a leather pouch speckled with rain.

"Any reason I should be suspicious?"

"Not as far as I can tell," she said, frowning. "Keep your eyes open, though, Kila. Things will be shifting in Staerleigh, and until we see where the pieces fall, we won't have much to go on. Stay as close to Burl as you can."

"Will do. Anything else I ought to be aware of?"

She shook her head and turned up the collar of her greatcoat, concealing the lower part of her face. "Watch yourself." She disappeared down the alley, Kila staring after her.

Good advice. If only I knew who I needed to watch out for.

Chapter 13

"No," Lach said in a voice so hoarse it was almost unintelligible. "No more." He turned his head away, refusing the draught Cianne was supposed to be administering. He had refused to take his previous doses from anyone other than her, but he'd taken them dutifully enough earlier in the day.

"Lach, your mother said—"

"Since when have you cared what my mother says?" he asked, the words coming out in short gasps. She was shocked. The tension between his mother and Cianne was something about which they had never spoken. Cianne knew Lach had noticed it, but she also knew he had chosen to ignore it as a means of telling her that he couldn't care less about his mother's disapproval.

"Fair enough," she said, setting the draught aside. He was exhausted and overwrought, and she didn't know if he'd made the comment as a joke or if he was angry with her for some reason. His emotions had been volatile the entire day, though she suspected the sedative was exacerbating the problem. It made him fall asleep for hours on end, but he was fitful and combative whenever it began to wear off.

"So thirsty," he said, panting.

Cianne poured him a glass of water and he drained it, holding the glass out to her. She refilled it and he drained that one as well.

"The sedative?" she asked.

"Think so. Don't want to be drugged anymore," he said, anger darkening his face. "She think she can drug this away for me?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure anyone knows what they're doing at the moment." Tears sprang to Cianne's eyes and she brushed them away.

"He's gone," Lach said, his voice breaking. He started to sob, but quietly this time.

"I'm sorry, Lach. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," Cianne said, putting her arms around him. Face pressed against her neck, he cried for a while. She rested her cheek against his hair, wetting it with her own tears.

"He didn't do this, Cianne," Lach said at last, when his tears were spent. He pulled away from her, sagging back against his pillows.

"Lach—" she began in a gentle tone.

"No! Don't you dare talk to me the way she does!"

The force of his anger took her aback, and she kept a wary eye fixed on him as she sat back in her chair, which a servant had placed next to the side of his bed, hours ago. It felt more like days. She poured herself some tepid tea and took a sip.

"Sorry," he said, hanging his head. He forced himself into an upright position, drawing his knees up to his chest. He dropped his head into his hands. "This grief, it— I feel like it will tear me apart."

"I know," she said softly.

"I know you do. Of course you do. I don't remember you acting like this, though," he said, waving a disgusted hand at himself.

"That's mostly because you didn't see it. I withdrew. We all deal with grief in our own way."

"I'm so angry," he said, the words a barely audible whisper.

She could understand that. She had been angry at her mother for dying, but Annalith hadn't gone out willingly. Cianne didn't know if she honestly suspected that what had happened to Toran had been anything but suicide, but she could imagine how she would feel if she were in Lach's shoes.

"It's okay," she said, hoping she didn't sound patronizing. "If you need to be angry, be angry."

"I'm angry because it's a lie," he said. He lifted his head to look at her, his face devastated by anguish, his eyes red and raw, his nose running, his cheeks scratchy with stubble. His hair stood on end as he yanked his hands through it.

"What's a lie?"

"That he did this to himself. He would never do this to himself!"

Chewing the inside of her cheek, Cianne tried to find the right words. This was all so grueling, far more grueling than she could have imagined. She had to keep him in the dark. Whatever was happening in House Staerleigh, she didn't think he played any part in it, but his mother might. Lach would never agree to do what Cianne intended to do, what she had long done: skulk around, observe, and snoop, until she could winkle out everyone's secrets. He would want to go charging in, demanding answers. Such blunt methods would not only get them nowhere, they might get them killed.

"You think I'm in denial," he said with a harsh laugh, before she could reply.

"I don't know, Lach. Perhaps," she said, sighing.

"Perhaps I am," he said, his anger fading, leaving him looking older than his years, weighed down with grief. "But I don't believe he'd do this, Cianne.

Every fiber of my being rejects the idea. He wasn't sad, he wasn't upset. He was a valued and valuable member of the House. Yes, he seemed preoccupied lately, but he wasn't despondent. He was happy I was home. He and I made plans, for Cearus's sake! We were going to go on a voyage, spend some time together, before—" He bit off his tirade abruptly. "Why would he make plans with me, knowing he intended to do this horrible thing?"

"What if he didn't want you to know that something was wrong?" she asked. As much as she hated herself for posing the question, he was irrational, that much was obvious. There might be something to his assertions, and she had already committed herself to looking into it, but she couldn't afford to appear to conspire with him. She had to behave as any other House member might when presented with his assertions.

"Cearus's bloody trident, Cianne. I thought you of all people would understand."

His words hit her like a slap in the face. Being the subject of his unbridled fury hurt.

"I do understand," she said, her words fierce. "I understand that you're hurting, and I understand that hurt. I hurt too. But lashing out at me isn't going to make it better."

"No, you're right, it isn't," he said, his voice breaking once more. His shoulders shook with dry sobs as he buried his face in his hands.

"Please, Lach, please give yourself some time. I don't want you to stop talking to me, but I don't want you to make this worse on yourself or anyone else."

His whole body shuddered as he inhaled. "All right. If you don't mind, I'd like to be alone right now."

"Of course. Whatever you need." Giving his hand a brief squeeze, she rose from her seat. "Should I come back in the morning?"

"No, the afternoon. My mother and I have to meet with the Elders, make arrangements." He had to force the words out, and his throat worked convulsively as he swallowed.

"Get some rest," she said, kissing the top of his sweaty head.

Reaching up, he caught one of her hands, squeezing it so hard she had to bite back a yelp of pain. He brought it to his lips and kissed it, then traced the veins running over the top.

"I need you, Cianne. I don't think I can do this without you. I couldn't bear to lose you as well."

"You won't lose me," she said, her throat aching, knowing the words were a lie. She wanted to pull her hand from his but didn't want to do anything to

increase his distress.

He loosened his grip and she slipped her hand free. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Turning his back to her, he curled in on himself, his head buried in his pillows. She wasn't certain leaving him alone was wise, and though he might be angry with her for it, she decided to tell his mother that he had refused the draught. Moiria would ensure nothing happened to him.

Cianne had heard the Enforcers arrive earlier. Lach had been asleep, and she had pressed her ear to the door but hadn't heard anything more than the sound of their footsteps fading down the corridor and disappearing behind another door. She had wanted to eavesdrop, but she hadn't wanted to leave Lach in case he woke and needed her. Kila could tell her what had happened, and she would tell him about her conversation with Lach.

Toran's study door loomed at the end of the corridor as she left Lach's room, tempting her. She wanted to slip inside and have a look about, rifle through Toran's papers and see if she could find anything, anything at all that might help her. She didn't dare attempt it, though. Too many people were in the manor, and if someone were to see her entering or leaving the study, she would not be able to explain it away. She would have to content herself with waiting until that night, when she could slip into the house under cover of darkness.

"Advisor Stowley, may I have a word?" Cianne asked, folding her hands demurely as she stepped into the sitting room.

"Certainly," Moiria said, walking out into the corridor with her.

"Lach didn't want to take the last dose of sedative," she said.

Moiria frowned. "That may be for the best. He'll want to be lucid for what we have to do tomorrow." She slumped against the wall, passing a hand over her forehead.

"He's not well," Cianne said gently. "He's very agitated. I'm concerned about him."

"I'll see to him," Moiria said, a flash of dislike crossing her face.

"He's asked me to come back in the afternoon, after you meet with the Elders."

"You're always welcome," Moiria said. She couldn't have made the statement more perfunctory if she had tried.

"My father asked me to tell you that if you have need of anything, don't hesitate to call, no matter the hour."

The mention of Cianne's father was enough to smooth some of the lines from Moiria's face, and Cianne wondered, for one appalled second, if the woman was having an affair with her father. But, no, she didn't think that was possible. Her father conducted all kinds of meetings with all kinds of people at all kinds of

hours, but she was fairly certain none of them were assignations. Besides, she kept track of her father's meetings, and she couldn't recall his being alone with Moiria more than once, and then only for a brief period of time. Every other meeting with her had included others as well.

"That's very kind of him. Please offer him my gratitude."

"I will. Good night, Advisor Stowley."

"Good night, Cianne."

Cianne lingered long enough to say good night to Lach's family, all of whom she knew. Some appeared to resent her presence, but others studied her with appraising gazes, their expressions knowing. It made her feel sick to her stomach. Were they anticipating planning a wedding once the funeral was done?

Outside she drew in a deep breath of the evening air. The drizzle had continued unabated since morning. Dreary and chilly as it was, the moisture felt good against her skin, as if it might cleanse away the stain of her thoughts.

It would make Stowley manor's walls slippery, so she would have to take extra care when she climbed them. First, though, she had to go home and put in an appearance with her father, little as she relished the thought.

Fortunately for her he was tied up in his study. She popped her head in to pass along Moiria's message, and he nodded before sending her away with an impatient wave.

She ate a quick, solitary meal in her room before dismissing Vivie for the night. She remained in front of her vanity for several more minutes, brushing her hair to a fine shine, until she was certain Vivie really was gone. Then she got ready, tying her hair back, dressing in her dark clothing, and assembling some of her necessities: three daggers hidden in various sheaths on her body, and a small pack containing some rope, powdered chalk, and several metal spikes.

Leaving her room, she crept through the corridor, tucking herself into a tiny supply closet a few doors down from her father's room. Once his heavy tread had passed her she counted to five hundred and then set out, climbing through a small window on the third story. She knew the exterior of their manor so well that she could skim, eyes closed, along the narrow stone ledge ringing the windows without falling or alerting anyone to her presence. She had done it, several times.

Guards patrolled the streets, so Cianne took a circuitous route to avoid them. The buildings in the enclave were spaced farther apart than those in the city, precluding her from traveling via the rooftops, as she did when she prowled the city proper. Instead, she wound a path through gardens, over walls, and along the upper story of a manor belonging to an elderly lady who retired almost before the sun set. The garden walls in the enclave were low, but one side of the

Stowley garden was concealed by a voluminous lilac bush, and Cianne climbed with confidence, knowing no one would see her. From the second floor she made a circuit of the manor, ensuring no candles were guttering behind the windows. All was still.

Jimmying open a window at the back of the manor, she slipped inside. Hopefully no one would ever discover that the latch was loose. She could probably still find another way in if they did, but that loose latch made her life a lot easier.

Skulking through Lach's home made her feel decidedly unsavory, but she pushed the discomfort aside. She consoled herself with the thought that she was no thief. After all, she never took objects of material worth. Still, she couldn't deny that she was splitting hairs, as she freely stole information.

Creeping to a door, she opened it a crack and held her breath, straining her ears. Nothing. Taking care not to allow the door to creak, she opened it wide enough for her to slip through it and pulled it shut behind her without making any noise. As a child she had resented her smallness. She had wished she were burlier, hale and hearty like her Houses' best sailors. As an adult smallness worked in her favor. Clad all in black, she was difficult to spot in the darkness, and she weighed so little that moving silently required far less effort than it would have for a hale and hearty sailor-type.

She made it to Toran's study without incident. Was this a foolhardy effort? What could she hope to find in here? If someone had murdered Toran they would have known the Enforcers would trek through whichever room he was found in, so they would have to be devoid of intelligence to leave anything lying about.

Ought to have thought of that sooner. Might as well take a look while you're here.

After half an hour of searching, though, she found nothing. It didn't look as though anyone had done much since Toran's death. Parchment and ledgers littered the top of his desk, and she kept her eyes studiously averted from the carpet. She didn't like the pattern she saw in its crushed surface.

Paging through the ledgers, her eyes glazed over at the endless columns of numbers. She detested accounting, long ago deciding it was better left to the Coin Masters. She had already ascertained there was nothing of interest in any of the drawers, nor did they have false bottoms or anything attached to their undersides. The parchments also yielded nothing, and she was on the verge of calling it a night when she halted. Paging through the ledger more slowly, she noticed something that struck her as odd. Toran must have devised his own system, because he never used words, just letters and numbers. Positive figures

had been inked in black and negatives in red. It was all very neat, orderly, but Cianne studied one entry, brow furrowed in concentration, then flipped past a few pages. Sure enough, she saw it at that entry as well. So faint she had almost mistaken it for a random blot, there was a hash mark next to the entry, just as there were with at least six others scattered throughout the ledger. What if Toran had attempted to hide something but had done so in plain sight?

Easing the ledger into her pack, Cianne decided it was time to go. It might prove to be a dead end, but it was all she had to work with, for the moment.

Chapter 14

"I've brought you something," Miss Wyland said as he emerged from his office on his way to make himself a cup of tea.

"Do make yourself at home," he said in a dry voice, wondering if he appeared as taken aback by her presence as he felt.

Brushing the comment aside, she said, "I've no wish to invade your privacy, but marching through your front door wouldn't be advisable. It's best if I slip in and out."

"You seem to have become quite skilled at it."

"I have," she said, her voice matter-of-fact.

He didn't think the statement prideful, merely a confirmation of something he had already ascertained, and he liked her for it. He disliked braggarts but didn't see the point of being coy about one's accomplishments, and he found distasteful anyone who employed false modesty in an attempt to garner the favorable opinions of others. Straightforwardness was a virtue he appreciated.

"What do you have?" he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. He wasn't overly fond of the thought of her coming into and out of his lodgings at will. It was also no use denying that it was rather humiliating to know that she could get the better of his security. He ought to look into that.

"No need to be ashamed of your security measures," she said, as if reading his mind. Her gaze was fixed on him, so perhaps she had seen the brief frown that had crossed his face. "They're more than sufficient to deter any common thief. In fact, your window latches and door locks are better than those on many of the enclave dwellings, and the wires you've rigged in front of the windows and doors are quite ingenious. It pains me to admit it, but I almost missed the hair you tucked into the window frame."

He couldn't stop himself, he grinned, but he quickly schooled his features into an expression of gravity. "Thank you for that evaluation. I wouldn't have thought a young woman of high standing in House Staerleigh would possess such skills," he said, prodding a bit, waiting to see if she would bite.

She shrugged, her face remaining a blank mask. "We must all develop what skills we can."

"True enough." He would let it rest for now. He sensed a frontal assault would garner him nothing. She was no doubt used to maintaining the utmost discretion, and if she felt he were pushing her she was likely to shut down. Gaining her trust by increments would yield better results, if he could manage the feat. Though she was eager to share everything she could about her House, she was certainly cagey when it came to details about herself and her somewhat shady skills.

Sliding a dark brown leather tome from her pack, she handed it over to him. "I found this ledger on Toran Stowley's desk."

"Dare I ask how you obtained this?" he asked, raising his brows.

"I'm certain it goes without saying that Moiria Stowley didn't offer it to me for my perusal."

"You know I can't do anything with this on an official basis?"

"Yes, I am aware of that. It's hardly relevant, anyhow, is it, as Enforcement has closed the inquiry."

"That's true as well. Our Chief Anatomical Examiner confirmed that Toran Stowley died of self-inflicted injury. An overdose of sophoria caused his death, and his body showed no signs of any other trauma. Both his wife and the House Healer confirm that Advisor Stowley took an occasional dose of sophoria to relieve his chronic headaches, and Burl and I spoke with the Apothecist who made the compound."

"All wrapped up as neatly as a gift."

"Which isn't an indication that anything is amiss."

"Nor is it an indication that anything isn't. Do you think Burl wouldn't stoop to helping the House cover up a crime if she were asked?" Miss Wyland's tone was confrontational.

For a second he was tempted to protest, but he'd be doing so on principle alone. The thought of another Enforcer aiding and abetting a crime was beyond sickening, but he knew Miss Wyland wasn't insulting his profession in general. She was better acquainted with Burl than he was, and she seemed to have a finger on the pulse of whatever underhanded activities were going on in House Staerleigh, even if she didn't have all the details. She was testing him, determining if he was open to the possibility that Toran Stowley's death and the subsequent neat inquiry were the result of a conspiracy.

"I know nothing about Burl," he said, which was the honest truth.

She accepted it. "Allow me to fill in some details as to how Cearova works. The trade Houses run the city—unofficially, of course. All three Houses have made an excellent show of swearing their allegiance to the royal family, such as it is. They are staunchly loyal subjects of the regents, trusting in their wisdom at

determining the line of succession, and eagerly awaiting coronation day.

"I needn't tell you how well that affair has gone; the claims are still disputed and seemingly no closer to resolution than they were twenty years ago. Does it matter, at any rate? Astoran's next monarch will be a fourth cousin of the former king, twice removed; a distant relation of the former queen, the provenance of whose line seems dubious; or the king's third cousin, an infant too small to travel with the royal entourage at the time, or he surely would have been slain as well. Every advisor of value also happened to be with the royal family at the time of the massacre, which means Astoran is, in essence, being led by a pack of headless chickens.

"Meanwhile, the trade Houses have been free to do as they please. Cearova has become almost a realm unto itself, for all its talk of being part of Astoran."

Kila had to admit he hadn't kept up on royal politics. He was aware, of course, of the upheaval caused by the royal massacre, as well as the chaos that had ensued. Yet the fact of the matter was that people had to continue on with their lives. When he'd last been in Cearova, there had been talk of what was happening in Vyramas, the royal seat, but he had paid it little heed. He wasn't an Astoran, and though he liked the realm well enough, he could return to Myrsha if Astoran's position became untenable. Once he was in the remote regions of Astoran the problem had seemed even more removed from daily life. After all, it wasn't as though the royal family had paid that much attention to the tiny forest villages on the outskirts of their realm. King or no king, queen or no queen, not much had changed for the residents.

For the trade Houses, though, royal affairs would be of great interest, so it didn't surprise him that Miss Wyland was so well-versed. The likelihood that the trade Houses had Intentionists and Obscurists galore embedded within Vyramas was high. Most of the Adept Houses, in fact, enjoyed various benefits as a result of the lengthy instability that went along with Astoran's lack of a Head of State. Without a clear leader to dictate what they should and shouldn't do, to command them to curb their excesses, and to keep them in line, they could conduct themselves however they saw fit.

The benefits weren't relegated to the Adept Houses either. The criminal elements enjoyed freer rein than they would have under the aristocracy. Crime couldn't run rampant, of course, particularly in a place like Cearova, where the people would turn to the might of the trade Houses. But to whom could the common people in other parts of the realm turn? Their young lords and ladies hadn't any real sway as there was no one on the throne they could influence, which meant the common folk hadn't an obvious authority to whom they could address their grievances. Clerics had stepped into the breach, but they were held

in check by the Adept Houses, who no more wanted Church control than they did an autocratic monarch. The Church reciprocated by holding the Houses in check, and so the wheel turned.

Even so, the realm was beginning to buckle under the pressure, the cracks becoming more apparent each day. If the trade Houses were plotting something, as both the chief and Miss Wyland seemed to think, wasn't it probable that their schemes concerned the question of who would lead the realm? Could Toran Stowley's death be somehow tied to this if it was, in fact, a murder?

Miss Wyland maintained her silence while Kila thought, and he appreciated her allowing him to ruminate undisturbed. "I won't commit to any belief as of yet," he said at last. "But I will allow that if someone in House Staerleigh wished to cover up a crime, they would benefit from the assistance of someone like Officer Burl."

"Given this, I'd suggest you take care with Burl. I don't know the extent of your gift, but I can assure you that she isn't one of the barely touched."

It was valuable information, and he filed it away. "How well do you know Burl?"

"Not well on a personal level, but I have gathered as much information on her as I can, both through observation and through reading House member documents. I have nothing glaring that I can provide you that points to her engaging in unethical conduct, but she has made herself quite indispensable to House Staerleigh."

"In other words, you had no hope that the official inquiry would uncover anything, even if there were something to be found."

"Precisely," she said, nodding her head at the ledger. "That's why I had no qualms about engaging in unethical conduct of my own."

"Are you so certain you aren't allowing your imagination to run away with you?"

"No," she admitted with a sigh, looking away from him. "Perhaps I simply need to feel as though I am doing something useful in this case. However, I do know that something is going on in the House, even if it is unconnected to Toran's death. What's more, Lach is insisting that his father didn't kill himself."

"It's not unusual for the loved ones of a suicide to insist that the person who committed suicide would never do such a thing."

"Yes, I know that sort of denial is common, and I can't say for certain that what Lach insists isn't a product of denial. But he was vehement. He says he and his father made plans to take a voyage together, which does seem like an odd thing for a person to do if they're planning on taking their own life before said journey. Yes, it could have been an attempt on his part to conceal the depths of

his despair from his son, but Lach insists that his father wasn't despondent. He says his father was preoccupied, but not in any manner that made Lach fear for him. Moreover, Lach says his father was thrilled that he arrived home early from his voyage."

"Very well, but what if Captain Stowley's return simply made Advisor Stowley have second thoughts about killing himself? Perhaps in a fit of relief he made plans with his son, but then his despair claimed him once more."

"It's possible," Miss Wyland said.

"Is anything suspicious about the captain's being kept sedated?"

"No," she said definitively. "I've never seen Lach in such a state. He needed the sedation for his own good. I don't think his mother was keeping him drugged in order to keep him quiet, if that's what you mean to imply, though I wouldn't put such an action past her."

"Have you known her to scheme in the past?"

"That woman never ceases to scheme," Miss Wyland said, her voice dripping with disdain.

Opening the ledger, Kila flipped through its pages. "These marks," he said, noting them immediately. It was as if they'd leapt off the page and assaulted his eyes. "What do they mean?" He glanced up at Miss Wyland, who looked rather impressed.

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps nothing. Perhaps they're just smudges caused by his having accidentally brushed his pen over the page."

"No," Kila said. Someone without his gifts might have written them off as accidental, but he had an unshakable sense that they weren't.

"So what could they mean?"

"You don't know?"

"Unfortunately, no," she said, disappointed. As he'd suspected, she'd show her emotions when it came to House affairs but was determined to remain cautious when it came to anything personal.

"May I keep this?"

"Best if you do. I have my hiding places, but I need to do all I can to ensure the House remains unaware of my actions. I'd recommend you don't hide it here, but it's for the best if I don't know where you choose to hide it."

It was a sensible suggestion. He couldn't afford for someone to discover he had House property in his lodgings.

"I'll let you know what I am able to glean from it."

"I might be able to contribute something as well, once I have an idea of what the transactions may indicate."

"It would benefit us both if I had some means of contacting you in case of

emergency."

She nodded. "Have you a quill and ink?"

He procured them from his office, giving them to her along with a scrap of parchment. She shook her head and set the parchment aside.

"No, you'll have to memorize this."

Taking his hand, she began to draw a map on his palm. She swept the quill lightly over his skin so as not to scratch him with the pointed tip, and the sensation was ticklish. More disconcerting was the sensation that filled him at the physical contact with her. She cupped his hand with her left hand, holding it steady as she wrote with her right. Her palm was warm and rough with calluses. He wondered for a moment why it struck no one as odd that a lady such as her should have such rough hands, but then he realized that it must be a common trait in House Staerleigh. Whether she went to sea or no, she must have assisted when needed with loading or unloading cargo, lashing it into ships' holds, and other such sailing-related tasks.

He liked the sensation of his hand in hers. A faint current seemed to run through them at the contact, and he strongly suspected that the current would increase were he to come in contact with more of her. Her smell was rather intoxicating as well, a fresh, somewhat bracing scent, like the wind on a stormy summer day, a scent he had always loved.

Her concentration on her drawing also allowed him to study her unimpeded. Tracing her cheekbones with his eyes, the shape of her jaw, the curve of her lips, he searched for traces of the girl he'd once known. She was there underneath, he could sense it. Time had hardened Miss Wyland, but that wounded child still existed somewhere, and it caused a rush of sympathetic warmth to wash through him. She didn't need his protection, but he wanted to offer it to her anyway.

Ah, but to offer her comfort isn't the only reason you feel such a strong impulse to embrace her, a sly voice whispered at the back of his mind. He pushed it away.

"There," she said, releasing his hand and turning to set the quill aside. While her back was turned, he ran the fingers of his other hand over what remained of her warmth.

"Memorize it," she repeated, pinning him with a gaze of such intensity he couldn't look away. Nor did he wish to. "Then wash it away."

"I will," he promised.

Satisfied with his answer, she nodded and gathered her things. "I must go."

He didn't bother asking when he could meet with her again, knowing that she would come to him when the opportunity arose. In the meantime, if he had

need of her, he knew where to leave a message.

"Good night," he said, a soft note in his voice, one he hadn't intended.

"Good night," she said. Then she was gone.

His lodgings felt empty.

Chapter 15

Cianne felt oddly at loose ends the next morning. Her father had left early and Lach and his mother were busy meeting with the Elders to plan Toran's funeral. Despite her soul-sucking sense of exhaustion, she wasn't able to seize the opportunity to sleep later. Her mind was far too busy, and the intensity of everything that had happened over the last several days left her with the sensation of a weight pressing down on her chest, making it difficult for her to draw breath.

Though it made her feel guilty, she allowed herself some time to think about Kila's return to her life. From under her shirt she drew out a tiny key on a leather cord that she wore around her neck at all times, then used it to open the small chest she'd extracted from the hidden compartment in her jewelry wardrobe. She didn't care one fig for jewelry, but even at the age of twelve she'd had an impressive collection of her own, much of it gifts given to her by other House members over the years. Upon her mother's death she had inherited Annalith's extensive collection, though she hadn't been able to bring herself to wear a single piece of it. Even looking at it was almost unbearable. Vivie hardly ever convinced her to wear jewels to important events, even when she employed her most persuasive cajoling techniques, and so Cianne's general disdain for expensive baubles had become known throughout the House. Another mark against her, she supposed. House Staerleigh wasn't overly ostentatious, but House members saw no reason to refrain from a tasteful display of one's wealth.

Which was why the jewelry wardrobe was such a good hiding place for the chest. No one ever saw her going into it, and House members tended to view her as simple, so underestimating her wiles that they would never believe her capable of any deceit. They would expect her to exhibit all sorts of suspicious behavior if she were attempting to hide something, so even though it made her grit her teeth, she did her best to take advantage and play into their prejudices against her.

Reaching through the stuffed wardrobe without brushing against any of her mother's familiar necklaces, bracelets, and earrings was also something of a training exercise for her. The task required a steady hand, intense focus, and an

unwavering gaze fixed on the back of the wardrobe, where the secret compartment's latch was hidden. It was also a test of mental endurance, because each piece reminded Cianne of times spent with her mother, provoking memories both painful and so exquisitely happy as to render them painful as well.

Her ordeal wasn't over yet as she would have to return the chest to its hiding spot, but even that was nothing compared to what she was planning on doing as soon as possible. Her hands shook as she pulled a small leather book from the chest and slipped it into a hidden pocket sewn into the inside of her shirt. The book was so slim that wearing a flared waistcoat over the shirt was enough to conceal it. Once the waistcoat was securely laced, the book pressed against her breastbone, a reminder of what she'd carried close to her heart for these nine long years. The thought of returning it filled her with a dull heaviness, but she knew giving it back was the right thing to do. It hadn't been hers to keep in the first place; it was due to a mere quirk of fate that she still had it.

Closing her eyes, she pictured the book with perfect clarity. The wine-colored leather had darkened with age, the edges of it stained and frayed from much contact with fingers. The pages were thin, fragile, and Cianne always turned each one with extreme care, not releasing her breath until she was certain she hadn't ripped it. A little larger than her palm, the book contained a series of meticulous sketches, thirty-two in total, covering the pages front and back. Each sketch depicted one of the forms of the deshya.

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"I can't do it!" Cianne said, throwing herself on the ground in frustration, trying to hide her tears. She hated that she was such a crybaby. She cried about everything, when she was mad, when she was sad, when her muscles became so tense from her inability to do something that she felt like her bones would shatter. Her mother had told her that she shouldn't be ashamed of the force of her feelings, that such deep emotions were the result of having a big heart. Her father, on the other hand, had often barked at her to wipe her eyes and compose herself, his scorn clear as he said that nothing was worth so much fuss. It didn't matter what the fuss was about; in her father's view, any fussing was too much of an extreme.

"Of course you can," Kila said in his gentlest voice. Squatting next to her, he peered into her face with his warm, dark eyes. She loved that voice, loved the instant effect it had on her, as if she'd slipped into a warm bath. It soothed her, calmed her in ways her mother and father had never been able to do.

"No, I can't," she insisted, mollified but not entirely ready to be agreeable.

He smiled, knowing how irascible she could be at times like these. "You didn't think you could complete the sequence from the first two forms either," he reminded her.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she resisted the urge to thrust her bottom lip out. She was twelve years old, not a baby anymore, not in any sense of the word. She'd never be anyone's baby again, and the thought carved an aching hollow in her chest.

"It's so hard to remember the forms," she said, a whine creeping into her voice.

"I might have something that could help you with that," he said. Pulling himself up in a fluid movement, he disappeared into his lodgings, and Cianne took advantage of the moment of privacy to mop her face with her sleeve.

She'd been visiting Kila for a mere three weeks, yet his place already seemed like more of a home to her than her own. He treated her like the kind older brother she would have loved to have. She could sense the protectiveness he felt for her, and it drew her to him like a moth to a flame. Lach was her friend, her staunch defender, but now that her mother was gone Cianne had been left without an adult to protect and shelter her. Until Kila had come into her life, that was.

He returned, this time seating himself on the grass next to her. It was a quiet night. Though Kila's home wasn't near the wharves, the night was so still they could hear the faint shushing of the far-off waves. A few insects chirped dully, as if grudgingly admitting they were obliged to fill the night with sound. Cianne couldn't blame them. The summer, so newly arrived, was blazingly hot, and even at night she felt more like a melting candle than a person. This night was no exception, but it hadn't stopped her from coming to see Kila, nor had it stopped him from suggesting they continue with their lessons on the deshya.

"Discipline above all else," he had intoned, but the twinkle in his eye had let her know he didn't expect her to take him too seriously.

"Before I give you this, you must promise me something," he said, holding an object between his hands. They were so large that they enclosed the object, and even though Cianne crooked her neck and tried to peer sideways between them, she had no idea what he was holding.

"What kind of promise?" she asked, her heart picking up speed. What if he suspected she had lied to him and asked her to tell him her real name or where she was really from? She couldn't risk that. It would mean she would have to stop coming to see him, that she would have to find some way of contenting herself with creeping about the city rooftops rather than being in his company. It

was only when she was with him that healing seemed possible, and she was terrified of being left alone once more to deal with the suppurating wound her mother's death had left behind.

"To take very good care of it for me. It's precious to me," he said, his voice serious.

Sweet relief flooded her, leaving her feeling woozy. That was an easy promise to make. Anything he could ever give her would be almost sacred, and she would guard it with her life. "I promise."

Opening his hands, he showed her the tiny book he cradled.

"What is it?" she asked, her fingers itching to reach out and touch it. Instead, she twisted her hands together and pushed them into her lap, her arms rigid.

"A book," he teased, his eyes twinkling again.

Rolling her eyes, she scoffed. "How amazing. It's not as though I've never read a book before," she said in the bored tone the other children in the enclave used when someone said something spectacularly stupid or ridiculously obvious.

His eyes widened a bit with interest and she realized too late what she had done. Biting her lip, she said nothing more, even though he sat there expectantly. Street urchins would know what books were, of course, but plenty of them couldn't read. Admitting she could didn't eliminate the possibility that she was who she claimed she was, but it was more information than she had wanted to give him about her real identity. Doubtless many members of her House would have been appalled and offended that she would accept someone thinking of her as common gutterspawn, but the truth was that she didn't mind. Better he think her street trash than know she was a House member. Better he think her anything but that.

Resigning himself that she would tell him nothing more, he said, "My father made this book for me when I was a boy. I had trouble remembering the forms too, so he drew this for me so that I wouldn't forget." He held the book out to her and she took it with trembling fingers.

With great care she opened the cover. She held the book close to her face, almost touching her nose, straining to make out the picture in the garden's low light.

Kila laughed. "You'll give yourself a headache like that. Why don't we sit near the house? I'll make tea while you study form three, then once we're done with tea you can try it again."

Nodding, she stood up and followed him to the table and chairs he kept outside his garden door. He went inside to make tea, leaving her alone with the book, and she gingerly turned its pages. She wanted to stop and examine each

one, but he had told her to look at form three, and she was eager to prove herself responsible enough to be entrusted with the book, so she did as he'd instructed.

Transfixed, she stared at the image of form three. She combed it from top to bottom, taking in as many details as she could. The picture was startlingly lifelike, a perfect image of a boy, legs shoulder width apart, both knees bent, arms in front of him, slightly bent at the elbows, right arm extended in front of him at shoulder height, the other higher, near his face. Both of the boys' hands were straight, palms out, his left hand concealing his left eye and part of his face. He was poised on the edge of movement, ready to begin his slide into position four.

"It's you, isn't it?" she asked Kila when he returned, bearing a tea tray that included the biscuits she liked. He hadn't served them the first two times they'd had tea, but she'd eaten four when he produced them the third, and he'd included them on the tray ever since. Some people found Enforcers uncanny, but Cianne liked that he noticed even minute details, despite that it made lying to him far more complex.

"It is," he said, blowing on his tea.

Reluctantly, Cianne set the book aside, careful to put it far from the tea, and picked up her own cup. She closed her eyes and inhaled. At home her father favored an orange-scented black tea. Cianne liked it too, but she liked Kila's tea even more. Pale green in color, it looked like spring in her cup, but it smelled of autumn, rich and warm. She took a tentative sip, scalding her tongue.

"Hot," she said, putting it down.

"What do you notice about form three?" he asked, dunking a biscuit in his tea.

Cianne took one as well, biting into it thoughtfully. She knew he wasn't asking for her impression of the picture, but about the specifics of the form, so she described it as best she could, her words inadequate to quantify the combination of grace and strength that leapt out at her from the image.

"Very good," he said, with an approving nod.

"You said your father drew it?"

"Yes."

"Was he…" she began, hesitating. Would he think the question impertinent? "Was he an Adept too?"

"No," Kila said, flashing her a smile. "My mother was an Adept, but my father wasn't. His talent took years to develop, and he practiced drawing every chance he got."

"He was very talented," Cianne said sincerely. The idea that someone without Adept abilities could accomplish something so wonderful prompted a

warm glow of hope within her.

She thought about the boy's face. Determination was etched in every line of it, yet she also got the impression he was a nice boy, just as he was now a nice man. Six years was a lot, half her lifetime. She wondered if she would seem as worldly as he did when she was eighteen.

"What about your parents?" he asked. He took a casual sip of tea as he gazed off into the night, but Cianne wasn't fooled. She'd already slipped once. She wasn't about to do it a second time.

"I'd like to try form three again," she said, ignoring the question altogether.

She didn't miss his sidelong glance. He didn't say anything for a moment, but then responded with, "Very well. Let's see it."

He set his tea aside and leaned forward in his seat as she took up her position. He watched with intense concentration, but his limbs were loose, as always. His elbows rested on his knees, his clasped hands hanging between them.

"Yes, that's much better. Start again from the beginning, and let's see if you can't manage that transition."

She was shaky, but she did make it, and he was generous with his praise for her efforts, which made her even more eager to perfect her skills. Tea forgotten, he rose and positioned himself across from her, going through the forms with her so that she could mirror his movements. He was the best, most patient teacher she had ever had.

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She had never told him that. Perhaps she should. Perhaps she would, when she returned his little book to him.

She would miss it when it was gone, but he had told her his father had made it for him, and she knew his father was gone. He had also told her that his mother had died, but he had never spoken of the circumstances of their deaths, or why he had come to Astoran.

Not that she had asked him. She had liked him a great deal from the moment she had met him, and by the time he had disappeared she had grown to feel something much different from childish affection, feelings that had never quite faded. Many nights she had soothed her troubled mind by paging through the book, even after she had long since learned every last form by heart. Holding the book reminded her that he was real, that he hadn't been a wonderful figment of her imagination. It had made her feel as if he couldn't be gone forever, because surely he would have to return someday to collect such a precious

object.

But if she gave the book back to him and he left, what reason would he ever have to return to her again?

Chapter 16

Several uneventful days passed, and though Kila kept an eye out for Miss Wyland, she didn't make a repeat appearance. He supposed she was busy with the funeral, and he wondered if she had learned anything more from Captain Stowley. Was the captain right that something was going on? Or had the man's insistence that his father hadn't committed suicide been the protestations of someone devastated by grief, and had he come to understand that refusing to accept the truth wouldn't bring his father back to him?

Kila knew what that kind of denial was like, though he refused to think about it.

Things had been quiet at the station. He had studied everything Burl had given him, and her hostility faded somewhat in the face of his thoughtful questions about House Staerleigh. He took care not to appear too obsequious, but he adopted a tone of respectful admiration whenever he spoke of the House, and Burl responded well to it. Calculation was never comfortable for him, and he hoped it never would be, but experience had taught him that a studied bit of calculation applied well could yield excellent results. Thus far his ploy was working with Burl.

The chief waylaid him again as he was on his way home one night, telling him that she'd heard the Elders of the trade Houses intended to meet and confer.

"Is that out of the ordinary?" he asked her.

"It's not unprecedented, but it is rare," she said, tugging at her bottom lip. "I wouldn't have paid any attention to it were it not for the fact that I've had reports that House Elders from all three Houses have been conducting smaller meetings."

"But that can't be unusual either," he said. "They have common interests. They would need to meet to discuss them."

"Yes, but when business meetings occur they're held at one of the Council Halls. These other meetings have taken place in a variety of locations, as if they're purposely avoiding meeting in the same places twice."

Thinking about what Cianne had told him, Kila asked, "Do you think this has something to do with the succession?"

Fixing him with a shrewd look, the chief said, "It might. The Houses have been consolidating their power for the last several years. They don't intend for their public works to cease with the renovation of our station. They're hatching plans for more community improvements, such as building schools and Healer clinics throughout the city, as well as improving roads and digging more wells to provide people with clean water."

"And those are bad things?" he asked, lifting a brow.

"Of course they aren't. But why now? Why not in the past? Why have the Houses taken such a sudden interest in the common folk of Cearova?"

"To buy collective goodwill," he said, understanding where she was going.

"Exactly. The Houses would love nothing more than to ensure the loyalty of Cearovans, gain their backing."

"Do you think they want to make Cearova a city state?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps they have no interest in that at all and want only to be guaranteed the autonomy to run the city as they like. There's no indication that they intend to place themselves in direct opposition to any of the candidates for the monarchy, but what they obviously want more than anything is to secure their position."

"You think Toran Stowley could have stood opposed to that?"

"It's possible. Perhaps he was an obstacle House Staerleigh felt it had to remove."

It still didn't add up for Kila. Why would they go to the trouble? Dissension in their ranks might be embarrassing, but he was under the impression that if Toran hadn't agreed with the Elders he had been in the minority. There were no other signs of trouble within House Staerleigh, which from all indications ran with impressive precision. They projected an overall image of harmony and unity, and why shouldn't they? House members enjoyed greater wealth and security than the average Cearovan, even if some of the House members benefited more than others. Membership in a House, no matter how lowly, guaranteed a person some level of influence. Murder seemed like an extreme response to someone who wouldn't have been more than an annoyance.

He kept the thought to himself. The chief seemed set on a course, and who was to say she wasn't right? He wasn't about to jump blindly aboard with her, but he wouldn't stand in her way either. Maintaining his independence would also allow him to pursue the leads he wanted to pursue.

"I'll keep you informed," he said.

She nodded and began to slip away but stopped, half turning toward him. "You're doing a good job with Burl. I wouldn't say she's ready to claim you as one of her closest companions, but she's not shutting you out either."

He thought he knew why she was sharing the praise this way. She was asking him to possibly betray his partner, an uncomfortable request regardless of circumstance. He was certain she wouldn't want him to feel as if she were manipulating him. He wasn't certain yet that she wasn't.

"Thank you," he said in a neutral tone.

She gave him a brisk nod and continued on her way.

He waited until she'd disappeared, then made a quick stop to pick up Stowley's ledger. Every few days he moved it from one place to another, not yet satisfied with any of his hiding spots. It was probably for the best at any rate. Someone could still stumble upon it, but his continuously returning to the same location might garner someone's notice. He was confident he would know if someone were shadowing him, but if the Houses' reach did extend as far as the chief seemed to think it did, there was no telling how many invisible spies they might have in their employ. He knew from personal experience that a few coins could do wonders to loosen tongues.

Once home and supplied with tea, he spent the evening in his office poring over the ledger. He had compiled a list of the dates of the hash-marked entries, which he kept on several slips of paper, scattering them around his lodgings so that they wouldn't look as if they belonged together. Pinning them up on his wall, he scrutinized them. He had already noted that they occurred at regular intervals, though it hadn't looked that way in the ledger, which Kila imagined might have been deliberate on Stowley's part. The dates were always three weeks apart, always on the same day of the week, Wednesdays. Were they the Elder meetings the chief had mentioned?

It was possible, but he didn't think so, though he couldn't say why. Instinct told him they weren't, and though he knew to trust his instincts, his instincts weren't proof. He would have to keep digging.

Amounts had been entered into the ledger for each date, though they varied. Some were so small as to constitute little more than pocket change. Others were large enough to raise his brows. None of them would give anyone pause if seen at a glance, though, not given Stowley's reputation for aptitude with figures. House Staerleigh dealt in precious goods on a regular basis, and many of the other ledger entries included similar exorbitant figures.

As with Stowley's other entries, those hash-marked were denoted with numbers and letters, but Kila couldn't make heads or tails of most of them. It was like a code for which he had no key, and perhaps that had been the point. Breaking codes took time, which presumably meant that Stowley alone would have been able to interpret the entries with any ease.

He needed to talk to Miss Wyland. Something about the dates might strike

her as significant, or perhaps she would know what the letters and numbers stood for. If she didn't show up soon, he would leave a message for her in the spot she had specified.

"Interesting," she said in a low voice as she entered the office, and for a second he was afraid her presence was the product of his wishful thinking. The woman was uncanny.

"Have you any idea how disconcerting that is?" he asked, unable to keep the shortness from his tone. His heart was pounding, and his hand had gone for the dagger he kept sheathed to the bottom of his desk. Forcing his hand away, he turned to face her.

"My apologies," she said, but the faint smile on her lips suggested she rather liked disconcerting him.

She wore dark clothing again, but not the same as the previous time. Her tight black breeches hugged her legs, and over them she wore a short, equally tight black leather coat. This one laced up the back and buttoned up the front, emphasizing her gentle curves. Her clothing fit her like a second skin, highly practical for when she climbed or snuck about. It offered nothing an assailant could grab, had no loose sleeves to get snagged on a jagged stone or protruding ledge. She'd pushed back her hood, and a crown of tight braids clung to her scalp. The flickering candlelight exaggerated the hollows in her cheeks. A black leather mask dangled from her right hand.

"I did need to speak with you," he conceded. "And what's interesting?"

"Your wall. It gives me a window into how your mind works." She moved closer to him, tilting her head back to better examine the wall, and his eyes were drawn to the curve of her throat.

"Moving the pieces around helps me to find the patterns," he said, focusing on the wall. "These came from Toran Stowley's ledger." He tapped the relevant pieces of parchment.

"What's all the rest?" she asked, gesturing as she examined his collection.

"Other bits of information I've gathered. The strings show where I've made connections. Anything without a string may or may not be relevant, I don't know yet. I might never know."

Shaking her head, she gazed at him in fascination. "That's amazing," she said. "I haven't been around many Adepts, other than the Seafarers, of course. Lach has told me what that's like for him, but it's rather astonishing to hear about other abilities. So much inherent talent. Gods-touched." He thought he detected a trace of envy.

"Was that part of it, when you were a child? You were upset you weren't an Adept?"

"You're either an Adept in House Staerleigh or you're nothing," she said, her voice tight.

"That must have been difficult."

"It was," she said, pained. He was surprised to get this glimpse into her life. "And it must have been hard for you to leave your homeland behind."

"There was nothing more for me there," he said, shocking himself by giving her a glimpse into his own life.

He felt her eyes on him, but he kept staring at the wall.

"I have something else for you, though this is of a personal nature," she said, garnering his interest. She unbuttoned the top button of her coat and pulled out a black leather pouch. It was looped around her neck, and she lifted it over her head, handing the entire thing to him.

She didn't respond to his questioning look, so he directed his attention to the pouch. Her eyes were sad, he noted. Opening the drawstring, he reached inside, knowing instantly what she had brought him.

"I thought this was lost," he said in a hushed voice as he pulled the book out. He ran a hand over its cover.

"You gave it to me," she reminded him.

"No, I knew I had, but I didn't think you'd have kept it."

"I promised you I would take care of it."

"And so you have." He opened the book and studied the pages, drinking in the sight of his father's old drawings. "I was so young."

"How old were you when he drew those pictures?"

"About the age you were when I gave the book to you."

"It meant a great deal to me," she said, the words bursting forth. She was clearly uncomfortable with sharing such intimate thoughts, but she took a deep breath and plowed ahead. "Your kindness came at a time when I desperately needed kindness, and the skills you taught me have served me well throughout my life. I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"You don't owe me anything," he said, folding his hands around the book. "You helped me too."

"I did?"

"Yes. You reminded me of the child I was once, and being kind to you helped ease his pain. He could have done with some kindness as well."

Her eyes glittered and she blinked rapidly. "You never told me that."

"You were young and in pain. I didn't want to burden you."

"I don't think I would have seen it as a burden. It might have helped me to know that I wasn't alone—not that you didn't help me," she added hastily, as if anxious to reassure him.

"No need to fear you offended me; I understood what you meant. It didn't occur to me at the time that it might comfort you to know someone else had shared your experience."

"At first I didn't tell you who I was because I was afraid I would get into trouble. Then I didn't tell you because I loved being me, not being House Staerleigh."

"The two are one and the same?" he asked, genuinely bemused by her words.

"For most everyone else they are. House is everything."

He thought he should say something in response to that, but words escaped him. He was still fumbling when her brow knit and she stepped forward, giving closer scrutiny to the dated scraps of paper.

"These dates are familiar," she said in a distant voice. She fell silent for a long moment, staring blankly, and he held his tongue, letting her think.

"Here," she said, pointing to one of the scraps. "I followed Moiria that night." If the admission embarrassed her, she showed no signs. "I thought it was odd because she was heading out of the enclave so late, cloaked and hooded even though it was mild out. She went to a house near the wharf. Three other people were inside, but I didn't recognize any of them and I don't remember what they looked like."

Moving on to another scrap, she said, "Elder Borean went to House Rolland's enclave on this night. He does have friends there, but it was an odd hour for making a call, and I thought I saw one of the House Mallay Elders, though I couldn't say for certain.

"And on this night," she said, her voice faltering.

She didn't say anything for so long that he had to prompt her. "What is it?"

"On this night, my father paid a visit to a shop in the city center, though it was well outside of business hours and the shop was closed."

Chapter 17

Cianne heard Kila's surprised intake of breath. She was more controlled, though her mind was a tumult, her emotions a wild roil. Was her father somehow caught up in all this? If Toran had been murdered, could Daerwyn have been involved? Cianne believed her father was capable of many things, but she had never imaged he might be capable of conspiring to murder someone.

No, you don't know anything for certain. You're reaching! You saw him going into a shop at night once and you're ready to convict him of murder? What kind of daughter are you?

The kind of daughter who was caught between a sense of obligation to be loyal to her House and the fear that her House might be involved in something dire. Attempting to write her feelings off, she told herself that she was itching to find something to throw back in her father's face, something she could use to prove to him and the rest of her House that they weren't superior to her and never would be, but it wasn't that simple. She wasn't above wishing for petty revenge, but this, whatever it was, went far beyond that. She had to follow this trail to its end, whatever that end might be.

"Miss Wyland," Kila began in a hesitant voice. "Are you certain of this?"

She appreciated his trying to give her an out, but she was so distraught that her voice was sharp as she responded. "Of course I am. Do you think I'd say such a thing if I weren't?"

He held his tongue, but she knew what he was thinking. It wouldn't be the first time she'd deceived him, and he was right to be wary. He couldn't trust her. For all he knew she might be spinning a web about him, trying to snare him in something meant to serve her own ends.

"I saw my father that night," she said, speaking more calmly. "I followed him to that shop, and I saw him enter. He tapped the door in a pattern, like a signal. That's what struck me as so odd about it. He could have been meeting with the shop owner to discuss House business, but if that were the case, why didn't he knock on the door in a normal manner? Why the code?"

Frowning, Kila stroked his chin. "Very well. It's an avenue worth pursuing."

"I know you don't trust me. You've no reason to trust me, but I swear to you that I wouldn't lie about this," Cianne said, meeting his eyes. "I want to know what happened with Toran. If he did commit suicide, I need to know why, when he gave every indication that he would never have even contemplated such an act. And if he didn't commit suicide…" She allowed her voice to trail off. It went without saying why she'd want to pursue the investigation in that case.

"Is there anyone in your House we might count on as an ally? Anyone you can trust?"

"No one," she said. Of that she was certain.

His eyes were full of pity, and she wanted to turn away. She'd always known he'd pitied her. Had she been in his place, she would likely have pitied herself as well.

She didn't want his pity. She didn't want anyone's pity.

"Not even Captain Stowley?" he asked.

"Not even him," she said firmly. "As insincere as you may find this, I believe you know more about me than he does."

He said nothing, studying her with a probing gaze that should have made her feel uncomfortable, but that instead made her feel something very different. He might not know her favorite color, might not know her favorite book, but he knew the real her in a way Lach never would, for all his good intentions. Lach had an idea of the Cianne he wanted to know, and he projected that image onto her, an image that made her fit neatly within the Staerleigh framework. Choosing between Cianne and the House was unthinkable. He needed to believe that the House cared about her as much as he did, and so he decided that the House cared about her, thus freeing himself from one day having to acknowledge that the House to which he belonged body and soul wasn't as benevolent as he was convinced it was. Whenever she protested, he brushed her off, determined to show her the error of her ways.

It didn't matter that he did so gently, that he did so with respect for her feelings, that he didn't want to offend or belittle her. He might talk to her, he might hear what she had to say, but he didn't listen. He never really had.

Kila did listen. He always had.

Nodding, he plucked a quill and a small book from his desk, making notes about the three dates they'd discussed. He asked her if she knew anything about the others, and she filled in as many details as she could. Some of the dates were meaningless to her, but when she had finished going through them it was clear that House Staerleigh had a regular pattern of conducting secretive meetings with the other Houses. Though Cianne had noted the presence of a few of the other Houses' Elders at some of these meetings, she didn't know what positions

all the meeting participants held. She did know that the most prominent members of her own House were attending them, though. Given that and the presence of the other Houses' Elders, she and Kila surmised that the meetings must have been orchestrated by the House elites.

"To what purpose?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, shrugging. "I never before connected the dates, so they seemed like isolated incidents, unusual but not anything that rang any particular warning bells for me."

"Why did you follow them, then?"

Cianne had the grace to feel abashed, and she let him see it. What must he think of her, spying on her own House members—not to mention slipping into his home uninvited, whenever the mood struck her. He'd have every reason to think her no better than a common Cearovan street thug.

"I worried my father was involved in something," she said. "Sometimes I'd lose track of him and follow the others to see if he'd be wherever they were going. Sometimes he was, but not every time. Whatever it is, he is involved, but he's not alone. I see that now, but in the past my focus was too narrow. I wanted only to know what my father was up to."

"You must have had other reasons for being suspicious. Following him around the city could hardly have been worth your time without some inducement."

Exhaling, Cianne fought to keep her shoulders from tensing as they wanted to, but then she decided not to bother pretending around him. For one, it was easier. Maintaining control of herself at all times was exhausting, but it was also necessary if she wanted to ensure the House never thought of her as anything more than a stain on their honor. It would be disastrous for her if they started to view her as possessing a brain capable of logical leaps. With Kila, though, there was no need for the pretense. She might as well show herself as she was to him. She longed for one honest relationship, but more than that, she felt she owed him her honesty.

If there is ever to be anything between us…

She pushed the thought aside. Age might no longer be a factor. Distance was no longer relevant. Yet neither made the situation any less impossible, no matter the level of fervency with which her heart might wish otherwise.

"It's hard to explain to someone outside the House," she said, turning to face him, wanting him to see her earnest expression, her open face. He might still think it a charade, and she wouldn't blame him, but at least she would know in her heart that she wasn't misleading him. "A lot of subtle things started happening. My father has always been important to the House, but his status has

become even more elevated in the last few years. No one doubts that he'll take over for Elder Borean when the time is right. My father was always a possible candidate for the Council, but something he did has clinched the position. Anyone else who might have been a contender has faded into the background.

"Minor privileges, small marks of esteem have followed. My father is invited to meetings non-Council members aren't typically invited to attend. He's been given more power to authorize agreements with the other Houses. I can't remember our family income ever being anything less than comfortable, but new signs of wealth have been springing up around the manor, gifts from the Elders, I suspect, though I couldn't say for certain. One day a valuable book will appear in my father's library. Another I'll find a Shaper-made trinket or a Weaver-fashioned carpet."

"He's never said anything about them?" Kila asked, looking dubious.

Color rose to her cheeks. "No. He thinks me too dim or too oblivious to notice, I expect. They simply appear, there one day. Besides, none of it is ostentatious enough to be noticeable to most."

"You notice," he said, and something about his tone made her feel an absurd sense of pride. Was it admiration she heard?

"I've made it my business to notice many things my House could never dream I notice."

"Evidently." This time, the admiration was unmistakable, and she felt as if she were about to crack wide open.

The way she drank up his praise embarrassed her. Was she so desperate for a compliment? Lach provided her with them in abundance, but his compliments never made her feel this way.

You've known for years that Lach can never have any hope of making you feel the way Kila makes you feel.

Her little girl fancies were mortifying, and if Kila were ever to receive any indication of how she felt, she would be humiliated. He could never see her as anything more than the quirky, strange, wounded child she had been when they had first met. Surely he couldn't.

And even if he could, what did it matter? There could never be anything between them. She could hardly march him to her manor and introduce him to her father. An Enforcer and a foreigner to boot, come to call on Cianne Wyland of House Staerleigh? To say it was unimaginable wasn't overstating things.

She had no romantic notions about running away with him. Life was difficult enough for him as it was. Asking him to take that step with her, even if he could ever feel a fraction of what she felt, was something she could never do to him. His not being a native of Astoran didn't matter to her in the least, but it

made him an outcast, and if she were to leave her House to be with him, he would be reviled as having corrupted her. That the truth would bear no resemblance to that characterization wouldn't matter. He would be subject to most of the blame, because no House member would be able to stomach the thought of another member being capable of defiling the House in such an unspeakable manner.

A life with her could be nothing more than a life of exile, and while it was a sacrifice she'd be willing to make, she wouldn't ask it of him. Exile had been forced upon him once already.

It wouldn't be a sacrifice, not for me, a voice whispered in the back of her mind. *Being with him could never be a sacrifice. Being with him would be a privilege.*

He didn't seem to notice her inner turmoil, so perhaps she was better at withholding than she thought, even when she didn't intend to withhold. She didn't know what that said about her.

Obviously deliberating, he rubbed his chin several more times, then came to a decision. "Chief Flim suspects the Houses are up to something."

Shocked, she stared at him in disbelief. "She does?"

The current chief didn't pander to the Houses the way former chiefs had, but as far as Cianne knew the House Staerleigh Elders merely considered her standoffish, not a threat. Were they to find out what Cianne knew, though… Kila's trusting her with the information was an immense leap of faith.

Nodding, he said, "It's why she brought me back to Cearova. She knew I had no loyalty to any of the Houses, and she hoped that the fact that I'm an outsider would help me catch anything she may have missed."

Alarm shot through Cianne, though she did her best to control it. "Have you told her about me?"

"No," he said, meeting her eyes.

Crumpling a bit in relief, she nodded too. "Thank you."

"You're a valuable asset, Miss Wyland. I've no wish to compromise your safety."

How should she feel about that? While she appreciated that he had kept her secret, he made it sound as though he had done so because he wanted to keep pumping her for information. Yet she knew he wasn't like that. Deep down inside, she knew. The man who had shown such kindness and patience couldn't do something so mercenary.

Couldn't he? He's been gone a long time, forced to live in obscurity for years, sent away to a place where he could have had no hope for career advancement. How much might he have changed during those years?

Now Chief Flim has brought him back here to work on her special project, offering him a chance for advancement at last. What do you know of the lengths to which he'd go to secure his position?

Perhaps he wasn't alone in his leap of faith, then.

No. She refused to think that way. She was tired of seeing enemies around every corner. Kila was her friend, she was certain of that. He wanted to protect her just as she wanted to protect him. That they both stood to lose so much was a testament to this fact. They could trust one another and only one another.

Chapter 18

Long after Miss Wyland had left, she occupied Kila's thoughts. They had gone through the dates together and made detailed notes about everything she could remember. She had taken the notes with her when she had left, promising him that she had a secure spot where she could stash them. He didn't doubt it. Everything he had learned about her so far had pointed to her considerable skills at deception. She would have made a minor Obscurist proud.

Despite the cautious side of him that urged him to be careful with her, he believed he had found an ally in her. She knew a great deal about him, but he knew a great deal about her as well. This provided him with leverage, should she do anything that might compromise his position.

The thought was vaguely distasteful. Being cautious made sense, but the thought of hurting her turned his stomach. A part of him still tended to think of her as the young, vulnerable girl he had instinctively protected, but another part of him was aware that she was no longer that girl. She was no fainting maiden in distress either, and he admired her wiles, her stealthy skills, and her quick mind.

Not to mention that hair, a voice whispered. He remembered the masses of curls she had worn the night of the assembly, contrasted with the tight braids she'd worn tonight. The night of the assembly she'd looked like a lovely lady of means, all soft hair, glowing skin, and floating gown. On this night she had looked every inch the capable spy, her body as tightly coiled as her hair, her stride purposeful, her movements assured. He liked the thought of seeing these two sides of her rather more than he should, and he batted away the annoying voice that wondered which was the real Miss Wyland. They both were, of that he was certain.

I wonder how she would look with her hair down, loose and flowing about her.

That thought was certainly one in which he wouldn't permit himself to indulge. He had business to attend, and attend it he would.

It was late, and if he wasn't careful his lack of sleep would catch up to him, something he couldn't afford to have happen. He forced himself to go to bed in an attempt to get some rest, but he spent hours tossing and turning, thinking

about his father's book.

Shock had crashed over him when Miss Wyland had handed it to him. As he had told her, he had been certain the book had been lost. It hadn't occurred to him that she might keep it all these years, nor had he ever imagined he would see it again.

It had been a complicated gift. Watching her struggle with remembering each position and how to transition to it had reminded him of his own youth, of the days he had spent with his father, alone in the forest clearing that his father had declared their secret world. His mother had known about it, of course. She had known everything, and though she had pretended to mind that she had been banned from it, Kila knew she hadn't minded one bit. Laurisha had loved her son and her husband, and seeing the two of them in harmony had been one of the great pleasures of her life.

And Kila and his father had been in harmony, at least then. They had spent hours together, and there had been nothing his father had been unwilling to tell him, nothing he had been unwilling to share. The general assumption had been that Kila would gravitate more toward his mother; after all, they shared a common bond in their Adept gifts. But though he had loved her, his father had been his favorite. Kila had thought everything about his father was wonderful, even some of the things others had seen as his shortcomings. So Sylosh had trouble remaining with a job, had a tendency to get restless and move from one thing to the next. So what? His father's mind was of such a curious bent that of course nothing could satisfy his intellect for long. Kila had found it natural that Sylosh would want to try everything he could, learn everything he could.

Laurisha had tried teaching Kila the deshya, but the truth was she hadn't the talent for it. Somewhat impatient by nature, she had never been able to grasp why what she felt were her clear, succinct instructions failed to make sense to her son. Sylosh had taken over from her, a twinkle in his eye when he had teased his son that they would go to *their* secret spot, away from Laurisha's prying eyes.

Kila hadn't been reluctant to learn the deshya, but having been granted cerebral Adept skills as well as a keen intellect of his own, he had always been more interested in matters of the mind than matters of the body. It was his father who had shown him how the deshya could help him focus, how physical exertion could clear his mind, opening the door for his thoughts to flow freely.

That didn't mean teaching his son had been an easy matter for Sylosh. Kila wasn't naturally in tune with his body like his father had been, and Sylosh had soon realized that his son wasn't likely to catch on to the subtle movements, or to master with ease the strenuous muscle control that the deshya demanded. Relishing the challenge, Sylosh had treated it like a game, trying out technique

after technique to help his son, devising riddles and songs and competitive bouts until his burst of insight: since his son showed such a marked preference for books, why not teach him using a book?

Laurisha had been appalled. The deshya was never depicted in books, it simply wasn't done. The form was meant to be passed down from parent to child by way of practicing together, going through the movements in tandem, the parents correcting the child where necessary. The idea of committing it to written record had scandalized her, but Sylosh hadn't been dissuaded. In addition to Kila's love of books, he had been transfixed by his father's drawings, a skill Kila had never been able to master, no matter how he applied himself. Sylosh had known that the combination of the two would be irresistible to his son.

And it was. Within months Kila's form had improved to such an extent that even his mother had grudgingly admitted that perhaps Sylosh had been onto something, and that maybe she should have listened to him. His father had pretended not to hear and had made her repeat herself four times, until all three of them had dissolved into laughter.

For many years Kila had cherished that book, and then it had become an object of pain to him. It was no use denying that when he had given Miss Wyland the book a part of him had hoped it was the last he would see of it. To study those pictures, to let his eyes travel over the attentive lines his father had drawn, to imagine the day his father had given the precious book to him, were memories too painful for him to bear at that time. He had arrived in Cearova with wounds barely scabbed over, and that had been a large part of what had prompted him to take Miss Wyland under his wing. Yes, he had been caring for her, helping her, but she had cared for him and helped him as well, even if she hadn't known it.

Perhaps that's why you're willing to grasp at the possibility that Toran might have been murdered. Perhaps you will never be able to accept that someone would be so selfish as to take their own life, despite all your personal evidence to the contrary.

Rolling over in his bed, Kila refused to let it occupy his thoughts any longer.

When he woke the next morning his mind was buzzing, telling him it had been hard at work during the night, his subconscious busy sorting and storing the information he had gained from Miss Wyland. He had no new insights as of yet, but he had to admit that the manner in which the pieces were beginning to fit together did point at something strange going on within the Houses.

Could Burl have helped Moiria Stowley and the Staerleigh Elders stage her husband's death as a suicide? The suicide letter could have been a forgery. Were

Burl a highly gifted Enforcer, someone with gods-granted skill at noticing the finest of details, replicating handwriting would pose no real challenge for her.

Kila thought again of the handkerchief Miss Wyland had given him, a handkerchief redolent with the stale tang of sophoria. Had the sophoria belonged to Toran Stowley as Moiria had claimed, or had Elder Borean procured a more potent concentrate for her? It would have been a simple matter for Moiria to slip it into her husband's tea and then set the vial on his desk after the fact, lending credence to the claim that he had dosed himself.

It would explain the lack of signs of struggle as well. Toran wouldn't question his wife's bringing him his evening tea, would he? It appeared he had been keeping his suspicions about the House under wraps, which meant he would have had to feign normalcy around his wife. Even if he had suspected her of something, would it have ever entered his mind that she might be capable of murdering him?

The scenario was straightforward and possible, with or without Burl's involvement. Yet House Staerleigh would have known they would be taking a risk, if they had orchestrated Toran's supposed suicide. They would have known that the high-profile nature of the incident would have required Chief Flim's presence. Had they murdered Toran, they would have wanted to ensure that no one would be able to prove that it had been a murder, which made Burl the obvious suspect, as far as collaborators went.

As luck would have it, he got his chance to observe Burl in action later that day. A shop owner had been murdered, and Kila and Burl were up on the rotation.

The beat officer who had been on patrol greeted them when they arrived, leading them back to the body. The shop owner's neighbors had heard a loud dispute and the sounds of a struggle, and they had summoned the officer to the scene, but he arrived after the murderer had fled.

"No weapon in sight," he said, filling them in on the details as they walked. "Chief Anatomical Examiner says it was an axe, though, and he'd know, wouldn't he?"

"A weapon of convenience, perhaps," Burl said.

Kila nodded his agreement. Axes weren't hard to come by, and every peasant in Cearova owned one so they could split the wood they used to heat their homes and shops.

"Murderer probably fled with the weapon in his or her possession," he said.

"In a panic, if nothing else," Burl agreed.

"Officer Burl, Officer an Movis," Krozemund greeted them. He was squatting next to the body, but he rose to greet them.

"What do you have for us?"

"A single blow to the temple followed by a second strike. The victim appears to have dodged the initial attack, with the result that the side of the axe hit him with a glancing blow. Second strike got him square, though."

Judging by the man's split head, which was oozing blood and brain matter, he surely had been gotten. The temple Krozemund had indicated was discolored.

"Defensive wounds?" Kila asked.

"Several. This man didn't go down without a fight," Krozemund responded. Squatting next to the body once more, he picked up the man's left hand, and Kila and Burl squatted on either side of the victim, Burl next to Krozemund. "Torn nail here, along with some scrapes and abrasions." He put the hand down and picked up the right, showing them the injuries. "More damage here, indicating the shop owner was right-handed."

"That's consistent with what the neighbors said when I arrived," the beat officer told them. "Said there was a horrible racket, shouts and screams and things being thrown about."

Debris littered the floor, and Kila felt a wave of despair. All that hard work, all those careful calculations as to how much stock to buy, what price to sell it at, and the man ended up here, lying in a pool of his own blood. Sometimes he felt like his abilities were more curse than blessing, and he wondered if he would have chosen the life he had, had he been given a choice. Would he have wanted to wallow in the sordid details of the terrible things people did to one another?

"My guess is the attack began while the owner was behind the counter, and he crawled over here," the officer said, indicating the mess behind the counter.

"No," Burl said, rising and walking over to the counter, her face creased in concentration. "The assailant did this. He or she must have been searching for something. The attack started there." She pointed to a staircase that led up into what Kila had surmised was a stock loft.

At first he didn't see what had tipped her off. After a moment of scrutiny, though, he caught it: a small nick on the side of the staircase, the color of the splintered wood far lighter than the smoke-stained surface of the stairs.

"He was coming down from above when he was attacked," Kila said, looking at Burl.

"There were three blows, not two. The attacker took the shopkeeper by surprise, and the shopkeeper tried to dodge the first strike. Stunned by the blow to his temple, the shopkeeper fell down the stairs as the attacker swung again. The attacker missed, nicked the stairs, and then struck the fatal blow once the shopkeeper was on the ground." Walking over to a sack near the base of the stairs, Burl indicated a depression in it. Studying the body and then the

depression, Kila saw that she was right. The man's head had crushed the sack when he fell, his shoulder making a dent in it when he rolled and tried to get up.

Burl was good, perhaps even better than Kila himself, leaving no question in his mind that she would have been well-equipped to advise House Staerleigh on how to deceive Enforcement.

"Neighbors have any idea of who might have done this?" Burl asked the beat officer, whose embarrassment at being corrected by her showed. She hadn't been rude about it, just her usual blunt self, but her matter-of-fact explanation of how the crime had occurred had made the beat officer's inferior abilities glaringly obvious. If Kila had to hazard a guess, the man would be walking a beat for a good, long time.

The beat officer filled them in on what he had learned, and then Burl sent him off to interview whoever else he could find while she and Kila searched the shop. Their search unearthed a ledger that revealed the shopkeeper was in debt to the tune of an eye-wateringly high amount of gold.

"That would be our motive, I think," Burl said.

Kila agreed. "It'll be a matter of tracking down which of his creditors was owed the most or stood to lose the most if he or she wasn't paid."

"Looks like you have a ledger to study," Burl said, slapping the book against his chest with a thump. A faint smirk lifted the corners of her mouth.

You have no idea, Kila thought.

Chapter 19

Weeks passed, and still no one spoke to Lach about returning to sea. Cianne was surprised. She had long suspected Lach was happiest when he was being thrashed about by the waves, but he gave no indication that he had any desire to return to his post. Listlessness had settled over him, alarming his mother to the extent that she had all but begged Cianne to look after her son.

"I must return to my duties, but I know if anyone can help him, it is you," Moiria said, and there wasn't the slightest trace of disgust in her words, of disdain in her tone. She was so desperate for her son to be well again that she was willing to countenance even Cianne's interference.

"I'll do what I can," Cianne promised.

She too was anxious about him. This new Lach wasn't her spirited best friend, always up for a laugh or an adventure. He had become a man who had ceased to find any pleasure in life, whose grief threatened to drag him down into the darkest depths.

"She wants to go through his things, you know," Lach said, startling her as he entered the room in his mother's wake. He must have been hiding around the corner, waiting for Moiria to leave before he came in.

"Lach, you frightened me," Cianne said, pressing a hand to her chest and turning to him with wide eyes.

He lurked in the doorway, blinking. Pale spring light flooded the sitting room, Moiria having decided days ago it was time to start opening the drapes again. The room was opulent, the floors covered in thick, forest-green Shaper-woven carpets, its walls paneled with rich, dark wood bearing a burnished gleam. The furniture was dark, heavy, buffed to a high shine, its cushions intricately embroidered in navy and emerald tones. Daylight highlighted the richness of the colors and the quality of the workmanship, creating a pleasant effect, but when the light was low the room had always struck Cianne as oppressive. It felt even more so when Lach strode over to the window and yanked the drapes closed with a vicious snap of his wrist.

"That infernal light gives me a headache." He slumped into a chair, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

Her brief glimpse of his features had been ghastly. She had known he wasn't faring well, but the dim light had concealed the deep hollows in his cheeks, the waxy cast of his skin, the plum-colored shadows under his eyes. His once handsome face had become cadaverous, his eyes sunken, lips chapped and flaking, as if he had gone weeks without food.

Come to think of it, he had. Cianne couldn't remember the last time he had eaten, and the realization prompted her to ring for tea.

"You have to eat, Lach," she said, in response to the way his lip curled at her action, his face spasming with revulsion.

"I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can't do anything until I know the truth," he said, his voice harsh, scratchy.

A twinge of guilt ate away at her. Here she was investigating the circumstances of his father's death, and yet she wouldn't tell him a word of it. He was living in torment and she wouldn't do anything to ease his pain.

"The Elders have asked her to go through your father's things, you know that, Lach. They have to know what the state of his affairs was. It concerns the House as a whole," she said, trying for a reasonable approach. She thought he might respond to it, given the many times he had tried to get her to see what he insisted was reason when it came to the House.

Turning on her like a rabid dog, he snapped, "She wants to move on."

"Lach, your mother… She and I have had our differences, that's no secret, but she did love your father. You know that as well as I. You're hurting, and I understand that, but you know she grieves in her own way, just as my father grieved in his after my mother died."

He turned his head away. She had him there. He could hardly argue with her that his mother's behavior was an indication that she didn't care about her husband's death. She wore her emotions on her face much more readily than Cianne's father ever had, and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the loss of Toran had torn Moiria apart.

"Are we to erase him, then? Remove all trace that he ever existed?" Lach whispered.

Cianne stood to go to him, but someone knocked on the sitting room door, interrupting them. It was a servant with the tea tray, which Cianne took, and by the time she returned to Lach he seemed to have collected himself.

"I'm sorry," he told her in a broken voice, wiping at his cheek. "I know I'm not myself. I don't mean to lash out at you."

"I'm worried about you," she said. Pouring a cup of tea, she added some sugar and cream to it, hoping that if he wasn't going to eat she could at least get some sustenance into him that way.

He accepted the tea but set it beside him, immediately forgetting it. "I can't accept that he's gone."

"I know, Lach, I know. Sometimes in the morning when I wake I still expect to hear my mother's voice, scolding me to get out of bed, chiding me for being so lazy." Fresh pain washed over Cianne even as she smiled, and she could feel tears rising to her own eyes.

"Oh, Cianne. No one understands what this is like the way you do," he said, reaching for her hands.

He had said the same thing many times over the last few weeks, and each time he said it Cianne's guilt and discomfort increased. He was enclosing them in a bubble she feared she wouldn't be able to pierce without lacerating them both.

"No, Lach," she said, making her tone as gentle as she could. "Don't do that. Don't deny the grief that others are feeling. Don't deny that your mother is in pain too. I made that mistake, and I don't want to see you make it. Your father was her life partner. Do you think it a simple matter for her to get over his death?"

Releasing her hands, he sat back in his chair and stared off into the distance, separating himself from her. She let him. She wasn't certain whether it was wise to continue to indulge him as she was, but she was at a loss as to what to do. The hope that he would pull himself together hadn't dimmed, despite his continued distress, and in the meantime she felt all she could do was wait and ride it out with him, as he would ride out a storm at sea.

Except that he could control storms at sea, could bend the water to his will courtesy of Cearus's grace. His grief, however, was a tide he couldn't turn, no matter how hard he tried, and Cianne had never before realized how helpless this made him. Unlike her, he didn't know what it was like to be battered about by the winds of life, to learn to endure.

"She goes out, late at night," he said, sounding as though he were in a trance.

Leaning forward in her chair, Cianne stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"She goes out, late at night," he repeated. His eyes focused and he returned her stare, his gaze burning with intensity. "She thinks I'm asleep. I've heard her do it twice since my father— She did it in the past too, before."

His voice trailed off, but Cianne knew what he had been about to say. Since her initial conversation with Kila about the dates of Toran's entries, she had gone over her own notes, stashed at various safe locations throughout the city. She had discovered that Moiria hadn't gone out just the one time she had recalled, but had done so several times over the course of the last two years. In fact, by studying her notes, Cianne had realized that the only House members who had gone

outside of the enclave on these secretive nighttime excursions had been Moiria, Daerwyn, Elder Borean, and Elder Vorfarth. The other three Elders had been present at clandestine meetings held on enclave grounds, but they hadn't ventured beyond the walls like the others. Since they were very elderly, their age may have been a factor, but Cianne had the distinct impression that whatever was going on between them was being orchestrated, for the most part, by her father, Moiria, Elder Borean, and Elder Vorfarth.

She hadn't thought Lach knew a thing about it, as he had been away at sea for a good number of the meetings, but he was apparently more perceptive than she had given him credit for being.

"Perhaps she's taking walks, trying to clear her head," she said. She wanted to know more, but if she started questioning him directly he might get suspicious. How would another House member react? Wouldn't they try to placate, believing him overwrought by his grief? She thought that was how she ought to play it.

"When has my mother's head ever been anything but clear?" he asked with a snort. His attitude toward his mother was shocking. Though she had gotten under his skin in the past, he had behaved with a great deal of indulgence toward her, as if she were a well-meaning child who didn't know any better. Cianne hadn't imagined he felt any scorn for his mother, let alone that he would express it so openly.

"Very well," she said, stiffening her spine as if feeling rebuked. "Why do you think she goes out, then?"

"I don't know," he said, shoving a hand through his hair. "Sometimes she goes to see the Elders, which is strange, but other times she leaves the enclave. What reason could she have for doing that?"

"Lach, are you certain—" she began in a delicate tone, but he cut her off.

"Cianne, come on," he said, the words exploding out of him. "I know you're not as dense as the House members make you out to be."

She didn't need to pretend to stiffen her spine; she was well and truly offended. She stood, fighting to contain her anger. "As you said, you're not yourself. I think it best if I go."

"Cianne, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he moaned, burying his face in his hands, his tears starting afresh. "How could I? You don't deserve that. There's no excuse for me to— Not when I—"

"I'm trying to be patient with you," she said quietly, not willing to be mollified yet. "But I will leave if you continue to treat me in this manner."

She was angry with him, but she also hoped she could jolt him back into the real world, the world where he didn't feel as though it were his right to lash

out while wallowing in his own self-pity. She wouldn't judge him for his behavior, not while his grief was still so fresh, but nor would she accept that this might become his normal conduct. He could be forgiven for acting mad with grief for a time, but at some point a line had to be drawn. She would not allow him to abuse her.

"You're right," he said, lifting his face, his cheeks streaked with tears.

"You need to eat, and you need to sleep," she said in a sharp voice. "That's part of the reason why you're acting this way. I know it hurts, and I know you feel like you can't go on. I *know* that, Lach, but you can't curl up and die either. Do you think that's what your father would want?"

"No," he said, his voice so small he sounded like the boy he had once been. "He would want me back at sea. He would want me to attend to my House duties. He would want me to be the man he was proud to call his son."

"Then be that man."

Nodding, Lach wiped his face with a napkin and took an unsteady sip of tea. "I will," he said. "But I must also be the man who uncovers the truth. Perhaps my mother's meetings are unrelated, and perhaps they're not, I don't know. Until I do know I won't be able to let it go."

"All right, I understand. But what if you're grasping at straws, Lach?" She posed the question because she needed to do so if she were to maintain the fiction that she didn't think there was anything to his suspicions.

"Then I'll loosen my grasp," he said. He offered her a one-shouldered shrug, his mouth twisting into a rictus of a smile. Even so, she saw some glimmer of the old Lach.

"Tell me about your mother's excursions," she said, sighing. She sat across from him once more, putting a few finger sandwiches and some grapes on a plate, and handing it to him with a stern look.

Obediently, he began eating, pausing between mouthfuls to talk. "I don't know where she goes, exactly. I haven't followed her."

"What do you think is going on?"

Lowering his eyes to his plate, Lach became suddenly very interested in his food. "I think she may be having an affair," he mumbled, ashamed.

Disbelief and relief flooded Cianne. If he thought that was what was going on, then he couldn't personally be involved. Cianne hadn't yet found an explanation for what was happening, but if there was one thing she knew for certain it was that his mother hadn't been carrying on an affair. Whatever it was, it was of a far more dire nature than that.

"Why would you think that?" she asked, injecting appalled shock into her voice.

"Beyond the late-night meetings, you mean?" he asked, still giving his plate his full attention. "She's received some odd messages."

That caught her attention, and she was glad not to have to hide her interest. "What do you mean by odd messages?"

"Coded or something, I don't know. All I know is I couldn't make sense of them. Can you imagine the effect it might have on the House if she's having an affair with another member? She could cause untold strife. Worse yet, what if she's carrying on with someone *outside* the House? She could be compromising our House unity, could be engaged in something that could tear the House apart," he said, his voice catching. He paused for a moment, taking another drink of his tea and putting a grape in his mouth, his jaw working vigorously as he chewed.

It was fortunate that he was so preoccupied with his own distress that it prevented him from noticing Cianne's. With a dizzying whoosh the blood had drained from her face, and she was glad he had lowered the blinds. The dim light would prevent him from seeing how pale she had gone.

"The thing is," he continued after a moment, "I think my father knew about it. They were in his study, in the middle of an argument the day I came back from my last voyage. I walked in on them. They brushed me off when I asked, but I heard my father as soon as I came through the front door. Over and over again he was shouting, 'How could you? How could you take part in such a betrayal?'"

Chapter 20

"I may need your assistance with something," Miss Wyland said as she slipped through Kila's back door.

Anticipating that she might drop in, he'd been on alert the entire evening, listening for her. He had taken to leaving his back door unbarred, his windows unlatched, when he was at home and awake. She'd already proven to him that she could sneak into his lodgings whenever she liked, so he doubted practicing her skills on his security would help her develop them any further. Why not make things simpler for her?

"Oh?" he asked, lifting a brow as he turned to her, wiping his hands on a tea towel.

Her face was drawn, her eyes troubled, but she brightened at the sight of his preparations. "Two cups?" she asked, her lips quirking in an amused smile.

Shrugging, he said, "I've decided it's best to be prepared. Been putting out an extra cup every night."

He would have called her expression wistful, but that didn't make much sense to him.

"That's kind of you," she said.

His traitorous eyes wanted to drink in the sight of her, and he found the urge difficult to resist. She was dressed as she always was, in tight, form-hugging black clothing that intrigued him more than he cared to admit. Her eyes were almost indigo in the flickering candlelight, and he felt himself being drawn into them. Tearing his gaze away, he returned his attention to the tea preparation.

Words tickled at the back of his throat. He wanted to tell her how much he enjoyed her company, but he wondered if that would sound odd, considering they were caught up in the midst of an intrigue. Would things be different once they managed to untangle the threads and discover what was happening in House Staerleigh? Was the chemistry simmering between them due to the excitement of being embroiled in a secret together, or was it more substantial than that? Would she continue to visit him at night after they'd solved the mystery?

He hoped very much that she would. Her secret skills and sharpness of mind intrigued him, made him want to learn more about her. He would like to

spend time with her, note the changes the years had wrought. He longed to know this new, adult version of the sweet young girl he had once befriended.

He kept his thoughts to himself.

They sat at his small table, Miss Wyland's shoulders relaxing as she sipped the tea. She was pensive, though.

"How may I assist you, Miss Wyland?" he asked.

"Miss Wyland?" she repeated, her lips curving in a full smile that snagged his gaze once more. "Really? When did we end up on such formal terms?"

"What should I call you, then?"

"You should call me by my first name, like you used to—" she cut herself off, looking abashed. "Right. I guess you didn't know me as Cianne then either."

"No, but I like to think I knew you."

His response pleased her, judging by the color that rose to her cheeks, the hope on her face. "You did know me. You do know me."

"Cianne it is, then, if that's what you would like."

Her cheeks got even pinker at his saying her name. "It is."

"So, how may I assist you, Cianne?"

"I may need to break into the offices in the Council Hall."

He wasn't surprised, not truly, but he did feel wary. Not because he didn't trust her, but because he wondered if it was a risk she should take. Her position within the House seemed precarious as it was. He did not think the Elders would be lenient if they caught her.

"Are you certain that's wise?"

"No, but I'm becoming convinced it may be necessary," she said. "Lach told me two things that strike me as very odd. For one, he said his parents were arguing the day he returned from his journey. He wasn't expected so early, if you recall, so they wouldn't have known he would walk in on them. He said his father was shouting at his mother, 'How could you? How could you take part in such a betrayal?'

"The second odd thing he told me was that his mother has been receiving coded messages. I plan to have a look around her study in the Stowley manor as well, but something tells me she wouldn't have kept them hidden there. My father doesn't keep anything of interest in his study."

Kila sensed something else was troubling her, but even as she continued to share more information with him, he couldn't shake the feeling that she was holding back.

She told him about the connections she'd made between her father, Moiria, and the Elders. He had to admit that all of it did sound rather strange. Why would the Elders be so secretive? The Houses were as strong as they were

because transparency was the standard. House Elders guided the House and stepped in to make decisions where necessary, but most House affairs were settled by consensus. Since every member of the House felt as if they had a vested interest in House outcomes, it kept them all loyal, involved, and motivated to do what was best for the collective good. Yes, some fared better than others, but when the House in general prospered so did even the lowliest of House members. It was what made the Houses such a force to be reckoned with, as many a non-Adept had complained to his or her companions in the local tavern. Hoping to win one House member to your side, to persuade them to go against the rest of their House, was considered a losing proposition.

"Very well. Should it become necessary to break into the Council Hall, I will assist you. I would very much like to see these coded messages," he said.

"As would I."

"What does the captain think his mother is doing?" he asked, wondering if Cianne intended to bring Captain Stowley in on their investigation.

Her face tightened at the mention of the captain, and Kila had the feeling that whatever she was holding back had to do with Captain Stowley. "He thinks his mother is having an affair."

"Do you mean to disabuse him of this notion?"

"No."

Her painful conflict at not sharing the truth with her friend was obvious, but he was glad she'd made the decision to keep what she knew to herself. As a general rule he wasn't necessarily in favor of going things alone, but he felt that in this circumstance secrecy was warranted. He was beginning to trust that she would defy her House if necessary, but he wasn't willing to bank on anyone else's willingness to do so.

"I think that's for the best, as difficult as this must be for you."

"So do I," she said with a heavy sigh. She threaded her fingers into her tightly bound hair and began kneading her scalp.

"Do you think the captain could ever be an ally?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. If we can find definitive proof that his mother did murder his father and that she and her conspirators covered it up, it might be enough to turn Lach. But I don't think it's wise to even consider bringing any of this to his attention unless we can find solid proof."

"I agree. I'm sorry. I wish I knew of some way to make this easier on you," he said, full of sympathy for her. He didn't like to see her under such strain.

"You help make it easier on me," she said, glancing at him. "Knowing I can speak freely with you, let down my guard, that does help. More than you might think."

"You may unburden yourself to me any time you wish."

"Do you know what would help me even more?"

"What's that?"

"Performing the deshya with you."

"I would be glad to have someone to practice with."

She was so lovely when she smiled.

Together they gathered the tea things and then headed out into his darkened jungle of a garden. Kila was accustomed to darkness, having spent many evenings staking out suspects and tracking wrongdoers, and his eyes adjusted quickly. Cianne didn't need much time to get her bearings either, as he'd suspected, and they took up positions across from one another, close but leaving an arm's length between them so that neither would accidentally strike the other.

Performing the deshya with a partner was an intimate act, which was why parents taught it to their children as a bonding exercise. Staring steadily into another's eyes for such a length of time was no easy thing, and it was thought that growing comfortable in performing the deshya with a partner was a good means of building trust. Kila suspected this was true, but he hadn't enough experience to say for certain. He had certainly trusted his parents, but aside from them Cianne was the only other person with whom he'd performed the deshya. After his departure from Cearova, he had been convinced he'd never perform it with a partner again.

The overgrown state of his garden heightened the sense of intimacy. The huge, unruly plants provided them with extra cover, shielding them from stray eyes. With so little space to work out, they had to be closer to one another than they might otherwise have been.

Threads of trust tugged at him as they glided from one form to the next without hesitation. When she had been younger the direct eye contact had made Cianne giggle in embarrassment, but now her face was serene as she moved. He was impressed by how well she performed. Her movements were lithe, fluid, beautiful to behold. She might not know it, but when she performed the deshya she was as much a child of water as any member of House Staerleigh. What a pity they couldn't seem to understand that value didn't lie solely in the Seafarer gifts Cearus had granted most of them.

Afterward they sat next to one another in the patch of scrubby grass, catching their breath. Kila had brought out some cool, weak ale for them to drink, and they gazed up at the stars as they recovered.

"Your skills are astonishing," he said.

"Because you wouldn't have believed me capable of developing them?" she teased. There was nothing but lightness in her voice, telling him that she trusted

him to see her in ways her House couldn't.

"Yes, that's it," he said, deadpan.

"Thank you very much for that wonderful compliment," she cried, nudging him with her shoulder.

The contact sent a shiver through him that had nothing to do with the night air cooling his overheated skin. His mouth went dry as she plucked pins from her hair, causing it to tumble over her shoulders and down to her waist in a cascade of loose curls. Breathing out in evident relief, she combed her fingers through her hair, brushing it away from her face. His fingers itched to reach out and touch it.

"You must have dedicated yourself to practicing," he said instead, hoping his voice was level.

"I did," she said, all seriousness. "I loved the deshya from the first moment you showed it to me, perhaps because it was so difficult for me. I was nimble enough, having grown up scrambling about ships, but I think I needed the challenge then. Once my mother was gone, I…" Pausing, she swallowed, staring off into the inky darkness, pinpricked by thousands of tiny, white stars. "I feared I wouldn't find my place in the world. When I found you and you showed me the deshya, I felt as if I finally understood where I belonged."

The words made his pulse leap in a manner he didn't quite understand. He recognized his attraction to her for what it was, had acknowledged that he was far more attracted to her than he had ever been to another woman, but he was also confused. She was no child, and he saw her as a woman, yet something held him back around her. All things considered, it would be a lousy time to become involved with anyone, but he felt as if becoming involved with her would be a violation even under the best of circumstances. Was it because she was a member of House Staerleigh and he knew that there could never be any hope of anything between them, or was it because he felt like he'd be committing an act of betrayal against the child he had once known? Either way, he could promise her nothing, which meant he had no business even broaching the topic.

He tried to find a delicate way to pose his next question. "You did grow up around ships? I would have thought that…"

She smiled at his obvious discomfort. "Don't worry, you haven't offended me. All House Staerleigh children are assumed to be Seafarers until proven otherwise. Ships are our playgrounds when we're young, and our parents encourage us to learn about every aspect of ships and sailing. We're formally tested at ten." Her smile faded as she spoke, pain etched around her eyes and mouth.

"I shouldn't have asked," he said, his chest aching. "I seem to have a talent

for inflicting pain on you."

"You didn't inflict this pain on me," she said quietly.

Staring off at the stars, he said, "Do you know what idea irks me more than any other? The idea that pain makes us stronger. Pain may make use wiser in the best cases, may make us more cautious, but I don't think pain makes us stronger. I believe strength is something you either have the will to muster or you don't."

She said nothing for a while, staring into the sky as well. "If you can't muster the strength, does that make you weak, then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps," he said, his thoughts chafing at him. He had tried so many times to make sense of it, but he'd never been able. He hadn't thought his father weak, and still wasn't convinced that his father was. But what other explanation was there for his father's actions?

"You have allowed me to share my pain with you, and I want you to know that you may share yours with me, if you wish to do so." Gathering her hair with her hands, she twisted it with deft fingers and pinned it back up again, then rose, offering him a hand. He took it, the contact with her skin once more making his nerves tingle, and got to his feet.

"Shall we go again?" she asked.

It was late but he wouldn't be able to sleep, due to his agitated state of mind. He was unwilling to let the night go, to put an end to the pocket of peace they had managed to carve out. He appreciated her offer, and appreciated even more that she had left it at that. It was clear that she understood how private a thing pain was. Someday he hoped he might find it within himself to share his pain with her.

Kila felt a sense of release as they repeated the deshya, as if he had begun to loosen his grip on the things that caused him the most distress. Cianne's motions were a mirror of his, and as he stared into her eyes, he could have sworn her emotions were also a mirror of his.

Chapter 21

Dawn had begun to tinge the edges of the sky gray by the time Cianne left. She had stayed with Kila for far too long, even though their time together had felt like mere moments to her.

You must be careful. You cannot afford to make mistakes, she chided herself.

She knew it was the truth and yet she didn't want to accept it. She wanted to snatch every last moment with Kila she could have. When Cianne's mother had died, she had experienced the painful first steps into adulthood, into understanding that those who were there one day might not be there the next. She couldn't say why she had fallen back into her childish beliefs when Kila had appeared in her life, why she had convinced herself that he would never leave. The blow reality had dealt her when she had discovered his absence had been grievous. Ever since, she had learned not to trust in assurances that the people she cared for the most would never leave her. Lach had been slipping away from her for years, their unmatched feelings for one another building walls between them of which he was as yet unaware. Though losing Lach caused her untold pain, the thought of Kila's disappearing again was far worse.

She loved him. She had loved him since she had been thirteen, though the love had been different then. Starved for attention, she had lapped up everything he offered her, becoming his devoted puppy. She hadn't known enough then to fear he might take advantage of her, but she knew enough now to understand that was something Kila would never do. Being gods-gifted with the skills of an Enforcer didn't ensure that an Adept felt a deep sense of devotion to protecting the weak. No, that was something that came from within Kila himself, from the depths of his character.

Over time her love had grown and matured, though she had never let herself really acknowledge it. Whenever his face had appeared in her mind, she had tried to resist its allure. For all she knew she had mythologized him, and he was nothing like what her memory insisted he was. Yet now that he was back and she had spent time with him, she knew she hadn't overinflated his attributes in any way. Kila was a man of honor, a man who believed in ferreting out the

truth, no matter the risk he incurred. He was kind, intelligent, and considerate, and he could make her laugh even when she was at her lowest and thought she might never laugh again. Her esteem for him had continued to grow, until she could no longer deny to herself that there never could have been room for Lach in her heart. He had never had a chance of winning her because her heart had long belonged to Kila.

She had been through too much to cherish an unwavering belief in happy endings, however. She wouldn't even let herself imagine what might happen between them. They had work to do, a mystery to solve, and she would focus on that work with singular devotion. Wondering about what might happen later, afterward, was a pointless waste of energy, and Cianne wouldn't allow herself to indulge.

The city had begun to wake. Shimmying up a baker's chimney was out of the question as the bakers had already started heating their ovens in preparation of baking the day's bread. She had made the mistake once of trying to scale a too-hot chimney, and it was a mistake she would never again make. Burns aside, the racket she had made when she had squalled with pain had been enough to bring everyone in the bakery running out into the alley to see what was the matter. She had barely been able to drag herself away, squeezing under a gap in a fence, biting down on her lip until it bled so that she could hold back the cry of pain as her burned hands had scraped over the alley dirt. For weeks she had been forced to find increasingly creative ways to hide her hands from her father. Training had been out of the question.

That was a shame, because the most direct route would have been to climb to the roof of the bakery on the next street over from Kila's and leap from roof to roof back to the outskirts of the enclave.

Instead she had to climb the university tower. She held her breath as she swung up onto the headmaster's balcony. He tended to be an early riser, but luck was with her. Not two seconds after she leapt to an adjacent roof, the headmaster stepped out onto his balcony. Flinging herself into the alcove of a chimney, Cianne folded in on herself, making her body as small as possible, and managed to escape the headmaster's notice. She waited impatiently for him to go back inside before she continued on her way. The near miss drove home why she took that risky route as infrequently as she could, but she had no choice this morning. Every other route would have taken far too long.

To her relief, Cianne made it back into her bed with moments to spare. The servants had begun their day, preparing breakfast for the Wylands and commencing their ceaseless battle against dust, scuffs, and smudges. Cianne slipped in through one of her windows, tore off her dark clothing, stuffed it into

the space she'd hollowed out beneath her floorboards, yanked a nightgown over her head, and vaulted between the covers just as Vivie's soft knock sounded on her door.

"Miss Wyland? Would you like your tea?" Vivie called out in a low voice.

"No tea," Cianne muttered, making herself sound as sleepy as she was able. "Sleep."

"Very well then, Miss. I'll return later."

Vivie's footsteps faded down the corridor and Cianne sat up in her bed, rubbing her burning, weary eyes. Her feather mattress conformed to her with delicious softness, beckoning her to lie down for a few moments, close her eyes, and take a nap, just a little one.

She couldn't afford to do so. She had a couple of hours until she was due at Lach's house, but some of the Elders were coming to call on her father, and she wanted to eavesdrop. True to her word, Vivie wouldn't return for hours, so no one would suspect that Cianne was up and about.

Taking a few moments to ensure that her secret stash of clothing was secure, Cianne removed her nightgown and pulled on a pair of the fine woolen breeches and billowing linen shirt she typically wore when she was at home. Her freedom of movement was more restricted in such clothing, and she had to take care not to allow her overlarge sleeves to catch on something, but she would have to make do. Should she be caught sneaking around the house, she'd have plenty of questions to answer without throwing her tight black apparel into the mix.

A knock rang out downstairs, and Cianne heard a servant answer the door, greeting the Elders. She counted four distinct voices, which was good. The more Elders that were present, the more of a tizzy the servants would be in as they bustled about making tea and ensuring that everything in the manor was set to rights. None of the House members liked to be embarrassed when the Elders visited their homes, and the servants considered it a point of honor to bend over backward to ensure they met the Elders' every need or whim.

"Hoping to curry favor," Cianne had once heard their cook whispering to a chambermaid.

"Elder Borean in particular has a long memory, so I'm told," the chambermaid had whispered back.

Naturally, a position in an Elder's household was the most desirable of all for the servants. Lacking Adept abilities and proper family connections, no other position was more worthy of bragging rights than that of an Elder's trusted household servant.

Not for the first time, Cianne felt a flash of frustration. The problem with

being a well-known member of the House was that she couldn't hope to insinuate herself with the servants. They were the key to any real information she could hope to gain, but she had yet to devise a means of getting that information from them. Kila would be no help in that regard either as all House servants familiarized themselves with every Enforcement officer.

Pressing her ear to her door, Cianne listened, meticulously cataloging every sound she heard and estimating its origin. When she was confident that none of the servants were in the immediate vicinity of her quarters, she slipped through her door and crept down the stairs to the second floor. The servants' stairs were off-limits as they would be crowded at the moment, so she had to risk the main staircase. Dashing across the corridor, she threw herself into the library, ghosting along the floor-to-ceiling walls of bookshelves.

Faint noises drifted to her, telling her that a servant was within, dusting the shelves, and Cianne cursed silently. Backtracking, she walked through the corridor without making a sound, but she didn't bother to try to hide. It would look far too suspicious if someone caught her skulking along. Better to run the risk of being seen and think up an excuse on the spot, which shouldn't be too difficult, considering that the servants would be far more concerned about the Elders than they would be about her.

Passing through one room to another, Cianne crouched in what had once been her mother's study, which shared a wall with her father's. He hadn't done a thing with the room since Annalith's death, and the air of neglect within it sent cold fingers skittering up Cianne's spine no matter how many times she visited the room. She had gone through it inch by inch a variety of times over the years, but had found nothing out of the ordinary. Her mother's books, papers, and personal effects were still scattered about the room, kept dust-free by the servants, as if Annalith might one day reappear in the room, muttering to herself as she dug through the mess on her desk in an effort to find whatever it was she was seeking.

"…Lachlon…" Elder Borean's muffled voice said through the wall. Something else followed, but Cianne couldn't make out the words.

Frowning, she reached into her pocket, her fingers closing around one of her most prized possessions, which she'd procured courtesy of the city's black market. The small brass object collapsed flat and looked rather like a funnel when she extended it. She pushed aside all thought of the questions that would ensue if anyone were to catch her with it, as if finding her huddled against the wall separating her father's study from her mother's wouldn't be bad enough. She would have to risk it. There was no other option if she wanted to hear more than meaningless snatches of their conversation.

"…past time for a new voyage," Elder Maizton said, her thin, feeble voice quavering.

"I agree," Daerwyn said. "Lachlon's deterioration is a matter of considerable concern. Returning to sea would be the best thing for him."

"There's the shipment bound for Leonovia," Elder Vorfarth suggested.

"That won't do!" responded Elder Florius's fretful voice. "It's been years since we've sent him on such a simple voyage. It's hardly worth his time."

"Then we tell my son we want to start him out slowly," Moiria said.

"Will he believe it?" Elder Maizton asked doubtfully.

"It's the truth, isn't it?" Daerwyn asked. Cianne could practically hear him shrug.

"But—" Elder Florius began, before Elder Vorfarth cut her off.

"Ellium, my dear, we cannot mince words any longer. Forgive me, Moiria, but it's no secret that Lachlon has been in a terrible state since his father's death. The best thing we can do for him is get him aboard his ship once more. If he remains here he may not recover."

"What do you think of this, Moiria?" Elder Florius asked.

Her voice steely with resolve, Moiria said, "I think Corlinda is right, Lach should be given the Leonovia run. Were anything better available, I would suggest we opt for it instead, but it's the best we can do on short notice. I can't bear seeing him like this any longer."

"Moiria," Daerwyn began, but she cut him off.

"No, we've discussed it and discussed it. It's time to do something. Cianne has done her best to help him, but even she hasn't been able to get through to him."

In spite of herself, Cianne's cheeks flushed. She'd had no illusions. She had long known that other House members, and especially the Elders, had often discussed her relationship with Lach, but it made her feel filthy to hear them discussing the intimate details of what should have been her private life.

"Perhaps she has begun to lose her influence with him," Elder Maizton said.

Everyone went quiet for a second, even Cianne.

"She's made far more progress with him than anyone else has managed," her father responded in clipped tones.

Two contradictory emotions flooded Cianne. On the one hand, she was utterly humiliated to hear the Elders speaking about her in this manner, particularly in front of her father and Moiria. It filled her with a sense of rage at the indignity of it all. Here Lach was trying to deal with his father's death, and the Elders were bickering over whether or not Cianne had a hold over him. She

hated it. She hated that they took her relationship with Lach and turned it into yet another piece on their chessboard.

On the other hand, she felt a pathetic sense of gratitude that her father had stood up for her.

Of course he did, whispered a voice in the back of her mind. *You think he wants you to lose whatever power he believes you have over Lach? Imagine how bitter it would be for him to have to see his dreams of a triumphant union between his daughter and the beloved Captain Stowley dashed to pieces. Do you think he sees you as any less of a pawn than the Elders do?*

"Daerwyn's right," Moiria said.

It seemed Cianne wasn't the only one surprised by Moiria's allying herself with Daerwyn. "What happened to your fears about the dilution of your line, dear?" Elder Florius asked her.

"Enough," Elder Vorfarth said. "We are all of us under a great deal of strain, but we will not allow that to cause fighting between us. Who are we, House Rolland? This backbiting suits none of us."

"Ellium has a point," Elder Maizton said. "Will there or won't there be a union between your daughter and Lachlon, Daerwyn?"

"Cianne is to give me an answer within the month."

"And Lachlon?"

"He will wait. He's always been nothing if not willing to wait for her," said Moiria, a note of disgust in her voice.

So much for being allied with my father, Cianne thought.

"Haven't we learned over these many years that patience is our greatest asset?" Daerwyn asked. "This is but another bump in the road, and we shall survive it and endure as we have every other bump in the road."

What in Cearus's name does that mean?

"I think this conversation has become rather too candid," said Elder Maizton.

"Agreed," said Elder Vorfarth. "Daerwyn, you are prepared? You have received word?"

"Yes."

"Then I suggest we all go about our business and meet at the usual time afterward."

"Allow me to speak with my son first," Moiria said.

"And I'll speak with Cianne," Daerwyn said. "I'll ask her to reason with Lach, to help him understand that a voyage is to his benefit. She will be able to persuade him to go."

"Are you certain of that?" Elder Maizton asked.

"Of course I am," Daerwyn said icily.

Collapsing her listening device, Cianne pocketed it again as the Elders took their leave. Her mind was racing. She was about to make her way back to her room when she realized she had heard only the Elders' voices fading away, not Moiria's. Pulling her device out again, Cianne could hear her father mumbling, and she was frustrated with herself for missing his words.

"What does it matter? They're beginning to doubt us," Moiria responded, her voice pitched so low Cianne had trouble hearing her even with the aid of the listening device.

"You will cease to give them reasons to doubt us. We cannot afford to let that happen, not after all we've sacrificed," Daerwyn said, his voice hard. "I won't tolerate it, Moiria."

Chapter 22

"I found one," Cianne said, slapping a note down on Kila's desk. Her color was high, her face pinched in anger, and he was astonished at the show of emotion. Her posture was rigid, as if she were having trouble preventing herself from lashing out.

In the two days since they had performed the deshya together, he had spent every free moment thinking of her and the things they had discovered. Combing through Toran Stowley's ledger, Kila had tried to glean some new information, but to no avail.

Ledgers didn't seem to be much of a friend to him as of late. He and Burl were still working on tracking down the shopkeeper's murderer, Kila not having made much progress with the shopkeeper's ledger either. Burl's face had been openly suspicious when he had reported back to her, and she had taken the ledger home with her the previous night. Her tone had been grudging this morning when she had admitted she hadn't found much either, but he had felt a glimmer of relief. Her skills were impressive, but the evidence that they didn't overshadow his was mounting. He didn't care about his pride taking a blow; rather he was concerned that Burl might be too much for him, that she might catch on to the fact that her new partner was doing some investigating on the side. Chief Flim had assured him Burl had no idea what he was up to, but he wasn't willing to get comfortable.

"Where did you find it?" he asked, smoothing the crumpled, singed sheet. He was quite certain Cianne hadn't been the one to crumple it, which indicated that if it were a love letter as the captain suspected, his mother appeared to have been jilted.

"Moiria's study."

"So perhaps she hasn't been storing anything at the Council Hall, judging by the state of this letter," he said. "She may be in the habit of burning anything incriminating."

"It's possible. At any rate, my hope is that this may provide us with a lead. I was able to get into her study seconds after she stepped out, and I managed to snatch this from the fire before it could catch. Whatever it is, she didn't want

anyone to see it."

A single column ran the length of the page. Each line was a jumble of letters and numbers.

"Looks like what was in Toran's ledger," Cianne said.

"No," Kila said, seeing immediately that Moiria's letter bore no resemblance to what Toran Stowley had written. "See here? It's designed to look like it might be counting book figures, but I'd be willing to wager that it isn't. The numbers and letters repeat in distinct patterns, and the combinations are different from what Toran Stowley used."

"Do you think you can crack it?"

"I can try, but I can't guarantee anything. Chances are that if Moiria and anyone else in House Staerleigh are in the habit of exchanging coded messages they're changing the cipher on a regular basis."

"Could you do what you can?" Hands on hips, she paced restlessly, like a caged animal.

"Of course. Has something happened?"

She recounted for him the conversation she had overheard in her father's study, and he understood her ire at once.

"Not the most pleasant of things to overhear," he said mildly when she was finished.

Patches of color stained her cheeks, and she shook her head. "I don't care what they said about me," she said, but she was lying. "I'm far more concerned with the whole nature of the conversation. I suspected my father was up to something, but now I am certain, and it gives me no pleasure.

"I am concerned about what they said about Lach. Something about the conversation gave me the impression they weren't comfortable with his presence in Cearova."

"Considering he is their best captain, doesn't it make sense that they want him back at sea? House Staerleigh presumably stands to lose considerable amounts of gold if the captain remains at home. Couldn't their concern be financial?"

"I've no doubt that's a factor, but I don't think that's all of it. He seems to be making them nervous."

"Due to his behavior toward his mother?"

"That could be it. Or it could be that he wreaked havoc with their timeline. Had he not returned home early, he wouldn't have been in Cearova when his father died."

"And he's been expressing his disbelief that his father would have committed suicide," Kila said. "Has he spoken with anyone else about it?"

"Not as far as I'm aware, but we both know the walls have ears. Any number of servants—not to mention the Apothecist who sedated him the night of his father's death—heard at least some part of what he's been saying."

"Sending him out of the city would get him out of their way."

Cianne nodded. "They wouldn't want to harm him. He's far too valuable to them. He brings in a great deal of gold."

"As did Toran Stowley."

She bit her lip but said nothing in response to that.

"Cianne, what if you're in danger?" Kila asked.

She met his eyes, something flickering in hers at the sight of the concern he hadn't hidden from her. "I may very well be, but I can't leave this alone, not now. I have to know the truth. I have to know what's going on in my House."

"If anything happens, anything at all, I want you to come to me and I will find a way to get you out of the city safely."

"I can't ask that of you," she said, turning away.

"You're not. I'm offering."

"I won't put your life at risk," she insisted.

"Cianne, we're in this together."

Turning back to him, she offered a tremulous smile. "I thought being alone was difficult, but somehow this is much more difficult."

"Trusting your life to another is no easy thing," he said.

"That's not it. I do trust you with my life. What isn't easy is the knowledge that I might be the cause of any harm that comes to you."

"I would have poked my nose into this with or without your interference," he said, making a gentle joke of it. The truth was, he probably would have. He hadn't forgotten the jarring sense he'd had that everything seemed somehow too neat at the Stowley manor. His gift was such that if something nagged at him, some loose thread he hadn't unraveled, he wasn't able to rest.

"Should we perform the deshya again?"

"Yes. I think it would do us both good to spend some time clearing our minds."

A fine mist fell from the sky, but the night was still warm, and the distraction was good. As students advanced in their studies, their parents often staged distractions to try to shake their focus. Becoming a deshya master was more than a feat of physicality, it was a feat of mentality as well.

He couldn't fool himself, though. The rain was nothing compared to how distracted he was beginning to feel by her presence. He hated to see her hurting, and he longed to say something to her about it, but it wasn't his place. He couldn't allow his own unspoken desires to prompt him to do something that

might cause her additional pain.

How can Moiria Stowley fail to see her worth? he wondered as he and Cianne began to move in unison. *How can she be so blind?*

It shouldn't have struck him as odd. There was nothing uncommon about Adepts looking down on those without abilities. Even at home, Kila had been one of the few children he knew who had one Adept and one non-Adept parent. Though there were, of course, exceptions to the rule, many highly gifted Adepts tended to see themselves as something more than human. After all, if being a non-Adept was the natural human condition, then being an Adept must be something closer to divinity.

Time was lost to him as they moved, and he realized with sudden clarity that continuing on this way with her put them both at increasing risk. Being with her had begun to feel like time out of time, as if they were stealing from the gods themselves, and there would be a price to pay for it. But how could he deny himself this? What was the harm in it, as long as he strove to maintain his distance?

His life hadn't been devoid of happiness, but the years since his parents' deaths had been years of near-constant struggle, struggle to adapt to Astoran culture, struggle to deal with his bitterness at having been cast out of Cearova, struggle to come to terms with his presence in Astoran in the first place. When he was with Cianne he struggled as well, but even so he had no desire to be anywhere else.

The rain had let up by the time they were finished, and they sat next to one another again. The ground was wet, but it hardly mattered as he was soaked to the skin, his clothing plastered to him. Cianne was every bit as wet as he was, but considering how tight her clothing was to begin with, it didn't make much difference.

He felt a vague whiff of disappointment at the thought.

Once again she unpinned her hair, letting the damp strands hang loose. The moisture intensified the curls, making her hair more voluminous than usual, and he found himself smiling at the sight.

"I look a fright, don't I?" she said ruefully. "Cearus must have a sense of humor to have given me hair like this, considering how close I live to the sea."

"You look anything but a fright," he said. "You've a leaf caught in your hair."

"Where?" She patted her head, trying to find it.

"A little lower. No, to the left."

"Oh, bugger it," she said. "I'll be at this all night. Would you be so kind as to pull it out for me?"

Swallowing, he nodded, and she turned her back to him, allowing him better access. The air felt heavy, and she was so still. He was glad she couldn't see his face, couldn't see how his hand trembled as he reached for her hair. A light breeze kicked up, tangling the strands, and he separated them with gentle fingers.

"And here's the offender," he said, holding the leaf over her shoulder so she could see it. He didn't want to admit that he did so because he was worried that she might think he had invented a feeble excuse to touch her hair.

She took it from his fingers, her skin brushing his. "Invader! How dare you!" She released it, and they both watched it drift away on another breeze.

"You told me I might share my pain with you, if I ever felt so inclined," he said, the words tumbling from his mouth of their own accord. He wanted her to have a reason to stay because she would otherwise feel obliged to leave, now that they were finished with the deshya.

He knew he should let her go. The last time she had been here they had made the mistake of lingering too long, and he had sat in his sitting room watching the sun rise, fretting that she might be caught sneaking back into her manor. Yet he was unwilling to let her go.

Wordlessly, she turned back to him, her gaze trailing over his face. "And I meant it," she said at last.

"I lost my parents when I was young," he said, studying the ground. "My mother was an Enforcer too, and she was attacked one night while on duty. At first it seemed she might survive, but then an infection set in that the Healers weren't able to control. My father was married to an Adept; he understood there were limits to their abilities, but he was crazed with grief. He accused them of having failed her, said they hadn't tried hard enough."

"How old were you?" Cianne asked, her voice hushed.

"I was fourteen."

Her gasp made him look up, and she squeezed her eyes closed. Lines of grief bracketed them, and he could see that she felt his pain as if it were her own. In some ways, it was her own.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice choked.

"Thank you," he said.

The next words would be the most difficult of all. Just thinking of them made him feel as though they were alternately trying to squeeze their way out of his throat and then shove themselves back down. He had never before spoken to anyone about what had happened.

"From there, he got worse. He drank to try to dull the pain, but even that didn't work. He would empty a bottle, pass out, and wake up to the reminder that

she was gone, which started the cycle anew."

She looked horrified. "Were you alone with him?"

He shook his head. "No, my uncle helped, took me to his house when my father was in a truly bad state. This went on for the next two years. By then I had begun my apprenticeship, and I spent most of my time at my uncle's house. My father was a recluse, the house falling down around his ears.

"The day after my sixteenth birthday, he took his own life."

"Oh, gods, Kila," she said, covering her mouth with her hand. "That's why you said what you did about strength and pain and weakness. You think he was weak."

"Don't you?" he asked, the words harsh.

Shaking her head, she gazed up at him sadly. "I think he was broken."

Anger lit a flame within him. "Don't make excuses for him."

"That's not what I'm doing, Kila. I understand why you're angry with him. You'd already lost your mother, and then he left you alone. But he must have been in such enormous pain. I can't help but feel compassion for him."

Kila clenched his jaw, unwilling to let her words penetrate. They did anyway.

"It's personal for you, isn't it?" she asked softly.

He didn't need her to clarify. "Yes, I suppose maybe it is," he admitted, dragging a hand over his face.

When he'd found his father, the scene had been so chaotic, so messy. He knew this wasn't necessarily the case with every suicide, but he also knew that his abilities didn't save him from his own presumptions. It was why Toran Stowley's tidy, orderly study had caught his eye.

"I wish I could find the right words to say to you," she said.

"There are no right words, are there?" he asked.

"No. No, there aren't."

Her hand moved to cover his and he let it. They sat there for a long while, contemplating their losses.

Chapter 23

"There you are," Daerwyn said when Cianne walked into the dining room to break her fast with her father. "I've not seen much of you these past weeks."

"I've been busy with Lach," she said, not bothering to hide her weariness from him. After all, there was nothing like making a noble sacrifice for the House.

Her father nodded his approval. "He's depended on you a great deal," he said, satisfaction warming his words. He, for one, showed no sign of being concerned that she was losing her grasp on Lach.

Cianne cast a pointed glance at the servant placing her plate in front of her, giving the young man a smile. "Thank you, Philius."

Taking the hint, Daerwyn said nothing more. While she waited for the servant to leave the room, Cianne tried to decide how to play this encounter with her father. She wanted to see what information she could glean from him, but it went without saying that she would have to do so in an underhanded manner lest she let on to him that she had some inkling of what was going on in the House.

"Lach is in a real state," she said to her father when they were alone at last. She sighed for effect, pushing a bit of ham around on her plate, using the distraction to study her father from under lowered lids.

"So I've heard. Moiria is quite concerned about him."

"She has every reason to be. I've never seen him so despondent."

"I understand there were some raised voices during one of your last visits with him," her father said in a casual tone. He put some ham in his mouth and chewed, brows raised as he waited for her response.

Cianne permitted herself to blush, though in reality it was due to alarm and not embarrassment. Her father was spying on her? She felt a momentary surge of panic. What if he knew she was going out at night?

Lowering her head, she controlled her features, schooling them into an expression of deepest chagrin. "I'm afraid I lost my temper with him. He was… He's not been himself, and it's led him to say some things he shouldn't say."

"Such as?" Daerwyn continued eating as if they were making simple conversation, but she knew he was paying close attention to everything she said.

"He was unkind to me." Fixing her eyes on her hands, Cianne conjured up some tears. Should she let her father see her welling or was it better if she pretended as though she were trying to conceal her hurt? Better to pretend to conceal it, she decided.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Daerwyn sounded displeased.

Time to salvage the situation.

Dashing her hand across her face to brush away the tear she'd allowed to roll down her cheek, Cianne pulled in a deep breath and met her father's eyes, offering him a tremulous smile. "It was terrible, but he apologized to me. He's told me he doesn't know what he would do without me."

There. Let him know she hadn't lost her power.

How sickening this game was, how vile it made her feel. She didn't think she was toying with Lach's feelings, at least not to his face. She hadn't encouraged him to act in any other manner than as a friend. But she couldn't shake the sense of guilt and shame she felt at knowing she was using Lach's feelings as ammunition with her father.

Make him the object of public speculation so that you may hide your own actions and motives. Well done, Cianne.

What else could she do? She wasn't doing this solely for selfish reasons. It was to Lach's benefit as well for her to do her best to discover if there was more to his father's death than there appeared to be. It was to the benefit of the House as a whole to investigate whether the Elders, Moiria, and her father were deceiving everyone. Whatever they were caught up in, it would appear as if the entire House were involved, whether or not they were. Why should the House as a whole suffer punishment for the actions of a few?

Daerwyn looked like a cat indulging in a bowl of cream. "He's fortunate to have you looking out for him."

And you're fortunate to have me to dangle before him, aren't you?

"He's having trouble accepting that his father is gone," Cianne said, deciding to risk it. She wouldn't tell him what Lach suspected, not after she had promised Lach that she would not, but she wanted to see how her father would react to this sally.

"It's never easy to accept that someone is gone," he said, his jaw tightening.

Deciding it wasn't safe to press the issue, she said, "I think it would benefit him to go on a voyage again. There are too many reminders here. It's best for him to get away for a while, so that he can begin to heal rather than remain mired in his grief."

"I tend to agree. It would give Moiria time to get things in order, and when Lach returned he could concentrate more on the future."

She knew full well what he was implying by that, and she lowered her head again, spots of color reappearing on her cheeks. "I don't think now is the time to discuss it with him."

"I don't either. I do think being away would give him time to sort out his feelings, and I think it would give you time to do so as well. A trial such as this isn't an easy thing, Cianne. You and Lach have both known more grief than anyone as young as you are should know. You weathered your mother's loss with Lach's help, and he will weather his father's with yours. Not every relationship can stand such a test. And for all the bad, the good is that you're forging the kind of bond that makes for the strongest of foundations." He had softened his voice, going for the tenderhearted father concerned about his daughter's well-being.

She couldn't deny the truth of his words, but she didn't bother pointing out to him that the same could be said of friendship. Trying to discuss the nature of her feelings for Lach would get her nowhere. The size of the House didn't change much from generation to generation, and there were a limited number of eligible women and men with each generation. Her father hadn't remarried after losing his wife because there had been no eligible candidates. Cianne suspected he wouldn't have been interested in remarrying at any rate, but he would have subjugated his own wishes and done so for the good of the House, had the opportunity presented itself.

Were Cianne to reject Lach, there were other young women who would be glad to marry him, to secure themselves to both the wealth and social standing he would bring them. That he would marry went without question. He was far too valuable an asset to Staerleigh to live as a bachelor. Cianne held his heart, but he would do his duty as required. Love didn't matter; even had he been one of the House members who preferred the company of his own sex over that of the opposite sex he would still have to marry in order to have children, though House members who found themselves in that situation usually made discreet arrangements to carry on affairs on the side. Their spouses had to agree to the arrangements, of course, in order to ensure harmony, and it was common in such cases for several married couples to work together to reach mutually beneficial arrangements. But the bottom line was that no good possibilities for breeding could go to waste.

Which was why Cianne had chosen the tactic she had, arguing that she wasn't a worthy wife for Lach because of her lack of Adept abilities. It was the only reason her father hadn't pressed her even harder than he had, because even he couldn't argue with that logic, regardless of how ambitious he was for his daughter.

Yet his patience was coming to an end, increasing her sense of urgency.

She would have to get to the bottom of this mystery, and she would have to do it soon.

"I-I wish I were… That I…" she said. The words came from between gritted teeth, but that made them sound as if her distress were so great she found it difficult to speak, so her father didn't notice anything was amiss.

"It cannot be helped," he said, giving her hand a perfunctory pat. She heard the mixture of disgust and disappointment in his voice. In her more generous hours, she worked to convince herself that her father was ashamed of feeling such things for his own daughter, but even in those generous hours she wasn't able to entirely convince herself.

"I think you're right," she said in an unsteady tone. "I am fortunate Lach and I understand one another as well as we do."

It was the truth, but she also said it for her father's benefit, to reinforce the point that she had a claim to Lach that no one else did.

Someday, she thought, *perhaps someday I can do something to make up for my transgressions against him.*

They continued their meal in silence for a while, then Cianne turned a falsely bright smile on her father.

"I heard some of the Elders came to see you a few days ago, while I was still asleep?" she asked.

"They did. We were discussing Lach, in fact. I've told them as well that I think he ought to be sent on another voyage, and they're considering sending him to Leonovia."

"I'm not certain he'll like that," Cianne said, wrinkling her nose, curious to see how much her father would disclose to her.

With a rueful smile, he said, "You sound like Elder Florius. Don't take it as a slight against Lach. I merely feel that it might be wise to get him back to sea with an easy voyage. From what you've said, I'm not certain he's ready for something more demanding."

"That's very thoughtful of you." She was surprised that he'd made the comment about Elder Florius. It was unusual for her father to critique the Elders, even obliquely.

"Elder Florius has Lach's best interests at heart," he said. "As do we all. We simply have a difference of opinion as to what that might be. Given that you also think it would be good for Lach to return to sea, my belief that the Leonovia voyage might be just the thing is even more firm. Would you speak to Lach about it?"

"Of course. I do so want him to get better," she said, employing her most earnest tone and expression.

Nodding his approval, her father wiped his mouth and stood. "I must get to the Council Hall. We've a meeting with one of the other captains, and I'm anxious to hear her report. As I'm sure you can imagine, Lach's absence from the roster has left us with something of a hole—not that I want you to share that with him. I don't want him to feel guilty, not while he's still grieving his father. It would be best for us all, though, to get him back onto his ship."

And there was the twist of the blade. Whatever her father might claim, he knew guilt over the damage he might be doing to the House would prove a powerful motivator for Lach.

"Cearus protect us," Cianne said, creasing her brow in a show of distress. "Is the House—"

"No need to trouble yourself, truly. It's a matter of a small wrinkle. It will all be resolved once Lach is back on the roster." Gracing her with a reassuring smile, her father gave her a light kiss on the cheek. "Will I see you for dinner tonight?"

"No. Lach has asked me to dine with him and his mother."

"It's just as well. Gorian Mather is coming to dine, and I know how it bores you when he and I discuss innovations in ship design." For the first time in far longer than Cianne could remember, her father's smile was genuine, and she was unable to resist smiling back.

"I am more grateful than ever to have escaped," she said in a fervent tone, making him chuckle.

Staring at the empty archway after he'd left, her mind was busy. Her father hadn't disclosed much, but it was obvious that he thought she might be able to persuade Lach where the Elders might fail. He'd also mentioned that Lach's absence would give Moiria a chance to set her affairs in order. The implication that Moiria wanted Lach out of the manor while she did so made sense, given Lach's resistance to his mother's suggestion that they go through Toran's things, but Cianne suspected there was more to it than that. If Lach were gone, Moiria could go through Toran's office with meticulous care, ensuring he hadn't left anything behind she didn't wish others to see, and Cianne doubted she would do so alone.

She might have been reaching, but Cianne felt a strong conviction that getting Lach out of the way was of the utmost importance to the group she was beginning to see as conspirators. Had Lach not arrived home early, they would have had time to search Toran's office before Lach returned. Having him in the manor while they were uncertain whether there was something for him to uncover must be stretching their nerves taut.

The exchange with her father had also left her with a sense of longing.

How different could her life have been had she and he known more than a moment of harmony here and there, had they managed to capture more than brief snatches of contentment at being in one another's company. She didn't think things had always been this way between them, though it was admittedly difficult for her to call forth a clear recollection of how things with her father had been before her mother's death. She did know that they had once been a happy family, that the three of them had spent some wonderful times together.

Since her mother's death, however, nothing. Her father had held her at arm's length, growing increasingly discontented with her. Perhaps she reminded him too much of her mother; she had been told that she favored Annalith.

Be cautious, Cianne. It's tempting to think life could be nothing but easy waters, but could it? Blind loyalty to your House, dutiful obedience, aren't guarantees of peace. You need only look at Lach to realize that.

Chapter 24

"I haven't been able to discern much of anything," Kila said without preamble when Cianne let herself into his lodgings that night. "I suspect these may be dates, these may be figures, and these may be initials, but that's as far as I've gotten."

He showed Cianne the relevant columns and left her to examine his notes while he went into the common room to make tea.

"Let me help you," she said, coming to join him. With a shrug and a self-deprecating smile, she added, "I'm not likely to find anything you've missed, am I?"

Remaining silent for a moment, he decided to do away with all pretense of formality between them. She wanted to confide in him and he wanted to confide in her. Circumstance had made them partners, but his wish to be her friend came from within.

"They're not infallible, you know," he said.

"What aren't?" she asked, glancing at him as she measured the tea leaves.

"Adept skills. We make mistakes, just as everyone else does."

He couldn't interpret the expression on her face.

"They make your life much easier," she said, the words clipped. He had the impression she was spoiling for a fight.

Curiously, this didn't offend him. He suspected she so rarely was able to speak to another person with any real candor, and he wouldn't try to deceive himself by insisting that he wasn't flattered she had chosen to speak candidly with him.

"Oh ho, is *that* what you think?" he scoffed.

"Yes, it is," she said, turning to face him. She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to level a neutral expression on him, but every line of her body was aggressive, and her eyes were mulish.

"Did it ever occur to you that the opposite is true?"

"Please! Spoken like one who has no idea what it's like to have no gods-given powers to rely on," she said, the words bursting out of her. One hip jutted forward, and she planted her hands on them.

"Spoken like one who thinks gods-given powers are all that's important in life." The moment the words were out he regretted them. He had gotten caught up in the heat of the moment, and he was afraid he had said something truly hurtful, something that would deeply offend her.

She flushed and hurt did flicker in her gaze, but then she relaxed her stance and turned back to the teapot. "Very well, perhaps you have a point," she said, mumbling the words in a grudging tone.

A smile flashed over his face, and he hid it before she could see it. "Neither of us know what it's like to walk in the boots of the other, do we?"

The kettle whistled and he poured the boiling water into the pot. She hadn't moved aside to allow him more room to work, and he could see it was because she was lost in thought. Their bodies were close, close enough for him to feel the warmth emanating from her skin, to smell her tempting scent. He caught himself leaning in even closer, drawing in a deeper breath than normal.

"No, neither of us does," she said, her eyes meeting his.

"You have lovely eyes," he said. More words escaping. Did he intend to make a habit of this?

Her eyes darkened, her lips parting slightly, and he knew how gratifying she found the compliment. "Thank you," she said, her voice throaty. "I've always liked your eyes as well."

Dangerous territory. Extract yourself at once.

"Shall we sit?" he asked, seizing the tray.

He could have sworn it was disappointment that momentarily marred her features.

"Yes."

He poured for them, feeling far more conscious of himself than he had ever felt. Making a fool of himself over a woman was something he wasn't in the habit of doing. He hadn't extensive experience with romance, but there had been a few women in his past, women with whom he'd passed a pleasant enough time but with whom he hadn't shared the sort of bond his parents had shared.

Then again, perhaps he did his best to prevent himself from feeling that sort of bond. Look where it had gotten his father. Kila didn't know if he was willing to make himself that vulnerable, if he was willing to risk the possibility that he could be crushed, heart and soul, by loss.

"Sometimes being gifted makes life more difficult," he said, deciding to pick up the threads of the conversation they'd been having before he'd gone and lost his senses.

"How so?" she asked, willing to go along with him, to his relief. Her interest was genuine, though. Eyes fixed on him, she offered him her undivided

attention.

"I can only speak to my own experiences, of course, but it can be tempting to rely too much on my gifts. Because they make some aspects of my life so easy, it's oftentimes a real blow to find that everything about my life isn't that effortless."

Nibbling at her bottom lip, she knit her brows, then nodded. "Yes, I have sometimes thought that of Lach," she admitted.

He hated hearing her speak about Captain Stowley, and felt an overwhelming desire to wince every time she referred to him by his nickname. He couldn't say why. Jealousy wasn't the problem, of that he was certain. Or at least not jealousy over the fear that Cianne might be interested in Stowley as more than a friend. Kila believed her when she said she didn't intend to marry him. When she spoke of him she didn't manifest the slightest indication that she cherished any tender feelings for him beyond friendship.

No, he supposed his dislike stemmed more from the fact that she seemed to know the captain so well and he her. Stowley knew Cianne in a way that Kila longed to know her, a way he feared he might not ever know her.

And Stowley has no need to hide his attraction to her. Were Cianne interested in him, Stowley would be free to pursue her.

Pushing his thoughts aside, Kila said, "I've known Adepts who devoted themselves to their skills with single-minded focus."

"Like the Seventh Sisters?" Cianne asked, a look coming over her face that he knew all too well. Everyone was fascinated by the Seventh Sisters, it seemed, even Kila himself.

"No, I don't think so," he said. "I don't know much about the Seventh Sisters, but then that's the way they prefer it, isn't it? What I meant was that some Adepts get to a point where they seem to forget that anything exists in the world beyond what they themselves are capable of doing. I've seen it especially with Shapers, Composers, and Performers, many of whom become so consumed by their art they forget to do things like eat and drink, and have to live with people who will remind them to see to their basic human needs."

"How does that differ from the Sisters?"

"I suppose because the Sisters alone possess more than a single Adept ability. I've never met one, you understand, so this is pure speculation on my part, but I imagine they have a better understanding that the world is a multifaceted place. They know it takes more than one narrow skill to make the world function. However helpful my ability might be in some situations, it's entirely useless in others. It can't make me a better friend, it can't help me grow crops, it can't help me soothe a broken heart."

"I don't know if I agree with that. In some ways it can, I would think—not growing crops, obviously. What I mean is, if you solve a crime, it must mean a great deal to the victims or to the loved ones they've left behind. It might not mend their broken hearts or free them from the trauma of what they've suffered, but doesn't it go a long way toward helping them move forward?"

"Perhaps for some. But, Cianne, you're capable of solving crimes too. You're capable of smithing a sword, or holding your own against an opponent in a dagger fight, or weaving cloth. You're capable of making things grow, of creating beauty, of caring for others."

"Like your father was."

"Like my father was," he agreed, swallowing against the lump in his throat. He pulled his father's book out of his pocket and showed it to her. "Thank you for reminding me of that."

"I hope… I hope I didn't overstep my bounds when I spoke to you about him," she said hesitantly.

"You didn't. I think I needed to hear what you said. I think I needed to learn to judge him more fairly, to soften my heart. I'm not certain I'll ever fully forgive him, but perhaps I understand him better now than I did before. I thank you for that."

"I'm glad if I was able to help you," she said softly.

"You were, and I am grateful to you for it."

She smiled. "Years have separated us, and I was very young when we met, but I have always considered you my friend. Sometimes, when I'm with you, I have the sense that little has changed between us at all, that I could go another nine years without seeing you and I would fall immediately into friendship with you once again."

"I'd rather not go another nine years without seeing you."

"Stay here. Don't leave me behind again."

Her voice was warm with humor, but he knew she meant what she said. And he meant it when he replied, "I never will leave you behind again."

Their eyes locked and time seemed to stop. He wanted to kiss her. He longed for it with a ferocity that made every nerve in his body ignite, every muscle ache.

Why? Why do I hold myself back?

But he knew the answer to that question. They both knew the answer to that question.

He was at a loss. What could he say to her?

"I've changed my mind. I don't think we should try to break into the Council Hall," she said, startling him. She had turned her attention to toying with

her teacup, and he wasn't certain what he should feel. Relief? Disappointment?

Heartache.

"You don't?" he asked, willing his voice to be steady.

"No, not yet. We may need to do so in the future, but I think it's too risky at present. My father mentioned an upcoming meeting when I was eavesdropping on his conversation, and it must have something to do with the meetings Toran noted in his ledger. It fits into the schedule."

"That's right," he said, sitting back in his chair, contemplating this revelation. "You think we should try to spy on the meeting?"

"I think I should try."

"Cianne, I'm not letting you take that risk on your own," he said firmly.

"Unless you've developed skills I know nothing about—which I concede is possible, given my own personal knowledge of what people are capable of doing if they so desire—stealth isn't your strong point."

He couldn't argue with her there. "Then I'll at least come along with you." She started to protest, but he talked over her. "I can keep a lookout for you, pay attention to who comes and goes in the area. We stand to learn a lot about how these meetings are conducted if I stay outside and observe. You'll be able to overhear what they're saying, and I'll be able to gain us some valuable information about what kind of security these meetings entail, as well as clues to why they've chosen the locations they have."

Sighing, she played with a strand of her hair that had fallen loose, tugging the curl straight and then wrapping it around her finger. He forced himself to deny his intense interest and look away.

He left unspoken the other part of his argument, that if she were discovered, he would be there to help her, for all the good it might do. They would undoubtedly be outnumbered, and it was safe to assume that at least one or two skilled fighters would be guarding the meeting place, but he could not leave her to tackle this on her own. He would never forgive himself if she were to disappear, and he was nowhere near confident enough in his own skills to feel assured that he could find her if she went missing.

"I'm not used to this," she finally said.

"To what?"

"To having a partner, to having to worry about someone else. I don't have any illusions that I can conquer everything, but I know I can rely on myself. I know the extent of my skills and my limitations. I know how to take care of myself, and if I'm outmatched, well, the risk is mine and mine alone. I don't know how to be responsible for another person's welfare."

"Welcome to my world," he said with a grim smile.

She smiled back, but it was pained. "I suppose you do know what that's like."

"You're not asking me to take any risks I haven't committed to taking on a daily basis."

"That doesn't mean I wouldn't feel responsible if something were to happen to you."

"You think I wouldn't feel responsible if something were to happen to you? I've told you, we're in this together."

"Very well, as long as you understand that I won't stand by idly if you're caught."

He wanted to protest, but he didn't have the right. "Ah, the negotiations required when two stubborn people agree to something," he said instead.

Her grin was so lovely that he thought he ought to make it appear more often. "It's best if we don't arrive together. I'll make my approach from the enclave and you can make yours from here."

"Agreed. And afterward?"

"We make our way back here independent of one another, if all goes well. If not…" She held her hands up and shrugged.

He didn't see any point in making more elaborate plans. Simple was best in this situation, since they had no idea what to expect.

"Do you know where the meeting is to take place?" he asked.

"No, but I know my father will be there. I'll follow him."

"I don't really like this. We've only four days to prepare. You'll be going in blind, and they'll have taken precautions. We'd be better off surveilling this meeting and then trying to spy on the next."

She shook her head vehemently. "We haven't the time, Kila. My father is pressuring me again, and my attempts to hold him off are wearing thin. Waiting until next month wouldn't gain us anything at any rate, as from what we can tell they never meet at the same location."

"Yes, but it would still give us an idea of the level of their security."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. We don't know who makes the arrangements, and it's reasonable to assume that the responsibility shifts. We would need months of covert operations before we might feel comfortable, and even then we wouldn't know exactly what I'd be walking into. At least this way we don't have time to give ourselves the illusion of security. We know what we're doing is risky, and I will be on my guard. It's the best we can do."

She was right, even though he didn't want to accept it. "We train every night until the meeting, if you think you can get away. Not just the deshya, but combat as well."

"I can, and I agree that we should."
It was better than nothing, he supposed.

Chapter 25

"You agree with them." Lach stared at Cianne, his face a mask of outraged disbelief. "You think they should send me away."

"Lach," she said, hoping to placate him, to halt the storm that was brewing.

"No! I can't believe this, Cianne. I can't believe that you of all people agree with them. How could you do this to me?"

She couldn't take it any longer. Though she liked to think she did a good job of hiding it, the strain was starting to wear on her. She could only worry about so many things at once, and at present she had Lach to worry about, she had whatever was going on in the House, her father's involvement, Kila's safety now that she had dragged him into it, and her heart, her traitorous, treacherous heart.

Just once, just once in her life she wished she could be open about everything, wished she could stop pretending, stop concealing, stop obscuring, and live an honest life.

"Lach, I can't help you," she said.

Opening his mouth, he turned to let loose, but she slashed her hand through the air, stopping him.

"It's not that I don't want to help you, it's that I *can't* help you. I've tried, Lach. Cearus's divine love, I have tried! You have no idea how desperately I wish I could fix this for you. You have no idea how hard it is for me to watch what this is doing to you and to know that I'm powerless to stop it."

"Don't I?" he asked, his voice quiet. His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes, collapsing in on himself. "When you hurt, Cianne, it's like I hurt too. I thought I understood what pain was, when I had to watch you go through your mother's death. I thought I knew. And by Cearus, if this doesn't feel like the worst betrayal of all, but I had no idea.

"This… This is killing me. Night and day, all I can think about is his face. Sometimes I hate him, want to scream at him, want to tell him I'll never forgive him for doing this to himself, to me, to the House. Then others I can't accept that he did do this, know in my bones that he couldn't have. But what if that's what I want to believe? I've never feared the sea, but I fear this. I fear it'll rise up over

my head and swallow me whole."

"That's what I'm afraid of too," she whispered.

"That's not even the worst part of it, not for me. The worst part of it is knowing that if it does happen, I'll have left you the way my father left me."

Why? Why now of all times did he have to choose to bare his heart to her again? She couldn't tell him what he wanted to hear, but how could she be expected to say the thing she knew would be the final blow, the one that would break him at last? How could she be expected to destroy him when he was at his most vulnerable?

"You're stronger than that, Lach. You're not going to let it swallow you, which is why you have to go," she said, pushing his unspoken confession aside. She hated herself for doing it, had to turn away from the pain in his eyes, but what other choice did she have? She was in an impossible situation and doing her best to claw her way out of it. "If you stay here, you'll keep doing this to yourself. Your mind will keep running in these circles, and then you'll be so trapped you may never find your way out again. You'll never forgive yourself if you betray yourself and the House that way. Return to the sea, Lach. It's where you're meant to be. It's where Cearus wants you to be. It's where your father would want you to be."

His face twisted in torment, he tilted his head back and covered his eyes with the heels of his hands. A silent scream parted his lips, and he didn't breathe for so long that Cianne was terrified. When he breathed again at last, the sound was painful, as if he were drawing in shards of glass along with life-giving air.

"Sometimes I'm afraid I don't want to move on," he said, in the smallest voice she had ever heard him use. "Sometimes I'm afraid I want to be stuck like this."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

Shoulders shaking, he pressed his hands against his eyes so hard the skin around them went white. His pain was terrible to behold, made worse by the fact that Cianne could do nothing to relieve it. She might be able to distract him, but she couldn't make the pain go away, no matter how hard she tried.

I'm destined to bring him nothing but misery.

Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him close. He resisted her at first, but then he collapsed, taking them both down to the floor in a heap. Sobs tore from him, racking his body so violently that Cianne's teeth snapped closed on her tongue and she tasted blood. Still she didn't let go. There were so many things she couldn't give him, but she could give him this.

"I am trying," he said, his face pressed against her neck with such force he

was cutting off her breath.

"You need to get away," she whispered. "Staying here is no good for you, Lach. You need to be at sea again. At sea you'll be closer to your father. At sea you'll find your peace."

"Will you be here for me when I get back?" His sobs were slowing, the tension seeping from his body, telling her he was relenting. She felt relief, but it wasn't as powerful as she had expected it to be.

"Of course I will. I always have been."

Would she be? She had no illusions about what she was up against. If she stumbled on something, she might very well have to leave in a hurry, without a word to him or anyone else. She hated the thought of leaving him, knew he would suffer from it as she had suffered when Kila had left.

"I'll go," he said, the words coming out a low moan.

She understood his feelings, as strange as they might strike others who hadn't experienced such grief. That was the funny thing about pain, that everyone experienced it differently. It made no sense that anyone would want to hang onto something that caused them agony, but she too had wanted to hang onto the pain in the wake of her mother's death. She hadn't been interested in healing, in moving on, because it meant accepting a world in which her mother had no part. Lach didn't need to say it in so many words, but she knew he had come to understand her better than he ever had before, that he was experiencing the exact thing she had tried so hard to articulate to him all those years ago, but for which she had never found adequate words.

Yet he still doesn't understand you at all. He still sees so little of you.

She had made that choice, and she had to live with it.

"You can do this, Lach. I know you can."

Pulling away from her, he gripped her arms lightly, locking her in place so that she had to meet his eyes.

"Cianne, I… I've never asked anything of you. I know… You know how I feel about you. You know that I love you with everything in me. I know you care about me, but I know you've struggled with your feelings. I know you're uncertain, and so I've tried my best not to push you. You've felt pressured so many times in your life, and I've always sworn to myself that I wouldn't be one of the people pressuring you, no matter what.

"But I feel like all my strength is gone. Getting out of bed in the morning seems like more than I can handle. I feel so weak, so useless. You're the only person who makes me feel like it is possible, like I can function again. It's not going to be easy for me to be away from you."

"Lach, please," she said, tears flooding her eyes. Her throat closed,

rendering her unable to say more.

Shaking his head, he said, "I'm not asking you to promise me anything. I know it's not fair of me to put even this much on you. It's one thing to need someone, but I don't want to suffocate you with my need. Being apart from you will be extremely difficult for me, though, and I have to feel as if you're with me. I'm trying to be strong, but I need your help. Can I have a lock of your hair? I'll wear it in a ring, and then you'll always be with me."

It seemed such a small question for such a huge request. Giving him her hair was a promise of a sort. She needed him too, needed him as her friend, needed to know she had someone on her side, but he didn't need her like that. She was frightened of his need, of the magnitude of it, of what it meant for her to deny that need. He could say he wasn't asking her to promise anything, but he was edging closer to that point every day.

"I don't want to mislead you," she said, the words strangling her. "I can't mar—"

"Ssh," he said, laying a gentle finger over her lips. "I know you don't want to mislead me. You're not. I'm not asking you for anything more than this. I know you, Cianne. You're afraid of hurting me, which is what makes you such a good friend. But you're not hurting me because you've said nothing to hurt me. I'll go on this voyage, and when I come back we'll be friends, as we've always been."

She nodded, but she didn't dare hope. Perhaps distance and time at sea would be what he needed to learn to accept the fact that she didn't want to marry him. Perhaps it wouldn't, but she had to give him that chance, had to hope that he could come to terms both with the loss of his father and her inability to offer him anything more than friendship. She hoped he would grow to understand that her not loving him as he wanted her to love him wouldn't mean she was lost to him as well.

"All right," she said, emotions making her voice hoarse.

He flashed her a quick, unsteady smile and stood, leaving the room. Cianne didn't bother to rise. Her knees were too weak and she was too weary.

When he came back he had scissors, and he knelt next to her, looking at her questioningly. She nodded and he lifted her hair carefully, his eyes reverent. She looked away. The sound of the scissors severing the lock sounded so final that something burst in her chest, nearly making her double over.

"Thank you," he said.

She said nothing. There was nothing she could say.

He left her alone once more and she collected herself as best she could. He was waiting for her near the front door when she emerged at last.

"I'll bring you a gift," he said, his smile faltering.

Her lips wouldn't cooperate, so she settled for a nod.

"May I come see you tomorrow, let you know when I'm leaving?"

"Yes, please," she managed to reply.

He kissed her cheek as he did every time he said goodbye to her, and she waited until she was home before clamping her hand over her mouth to hold back her scream.

How long would it be before her father discovered that Lach had her hair?

The day couldn't pass by quickly enough for her, and she felt a sense of rising desperation as she waited for the sky to darken, for time to release her from her prison.

Her first breath of night air tasted like freedom, and she sucked it in, inhaling until her lungs could hold no more. Her clothing hugged her like a second skin, warm and soft.

Why stay? Why not throw every caution to the wind and ask Kila to leave with her?

It was a mad idea, and she knew it. It was also intoxicating, so seductive that she crouched in the shadow of her manor's chimney and closed her eyes, allowing the images to wash over her. None of it was definite, no detailed picture of the house they'd live in or where they could possibly go, because none of that mattered. All that mattered was that she was with him in her dreams, that she had broken away at long last, that she at last had everything that was dear to her in the world.

She held the thought close and then she released it. She couldn't be happy that way, not because she wouldn't be happy with him, but because she would know she had abdicated her responsibility. Whether or not he would agree wasn't even worth consideration because she would never put him in that position. What could he say in response to something as wildly inappropriate as that?

He isn't immune, a sly voice whispered at the back of her mind.

She was fully aware he wasn't. She had caught him looking at her, had seen the conflict in his eyes when they lingered on her face or her lips. He was attracted to her and determined to hold himself back from acting on that attraction for reasons she well understood. Part of her wanted to surrender to the attraction, she couldn't deny it. That part wanted to throw herself in his arms and give in to every fantasy that had ever played out behind her lids.

It wasn't good enough for her, though. Oh, she wanted him, craved him in a way she had never before known, but her urges weren't confined to her body. What she felt in her heart was real. Everything in her world made sense when she was with him. She felt ensconced in warmth, safety, and contentment. Her

soul recognized the twin to its own.

That was worth so much more to her than a temporary physical release. He might be attracted to her, but she didn't know if his feelings extended any farther than that. If she surrendered to her urges, if she gave up everything for one night with him, it would never be enough for her, she was wise enough to recognize that. She would have precious moments to hold onto, and she wasn't discounting that, but she would be left without the things she most desired. What good would that do her?

All or nothing, that was what it was to be, she supposed. What other option existed? She was no more able to deny what she felt for Kila than Lach was to deny what he felt for her. She wanted nothing of a pale imitation of love, wanted nothing of spending her time trying to make someone feel for her what she felt for him. She had witnessed what it had done to Lach, and she wouldn't allow herself to plummet into that same pit.

Chapter 26

"Well done," Burl said as they watched a junior Enforcement officer lead the shopkeeper's murderer away.

"Thank you," Kila said.

He was satisfied to have closed another case. Since the ledger had proven to be such a dead end, he had gone back over the crime scene, combing it for several hours before noticing something they had missed the first time around: a scrap of torn parchment with part of an emblem on it. He had then walked the city streets for two hours, examining shop signs, until he had found one with a matching emblem.

The case had evolved quickly from there. It turned out that their victim hadn't been murdered by the supplier with whom he'd been overheard arguing, but by a competitor who was being driven out of business by the victim's securing exclusive agreements with their mutual suppliers in a last-ditch effort to save his own business at the expense of his rival's. Fifteen minutes of intense questioning had been enough for Burl to break the man. Sobbing and shaking, he had confessed, telling them about the axe he had used, how his first swing had missed. Every detail he provided was an exact match for what they'd found at the crime scene.

"You could be a valuable asset to Enforcement," Burl added.

Kila darted a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. She was focused on the arrest, but he had the impression that she was assessing his reaction to her words.

"I'd like nothing more."

Nodding, she swept a frank gaze over him and headed back to her desk without another word.

The day was quiet. A few petty thefts were reported, and one altercation at a dockside tavern, but nothing that concerned Burl and Kila. He was grateful for the chance to catch up on some of the reports he'd neglected, and to have some time to think.

He had spent hours with the missive Cianne had given him, breaking the code at long last. Something about its pattern had teased at the edges of his

recollection, and he had dug through his things until a prickling intuition told him he'd found what he'd been searching for. Sure enough, his old code book, one his mother had given him as a child, had provided him with the answer he'd been searching for, enabling him to determine that the code used was a standard Arcarian cipher. From there it had been a simple matter of determining the matching text, which hadn't posed much of a challenge for him as during the investigation into Toran Stowley's death, he had noticed the spine of one of Stowley's books protruding slightly from the shelf and made note of the title. A quick trip to the Cearovan library provided him with the tome he needed, and within hours he'd deciphered the message.

As he'd suspected, the note consisted of dates, figures, and initials. He needed to retrieve Stowley's ledger and examine the two side-by-side. The initials in the missive didn't match those in the ledger, but he remembered seeing matching figures and dates, and he suspected the note and ledger listed the same transactions. If they were simple business transactions, why go to such lengths to obscure them? It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that they were perfectly legitimate, but Kila had a strong suspicion the money hadn't been used for purchasing material goods, but for purchasing information, or silence.

Twilight fell over the city, and the warm glow of the candles made Enforcement headquarters seem cozier and more modern than ever. Hearts and minds indeed. Kila knew for a fact that plenty of his colleagues felt a great deal of gratitude toward the Houses for having liberated them from the cold and dank of their old headquarters.

Burl gathered up her things, fastening the top of her greatcoat with a clasp that had long since garnered Kila's notice. It was just a little too finely wrought, the metal a little too pure for it to be a simple costume fastener of the type most Enforcement officers wore. Burl was meticulous, but she apparently hadn't been able to resist this one small show of wealth. She paused at Kila's desk, her hand resting casually on its surface.

"I've an appointment with House Staerleigh's Elders in two days. I think you should accompany me," she said.

"I would be honored. What time are we expected?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Shall I meet you here?"

"No. I'll head there directly from my lodgings; meet me at the enclave gate."

"I will."

Her nod was a sharp, precise gesture, and then she was gone.

On the way home Kila decided to stop and have a drink at a tavern that he

happened to know was popular with Enforcers, many of whom patronized it on a regular basis. Several were in attendance when he got there, and not one of them looked askance when Chief Flim arrived and sidled up next to Kila at the bar.

"Burl may be attempting to recruit me," he said in a low voice that only she would be able to hear over the bustle.

Flim took a long drink of her ale, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "That's good."

With a nod, Kila drank from his own tankard.

"Good work on the shopkeeper murder. Glad to have that one closed."

"Makes two of us."

"Foster!" Chief Flim called to a young man a short distance away. Kila recognized him as one of the officers who had worked the scene. "Come have a drink on me."

"Celebrating the closed case, are we?" the man asked with a grin. "Not that I need a reason to accept a free drink, you understand."

"We certainly are," the chief said, slapping the man on the back. She accepted an overflowing tankard from the barkeep and handed it to Foster.

"To a job well done," Foster said, saluting Kila with his drink.

"I'll drink to that," said Flim, raising her own tankard.

"As will I," said Kila.

He shot the breeze with Flim and Foster for a while, their party enlarged by the addition of Zader, another officer who had worked the case. All in all, it was a pitch-perfect scene of officers celebrating their efforts.

Things were starting to get loud when Kila begged off, bidding all of his colleagues—Chief Flim included—a good night. Light spilled out onto the cobbled streets, along with snatches of song, the salty scent of the sea mingling with the tang of alcohol. He saw no sign that anyone was following him. He'd become quite diligent of late at paying even closer attention to his surroundings than he normally would.

Cianne was waiting for him when he arrived home, pacing his common room with nervous agitation.

"Has something happened?" he asked her.

"No. Well, yes, but it's… It's Lach."

"Ah," he said, turning away from her as he removed his greatcoat and hung it on the stand near his door.

"The Elders are sending him to sea again."

"Are they? I thought you said he was still in a state of great distress."

"He is, but I think they want him out of the way so they can search Toran's study at last."

"Do you think they'll notice the missing ledger?" Kila asked in alarm, facing her again.

"No, I don't think so. If they had known it existed, I should have heard at least some whisper of it by now."

"Don't tell me you're thinking about trying to get into that study again," he said sharply.

"Perhaps," she said, flashing him a strained smile. "I'm curious to know what they're looking for."

"Does Captain Stowley suspect they're trying to get rid of him?"

"Yes, but not for the reasons we do. He believes that his mental state is the full extent of their concern, and that they want to send him to sea in the hopes that he'll get better."

"How did he react to the request that he return?"

"Not well," she said, sinking into a chair and kneading her forehead, her eyes falling closed. Tension radiated out from the corners of her eyes, her pinched mouth. "My father asked me to talk him into it, and so I did. As much as I hated doing it, and whatever the Elders' motives may be, I think it's for Lach's own good. He needs to get away. I don't think he'll make any progress until he does."

Taking a seat across from her, Kila reached a hand toward her but then let it fall. "You're concerned about him."

"He's my friend."

"When is he set to leave?"

"I don't know yet. He's to meet with them tomorrow, and he'll let me know afterward."

Kila didn't know what to say. He longed to run his fingers over her brow, smooth away the furrows. He longed to take her hand, to give her something to hold onto, to let her know that she wasn't alone.

"Though I keep hoping he'll work through his feelings while he's gone, I'm afraid he'll ask me to marry him when he returns, and I will have to tell him no. He almost asked me today, and I— What am I to do? I can't say yes, but how am I to say no? I'm terrified of what will happen. I've never seen him like this, as if he's teetering at the edge of an abyss. What if I push him over the edge by telling him I can't marry him?"

Her words tore at Kila. He was glad she intended to refuse Stowley, even though he had no right to feel such relief. Yet he ached for her, for the obvious torment in which she found herself. He wished he could take the pain from her, that rather than possessing the gods-granted ability to fit together the pieces of a puzzle, he had been granted the ability to fit together the broken pieces of a

human heart. Had he had that ability, perhaps he could have saved his father.

"Whatever happens, Cianne, it won't be your fault," he said gently, knowing the words would be no consolation to her despite that they were true. She wasn't responsible for the actions of others.

No more than you are, and hasn't that done wonders to ease your own conscience?

He hated his impotence.

"I know that, but I can't make myself believe it," she said, her voice ragged. She met his gaze with a pleading look, and he wished he could answer it. "Can we spar, please? I need the outlet."

"Are you certain that's wise?"

Giving him a bitter smile, she said, "Of course it is. Do you think if we discover what's going on it won't have any emotional impact on me? I know how I must appear to you, but I promise you that I am good at keeping my emotions in check when I fight."

He said nothing in response, merely rose and headed out into his garden, Cianne following him.

They agreed to spar with daggers. He had promised to provide her with blunted practice weapons so that she wouldn't have to carry any with her, which would necessitate her leaving some of her lethal weapons at home. He wanted her fully armed whenever she was out on the streets, though he didn't tell her so.

"Have you learned anything new?" she asked as they assumed their positions.

"I think House Staerleigh has been bribing people," he said, feinting toward her.

She recognized the ruse, sidestepped it, and evaded his follow-through. "Who? And why?"

"I don't know yet." He parried her blow and advanced, forcing her to return to the defensive. Neither of them were holding back, and he knew he wouldn't be able to keep up the conversation much longer lest he become too winded. "I need to take another look at the ledger and compare it to the stolen note."

"You think there are matches?"

"Yes."

Conversation ceased as they devoted their full energies to sparring. Cianne was good, but it was obvious she wasn't used to working with a partner. He admired her self-taught skills and her discipline, but they would only get her so far. She could do with the practice so that she could learn to read and anticipate her foes.

Bit by bit, he wore her down, until she fell for another of his feints,

enabling him to seize her. Whirling her around, he trapped her against his body, one of his hands splayed over her belly, the other around her shoulders, his dagger held to her throat.

Her chest heaved as she drew in air, and she angled her neck, her eyes locking with his. Those eyes seemed to bore into him, to search every corner of him for his secrets, and he allowed them to do so, mainly because his eyes were doing the same to her. She smelled of exertion, but the fresh scent also emanated from her skin, worming its way into his senses. Her belly quivered under his hand and liquid heat shot through him, made him aware of how her form molded against his.

Unable to bear it any longer, he lowered his head, his lips claiming hers. She gasped, swallowing his own gasping breath. Her lips were warm, sweet, and though she was startled, it didn't take long for them to move in response to his kiss.

He lost his head completely. He kissed her as he had longed to kiss her, desperate to prolong the contact with her mouth for as long as he could. Her tongue slipped over his, and he nibbled at her bottom lip.

All at once reality came crashing down on him, and he pulled away so abruptly that she stumbled. His dagger had slipped from his fingers at some point, though he couldn't say when, and his heart pounded, his body throbbing with the urgent need to pull her near and lose himself in her kiss again.

"Cianne, I—" he began.

"I'm not a child anymore," she said, her voice harsh. "Don't you dare treat me like one. Don't you dare say—"

"Is that what you think? That I still see you as a child? Believe me, Cianne, I couldn't be any more aware that you are no longer a child if I tried. Why do you think I maintain my distance? Why do you think I never touch you?"

She flinched as if his words were physically striking her and took another step away from him. Shaking her head, words tumbled out of her in a torrent, gaining momentum. "No. This can't. We can't. No. No. I won't. Not if… No."

He felt like he was being torn to shreds. What had he done? He had no right to kiss her, no right to take advantage of the situation. "I'm sorry, Cianne. I am so sorry. I never want to hurt you. Never."

Her eyes were wide and wild as she stared at him one brief moment more, her lovely face stricken. Then she gave her head one last shake and bounded out of his garden and into the night.

Chapter 27

When Cianne woke the next morning the turmoil started up anew. Touching her fingers to her lips, she couldn't slow her racing pulse as she remembered what it had felt like for them to be claimed by Kila's. Nothing she had ever imagined had compared to the reality, and she wouldn't have stopped kissing him if he hadn't stopped kissing her. She might have kissed him the entire night, might have kept kissing him well into the following day.

It was stupid, dangerous, and she knew it. Hadn't she promised herself that she wouldn't allow something like this to happen because she knew there was no hope for it? The thought of being apart from him brought her nothing but pain, but she couldn't see how being with him would bring her any less. How long could they carry on a clandestine love affair? At what point would stolen moments cease to be enough to satisfy her?

And what of Kila? She didn't think he intended to use her, especially not after she had heard the vehemence in his voice as he had vowed that he never wanted to hurt her. She trusted that his intentions weren't untoward, but what good did that do either of them? He knew as well as she did that there was no hope of anything between them, no matter how much they might both want it. They couldn't be together.

Can't you? You know you can't remain here, and at any rate you might soon have no choice. Why can't you be together?

Yet there was no use in revisiting previously trodden ground. She couldn't ask it of him. She *wouldn't* ask it of him.

What if he were to offer?

No. She refused to think of it. Too much was happening, too many things conspiring to throw her emotions into chaos, and she couldn't afford to be so distracted. She would have to keep her wits about her if she were to have any hope of keeping all the balls she was juggling up in the air. She couldn't afford for everything to come crashing down around her, for her own sake and for Kila's. Everything she did put not just herself at risk, but him as well. She might well have to destroy Lach, there was no way around that, but she would not be responsible for being Kila's downfall as well.

Her hands shook as she dressed. Every part of her longed for Kila, longed to feel his touch, and the wanting made her weak. Never before had it hurt her this much to deny herself something, and the recognition that she now had some inkling of what Lach was going through exacerbated her discomposure until she began to wonder if it might be wiser to hide in her bed the entire day, claim she was ill.

But no, she couldn't do that either. Lach had asked to come see her and tell her when he was leaving, and she wouldn't hide from him. He deserved better than that.

That she also needed the information pricked at her conscience, regardless of the fact that it wasn't she who had orchestrated the situation. Many times she had been overcome with anger and frustration at her father, but this was the first time she had begun to feel true rage. How could he do this to her?

What if it's nothing? a very faint voice wondered, but she barked out a laugh at the thought. Of course it wasn't nothing. She was well beyond the point of believing that, of deluding herself into believing she was reading more into things than what was there.

She spent the morning cleaning her weapons, conditioning her leathers, and performing the deshya in her rafters, and all these things helped to calm her, particularly the deshya. Emotions were a force, and she could gather that energy and use it to her benefit. She didn't have to be ruled by it, and it helped that she had the chance to remind herself of this.

Lach arrived shortly after she had eaten her lunch alone, her father tied up at the Council Hall. She hadn't much taste for her food but she forced herself to eat anyway. With the amount of energy she was expending training with Kila and working herself up into a state about Lach, she would need the fuel.

"Hello, Cianne," Lach greeted her when she let him in. The words were a monotone and his face was unreadable, but she suspected that was because he was working hard to keep himself in check, for which she felt guiltily grateful.

"Come in," she said, leading him to her sitting room, where they could speak in private.

She had taken extra care to provide some subtle insulation, filling any gaps and cracks she found and ensuring that her door fit snugly into its frame. Fortunately for her, her sitting room fireplace stood to the right of the door, near the corner of the room, and she had set her chairs well back from it. Were anyone to press their ear against the keyhole, they wouldn't hear much above the crackling of the fire. It wasn't foolproof, but it was the best she could do to prevent anyone from eavesdropping on her without them noticing the efforts she had made.

"What did the Elders say?" she asked when they were settled and she had poured him a cup of tea.

To her surprise, he accepted the cup and began sipping, holding the saucer in his left hand rather than setting it down. It was the most interest she had seen him take in sustenance in longer than she could remember.

"I'm to leave in a week," he said, trying for a smile and a bit of self-deprecating humor. "I must be a mess if they're sending me to Leonovia with a ship full of cotton. Haven't done a run this simple since I was eighteen."

"They've been worried about you."

"It would seem everyone has been. And rightfully so."

"How are you feeling today, Lach?" she asked, cutting through the banalities.

"I don't know," he said, a muscle working in his jaw. He took another sip of tea as if to steady himself and continued. "I can't say I'm feeling better, but I guess I may feel as though I'm seeing things more clearly. I've done no good here in Cearova. It is time for me to return to sea, despite the aversion I seem to have developed for the very idea. I suppose I'm punishing myself."

"For what?"

"For not stopping my father," he said, his voice tapering off to a whisper. He set his tea down at last and rubbed his eyes. "You don't have to say anything, Cianne, because I know what you'd say. It doesn't make it any easier to accept."

"No, of course it doesn't."

"I wanted to apologize to you."

"Why?" she asked, stunned.

"I've been mistreating you these past few weeks. I've taken advantage of our friendship and imposed myself upon you in ways I had no business doing."

A strange awkwardness settled between them. As difficult as it had been for Cianne, due to her awareness of the depths of Lach's feelings, their friendship had still been that: a true friendship. She had relied on Lach, had counted on him to be in her corner, to be someone on whose strength she could depend when she felt she was at her weakest, and she had extended that same consideration to him. She had known that at some point the difference in the extent of their love for one another would cause irreparable harm to their relationship, but she supposed that, childishly, she had tried to deny that knowledge, had tried to convince herself that nothing would ever change.

"I think, considering the circumstances, it's understandable," she said.

He flashed her a pained smile. "That's very tactful of you."

"I'm sorry, Lach," she said, the words bursting forth. "I feel as if I've failed you, as if I'm incapable of giving you what you need, and it pains me a great

deal."

He shook his head. "Please, no. Let's not have this conversation. If anyone has failed anyone, I have failed you. I haven't been a true friend to you, and I can't express how much I regret that."

"I wish—"

"We all wish for many things, don't we? I should go. I've a great deal to do to prepare for this journey. We'll talk more when I return. I think everything will be clearer then."

Distance grew between them, widening into a chasm Cianne was certain they could never bridge. Something inside of her felt as though it were fracturing, and she feared that any additional pressure would cause her to shatter entirely.

They rose and left her sitting room, heading down the stairs in silence. There were so many things she wished she could say to him, but she didn't bother with any of them. None of them were what he would want to hear.

"You'll always be dear to me, always, you know that, don't you?" he asked as she stood at the door with him.

"I can't put a value on your friendship," she replied. "I don't know what I would have done all these years without you. I owe you so much."

"It's never been about that, Cianne. With us, it's always been give and take. Sometimes perhaps the giving hasn't been equal, but that's of no consequence. Sometimes I've tried to take more than I should." He brushed a light kiss over her cheek. "I'll bring you that gift I promised you."

The lump in her throat ached so fiercely she felt as though it were strangling her. "I'll look forward to it. Will I have a chance to say goodbye to you?"

"Of course," he said, his face softening. "My mother is having a farewell dinner for me the night before my departure, and she commands your and your father's presence."

"We'll be delighted to attend," she said, unable to offer him anything better than a wavering smile.

After he was gone she allowed herself to do something she hadn't done in many years. She retreated to her room and wept for hours. Despite the grief she feared she had caused him, despite the pain she knew he felt, she couldn't suppress the liberating sense of relief that engulfed her, and the shame of it was almost more than she could bear.

When her tears dried up at last, she sat up in her bed and drew in several long breaths. She squared her shoulders and gathered her determination before cleaning all traces of her sorrow from her face.

Her father was late to dinner, and then he hurried through the meal, so distracted that she didn't have to expend much effort with him. Even so, her shoulders loosened when he was gone, and she returned to her room to prepare for her training session with Kila. She was destined to move from one emotionally draining incident to another, all in one day, it seemed.

He was in the garden when she arrived, his eyes fixed on the wall. She remained crouched in the shadows for some time, studying him. The light spilling from his lodgings illuminated one side of his face, and she followed the aquiline slope of his nose, examined the shape of his lips, swept her gaze over the light stubble darkening his cheek and jaw.

She loved him. Like Lach, she would have to find some way of living with her unrequited feelings.

"I wasn't certain you would come," he said when she dropped down onto the grass and padded over to him on silent feet.

"Nothing has changed, Kila. We have only three days left to train, and I need the practice."

Hurt flickered through his eyes and his jaw tightened. He nodded. "I shouldn't have—"

"No, you shouldn't have," she said, meeting his gaze. "But not for the reasons you think. I have been in love with you since I was a girl, and I have dreamed of you for many long years. It doesn't matter. There's no place for us, and I will have to learn to accept it."

His jaw tightened further as he nodded again. "No place for us," he echoed, and she couldn't quite make out what it was she heard in his tone.

"I think we should focus on our training," she said in a gentle voice. "I need your help."

"You will always have it."

Everyone seems to be making vows to me this day, and yet what good are they? What use have I for empty words?

She turned away under pretense of examining the practice weapons he had spread out over the grass. She couldn't stop herself from feeling the bitterness, but she could prevent herself from allowing him to see it.

"Cianne, if you wouldn't mind, I would like to perform the deshya first, to center myself before we spar," he said.

"Very well." A shiver of misapprehension ran down her spine, but she kept her face serene.

It wasn't as terrible as she had feared, though. Standing across from him, locked in an intense gaze, she didn't feel the turmoil she had anticipated feeling. Her love was there, her pain at having to deny it an ever-present ache, but the

calm came, as it always did. She hadn't expected to find this tranquility with him, and she felt as though she were receiving her own long-awaited gift from the gods.

From the deshya they moved promptly into sparring, working harder than they had the night before. Kila disarmed her several times and overtook her once, but she held her own better than she had the previous night, and he was as good a teacher as she remembered him being. Patient and helpful, he was able to illuminate for her where she went wrong and what she could do to correct her technique. She knew she couldn't come close to mastering her skills before their spying mission, but at least she would go into it more prepared than she would otherwise have been.

"I'll be at the Staerleigh enclave tomorrow morning," Kila told her as they sat resting on the grass afterward.

"Why?"

"Burl is meeting with the Elders and she asked me to attend."

"They intend to size you up."

"Most likely," he agreed.

She could feel him watching her out of the corner of his eye, and she knew in which direction his thoughts had bent. Any attempt of his to dissuade her from trying to eavesdrop on the meeting would be pointless, so he didn't bother, though it was clear he wasn't happy about it.

"I've news for you too," she said before he could say anything about the Council meeting. "Lach is leaving in one week."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Relieved, for many reasons. Not least of which is the hope that he'll be gone when I figure out what's been going on."

"You want to protect him from learning something about House Staerleigh that might hurt him."

"Yes."

"Who will protect you?"

Blowing out a breath, she stared off into the overgrown, darkened yard. "I'm not concerned about protection. I'm concerned about finally knowing what the next step is for me. I can't know that until I know whether I need to break away from House Staerleigh once and for all."

"Either way, it won't be easy for you," he said, caution in his tone. "You're going to learn things you might wish you had never known."

"Is that what it's like for you?" she asked, turning to catch his eye.

He gave her a grim smile. "Every day."

"I've no doubt it's not easy, but I would rather be wise than be ignorant."

"Even if being wise destroys your happiness, your peace of mind?"

"Even then. What use is happiness or peace of mind if it's built on a foundation of lies?"

"I admire your spirit." He made no move toward her but she felt physically comforted nonetheless.

"And I yours."

Chapter 28

"Good, you're early," Burl said, inclining her head in a slight nod of approval when Kila met her in front of the enclave gates ten minutes before their scheduled meeting with the Elders.

"I didn't want to risk being late," he said. He had to make a conscious effort to focus on Burl rather than allow his eyes to dart around what he could see of the enclave, searching for Cianne.

As if he would see her, at any rate. Her fighting skills could use some polish, but he had a hearty respect for her stealth skills, which, as she had pointed out, were far more formidable than his own. It didn't mean he would stop worrying about her, though.

He wished he had found the courage to share with her what had been in his heart the previous night. He cared for her, deeply. At first he had told himself he was confused, the friendship he felt for her becoming muddled with his increasing attraction to her, but he knew it wasn't true. His feelings were growing, ripening, becoming so much more. In the face of her admission that she was in love with him, it struck him as a betrayal not to have told her the truth about his own feelings.

She was right, though. There was no place for them. He hadn't let his mind dwell on that fact, but she had been right to bring it up. What did it matter if they could share something beautiful, something for which he had come to realize he had long been searching without being conscious of the search? She filled his life, lit up his days, and inspired in him more physical and mental passion than he had ever imagined he could feel for another person.

None of that would change the fact that their relationship could go nowhere, that to cross the line as he had, to answer the call he felt thrumming within him morning and night, would inevitably bring them far more pain than it would pleasure.

Would it?

Someday, years from now, would he look back on his life and feel relief that he hadn't allowed himself to know her touch, to lie with her in his arms? Or would it be his deepest regret?

"Elder Borean will be pleased. Manners are very important to him," Burl was saying as Kila tuned back in to her. He panicked for a moment, thinking she had caught him out, but it was quite clear she hadn't noticed his distraction. Her attention was fixed on the clock tower in the center of the enclave, and he had a feeling she was rehearsing in her head the things she intended to say to the Elders.

Yes, he knew how important observing social niceties was to the Houses. They preferred to kill via a million tiny cutting words rather than do something as distasteful as be honest and use a sword. Neat, quick, and clean wasn't for them.

"What is this meeting about?" Kila asked as they were admitted to the enclave by the two menacing Battle Masters guarding the gates.

No doubt House Staerleigh paid top dollar for them, he thought, a casual flick of his eyes enough for him to pick up a myriad of tiny details. That the guards were hardened was obvious, considering their well-worn armor and implacable expressions. But Kila had tallied their scars, had observed the way they held themselves, had not failed to notice their subtle appraisal of him, and knew that they were highly trained and had plenty of experience.

They were also members of one of the mercenary companies. Though their weapons and armor were well-crafted, they were plain and made from sturdy but economical materials. House Staerleigh could have paid extra for fancier, more ornamental gear, which told Kila their intent was likelier to be to impress upon their visitors that their gates were secure than it was to show off their wealth. Even so, only the Battle Masters in the employ of the royal family had the financial backing to bear the best arms and armor Metal Shapers could craft. And only the royal family—what was left of it, at any rate—had the coin to pay for the most skilled of the Battle Masters.

Which was all to say that Kila had no desire to test either of the guards, not even were he in the company of another ten Enforcers he knew he could trust to back him.

"It's a regular monthly meeting," Burl said. "Enforcer liaisons to the Houses attend a meeting at the end of each month so the Houses can bring us up to speed on their most pressing concerns."

"Have you any idea what those might be for House Staerleigh?"

"I imagine they don't have many at present. Now that House business has begun to settle back into its usual patterns, I expect that the Elders will be relieved to be able to focus on their normal day-to-day affairs."

She wanted him to read between the lines; every muscle in her body betrayed that fact. House Staerleigh was pleased that the Toran Stowley business

had been resolved with as little fuss and inconvenience to them as possible, and both Burl and the Elders felt Kila had played his part in that particular charade. With any luck, they had decided that he had been properly chastened by his exile to the forest, and now assumed he was ready to abide by their rules.

Two more guards were stationed at the Council Hall. They waved Burl in without her having to break her stride, telling Kila that they were both quite familiar and quite comfortable with her presence in the Hall. He deduced that either the Elders had requested his presence as well or Burl had informed them of her intent to bring him along, and the guards had been told not to bother with stopping him.

A solicitous young man saw them into the Council's private meeting chambers, where they found all five members waiting for them.

"Officer Burl, Officer an Movis, thank you for attending this meeting," Elder Borean said, rising to greet them. The other four remained seated, which Kila was certain wasn't entirely due to how old and frail three of them were. If Burl minded being treated like one of the servants, she showed no sign of it.

"Thank you for having us, Elder Borean," Burl said, folding her hands and bowing at the waist. Kila followed suit.

"Branis, bring some refreshments for our guests," Elder Borean said to the young man, who nodded and hurried off to do as he had been bid.

"Officer an Movis, I believe you've already met all the members of our Council of Elders," Elder Borean said, turning his attention to Kila.

"I have had that honor indeed, Elder Borean."

The polite address seemed to please the Elder. "Allow me to refresh your memory. This is Elder Vorfarth, Elder Maizton, Elder Florius, and Elder Stanich," he said, going clockwise around the round table. The Elders all deigned to incline their heads at him, though Elder Stanich didn't do much to conceal his open distrust of Kila.

"You are not native to Astoran," Elder Stanich said, the words more an accusation than an observation.

"No, I am not, though I have long been a resident of your fair realm," Kila replied.

Elder Stanich huffed as if the response were barely tolerable, and perhaps for him it was. Not everyone in Astoran loved the thought of foreigners dirtying their sacred ground.

The young man returned with a beautifully engraved silver tray bearing a tea service and a variety of small cakes and finger sandwiches. He set it down on the table and bowed his way out of the room. He hadn't even shut the doors before Elder Stanich pounced on the tray, loading a plate with an impressive pile

of assorted treats. He was so bird-like it seemed hardly credible that he could consume such a quantity of food.

"Shall we begin?" Elder Borean asked, gesturing to two empty chairs on either side of his seat. Burl took the one next to Elder Florius, which meant Kila had the pleasure of sitting next to Elder Stanich, who proceeded to act as if Kila didn't exist.

The others weren't so rude nor so dismissive. Elder Vorfarth nodded at him. She had seen him at the Stowley manor, though she wouldn't be so indelicate as to bring that up. A mysterious smile wreathed Elder Florius's face as she appraised him with lowered lids, and Elder Maizton made a blatant study of Kila.

Do they coordinate? he wondered. *Decide ahead of time which of them will stare and which will pretend not to be scrutinizing me?*

Once more his thoughts turned to Cianne, and the back of his neck prickled. He half expected to look up and find her clinging to the rafters, but she wouldn't be that reckless. More likely she had flattened herself against the side of the building next to one of the windows, or was hiding in a closet in another room, ear pressed against a peephole she had previously drilled into the meeting chambers.

He almost smiled at such fanciful visions, but caught himself in time. While the amusement was certainly preferable to the fear, it was better he not think of her at all lest he somehow draw attention to himself, or, worse, give away something about her.

"Have you any particular concerns you wish to raise?" Burl asked the Elders in a tone so deferential that it set Kila's teeth on edge.

"None at the moment," Elder Maizton said with an air of deep satisfaction.

"Normal shipments will soon resume, and Captain Stowley will oversee the Leonovia run next week," Elder Borean said.

"That's excellent news," Burl said.

"It is indeed," Elder Vorfarth agreed. As one, the Council members all bobbed their heads in agreement, which Kila found uncanny to the point of being creepy.

"Have you had any further trouble with that petty theft ring down on the docks?" Burl asked.

"We have not, thanks to your assistance," Elder Stanich said.

After a while, Kila didn't trouble himself much with the particulars of the conversation. Whether the Council was typically more frank with Burl, he couldn't say, but the meeting consisted of nothing more than common banalities. Kila did notice one thing of interest, though: the Council didn't bring up a single

issue within its own House. Anything that affected them appeared to be instigated by outsiders, such as the petty theft ring Burl had mentioned.

Well, aren't they perfect? Kila thought, suppressing a sardonic smile.

Really, the purpose of the meeting seemed to be what he'd suspected: it gave the Council members a chance to size him up. He wasn't certain how to interpret it, which forced him to admit it would be a good thing if Cianne did manage to eavesdrop. The Council could want nothing more than to familiarize themselves with Kila's appearance so that they would know him by sight and keep him from learning too much. Or they could want to assess his potential as another asset within Enforcement. Either way, Kila had no idea what was going on in their minds, no more than he did with Burl. The best he could do was work as hard as he could to ensure his actions appeared above reproach.

Kila asked Burl as many questions as he felt safe posing as one of the House carriages took them back to headquarters. He had to take care to appear interested but oblivious to anything that might make Burl suspicious, which was easier said than done. Burl, he knew, would pick apart everything he said.

By the end of the day he was exhausted. The mental strain of what he and Cianne were doing was taking a greater toll on him with each passing day. He had never been fond of intrigue, and his time in Cearova was making him even less fond. He hadn't thought it possible, but he even found himself longing for a return to his forest exile. The obscurity had been so much more relaxing.

"Were you successful?" he asked Cianne when she appeared in his home office that night.

"I was," she said, "though not as successful as I would have liked. Still, I can at least set your mind at ease on this count: the Elders don't suspect you of anything."

"Are you certain?" he asked, unwilling to surrender himself to relief just yet.

"Very," she said with a definitive nod. "I've not had the chance to eavesdrop on the Council very often. Getting in and out of the Council Hall unnoticed is no mean feat, but I've listened to them often enough in other settings to know when what's left unsaid is more important than what's said."

"So do you think Burl may be considering recruiting me?"

"If she is, she will not be able to do so without the Council condoning it. I think this meeting was intended to give them a chance to formulate their own assessments of you. My guess would be they plan to test you further down the line, see if they feel you're worthy of their trust."

"Lucky me," he said, sighing and pressing the pad of his thumb to the inside corner of his eyebrow. "Have you anything new to share?"

"Unfortunately, no. I've been rather preoccupied with ensuring you haven't registered with the Elders to concentrate much on anything else."

It made sense. Were Burl or the Elders to become suspicious, the whole delicate web he and Cianne were spinning could unravel, potentially leading them back to her. Neither of them could afford that. Yet he also suspected her concern stemmed from something more personal, and however determined he was not to allow himself to slip with her again, he couldn't deny that her concern warmed his heart. How long had it been since he had felt someone truly cared for him?

"We should discuss the equipment we'll bring with us in two days," Kila said.

"You should bring nothing more than you usually carry," she said. "You'll be confined to the ground, which makes the risk to you greater."

"Yes, but if I'm pursued I can leave my equipment behind."

"And then they'll know for certain that you were spying. Should someone question you, your best bet will be to feign ignorance. They won't want to fuss with capturing you if they don't have to. A struggle would create too much of a ruckus."

The worry on her face made him worry too, and he tried not to think about what might happen to him if he were caught.

What neither of them said was that they both doubted anyone who might catch them would believe claims of ignorance, no matter how feasible they sounded. In the interest of averting a ruckus, whoever was on the lookout during the meeting might just leave him dead, Enforcement officer or no.

"What about you?" Kila asked.

"I can flee over the rooftops and through the alleys if I'm spotted. I know this city like the back of my hand, have spent years navigating every route through it I can think of."

"I still don't like this," he said.

"Neither do I, but nothing has changed, has it?"

"No, but I felt it had to be said." He grimaced.

"We won't take any unnecessary risks," she said. "Whatever this is, it isn't worth our lives. Leave immediately if you suspect you've been made. Work your way through the city until you're certain you've lost any possible tail, then return here. I'll do the same."

"Let's spar," he said, too restless to talk about it any longer.

"Yes, let's," she said, her relief evident.

Chapter 29

Cianne was so tense the day of the eavesdropping mission she felt like her bones might snap from sheer pressure. She hadn't seen Lach since their last, unsettling encounter, and as much of a relief as it was not to have to continue to put on a show for him, she also worried about not seeing him. What did her father, Moiria, and the Elders make of it? Had she exposed herself, destroyed the one thing that had provided her with cover? If they felt she no longer had any power over Lach, they'd have no further use for her, not even her father. Especially not her father. She would be an impediment to him, an obstacle standing in the way of whatever it was he hoped to achieve.

She wanted to be well rested for that evening, but her worries kept circling around and around in her mind until she gave in and spent some time in her rafters, pushing herself to move faster, to work harder. She moved until she could move no more, and then she collapsed in one of the alcoves formed by a joist and a strut, folding herself into the tiny space. The sun's position told her it would soon be time for dinner, and she let her eyes go unfocused, the fragments of color thrown off by her glass baubles softening and going blurry around the edges. When she swept her eyes around the rafters like that, taking in the refracted light, she felt almost as if she were sitting in a rainbow, high up in the clouds, far from the city, far from House Staerleigh, far from anything that could hurt her.

Would her illusion of safety and security ever become a reality?

She lingered as long as she dared and then leapt lightly down to her bed frame and set about getting herself cleaned up and dressed. Her gear sack had long since been packed and repacked, checked and double checked, and was hidden under her floorboards with the clothing she'd selected for that night. Once she and her father finished dinner she wouldn't have much time. She would have to get back to her quarters, change, and climb out through one of the upper story windows in a matter of minutes. Otherwise she risked losing sight of her father, who she knew would leave promptly after dinner ended, as he had every time he had attended one of these secretive meetings.

"Cianne, you're looking well tonight," Daerwyn said as she joined him at

the table.

"Thank you, Father," she replied. No matter how much icy water she had splashed over her face, she hadn't been able to rid it of the flush brought about by her exertions. She worried that he suspected something, but he gave her no more than a cursory nod of approval before focusing his attention on his meal.

They ate for a while without speaking, Cianne casting about for safe topics, but she no longer had any idea what was safe. Every subject seemed to hold twice the meaning she believed it to hold, and she felt as though she had to tiptoe around everything while with her father. She lived in dread of that one misstep, that one slip that would reveal her hand. Though she had been about the practice of deceiving him for many years, she had begun to wonder if she was up to the task of continuing.

"How are the preparations for Lach's journey coming along?" she asked at last.

"Very well. I had initial concerns because he didn't show much interest in the preparations, which, as you know, is quite unusual for him. But he's come around of late, is almost acting like his old self again, so whatever you said to him helped."

Was he testing her? She sent an appraising look at him from beneath lowered lids, feigning modesty at the compliment. Nothing seemed amiss. Even so, she felt a tingle of apprehension at the base of her spine.

"I'm glad I was able to help him, though I don't think I can take all the credit. The decision to send him on this journey did him a real service, but then you, Moiria, and the Elders have always looked out for his best interests."

"Always will, as we would for any member of our House. We must none of us neglect our duty to our House," her father said, a note of something in his voice that Cianne didn't like.

"I have done my best these past few weeks to do mine as well," she said, speaking in a low voice, head hung as if in embarrassment for her past transgressions.

"You have made great strides this week, my daughter. I'm very pleased. Is it possible you believe you have discerned your role in our House?"

"Yes, I believe I have," she said, raising her eyes to meet his, letting him see her determination.

"You cannot imagine how glad I am to hear it," he said, wiping his mouth with a linen napkin. He rose, tugging his embroidered silk waistcoat into place. His manservant emerged from the shadows lurking around the edges of the room and helped him into his frock coat. "I hate to rush off on you like this, but I've an engagement with Rayshford tonight. It may run late. Have you any plans?"

"No, I don't," she said.

"That's a shame," he said, displeasure flickering across his face.

It would have been far better had she been able to claim some engagement. Her lack of invitations alarmed him, and she knew he must be particularly disappointed that she wasn't to spend the evening with Lach. She had no one to cover for her, though, so it was best she not have to try and invent something plausible. It kept things as simple as they could be, considering the circumstances.

"Don't wait up for me. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast," he said, and like a dutiful daughter she turned her cheek for a kiss. His lips didn't even make contact, and then he was gone.

Feeling as though she might fly out of her skin, Cianne forced herself into an appearance of tranquility, taking a few more slow bites of her dinner before wiping her own mouth and leaving the table. She hurried along the corridors as much as she could without giving the appearance that she was up to something. Her heart pounded and her palms were sweating as she threw herself into her room.

Vivie had the evening off, which was good for Cianne. Another servant had already seen to her fire, and no one would venture all the way up to her quarters unless she summoned them, which meant no one should notice her absence from the manor.

Unless anyone sees you spying on them, that is.

She ignored the thought, willing her fingers steady so that she could get herself out of her casual dinner gown and into her leathers as swiftly as possible. Strapping her gear over her back and sheathing her daggers, she climbed through her window and out into the night.

Fortunately for her, a mist was rolling in off the sea, providing her with additional cover. Unfortunately for her, it also decreased the range of visibility, so she had to move more slowly than she would have liked, her sense of impatience rising until she thought it would make her run mad. In the enclave she had no choice but to tail her father over the cobbled streets, keeping to the shadows and maintaining a considerable distance so as to avoid detection. Unlike him, though, she wore boots she'd had specially designed, the soles soft and pliable so that they were soundless, while her father's fashionable shoes clicked with his every step, helping her to track him.

She slipped up and over the enclave wall at one of her usual spots and resumed tailing her father. Now that they were in the city proper she could do so from rooftops. The height should have provided her with an advantage, but the misty night was working against her. She had to hunker down, eyes straining, in

order not to lose sight of him, moving at a crouch that made her thighs burn in protest. Ignoring the discomfort, she kept pace with her father.

No one joined him in his walk. He had turned his collar up and he walked with purpose, head bent, looking like any other Cearovan citizen hurrying to get inside, away from the damp chill. The streets were less crowded than usual due to the weather, and Cianne didn't notice anyone who struck her as suspicious, but then there was no real way of telling. Would whoever her father's secret partners were keep lookouts along the streets, taking note of his progress and ensuring that he made it to the meeting safely without anyone following him, or did they try to involve as few people as possible, the better to keep things secret?

He paused when he reached a warehouse not far from the Mallay enclave. A man and a young woman loitered near the door, the woman pressed up against the warehouse wall while the man leaned over her in a manner that suggested they were seconds away from a heated embrace. Daerwyn opened his coat enough to flash something at them, and the man and woman resumed their charade as he slipped through the door.

Relief flooded Cianne. The meeting's being held in a warehouse made her task much easier as it would offer her plenty of hiding places. True, it meant guards could be hiding as well, but she would take whatever small advantage she could get. Slipping into the building through one of the high window vents would be an easy matter for her, and if she were fortunate she could take up a perch in the rafters, which would give her a bird's-eye view of everything below her, including any hidden guards. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she said a little prayer to Cearus, asking him to ensure that her father's and his conspirators' voices would be loud enough for her to hear, or that the warehouse would have the courtesy of having excellent acoustics, so that their voices might carry.

Skirting the warehouse, she leapt from roof to roof, surveying the building's perimeter. She saw another man a short distance from the south side of the building, and a couple of women talking and laughing half a street away from the building's eastern side. Best to assume they were all guards, she decided, and used the western wall as her entry point.

By the time she was inside the meeting had begun. The participants weren't far from her, but their voices were a murmur that was too hard for her to make out. She had no choice but to get closer. Lowering herself to a beam spanning the length of the warehouse, she hugged it, shimmying along until she was close enough to hear. She would have liked to have been farther away from the participants, giving her more of a lead should she need to flee, but there was nothing else for it.

"…making noise again," a woman was saying. The warehouse was very dim, which provided cover of darkness for Cianne but made it difficult for her to see who was below. All she could discern was that the woman appeared to have light hair, and that she was shorter than Daerwyn, though nearly as broad. The coiled energy with which she moved suggested a powerful woman, one comfortable with the physicality of her own body.

In addition to Daerwyn and the woman, Cianne saw one hooded and cloaked figure, a man with flaming red hair, and another woman, this one with short, dark hair.

"Aren't they always?" Elder Borean's voice came from under the hood. That made two people Cianne knew. As for the others, they were unfamiliar, and she was too far away and the light too low for her to be able to make out the details of their clothing or appearance. Were they Caravanists, as the proximity to the Mallay enclave might suggest? Perhaps at least one was a Coin Master?

"I don't think you appreciate the gravity of this situation," the dark-haired woman said. Her voice was a velvety purr, but a steely note lay beneath. "They've taken it upon themselves to demand we pay more for their silence."

"Have we any leverage we can use?" the other man asked. His voice was low, gravelly, and not one Cianne could recall ever having heard before.

"There's always leverage," Daerwyn said dismissively. "It's simply a matter of finding it."

"I'll see what I can dig up," the light-haired woman said.

"They won't be easily dissuaded," the dark-haired woman warned, sounding dissatisfied.

"They never are, are they?" Elder Borean asked.

"That is the price we knew we would have to pay in order to ensure conditions remain favorable to us," the other man said.

No one argued with him.

"What of our friends in Vyramas? What news do they send of this succession battle?" Elder Borean asked.

"It's no closer to ending than it ever has been," the light-haired woman said. "Our sources take care to sow the seeds of discontent to ensure the battle continues to drag out."

"At this rate, none of us will live to see a successor," the other man said with a sardonic chuckle.

"Would that we could be so fortunate," Daerwyn said.

"That is good news indeed," Elder Borean said. "Any other matters of concern?"

"One," the dark-haired woman said. She strutted from one person to the

next, making a circuit of the meeting's attendees. Every one of them stiffened at her approach. "One of our House members doesn't want to be a good little boy and tow the line. He's asking questions. Uncomfortable questions."

"Get on with it, Farla," the other man growled. "How close is he?"

"Rather closer than anyone else has been," she said. "I can't help but admire his tenacity, to be honest."

"You sound smug for someone who was so worried about our miner friends a moment ago," the light-haired woman noted.

"That's because I, like my good friend Daerwyn here, know how to deal with the members of my House who run amok," she said.

"It's come to that?" Elder Borean asked, sounding weary.

"Like your man Stowley, I'm afraid the boy is starting to connect too many of the dots, wondering how the poor royals—"

"Enough," the light-haired woman said, moving aggressively toward the dark-haired one. "We get your point. Take care of it, as Elder Borean and Daerwyn did."

Cianne's blood ran cold, and she felt so faint she had to clutch the beam, her lungs burning as the force compressed her chest. A violent shiver tore through her, and she clamped her mouth shut to prevent her teeth from chattering. The floor of the warehouse seemed to rush toward her and then away, toward her and away again.

"Mustn't forget dear Moiria," Farla, the dark-haired woman, said. "But, then, I suppose she has you to turn to, doesn't she, Daerwyn? So sad when one can't keep one's spouse in line."

Rage swept through Cianne, mingling with the fear until her pulse pounded with such force she felt her head might burst. She wanted to scream, wanted to tear every beam from the rafters and collapse the building in on its occupants, even if it meant she would be crushed along with them.

"…can't afford to allow ourselves to be divided," Elder Borean was saying, his voice sharp. He sounded as though he were speaking from the bottom of a well. Screwing her eyes closed, Cianne pressed her face to the beam, a splinter biting into her cheek. She forced her eyes open again, forced herself to watch and listen. "We've held ourselves together for twenty years. We can't stop now."

"Oh, wouldn't the other Houses love that? Wouldn't the nobles?" the other man said.

"Never let yourselves forget that any one of the players would gladly throw another to the wolves, allow them to take the fall," Daerwyn added in a low voice.

"Find that leverage," Farla said to the fair-haired woman. "Despite what the

rest of you may believe, we cannot make coin appear out of thin air. We have a great deal of it, yes, but there's only so much to go around."

With that, the meeting dispersed, the attendees heading out one at a time, using both the north and south entrances. Still clinging to her beam, Cianne didn't move a muscle. She couldn't have even if she had tried. She was paralyzed, her limbs locked into place even as the warehouse seemed to whirl around her. The meeting attendees took their lanterns with them, plunging the building into darkness, and she allowed her tears to fall while she waited for her eyes to adjust.

Peeling herself from the beam at last, Cianne's knees shook as she rose into a crouch. She dashed at her face with her hand, forcing herself to breathe.

I must get to Kila's, she told herself. *I have to get there undetected and tell him what I heard.*

Moving was arduous, but she made herself do it anyway. She couldn't risk something happening to her, couldn't risk the information she'd gone to such lengths to obtain dying with her. Of all the horrible things she had imagined, she had never once entertained the thought that it could be something of this magnitude. How could she have? How could she ever have dreamed that her father had killed her mother, and was involved in the slaughter of the entire royal family?

Chapter 30

Alarm shot through Kila when Cianne staggered into his lodgings, bringing a metallic taste to his mouth.

"Cianne, what is it? Are you hurt?"

Despite his urgent tone, she didn't seem to hear him. She stared blindly ahead, as if she were looking straight through him, leaving him sick with fear.

"Are you wounded?" he asked again. When she still didn't respond, he grabbed her and began moving her limbs around, searching for an injury that didn't exist. From the way she was behaving he had feared she was suffering from shock brought on by pain and blood loss, but then he realized that though her face was colorless, no trail of blood streaked his floor. Her shock must have been caused by something she had learned.

"What is it?" he asked, guiding her into a chair, touching her face with gentle hands. "What is it? What's happened? What can I do?"

He was so distracted, so distraught by her catatonia, that he didn't notice they had company until someone seized him. Pinning his wrists behind him, his captor pressed a blade to his throat.

"What were you doing at that warehouse?" a familiar voice growled in his ear.

"Cianne," he choked, straining to reach for her even though he knew it was futile. A woman he'd never seen before had her arm around Cianne's shoulders, a blade held to her throat as well. "Don't harm her. Please, I beg you, don't harm her. She's not well."

The woman holding Cianne flicked her eyes toward Kila's captor, who tightened her grip on him.

"What were you doing at that warehouse?" his captor repeated.

At last the voice pricked the bubble of panic surrounding him, and he tried to no avail to turn his head so he could look at her face.

"Chief Flim?" he asked, his voice ringing with disbelief.

"I won't ask you again."

If Kila thought he'd been worried before, he had known nothing. His fear was so palpable he felt as if it could crush him. He had been so certain no one

had seen him, that he had made it back to his lodgings without anyone following him. Staying far from the warehouse, he had walked in a wide circle around it, studying the streets, searching for any clue he could find. He hadn't seen a thing that had given him pause, and that worried him more than anything.

"Do you think I'll answer that?" he asked harshly. "You may as well slit my throat now, spill my blood all over this floor."

"Flim," the other woman said, her voice high and thin.

"What?" the chief barked.

"This is Cianne Wyland."

"*What?* They know. House Staerleigh knows," the chief said, and now she was the one who sounded terrified.

To Kila's surprise, Cianne snapped out of her stupor. While her captor was distracted, she bent back her assailant's finger, causing the woman to cry out and drop her dagger.

"Don't move!" Flim ordered, the words cracking through the room, even though she spoke in a low voice. "I will kill him."

"Not if I kill you first," Cianne said in a rasping voice that sounded nothing like her own.

"Stop," Cianne's assailant gasped, cradling her injured hand against her chest, her face white. "You don't understand. She's Annalith's daughter."

"Why are you talking about my mother?" Cianne asked, so viciously her assailant flinched away.

"I'm not letting him go until I know why they were at that warehouse," Chief Flim said. She hadn't let her guard down in the slightest, and Kila wasn't about to test her. The pieces were all jumbled, and he couldn't make sense of anything that was happening, not why the chief and this other woman were in his lodgings, not why Cianne was acting as though she'd lost contact with reality, and least of all why the other woman was bringing Cianne's long-dead mother into the discussion.

Well, I suppose I'd best talk, then. See if I can't figure out what's going on and use it to find a way to get us out of this mess.

"We've been looking into House Staerleigh for weeks," Kila said, trying to catch Cianne's eye. It was no use as she was staring wild-eyed at her assailant.

"Why?" Flim asked.

"Because we suspected they had something to do with Toran Stowley's death."

The blade eased away from his throat a bit. Not enough to convince him it was safe to move, but enough that cold steel no longer bit at his neck, which made him feel considerably better.

"I thought we had an agreement."

"Oh, well, forgive me for worrying about trusting you," Kila said, his tone dripping sarcasm. His adrenaline was pumping. "Clearly that was a mistake on my part."

Letting out an irked noise, Flim eased up a little more but still didn't release him. Kila deduced she worried it might not be the wisest course of action, considering that Cianne's murderous glare was now directed at Flim.

"Cianne's not involved. I would have known," the other assailant said, her eyes creased at the corners in pain.

"Would you? What if she's being recruited?" Flim asked.

With a bitter bark of a laugh, Cianne said, "Considering my own father has been lying to me about everything for the last decade, he must be using the subtlest of all recruitment tactics. You've been lying too, apparently." She rounded on the other woman, who cringed.

"Cianne, who is that?" Kila asked.

"Vivie. My maid."

"I thought you were suspicious of the House members," Kila said to the chief.

"As you know, trust is a fragile thing," she snapped.

"Stop. We all need to stop," Vivie said. Keeping wary eyes on Cianne, she pulled herself up off the floor, her uninjured hand held out in a placating gesture.

"I want to know why you brought up my mother," Cianne said, and it was obvious she intended to be anything but placated.

"Because your mother is alive."

"Vivie!" Flim snapped.

Cianne blanched and swayed on her feet. Vivie used her good hand to prod Cianne back into her chair.

"We're not working with the House," Kila said. Gaping holes still prevented him from seeing the full picture, but he was beginning to put the pieces together.

"How can my mother be alive? Where is she?" Cianne demanded, directing a fierce glare at Vivie.

"I'll tell you everything, I promise. But first we need to know what you were doing tonight. It's important, Cianne. I wouldn't make you wait otherwise, I hope you know that," Vivie said, her voice strained.

"No. First you tell me where my mother is. You tell me who you are and what you're doing," Cianne said. "I won't tell you a thing I heard until I know that."

A silent argument passed between Vivie and Flim, and then Flim released

Kila with a frustrated grunt.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Flim said, pointing at Vivie with her dagger.

"Your mother is safe. That's all I can tell you," Vivie said.

Cianne opened her mouth, her face thunderous, but Flim cut her off. "No, she literally can't tell you. Neither of us can. Annalith is always on the move, and we never know where she is at any given time." At Cianne's searing glare, Flim added, "For her own protection."

"She had to flee, Cianne. Your father, Moiria Stowley, the Elders, they found out that your mother had uncovered information about their activities, and she had to disappear. They were going to kill her."

"Kill her?" Kila asked in disbelief. "What are you on about? Cianne, listen to me. They show up here, hold us at daggerpoint, and claim that your mother is alive? You can't trust anything they say."

"I can prove it," Vivie said quietly. Drawing a necklace out from under her shirt, she lifted it over her head and handed it to Cianne, whose face paled even more.

"It was my mother's," Cianne said, her voice cracking. "She was wearing it when she left for her last journey."

"How can you be sure?" Kila asked, trying to speak as gently as possible. "It was such a long time ago, Cianne, and—"

"It's Shaper-made. My father commissioned it for her, for their tenth anniversary. It's one of a kind," she said, holding it out to him.

He took it from her shaking hand and examined it, all doubt disappearing the instant he saw it. The pendant was a small ship at sea, tossed about by roiling waves. Though no bigger than his thumb, it was incredibly detailed. Minuscule sailors hauled ropes on the deck while gulls wheeled overhead. The waves were so realistic he was surprised his fingers remained dry when he touched them. He could even make out the grain of the wood from which the ship had been built.

Returning the necklace to Cianne, he crouched protectively beside her chair, his arm curled around the chair's back. He could feel Flim's eyes on them, but he didn't care. He studied Cianne, searching for the right words to say.

"How did you get this?" Cianne asked Vivie.

"Your mother sent it to me, in case I ever needed to tell you the truth."

"Why didn't she take me with her? Why did she leave me here?" Cianne cried.

She sounded like the child she had been when she'd been led to believe her mother had died. It reminded Kila of the fragile, skittish girl who had appeared in his garden, who had seemed so lonely, as if she had no one in the world on

whom she could rely. Betrayal and grief carved harsh lines in her face, and tears sprang to Vivie's eyes.

"She had no choice, Cianne. She had no idea they had discovered what she knew, and she only just escaped with her life when they tried to kill her during her last voyage. Sending for you was out of the question. She hasn't ceased running since, and she knew that was no life for a child. As long as you didn't know what the House had done, you would be safe, and she asked me to look after you, to get you out if you had to leave."

Pressing her lips together, Cianne said nothing. Kila watched her struggle with her newfound knowledge and wished there were something he could do to help her. Never in his life had he felt so utterly useless, and it tore him apart.

"Why would they want to kill her?" Kila asked, desperate to understand.

"Because she discovered the House had conspired to kill the royal family," Cianne said in a faint whisper. She stared at the pendant as if it were the only thing in the room she could see.

"What?" he asked, horrified.

"I heard them talking about it, though not in so many words. Toran had figured it out too; it's why they killed him." Taking a deep breath, Cianne recounted for them what she'd overheard, her eyes never leaving the pendant. Her voice gained strength as she spoke, and with her final words she closed her hand around her mother's pendant, clutching it in her fist.

"How did you manage to hear all this?" Flim asked suspiciously, and Kila felt his own hands curling into fists.

"I snuck into the warehouse and hid in the rafters while they spoke. I heard everything they said," Cianne said.

"How did you—" Vivie began, bewildered.

"I also know how to keep secrets," Cianne said, anger making a lash of her words. Abashed, Vivie dropped her eyes to the floor, color rising to her cheeks.

Chief Flim had begun pacing the room, rubbing her chin as she walked. "We have to determine who Farla was talking about, see if we can get him out. He may be willing to help our cause," she said to Vivie.

"What cause?" Kila asked.

Sighing, the chief stopped walking and faced him. "I only told you part of the truth when you arrived in the city. For years I've been working with an organization devoted to uncovering the truth about what happened to the Astoran royal family. I've long suspected the trade Houses were involved, but I have no proof. I'd hoped you might get close to Burl, help me find something incriminating, but until I could determine your loyalties, I couldn't tell you anything. I couldn't risk you going to Burl, or Burl extracting the information

from you against your will."

Kila didn't know how to feel about that. On the one hand he understood why Flim had to be as cautious as she had been, but on the other hand he felt used. How could she send him into this whole mess so ignorant and unprepared?

When he looked up at her, her gaze held no apology, and he understood. Some things were bigger than any one person. Flim was concerned with the fate of an entire realm, not the welfare of one Enforcer. Though he wasn't pleased that she had used him, he knew why she had, and he had to admit that were he in her shoes he might very well have done the same.

Yet he didn't care about Flim's cause. He didn't care about anything except what had happened to Cianne.

Cradling her hands in his, he peered up into her face. "What are you going to do?"

"I can't stay here," she said, tears flooding her eyes. "Not after all I've learned. Not knowing that my father—" When she inhaled, her breath caught on a sob. "And my mother, I have to see my mother."

"Can you get her to her mother?" he asked Vivie.

"Yes. Annalith has had several contingency plans in place ever since she left."

"What will you do?" Flim asked Kila, regarding him warily.

"I'm not going to go running to either Burl or House Staerleigh, if that's what you're concerned about," he said. "I don't know what I'll do, but I can promise you that I will keep my mouth shut."

Relief smoothed away the lines on her forehead, but her mouth turned down in disappointment.

That was all he intended to say to her, though. Anything else he had to say was for Cianne's ears and hers alone.

"Don't go back to the enclave," he said to her. "It's not safe for you there."

"No one saw me. They would never have said as much as they did if they had. I'm safe for the time being, and I can't leave without telling Lach the truth," she said, pleading with him.

"That's not wise," Flim barked.

"I won't have him living a lie, like I was." Cianne's lip curled in a snarl. "I will not hide the truth from him, like it was hidden from me. He deserves to know what happened to his father."

"But—"

Vivie cut the chief off with a gesture. "Are you certain, Cianne? Doing this will put you both at risk, and there's no way of knowing how he'll react."

"I've never been more certain," she said, rising from her chair.

"Come here immediately if you fear you're in danger," Kila said. "I'll help you get out of the city." His heart felt like it was squeezing its way up his throat. He wanted to plead with her to stay with him, so that he could try to help protect her, but he knew he couldn't keep her from this. She would never forgive him if he did.

"I will," she said, giving him a quick embrace.

Without saying a word to Flim or Vivie, she walked out his back door.

"You had better keep her safe," Kila said to Vivie in a low, dangerous tone.

"I will," she said, her face a mask of determination. "I won't let her down again."

Chapter 31

Never before had Cianne known real torment until that next day at her father's manor. She wondered how she would be able to look at him, how she would be able to function around him without leaping on him and wrapping her hands around his neck, choking the life from him. He and Moiria were far more alike than she had ever imagined, both willing to sacrifice anything and everything to fulfill their own ambitions. Even those they purported to love.

Cianne's hours were numbered, she was certain of it. It had become abundantly clear to her that her failure to unite herself in marriage to Lach would result in her father's deciding she was a liability. He might not kill her, but he would keep her under his thumb, trap her in a position from which she would have no hope of extricating herself. Abject loyalty to the House, no matter its actions, was the one and only way to ensure her security, and she would never comply.

Everywhere she looked, Cianne feared conspirators were lying in wait, base criminals who had plotted to commit regicide and would not blink an eye at the necessity of taking her life as well. They had helped arrange the indiscriminate slaughter of an entire family. No one had been spared, not one man, woman, or child. In one fell swoop, House Staerleigh, House Mallay, House Rolland, and who knew how many other Houses and nobles, were all guilty of the bloodiest massacre Astoran had ever known, and she would never forget it.

Not everyone. Not all of them. Think of Vivie. Think of all those members who are like you were once, who have no idea of the depths to which the House will sink. Do you really think every one of them would applaud the Elders for what they've done?

No, she wouldn't be like her father. She wouldn't view everyone who wasn't on her side as an enemy to be destroyed. That she would do everything in her power to bring to justice those who had actively participated in the crime wasn't in doubt, but she would never be a party to harming innocents. Everything she did from this point forward she did in service to her realm, to Astoran and its innocent citizens, who had no idea the wolves were living amongst them.

"You seem preoccupied this morning, my dear," her father remarked as they ate breakfast.

Her hand tightened around her fork and she contemplated using it as a weapon, imagined plunging it deep into his black heart. Perspiration prickled along her hairline as she forced herself to respond. "I'm worried about Lach. He's leaving soon, and I hope he'll have a safe, prosperous journey."

"He will. Cearus favors Lach more than he favors any other member of House Staerleigh."

"Yes, Lach is very blessed," Cianne said, the words tasting like ash, threatening to choke her.

"What are your plans for the day?"

Has he always asked me that, feigning interest in my days while maintaining a vigilant watch over my actions? Or is this a new thing, born of his suspicions that perhaps I'm not the dutiful slave he and the House demand I be?

"I've asked Lach to have lunch with me. He should be here shortly."

Smiling his pleasure, her father reached for her hand, and she commanded herself not to stiffen as his warm, dry hand covered hers. Her skin crawled, the sensation so intense she longed to scream and scratch herself until she bled.

"Have a wonderful time. I'll be home for dinner tonight."

"I'll see you then. Have a pleasant day, Father." Her practiced smile appeared relaxed, but inside she was as rigid as steel.

The minutes felt like hours as Cianne prowled around her sitting room, waiting for Lach to arrive. Disjointed thoughts ran through her head, fragments of plans, snippets of ideas, but she couldn't focus on any of it, no matter how hard she tried. Would her mind ever be quiet again? How could she be expected to live with the weight of this knowledge crushing her?

I'll be doing something. That will be my salvation. I will join my mother, and I will devote myself to helping her and her allies.

Tempting as it was to track down Vivie and pump her for information about who was a part of their cause, how many allies they had, what sort of resources they commanded, Cianne resisted the urge. She didn't intend to remain in the city for long, and as excruciating as it was to continue with her subterfuge for even a short time, she would bear it, for her own sake and that of her mother. That was the light that shined through the darkness, the knowledge that she had a way out.

Yet her feelings about her mother were also conflicted, that she couldn't deny. While she had understood the logic behind Vivie's explanation, logic could do nothing to soothe her wounded emotions. Her mother had left her without attempting a rescue, abandoning her to the care of plotters and assassins. How

could she have trusted Cianne to the man who had tried to kill her? Did she honestly think that a man desperate enough to agree to his wife's murder would make any exceptions for his daughter?

A knock on her door interrupted her train of thought, and she felt the briefest burst of relief, apprehension following hard on its heels. She had no idea what Lach would do when she told him the truth about his father's death. What if she couldn't keep him quiet and he exposed them both? His behavior had been so volatile that she feared he would explode. But what other choice did she have? She owed him at least this much.

Stomach churning, Cianne called out, "Enter."

"Captain Stowley is here," Vivie said, shooting a cautionary glance at Cianne.

She noticed that Vivie was taking care with her finger, but it wasn't splinted, so Cianne must not have broken it. Finger injuries were so common amongst the servants that no one would pay any attention to Vivie's—not that Cianne had been concerned about that when she had attacked Vivie.

"Thank you, Vivie. Show him in."

"Yes, Miss," Vivie said, withdrawing with a bow. She betrayed no visible reaction to Cianne's disregarding her concern.

"Cianne," Lach said, walking into the room and taking her by the hands. He was clean-shaven, his hair brushed back in the neat waves she remembered so well. He was far thinner than he had been a few short weeks ago, and his face still bore evidence of strain, but his condition had improved considerably, surprising her. "I was so pleased to receive your invitation. I had feared that I…" He let his voice trail off delicately.

She bit back the urge to laugh. To think that her worst fear had once been breaking his heart by refusing to marry him. Now she would be the one to destroy every sacred truth he had ever held dear, and her urge to laugh dissolved into an urge to weep.

"I have something to tell you," she said, her voice trembling despite her best efforts to keep it steady.

"I know, Cianne," he said, squeezing her hands and releasing them. "There's no need to put it into words. I understand. I won't pretend it doesn't hurt me, but I've no wish to lose your friendship."

"No, it's not that," she said, the words spilling out in a hasty rush.

He frowned, and her heart ached at his attempt to conceal his wounded feelings. "What is it then?"

"Lach, I… I have no idea how to say this to you," she said, pushing her hair back in agitation. She wrung her hands and paced before the fire, one side of

her blazing hot while the other was chilled to the bone.

"Whatever it is, Cianne, you can tell me," he said in a gentle voice.

Swallowing hard, she forced the words out. "You were right about your father. He didn't—"

"Cianne," he said, holding up a hand. His face was smooth, but his features seemed to ripple, like the deceptively placid surface of the seas before a storm. "In my grief I said terrible things, things that weren't true. Things I regret saying. I was out of my head, and I'm learning to come to terms with my loss."

His frank words surprised her, knocking her off course. "No, you weren't. Your father—"

"My father killed himself," he said, his tone so matter-of-fact that Cianne froze, staring at him, her mouth hanging open.

"He killed himself," Lach repeated, his voice softening. "I have to accept that. I have to move on."

"He didn't, though," she said, desperate for him to believe her. "Your mother, my father, the Elders, they staged his death to look like a suicide, but it wasn't. They killed him. They did it because they—"

"Who's been filling your head with such outlandish stories?" he asked, his brow furrowing, face darkening. "Why would you ever believe something so insane?"

"Because it's true," she said, her hands balling into fists in anger and frustration. "Your father didn't kill himself, he was murdered. By my father. And your mother. By the Elders. I heard them talking about it, Lach. All because he found out—"

"Stop right there. Just stop," he said, his voice cold.

"I'm sorry, Lach. I know this isn't easy to hear, but you have to believe me. I would never lie to you about this. You have to know that."

"I know what the truth is."

Narrowing her eyes, she stared at him. Calm, he was far too calm. The ripple was still there, but she could see he was determined to control it, determined to maintain his unruffled appearance.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Shaking his head, he let loose a long-suffering sigh. "I know how much you want to believe your version of the story, how you long to cast House Staerleigh as the villain. You've always questioned the House, have always had trouble accepting your place within it. I was sympathetic to you, I truly was. I thought if I could only help you, I could make you see the role you had to play. I could make you understand that your loyalty and devotion would pay off in the end.

"But that was weakness on my part. You've always been my weakness, you know that? Sweet, lovely, wonderful Cianne. How I adored you. When we were children, you were like the sun to me. I couldn't live without your light. As we got older, as you grew up, as I started to experience this strange sensation of yearning, I realized you had pulled me in so deep I had no hope of ever getting out again.

"My mother warned me. She told me all along that I had best be on my guard around you. She said that you might seem lovely and sweet, but you were treacherous, and that aligning myself with you threatened my position in the House. I laughed her off, thought she couldn't stand to see another woman influence me. I refused to believe anything but the best of you."

"She can't stand my influence," Cianne said, her face reddening with a mixture of confusion and fear. What was happening? Who was this man standing before her, this man she had sworn she knew? Everything about the encounter was grotesque, from the way he was looking at her, to the even tone with which he spoke, to his words themselves.

"Well, I suppose there is some truth to that, isn't there? But the fact of the matter is, Cianne, my mother was right. I see that now. My feelings for you have long been my greatest weakness. They made it easy for me to overlook your flaws, to ignore your lack of a sense of duty to our House, to laugh off your rebelliousness. I misinterpreted them, thinking you were spirited, and I loved it.

"I've been spending a lot of time with the Elders lately, you know. They've explained things to me, made me understand things I didn't understand before. They told me how bad things were becoming for our House, how restrictive the new laws the king and queen wanted to pass were. The nobles were growing increasingly jealous of our successes and wanted to curtail us. We stood to lose so much, and the Elders couldn't tolerate that. It's their sacred duty to look out for our House, to care for us and protect us all.

"And it's not just their duty, but ours too. House above all, Cianne, you know that. You simply refuse to accept it. I thought you were misguided and could be made to see the error of your ways, but your actions have proven otherwise."

The blood drained from Cianne's face. With every word Lach was hollowing her out, scooping out and flinging aside things she had thought were truths.

"You have been my weakness," he said, his voice low, threat creeping into it. "But this is the last time, Cianne. This is the last time I will protect you, the last time I will let you manipulate me. I swear to you, when I return from this voyage, I will never be weak again, especially not where it concerns you."

"Lach," she said, her voice hoarse with desperation. She was sick with terror. Her friend was gone, but she couldn't accept that. She could bring him back. She could make him see reason. She could. She had to. "Can't you see what they've done to you? They killed your father, and they made you think it was necessary, that it was a good thing? You can't believe that, Lach, you can't! You can't believe that's what it takes to show devotion to the House. You can't think such extremes are worth it!"

"Oh, I can and I do," he said. His face spasmed in pain and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were wet with tears. "Can't you see? My father would have exposed what he had discovered, and the others would have concealed their part and let our House take all the blame. It would have destroyed every last member of the House. How could my mother, your father, and the Elders allow that to happen? I had hoped that you would understand. I had hoped… Sometimes, Cianne, we have to do things that cause us great distress. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made for the good of all."

"No," she whispered, shaking her head. She couldn't believe it of him. She wouldn't. "No."

"Yes. This gives me no pleasure, none at all. I wanted you to be my wife. I would have made you happy, I truly would have."

Her stomach heaved and she thought she might be sick all over his shiny boots. She clamped her hand over her mouth. His eyes pinched in sorrow, he pulled a ring from his finger, the ring containing her lock of hair, and held it out to her. When she refused to take it, revulsion causing her to shudder, he set it on a table with a faint clink.

"Goodbye, Cianne," he said, giving her a sad smile as he headed for her door. "Your secret is safe with me, for now. I have to believe it is still possible for you to reach acceptance, given some time for serious reflection, and I will grant you that. But don't forget what I said. I *will* conquer this weakness, that I promise you. I have to. I cannot allow you to destroy our House. When we meet again, I trust you will have a new outlook."

As he closed the door behind him, the last piece of her world fell away.

Chapter 32

Worry over Cianne's safety stole any hope of Kila's being able to rest. He paced every inch of his lodgings, its walls confining even as they seemed to shield him from the city's dangers.

What could they do? Kila didn't know if he truly wanted to remain in Cearova. Burl didn't suspect him of anything, so he could continue on as he was. He could take pains to conceal from her his true motivations, continue to work his way into her trust. She was contemplating bringing him in on her participation in House Staerleigh's plans, and if he could worm his way into the inner circle he would be able to provide Chief Flim with invaluable information. He could work from the inside to bring down the trade Houses, to expose their role in the royal family's murder, and do his part to bring about justice.

Was he concerned about that justice, though? And how long could he continue with such a charade? No matter how meticulous he was, Burl was as gifted an Enforcer as he, and he could not guarantee that he wouldn't betray small indications that would eventually lead her to the truth about him. Was he willing to risk his own life for the good of a realm that had never claimed him as one of its own?

What of Cianne? It didn't appear that anyone in her House suspected her, and Vivie was proof that not everyone in House Staerleigh was content to go along with the House's dictates, to trust that the Elders were looking out for their best interests, and to turn a blind eye toward anything that didn't seem quite right. Perhaps Cianne could work with Vivie. She was more of a House insider than Kila could ever hope to be, and she had already proven how effective she was at being a shadow. She could continue to move about the city, collecting evidence and spying on House meetings. It was thanks to Cianne that they had gained the proof they had so far, and with time she would be able to obtain even more.

All of that might have worked had she not insisted that she had to tell the captain the truth about his father's death. Kila understood why she felt it was necessary, had even felt a twinge of envy that the captain had such a true friend in Cianne that she was willing to put herself at great risk to do what she felt was

right by him. Yet Kila couldn't bring himself to trust the captain. He could be an invaluable asset, there was no denying that, but would he be able to keep such a thing secret? Would he be able to continue to work with the Elders, to maintain the pretense of a relationship with his mother, all while concealing his knowledge that they had conspired to murder his father? Wouldn't the information eat away at him, erode his conscience until he either unwittingly exposed the truth or did something drastic in order to salve his sense of self? Kila wasn't willing to risk it. Cianne's life was far too precious.

What if the captain doesn't believe her? a voice he wanted to ignore whispered at the back of his mind. *What if he blames the messenger and decides to take his grief and rage out on her?*

When Kila put it all together, when he considered things from every angle, he knew that only one thing mattered to him: Cianne. What had happened to the royal family was a travesty, filling him with a sense of revulsion. The conspirators deserved to be exposed and brought to justice, but he wouldn't trade Cianne's life for that justice. The thought of her entrapped in the pit of vipers that was House Staerleigh terrified him. Whether to stay or to go was her decision to make, but he wouldn't deny that his worst fear was that she would decide to stay.

"Cianne," he gasped when she came through his door.

Her gaze turned his way, but she didn't seem to see him. Her eyes were wide, the whites luminous, and the look on her face made his blood run cold.

"What is it? Tell me what's happened," he said, closing the distance between them in two swift strides, grasping her arms with gentle fingers. His pulse throbbed with such force it was like a drum, beating out a steady, frantic rhythm.

"Lach, he…" Her voice broke and she swallowed in a huge, gulping sob. "They got to him. I don't know how they did it, Kila, but they convinced him what they did was the best thing for the House, and he's gone along with it." Tears streamed down her face, and his heart fractured.

"I'm so sorry, Cianne. I am so very sorry," he said, drawing her into his arms.

Her sobs broke, her body convulsing with the force of her grief. "He called me his weakness, warned me that he wouldn't be weak when he returns from his voyage."

A ferocious chill froze Kila's bones. "He'll expose you?"

"If I don't prove my loyalty to the House, yes."

Shuddering, he brushed loose strands of her hair away from her face, cupping it and tilting it back so that he could see her. "Cianne, you're in danger. How can you…" His frenzied mind couldn't find the right words.

"I can't," she said. "I can't do it anymore. I don't *want* to do it anymore. I want to see my mother."

Relief flooded him, sorrow swift on its heels. "Oh, thank the gods. It's not safe for you here anymore."

"It never was," she said, a spasm of bitterness twisting her features.

"I know Captain Stowley was dear to you. I'm sorry that you've lost him."

Tears filled her eyes as she gazed at him, and he swore he could see her every raw emotion, stripped bare and exposed to him. "It hurts, Kila, but I can live with it. What I can't live with, could never live with, is if something were to happen to you."

He caught her hand as the backs of her fingers brushed his cheek. Turning it, he kissed her palm, her wrist. "I couldn't bear it if something were to happen to you either. I want to beg you to leave the city, but I promised myself I wouldn't. I told myself I haven't that right."

"But if I leave—" she began, her voice choked with agony.

"I'm coming with you. If you'll have me," he said.

Shock widened her eyes even more, and she stared up at him in disbelief. "But, Kila, I didn't… I thought…"

"Cianne, I've been falling in love with you since the first night you broke into my lodgings."

Her mouth twitched at his mention of her uninvited presence in his home, but she still appeared to find his words inconceivable. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you say something when I told you how I feel about you?"

"What could I say? What could I offer you? I knew you could never be with me, not while you were a member of House Staerleigh, and I couldn't ask you to defy your House for me. I couldn't ask you to abandon everything you've ever known."

"Kila, there is nothing I wouldn't sacrifice for the chance to be with you. You are the only true friend I have ever had. Do you not know how precious you are to me, how infinitely dear you have always been?"

"You're equally precious to me, which was why I kept my feelings to myself. That may sound strange, but, Cianne, I feared what might happen if we were to run away together, because that's what would have been necessary. What if you grew to resent me for having taken everything from you?"

"Taken everything from me? All you've done, all you have ever done, is give. You gave a wounded little girl a place where she felt safe, where she knew she wasn't alone. You gave a frightened woman a sanctuary, a place where she could be her true self, for once in her life. There is no one else in my life like you, Kila. No one."

Her hands were on his face now, and she pulled his mouth down to hers. Their dire situation gave their kiss a frantic edge.

"I'm not certain this is wise," he said to her in a jagged voice, hating that he caused hurt to flicker across her face. She started to pull away from him. "No, please, Cianne, stay. What I meant was that when I kiss you I never want to stop."

She stilled, her eyes locking with his, the intensity of her passion sweeping over him courtesy of her burning gaze. "Then don't stop."

Abandoning all sensible thought, he swept her into his arms. He couldn't forget the imminent danger they faced, but he would never forgive himself if something were to happen and he had denied Cianne, had denied himself, this chance to be together.

"You have no idea how I longed for you," he murmured as his lips grazed over her skin. From the sweetness of her mouth, he trailed his tongue to the hollow of her throat, making her gasp and arch her neck back as she thrust her fingers into the hair at the back of his head, urging him to continue.

"Yes, yes I do," she said, her voice throaty. She broke away from his mouth so that she could kiss his neck, provoking a low groan of pleasure from him.

Their mouths met again and they kissed deeply. Her tongue teased him, tasting him, driving him to the brink of madness. He couldn't get enough of the taste of her, of the intoxicating scent of her skin, and his fingers fumbled with her collar as he pushed it aside to allow him greater access to the sensitive skin of her neck. She shivered, clutching him, her hands bunching up his shirt until she freed it from his breeches. Her warm, soft hands slipped up underneath it, splaying over his skin, sending frissons of pleasure up his spine. She pressed her hands to the small of his back, bringing him closer to her, crushing his body to hers. The feeling of the length of her body against his made him shudder.

"I want you so desperately I can't maintain a coherent thought," he told her in a voice rough with passion.

"I want you too. I want to be with you, now."

"Are you certain?"

"Please, Kila. I burn for you."

The words nearly made him lose his head, and his fingers fumbled with the lacing at the top of her leather vest. He wanted to race, was desperate to feel her skin against his, but he wouldn't rush this. With deliberate slowness he undid her vest, her breathing growing increasingly ragged as he proceeded. His fingers brushed against the curves of her breasts through her shirt and shift and she trembled, clinging to him.

Her hands continued their exploration of his back, making his skin flush.

She teased him with kisses, working her way from his jaw to his ear, her breath hot against his skin, setting every nerve in his body on fire.

His hands shook as he slid her vest away from her body, and he drank in the sight of the thin linen shirt clinging to her form. Her nipples were erect, and she moaned as he slid his thumb over the right one. He cupped her breasts in his hands, learning their contours, the feeling of her stiff nipples against his palms so heady he could hardly bear it.

"More?" he asked her.

"More," she said, followed by an incoherent groan.

Sweeping her off her feet, he carried her to his bed, her vest discarded and forgotten on the floor. He sat her in the middle of the bed and knelt before her, studying her with tenderness. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted and awaiting his kisses, her gaze for him and him alone.

"You're beautiful," he told her, running the backs of his fingers over her jawline.

"So are you," she said. Her fingers mapped his face, then trailed down his neck and to his chest. She explored his chest through his shirt, and it was his turn to gasp as her fingers found his nipples. She slid her hands over his stomach, pausing as his muscles quivered.

"I want to see more of you," she said, gathering his shirt in her hands. Slowly, she pulled upward, coming up onto her knees as she tugged it over his head and cast it aside. Her eyes never left him as she explored his skin with her fingers. "Beautiful," she repeated, and then explored his skin with her mouth.

He was so flush with desire he felt he might combust. Sliding his hand up the back of her shirt and shift, he caressed her skin, drunk on the velvety texture of it. Unable to bear it any longer, he slipped her shirt and shift up over her head as well, his breath catching at his first glimpse of her.

"Oh, Cianne," was all he could manage to say as he devoured her with his eyes. He spent some time exploring her body with his fingers and mouth, making her gasp and moan. Grabbing his hips, she pulled him against her again, so that they were molded to one another, skin to skin.

She held him like that as he worked his fingers through her hair, finding the pins and pulling them out, releasing her hair section by section. It cascaded down around her, silken strands tumbling over her shoulders and down her back. The sight of that hair concealing and reveling the swell of her breasts, the firm muscles of her stomach, the curve of her shoulders, was enough to ignite every one of his fantasies. He wove his fingers through her loose hair, coaxing her face forward so that he could kiss her again, her swollen mouth warm and pliant under his.

They unlaced one another's breeches, and he was shaking as he slid hers over her hips. She was trembling too, and her eyes fell closed with a gasp as his seeking fingers caressed her gently. Her hands slipped down to his hips, easing his breeches down until she closed her fingers around him, caressing him in turn.

Falling back on the pillows, they lay side by side, her leg over his hip as they learned one another's bodies, moving unhurriedly, whispering to each other, guiding and encouraging. When she reached her peak, she gasped long and deep against his lips, her body shuddering, and he rolled on top of her, pausing to look down at her questioningly.

"Yes," she said, her hands on his hips, pulling him into her. She arched up against him and her hands moved up his back, kneading him, urging him on.

But he moved as slowly as he had that whole evening, reveling in the sensation of her encompassing him. He reached for one of her hands, easing it down onto the pillow beside her head, lacing his fingers with hers.

"I love you," he whispered.

"And I love you," she said, arching her hips against him once more. They found a rhythm together, their eyes locked until he shattered and his eyes fell closed of their own accord.

Collapsing next to her, he maintained his hold on her hand as she curled up beside him, molding her body against his. She tucked her head under his chin, her cheek against his chest.

"Are you certain you want to leave?" she asked in a soft voice, her breath fanning over his skin.

"I want to be wherever you are, and nowhere else, for as long as you'll have me," he responded, tracing circles over her skin. She was a marvel, a work of such beauty he could scarcely believe she was real.

"Will you come with me to find my mother?" she asked, her voice small, hesitant.

Slipping his free hand under her chin, he coaxed her out of her burrow, tilting her head so that he could see her face. "Of course. I will be with you every step of the way, I promise you that."

"Thank you," she said, tears wetting her lashes. She kissed him, a slow, sweet kiss.

"When do you want to leave?" he asked, stroking her hair and kissing her brow.

"The sooner the better," she said. She tried to make her voice sound strong, resolved, but he heard the waver in it.

"Tomorrow night? We've only a few hours until sunrise now."

"Tomorrow," she agreed.

They lay quietly for a while, kissing and caressing, then she rose up on one elbow with obvious reluctance.

"I must go. I want nothing more than to stay here with you, to wake up beside you, but if I am not at the manor in the morning someone will notice."

"I know," he said, sliding his fingers down a strand of her hair. His impulse was to cling to her, to refuse to let her out of his sight, but he knew what she was suggesting was the best course. They didn't want to rouse suspicion. "Be careful. Come here straight away if you think you're in any danger."

"I will," she promised.

He helped her dress, not bothering with his own clothing. His heart ached, and fear made his fingers icy, but he kept it to himself. She knew how to take care of herself, and she wouldn't take any unnecessary risks.

Still, that knowledge wasn't much consolation as she kissed him one final time and disappeared into what was left of the night.

Chapter 33

The enclave was quiet as Cianne slipped back within its walls. She knew it was her imagination, but the calm seemed unnatural, as if the enclave held its breath in preparation for the storm that was about to overtake it.

She could smell the scent of Kila's skin on her, reminding her of everything that was at stake. There were larger issues than the welfare of the man she loved, than the discovery that her mother was still alive, she knew that. She cared about what had happened to the royal family, cared that her House had been intimately involved. Vengeance may have played a part in the decisions she had made, but she knew vengeance alone wasn't reason enough. She wanted justice, not just for the royal family, but also for her mother, for Toran Stowley, and for everyone else who had placed themselves in peril to stand up for what was right. What Chief Flim and Vivie were doing was important, but protecting the people she loved was also important to Cianne. As pressing a matter as uncovering the conspiracy against the royal family was, seeing to the well-being of those about whom she cared was even more pressing to her.

Despite everything that had happened, despite all the treachery that had been uncovered, the dark secrets and unthinkable lies, she couldn't prevent herself from feeling a pang as her manor came into sight. It stood as stolid and stunning as it had ever been, but she saw it now as rotten within. No matter how pretty the enclave looked from the outside, its appearance belied the corruption and filth lurking behind its walls. To acknowledge this was to watch everything she had ever known crumble to dust, and it hurt her. She had thought that the indifference and condescension of the other House members was the worst pain she could experience, but that was before her father, Moiria, the Elders, and Lach had destroyed everything she thought she had ever known.

Cianne had no desire to see her father, to offer a private goodbye that she did not dare speak aloud. He was no more her father than a random stranger on the street. Everything she thought she had ever known about him was a lie, his ambition so much worse than she could have imagined. There had never been any question in her mind that she couldn't remain in the enclave. The thought of having to look at her father, to know what he had done, and to smile and pretend

as though she were still ignorant was repulsive to her.

Yet as repulsive as it was, it was nothing to the unspeakable revulsion with which she thought of the elaborate act she would have to carry on with Lach if she stayed. She could never do it, never. She couldn't pretend allegiance to a House that was so thoroughly devoid of any sense of morality, and she certainly couldn't pretend to earn the approbation of the man who was nothing like the friend she had thought him. A very tiny part of her wanted to stay, to try to save him, but it was a part she could easily disregard. Lach might still be redeemable, but it wasn't up to her to redeem him. Even if he were to redeem himself she doubted it would matter much to her. He was lost to her, had been lost to her the moment he had chosen to place his allegiance with the House rather than with those the House had wronged.

Climbing through an upper story window, Cianne's heart leapt into her throat as she heard a servant coming up the corridor, and she nearly lost her footing and plummeted back out to the street below. She clung to the window frame while her pulse hammered against her collarbone. Levering herself inside, she fell, tucking her body into a ball, turning the tumble into a roll. She managed to throw herself into an empty guest room as the servant rounded the corner, and she had to remain hidden within for a full five precious minutes, until her pulse and breathing slowed enough for her to move again.

Fine night for a servant to be sneaking back in from a late-night assignation, she thought, irrationally furious with said servant.

But was it simply a matter of a servant out on the prowl? Was someone looking for her, checking to make sure she was safely shut inside the manor? Perhaps despite all the care she had taken someone had seen her sneaking out and had alerted her father.

Or perhaps the sneaking servant was involved in yet another of the House's schemes. Had her father entrusted any of them with delivering his clandestine messages? All this time, had he been conducting a secret network right under her nose? As much as she hated to admit it, the thought pricked at her pride.

What did any of it matter? It was no longer her concern. The only thing she needed to concern herself with was getting to her quarters so that she could pack. Soon she would be far away from all this, and whatever peril she might face at her mother's side was surely better than this. After years of skulking around, fearing the shadows, Cianne was quite certain she would prefer open danger to hidden menaces.

There's no more time to waste, she told herself. Breathing in, she cracked open the guest room door and peeked out into the corridor, listening. Silence.

She had no other run-ins on her way to her quarters, though she couldn't

stop thinking about the servant sneaking around. Then again, how did she know it was a servant? She had assumed her father wasn't likely to be skulking around his own manor, but she should know better than that by now.

Her mind was still alight with a variety of paranoid fears when she made it back to her sitting room to find Vivie within.

"Where have you been?" Vivie gasped, hurrying over to Cianne. She grabbed her mistress's hand and dragged her toward her bedchamber.

"I was… out," Cianne said, a blush creeping over her cheeks.

"You were with that Enforcement officer," Vivie said in a brisk voice. She kept it low, hushed, as if afraid someone might overhear them even here.

Her cheeks blazing brighter, Cianne asked, "What are you doing here?"

Vivie didn't answer, and Cianne's astonishment scaled to new heights when Vivie rolled aside the rug and lifted the floorboard, pulling items out of what Cianne had deluded herself into thinking of as her secret hiding place.

"How long have you known about that?" she asked, sputtering.

"It would be easier to answer the question of how long *haven't* I know about it. That was a far shorter period of time."

Cianne's face went white, and she dropped to the end of her bed. "Do the other servants know?"

"Of course not. Why do you think I hover so? Why do you think I became your maid in the first place?"

"Did *she* ask you to do it?" Cianne asked, anger leaping to the fore.

"Yes," Vivie said, not bothering to dissemble. "I made her a solemn promise years ago that I would keep you safe, and I intend to keep that promise. Now hold your tongue and come help me with this. We haven't much time."

The slight tremor in Vivie's voice sent icy tentacles of fear throughout Cianne's body, and she heaved herself from the bed onto the floor, helping Vivie gather her things, their hands blurs as they rolled her clothes and stuffed them into her pack.

"Why are you here? What's happening?" Cianne asked.

"You have to flee now."

"*Now?* That's impossible! It's almost dawn, and I'm not prepared!"

"That's why I'm here."

"I appreciate the assistance, really, I do, but helping me pack won't get me outside of the city walls before morning breaks."

"I know a way," Vivie said, stuffing one final article of clothing into Cianne's pack and thrusting it at her. "Gather your weapons."

Biting back her questions, Cianne did as she was told. Vivie's carefully controlled manner frightened Cianne, spurring her to make short work of

packing her things.

"Did someone expose me? Did Lach say something?"

Vivie's face twisted in disgust. "No, the dashing captain has kept your secret, thus far. But Officer Burl is asking questions about Officer an Movis that are rather uncomfortable, and the Elders have agreed that every member of the House must be kept under tighter surveillance."

"Why?" Cianne asked, not even surprised as Vivie went to the secret hiding spot in her jewelry chest and began raiding it.

"I don't know yet. Something about Toran Stowley's study, I think. I was a little too concerned with getting you out of the city in one piece to spare much attention for the details."

"Cearus's mercy," Cianne gasped, covering her mouth. She was so terrified that her fingers jerked as violent shivers overtook her body. "They noticed the ledger is missing."

"You took it?" Vivie asked, her voice sharp as she whirled on Cianne. Then she paled, darting glances all around the room as if searching for hidden eyes.

"Yes, I did. Burl thinks Kila took it." It wasn't a question. The realization made Cianne sick to her stomach with worry. What if Burl got to him before Cianne could make it back to his lodgings? If he were to disappear this time, chances were very good she would never see him again.

"Probably," Vivie said, moving with even more haste. She showed no reaction to Cianne's using Kila's first name rather than referring to him as Officer an Movis, but then Cianne thought she would have been hard-pressed to be shocked to discover that Vivie was actually an Intentionist. How ironic that she had often thought sneeringly of how oblivious the rest of the House was when she had been every bit as oblivious as them.

"Is Burl going after him? Are the Elders?"

"I don't think they'll move just yet. Burl doesn't trust that Enforcement is secure, and she thinks that if they're too hasty someone will notice something amiss."

"She knows about the chief?" Cianne asked, her stomach clenching.

"No, we don't think so. You think an Movis is good? You ought to see Flim in action." A mixture of pride and amusement slipped into Vivie's tone. It struck Cianne that perhaps there was more to Vivie's and Flim's relationship than met the eye.

"I'm not leaving the city without Kila." Balling her hands into fists, Cianne paused long enough to level a challenging glare on Vivie, who held up her hands in surrender.

"We thought as much. I'll lead you both out."

"Are you coming too?"

"No. I've more work to do here, and I'll not leave Flim alone to earn all the glory. Here, take these too," Vivie said, bringing Cianne her journal, a hair pin that had belonged to her mother, and a couple of other items. "It's not wise to leave anything incriminating behind."

"You think my disappearance won't look incriminating enough?" Cianne asked, scoffing.

"Of course it will, but my associates and I will take the trouble to obscure things, plant a few rumors, make it look as though you fled for love. Wouldn't be the first time it had happened, you know, but I'm sure your mother can fill you in on all that. Seeing as how Officer an Movis will also be disappearing, it won't take long for the gossip to spread. I'll of course have to confess all, as my part is sure to come under suspicion. It'll distract everyone, provide you with some cover. It won't fool your father, Moiria, or the Elders, of course, but it will complicate matters for them."

It would infuriate Lach, but Cianne kept that thought to herself. Let it. She didn't think it was too base an emotion for her to feel some smug satisfaction at the thought. Lach hadn't actively participated in the House's nefarious plans, not yet, but he was complicit, and that was enough to take at least some of the shine off what Cianne felt for him.

"Well, my life has always been about making things difficult for them," she said sourly, bringing a smile to Vivie's face. "But what about you? You won't be safe."

Vivie surprised Cianne by embracing her. "You let me worry about that. Cearus's left knee, but if I'm not fond of you. Listen to me: don't give your mother too difficult a time. Go easy on her."

"I'm not certain I can promise you that." A muscle in Cianne's cheek twitched.

"Try. That's all I'm asking. She'll explain everything to you."

"Let's go," Cianne said, both impatient to be gone and impatient to stop speaking about her mother.

"You've got your way of moving and I've got mine. It's best if we split up. I'll meet you at Officer an Movis's lodgings and guide you from there."

"Be careful," Cianne said, seizing the other woman's wrist, forcing her to pause. "A servant was creeping about when I got back in tonight."

Shaking her head, eyes full of mirth, Vivie said, "Tell me something I don't know. Who do you think was doing the creeping?"

"That was you?" Closing her eyes for a brief second, Cianne sagged with relief.

"I was looking everywhere for you. As I said, I've got my ways of moving about too."

"This is all a rather embarrassing lesson in why I shouldn't overestimate my own abilities," Cianne grumbled.

"I'm not knocking yours. You've surprised us all, I'm pleased to say. And that's enough praise for one night. Wouldn't want to swell your head," Vivie said. Gripping Cianne's wrists, Vivie met her eyes, her expression turning deadly serious. "Make haste. And, Cianne, be careful."

"You too." Giving Vivie's hand a squeeze, Cianne dashed off to her sitting room and shimmied out her window.

Chapter 34

Though he had tried his hardest to preserve it, Cianne's warmth had faded from Kila's bed. He might have deceived himself that she had never been there at all, that everything that had happened between them had been nothing more than the most delicious dream he had ever dreamed, but her scent lingered. Exhausted as he was from everything that had happened, sleep had eluded him, his mind too alternately occupied by memories of what they had shared and the creeping sense of dread that would not cease to insinuate itself in his mind. Not persuading her to stay had been a mistake, he was certain of it, and he felt as though a boulder had settled on his chest, crushing him with the weight of his fears.

A shadow passed his bedroom window, and Kila bolted upright. Drawing a dagger from under his pillow, he slipped it beneath his sheet in order to conceal it. He held his breath for several long beats but refused to allow himself to relax when nothing more happened.

Perhaps his worries were affecting him more than he wanted to admit, but he was not prepared to dismiss the shadow as a figment of his overactive imagination. He had just resolved to go outside and search his garden when the shadow appeared again, this time resolving itself into a form that slithered into his room. He knew immediately it was Cianne, but rather than relieving him the realization filled him with alarm.

"What's wrong?" he whispered to her, his voice no more than an exhalation of breath.

She held a finger up, warning him to be quiet, and he slowly moved his legs to the edge of the bed, taking care not to rustle his bedclothes. Crouched below the sill so that she could not be seen from the outside, Cianne lingered by his window for several unendurable seconds before moving closer to him. Bending down, she brushed her lips over his ear and spoke directly into it, so low he had to strain to hear her despite her proximity.

"Vivie caught me when I was coming back into the manor. She said we have to flee right away."

He opened his mouth to protest but she laid a finger over it.

"I know, I've already said it all to her. Please, get dressed and pack what you need. Vivie will be here any second."

Swallowing his protest, he nodded and got out of bed. She rushed around the room noiselessly, tossing his clothing to him and jamming things into a bag she had made appear.

His pulse raced and his ears strained as he yanked on his clothing. Every common nighttime sound now struck him as a potential threat. Those two men laughing raucously in the street? They might be on their way to seize him and Cianne. Was that the whinny of a horse? Had he heard a sword rattling, or was it his imagination?

After making a quick circuit of his room, running her hands under his mattress and below every surface, sliding them over his walls, she returned to his side.

"Vivie's going to lead us out of the city," Cianne said, helping him pack spare clothing.

"Do you trust her?" he asked, pausing to fix an intense gaze on her.

"I don't trust anyone other than you," she said, which, while gratifying, did nothing to reassure him of the wisdom of placing their trust in Vivie to get them out safely. "However, I mistrust her less than I do the rest of the House."

Nodding, he decided to be satisfied with that, for the time being. They would be able to reassess later—he hoped.

"It does seem like too elaborate a scheme to capture us," he said, wondering if he believed the words.

Putting her hand over his, Cianne paused long enough to give him a steadying look. She squeezed his hand. "Me disappearing poses more problems for the House than it does solutions, which means this isn't an ideal way of ridding themselves of me, especially since the whispers about Toran's death haven't completely died down yet. If they really wanted to silence me for good, it would have made more sense for them to send me along with Lach on his voyage. They're good at making people disappear at sea, after all."

Giving her a quick kiss, he tried to pull the bitterness from her lips and into his own body, wishing he could do more for her. He *would* do more for her, he vowed. He would prove to her that not everyone in her life was destined to fail her. She leaned into him for the briefest of instants before they resumed packing.

Something hit his sitting room window, making them both freeze. Dropping to the floor, Cianne motioned to him to do the same, and he complied. She pushed the bag toward him, gesturing, and he understood that she wanted him to continue packing while she went to investigate. He wanted to protest, but he gave her a curt nod and, crouching so low he was all but crawling, made his

way into his office, where he began going through his papers, grabbing the notes relevant to the conspiracy.

In anticipation of their spying mission, he had stowed Toran Stowley's ledger in a new, safer location. They wouldn't have time to get to it. It would take a long time for the House to track it down, but he had a feeling that with Burl's help they would find it at some point. He would have to disclose its location to Vivie and hope that Cianne was right about her. His natural inclination was to trust the chief, and, by extension, Vivie, but he wasn't willing to leave much to inclination at the moment.

He heard no sound from the sitting room, which didn't make him feel better. On the one hand, the absence of the sounds of a struggle was reassuring, but on the other he couldn't suppress the worry that someone may have gotten the drop on Cianne. The thought was enough to steal all breath and warmth from his body, and he just barely prevented himself from staggering into his desk.

"I'm here," she whispered, dispelling his chaotic thoughts. "Vivie's with me."

"You have two more minutes, then we go. Anything you can't grab now you'll have to leave behind," Vivie said.

"What about—" he began to ask, gesturing at the room, but she cut him off.

"The chief will take care of it. I've sent a runner to her with a message."

Scribbling a note, he thrust it at Vivie. "You'll find Toran Stowley's missing ledger at this location."

She nodded and tucked the note away.

A million questions sprang to Kila's mind, but they didn't have time for any of them. He knew Cianne was in knots at the prospect of meeting her mother, and he would have liked to do his best to smooth the experience for her, but he was going to have plenty to say to Annalith as well.

Stilling himself, he cast a glance over to Cianne and she nodded. Adopting a defensive stance at his back, she protected him while he centered himself with a lightning-quick bit of meditation. He pushed his fears aside, honing his focus, and examined his office with careful, Enforcer eyes. Picking up a few scraps of parchment that had fluttered to the floor, he pinned them to the walls. He rearranged some strings, removed others, taking care to erase all traces of his investigation of the House. He had no intention of making any of this easy for them.

He also seized the opportunity to leave a coded message for Flim. No one else would be able to interpret it, of that he was confident. Burl might be able to put together a few pieces of it, but it wouldn't make any sense to her. In order to work it out, she would have to have shared the close relationship with Kila that

Flim had once shared, back when they were partners. He still wasn't certain if he trusted either Flim or Vivie, but trying to account for all possibilities struck him as their best bet.

"I'm ready," he said, grabbing his pack.

"I give you this signal, Cianne, you get yourself up on the nearest roof, but stay as close to us as you can. Kila, you and I will start having a loud, nasty argument," Vivie said. She folded down her thumb and flashed four fingers at them twice, in rapid succession. "Hopefully that will be enough of a diversion if we run into any trouble. If not, I'll create a distraction and you two will scatter."

Cianne's body was coiled tightly, and she jerked her head in a nod. Flicking a glance at him, they shared a wordless agreement: neither would leave the other behind.

"From this point on, don't talk unless I tell you to. Stay close to me and focus; you'll need to be able to retrace our route if something does happen and I have to split from you," Vivie continued. Kila and Cianne nodded their agreement.

Leading them through the back door, Vivie stole through the garden, making her body as small as possible. When they reached the wall she nodded at Cianne, who vaulted up to the top of it with an ease that made Kila embarrassed of his own physical abilities. Spreading herself flat on her belly, Cianne extended a hand, and Kila boosted Vivie up. Once Vivie was on top of the wall, Kila climbed, the two women grabbing onto his coat, hauling him up to the top.

They ran through his neighbor's garden at a crouch, slipping out through a gate that wasn't intended for public use, judging by the shattered, rusty lock hanging from it. Plunging down a black alleyway, they kept their backs to the wall, deliberately placing each foot as they slid along. They startled a cat, which hissed at them before darting away with an indignant cry so loud it rent the still air. They made statues of themselves, and a drop of sweat trickled along Kila's temple as he tried to ignore the first fingers of gray light that signaled dawn's imminent arrival.

No one came to investigate the sound, and Vivie gestured them forward. Kila was dreading going out into the street, where they would be exposed, but Vivie dropped to a knee and tugged at a sewer grate, which gave with a low, rasping groan of metal against stone. Cianne plunged down first without hesitating, and Kila followed suit. He wondered if she had ever made her way through the city via sewer before, and he couldn't help but hope that she had. He did not like the idea of being trapped down there.

Taking advantage of the brief second before Vivie joined them, Cianne grabbed his arm and yanked him to her. "I know where we are," she said into his

ear, setting his mind at ease.

Of course. The city was laid out rather well, particularly in comparison with other cities in the realm. A fairly straightforward grid of streets cut regular swathes through Cearova, which would make the sewers easy enough for Cianne to navigate, given the mental map of the city she had long since established in her head.

Indeed, as they walked, trying to ignore the squelching beneath their feet, as well as the muffled squeaks of rats, Kila noticed that Cianne was paying close attention to their heading, mentally ticking off every turn they made. They were still far from safety, but it did reassure him to know that they could ditch Vivie should it become necessary.

"This is as far as I go," she announced abruptly. "I must get back to the manor before anyone notices my absence. Continue north. Keep walking, and you'll eventually find yourself—"

"Exiting via a drainage pipe, I know," Cianne said.

Vivie examined her with shrewd eyes. "The old map your father thought he burned a few years ago?"

"The same one you memorized, I imagine."

"They never did give you enough credit, your father and the Elders," Vivie said, shaking her head with an awed expression of approval.

"Where do we go from there?" Kila asked.

"Someone will be waiting for you outside. He'll take you to a cart, drive you out to the forest. You'll have to lie under sacks and pretend to be cargo, I'm afraid, but it'll ensure no one spots you on your way out. I don't know where you'll go from that point; he'll have instructions for you. Give him this." She gave Cianne a small token, which Cianne palmed. "Remember what I told you about your mother."

"I will," Cianne said. The two women nodded at one another, then Vivie saluted Kila and hurried off.

"Are we going to follow that plan?" he asked.

"For now," Cianne said. She handed him the token Vivie had given her. He didn't have enough light to make out the details, but he could see a rough outline, and running his thumb over it confirmed his suspicion.

"It's a ship, like the one on your mother's pendant."

"Yes."

He returned the token to her and she slipped it into one of the pockets on her tight breeches.

"Do you think your mother is the uniting force behind all this?"

She shook her head. "Do you?"

"No. I have little to go on at this point, but everything is too organized, too well-run and well-concealed to have sprung up recently. My guess is that a resistance had formed long before your mother disappeared, and they felt she would be an excellent asset."

"That makes sense."

"What you said earlier, about not trusting anyone else, Cianne, I… I don't know how to say this," he said, frustrated with himself for fumbling the words.

"You don't need to say anything," she said softly, laying a hand on his arm. "I meant what I said. I don't trust anyone other than you, and I don't intend for that to change any time in the foreseeable future. Vivie claims that my mother had her reasons for leaving me behind, but I'll draw my own conclusions once I've had a chance to speak with her."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I know I can count on you, and that's all I need to know."

It wasn't exactly the most romantic spot in the realm, but that didn't stop him from running a thumb over her cheekbone. He gave her a warm kiss, sheltering her in his arms, and she lingered there for a moment.

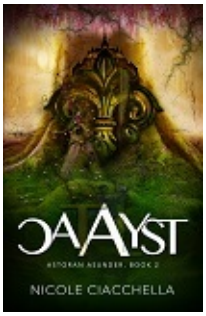
"Into the breach?" she asked at last, pulling away just far enough to tilt her head back and look up into his face.

"As long as I'm going in with you," he said.

Hand-in-hand, they forged a path through the sewer, heading for Cianne's mother.

The Conspiracy Runs Even Deeper Than Cianne and Kila Know…

The story continues in *Catalyst*, book two of the suspenseful romantic fantasy *Astoran Asunder* series



Contains some mature content.

Xaran Ridgeford is on the cusp of a discovery that could have cataclysmic repercussions for the realm. Concerned about how deeply beholden to the trade Houses his House has become, he's determined to go to extreme lengths to protect the secrecy of his research.

Unable to shake the conviction that there was more to her brother's death than she was told, Aderyn Silverin left their mercenary company and has spent years wandering aimlessly, trying to erase her past.

A chance meeting in the city leads Xaran to hire Aderyn to help him get his research into secure hands. But her help comes with a price: information about her brother's mission for Xaran's House, the mission that got him killed.

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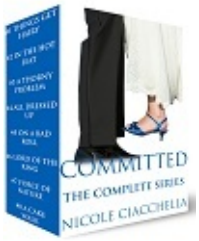

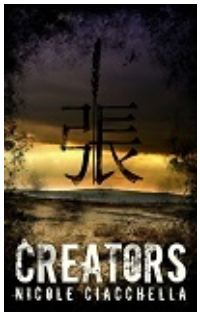

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About the Author

Nicole has progressed from scribbling in notebooks to banging on keyboards, but she's never managed to stop daydreaming at inappropriate moments.

When not answering the demands of her characters, Nicole can often be found curled up with a good book or spending far too many hours acting the hero in whatever video game is her obsession of the moment.

One of Nicole's other great passions is travel. She loves being married to a native Belgian, both because she likes the idea of being "The American" and because it gives her plenty of excuses to visit Europe—that wondrous land of coffee, chocolate, pastry—as often as possible.

Michigan born and raised, Nicole lives there with her honorary Michigander/Belgian husband and her two children. A Michigan State University alum, Nicole bleeds green and is a Spartan for life.

Book Description

Cianne Wyland leads a double life. No one in House Staerleigh would suspect that the meek woman on whom they heap their disdain is a gatherer of secrets. Determined to uncover whether the House's upper echelon—including her own father—are engaging in illicit activities in a grasp for control of the House, Cianne has made an art of slipping into their homes to rifle through their private lives.

Kila an Movis is an Enforcer. Gods-gifted with an extraordinary ability to piece together physical clues, he's entrusted with protecting the vulnerable from crime. But his habit of expressing his opinions a little too freely earned him a nine-year banishment to the wilds, and he's determined to be more circumspect upon his return to the trade city.

When someone close to Cianne dies and Kila is called out to investigate the scene, her world and his collide once more. His long absence hasn't driven the memory of him from her heart, but the woman he encounters isn't the child he remembers.

Unwilling to trust anyone else, Cianne enlists Kila's help. The deeper they dig, the more secrets they unearth about her father, the other House members, and her entire life—until Cianne discovers that House Staerleigh is built on a foundation of lies.

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