

CHAPTER ONE

Nels

One

It was late, but Nels couldn't sleep. Worries concerning the morning's journey circled his skull until he grew to hate the look of his bed curtains. Worse, when he had slept he'd had terrible nightmares. He told himself that prognostication didn't run in his family line, and the dreams were meaningless. Nothing seemed to help. The nightmares fomented feelings of nameless dread until the need to flee his bedchamber in search of company was huge.

Captain Karpanen might still be awake, he thought.

A fire in the hearth cast his room in ruddy shadows. Grabbing a thick velvet robe, he crept through his private

parlour. Then he exited into the chilly darkness of the outer hallway--the door shutting behind him with a quiet click.

Placing a hand on the cold stone wall, he shuffled into darkness. The sound his feet against the palace's stately marble floors echoed down the hallway. There were no carpets. They had yet to be replaced---a casualty of one of Nels's pranks. Marble chilled his bare feet until it was painful to walk. His trailing fingers brushed against a painting almost sending it crashing to the floor, but he caught it and straightened the picture as best he could in the dark. He then resumed his journey. Taking the first left, he spotted warm light pooling at the bottom of the door at the end. He listened before knocking and then entered.

In contrast to the rest of the palace, the Captain's sitting room was spare and precise. As usual, it made entering seem like a visit to a foreign country. What furniture there was was of Ytlainen make, carved from birch and decorated in intricate geometric patterns. This, in contrast to the current Eledorean fashion of organic curves and swirls. A lone painting graced the wall above the fireplace. It was a landscape, depicting an unfamiliar mountain and executed in loose brush strokes. Unlike any work of art Nels had ever seen, it was his favorite. Up close, it appeared to be nothing but flat strokes

of color. However if he viewed it from across the room, the picture took on more depth and reality. Made of soft purples, blues, and greens it'd taken him an entire afternoon to realise that there was no black pigment in it at all. That in itself was unusual, given that it hung in a soldier's apartments. Nels had always assumed the painting originated from the Kingdom of Ytlain like its owner. Never having been outside of Eledore, let alone the city of Javlokivi, he didn't know for sure.

Nels surreptitiously shut the door behind him. His nose was immediately met with a comforting mix of old incense, warm candle wax, and burning charcoal.

Captain Karpanen paused and then placed a wicked looking dagger onto the birchwood altar table between a beeswax candle and his saber. Several other items were arranged on the table's surface, among them a small, stoppered brown bottle, a black bowl of herbs, and a second ceramic bowl painted dark blue. The ornate blue bowl contained white sand and a single piece of glowing charcoal.

"What are you doing?" Nels asked, eager to put his nightmares behind him.

Karpanen was dressed in a loose, worn evening robe of faded green linen decorated with an ornate Ytlainen pattern. Even the cut of the sleeves was foreign. Nels hadn't seen anyone

else in the palace wear anything like it, and he had the impression it was older than he was. The collar of a white silk nightshirt half-escaped the frayed robe.

He's not wearing any black, Nels thought. It struck him as a little more than daring. He's in his own rooms. He can do what he wants, can't he? In Eledore, the color was used to set soldiers apart. It served as a warning. Soldiers were unclean. Mother says the Ytlainen don't keep Blood Custom, not like Eledoreans do.

A small silver medal with the figure of a horse embossed on it hung off a silver chain around Karpanen's neck. His feet were bare, and his long light brown hair rippled down his back. It looked as though he'd only just freed it of its braid. That was unusual for Karpanen. He was normally exacting and tidy. It gave Nels a bad feeling.

The quiet hiss from the charcoal filled an expectant silence.

Karpanen at last spoke in a cool tone. "Did I say you could enter?"

"I knocked like you asked. But you didn't answer."

"It's late, Nels. I might have been entertaining someone."

Aged fifteen -- almost sixteen -- Nels was annoyed

that the Captain thought him too young to understand. "You aren't. I listened at the door first. Anyway, I asked Lady Karita months ago if you had a lover, and she said you didn't. You don't even keep an automaton." He'd added that last bit to demonstrate worldliness and then regretted it when he spied a flash of insult in Karpanen's unyielding black eyes. "You've no lover at all. At least, not since you moved into the palace."

The Eledorean royal court was a dangerous place. As Crown Prince, Nels had learned early that he couldn't afford ignorance. Therefore, he paid regular bribes in exchange for information.

"Hasn't anyone told you that spying on people is impolite?" Karpanen asked.

"Sure," Nels said with a shrug. "You do. All the time." He gave the Captain his most charming smile. "Doesn't stop me, though."

"Too bad," the Captain said in a patient tone that bordered on amused.

"No one tells me anything," Nels said. "How else am I to know what's going on?"

"Shouldn't you be asleep?"

Relieved that the offence had been forgiven, Nels relaxed. Of course, the mistake would run over and over in his

mind later, and he'd think again and again about what he should've said. He never seemed to learn. Unlike his twin sister, Suvi, he was always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Luckily, Karpanen rarely stayed angry with him.

Nels stepped farther into the room. "Is this a soldier's ritual?" There wasn't anyone around to be shocked by his curiosity. Showing off ill-gotten knowledge, he pointed at the contents of the black bowl. "That's sandalwood, isn't it?"

"That would be one of the ingredients." Karpanen sounded almost pleased. His irises changed from hard black to a warm grey.

"And clove oil? That's clove oil." Nels pointed at the little brown bottle. "That's for keeping rust off blades. Oh! I know. This is a cleansing ritual, isn't it?" He'd stolen-- borrowed--one or two of Karpanen's books on martial practices. Of course, he'd done so one at a time and returned each before Karpanen could notice the loss. "Will you show me how?"

"You know good and well such things are forbidden."

"Show me anyway. Please?" Nels stepped closer to the birchwood altar table with its silver inlay design. "You promised you would one day. I won't tell anyone. I swear."

"I can't. Your mother--"

"Oooooooh! Is that blood?" Nels pointed at the saber

lying on the table. He'd heard that there'd been an execution earlier in the day. He didn't know the details. No one of quality spoke openly of blood or death, nor did they associate with those who dealt in them. In any case, the execution wouldn't have involved anyone he knew, other than Karpanen. Karpanen's responsibilities--in addition to watching over the Queen and the Crown Prince--included standing in as royal executioner whenever Nels's father, King Henrik Ilmari, demanded it.

That seemed an odd combination of duties now that Nels thought about it.

"Don't touch that! It's unclean!"

Nels jerked his hand from the blade before it was slapped and frowned. "I wasn't going to."

Captain Karpanen sighed, and his eyes lightened to dove grey. "All right. If I show you how to reconsecrate a blade will you go to bed? Tomorrow will be a long, tiring day, and you need your sleep."

Nels's pride stung. "I'm not a child."

The morning's journey would be his first attempt at independence. Publicly, the intent was to travel south to Gardemeister where the Silmaillia, Saara Korpela, the King's seer and personal healer lived. It was to be a dull holiday

excursion--even if it was his first. He'd told everyone he wanted to see the country over which he would one day rule. In reality, his intentions were far more dangerous. If I'm caught, Uncle Sakari will have me killed. But I have to do something. Now. Before father names Suvi heir in my stead. Disturbing, persistent questions about the future gnawed at his confidence like rats. I'm not afraid. I'm not. Eledorean princes were never afraid. Fear was for the powerless, and he had power. His mother said her side of the family often matured late. She told him she'd had reassurances from the Silmaillia. He didn't have anything to worry about. I'm a royal prince. I'm not a changeling.

"Any experienced soldier would know that getting enough sleep can mean the difference between life and death," Karpanen said.

"We're not going into... battle."

Karpanen raised an eyebrow in question.

He senses the danger even if you haven't told him the truth, Nels thought. "Fine. I'll go to bed. After."

Karpanen stared him directly in the eyes. The color of his irises had returned to that flinty black. "Do you promise?"

"I swear." Out of habit, Nels made the oath in Acrasian and crossed his heart using his index finger. He

understood it was an Acrasian custom. He made a habit of studying foreign languages and cultures. Being able to speak more languages than anyone else made him feel accomplished in spite of his other failings. There were advantages in such information. His father's spies couldn't report what they didn't understand.

Karpanen frowned. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry," Nels said. "I give you my word, sir." He used formal Eledorean Court Speech for the oath and had added the 'sir' without thinking. His cheeks grew hot, and he looked away. This, after the latest stern talk from the king. Fixing his attention on the altar table, Nels hoped Karpanen didn't notice the slip.

"Stand on the carpet," Karpanen said. "Here. On my left." He paused. "Where are your slippers?"

"I forgot them."

"Aren't you cold?"

Nels nodded.

Karpanen left briefly for his bedchamber and then returned.

Nels noticed a blood-stained rag resting on the table. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at the rag.

"Never mind that." He dropped a pair of old slippers

on the floor next to Nels's feet. "Put those on."

Worn brown velvet warmed Nels's frozen feet at once. The slippers were too big, of course. He wiggled his toes, enjoying the feel, nonetheless. "Thanks."

"Be quiet, please. And stop your fidgeting."

"But--"

"Do you want me to teach you or not?" Karpanen asked. "Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing and empty your mind like I taught you."

"Why? Aren't you going to show me how to clean the blade?"

"Don't waste time asking useless questions. What did I tell you about the distinction between what people do and what people say?"

"Actions speak truth even when words lie."

"Exactly. Now, be quiet and observe. Empty your mind and then listen carefully. I'll answer your questions afterward."

Nels shut his eyes and breathed in the peaceful atmosphere. The ticking of the mantle clock over the fireplace and the slow ebb-and-flow rhythm of his breaths marked the time. He heard the quiet rustle of silk against linen as Karpanen moved. Nels opened his eyes at once. He didn't want to miss a

thing.

Karpanen poured a small amount of herbs onto the charcoal. Thick white smoke rose from the blue bowl. He waved a hand over it, breathing in the scented fumes. He then resumed his former posture, closed his eyes, and raised his hands. Then he spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper. "Great Hasta, White Queen of Crossroads, Horse Mother, and Protector of the Weak, Giver of Life, Escort of the Newly Dead, we beg your favor this night." He paused and then bent at the waist with his hands folded in front of his face in prayer. "Your servant asks your forgiveness, and forgiveness for those I've slain, that they might pass into the next world without the great burden of anger, or fear. Bless us, those you have chosen to partake in your rite of life and death. Remove the stains of our inequity for all are equal in your eyes and in your rite. Forgive me my rage felt for my fallen brothers and sisters. And forgive me my pride in my skill as well as my joy in victory. I will remember with respect those I kill, although I remove their life's blood from my blade." He took up the damp, stained cloth and began working at the small amounts of dried crimson on the saber in silence. When he finally finished he followed this up with a coat of clove oil from the brown bottle, using a clean rag.

Breathing in the spicy mixture of incense smoke and

oil, a combination of feelings overcame Nels. He had a sense of the sacred, but he also felt a thrill. Father would have apoplexy, if he knew I was here.

"Please grant Sir Joonas Pohjonen an easy and safe passage to the next world, Lady Hasta."

Nels blinked as he recognized the name. Sir Pohjonen was a notorious court dandy and a flirt. He was also--had been--one of his father's favorite violin players. Nels looked to Karpanen, and the sense of danger intensified.

"Watch over the loved ones he leaves behind." Karpanen next picked up the wicked-looking dagger, shoved up his sleeve, and sliced the back of a scarred forearm. "I hereby pay the blood-price for their care." He let a few drops of blood fall onto the hot charcoal. It hissed, and the scent of burning blood met the air. He then used the clove oil-soaked cloth to dab the wound clean. When the bleeding stopped he collected both rags, went to the fireplace, and tossed them into the flames. "Please, Hasta, free your servant and his weapons of all blemish so that he might continue to do your holy work." He turned to the water bowl and rinsed his hands, drying them on a clean white cloth. Then he used the whetstone on both the dagger and the saber. Once they were sharpened to his satisfaction, he gave them a last coat of clove oil before replacing them on the altar. "With

this water, please bless your humble servant, Great Hasta." He sprinkled a little on himself, and as if on a whim, Karpanen playfully flicked a bit of water in Nels's face.

Nels was only just able to keep from laughing.

Karpanen resumed a serious demeanor. "Thank you, Lady Hasta." He bowed again with his hands folded in front of his nose. Straightening, he placed another pinch of herbs onto the charcoal and again breathed the smoke. After a few moments of silent prayer, he turned. "All right, Nels. You may ask your questions."

Nels hesitated, not out of a lack of curiosity. There were at least twenty questions burning on his lips. However, there was one in particular he deeply desired to ask. At the same time, he didn't want Karpanen to think him perverted. It wasn't as if Nels had a secret wish to kill. That would be an abomination beyond any he could imagine. It was only that he wanted to know what it was like to be a soldier, and the question was at the heart of what being a soldier was about. He decided to take a chance. "What's it like to kill someone?"

Karpanen blinked and looked away in shame, and Nels felt an overwhelming guilt for having hurt the one person he looked up to and cared for as much as he did his mother and sister.

Stupid! You are a defective just as they say. How could I ask him that? Nels said out loud, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean--"

"It's time for you to go to bed," Karpanen said without looking at him.

"I do mean it, sir. I'm so sorry."

"Go." Karpanen turned his back on him and ran a hand through his untidy hair. "Now. Please." The hand trembled as he lowered it to his side.

#

Two

"Was this the route approved by the Seneschal of the Chamber?" Captain Karpanen asked. "Shouldn't we have taken a left ten miles back? We should be headed east. Not south."

Nels struggled to find an answer that wouldn't be an outright lie. The king had insisted that Nels distance himself from the captain. You're too dependent upon Karpanen. Everyone knows it. It's unseemly. But that didn't mean Nels actually wanted to comply with his father's wishes.

I should've left without Karpanen. But Nels knew that would never have happened. The truth was, he hadn't travelled outside the palace without the captain in his life. Of course,

if Nels were truthful, and he wasn't always, there'd been another reason for taking Karpanen with him. Nels was terrified of his Uncle Sakari.

"Why is he in charge, sir?" one of the other guardsmen asked Karpanen in a tone just loud enough for Nels to hear. "He isn't old enough to grow a beard. We should turn--"

Karpanen cut off the remainder of the guardsman's words with a glare. Riding behind Karpanen, Nels didn't actually see it. He didn't need to. He was familiar enough with Karpanen's disapproving stares to know. Chastised, the guardsman in question magically compelled his horse to slow with a word and resumed his place at the rear.

"I asked you a question, young prince," Karpanen said over his shoulder. He used formal Court Speech, and while the words indicated the utmost respect they still managed to sound like a command.

How does he do that? Nels thought. And why can't I?
I'll never be the leader he is, will I?

The Royal Family of Ilmari prided itself on the power of absolute command. All the Ilmaris possessed it in one form or another. The talent had been present in the Royal line from the first Ilmari. That unbroken line of power was used to support the divine right of kings. All kainen had talents of one form or

another. It was said that the strength of that ability determined one's place in life, and the ability to bend others to your will was what set the upper classes apart from the lower. Even lesser nobility had command of animals. Yet, the royal catacombs told a different story. Like much of Eledore's hidden histories, changelings and other defectives supposedly didn't exist in the royal family. However less than a month ago, his father had taken Nels on a private tour beneath the castle. There, he'd seen for himself the quarters where royal changelings lived out the last of their days--buried alive, used for sport. The unspoken message was clear. Develop the power of command or vanish in those tombs beneath the palace.

"And now I ask it a second time," Karpanen continued. "Are you certain this is the correct road?"

Heart thudding in his ears, Nels decided to ignore Karpanen. The king did so often enough when underlings asked questions he didn't like. In truth, Nels didn't know how to deal with the complications that a truthful explanation would foster. Summer was almost over. The wind was already perfumed with the scent of dying leaves. With the arrival of fall would come his and his twin sister's sixteenth birthday, and with that would come the official confirmation of their father's successor. Such a thing was unusual, but so was the birth of twins in the Royal

House of Hännenen.

More importantly, there was his father's unspoken warning.

I'm not a changeling. I can't be.

He had no control over when his powers would manifest anymore than he could rush the growing of a beard, but he did have the ability to prove himself in other ways. He could best his uncle at one of his games, and he would start with the Province of Hirvi. Uncle Sakari currently served as the protector of Hirvi, but that would end when Nels came of age on his sixteenth birthday. Normally, the Crown Prince would be eased into the role and kept informed. However, his uncle had repeatedly declined to do so. It was suspicious. Still, Uncle Sakari continued to insist that all was peaceful and profitable in the province, and that there was no need for oversight before the change. The border dispute with Acrasian Regnum was over. In any case, Eledore had nothing to fear from humans--creatures that had more in common with animals than kainen. That much everyone knew to be true. However, Nels's mother, the Queen, had conflicting information. She'd told Nels that reports from Hirvi were being falsified. His mother had been his primary tutor when it came to politics, and she'd taught him that when it came to hidden plots it was wise to follow the money. There was a reason

Sakari didn't want anyone to look too closely at Hirvi. That was obvious, and Nels intended to find out what that reason was. Everything pointed to the city of Merta and her silver mines.

But now, everything is falling apart.

Proving himself was vital. Karpanen's objections weren't.

One more month of being treated like a child. One. Of course, thanks to his father, Nels didn't have a month. He wasn't sure he had one week.

"Well?" Karpanen asked.

What am I to do? He won't give up until I answer. Nels supposed he was lucky the ruse had lasted as long as it had. He hadn't wanted to alert Uncle Sakari. So, he'd chosen an indirect route to Merta. Should I tell Karpanen our real destination? Can I risk it? Nels wasn't certain of the other guardsmen. One of them most certainly would be spying for Sakari, and Karpanen would likely insist on returning to Jalokivi. Nonetheless, Nels would not turn back. He couldn't. As long as he was outside the palace, he could buy himself time. He might yet avoid the catacombs. Can I tell Karpanen? There was too much at stake, and they still had several days of travel before they reached Merta.

Nels settled on a half truth. "This journey was organized at father's request."

The king had suggested a journey but only to rid himself of an annoyance. Angry, Nels had left an inaccurate itinerary with an overwhelmed Seneschal. Of course, it wasn't as if the king would notice. And if I were Suvi he wouldn't care whether I left Jalokivi or not, Nels thought. Sometimes he was envious of his twin sister. Her every move wasn't judged and weighed. She was free to do whatever she wanted. She already had her powers. It wasn't fair. If father names Suvi Heir Designate, what will become of me?

"Kai? I would see the map. Bring it here." Karpanen muttered another magic-laced word of command to his gelding.

The horse stopped at once, causing Nels to bring Loimuta up short with the reins. Embarrassment heated his cheeks. He hadn't used a verbal command. The others already think me a defective.

Kai said, "I don't have the map, sir. I--"

"I have the map," Nels said. "And I'm quite capable of reading it." The plan was to travel south, loop around the end of the Selkäränka Mountains, and then head north to the city of Merta. He squeezed Loimuta's sides with his knees, signalling he wished to continue and then spoke a useless command word. The horse slowly eased around Karpanen's gelding. "We're exactly where we should be."

Karpanen spat out a word, magically compelling Loimuta to halt. Insulted, Nels turned to face the captain. A cool breeze toyed with the black feather in Karpanen's broad-brimmed black hat. The captain frowned, and his eyes narrowed. Nels's heart slammed even harder inside the cage of his chest. He was only able to hold Karpanen's unyielding black gaze for three heartbeats before looking away.

Remembering the latest reprimand he'd gotten from his father regarding Karpanen, Nels sat taller in the saddle. I'm in charge. Not him. He slowed his breathing and once more attempted to face down the captain.

"I know you," Karpanen said, keeping his voice low so that the others wouldn't hear. His gaze was sharp, steady, and yet, there was a hint of compassion. "You're up to something. You have to let me in on it." His horse shifted, restless.

Swallowing a burning lump in his throat, Nels set his jaw. The memory of Sir Joonas Pohjonen's fate was close as Nels struggled with his inadequacy. Be strong. Firm. The others are watching. "Do your duties include interpreting my father's wishes in addition to following me about like a nursemaid?"

Captain Karpanen's face registered surprise before it transformed into a mask of professionalism.

Shit, Nels thought. Now I've done it. I've gone too

far.

Clearing his throat, Karpanen then said, "We are at war, young prince."

"The Acrasian quarrel is over. Anyway, that would hardly count as a war," Nels said. "Father says--"

"Listen to me. This area is dangerous," Karpanen said, keeping his voice low. "Acrasian squatters have--"

"Not here. Not this far north. The Acrasian Ambassador has assured us that the Regnum has not pressed its interests beyond Greenleaf," Nels said. It's Uncle Sakari who is up to something not the Acrasians.

Captain Karpanen whispered again, "The Acrasian Ambassador only tells the King what he wishes to hear."

"That's impossible. Humans aren't mentally capable of such duplicity." Nels felt the blood pound in his temples. Bright spots appeared in his vision until he blinked them away. His stomach did another lurch. He swallowed his nausea as he caught a smirk lodged on the formerly reprimanded guardsman's lips.

"The Acrasian Ambassador is entirely under your uncle's thrall," Karpanen whispered. "Listen to me, boy--"

The other guardsman's expression stung Nels. "Release my horse at once," he said as loud as he could.

"I humbly apologize, Your Grace." Captain Karpanen withdrew his influence from Loimuta. Then he shook his head and gave the other Guardsmen a short series of hand signals. Resuming the lead, Karpanen's horse broke into a trot.

Nels swallowed the apology wedging itself in his throat. It was unfair to take out his discomfort and frustration on Karpanen, and Nels hated himself for doing it. He admired Karpanen. He was one of Nels's few friends, but the relationship was considered inappropriate and some said, treasonous. Karpanen was a soldier and a foreigner, no matter he was the Queen's cousin. Nels didn't care about taboos or what anyone said. That is, until now. Now, you're worried about what damage he'll do to your position at court. Isn't that right? Nels wanted to take back the insult more than anything. He wanted to ask Karpanen's advice but couldn't think of how to do so without appearing weak. There was another reason, of course. Nels was afraid of what his father might do to Karpanen if the captain were made a part of the plot.

Father never apologizes, Nels thought. Apparently, that was something kings didn't do, certainly not to servants, and Karpanen was a servant---less than that, really. So were the others. Nels knew he shouldn't care, but he did. He gave Loimuta another hidden signal, shifting his weight forward in the

saddle. Disgusted with himself, he didn't bother to cover it with a verbal command. There was no one to notice outside of his personal guards, and they already knew the truth.

Defective. Changeling.

Late maturity isn't unusual in mother's family line.

Mother said so.

What if mother is wrong? What if the Silmaillia lied?

Nels wanted to be sick. Breakfast wasn't sitting well, and even Loimuta's smooth gait was proving a problem. I won't get sick. I won't show myself for a weakling. Not in front of Karpanen. I won't. He swallowed the slick lump in the back of his throat, forcing it down. There was something wrong with his eyes too. All morning he'd been seeing spots of light come and go---light he was sure wasn't actually there. At least, no one else had reacted as if they'd seen it. He briefly wondered what it meant and then went back to worrying about his future.

The woods thinned, and half-mown fields appeared on both sides of the path. If the map was accurate, they were nearing a hamlet called Onni. Nels urged Loimuta into a trot, attempting to pass Karpanen. To Nels's annoyance, the captain kept pace, easing to the left. Karpanen issued another series of hand signals. A second Royal Guardsman flanked Nels's right.

Karpanen scowled at the fields and then placed a hand

on the hilt of his sword. "Something is wrong."

They'd traveled the few remaining yards to the hamlet's perimeter wall before Nels sensed it too. He glanced back to the fields. It was late in the season for unharvested crops. Why would they risk the corn rotting? An uncertain chill crawled up Nels's spine. At that moment, a hatless woman in patched mercenary black stepped into the middle of the road with a drawn saber. Her long red hair was bound into a ponytail. She held up a hand, barring the way. Nels signaled for Loimuta to stop, barely remembering to speak the command first. The hissing chime of drawn steel gave Nels a start. Sensing the tension, Loimuta stamped in place, and the muscles in the gelding's white neck quivered. Nels kept a wary eye on the mercenary. A male freeholder dressed in green stepped from behind one of the cottages.

"Who are you?" the red-haired mercenary asked.

"Who wishes to know?" Captain Karpanen asked in return.

An archer, also wearing loose-fitting black, settled against the corner of a cottage. Nels counted Onni's buildings, and his unease worsened.

A hamlet of perhaps three families supports two mercenaries?

Captain Karpanen turned to the archer. "Is this the way you greet noble visitors?"

"We are at war, My Lord," the red-haired mercenary said. She bowed her head but kept her eyes on Karpanen.

Nels grew impatient with Karpanen's posturing and dismounted. "The war has advanced this far inland?" According to his uncle's agents, the area was peaceful. His mother's contacts indicated otherwise. This was the sort of information Nels needed.

Captain Karpanen cursed, sheathed his blade and then dismounted. The soles of his black boots slapped hard-packed ground.

Nels dismissed the frowning Karpanen with a gesture. It was time to dispense with pretense. "I'm here to learn the truth." He turned to the red-haired mercenary. "What is your name?"

She stepped closer, examining the falcon emblem stitched on Nels's green velvet traveling coat. The point of her blade lowered, and a surprised look replaced suspicion. "My name is Tarja. Tarja Lassila, Your Highness."

"Tell me. What is going on?" Nels asked.

At that moment, one of the Royal Guardsman let out a warning cry. Nels felt rather than saw Captain Karpanen throw

himself into a protective stance, using his body as a shield.

"Get down, Nels!"

A large insect buzzed past Nels's cheek. A crossbow bolt appeared in Tarja's throat. Confused, Nels gaped. Tarja let out a wet choke before collapsing. Then a crushing force drove Nels to the ground. Gasping for air, he registered the hiss of more bolts, thunder claps, screams and horse squeals of pain. Loimuta? White smoke blotted out the sun. He felt a hard slap. His eyes watered with the sting of the blow. The shivering lights appeared again---this time the spots grew until they blinded him. He squeezed his eyes shut in spite of all that was happening and bit back frozen panic. Have I gone blind? He felt a hand against his left cheek and brushed it away. The sounds of battle stopped almost as soon as they'd started. Peeking out from under his eyelids, he was relieved to discover he could see again and blinked until his vision shifted into focus. Someone was laying on top of him. He recognized the black braid on the dark blue uniform sleeve.

"Captain, leave off. I'm all right." When no response came. Nels struggled to roll over, but with Karpanen's weight pressing it was difficult. Muddy stickiness clung to his right cheek. He tasted salty grit. He spit to clear his mouth. Why doesn't he move? "Captain Karpanen?"

A pair of scuffed brown boots stopped inches from Nels's nose. He heard deep voices and laughter. It took several moments to register they weren't speaking Eledorean. He strained to look upward. The man standing over him wore peculiar clothes. His features were blunt, and his hair was cropped very short, revealing the rounded tips of his ears. Nels's heart staggered.

They're human. They must be Acrasians.

"You missed one, Lucian," the owner of the brown boots said.

"Is it wearing any black?"

"No," Brown Boots said. "Green."

"Don't pay it any mind. Docile as lambs, they are. It's the ones that wear black you have to worry about." Nels heard footsteps rustle in the dead leaves. "Huh. It looks rich. Maybe it knows where the silver is buried. Georgie said there won't be any markers."

Nels felt the mass trapping him shift. He heard Captain Karpanen groan. Brown Boots stooped and roughly tugged at Karpanen. With the Captain's weight gone, Nels was able to sit up. He saw Brown Boots had Captain Karpanen by the hair. Crimson stained the front of Karpanen's uniform coat. There was a round wound in his chest, and Nels could hear wet choking sounds as the Captain struggled to breathe. His eyes fluttered

open. Blood leaked from his lips. He mouthed one word before Brown Boots's blade caught him under the chin.

Run.

Instead, Nels winced and shut his eyes. A hot splash hit him full in the face. He tasted blood, and wiped his face clean. When he saw his crimson-stained hands, everything stopped. At the edges of his vision, the colors of the trees, and the ground took on a strange darkness, except for the blood. The blood remained a bright red. He wanted to run as Captain Karpanen had urged, but Nels couldn't get his legs to work. He looked around and found the other three Guardsmen were dead. His stomach did another lazy roll. Captain Karpanen is gone. Do something. Now.

He can't be. He's my protector.

Brown boots grabbed Nels by his coat collar. Nels's long hair got caught in the Acrasian's grip. Sharp pain slapped back some of the numbness.

"What do I do with this one?" Brown boots asked.

A short Acrasian with graying hair stepped over Captain Karpanen's body. Wiping blood from his knife, he squinted at Nels with pale, unchanging Acrasian eyes. "Leave it for now. Help Paine, Marrek and Harris round up the others."

Nels was dumped to the ground, getting another

mouthful of bloody dirt. Again, his stomach threatened revolt. Brown Boots strode into the hamlet and whistled a jaunty tune. The strange melody echoed off the buildings with a cheerful menace. Nels felt as though he were in a trance. The crash of broken doors and screams held no meaning. No urgency. Such things belonged to a separate existence, one that Nels wasn't yet a part of. He got to his feet and then gazed down at Captain Karpanen's body. He died for me. He was at my side every day of my life. And I didn't know his full name.

It wasn't seemly.

What does 'seemly' matter now? Nels couldn't look away from the blood, the stillness of the Captain's body, the sheen of a polished silver scabbard in the sunlight. Why didn't Captain Karpanen protect me? The flash of anger was replaced with shame. This is my fault. I brought all of them here. I did this. I didn't listen. He was right. This is my fault. Nels felt a tug on his sleeve.

"Come," Lucian said in badly accented Eledorean.

Nels didn't budge. Lucian muttered something in Acrasian that sounded like a curse and reared back for a slap. Unconcerned, Nels turned to stare at the ruby set in the pommel of Karpanen's saber. Scabbard and blade were half-trapped beneath the Captain's leg.

Pick up the sword.

Lucian struck. After an instant's numbness, pain exploded in Nels's jaw. He blinked watering eyes until it faded. His only real connection to the disjointed world was his swelling lip. He explored the bleeding wound with a distracted tongue. The saber.

It's forbidden to draw a dead soldier's blade. It wasn't appropriate for someone of his standing to handle weapons of any kind---let alone a blooded saber. Blood was unclean. Karpanen was my friend. He was supposed to protect me.

A whisper of anger stirred in the emptiness. Respect for the dead isn't important. Survival is.

I'm not a soldier. I'm the Crown Prince.

Nels felt himself dragged a couple of feet to a cluster of fearful villagers. Others were driven from hiding. Cries of protest mingled with the terrified wailing of small children. An old woman trapped him with a wet stare full of expectation. Anxiety struck home. Captain Karpanen's voice snarled in the back of his mind.

It's your duty to help the people. You are their Prince.

Nels squeezed his eyes shut. Although the corners felt sticky and itchy, when he opened them again his vision cleared.

For the first time he noticed the weapon in Lucian's hands. It resembled a crossbow without the prod---a hand-held cannon. Years ago, rumors that the Acrasians had created new, more powerful weapons had filtered into court. It had resulted in a meager debate, but since humans held no magic, such things weren't deemed a threat.

"Hurry up!" Lucian said. "Daylight is burning."

Brown Boots and the other Acrasian humans drove more freeholders from their homes, shoving the slowest into the dirt. One of the humans was a female with fuzzy brown hair and a nasty burn scar covering half her face. Nels searched the roofs, hopeful for mercenaries, but there were none.

It's your duty.

Lucian asked in broken Eledorean, "Where silver is?"

When no one offered an answer, Lucian sighed. "Silver," he said, speaking more slowly as if his audience were stupid and not terrified. Grasping the front of a girl's dress, he shouted into her face and drew a knife. "Silver!"

"Killing her will not produce what you wish. There is no silver here, save this," Nels said in Acrasian. He found himself stepping away from the others, pausing briefly to place a reassuring hand on a freeholder's shoulder. He broke her gaze before it could erode his tenuous resolve. Then he produced a

money pouch from inside his coat, tossing it at Lucian's feet.

"Take it and go. It is all you will get."

The pouch hit Lucian's black boot with a heavy clank before he snatched it from the ground. "You speak Acrasian?" Lucian asked. "How?"

"One of your missionaries visited the city where I live," Nels said. "She generously offered to teach me your language." In actuality, it had been less an offer and more of a command. She was under father's thrall like the Acrasian Ambassador. He inwardly winced. "Please take the money. Trouble these people no more."

"Who are you, boy?" Lucian asked. His grizzled face with its pale eyes squeezed into a suspicious glare.

"A traveler. Nothing more. Accept the money. It is all I have."

"That's a lie! Everyone knows your kind buries money with their dead," the scarred female said.

Nels frowned. "Why would anyone do that?"

Lucian bounced the leather pouch in his hand. Three slow clinks marked time. "How do we know you're not lying?"

"Search the baggage if you wish. I cannot stop you. As for the rest," Nels made a sweeping gesture with his arm, showcasing the three cottages and one barn that constituted the

whole of Onni. "Does this look like a prosperous city to you?"

Someone behind him muttered, "Stinking round ears."

"What did he say?" The scarred female stepped toward the freeholders with a hand on her sword. Her sneering half-mouth was now matched with a frown.

"He said please take the money with our compliments." Nels stepped between the freeholders and the scarred human. If she chose to cut him down there was no Royal Guardsman to stop her. He was trembling, but his voice remained steady. He didn't know how that was possible. "Please take the money and go."

"I don't like any of this," Brown Boots said, pointing at Nels. "And I certainly don't like the look of that kid. He's lying."

"And what do you propose to do about it, Randal?" Lucian said.

Randal grabbed a young woman by the arm and yanked her to him. "She looks like a talker."

A freeholder in the green shirt struggled to force his way through the clinging arms of the other hostages, but was held fast. "Raisa!" He turned and caught Nels's gaze. "Your Grace, please. Make them stop."

Again, Lucian squinted as if puzzling over something.

Nels gave his back to Lucian and hissed in Eledorean,

"No titles. Not now. Call me Nels. I give you my word that I'll do everything I can. But you have to stay calm." Stay calm? It occurred to him that it sounded like something Captain Karpanen would say. The thought made him feel a little stronger.

"What did it say?" Lucian asked.

"Nothing you would wish translated. I have reminded him you are our guests," Nels said, resorting to the formal court tone out of reflex.

"Come on, Lucian," Brown Boots said. "Let's have some fun."

"Honestly, Randal." Lucian sighed. "Do you ever come up with anything original? There's a reason I'm in charge of our little family, and you aren't," he said, striding forward. He snatched an elderly male freeholder's shirt front. Before Nels could say a word, Lucian cut the elder's throat.

Again, blood fountained into the dirt. The freeholders screamed and the one in the green shirt fought harder to free himself. Nels felt dizzy. His nausea worsened, and a monstrous headache bloomed behind his left eye. He blinked against the pain, not knowing what to do or say next. He'd never felt so powerless in his life. Captain Karpanen would've fought them. The King would've talked the Acrasians into surrendering. He would've used magic-laced Court Speech---domination magic---to

convince the humans to throw themselves on their own daggers. Even Suvi could have compelled them into believing anything she wished because Acrasians were notoriously weak-willed. However, it was obvious from Lucian's expression that Nels didn't even have enough magical power to misdirect suspicion from a lie.

Make them stop.

Nels knew what the freeholder was asking. He wished he could comply---with his whole being he wished it, but unlike every other kainen of royal blood his age Nels didn't have the magical talent to control a horse, let alone a human. He used to think the shame of that knowledge would kill him, that the possibility of others discovering his weakness was his worst nightmare. Now, he understood his deficiencies could kill others. And that was much, much worse.

"Boy, tell me where the silver is. Now," Lucian said, moving on to Raisa. "Or I will kill her. Am I understood?"

Nels swallowed. Please. Not this. "There is no more silver."

Lucian lifted his knife to Raisa's throat. "Don't lie. I don't have the patience for it."

"Please! Don't!"

"Then tell me."

The freeholders moved closer, hesitantly at first.

Their hands brushed his arms, back, shoulders. Hesitant and fearful, their voices surrounded him, but he continued to feel distant from them. It felt like a dream. A nightmare.

"We implore you..."

"Have we done something to offend, Your Highness?
Please, save my daughter."

The saber.

"Boy!" Lucian wasn't watching him. The human was intent on Raisa.

Nels acted upon the opportunity. He went to Captain Karpanen's body and grabbed the sword. He didn't think about what he was doing---the consequences. The aftermath. All he knew was that he, Nels Gunnar Ari Hänninen, Crown Prince of Eledore and Archduke of Hirvi, had touched the blooded saber of a dead soldier.

Unclean.

Straightening with one hand on the scabbard, the hilt felt oddly warm in his right palm. He shivered. There'll be no going back after this. The sword seemed somehow right in his grip and yet, foreign. Not for him.

The people depend upon you. You must do something.

"No, Your Highness!"

There's no other option. Nels eased the curved blade

from its scabbard. The hiss of steel sliding free got Lucian's attention. All at once Nels was inundated with a sense that Captain Karpanen was near, very close---too close. In a blink, Nels saw and knew things Captain Karpanen would never have told him. The Captain had no family of his own, but did in fact have a lover named Laina. Nels blinked back images too private and too jumbled to form coherent patterns. Captain Karpanen was a distant cousin and close friend of the Queen and held his commission specifically as Nels's protector at her request. The pair of them, Nels's own mother and Captain Karpanen, had intended to make changes after Nels had assumed the throne, changes that would alter the way Eledore was ruled.

I must set the lad on the right path. It isn't proper, but someone must take a hand, or Nels will be worse than Henrik. Eledore won't last another--

Before Nels had time to register how he felt, the thoughts and images whirled away. Suddenly, he was seeing the Captain's death all over again from a more immediate perspective. Karpanen's mind raced along scattered, broken paths. He'd never see Laina again, or the way her face lit up when she smiled. An overpowering sadness combined with the startling beauty of the trees and sky. Nels caught a disturbing vision of himself through Captain Karpanen's eyes. The Captain's

last thought threatened to shake Nels to the core of his being. He shied from it before it could take full form.

Veli Ari Karpanen, that was his name.

I'm so sorry. Nels's cheeks burned with cold, and he tasted salt from tears.

"Boy!" Lucian's voice snapped Nels back to the present. "Just what do you think you're going to do with that?"

Heeding images from the sword, Nels shifted his grip on the weapon so that it was more secure---thumb parallel to the blade. That's better.

Lucian stepped away from Raisa and put out a hand. "Be a good lad. Give me that thing before you cut yourself."

Nels ran at Lucian with a roar. Lucian brought his knife to bear but was too late. Nels swung the saber. The point of the captain's blade bounced off Lucian's ribs and slid to the right, slicing a long, ineffective gash through cloth as it went. Lucian howled and twisted. Nels freed the sword and tried again, jamming the blade into the human's belly using both hands. The sensation of steel sinking into living flesh was more horrible than anything he'd imagined. Cool blood poured onto the ground, coated the blade, splashed on his skin.

It's true. Acrasian blood is colder than Eledorean.

There was an explosion. Nels felt the impact through

his feet. Deafened, he hopped backwards. The curve of the hilt briefly caught on the man's clothing. Nels automatically jerked the sword free, and the blade slid downward parting Lucian's belt. The wound gaped wider. Lucian's scream pierced Nels's ears as his hearing recovered. The shriek issuing from the man's throat rose to ever-higher notes of hysteria. Entrails sprang from the cut like a greasy rope, hitting the already blood-soaked ground with a splat. Shocked and nauseated, Nels retreated another step and slipped and fell in the steaming gore. He almost lost the Captain's saber.

I've killed Monitoris Lucian, father of five, former carter, Nels thought. Along with his name and family came the knowledge that Onni wasn't the first Eledorean village Lucian had raided. It didn't lessen the terrible sensation of the human's life draining away.

Another explosion parted the smoke-filled air. Sulfur masked the stench of blood and entrails. Struggling to get up, Nels turned toward the sound. One of the humans poured gun powder into his hand cannon. The uncapped bull's horn rattled and most of the black powder spilled useless onto the ground.

Musket, Nels thought. The weapon is called a musket. He got to his knees and then his feet, using his hands to steady himself. He nearly vomited when he saw the ground. Standing, he

moved away from Lucian. At the corner of his vision he spied a large freeholder in the green shirt. The young man rushed to Raisa's aid with an Acrasian dagger. Others attacked their captors with bare fists. Sick, Nels watched Lucian vainly hold his stomach closed. The human babbled that he was fine, that everything would be all right and then fell over. Beyond him, Green Shirt struggled on the ground with Randal. All the while voices battled for Nels's attention from within and without. Captain Karpanen. Lucian. The freeholders. The awful stench of death filled his nose and throat. Nels didn't want to breathe it any more and choked.

I don't want to kill anyone else. Please don't make me.

A human slipped in the bloody muck at Nels's feet, dropping his gun. Scrabbling for his sword, the human found the scabbard empty. Nels took the opportunity to kick the musket out of reach. With that, the human scooted backwards. A trail of fresh blood was traced in the dirt. Nels looked on, not knowing what else he should do.

"Have mercy! Please! I didn't want to come here," the human said, flinching and holding a hand up to protect his head. "I'll never return. I swear. Just let me live."

"Then leave now and--" Something blunt slammed into

Nels's left shoulder, shoving him sideways and back. He turned. It was the woman with the burn scar. Her ugly face was twisted in fury. She held a musket by the barrel.

"Don't you dare hurt my Marrek. Don't you...," she stopped before she could finish the sentence. Her anger transformed into confusion and then terror. "It's going to use its demon magic. Look at its eyes."

She dropped her musket and then made a complex motion with her fingers. Clumsy with terror, she tripped over Marrek. He yelped in pain and jerked his hand from under her boot. She stooped, helping him up---all the while maintaining that meaningless sign. Nels watched them flee into the woods. A bitter laugh bubbled up his throat and died on his lips. It was such a simple thing. The way his irises changed color from their normal black to an unnatural green and then blue. Sometimes they faded to white when he was frightened. It was the only evidence that he held any magic at all. He didn't even have the ability to control it as Suvi did. Why couldn't that have frightened Lucian away before anyone died?

The surviving freeholders gathered into a tight group, inquiring after one another and inventorying their injuries. Nels lurched to Captain Karpanen's body. His knees felt loose, and he swayed like a drunk. The saber tip dragged in the dirt.

His head ached, and his guts twisted in terrible knots. He put a hand against a tree to steady himself. He felt empty of everything but misery and agonized whispers so quiet that he couldn't make out words. It was the captain's saber, Nels suddenly understood. He shook his head to clear it. After several deep breaths, he crouched next to Captain Karpanen. The captain lay in the mud, one leg twisted under him, staring upwards. The black irises were blank and empty. Nels trembled. For a moment he saw the trees and sky as Captain Karpanen had last seen them. Nels reached out to tug the Captain's leg straight and then paused. Unclean.

With a hesitant blood-stained hand, Nels shut Captain Karpanen's eyelids instead.

Don't worry, Nels thought. There's no chance of me becoming like father now. Tears crowded the edges of Nels's burning eyes and traced cool paths down tight, itching cheeks. He sensed movement behind him but didn't have the energy to care. He wiped his face with a stiffening sleeve before a young woman with blonde hair and a bloody lump on her forehead sidled into view. She looked terrified until he blinked.

"I am Inari. Raisa's sister. Are you well, Your Grace?"

Your Grace. Suvi would succeed their father now. He,

Nels, would become a soldier. That's better than the palace
dungeon, I suppose.

Inari waited for an answer while unease played on her face.

She's afraid father will blame them for what I've
done. And if something weren't wrong in me she'd have good
reason to fear.

Unclean.

He couldn't open his mouth, so he nodded instead. Inari looked relieved. An old mother moved next to Inari, her hair was a wispy white, and her skin was brown. She stared at Nels for a long time before she spoke.

"I am Marjatta, the elder. We thank you for your great sacrifice and will mourn for you until your family is able." She gave Nels an expectant look. When whatever Marjatta waited for didn't come to pass, she said, "The dead, Your Grace, it is now your place to see to them. Do you need help?"

A soldier buries the dead. Nels blinked at the bodies strewn on the ground. Lucian. Captain Karpanen. The nameless Guardsmen. Onni's former guardians. Randal. Three unarmed freeholders.

So many dead.

At least most of the freeholders are safe.

It is your duty to protect them. He winced, but his mouth remained sealed. It was difficult to think around the ache in his skull.

Marjatta took charge in a soothing but firm tone. "His Highness needs assistance. Dig the graves and light a pyre for the Acrasians. His Highness and the new Guardian will take care of the dead. Erja. Hilma. Find something for winding cloth." When the others were gone, Marjatta moved toward those that remained. "The Guardians of Onni have passed. Their loss will be felt by all, but their places must now be filled. Who would accept this burden?"

The Green Shirt glanced up. His hands were blood-stained, and he stood near Raisa without touching her. He bent, whispering in her ear and then waited until she gave him a sorrowful nod.

"I, Armas, must accept," he said.

Raisa huddled deeper into her blanket and stifled another cry. Inari hugged her, pressing Raisa's head to her chest in a motherly gesture. Armas stepped next to Nels, the top of his head level with Nels's shoulder. Armas was stout with muscles forged by hard labor. Nels couldn't help thinking that the freeholder would make a far better soldier than he ever would.

There were no other volunteers.

#

Three

The freeholders left to care for the wounded and organize the work details. Nels was relieved to spy Loimuta being led into the barn with the remaining horses. There was a long scratch along the gelding's flank that would need tending. However, he seemed otherwise unharmed. As the young girl led him away Loimuta jerked the halter out of his handler's grasp. Knowing what would be next, Nels opened his mouth to shout a warning, but he was too late. Loimuta arched his neck nipped the girl on the shoulder.

"Ouch! Stop it, you big brute," she said.

At fifteen hands, Loimuta wasn't big. He only thinks he is, Nels thought. Loimuta lifted a hoof, and the girl dodged his half-hearted kick.

She stared Loimuta in the eyes. "I mean it." Snatching his halter, she then held his head at an uncomfortable angle. "Don't try it again. I don't care who owns you, I'll sell you to a human for his stew."

Nels's lips formed a weak smile. His father had told him that it was childish to form such attachments because beasts

were to be compelled and used, not loved, but Nels had rebelled. Other than his twin sister and Captain Karpanen, Loimuta was the only friend Nels dared to have. Everyone else wanted something. Loimuta should have an apple tonight.

Unclean. Nels winced.

I can't touch him. Not until I'm-- He felt a gentle tap on his arm and flinched. Captain Karpanen's saber flashed a muddy red in the afternoon light. The sword faded into an apparition of sunlight in Laina's face. Nels shut his eyes and swallowed, but it only blurred the Ghost Laina. His head ached with the grief-saturated murmur of the captain's memories.

"Highness, I don't suppose you know the names of your guards' patron deities?" Armas's gentle voice pierced the vision.

I don't even know the guards' names. Nels said, "I'm afraid not."

Armas nodded.

Eledoreans practiced many different religions. The Kingdom of Eledore had been formed over centuries as kainen migrated from all over the continent during the Dark Time. Each group brought their Gods and Goddesses with them. Historically, practitioners of differing beliefs hadn't always agreed with one another. This led to laws stating that individuals were free to

practice their religion as they wished, provided those beliefs did not interfere with the practices of another group. No one was exempt from this law, not even the king. Thus, religion was considered a private matter---either kept secret within families and passed from one generation to the next, or individually chosen at a significant life event. Over time, the Commons Church was formed to provide a neutral spiritual meeting space for public events, for those without a specific patron deity, and to support common charity work.

"Perhaps we should start by cleaning that blade," Armas said. "I learned something of the rituals from Tarja. I can show you how. I didn't wish to tell Raisa, but I had thought to take this path before."

Armas's words faded away, and the world took a dizzy tilt to the left. The spots in Nels's vision returned, and his stomach twisted into a hard knot. I will never see Laina again. She waited so long. I should've bound with her. It isn't as if Mia would've ever have been free. Nels shook his head and took a slow deep breath. The back of his mouth felt slick again. He knew what was coming and wasn't sure if he could control his stomach any longer. I'm not Veli Karpanen. I'm Nels.

Mia? That's mother's name.

There are many Mias. It's a common name in Ytlain.

I won't lose control. I won't.

"Are you all right, Highness?" Armas asked.

Nels opened his eyes. Armas's pallid expression was full of concern. For an instant Nels didn't recognize him. Armas vanished behind another ghostly image, this time of Nels's mother, the Queen. She sat in her garden with a face far younger than Nels had ever known. Her hair was the same moon-pale blond as his own, although hers hung around her face in careful ringlets while his fell straight. She placed a protective hand on her swollen belly with a sad smile.

So beautiful. So unhappy. If only she hadn't bound with that flap-dragon. If only her mother hadn't interfered. She loves me yet. I can see it in her eyes. Ideas shifted dizzyingly fast in Nels's mind. Captain Karpanen's last thought solidified, and linked with court rumors. Nels slammed his mind closed---his left hand clenched into a fist with the effort, but nothing stopped the echoing whisper laced with a fierce need to protect. If it is so, there are worse things than dying for your son. Hasta, please. My life's blood for him. Let him live.

Run, boy!

A devastating mass of terror, love, and longing punched Nels in the gut. Breathing became impossible. The ground no longer seemed to support his feet as certainties were snuffed

out like candles. He finally lost control of his stomach. Luckily, he was quick enough to make it to the privacy the other side of the tree before retching.

"Highness? Are you all right?"

Nels spat. It took several tries to clear his mouth, but he felt better at once. Stumbling from the pool of vomit, he was afraid of being sick again. He felt something drag, looked down, and understood he was still gripping the saber. Nels Gunnar Ari Hännenen. Mother gave me one of his names. Goddess, I didn't know.

I don't want to know.

"What did you say, Highness?" Armas asked.

"The sword," Nels said through his teeth. You must let go of Karpanen's saber, he thought. He concentrated on releasing the grip, and the blade finally slipped from his fingers, hitting the ground with a ringing thud. All at once, the haunted echoes died. He was finally able to draw a shuddering breath.

Armas frowned. "Stay here, Highness. I'll get help."

Nels heard Armas run, shouting for Marjatta. Was Captain Karpanen our father? Surely mother would have told us. Is that why I've no magic? Can't be. Suvi has magic. So does... did Captain Karpanen for that matter.

Armas returned with a bucket of water and rags. The

old woman, Marjatta, trotted close behind.

"Were you injured, Your Grace?" Marjatta asked.

Nels shook his head. "The sword." He took another tattered breath. "The sword speaks."

Marjatta frowned.

"We should put it away," Armas said, reaching for the blade lying in the dirt. "It's disrespectful to leave it in the--"

"Do not touch it," Margatta said.

Armas stopped at once. "Yes, Mother."

"The voice you hear, is it the man who carried this blade?" Marjatta asked.

Nels nodded.

Armas gazed at the saber and a confused line appeared between his brows.

"Armas, fetch me a stool from the barn," Marjatta said.

In the distance the freeholders dug at the ground, their efforts hammering a dull off-beat rhythm. Nels listened, trying hard to make sense of things that made no sense.

"You're sensing the sword's past and strongly so. How long have you been able to scry?" she asked. When he didn't answer she continued. "It's not my place, I understand, but has

no one discussed this with you?"

"It must be the sword. I can't--" Nels shook his head, deeply shamed. "I--I don't have magic."

She squinted at him, judging. "That's not possible. All kainen have magic."

"I don't," Nels whispered and looked away.

"Are you human?"

"No!"

Again, she stared. Then she sighed and said, "That is not a normal sword. It's special, valuable, and very old. Do you see the pattern in the blade?"

Looking closer, Nels noticed the water-like rippling lines in the steel.

She didn't wait for his answer. "It is believed a soldier's sword absorbs a part of their soul with long use. More so with weapons like that. It is made of water steel." Her stern face softened, but the frown lines around her mouth remained. "No one else must touch it until it is clean of the one who owned it."

Nels nodded again. How does one clean a saber of a ghost?

"You understand now why it is forbidden to handle a dead soldier's blade, don't you?" she asked.

He opened his mouth and somehow managed not to choke.

"Yes." But there wasn't any other choice.

"Good. Now, wipe off the blood and put it away. Do not use it again until it is clean."

Armas arrived freshly washed, carrying a three-legged milking stool. Marjatta perched on it like a noble woman ready to bear witness at court. Her concerned frown never wavered. Nels gritted his teeth and retrieved Captain Karpanen's saber from the mud. To his relief, there was no sound, not a whisper---only the strange warmth from the grip. He wiped the blade with an oiled rag as Marjatta looked on. Several paces away, Armas arranged the dead in a neat row, but paused upon reaching the mercenaries. He cut a button from each jacket, his lips moving in prayer.

Armas spied him watching and said, "It is a reminder of those who passed in service, Your Grace. I will sew them to my new coat so that they will not be forgotten. That is the custom."

Nels shuddered. I don't want to wear a dead man's buttons. Guilt heated his face.

"Do you wish for me to show you how to properly clean the sword, Highness?" Armas asked.

"Can you free it of the ghost?" Nels asked instead. He

didn't want a stranger to demonstrate what he already knew. He didn't want to blur his memory of the rite as Karpanen had taught him.

"We would need a swordmaster to remove a ghost," Armas said. "Tarja only taught me the basic rituals."

He will wonder why I know the ritual. "Then demonstrate what you do know," Nels said.

Armas told him to remove all traces of blood from his face and hands with soap and water first. Doing otherwise would only re-contaminate the blade. When that was done they dumped the dirty water at the base of a birch tree.

"Always use a birch, if you can," Armas said. "Birch trees are guardians of the underworld. A birch will clear the death taint from the water."

Nels blinked, understanding. Only soldiers used birch-wood and now he knew why.

Then Armas demonstrated the first ritual---the Ritual of Contrition, using a fresh bucket of water. Nels rinsed his clean hands three times and recited the prayer with Armas: With this water, I remember sin. With this water, I declare my sorrow and beg forgiveness. With this water, I cleanse death's stain. Afterward, he felt refreshed, more himself, that is, until he glanced at the bodies and considered what was ahead.

"What if there is no water?" Nels asked. "What if I'm alone?"

"Then use snow," Armas said. "If you can't conduct a full Ritual of Contrition, close your eyes and imagine doing so. The water isn't what's important, or even the prayer. It's the presence of another soldier. Tarja said confessing the act of killing is at the heart of it. Bearing the weight of death is too much to do alone. So, if you can't perform a full ritual, do so in your mind and confess the sin to your patron god or goddess."

"What if I don't have one?"

"You'll have one soon enough," Armas said. "We all do. For now, you can offer your prayer to the Great Mother." Then he taught Nels a quick blessing using the clove oil from Tarja's pack.

With that done, Nels resumed cleaning Captain Karpanen's blade. He concentrated on transferring the stains from metal to clove oil-soaked cloth. Karpanen's ghost rested quiet. At last, Nels whispered, "With this water, please bless your humble servant, Lady Hasta." Hasta was Ytlainen, and she had been Karpanen's patron, but it felt right as if she were a part of Karpanen he could keep. He sprinkled a little of the water on himself as Karpanen had done back at the palace. The

ache of grief pierced Nels's numbness. He swallowed it and then sheathed the saber with a relieved sigh. Did I do the right thing? He turned to the freeholders preparing the pyre. Inari handed off dried brush, a fresh bandage on her head. Nels saw how each freeholder interacted with the other. The unspoken emotions expressed in gesture and expression---a tangible connection of love and respect. It occurred to him that he didn't remember seeing such a thing among his family, not openly and certainly not between his parents. It is your duty to protect them.

Nels shrugged off Karpanen's words and went to help with the first shroud.

When the sky faded into darkness the freeholders brought torches. Still Marjatta didn't budge from her milking stool. Whenever Nels paused in his work he spotted her studying him with eyes that reminded him too much of Captain Karpanen. Nels got the impression she worried at some awful judgment. He tried not to think about what it might be. Instead, he focused on how each body should be cleansed, anointed with clove oil, and sewn into a shroud before it was carried to a grave. His apprehension increased with each step of the process explained. He wasn't about to admit it, but he had never used a needle in his life. When Armas finished his demonstration, Nels accepted a

second threaded needle with clumsy fingers, instantly dropping it. Armas retrieved it from the mud.

"Please be careful, Your Highness. Needles aren't easy to come by. And they can't be employed for any other purpose once used on a shroud."

Nels nodded. His awkward stitches appeared to amuse Armas, who was too well-mannered to comment. By the time they had started on the second shroud Nels's fingers were bleeding and sore, but he refused to leave the job entirely to Armas. If he did that, neither of them would sleep until well into the next day. The hours dragged. Nels grew accustomed to the stench of fresh death. With each body he acquired a new respect for Acrasian muskets and was glad the darkness blunted the horror of the violence done. He stepped to the first of the Guardsmen, and following Armas's example, cut a button from the jacket. The face was familiar, but that was all. Again he was reminded of people who had sacrificed everything for his comfort and safety---people he had considered too small to see. Concerned that he would have to report the name of the dead Guard, he checked the uniform for identifying marks. His temples were pounding, but he did his best to ignore it.

Is Captain Karpanen our real father? Did mother lie?
Does it count as a lie if you don't declare the truth? He

coughed, choking back another lump of pain. Aware that Marjatta was watching, he pressed wet eyes against his filthy sleeve before resuming his search. He tugged open the Guardsman's collar and discovered a small silver chain. On the chain was a disc with a name and rank struck into the surface. Nels pulled it free.

"A grave token," Armas said. "It's to cover the price of a coffin. I've never seen one before."

"Shouldn't we provide him a coffin, then?"

"The Commons Church in Gardemeister could supply whatever is needed. They serve, but that would take some time. And I don't know the rituals a wait would involve. I--we can't risk contaminating the living."

Biting his lip, Nels gave it some thought. And I must leave here before Uncle Sakari finds me. With that decision made, he took the grave tokens from each body. I can send someone back to give them the burial they deserve. And if I have the tokens, their families can be informed. He then studied his inexpert stitching in the torchlight. Standing, he dusted off his aching knees with little success. A painful knot had formed between his shoulder blades, joining the constant headache. His sewing skills had done nothing good for the patched, mismatched fabric. They deserve better than this.

"I'm sorry we've but poor quilt tops and horse blankets to offer."

"Your efforts aren't the problem," Nels said, opening and closing his stiff hands in an attempt to stretch out the pain. "Mine are."

A concerned line appeared between Armas's brows.

"You're tired, Highness. I can finish this."

Nels shook his head and blinked burning eyes. "This is what I am now. I'd best get used to it." Was Veli Karpanen my father? "And please call me Nels. The bowing and scraping is ludicrous given the fact I'm covered in the Mother knows what. It's giving me a headache."

Stunned, Armas nodded.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Nels took up the needle again. When he was done he helped Armas carry the sixth body to its grave. The freeholders had long since finished digging and retired to their beds. Nels stretched with a yawn, wishing he was home asleep in his own bed. He was cold, his hands were stiff with pain, and the powerful ache continued to throb behind his left eye. He turned to the pyre and saw it was ready to light, its bulk reminding him of a nest of thorns in the torchlight. He returned with Armas to where the last body lay.

Captain Karpanen. Suddenly Nels was more exhausted than he'd been in his life.

Armas stooped to move Captain Karpanen onto the shroud. Nels held up a wounded hand and noticed his fingers were swollen.

"Please," Nels said. "Let me."

Armas straightened. A question formed on his lips, but he didn't give it substance. He nodded instead. "I'll see to the humans then." And with that he went to place the Acrasian dead on the pyre.

Captain Karpanen was not a small man, and positioning him on the shroud alone wasn't an easy task, but Nels felt he owed the Captain that much at least. He bent to place the ghost saber in the dead man's hands.

"Don't," Marjatta said.

Nels started, having forgotten about her. His sore hand trembled as he swept filthy hair from his face. "Why not?"

"Keep the blade, Your Grace. I believe it now holds a part of you. I fear what would happen if it is buried."

Staring at the saber in his hand, coldness washed over Nels at the thought of carrying it the entire journey home.

Captain Karpanen would do so without complaint. He felt himself nod, lashing the saber to his belt as best he could. Next, he

grasped a button on the front of the captain's jacket, paused and then reached into a coat pocket instead. Nels felt the cool edge of polished wood, knowing exactly what it was---a toy whistle carved long ago for a son that wasn't even aware of the maker's full name. He considered all the times he had cursed Captain Karpanen for interfering, for shielding him from his own reckless selfishness and saw everything in a different light. As Nels pocketed the whistle, a stray thought entered his mind and stuck. What will father say when he sees what I've done? Will he grieve or will he turn away and name me a fool?

What if he isn't my father?

Stop it.

I shouldn't have come here. Karpanen was right. All I've ever wanted was for father to look at me the way he does Suvi. Just once. A smothering pain in his chest drove back the numbness. Flames painted shadows as Armas lit the pyre. Nels rubbed burning eyes and then stopped. He bent closer to the Captain, comparing angles, studying Captain Karpanen's dead face for answers, only to find more questions. Careful steps spurred him into tugging the shroud over Karpanen's head before anyone could guess why he had paused. I wish I had known. If I had, I'd have treated you better. In his heart Nels knew it was a lie, and there was no point in lying to the dead. He struggled for a

token worthy of Karpanen's sacrifice.

I promise to be the man you hoped I would be.

Nels finished off the last stitches with blurry eyes. Waiting until the seam was done, Armas then took hold of the bottom of the shroud while Nels staggered under the weight of Karpanen's torso. He tripped and nearly fell into grave. On hands and knees at the edge of the pit, Nels fought for control of his emotions. Armas offered to help him up, but Nels shook his head. Too embarrassed to look him in the face, Nels grabbed the shovel instead and dumped dirt back into the grave with fierce determination. With that, he buried more than Captain Karpanen.

He buried his future.

When he returned home there would be no more races down the stairs to the grand ballroom with Suvi as they fled frustrated tutors. There would be no more indulgent smiles created on his mother's face with tales of childish rebellion. When he reached the palace at Jalokivi, he would pack the few things he'd be allowed and move into the birch-wood constructed barracks with others of his kind. Forever separate. Like Captain Karpanen.

At last he, Nels, had proved his worth.

#

Four

Late the next morning, Nels finished knotting his long wet hair into a pigtail, folded it into a more manageable length and bound it with one of Karpanen's black ribbons. It wasn't easy. His fingers were swollen, and he wasn't used to doing it himself. Having slept in the stall with Loimuta, he didn't have access to a mirror, and his hands were painful, and clumsy. At least the headache had retreated somewhat. The contents of the bucket were no longer fit to use. So, he set the bucket near the stall gate for emptying. It was then that it occurred to him that there was probably a protocol for this kind of thing, and he may have just contaminated the barn. He slumped. I should've asked Armas if there was a more appropriate place to bathe. Sighing, he shrugged on Captain Karpanen's spare coat over his own blue trousers and brown boots. There was no possibility of wearing Karpanen's. What he had on would have to suffice. Nels glanced up in time to catch Loimuta's incredulous stare.

"Is something wrong?" He knew it was ludicrous to ask, but there were times when he was convinced the gelding understood him. Looking down at the hang of the Captain's coat, he answered his own question. "Too big. I know. And I don't hold a rank. But I've no black. And there's no way to remove the

braid without making a mess of the sleeves."

Loimuta returned to his breakfast with what Nels was certain was a derisive snort.

He picked up Karpanen's black sash and found he had to double-wrap it around his waist to prevent it from dragging on the ground. All the Hännenens tended to be tall, but like his magical talent, he hadn't come into his height yet. When he was done, he was glad he didn't have a mirror. He could see enough of himself to feel ridiculous. What am I thinking? I won't pass for a courier or a Royal Guardsman. Not even from a distance.

A polite knock on the stall door startled him.

"Coming." Nels opened the stall gate and shut it behind him. He kept his eyes on the barn's hay littered floor, reluctant to meet the freeholder's eyes. Armas had enough manners not to laugh, but Nels wasn't as sure of anyone else. However, judging by the polished black boots, the one waiting wasn't a freeholder.

An unfamiliar Royal Guardsman bowed, sweeping his broad-brimmed hat in the air between them with a flourish. Nels stared at the top of the man's brown head for two heartbeats before remembering to close his mouth.

"Sergeant Hurme at your service, Your Grace. Half the regiment is scouring the countryside. Your uncle will be most

relieved. He--" As he straightened Sergeant Hurme seemed to take in Nels's clothing at last. His expression drained of color.

"Your Grace, did--" He swallowed. "Did you lose your baggage?"

Nels's face burned. So it begins. "No."

Sergeant Hurme's gaze drifted to the saber dangling from Nels's hip.

Nels cleared his throat. "Acrasian bandits murdered Captain Karpanen and the others."

Sergeant Hurme gawked. "You killed--"

"I--" Nels cut off the sergeant, unwilling to openly commit to the word 'kill.' He suppressed a shudder. What's it like to kill someone? Well, now he knew, didn't he? He fought yet another urge to be sick. "It was one bandit. But one is all it takes, isn't it?"

"Surely a few freeholders aren't worth--"

"Everyone in the hamlet would've--" Died. "--suffered, if I hadn't. Including me." Nels forced the words between clenched teeth. The pain behind his eyes intensified for a moment. He massaged his temples.

"Is something wrong, Your Grace?"

"I'm--I'm not feeling well."

Sergeant Hurme paused. "Ah, I see." However, his expression demonstrated he didn't. "Perhaps you should eat now,

Your Grace. Your uncle will be here soon."

It was as if Loimuta had kicked Nels in the stomach. The idea of facing Uncle Sakari while dressed as a baggy clown killed Nels's already weak appetite. The broader implications came to him in a flash. You have no protector. And you can't defend yourself, not yet. It would be easy. The Captaincy is open. All it would take is one power-hungry Royal Guardsman. Uncle Sakari could blame the Acrasians. No one would say a word. Uncle is too powerful. Nothing stands between him and his ambitions now.

Nothing but Suvi. A clammy chill settled into Nels's empty stomach. "How many of you are here?"

"Five, Your Grace. The freeholders sent a message to Rehn. We were sent ahead to--"

"When will Uncle Sakari arrive?"

"In a few hours at the most, Your Grace."

"Then we leave in a quarter hour. Inform the others."

"But, it will be dark soon."

The pain lurking in Nels's brain re-asserted itself, squeezing into a hot ball of agony. He squinted against the pain. Suddenly furious, he strode up to Hurme---not stopping until he'd scuffed the toes of the Sergeant's boots with the tips of his own. "Are you questioning my command?" If he

resists, I've no magic to influence him, Nels thought, holding the man's gaze. This is it. Either he does as I say, or I die.

"No, Your Grace." Sergeant Hurme gulped and looked away.

"Get someone in here to load the baggage and saddle my horse. Now." Nels glanced at the water in the bucket at his feet. "And have someone empty that at the base of a birch tree."

Sergeant Hurme blinked. "Yes, Your Grace." He then scurried out of the barn, nearly falling through the barn doors.

Nels looked on with a measure of surprise until he remembered the violence with which Suvi's magical abilities had first manifested six months ago. Depending upon the specific talent and its strength, the onset of uncontrolled magic could either pass unnoticed or result in something horrific. He'd been in an adjoining classroom with the involuntary Acrasian tutor when Suvi's screams had brought the servants running. He had arrived in time to see a serving girl collapse to the floor in a writhing heap, blood running from her eyes, nose and mouth. He'd rushed to Suvi to see if she was injured, but their nurse had shooed him out of the room before he could speak or touch his sister. Suvi had complained of headaches before the accident.

Headaches. Shit. The thought was followed with an image of Marjetta.

How long have you been able to scry? He swallowed.

Great Mother, please don't let that be my power. Please. If that was the case, he might as well have no magic at all. He'd be no better than a common peasant. Nonetheless, if his magic truly was manifesting, then he was a danger to everyone around him.

It is your duty to protect them, Captain Karpanen's words whispered in Nels's mind.

I must leave here. Now.

#

Five

Travelling as fast as the horses could stand while avoiding the main roads, Nels and his new escort reached the outskirts of Gardemeister in one day instead of two. Having ridden through the night, they stopped for a short rest at the side of the road around dawn. The journey hadn't done anything good for Nels's headache. He felt terrible. His stomach was still upset--he'd gotten sick twice, and his legs hurt so badly he could barely walk. At least he was still alive. Ahead, Grandmother Mountain stretched tall next to the Angel's Thumb. Beyond that and just a week's ride away was the forest, a few rivers and then Herraskariano. After that, a journey around the shores of Lake Hedvig would lead to the city of Järvi Satama and finally the

capitol, Jalokivi. He might make it, if he could lose himself in the woods. Uncle hasn't caught me, not yet. I've been lucky. His smile died as he turned to the south and spotted the rising column of road dust.

Shit. We're not going to reach Gardemeister, he thought.

If he was going to live, he needed an ally or at least a witness---preferably one that his uncle couldn't manipulate, intimidate, or kill. The horses were nearly spent. He was running out of options. The fact he was exhausted and sick didn't help. He rubbed sore fingers against his temples once more. Yet again, it did nothing against the pain. He needed a healer, but none among the guard travelling with him had healing talents.

Nels caught Sergeant Hurme's worried expression. As a Royal Guardsman, the Sergeant had to be a veteran of more than one family dispute. Nels thought again of Suvi and the serving girl. Family quarrels aren't the only danger when living among royals.

Not me. I've more self-control than Suvi. Always did.
Mother said so.

The Sergeant doesn't know that.

On the other hand, are you willing to bet anyone

else's life on it?

He looked again at the column of dust. Aren't I already? Self-doubt swirled in a quick blast of frustration and anger. Why did my powers have to assert themselves now? Haven't I enough trouble?

What if the headache is just a headache?

"I'm sorry I dragged all of you into this," Nels said with a sigh.

Hurme blinked and then his expression softened.

He didn't expect me to consider them, Nels thought. Before yesterday, I wouldn't have.

Hurme said, "I see His Grace is getting very close."

It's over, Nels thought with a nod. There's no point in pushing on. I'll only kill the horses and endanger everyone even more than I already have. Still, he wasn't ready to admit defeat. "Maybe it isn't him. Maybe it's a mail coach. Maybe--"

Hume looked as though he was going to agree to the lie, stopped himself, and looked away.

Nels's shoulders dropped and the tension in his back loosened a bit. "We'll wait here until they meet us. I'll do everything I can for you. I'll tell Uncle I forced you to come with me."

Hurme raised an incredulous eyebrow as if to point out

the unlikelihood of such a thing. Then he spoke to the woods at the side of the road. "Are you familiar with Saara Korpela, Your Grace?"

"Of course. She's my father's seer and advisor," Nels said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Then you probably know the Silmaillia also has an estate less than a mile from here."

"Oh." Nels actually didn't. He thought she lived in Gardemeister's walls. Hope took root in despair. "How soon can we leave?"

"Couldn't risk it for another half hour, I'm afraid."

Nels slumped. "Shit."

"You can go on foot. Take Corporal Eriksson with you. His family has a farm a few miles from here. He'll know the way. We'll follow as soon as we can. If your uncle gets here before we can continue, we'll buy you what time we can."

Nels took a deep breath to calm himself. He was trembling and hoped Sergeant Hurme wouldn't notice. So many have died already. "I can't. That would mean leaving you to Uncle. Without me here to take responsibility, he might--"

"We understood the risks before we left Onni even if you didn't." Sergeant Hurme shrugged. "This way, there's a chance something positive will come of it. Whatever happens to

us." He turned and shouted orders at Corporal Eriksson.

All at once the weight of his own actions hit Nels. I shouldn't have left home. I wish I'd consulted Captain Karpanen. I wish-- But wishes and intensions wouldn't change anything. People are dying because of me. "Thank you." It wasn't enough, but it was all he could think of to say.

"Live and remember us," Sergeant Hurme said and began to turn away.

"I will remember." Nels put out a hand to Hurme. He'd read about the farewell custom in a stolen book belonging to a dead man.

Hurme glanced down and for a moment Nels wasn't sure he'd done the right thing. He could feel blood heat his cheeks.

Then Hurme took his hand. "It isn't proper. You've not been initiated. But I appreciate the gesture."

Cheeks still burning, Nels left Loimuta with Sergeant Hurme and followed Corporal Eriksson into the early morning forest at a run. Panic kept exhaustion and pain at a discrete distance. Nels focused on moving as fast as he could. At this point, the mountain's incline wasn't extreme, and the underbrush wasn't so thick as to slow them down. They'd run for quite a while before he had to stop. He bent over, grabbing his knees.

"How much farther?" he managed to ask between gasps.

It was annoying to note that the corporal wasn't even winded.

"Not much, Your Grace. The estate is just over that ridge. If we follow that stream there will be an easy crossing a few hundred feet from here." Corporal Eriksson looked over his shoulder toward where they'd come from.

"Do you suppose Uncle Sakari has reached them yet?"

Corporal Eriksson shook his head. "We'd have heard something, I'm thinking."

"All right. I'm ready. Let's go."

They continued upward, reaching the crossing in short order. Nels staggered behind Eriksson and made a great deal of noise in the process. Nels no longer cared. His vision narrowed down to the forest floor a few feet ahead. His mouth was dry, he felt dizzy, and the ache in his brain made him want to retch. Still, he pushed onward. It wasn't until he'd thumped face-first into Eriksson's back that he understood the corporal had halted.

Peering beyond Eriksson, Nels spied a girl who might have been a couple of years younger than himself. He wouldn't have called her pretty. She was too odd and angular-looking for that. Her skirts were patched greens, purples, blues, and browns. Thick blonde curls cascaded over her shoulders and down her back. She was all at once graceful and awkward, reminding him of a wild and uncertain colt. At the same time, there was a

fierce power behind her eyes that made him uneasy. He watched her irises change from a normal black to a dark green the color of emeralds and back.

"I knew you'd be here," she said with a smile as if she often ran into royal visitors in the woods. "Come on. This way." She whirled, skirts flaring out around her. The fabric caught on a bramble bush, but she didn't give it much thought beyond a short tug. By the ragged state of her skirts it was clear this was a common practice. He also noticed she was wearing heavy boots instead of slippers. The boots didn't seem to hinder her gracefulness.

Nels scrambled to keep up. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ilta. You're Nels, and he's Petri. There isn't much time. Gran isn't back yet. And we've got to get you inside the house before your uncle gets here."

"How do you know about Uncle Sakari?" Nels asked.

She turned and gave him an impatient look. "Gran is the Silmaillia. And I'm her apprentice, Ilta. Didn't you know?"

"You had a vision about me?" Nels asked, feeling his face heat up yet again. This little girl has more magical power than I do.

"We're wasting time," she said. "Can't this wait until we're inside?"

"I guess so."

Ilta whirled again and left. Nels followed as best he could with Corporal Eriksson assuming the rear. The woods thinned out until Nels found himself in a patch of tall corn. It was part of a vast, well-ordered garden. Corn grew in regimented patches on the outermost edges of the clearing, forming a border. Herbs and roses bloomed in flower beds closer to the house. The house itself rivalled the royal palace in everything but size. It was easy to spot the king's favorite architect's influence in the details on the design of the porch and eaves. The regal three-storey structure sported a fashionable tower on the eastern corner and rows of expensive glass windows reflected the morning sun. A steady breeze bid an eerie welcome with the hundreds of dangling chimes anchored in nearby tree branches. Ilta hadn't paused. He ran to catch up until they came upon a neat circle of person-sized granite stones arranged between the garden and the house. Growing herbs saturated the morning air. He caught the sharp clean smell of mint. His hands were numb with cold in spite of the Captain's floppy coat sleeves. Ilta signaled for them to stop.

That was when he heard the horses.

Ilta motioned for them to get down. "Too late," she whispered. "He's here."

Uncle Sakari's guardsmen rode through the garden without regard to the plants. Their horses were lathered from the long, hard ride. His uncle rode into the dooryard on a tall roan. He was wearing a thick brown leather coat, and his high cheekbones and thick brows were framed by a lush fur collar and matching hat. The resemblance between Nels's uncle and Nels's father ended with the curly hair and straight nose. Where Nels's father was stocky and gruff, Nels's uncle was lean and personable. However, Nels had learned early in life to see underneath the friendly exterior. At the moment, Uncle Sakari's face was far from friendly. It was obvious he'd cruelly forced his mount to continue on beyond her physical capacity to run. The roan mare staggered in her suicidal attempts to please. Her coat was matted with lather.

"Nels!" Uncle Sakari leapt from the saddle and shouted at the house. He had a bundle in his hand. "Stop this pointless game at once!"

The mare fell to her knees and then dropped onto her side, breathing in hoarse gasps. Her eyes rolled, showing their whites, and her hooves continued to spasm as if she were still running. Nels's stomach turned. His mother's warnings took on a new seriousness. He looked away. He couldn't watch the mare kill herself. He wanted to shout to his uncle to command the mare to

stop but didn't. There were Ilta and Sergeant Eriksson to consider.

"Nels! Come to me right now!"

The press of domination magic tingled against Nels's skin as it passed through the air. The shock of it caused a quake of cold fear. His uncle had never gone to such depths to control him before.

"This is foolish. I know you're here. The sergeant confessed everything." Uncle Sakari tossed the bundle into the dirt.

Nels saw it was a hand.

"Come to me now, and I may spare your corporal."

Scrambling to his feet, Nels felt Ilta tug at his sleeve.

"Don't," she said.

"I have to," Nels whispered. Every muscle hurt, and the headache was now the worst it'd ever been. Terror spurred his heart into beating ever faster. Pain slammed him with every rapid beat. It was all he could do to step out onto the path leading to the dooryard. "I'm here."

Uncle Sakari said, "You shouldn't have run. It will only make the punishment worse."

Shrugging, Nels moved closer at a measured pace.

His uncle snapped his fingers and a guardsman that Nels didn't recognize came forward. He pulled at a rope looped around Sergeant Hurme's neck. The three other guardsmen that had helped Nels escape stumbled along behind. Each had their hands tied with a rope that stretched from prisoner to prisoner like a chain. Pale and sweating, Sergeant Hurme hissed in pain as the rope joining him with the others yanked at his wrists. His right arm ended in a stump wrapped in a bloody, dripping rag. Still, he held his head high, and his jaw was set.

"What are you going to do to them?" Nels asked. A knot of dread twisted in his stomach.

"You've always seemed a bright enough boy. It's time you learned a hard lesson," Uncle Sakari said. Another wave of domination magic shoved at the morning air.

"You're not going to-to kill me?" Nels wasn't sure why he asked, but he couldn't help hoping.

"Why would I need to do anything so artless and clumsy?" Uncle Sakari shook his head. "Lieutenant, remove their bounds and return their weapons. No. Not the sergeant. Leave him."

Then Uncle Sakari motioned for Sergeant Hurme and the recently freed guardsmen to approach. "Watch, Nels. Watch and learn." Uncle Sakari stared each of the men in the eyes for a

long moment. The weight of power in the air became unbearable. Then he said, "Gentlemen, there is a traitor among you. Your sergeant. He went against my orders. He led you into a mistake. Redeem yourselves." He brushed dust from his sleeve. "The first to kill him will be promoted."

There came a clatter of swords being drawn. Sergeant Hurme shouted in defiance once before all three swords pierced his body. One of the men twisted his blade free of the sergeant's chest and then drove it through the sergeant's neck. The blade bit deep before Nels closed his eyes. Someone screamed. It was Ilta.

Corporal Eriksson burst from the garden. "No!" He rushed past Nels and went to Sergeant Hurme.

The sergeant's body lay at Nels's feet. Blood stained the dirt everywhere Nels looked. Red stains were splashed on the cooling body of the mare, across Nels's boots and soaked into the bare earth in a growing puddle. Corporal Eriksson knelt next to the body.

"He didn't deserve this," Corporal Eriksson said.

Uncle Sakari said, "It's time to make a decision, corporal."

Ilta emerged. Her eyes were wild and unfocused.

"Please. Don't."

Saara Kelmari rode up to the house at a full gallop. She tugged at her reins, bringing her horse up short and dismounted. Her riding clothes were dusty, and she looked exhausted, if furious. She resembled Ilta, in that her snowy hair was thick, long and curly. Where Ilta's features were spare and angular, Saara's were more rounded. "Just what do you think you're doing, traipsing across my land with a damned army?" Saara's question shot through the morning like an Acracian musket ball. "Get those horses out of my corn!"

Nels's uncle didn't pause. He turned his attention to Saara as if nothing unusual had happened. "I am here to escort His Grace home. As his uncle, it is my duty to see him safely to the palace and return him to his father. The troops are a necessity to assure his safety," Uncle Sakari said. "Much has happened as you can see. I would not have His Grace risk his life a second time." He motioned to the guardsmen.

Nels moved backward as the soldiers closed. Saara stepped between. She laid a hand on the first guardsman's arm, and he halted as if punched. Then his eyes rolled back, and he dropped to the ground. The second guardsman froze in place.

Uncle Sakari gasped. "What did you--"

"Anyone else want to push me?" Saara asked. Her voice was edged steel. "I was being polite, but I'm done with that."

So, let's be clear. I'm perfectly capable of killing the lot of you."

Silence stretched across the dooryard. The fallen guardsman stirred with a moan. No one else moved. Nels waited and listened to insects, birds, and Ilta's sniffles.

Saara stared at Uncle Sakari in disdain but spoke to Nels. "Take Ilta inside, boy. Get her comfortable, and make her a cup of tea. Stay with her until she drinks all of it, do you hear?"

Nels looked from his uncle to Saara and then to Ilta. Ilta appeared to be in shock. "But--"

"Just get her inside," Saara said. "I need to talk to your uncle. In private."

Nodding, Nels took Ilta by the hand. "Come on." The girl followed him without seeing or resisting. She seemed to be in a trance. When they reached the porch steps he had to lead her up one step at a time. Saara didn't resume talking until the door clicked shut behind them. Curiosity getting the better of him, Nels stopped there. Her voice carried through the glass panes in the front of the house.

"Don't lie to me. We both know he's not the crown prince any more. What do you want with him?"

At the reminder, the ache of disgrace was reborn in

Nels's throat. His vision blurred. So many dead. All my fault.
All for nothing.

"My poor brother will be struck to the floor with grief. Such a tragedy."

"An embarrassment, more like. Which will smart less, you think? A dead son? Or a soldier son with a pulse? It occurs to me that it'd be mighty helpful of the Acrasians to murder him. Damned fine reason to send General Bohinen and the others south, conveniently removing all support for certain weapons proposals," Saara said. "Granting the military power is dangerous, after all."

Proposals? What weapons proposals? Nels frowned.

"Only, he didn't die as planned, did he? How much more power will the military have with a prince in their ranks? Particularly a prince that isn't influenced by your spells."

Nels felt a surge of relief. Oh. It was more evidence that he possessed some form of magic---if from his mother's side of the family.

Ilta tugged free, took a deep breath and then blinked. She seemed to be recovering from her fit. He heard her mutter something he didn't quite understand, but he caught the last of it.

"Don't, Gran," Ilta whispered. "Please don't tell

him."

"Why are you saying such things?" Uncle Sakari asked.

"We're here to protect Nels. Not--"

"I'm the Silmailla, not some fool you can spell with Court Speech. Stay that honeyed-wolf's-tongue and listen to me."

Ilta laid a hand on Nels's arm. "This isn't for you to hear." Her eyes were still distant, but she seemed more herself.

"I don't care," Nels whispered back and shrugged her off.

"We should go to the kitchen," Ilta said. "You're supposed to make tea."

"Be quiet." He'd missed his uncle's response.

"That boy's head holds more value than a prop for a crown, you hear me?" Saara asked. "He must live."

Nels felt his mouth fall open.

"What do you mean, old woman?" Uncle Sakari asked, all semblance of civility stripped from his tone.

"Wasn't I plain enough? The Acrasians are on a holy crusade. They won't be reasoned with, charmed, or bought. The humans aren't going to stop until every kainen bearing magic is dead."

"I don't understand what--"

"Let me make it simple for you, then. Kill that boy,

and you kill Eledore's future."

Ilta grew more insistent, pulling Nels away from the windows, but again he yanked free.

"Him? He's a defect. My brother should've had him smothered at birth. Twins are an ill omen. Henrik should've counted himself happy with the girl. Better a girl on the throne than a changeling."

Nels curled a fist around old rage and shame. It had been made clear to him in a myriad of small ways from the time he could first understand, that he owed his life to a foreign midwife---a midwife who'd traveled to Eledore with the Queen's retinue.

"Damn you," he gasped through his teeth. I'm not a changeling.

"Stop it," Saara said.

For an instant Nels wondered whether she'd spoken to him or his uncle. He moved closer to the window and heard a sigh.

"Do as I tell you. You may yet have a country to rule when all is done. Ignore my warnings and pay with more than your life. Henrik learned better than to cross the fates. He was a fool to try. You're no different. The only distinction now is the number of people who will pay for your arrogance."

#

Six

"Are you warm enough?" Uncle Sakari asked.

Nels nodded, careful not to remove his gaze from the road ahead. He didn't even want to glimpse his uncle's expression. The false smile pinned to Nels's lips locked down his hatred but didn't stop his stomach from rebelling. I must control myself. Ilta was watching---he knew it without checking. At the moment, she kept her mare behind Saara's, but if he turned his head just so, he'd catch a glimpse of bright blonde curls.

"That coat can't be very warm. You should've accepted my cloak," Uncle Sakari said. He'd been sickeningly attentive for the entire journey to Jalokivi. The reason why rode on a dapple grey mare five feet to Nels's left. Saara sat in the saddle with her chin held high and her eyes fixed to the way ahead and Nels assumed, the future. He hadn't told her that he'd overheard her predictions. To his knowledge, no one other than Ilta knew. He still didn't understand why Ilta hadn't wanted him to hear. Saara's words gave him hope that everything might be all right after all. He might even be at peace with his new status if it weren't for his uncle, but with each false

declaration of concern, Nels's shoulders tightened until the dull tension became a constant ache. For the moment I must pretend he is sincere, and that he rescued me without provocation. For the moment, I must pretend I didn't notice Saara check every morsel of food and every cup before it touched my lips.

For the moment.

The journey home had been a slow one--made even more tedious by his uncle's cloying concerns. An early winter storm had blasted the last of the leaves from the trees and coated the roads in snow and ice. Soon, the mountain roads would be impassible, and the river would freeze solid, isolating the capitol for two monotonous months. Normally, that would mean weeks of parties, ice skating, skiing and other winter amusements, but Nels wouldn't be attending any of the usual social events. Soldiers didn't consort with society, even soldiers of high birth. He took comfort in the fact that there was only a narrow chance of him seeing the royal catacombs. A soldier like a serf, even one with little magic, was probably considered too useful a resource to discard.

Soldiers have the advantage of being free, at least.

He remembered the myriad of social restrictions and honor codes that Corporal Petri Eriksson had set him to

memorizing. Well, relatively free, anyway.

The only thing preventing complete misery was Ilta. Her sympathetic smiles and the faces she made behind Uncle Sakari's back had kept Nels from grinding his teeth flat. Curious, he wanted to chat more with her. Unfortunately, no matter how often he arranged to be where she was, Saara would appear, casting an impenetrable barrier of herbal lessons or demands for assistance. He wondered at the reason. Is it because I'm now a soldier, and Ilta is to be a healer? The thought set his chest to aching like a bruise. He hadn't heard of any such taboo but that didn't mean one didn't exist. He hadn't associated with healers before, and he was only just now being taught the confines of a soldier's life.

Over the past few weeks, Corporal Eriksson had begun to rectify that lack. There was a great deal to commit to memory before the initiation---long passages of history about the Old Ones, the appropriate charms, and protections. Thanks to Eriksson's tutelage, Nels now understood why soldiers were required to bury the dead. He also had begun to learn why there was so much fear surrounding blood and death. According to soldiers' lore, the Old Ones didn't walk alone. Still, no one had seen revenants in centuries. Therefore, Nels found it difficult to focus on demons and restless dead. It was hard to

believe in such things when he had other more important concerns. Concerns with the living.

What will father say?

The stench of sewage and coal-smoke reached his nose long before he sighted Jaloviki's granite walls sparkling on the tree-crowned hill. Inns and alehouses lined the road, and ever larger numbers of common folk retreated from the path as his uncle the Duke, Nels, the Silmaillia and the Duke's two hundred mounted Royal Guard rode past.

At least the headaches that had plagued him for a week had finally receded. Yet, sharp thoughts pricked at the tender insides of Nels's skull. I'm not even worthy of a healer anymore. He heard a cough and turned to look behind him. It was Corporal Eriksson. His eyes shot a warning to Nels's right.

"Is something wrong?" Uncle Sakari asked.

Uncle is watching., Nels thought. You're brooding. Stop it. For the hundredth time that day, he pushed the fur-trimmed sleeves of his coat up to his elbows. The material crept back over his knuckles with the rhythm of Loimuta's gate. He considered binding the sleeves up but knew what it would look like if he tried. Leave it be. Don't show uncle that he's getting to you. "Thank you for having the braid removed from Captain Karpanen's coat," Nels said. He tried not to smile when

Uncle Sakari twitched at the dead man's name.

"A Private's uniform would've been more suitable," Uncle Sakari said. "Imagine. Wearing used soldier's clothes." The air of disgust was apparent when he used the word 'soldier.' "But there wasn't time to have one made. Your father is very concerned. He was most insistent upon the promptness of your return."

Nels grit his teeth. Bad enough that I'm returning in disgrace but as a private? It was only another of Uncle's games. Ignore him. The anonymity of the uniform proved of some use. There were no outbursts of shock or grief as the column rode past. Reminding himself that Ilta was near, he was able to concentrate on keeping his chin up and his breathing even. By the time they reached the first city gate Nels's stomach swarmed like an entire unkindness of ravens. He wasn't sure if he was hungry or wanted to be sick. Since they hadn't stopped for lunch, it was probably a combination of both. What will father say?

Is he really my father?

A lieutenant of the Royal Guard approached Uncle Sakari, and after a whispered consultation, the lieutenant moved to the front of the line, muttering orders. Two Guardsmen remained behind, and another dashed ahead with what Nels assumed

was a message to the palace. As Loimuta's hooves clattered on Jalokivi's narrow, cobbled streets, Nels was overwhelmed by a feeling of unease. It was hard to remember to breathe. The brightly-painted buildings, the red, green, yellow and blue doors and windows that had once seemed cheerful and friendly only served to hide the city's judging face behind a garish carnival mask.

The Nels who rode through Market Square two months ago is dead. Who am I now?

Changeling. Defect.

The column reached the palace gate, and the lieutenant barked a halt. A Guardsman waited at the open portcullis, and Nels recognized the private who had ridden ahead by his auburn hair and square face. The private approached the lieutenant, and the lieutenant, in turn, passed along his message to Uncle Sakari. Risking a glimpse at his uncle, Nels studied the full mouth nestled between the brown moustache and goatee. He couldn't read his uncle's expression. Nels turned away, pushing back the captain's hat and leaning forward to peer through the portcullis, but the courtyard was empty.

"You are to proceed directly to your apartments. We'll supper in my rooms tonight and then discuss--"

Nels's heart stumbled and pitched into his stomach.

"We aren't going to see father?" He winced as his voice cracked.

How could I sound so calm when I killed Lucian and not now?

"Your audience is scheduled for tomorrow," Uncle Sakari said. His eyes were hard. Cold.

Defect. Changeling. Nels thought, reading his uncle's scorn. "You said father was concerned."

Uncle Sakari shrugged. "He is aware we have arrived safely and is therefore, much relieved. He is in the Chapter House with the Council of Nobles and cannot be disturbed."

On impulse, Nels kicked Loimuta's sides, urging him through the cluster of Royal Guardsmen.

"What do you think you are you doing?" Uncle Sakari asked.

The lieutenant maneuvered into Loimuta's path, and Loimuta reared, kicking the lieutenant's mount in the chest. Organized lines shattered into a confusion of shrieking horses. The lieutenant's gelding hesitated, and Loimuta bolted past.

"Get that creature under control, you irresponsible--!"

Nels let Loimuta have his head. The horse obliged with a burst of speed Nels hadn't thought the gelding possessed. Loimuta plunged through the portcullis, the hollow clank of his iron-shod hooves echoed in the tiny space before they reached

the courtyard. He galloped through the courtyard gates---not slowing until they'd reached the arched iron-fenced west entrance of the cathedral. Nels leapt from the saddle onto the steps, not bothering to secure Loimuta's reins.

"Nels! Come back here at once!"

Nels shoved at the main doors with all his might, their ponderous weight gave away grudgingly. Then he rushed through the Nave, past the Choir and through the South Transept to the Chapter House. Fury and grief blunted the peaceful scent of burning frankincense, the beautiful vaulted ceilings, rows of white marble pillars and statuary. Startled courtiers, priestesses, priests, and clerks blocked his path until they recognized his face. Then they retreated with ashen faces.

"Damn you, boy!"

Upon reaching the passage leading to the Chapter House, Nels assumed a more dignified pace. Head high, he forced his way through those loitering there, stomped up the stairs and through the open doorway. His uncle's distant protests were cut off by the slamming of the door. Those trapped inside fell silent---except his father and the short, fat noble he conferred with.

Built by Nels's ancestors, the Great Mother's cathedral was more than five hundred years old, but the Chapter

House was new. Laid out in an octagon, the small room had yet to inherit an air of the importance from the proceedings occurring within its walls. Half-finished frescos graced eight niches. Four of the stained glass windows were incomplete. They were temporarily covered with parchment, permitting access to cold drafts and insects. Wooden arches naked of paint formed the vaulted ceiling. The posts were carved with intricate swirls and details. Rows of benches---mere wooden planks balanced on stone steps---bordered the confines of the room. Every bench supported the weight of nobility draped in furs, finery, and at the moment, disbelief.

Nels felt the door latch turn against the small of his back. Muffled curses seeped through the wood like a blood stain. He hoped to speak to his father before Uncle Sakari could force the door open, but the King was absorbed in his discussion. Only the top of his dark head was visible. Nels heard a gasp.

To the King's left, the Queen's moon-thistle hair shone in graceful ringlets drooping past her shoulders. After Captain Karpanen's revelation, it was reassuring to see that paleness reflected like a mirror, to see the obvious similarities in the line of her nose and the tilt of her eyes. Grief glistened raw on her beautiful face.

"Oh, Nels, darling. What have you done?" his mother

asked, covering a sob with a delicate hand.

Involved in their father's discussion, Suvi peeked over the top of the nobleman's bobbing head. Where Nels favored their mother, Suvi took after their father---or had always seemed to. Her unruly brown hair had been tamed into curls, and Nels saw her eyes change from black to a wide white before she caught herself and changed them back.

The portly nobleman turned, and Nels recognized Baron Hiltunen as the man scurried off.

Move. Now. Nels took a deep breath. The scent of raw wood filled his lungs as he traversed the room. The King's face was unreadable. Feeling the weight of every stare, Nels forgot to breathe. He tried not to notice how like Uncle Sakari his father looked with the new moustache and goatee. He tried not to think about the door opening behind him. He focused on getting across the room without tripping---which wasn't easy since his legs had gone numb. He had imagined many variations of his father's reaction, but none of them had included silence. Time gaped with possibility. When he reached the bench where his family sat, Nels's mind instantly voided all the things he'd thought to say. Instead, he unknotted the braid securing the saber to his side and knelt. Using both hands he placed the Captain's blade at his father's feet.

"Captain Veli Ari Karpanen is gone." Nels paused. "Another will take his place." He followed the form without shaming himself. He was relieved that he'd managed that much properly at least. Still, he didn't have the nerve to look his father in the face.

He heard his mother choke. His heart slammed in his ears two, three, even six times. Then his father finally shifted in his seat. A loud wooden squeak pierced the air. Standing, he grabbed Nels's shoulders. Nels flinched with the violence of it. His mother sniffed. Nels still couldn't bring himself to look up. The hands gripping him emanated strength, maybe even love. Blood rushed through his veins. The room seemed to swell and fade to the beat of the thundering in his ears. He took a deep breath and braved his father's face.

Black eyes burned with an overwhelming rage. The ground collapsed, and suddenly the only thing keeping Nels upright was the grip of bruising fingers.

King Henrik Ilmari bent close. "You. Are not. My. Son," he whispered between clenched teeth.

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