

Chapter 7

Two soldiers flanked Durkis as he exited the tram. Two preceded Ariannah and Ian, the rest of the guard behind them. They made their way toward a large alcove set into the center of the rear wall, where several lift doors awaited. Pale blue glowing icons to the left of each door obviously indicated destination served, provided you knew what they meant. Everyone else did, of course, and Durkis and his attendants chose the lift on the left, and the two guards leading Ariannah and Ian chose the one on the far right. The tram terminal disappeared as the door closed behind them, and Ian felt the now familiar sensation of upward movement.

He looked down at his throbbing hand, still gripped by his other one, and saw that the bandage was now so soaked with blood that occasional droplets spattered on the floor of the lift. The pain was constant and intense, and he felt light-headed, struggling to keep his mind clear and thinking. From beside him, he heard Ariannah's voice. The strange tone in it was enough to turn his gaze from his hands to her face, though the effort required more from him than anticipated. Her eyes met his, and the intensity in them galvanized him, helping him to restore his waning ability to focus.

"We are almost there. The First can provide you some relief. Stay with me."

Her tone reminded him of that tiny moment in her room before their trip to Market, where she had sounded...real, for lack of a better word. And the other moment, where she had described her purpose in attending the Market. The *real* her, or maybe it was just his vain hope. He'd certainly had enough of the twirling idiot and the crafty brat. Could there be something else there? Of course there was. But whether it was authentic, or another veil to accomplish something, who knew? Not he.

"I'm here. Have to say I'm not enjoying it, though." Even to his own ears, his voice sounded rough and strange.

"No, I can see that. But...thank you. Thank you for what you did."

Ian waited for a qualifying statement, a clarification that would diminish or dilute the simplicity of her sentiment, but none came. Only silence as the lift pressed upward.

After a few more silent moments, Ian felt the deceleration and the ease to rest as the lift reached its destination. The doors slid open onto a now familiar single hall ending at a wooden door.

Ariannah put a light hand on Ian's shoulder and gentled him into forward motion, speaking to the surrounding soldiers as she did so.

"Thank you for your valor today. Please return to your barracks. "

The men bowed their heads in unison in reply, staying in the lift as he and the princess exited, the doors sliding shut behind them.

They moved down the hall to the door and Ariannah raised her hand to knock, though Ian got the impression that her emphasis was on the raising of her hand, rather than the follow-through, the delivery of impact. The door swung open on the First's chambers before her hand contacted the wooden surface, though this time the old man was at the opposite end of the room, struggling intently to loop a long metal coil around a glassine bladder.

"Uncle." Ariannah greeted the old man as she led Ian into his chambers. The First looked up from his struggle, his urgency in his task fading quickly as his focus shifted from it to them. After a moment, he tossed the unrealized attunement of elements in his hands to the long cluttered table beside him, and moved toward them, intent on Ariannah.

"It's you. You. You look - ."

Ariannah interrupted.

"- look like my mother. Yes, Uncle, you say that every time you see me."

The First halted, brought up short by her statement. He reached then for the castaway items beside him, beginning his

struggle to combine them again before responding to her, turning away from her.

"- look awful, I was going to say, but I suppose I can see the resemblance you allude to. What do you require of me? Fix this, remedy that, I suppose."

Ariannah stopped, and Ian almost bumped into her, distracted as he was by the pain. He stopped, too.

"I apologize, Uncle. I came for help, as you say. A fix, and a remedy, both. My Protector has suffered an injury on my behalf. Are you willing to grant your aid?"

The First stopped his gyrations with the objects in his hands. He remained frozen for a moment or two more, then relaxed, looking downward.

"Remove the bandage. Have him stand there, at the table edge." He said, finally, once again putting aside the coil and bladder. "If he can't stand, then seat him on that stool." He said, indicating a single seat along the table edge. Ariannah did not hesitate, but again gently moved Ian from where he stood to the indicated seat, and pressed him down into it.

The First opened a drawer below the table edge, taking out two sheets of a thin, flexible metal, and then shut it with a bang. He then opened a second drawer a bit further down the table length. He drew out several shards of colored glass, and what looked like a flat cork pad. He then shut that drawer with

the same vehemence, and brought the items to where Ian sat, dumping them unceremoniously onto the accumulated clutter before him. The old man regarded Ian intently then, and spoke in a sepulchral voice.

"This will hurt quite a bit."

Ian let out a short breath, and then looked at Ariannah.

"I suppose this is the relief you spoke of earlier."

"Shush. He is being dramatic. Uncle, please." She cast a dark look at the First.

He lifted Ian's damaged hand with surprising gentleness, and unwrapped the soaked bandage. He then placed one of the metal sheets on the table, centering the still bleeding wound on the sheet. He placed the shards of glass on either side of his hand, also upon the metal sheet, and then placed the second sheet over the top of them, Ian's hand hidden now below the top sheet of metal. He pressed the cork pad atop all, and then spoke a single word.

"Mend."

To Ian, it seemed as if the arrow passed through his hand again, though this time the pain came at the first, and seemed to decline from agony to impact in a reverse curve. He twitched as he experienced the pain for the second time, but because the zenith came first and then diminished, it was over before he had a chance to fully experience it.

The First let off the pressure, lifting his hand as well as the cork pad. He then removed the top sheet of metal with his other hand, exposing Ian's hand. The colored glass had been transformed to white sand, arranged in the same approximate shape. A breeze through the open window moved some of the grains across the lower metal sheet as Ian lifted his hand, staring at the new pink skin where the ragged hole had been a few moments before. The pain was not entirely gone. A dull ache still muttered darkly behind the healed wound, but it was a fading ember of the previously consuming fire. He dropped his hand to his side and looked at the First.

"Thank you. I don't know what else to say."

The First didn't respond immediately, just picked up the bottom sheet of metal, allowing the sand to spill off onto the floor before he returned both sheets, as well as the cork pad to their points of origin, making sure to slam each drawer shut. Once accomplished, he turned to them, scowling.

"I suppose you'd like me to prepare some food for you, as well? Perhaps an afternoon omelet?"

Ian remembered his previous encounter with this volatile man, and spoke instinctively.

"Contained without hinge, lid, or key. Yet golden treasure inside to see."

The First's scowl resolved slowly to a reluctant smile. He shook his head, closing his eyes as he did so. He didn't say anything for a time, all his features coming to rest. Ian looked sidelong at Ariannah, who was intent on the First, a quizzical look on her face. He looked back at the First just in time to see him open his eyes, gaze intent upon Ian, and speak.

"I had not thought you anything more than random. Perhaps it was a misjudgment on my part. I suppose we shall see. An egg, by the way. Perhaps you could try a bit harder next time." The last was spoken dismissively, and he turned away from them, heading for the farther reaches of the room.

"Thank you, Uncle." Ariannah's tone was perfunctory, and she grasped Ian's arm, propelling him toward the door. There was no response from the First, who had taken the coil and bladder up again, and resumed his wrestling match. They passed out of the First's chambers into the short hall before the lift door.

Ian waited until they were standing before the lift door, Ariannah having pressed the left icon beside the door frame, illuminating it. They stood before the door, watching the icons above glow alternately from left to right. He spoke.

"So, was that typical, or momentous?" He said, staring up at the slowly marching icons.

"What?" She looked sideways at him, dipping her chin questioningly.

"Was that a typical interaction? Or not? I'm the stranger in a strange land, trying to establish an interpretive framework. That's my second experience with him. Given the diversity of input, it's difficult to hazard a conclusion."

She looked away.

"There is no typical. An audience with my Uncle is a gamble."

The icon march reached equilibrium, and the lift doors opened, and they entered, both turning instinctively toward the closing doors. Ariannah pressed the right icon, and the lift moved downward.

"You didn't know if he would help me?"

"He was the only one who could. I hoped today would be a good day."

There was silence for a while. Ian was the first to break it.

"Thank you for your gamble. I feel a lot better for it."

Ariannah didn't look at him, and he felt her effort at realignment in her next words.

"This doesn't change our arrangement, as far as I'm concerned."

He smiled slightly to himself, turning his face away from hers as he responded.

"If you say so, Highness."

He was surprised when she continued, thinking that the interchange had reached its end.

"Though I'm sure you're aware that your market value has increased dramatically, given what you pulled off today. Care to share how you were able to do that? Not that I am complaining. At all."

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Oh, do tell, do! Will my Protector not thrill the heart of his charge, illustrating for her how he grabbed her demise from the very air?" She grasped her hands before her bosom, eyes wide and voice high and chirpy.

"Pfffft. I certainly won't now." Ian said, rolling his eyes.

"I'll twirl. Will you tell me then?" There was laughter and self-deprecation in her eyes now, and Ian was alarmed to see how instantly attractive that made her. Being with her was like standing next to a zephyr, the potential for an instant change in direction bound up in her every movement.

"I'll pass. A hand to play another time."

"Gambling metaphor. No, two. Yawn. Suit yourself."

And then the lift reached the ground floor, the moment over. The doors slid open. Buchard stood before them, flanked by Durkis and another soldier. There was no expression on his face. He bowed to Ariannah, and spoke in a neutral tone, gesturing back over his shoulder toward the palace.

"The King would speak with you both. Please accompany me."

He turned on his heel, passing between the two behind him.

They moved aside to allow Ariannah and Ian to pass as well, and then fell in step.

The journey to the King was short, and silent. The lift had deposited them in the lobby of one of the tower bases, and they passed out through the gardens to the castle. They came to an unmarked and unassuming wooden door not far along the main hall. Buchard rapped twice, and then opened it without waiting for a reply.

It opened on a large room, brightly lit by floor to ceiling windows along one wall, which were open of course. It reminded him of Alexius's office, but it was better appointed, and there were more seating options. The desk was larger, and much less cluttered. Jared, however, did not sit behind it. He stood before one of the open windows, looking outward on the gardens, though he turned the moment they entered the room, his face clenched in a grimace of concern. He stepped forward, and clasped Ariannah in his arms, momentarily burying his face in her hair. He let her go almost immediately, and then looked at Ian.

"It would seem that I am in your debt yet again." His gaze was intense, and his eyes flashed with emotion, though Ian couldn't tell exactly which one. Ian broke eye contact, flustered.

"Sire, I-."

"Please don't interrupt. I have had several accounts of what transpired today. I need yours, however. Now. And precisely."

Ian brought his eyes up to meet Jared's again. There was a beat in which Ian debated his spin options. In the face of Jared's scrutiny, he opted once again for the truth, sacrificing whatever heroism lay inherent in his deed before the King's feet. He wished for the sense life made before these last few days as he did so.

"Sire. I saw a bird. Black. It dropped from the sun, as if to attack your daughter. I tried to intercept it. It became something else, and you know the rest. I can shed no light on it beyond that."

Jared stared at him for a few moments more, and Ian saw the ferocity in his eyes first temper, and then drain away. He abruptly stepped forward, and caught Ian in an embrace. From beside his right ear, Ian heard the King whisper,

"Thank you. You wonderful boy, thank you. Well done." And before Ian had a chance to even react, Jared stepped back and turned to Buchard.