

Chapter  
“Heir’s burden”

I woke with a dry mouth and the dull ache behind my eyes that only Mason's kind of night leaves behind.

The light leaking through the shutters was soft and gold — not yet harsh, not yet loud. For a moment, I thought I might get away with lying still, letting the world wait. But Davenrest doesn't wait. Not for lords, not for sons, and sure as hell not for the ones who drank too deep the night before.

I sat up slowly. The room smelled of sweat, ale, and smoke — a tavern's ghost still clinging to me. My boots were half under the bed. My tunic was on the chair, tossed in a heap like it had tried to undress itself.

Mason would still be snoring wherever he fell. Gods know where. Or with who.

I rubbed my eyes, stood, and stretched until my back cracked.  
Another day. Another chance to disappoint Father.

My father, Elias, is an asshole by most standards — but a fair one, I'll give him that. He's the kind of man who doesn't waste words on praise, especially not for sons born third in line. In twenty-two years, I can't remember him saying anything kind to me that wasn't followed by a command or a warning.

That's not bitterness. That's just how he is. And I suppose that's what I get for being the middle blade in a rack full of sharper ones.

Then there's Mason — my younger brother by three years and somehow twice the trouble. He's nineteen, loud, reckless, always in someone's bed or someone's coin purse. But gods, can the bastard drink. I like to think I can hold my own, but last night he drank me into the floor like I was a green squire. My skull's still pounding from it.

My fucking head is pounding. I need a little hair of the dog — it's always worked for me before. A mouthful of last night's poison to chase away the echo in my skull. It's not smart, but it's tradition, and like most traditions in this house, it sticks around because it works well enough to keep surviving.

The room was plain, like everything in Davenrest — stone walls, oak beams, and a narrow window that let in just enough morning to make my headache worse. A half-finished sword leaned against the far wall, a few rough sketches still spread across the desk beside it. I'd meant to finish it two nights ago. Then Mason showed up with two bottles and that smile of his that always meant trouble.

I crossed the room and pulled open the cabinet beside my bed. There was still a finger of dark liquor in the bottle — bitter, sharp, just enough to burn the fog from my head. I drank it straight, wincing as it hit.

Behind me, the door creaked open.

“Elijah?” came a voice — soft, uncertain.

It was Mira. She froze, mid-step. Young, maybe just past twenty, with soft auburn hair braided loosely down her back and wide, intelligent eyes the color of river clay. Her dress was the usual plain brown of a house servant, apron pulled tight at the waist—but the way she carried herself made it seem more like a uniform than a burden.

“I—I didn’t mean to intrude, I was just—Lord Elias said to wake you—”

She stopped short.

I turned halfway, still naked, and her jaw practically hit the floor. Her eyes dropped — not to my face — and stayed there a second too long. I didn’t say a word. Neither did she.

She flushed so red I thought she might faint, stammered something that could’ve been an apology, and spun on her heel so fast her braid nearly smacked the doorframe.

I snorted and reached for my trousers. It wasn’t the first time that happened, and knowing this keep, it wouldn’t be the last. Still, she was nice to look at. Shame about the timing.

The great hall of Davenmore Keep stood quiet, the early light filtering through tall, narrow windows, painting silver lines across the flagstone floor. Smoke from the hearth drifted lazily toward the rafters, carrying the scent of oak and ash.

Twenty paces down the center aisle, beneath the towering iron chandelier, stood Elias — our father — clad in a dark tunic and heavy leather belt, hands clasped behind his back, posture like a statue carved from command itself. The hall may have been quiet, but the weight of his presence was enough to silence a feast.

At his right side stood Ser Jameson, father’s most trusted advisor — not a knight, though he wore a sword. Slender, bald, with eyes sharp as broken glass and a voice like dry parchment. He rarely spoke, but when he did, no one forgot it. Rumors swirled about his past — a whisper of poison here, a vanished heir there — but Elias trusted him, which meant the rest of us had to tolerate his shadow.

The main hall was already full when I stepped inside.

Elias didn’t even turn, but his voice cut through the air like cold steel.

“You’re late.”

Just two words. No anger. No surprise. Just that tone — the one he used when he wanted you to feel like you’d already failed before the day began.

I didn’t bother explaining. He wouldn’t care if I’d been dragged in by wild dogs or tripped over Mason’s damn boot on the stairs.

My father was an asshole. Not loud, not cruel in the way the common folk use the word — but methodical. Controlled. He wielded silence better than most men wielded swords, and his expectations had the weight of a castle wall pressing down on your back.

He didn’t punish with fists. He punished with pauses — with the slight narrowing of his eyes, the shift of his mouth that told you you’d fallen short again. Elias Davenmore didn’t need to raise his voice. He just looked at you like you should’ve been someone else.

And gods help you if he thought you could’ve been better.

I kept walking and offered a half-hearted shrug.

“Blame Mason. He had me out drinking again.”

Derrick sat nearest the hearth, straight-backed, armored, his jaw set tight. There was no smile, no warmth — just that carved-stone calm he wore when he was trying not to let the world see he was already bracing for a fight.

Rolland was at the far end of the table, near the ledgers and parchment stacks. He gave me a tired look over the rim of his goblet. If I knew him, he’d already been up for hours going over numbers — likely calculating the cost of whatever storm Father was about to summon.

And then there was Mason, sprawled on a bench like a drunk cat in the sun. His shirt was half-unlaced, eyes bloodshot, hair a tangled mess that looked like it had been slept on by a wolf. He raised a flask in my direction with a lazy grin.

“I don’t recall dragging you anywhere,” he mumbled. “You followed me like a loyal mutt.”

I took the empty seat across from him and slouched into it, already regretting whatever this meeting was about.

Because Elias only summoned us when something important was coming.

And it never meant anything good.

Mason smirked from his chair without even opening his eyes. “You were the one who said just one more bottle.”

“That was after your third,” I said.

He let out a low chuckle. “Still stood straighter than you by the end of it.”

“You passed out on the tavern floor.”

“Gracefully.”

Roland sighed and muttered, “Mother would be so proud.”

Derrick didn’t say a word. He never did when Mason and I went off. Just clenched his jaw a little tighter and waited for it to end.

Father finally turned toward us, the flicker of irritation behind his eyes barely visible but unmistakable.

“I didn’t gather my sons for banter,” he said, voice like the edge of a whetstone. “Now shut your mouths and listen.”

And just like that, the mood was gone.

He stood there for a moment longer, hands clasped behind his back, eyes like storm clouds pressed into steel. Then he stepped toward the wall where a wide, worn map of the southern provinces hung on the stone.

“There’s an opportunity before us,” Elias said. “House Veralt has reached out. They’ve been our allies for decades-but with tensions rising in the north they want to strengthen that bond. They’re offering us something more than permanent. Something built on trust.”

He turned slowly, surveying the four of us like a blacksmith inspecting a set of blades, checking which one would bend, and which would break.

“A marriage.”

The word dropped like a hammer on stone. None of us moved. No one dared speak first. That was the way of it with Elias — speak too soon, and you played into his hand.

“One of you will wed a daughter of House Veralt before the first frost,” he continued. “They want more than words and banners—they want blood, name, and legacy tied to ours. The girl is young, healthy, and... not unpleasant to look at.”

Mason perked up at that.

Father ignored him.

Elias let the silence coil, then spoke — slow, sharp, final.

“The only question now,” he said, “is which of you I will choose. One of you will lay down his freedom, bind himself to a stranger, and carry this house’s future on his back — not for love, but for loyalty. For legacy. For Davenmore.”

Derrick was the first to speak — of course he was.

“They lost a garrison last month,” he said, eyes still on the map. “Small skirmish with that rebel holdout near the Red Hills. Rebels are gone now, but they took twenty-three Veralt men with them. From what I’ve seen, their soldiers aren’t the best-trained — but they can hold a line if pushed.”

Roland chimed in next, not bothering to look up from whatever figures he was already scrawling in his ledger. “They’ve still got access to the northern silver roads, and half the salt from the coastal flats passes through their markets. If they fall to a stronger house, we’ll have to pay twice for grain this winter.”

Mason leaned back in his chair, stretching with a groan. “They also serve the worst ale I’ve ever had. It tastes like goat piss and burnt bread.”

“You’d drink it again,” I muttered.

“Only if I was already too drunk to care.”

Father didn’t flinch at any of it. He just waited, letting us speak, letting us circle like hounds while he held the leash.

I said nothing. Not yet.

Because I knew what was coming — or at least, what it meant. One of us was going to be tied to this deal, locked into a marriage not for love or lust or even blood, but for politics. And as much as I hated to admit it, I knew damn well it could be me.

I didn’t want to get married.

Not to some stranger from a house that needed our swords and silver. Not to a woman I’d be expected to bed and breed and tolerate for the sake of alliance. I hadn’t even figured out what I wanted yet — except to keep my freedom, my forge, and the option to walk away when I felt like it.

But I didn’t say that out loud.

Instead, I crossed my arms and said, “Feels colder this morning.”

Mason grunted. “Great. Here comes six months of wet socks and chapped balls.”

Roland nodded once. “It’s going to be a long winter.”

Father let the silence stretch — just long enough to make us wonder if he was enjoying it. Maybe he was.

Sir Jameson, standing at his side like a shadow dressed in steel-trimmed velvet, leaned down and whispered something into his ear — too soft for any of us to catch.

Elias didn’t nod. Didn’t acknowledge it at all.

Then he turned back to the map and spoke, like he was stating a fact, not reshaping someone's life.

"Derrick."

The name hit the room like a hammer. Simple. Final.

Derrick didn't flinch. Didn't move.

"You're the eldest," Elias said. "You carry my name and this house's future. It's time you made that clear to the rest of the realm. House Veralt stands strong. Their hold is strong, their lands secure, their name respected. But strength alone doesn't keep the wolves at bay. They want a bond that lasts. They want blood tied to ours. And that bond... is you."

He turned toward Derrick, tone colder now. "She'll be brought to Davenrest before the first frost. You'll wed her under our roof, raise your heirs under mine, and make it clear to every house between here and the coast that the Davenmore line doesn't scatter. It roots. We do not drift in the wind. We choose our ground... and we build legacies upon it."

Still, Derrick said nothing. No protest. No agreement. Just that same unblinking stare — not fear, not anger, but something deeper. Something like duty twisted too tight in the chest.

I glanced at him. If he was bothered, he didn't show it. But I knew my brother. I knew that kind of silence. Elias had just shackled him to a future he never asked for — and expected him to wear it like armor.

Roland flipped a page in his ledger, his eyes already measuring the long-term gain.

Mason raised an eyebrow at me and mouthed, "thank the gods."

And me?

I was relieved.

But only for a moment.

Because in this house, one decision always came with another close behind.

And Father wasn't finished.

Elias gave us one more glance — not a look of satisfaction, just calculation. The next order was already loaded.

"You'll leave by midday."

That pulled my eyes back to him.

He didn't pause.

"Elijah. Derrick. Mason. You'll take twenty of our vanguard and head north. You'll arrive at Veralt within nine days, gods willing. Escort the girl. Bring her back without delay."

He stepped forward, the firelight casting lines across his face like old cracks in hard stone.

"She is not a gift. She is not a guest. She is to be your wife, and the key to securing our alliance with House Veralt. Treat her with the respect her station commands."

Mason sat up straighter. "You're sending all three of us?"

"Yes."

"And Roland?"

Elias didn't hesitate. "Roland stays. I can't have all of my heirs dying if something goes wrong."

There it was — plain as anything. Not affection. Just arithmetic.

He went on, voice cool as ever. "Roland will be here collecting coin while the rest of you spend it. We still have merchants to pay, stock to move, and silver to manage. This marriage won't keep us warm through winter unless we make it work."

Roland gave a slight, almost smug nod. Of course he agreed. He probably preferred paper to people.

I looked at Derrick. He was still silent, still unmoved. Maybe he expected it. Maybe he didn't care. Or maybe he just swallowed it the way he always did — like another sword to bear.

And Mason...

He was grinning again. He loved a good ride. Especially if it involved nobles, politics, and a chance to flirt with someone he shouldn't.

Me?

I wasn't sure how I felt yet. Escorting a stranger home to marry my brother wasn't the worst task I'd ever been given... but something about it sat wrong in my gut. Like a weight that wasn't mine, but I'd still have to carry.

Elias turned back toward the map. "Gear up. Eat something. You ride before the sun climbs too high."

And just like that, the meeting was over.