

Chapter 5

Ian swam up from the depths of sleep with lazy strokes, reluctant to leave the comfort of the darkness. Inarticulate patterns of vibration resolved into distinct rapping sounds as he neared the surface. There was a muted click and a slight change in air pressure as he broke the plane between asleep and awake. Words came out without any forethought, and his eyes opened quite against his will.

"Hey! Go away!" He slurred.

The flood of morning light through several un-shuttered windows made focus difficult, and the figure entering the room through the now open door was briefly anonymous, a smudge in motion against a background of ill-defined shape and bright light. But clarity came quickly, and the smudge resolved itself into a curvy blond girl in a close-fit tan dress moving toward his couch, carrying a covered tray. She was pretty in an almost obtrusive way, and showed no hesitation in her manner. Ian was temporarily unsure if he'd said what he just said, or just thought it. He decided it didn't really matter, given that he was awake now, and she was already in.

"Alright, please come in, then. You are?"

The girl put the tray on the table next to the couch, and smiled at him, removing the cover to display the steaming cup

resting upon it. The contents were dark and the smell the same. Ian chose to ignore it.

"I am Eya. Ariannah is my mistress, and I her maid. She summons you to breakfast with the King and the Prince. Korey waits without to escort you. I will turn out your chambers."

Ian looked around at the pristine condition of his untouched suite. He hadn't even made it to the actual bed, located in an adjoining room. He didn't think he'd touched more than two objects since he'd entered the room not nearly long enough ago. He blinked.

"Yes, I can see I've messed the place a bit."

"She was most emphatic that you arrive on time, sir."

"Can I wash my face at least?" He asked, swinging his legs onto the floor and sitting up. He rubbed his eyes with his palms.

"She said that she imagined your growth of beard would inspire confidence. Besides, she instructed that you be her representative at breakfast, since she is fatigued from her long travels, and requires more rest." There was the slightest of pauses, "And now time is scarce, if you are to arrive when requested."

His gaze returned to her. Her hair had fallen across one eye, reminding him of the barmaid the night before, but it made

her look not tired, but coy. There was mirth in her gaze, and something else that might have been bright interest. She tossed her head slightly, and then both eyes were on him. Her smile widened, but any apparent meaning in it broke against the depth of Ian's fatigue and scattered like smoke. He sighed.

"Of course she did." He ran a hand through his hair, in an attempt to tame any wayward tufts, and rose to his feet, realizing he still had his boots on. "You said Korey is waiting outside?"

She nodded.

"Well, I'll be off, then." He said, moving toward the door. "I expect this mess to be taken care of upon my return."

"Yes, master Ian. As you desire."

"And bring some fruit. Oh, and get some...uh..."

He was moving toward the door, but stopped, puzzled. He turned back to Eya.

"When did she speak with you? Is she already awake?"

Eya made no hesitation in her reply.

"I am her maid. She need not wake to give her preference. I hear her whether she sleeps or wakes, or I the same."

Ian flipped one hand aside in a dismissive wave, hiding his complete lack of understanding of her statement with forward motion.

"Yes, I thought as much. Carry on." He continued toward the door, opened it, and passed through, still considering the whole transaction, when Korey caught his elbow and hurried him down the hall toward the lift.

"Master Ian, sir, the stone is safe!" Korey breathed in proudly conspiratorial tones. "I have done what you asked."

"What?" replied Ian, dragged unceremoniously from the recent past to the present.

"The stone. I hid it in the --."

"Stop! I told you not to tell me!" hissed Ian, clapping a hand over Korey's mouth as recollection arrived not a moment too soon. "If you can't follow instruction, then I have no use for you."

Korey slapped his own hand over Ian's as his eyes widened in realization of his mistake. Ian clamped down on a laugh before it could rise anywhere near his throat, and pulled Korey's hand aside, retrieving his own as well.

"Sorry! Sorry, I'm so sorry, master --."

"Yes, yes. Speak no more. Your errant tongue will be the end of us both. Just take me where I need to go, alright?"

Korey nodded abashedly, and in another moment they were in the lift, and descending (or so Ian's stomach declared) toward the base of the tower.

They left the lift when the doors opened on the foyer, and passed through the outer doors into the bright morning light of the gardens, passing quickly along the path without conversation toward the castle. Korey led him inside, turned left, and proceeded mid-way down the high-ceilinged main hallway of the southern wing, then up three successive flights of stairs. Ian was sorely missing the ease of the tower lift by the time they gained the last landing, but Korey gave no rest, and turned south again along the highest gallery railing, until they reached two enormous, open doors on the walled side that led into a large dining room.

The far side of the room was almost entirely windowed, and looked out above the top of the castle wall. All of the windows were thrown open, and sea breezes redolent with the smell of flowers in bloom blew softly in across the sills. The downward slope of the city to the ocean was visible as well.

The room, like so many others Ian had seen so far, was beautifully appointed and sun-lit from the open windows and sky-lights in the ceiling. Sun streamed down and across a huge, rectangular dining table made of some highly polished, dark metal. It was surrounded by twenty or so high-backed stone chairs with dense, red cushions. At the head of the table sat

Jared, listening somewhat disinterestedly to a dark-haired, compact woman sitting to his right. Next to her, a younger version of Jared held a fork out before him, tipping it this way and that for no apparent reason, studying it intently. Servants bustled to and fro through an adjacent doorway, setting the table and bringing covered dishes to a long side-table in anticipation of the meal. Korey did not follow Ian into the room, but stopped to one side of the entry, and held his station.

Jared noticed his entry, and beckoned him. A server rushed forward, and drew the chair on Jared's immediate left away from the table, and bowed his head toward Ian, a clear indication that he should sit.

As he neared his seat, Jared hailed him.

"Ah, good morning, Ian lad. I'm glad you could join us. I wanted the opportunity to introduce you to the rest of the family before matters of state rule the day." Jared didn't rise from his chair, but the man and woman flanking him did, looking at him with interest. He continued.

"This is my son, Peittra. He is six, no, seven..., is it seven, Pietra? Yes, seven years Ariannah's senior."

Pietra's face tightened slightly at this equivocation, but smoothed almost instantly. He extended his hand across the table, and addressed Ian.

"Well met, young man. I hope my sister's reckless choices haven't caused you too much trouble. She's at that age, you know." The woman next to Pietra harrumphed at the mention of Ariannah. Ian took the man's hand, noting the limp grip as he shook it, and kept his expression neutral. The man couldn't be more than a few years older than Ian. The political landscape swam into focus. He smiled raffishly, dropping Pietra's hand.

"Well met, Pietra." Ian responded, pointedly not adding an honorific such as "prince", or "lord". "Your sister is spirited, sure, but I find that those destined to shape the world usually are. I've met more than a few in my time." He turned his smiling gaze from Pietra's slowly forming frown, and turned it toward the woman next to him. "And who is this charming creature at your side?"

Pietra got no chance to introduce the woman, because she extended her hand at once, and spoke with a ferocious intensity that had Ian not anticipated, may have caused him to flinch.

"I am Beatrice, heir to the Queen's role, should anything happen to Ariannah. I hope you are a capable man, as her continued safety is crucial. I have no desire to carry such a

weight, though I will if I must. Oh, and I am also Pietra's wife." Pietra put his arm around the woman's shoulder and adopted a conscientious expression at this last. "That girl has no sense of the responsibilities resting on her shoulders. We are all at her mercy, and I certainly hope you can influence her course." Ian nodded gravely, and then took her hand, leaning a little farther across the table than he anticipated to place a quick kiss on the back of her hand. Her skin smelled strongly of lavender and ambition, and her words belied her intent in a palpable way. Ian wondered briefly at what this "Queen's role" business meant, but thought that bluntly asking about it would weaken his position. He'd investigate later, through other channels.

"Most pleased to meet you, Beatrice. I will double my vigilance, as inspired as I am by your familial loyalty." His back protested as he drew himself up, and then sighed with relief as he sat in his designated chair.

Pietra and Beatrice sat as well, their eyes still on him. Ian observed via his peripheral awareness that Jared's expression and vague smile had not changed at all through this interchange, but that there was something going on deeper in his observant gaze. He reminded himself that he would be wise not to pigeon-hole Jared based on his limited, superficial interactions

with him so far. He took a fraction of a moment to savor the feeling of being fully, completely back in the game, tired or no, and then spoke again.

"Many thanks to all of you for your confidence. I will do my best to see that it is justified." He turned toward Jared just as the King spoke.

"Now that introductions are done, let us eat. I can feel the press of obligation even through all this stone. Family meals are so rare." He sighed. "Would that Ariannah could be here. She seems so energetic in foreign lands, and upon on the sea, but she spends the days in her chambers while at home." Ian thought that below the absent regret in Jared's tone there was the tickle of something else, but was distracted by the rumble in his stomach as servers appeared at each elbow, and food appeared in rising stacks on the expansive ceramic plates. Across from him, Ian saw Pietra pick up his fork again, tip it from side to side as he inspected it, and then place it on the far side of the adjacent place setting. He then took the fork from that place setting, and inspected it closely, as well. Apparently satisfied with it, he speared large piece of fruit, and commenced eating. Ian followed suit, and forked a small bit of some unidentifiable meat into his mouth. It was apparently straight from heaven, and all thoughts of mental maneuvering

disappeared as he waded into the food before him. It actually took him a few moments to realize that he had been addressed by Pietra again, so lost in the feast as he was. He put down his fork with something that momentarily bordered on anger.

"Pardon?" He said, keeping his tone even.

"I said, I'm curious what you feel you can add to the security already in place around my sister? Buchard is a decorated commander, and his men are hand-picked for her detail. They have kept her safe her entire life. I defer to my father in his choice to add your..., umm, services to our list of precautions, nor do I question it. Father, you don't mind if I ask...?"

Jared didn't even look up from his meal, only waved his hand in dismissal.

"Well, I thought I'd already illustrated that, even though my participation was accidental, to be sure. Commander Buchard is most certainly a formidable man, and his men no less so." Ian stroked his stubble, in apparent consideration, but mostly because the seductive alternative was to pick up his fork and resume eating. "I have only a lifetime of experience, and undiluted focus to add. Buchard is charged with many duties, and his men the same. I only have one." He hoped this rhetoric was enough, and he'd be allowed to eat again, but alas, no.

"And that is?"

Ian allowed his pause to spin out for a theatrical beat. He then furrowed his brow to convey his seriousness, extended all the fingers of one hand, and then placed his fingertips dramatically upon the table's surface to the right of his plate.

"Her."

In the following beat, Jared paused from his meal, coughed slightly behind a closed hand, and then resumed eating. Pietra and Beatrice stared at him with two different variations on a theme of dubious appraisal. He grabbed his fork and tore into the meal before him, vowing to pack a few bites in before the inevitable response. Pietra didn't let him down.

"Yes, I appreciate your commitment, but, my sister has her own detail, our kingdom's most decorated swordsman among them. Those men don't really have any other duties. My sister is attended at all times, by soldiers who were assigned to her while she was still an infant. I don't see how --."

Ian swallowed quickly, and cut him off.

"You mean, of course, the men who knew nothing of her whereabouts during the events leading to our chance meeting, and the same who did not arrive until that matter was concluded?" He said this in an even tone, but darkened his gaze to a reproachful glare for effect. "Her men run shifts, correct? None

of them are with her at all times?" This last was complete conjecture on his part, but seemed a good guess in the moment. His instincts were confirmed in Pietra's response.

"Yes, but, I don't see how --." Ian saw Beatrice's eyes narrow at this last interchange, and imagined that he had just moved from potential obstacle to tangible obstacle in her estimation. Ian forged on, relishing the irony. She was beginning to believe that he might actually be what he purported to be. Oh, if only he could mentally pat himself on the back, talk, and eat at the same time. Sadly, he could only manage the first two.

"So you've said. Twice. I do, however. I am merely adding yet another level of security to a well-established system. More vigilance can't hurt, wouldn't you say? It would appear that your father agrees, as well." He finished, and immediately regretted it, as it appeared to interrupt Jared's disengagement in the conversation. However, Jared's interjection was not at all what Ian expected.

"So, Ian lad, what does your father do?"

Pietra and Beatrice both swung their heads in tandem to look at Jared, whose gaze was wholly intent on Ian now, and then their eyes swung back along the line of Jared's intent to Ian

again. Ian considered and rejected several lies in the space of a moment, and then decided to go with the truth.

"I do not know, Sire. I do not recall him, and my mother refused to indulge my interest before her passing, God rest her. My Uncle mentioned that he was a spokesman for a small trading company, but would say no more on the matter. My Uncle Hoshi is a man of few words, but he is wide of mind. He raised me, and is more my father than the other."

Jared considered this for a moment, and then nodded shortly, returning his attention to his meal as he spoke.

"Perhaps I may meet him someday, your Uncle."

Ian nodded, and his response left his lips before he had fully considered it.

"Aye, Sire, perhaps. He still lives, and toils in his fields along the northern Ares at Widmarke."

Curse, and curse again. Why not just draft a map to his past for these folk? He was again knocked out of the game, and by nothing more than an innocuous question. He viciously steeled himself, and sought for damage control.

"Nearer Tatia's Crossing, on the eastern shore, but still lining the pockets of the Widmarke Town Council." Two miles of misdirection was all he could conjure in the moment.

Ian saw the corners of Beatrice's mouth twitch upward slightly into a tiny smile. Pietra's frown remained undiminished, and Jared gave no response. What a Mayfaire swing this breakfast had been. He thought it might be best to retreat for now, and fully evaluate the ramifications of his most recent stupidity.

He pushed back from the table, and stood. His stomach growled at this, but thankfully without auditory accompaniment. He bowed to Jared.

"Sire, I hope you will allow me to return to my charge. Your commission makes me loathe to be separate from her, given your expressed confidence."

Jared looked up at him, and smiled with sudden, radiant warmth.

"Of course. My thanks for attending this meal. Give my daughter my regards."

"Yes, Sire." It was all Ian could muster in the face of Jared's reaction. Ian made a short bow to Pietra and Beatrice, as he turned away, saying,

"Honored, and well met. May I be of service to you, as well.", and he hurried toward the open doors.

"Ian." Jared called his name. Ian stopped and turned, questioningly. The monarch's gaze was steady, and wholly focused

on him. He felt his heart beat faster, for no reason he could give.

"Have Korey take you to see my Treasurer before you return to your post. There is the matter of your compensation yet to be taken care of."

Ian again considered a number of manufactured responses in the face of Jared's attention, but opted for a simple acquiescence.

"Aye, Sire. I will."

Korey fell in step behind him as they passed through the doorway and turned back the way they had come, and then moved without hesitation into the lead.

Gravity and preoccupation stole Ian's awareness of the stairs, and the latter indeed the entire journey to his destination. He only knew he was still in the castle when Korey's abrupt halt before an anonymous stone door in an atypically dim hallway broke him from his reverie.

"The office of the Treasury, Sir Ian." Korey said, standing aside to give Ian access to the doorway.

"What, here?"

"Yes."

"Do I knock, or what?"

"Just enter. Word has preceded us."

Ian looked dubiously at Korey, but Korey stared back stoically at him, assured of the way of things in his world. That was good enough for Ian, and he pulled the door open, and entered the room beyond.

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It was slightly smaller than the main room of his own quarters, gray stone walls unadorned except for a single large tapestry embroidered with Jared's crest. It hung on the back wall of the room, to the left of the only window. The window itself was shut, and also draped with a sheer fabric hung from an iron rod above, allowing light, but no view. The tapestry, however, dominated the room, and was large enough for Ian to make out the detail for the first time. He saw that the upper left quadrant of the crest was actually the same depiction of sea-dogs surging through heavy seas that adorned Ariannah's door, with a white background. The top right was a field of red with three black wavy lines on it, and the bottom left was an uninterrupted field of red. The bottom right was a black bird with a serpent clutched in one talon, also against a white background. His interest in the possible interpretation of the symbolism disappeared as a slight cough, and an "Ah, there you

are." drew his attention to the compact, fastidious man sitting behind the desk lined with stacks of papers. Their eyes met, and Ian felt a small burst of joyous satisfaction, as he instantly read the man and his place in Jared's universe, and saw that not everything was different in this new world. The cut of the man's clothing was severe, but the cloth was of the finest weave, and the embroiderer's silk glowed richly in the Sari tradition. The desk was tallow-wood, and reflected Ian's image along the burnished planes facing him. He noticed the carpet under it, and swallowed appreciatively.

"You must be, ah...," The man made a quick and obviously un-necessary consultation with a hand-written notation at the base of the paper towers. "the new, ah, Protector?" The rheumy, yet still sharp hazel eyes tracked quickly from the paper to meet with Ian's, though Ian sensed he still did not have all of the man's attention. The man continued without waiting for a response.

"Protector. Yes. I'm not sure what that means." The gray-haired man pushed the paper distastefully aside. "Your duties are not specifically described here. While I understand that you fulfill some function, I think that I will need some clarification from the King before I can assign you a rank and a pay-scale. Perhaps you could come back later in the week."

Ian saw the paper move from its cast-away position on the desk into one of the paper towers as if by sleight of hand, as the man's eyes dropped easily and unhurriedly from Ian to more papers scattered upon the desk.

"Good day." He said in dismissal, and idly shuffled the papers before him. Ian indulged an inward smirk.

"I think I can clarify the issue for you, without the need to consult the King." He said. He watched the man's gaze move quite slowly from his hands back to Ian, his brows arched questioningly.

"Pardon?"

Ian remained expressionless.

"I believe you heard what I said."

He saw the storm of indignation quickly brewing in the man's expression, and decided to pre-empt the tirade. This man reminded him quite strongly of Amil's chief money-counter. Not physically, but in every other way. Ian had bested that one easily. Except, of course, for the bit where it had fallen completely and utterly apart. He hoped this one would stop at easy. One could hope. He raised his arm, palm outward, in a gesture for silence.

"Yes, yes. Just stop." He said, dropping his hand to grasp a paper jutting askew from the middle of one of the stacks of

paper on the desk. He pulled it quickly with a flourish from the stack, without disturbing or toppling the stack, and brought it instantly to view. His heart leaped as he saw the columns of numbers he had expected, and wasted no time in interpretation. The pattern was quite clear, and he knew he was fine. "Ortly's dual-entry, and the Kibaster short-hand reduction. I would have thought that the treasurer of the richest kingdom in the world would invest in a more complex form. Still, graft is graft." He delighted in the man's instant widening of the eyes, and the clenching of his fingers upon the papers still in his grasp. The man's mouth opened in what was almost certainly indignant protest, but Ian cut him off once again with a wave.

"Recognized, named, and easily explained to those who need know. I'm not here for that. I'm here at the King's bid."

The man's mouth closed slowly, and he looked at Ian with all of his attention now. Caught in the full focus of the man's attention, Ian knew in an instant that he had a tiger by the tail. Amil's man had alerted the tiger (Amil, and Pice by proxy), but Ian now saw that this man was a tiger in his own right, and while he would most certainly get the accommodations he sought from Jared's treasurer, he was in danger if he were to ever let go of this man's tail. It made him tired just thinking about it. He should at least know an enemy's name.

"And you are?" He asked.

The man composed himself with little external effort.

"I am Alexius. Treasurer to the Crown. Welcome to Myr-Istia, latest whim of Her Highness. Shall we end this audience quickly?"

"Yes, please."

"Soldier of the Crown, first-class. Extended duty, and hazard pay."

Ian raised his eyebrows, looked off to the side, and then back.

"What does Buchard make?" He asked.

"Pardon?"

"What does Buchard make?" He repeated, enjoying the negotiation despite the danger.

"Are you saying you should command the same pay as the highest ranking officer in the kingdom?"

"No. Of course not. Double it. I know you can cloak the expenditure in crop degradation, or harbor dredging. Or both. Or neither. It's the power of the pen. Your pen, to be exact."

"You realize that this will not last, don't you? It's silly of me to ask, because I know you do. Are you really willing to put yourself in this position?"

Ian laughed a short little bark.

"The future is uncertain. Both yours, and mine. Let's go with this, for now."

The man shrugged, and then waved both hands out away from himself, in a feigned gesture of indifference.

"Fine, pretender. You will receive what you want for now, right up until you cut your own throat, or someone cuts it for you. Leave me out of it, or I will ensure that your execution will accompany my own."

"Agreed." Ian turned to leave.

"Oh, yes, Protector, or whatever you are. Until such time as you are crushed under your own machinations, a word of advice. Pay attention to your duties. Myr-Isle will forgive the loss of capital, but not the loss of family."

Ian left without reply.

Korey again took the lead, with a backwards glance at him.

"Did you accomplish what you needed? He always makes me nervous."

Ian didn't immediately respond to the question, as he was still tossing around the Treasurer's last statement. It seemed strange that the man would offer any advice to someone who had so utterly turned the tables on him. Mayhap the man wished him to do the opposite, hoping for his dismissal or worse for non-

performance. However, there was something in the assertion that rang true, though he had no idea why this should be so. After a few more moments, he gave a mental shrug, letting the matter drop.

"Yes, I did. And, I got you a bump in pay, as well."

Korey looked quickly back at him, having turned away at his silence. His eyes were wide.

"Really?! That's amazi--."

Ian cut him off.

"Which I will manage and invest for you. You would just spend it."

Korey looked crestfallen.

"But--."

"No need to thank me. Your assistance is worth the additional burden."

"Oh. Well, thanks. I guess."

"I said there was no need."

They continued along for a few silent moments. Then Korey spoke again, face brightening over his shoulder.

"But I'll get it at some point?" He asked hopefully.

"Yes."

Korey sighed gratefully.

"Good. Thank y--."

"If the investments bear fruit. I'm smart, but I'm no magician."

"Oh."

A short while later they exited a hallway into the central part of the castle at the ground floor level.

Ian asked Korey where they were headed to next.

"The princess is awake, and has requested your presence."

"How do you know that? You were with me the whole time."

Korey shrugged.

"A runner came while you were with the Treasurer."

"Ah." Ian said, as they headed back toward the twin towers.

His stomach rumbled again.

"I don't suppose we could find any food along the way?"

Korey didn't even bother to look over his shoulder as he replied.

"The princess was emphatic in her dispatch. She is ready to leave, but cannot until you are there to accompany her."

"So no food, and we are to leave right away."

"That was her message."

"So where are we going?"

"That was not in her message."

Ian sighed.