

Chapter Four

Ian kept his footing easily despite the dark, and the soft soil underfoot. He moved instantly away from the curve of the tower, in the direction he'd seen Ariannah take.

There had been only a short lag between her exit and his, but he was unable to locate any movement in the twilight ahead, which made him nervous. He passed among the exotic plants as quickly as he could without sounding like a bolting horse, casting about for any sign of the princess.

He was almost convinced he'd lost her already as he neared the edge of the palace grounds, which were poorly illuminated by starlight and the final sliver of a waning moon, and found himself at the palace wall. Just as he moved out of the trees into the short clearing at its base, he saw a slight silvery shimmer directly across on the face of the great stone wall, at its foot. Even as he focused on it, it disappeared, as if it had never existed.

He quickly crossed to where it had been, stretching out his hand, expecting cold stone. Instead, the stone shimmered at his touch, and his hand passed through, encountering no resistance. He withdrew his hand, and the moment his fingers lost contact, the shimmer disappeared. He fought the urge to stand and marvel at the illusion, and

forced himself to walk forward through it.

He immediately wished he'd taken the time to feel for the size of the opening he was entering as his forehead smacked into a low arch where the stone was far from illusory. He clamped a hand over the damage, and his teeth against a moan of pain, staggering into a narrow foyer lit by a single charm-globe. Flecks of light danced merrily in his vision, and his head hummed angrily, but his senses were just clear enough to make out a small iron-bound stone door before him. Rather than stand still and risk losing Ariannah for good, he twisted the latch, and pushed, feeling nauseous and light-headed.

The door swung easily and silently aside, despite its immense thickness. Ian's vision cleared quickly, and beyond the door he could see a short passage that ended at what was obviously the outer edge of the palace wall. Through the low arch, he could see the trunk of a tree, and beyond that, a roadway. He pushed the door closed behind him, and proceeded out, ducking lower than was necessary, and still holding his forehead.

Once outside, he turned and looked for the passage he'd just left. There was no sign of it, only the implacable stone of the wall. He reached out again, and the wall shimmered again where he touched it. Just checking, he

thought to himself. Casting about quickly, he grabbed several fallen twigs from a small pile below a sheltering scrub tree, and arranged them in a lattice pattern, geometric and recognizable.

He then looked up at the crenellations along the top of the wall, where large charm-lamps cast light into the night, and saw the shadows of palace guards moving along their watch-routes. He was shielded from their view by the over-hanging branches of the same tree, so he took a few moments to rub the swollen knot on his brow while he looked about for any sign of the princess.

He saw nothing at first, but then movement caught his eye near the head of the Queen's Road. He couldn't be sure, but a shadow moved among shadows through a break in the hedge along the opposite side of the road, masked from view of those atop the wall. Ian waited until he could see no movement above, and then darted across the road into the sheltering shadows, moving quickly but quietly in chase.

He passed along between the tall hedge and a chest-high stone wall which bordered estate grounds stretching away from the palace, soon reaching the end of the narrow trail at the side of the Queen's Road, just below the gates. He stood in the final shadows, watching the palace traffic moving past. Wagons, carriages, and pedestrians

made their various ways about, and he looked for the princess.

Charm-lamps pushed the dark aside along the wide street, their blue-white glow haloed by buzzing insects, and Ian recognized Ariannah's dark hair and cape moving purposefully, confidently away toward town. He eased surreptitiously into the flow, moving as quickly as possible to close the distance, but leaving enough room for comfort against a potential backwards glance.

Ariannah moved quickly down through the city, passing again through the high streets all the way down to the waterfront. She left the Queen's Road near where they had disembarked ages ago that afternoon, along a street that followed the curve of the harbor. The surroundings became rapidly less pristine than what Ian had seen of Myr-Istia so far. The buildings were less aesthetically pleasing, and pressed closer together. The street-lamps were further apart, but, like everywhere else, windows were thrown wide to the mild night breezes. The sights and smells were a frenetic jumble, and everywhere walls of vines and flower masked the decay.

They passed several ale-houses, where laughter, smoky charm-light, and not a few intoxicated patrons spilled out into the street. Just a bit further on, they came to

another of these, and Ian, a discreet distance behind, watched as Ariannah strode up onto the verandah, and in through the open doors. Ian followed, moving out of the street and up the steps, pausing outside the doorway as several men exited, deep in debate about the size of ale-mugs relative to cost three streets over. He debated just waiting outside, as the boisterous slurring faded behind him into the din from inside in front of him. Through the doors, he could see that the interior was well-lit, but crowded, and there seemed to be enough commotion going on to protect an unobtrusive entrance. He spotted Ariannah making her way to the bar on the far wall, her back to the entrance, waving at someone.

Ian entered with a measured stride, obliquely scanning for a good, out-of-the-way observation spot. He pushed for the far wall on the right, arriving at a small, high table that had come empty seconds before he reached it. He pushed the stool back up against the wall, and sat on it, shielded from full view of the bar by a ceiling support pillar.

The room was high-ceilinged, with a long bar running the length of the back wall, and the strange mix of patrons immediately caught Ian's attention. While the majority was certainly what you'd expect of an establishment of this class (low and coarse long-shoremen and ship-crew), there

were also a fair amount of younger, fairer people, who seemed out of place to Ian. He could see that Ariannah had met finally with a small group of these at the bar, and was deep in animated conversation.

An ample server emerged from the roiling mass of the crowd in front of Ian's table, her damp blond hair hanging tiredly over one side of her empty gaze.

"You'll have?"

"Queen's triple-x, if you please."

"Twelve quire."

"Twelve quire? I pay that in Southward. Isn't it made around here?"

The woman sighed, gaze focusing resentfully on Ian.

"No, sweets. It's made across town, miles from here, so, twelve quire or order something else."

Ian rummaged through his pockets, and produced the appropriate coins. The server disappeared without another word.

Ian resumed his observations. He watched the room move, and sought its pulse, what was odd about it, even as he kept a watchful eye on Ariannah, presiding benignly over her group.

It actually only took him a few seconds to figure it out. The coolers standing at all corners, the bar-keep's

watchful gaze, the limited interaction between the two types of societal strata, everything said step-down. At least, that's what they called them in Southward. A place where the nobility's youth rubbed shoulders with what they considered the dangerous element, outside of the parental eye, and hopeful working-class rough-necks sought the distant hope of extraction from the hard life.

Once it dawned on him, Ian had to laugh. Head trauma or no, he'd have nailed this place without even going inside back in Southward. This place, these events, had really thrown him. Time to wake up, he thought. Even if there was no way out at this point, perhaps, at least, there was some way to strengthen his position.

The server passed by, depositing a heavy, ceramic mug of ale on the table without slowing in her trajectory through the crowd. Ian grabbed it and took a deep draught. The earthy bite eased the still throbbing knot on his forehead, and he returned his full attention to the source of his present difficulties.

Ariannah had moved down the bar slightly, leaving her entourage for deeper waters. She was now juggling conversations with several different men, each one vying for her attention. She seemed immune to their intent, deflecting their advances with sly looks and a

contradictory air. It was a perfect blend of engaged detachment that seemed only intensify their interest.

Across the room, a trio took to a small, raised stage. There were shouts of encouragement from the crowd, and Ian glanced over as three young men, one with a pipe, another with a guitar, and a third with a herder's drum began to play a sailor's jump. When his attention returned to Ariannah, he was not surprised to see her twirling, although there was something much more suggestive than in any previous twirling he'd seen.

The men around her clapped in time. Ian rolled his eyes as she drew one of the men slightly away from the bar and twirled around him, her hand tracing the base of his neck as she moved, dancing away as he reached for her, his gaze fixed at a point that was definitely below hers. This brought her into the arms of another, who she favored with full body press before swirling out of his grasp. Ian put his half-empty mug down with a loud clunk and put a hand to his forehead, squeezing his temples in frustration. This just keeps on getting better, he thought.

It was because of this that he missed whatever catalyst it was that touched off the ensuing altercation. As he looked up, he saw that the princess's initial dance partner had a hand on her upper arm, and the expression on

his face said that he was not at all pleased. She, in turn, was glaring at him, and pulled her arm out of his grasp. In one fluid motion, she snagged her drink off of the bar (probably purchased by this same man) and tossed the contents into his face. He spluttered for a moment, then lunged for her. She side-stepped him easily, the look on her face indignant, and without fear. He stood on impulse, torn between the dictates of caution and self-preservation, and those more recently imposed upon him by current provocation.

The man's forward motion carried him into the arms of another of Ariannah's admirers. A curse, a shove, and then the entire area dissolved into chaos. Ian could see the princess managing to work her way to the edge of the melee unscathed, and held his place, unsure of what to do.

It was at that moment that to Ian, the whole scene lensed, at once brightening and darkening at the same time, contrasts scaling immediately inward toward a central focus point.

It was centered on a man moving through of the crowd, non-descript save for the sense of purpose in his stride. Ian thought at first notice that he was a cooler intent on restoring order, as there were several of these moving in, but Ian caught a glint of silver held close, and mostly

concealed. His intent traveled along a line evident from Ian's vantage point, directly toward the Princess, and Ian's pulse stuttered in alarm. The man closed the distance between himself and Ariannah seemingly without resistance, though the crowd around him still raucously contended with itself, the fighting continuing unabated. Ian started forward, but knew that he was far too far away, with too many intervening bodies to do anything at all. His panic escalated as the man neared Ariannah, who was watching the fighting with a slight smile on her face.

Ian cast about for anything that might help him. He could just hear Buchard now,

"Within mere hours of being appointed her Protector, you allowed the Princess to be slaughtered amidst the most common of common folk. In a tavern, no less. Off with his head."

His eyes came to rest on his ale-mug. Though part of him knew it was pointless, he grasped it and turned, hurling it with everything he had. Amazingly, everyone around him was intent on the conflict near the bar, so no one seemed aware of the throw.

He knew from the inception of the idea it was impossible. An open ended cylinder is a poor missile. Forget one half-filled with liquid. But what else was

there?

The mug cruised along above the heads of the crowd, impossibly upright, yet evidently a perfect throw. It rotated slowly on its vertical axis, handle waxing and waning from view. A fine mist of ale drifted from the lip of the mug as it coursed through the air. Ian could see that despite the equanimity of the mug, the line of the throw was off. Though it was close, he could see it would miss, and his heart sank. The man was almost directly behind Ariannah now, who was still unaware of this closing threat.

His anger at the injustice of it all turned to incredulity, as the mug smashed against the side of the man's head, shards of ceramic and ale-foam exploding outward, as its trajectory proved true after all. The man pitched sideways at the impact, disappearing into the conflicting crowd to measure his length on the tavern floor. Ian saw the blade soar free of his grasp, and disappear also. Ariannah covered her head with her arms too late to avoid a drenching. An approving roar rose from all onlookers, who of course had no idea of the import of the occurrence beyond the fact that it was extremely entertaining.

Ian stood rooted to the spot, unbelieving. Talk about

your last minute reprieve. He'd have sworn a blood oath that the throw was off. Then relief poured through him, and his knees wavered. He sagged back into his chair, as Ariannah's friends came to cluster around her as she sputtered in anger at the dousing, tossing back her damp tresses in disgust. The bar-keep's crew finally dispersed the various combatants, propelling several toward the door, including Ariannah's initial attacker. The other remained on the floor, down for a good while, it looked like. Ian saw in a moment that it was time to leave, as it looked that Ariannah had lost the taste for this particular locale, and was heading toward the door as well, with a number of her companions in tow. He waited until she passed outside, and then moved quickly to follow, stopping just inside the entrance to evaluate the Princess's progress. She argued for a moment with several of her friends before continuing down the street with two of them. Ian exited the tavern, and followed at a discreet distance.

It soon became apparent that Ariannah had soured on the entire expedition, as her route was direct and expedient, taking her back toward the palace with only two stops, the homes of her companions, both daughters of nobility living in close proximity to the palace. At the latter of these, Ian was afforded the opportunity to pass

by, choosing to precede the princess to the secret entrance. There was a moment of panic as he tried to locate his marker, but he found it quickly, and swept it into anonymity with his foot. He passed through the passage and door. He decided to just assume that Her Royal Highness was calling it quits for the night, and to make for her suites and await her return. His head still ached, and his body was reminding him that he'd had no trauma-free rest in a very long time. There was another moment of panic when he arrived at the base of the tower below her window, and realized that he had no idea how to get in without going around to the foyer and the...lift-thingy. After close inspection of the tower wall, he realized that there were strategic hand and foot-holds in the decorative stone that would allow ascent. He did this, and threw his tired form onto the very couch from which the whole adventure had started mere hours (eons) ago. The single charm-globe still burned, so he put his forearm across his eyes, and waited.

Only a few minutes went by until he heard soft sounds at the window. He kept his breathing deep and even as her footsteps neared. He fought down a smile as the smell of ale wafted along before her. He heard her cape fall in a heap on the floor, and then he felt the impact of her foot in his ribs; a half-hearted expression of irritation on her

part. He acted as though he was starting from a deep sleep, complete with a slurred "Huh? What?", and opened his eyes. She was certainly a sight.

"What happened to you?" He asked, in mock concern.

She glared at him.

"I'm sure you'd like to know. Therefore, I'm not going to tell you. And, get out. Your rooms are next door. I'll call for you when your presence is required."

"But--."

"If you ask me any more questions, I will have you thrown into the Channel."

Ian clamped his teeth against a laugh.

"Very well."

And he turned and left, proceeding down the hall a few paces to the next door, and entered what were evidently his chambers. Slightly less appointed than Ariannah's, but still luxurious. He waved a hand over the few globes alight, and fell onto a couch. The next instant, he was asleep.