

The decoration of the floor tiles in the council room had never been of interest to me, but as the council meeting stretched on, I found myself entertained by the patterns imprinted on the floor. Whoever had spent time designing them must have been either very talented or deranged.

Standing up in a futile attempt to look more important, Lord Oswald was addressing the entire room, swinging his hands around to make his point, droning on without end.

“I propose we conduct an experiment,” he declared on in his raspy and squeaky voice that echoed in the silent room, “on whether or not the shipments for newly accumulated seeds for the recently cleared lands should be moved through Mendenwall into Northern or Southern Carthya-” Lord Oswald’s eyes landed on me and he came to a stop. “Forgive me, Your Majesty, am I boring you?”

I huffed. “Yes. You are.”

Lord Oswald looked offended and the other regents exchanged disapproving glances, which I thought was unfair since it seemed no one in the room was actually interested in what he was saying.

Lord Oswald puffed out his chest. “I can assure you, Your Majesty, that this is of uttermost importance.” He opened his mouth to continue, but I raised my hand to silence him.

“And *I* can assure *you*, that what’s more important is the king of Mendenwall, who will be arriving today in several hours to discuss matters more crucial than the trading route of seeds. I’ve been sitting here since sunrise today and I’ve found nothing about this meeting interesting nor relevant for my presence. I believe it’s time for me to prepare for my guests.”

Before anyone could object, I pushed myself off my throne and headed out the door and into the hallway, leaving the regents murmuring behind me. I shifted the heavy crown on my head, still unfamiliar with the weight of it. Whoever had thought about golden crowns must have wanted those wearing them to suffer. The amount of back and neck pains I had from my crown rivaled those of Kerwyn, my high chamberlain.

Soft footsteps followed me and Kerwyn reached my side as I headed towards the royal quarters to get ready.

“If you’re going to scold me on leaving, don’t bother,” I told him. “I nearly fell asleep in there. I’m not going back.”

Kerwyn chuckled. “I would do no such thing. Rather, I wish to thank you for allowing an opening for me to escape as well.”

I raised my brow and laughed. “You, of all people, I would have expected to be against me leaving.”

“Such trivial matters are not something that as king you are required for and I found them rather unnecessary,” he agreed. “Especially with an important meeting up ahead, where you will without a doubt discuss similar subjects with the king himself. You have not seen King Humphrey since the war and such a meeting should not be taken lightly by the regents.”

We headed up a winding set of stairs leading up to the higher levels of the castle.

“Carthya is recovering well,” I said, a familiar weight pulling at my heart as I thought of all the lives the war had claimed. “Much better than I imagined in only a year.”

“They are being led by an excellent king,” Kerwyn replied with a somber smile, which I returned. Sometimes I wasn’t so sure if I was as good a king as he made me to be.

We soon came to the royal quarters and with a nod at the four guards outside the door, I stepped through, closing the door after Kerwyn. I made my way to the wardrobe and began changing into a more formal outfit, cursing as I became tangled in the laces of my shirt. Kerwyn waited patiently by the doorway, keeping his eyes averted. I wondered why it was that the wealthier you are, the more complicated your clothes become.

“King Humphrey will be arriving in a few hours,” I announced once my clothes were on. I buckled my sword belt once more and walked over to my desk, littered with papers, and flicked through them. “We’ll have a private dinner and then continue onto a more formal meeting to discuss

matters of new treaties, borders, and final war reparations, among other things. Am I forgetting something? A gift card or welcoming gift perhaps?"

Kerwyn smiled and shook his head in response, then walked forward to fix the collar of my shirt. "I am still finding it hard to believe that you're the same boy I knew all those years ago. You have changed so greatly, yet stayed the same."

"It's true that my tricks never left me," I told him quietly. "But I am far from the person I once was."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment. He knew that I was still struggling with coming to terms with all the change I'd had to go through in the last year.

I'd had to go through the transformation of going from orphan, to prince, to king in only two weeks and after that, I'd had to worry about the pirates and then the raging war. Only now that it was all over I had found time to go through everything in my mind and realize just how different my life had become.

"How is the preparation for the dinner going?" I said, changing the subject. Kerwyn caught my need for a distraction.

"Warm foods are being prepared as we speak. The table has been set and meeting papers are being arranged. Everything is in order."

"And the council meeting? Is it still going on?" If so, I was glad I wasn't there. I wasn't sure how long I would have lasted before falling asleep. It was a miracle I had survived as long as I had.

"I believe it is. I will have to disperse the regents to allow the area to be prepared for the meeting later today."

I smiled at him. "I'll let you get to it then."

He gave my collar one last tug and bowed. "My king," he said and hurried off, leaving me to prepare for our guests.

King Humphrey and his escort arrived several hours later. I stood at the castle gates, with Imogen next to me, wearing a stunning, milky gown, her

hair falling gracefully down her back. Kerwyn and Mott stood nearby, watching patiently at our arriving guests.

I'd made sure to keep Fink busy today since he wasn't quite grasping the proper etiquette of meeting with royals. I knew he would have been bored if he had taken part in the meeting, so for the moment he was in a sword-fighting lesson with his instructor and hadn't been too bothered for missing this event.

As we waited in silence for our guests to arrive, I shifted in my clothes, tugging at the collar of my shirt that seemed to be trying to strangle me.

Imogen grabbed and stilled my hand, then fixed my shirt. "You must stop doing that," she told me, her voice firm. "You have no idea how long it takes to straighten all the wrinkles."

"Well maybe if the shirt wasn't made so tight I wouldn't have to wrinkle it," I grumbled back, but held myself back from shifting them again. While Imogen by no means spent her time straightening my clothes, she still remembered the work she had had to do at Farthenwood and had a unique respect for those who worked at the castle. It was one of the many things I loved about her.

King Humphrey's entourage rode through the gates in multiple carriages, encrusted with jewels, all rimmed with gold and silver, rubies melded into the corners, shining in the midday sunlight. I turned my attention to the largest carriage in the middle as it came to a stop.

The driver stepped off and hurried to open the carriage door and the king stepped out.

He had gained several pounds in the last year, his stomach bulging over the rim of his belt. A sword hung from the belt and I was taken back to the time years ago when I had challenged a duel against that very sword. A smile rose onto my face at the memory. I'd lost the fight, but I'd given the king a wound on the thigh, which I counted as a win itself.

I stepped forward. "Welcome back to Drylliad, King Humphrey. I hope the journey wasn't too awful?"

By the looks of him massaging his bottom, it was most likely a bumpy ride and he said so as well. As we moved inside, Kerwyn and Mott followed

loosely while Hupmhrey's accompanying advisors followed after. We exchanged formal greetings and more details about the journey; Imogen asking most of the questions, which I appreciated since my interest was wavering after the first minute or so.

We moved to the dining area where the normally long table had been switched with a shorter one. A golden tablecloth covered the entire length of it, draping off both ends of the table, silverware sat along the edges, waiting for us to sit down and small bouquets decorated the area.

We dispersed into our seats; King Humphrey and I taking place at the ends, while the others settled elsewhere. Servants streamed in, placing the first round of salad on our plates. I noticed Imogen smiling at the servant serving her and felt my heart swell.

King Humphrey took it upon himself to introduce those of his entourage seated around the table.

Along with him were several advisors from his court. Lady Ophelia, a tall woman with scarlet locks and an arrogant look in her eyes sat on his right. Two male advisors sat to his left, frowning and calculating the foods as they were brought in. I felt an immediate dislike for them all. I'd never much liked nobles or regents, and seeing these strangers look down upon the hard work of the servants made me clench my fists.

The fourth member of the party, who sat next to Lady Ophelia, appeared more reserved than his fellow advisors. He introduced himself as Sir Anwir.

Contrary to the outerwear of his fellow advisors and their intricately patterned clothes, he wore a simple light-brown shirt and vest I might see on a visiting noble, though I could make out a few golden patterns blending into the material. His hair was combed neat, and I wondered if it had taken as much time as the castle hairdressers had with mine. I was sure they still held a grudge on me for the number I'd done to my hair while sneaking off to the pirates.

He kept his head bowed in respect rather than held high in arrogance, which I found peculiar and rather admirable. The only other regents I

knew to act like this were my recently appointed regents Harlowe and Tobias.

“Congratulations on the engagement,” King Humphrey said once introductions were over.

A large smile broke onto my face and I grasped Imogen’s hand and beamed at her. Several months earlier I’d taken her on a trip back to her hometown, where, without her knowing, I’d asked for permission to marry her from her mother; her only living relative since Imogen’s father had died. After receiving her blessing, I’d proposed formally to Imogen in front of a receding sunset, a moment shared privately between the two of us. I’d proposed in the dungeons of Conner’s estate a year earlier but wanted to do it the right way – the way she deserved. To my greatest delight and confusion, she had said yes.

“Thank you,” Imogen replied. “A more formal invitation will be given later today as you leave.”

One of King Humphrey’s rare smiles crossed over his face. “I will be sure to be there. And since we can expect little princes and princesses to be running around in a short time, perhaps we can discuss an arranged marriage with one of my grandchildren when we move to more official subjects?”

At the mention of children, I’d nearly choked on my water and dissolved into coughs. Imogen blushed beside me.

It wasn’t that I’d never thought about having children, in fact, I was looking forward to one day being able to have a family with Imogen, but we weren’t nearly ready for that, and we weren’t even married yet.

Getting my coughing under control I shook my head when his suggestion for marriage sunk in. “We appreciate the offer, but we’d rather let our children choose their partners when the time comes.”

I knew from experience that arranged marriages were horrible. Had we not found a solution that allowed both Amarinda and me to break off the betrothal, we would have had to marry. It would have been a happy marriage, but not one of choice. I wouldn’t force my children into that situation.

Imogen was nodding as well. “It’s very generous of you, but as Jaron said, we’ll let them decide that for themselves.”

King Humphrey accepted the refusal and dug into his salad once more.

Our plates were fetched and the next was being served. Sir Anwir readied his plate to be taken away and his hand bumped his fork, knocking it onto the floor with a clang.

As he pushed away from the table to pick it up, his chair collided with a servant moving behind him, sending him and the food tumbling toward the ground. Sir Anwir reacted fast, grabbing the server and food, successfully stopping either of them from hitting the ground.

Steadying the server, Sir Anwir handed him the dish.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Sir Anwir apologized. “I should have looked before I backed, forgive me.”

The server flushed and assured him that it was fine. He then hurried to me and placed the food down, apologizing for the delay, but I brushed it off and before I could ask him if he was alright, he was gone.

We made idle conversation and Lady Ophelia began telling a story of her grandfather when I took the first bite of my food. It was chicken, tender and perfectly seasoned, covered in brown gravy.

But there was something wrong.

There was a bitter taste to the meat. It could have been too much salt or a miscalculation of another spice, but warning bells began ringing in my head.

Keeping my face neutral, I pushed the meat to the side of my mouth and mimicked swallowing, but made sure to swallow nothing. I nodded along with the story, weary of everyone immediately. I brought my goblet to my mouth and pushed the meat piece from my mouth inside while mimicking swallowing once more. I didn’t want to take the risk of my goblet being poisoned as well.

Whatever was in the food was either a drug or a poison. There was no way to know how fast it would have started working had I eaten the meat piece, but since it hadn’t been tasteless and would be easily discernible if you were paying attention, it was probably expected to do its job quickly.

I grabbed Imogen's hand under the table as she was about to take her first bite and gave it a hard squeeze. She glanced my way and I smiled at her and drew her close so I could whisper in her ear.

"Don't eat," I warned her, keeping the smile on my face, fearing that her dish may be poisoned as well. She must have seen my effort to keep my expression happy, because she smiled at my words, seemingly unbothered, before moving away and focusing on the discussion, setting her fork down. She didn't take another bite.

I knew I had to hurry. Since I couldn't get the warning to any of the others without revealing my knowledge of the poison, in case the poisoner was in the room, I needed to identify the toxin as fast as possible and find a way to reverse it.

A sudden woozy feeling washed over me and I realized that somehow a small amount of the drug must have reached my stomach despite my efforts to prevent it.

I had to act immediately.

"Excuse me for a moment," I interrupted Lady Ophelia. Everyone turned towards me. "I think the food might have been undercooked, so I urge you to refrain from eating any more. I'll be back in a second."

I walked fast out of the room, swaying only slightly. Nausea began building up, rising in my throat and the back of my eyes began throbbing. Even the small amount I'd swallowed of whatever had been on the chicken was strong enough to be affecting me and it worried me.

I rushed up the stairs, ignoring the pressure building up in my head and headed to the royal quarters. The guards stood up straighter when I approached and I came to a halt in front of them, struggling to keep my eyes focused.

"Let whoever comes after me inside, but be on guard and ready to come in if I need help. Act normal, don't tip them off," I ordered. The guards exchanged glances, but before they could ask me what I meant, I slipped inside the royal wing.

The poison could instead be a knockout drug, meant to put me to sleep, either immediately or after a few minutes. That must be why I was feeling

so tired. Without a doubt whoever had administered the drug had been prepared to finish off the job once I was unconscious and if they had been in the dining room, they would see me leave and most likely follow me here. I had to be ready for that.

I only wondered what would have happened if I hadn't gotten up from the dinner table? Would I have simply collapsed, or would the drug have eventually killed me?

Whoever had poisoned my food was either positive that the poison would do the job for them, or in the case of it being a drug, they would have been prepared to give themselves up attempting to kill me in front of all those people.

My sword was strapped to my belt but I knew that I would need a more maneuverable weapon. Knowing the sword would only get in the way, I unbuckled it and slid it under my bed to avoid tripping on it.

I then reached into my bedside drawer and withdrew a dagger, holding it tightly in my grasp, fighting to clear the black spots from my vision. I quickly gathered some pillows and arranged them underneath my covers, to make it seem like I was laying underneath. I then moved to a bookshelf next to the door and concealed myself behind the side opposite the door, waiting for whoever would walk through the door.

My heart pounded in my chest, blood rushing through my ears. Sweat beaded my forehead, but I couldn't be sure if it was from anticipation or the drug. Adrenaline pumped through me, clearing my head slightly.

I slowed down my breathing and listened. Not a minute later I heard the door handle turn and the door open and close, the key in the lock turning and clicking. Trapping me inside with whoever had entered.

I didn't dare peek from behind the side of the bookshelf, but I listened as the unknown visitor moved away, heading toward the bed. As they stepped into view, I recognized the neatly trimmed brown hair and identically bland colored clothing.

Sir Anwir.

It all made sense.

There would have been no way for him to administer the poison before the dinner since we had gone to the dining room directly from where King Humphrey had arrived with his entourage, so the poison would have been administered during dinner..

Sir Anwir must have tripped my servant earlier on purpose and when catching him, poisoned my food. Since he hadn't been holding a bottle of any kind, the poison must have been a powder or something similar. It would have been easy to hide in his hand until he could sprinkle some of it onto the chicken and gravy, where it would be disguised with the other spices.

Then, once I would inevitably grow sleepy from the drug and excuse myself, he could follow soon after with the defence of the chicken being undercooked, which was what I had said to be my excuse. No one would suspect a thing and he would finish the job before anyone knew something was wrong.

It wasn't the best plan, but a good one nonetheless, and it had happened right beneath our noses without us suspecting a thing. I wouldn't have thought anything was wrong had I not tasted something different about my chicken. The plan would have worked otherwise. My gut twisted thinking about what might have happened.

The question remained of whether or not King Humphrey was aware of the plan to assassinate me, but I doubted it. He didn't want war with Carthya. Either way, it was a concern for later. First, I had to deal with the situation at hand.

From the folds of his clothes, Sir Anwir pulled out a knife, glinting in the light streaming in through the windows. He crept close to my bed where the pillows were tucked underneath the covers to create the illusion of my sleeping form.

Without hesitation, he plunged the knife where my head would be hidden. I cringed. That would have been a rude awakening.

Sir Anwir drove the knife down in rapid succession, then stilled and ripped the covers off to reveal the pillows. Before he could react, I surged

forward, placing my knife at his throat and grabbing his knife arm by the wrist. Sir Anwir froze.

“That’s a rather rude way to treat my pillows,” I said and he stiffened, “I doubt they’ve done anything to upset you.”

“King Jaron,” Sir Anwir hissed.

“Alive and well.”

“Not for long,” he warned.

I opened my mouth to call out to the guards when Sir Anwir grabbed my knife hand with his free one, and yanked the knife from his throat. He then twisted around and kned me in the gut and my grip loosened on his wrist.

The knife came at me fast and I jumped to the side to avoid it, the blade cutting into my shirt, narrowly missing my stomach. My world swam once again, flashing dark for a moment, but I was able to land a punch in the middle of Sir Anwir’s jaw. He retaliated almost immediately.

Pulling out a second knife from his boot, Sir Anwir took a running step toward me, bringing one of the knives directly towards my chest, the other towards my leg. I twisted my body so the knife aiming for my chest missed, but I received a cut across the front of my thigh. Almost directly the same place where I had cut King Humphrey all those years ago. The irony escaped me.

I hissed in pain and swung my knife toward Sir Anwir’s chest but missed and the blade sliced through Sir Anwir’s shoulder instead. I made another attempt to call out to my guards, but Sir Anwir flung his knives away and wrapped his fingers around my throat, cutting off both my air supply and my words.

We tumbled to the floor, my knife clattering from my grasp, and Sir Anwir soon pinned me against the floor, leaning his full weight on my throat. I choked and sputtered, struggling to push him off me, but his hold was held fast. A pang of fear shot through me as I realized just how much the drug had weakened me.

Black spots swam in my vision as my lungs screamed for air and I frantically pushed up against his chest, and even managed a punch on the

side of his head, but this only made him increase the pressure on my throat. I feared if he pushed harder, my neck would break.

My hands patted down his body and I felt a bump in the cuff of his breeches. I grabbed it and pulled out a hidden knife. Without thinking I plunged it into his side. Sir Anwir cried out and fell to the ground, allowing me to suck in a much-needed breath.

I swallowed back the bile that had risen in my throat and ignored the throbbing inside my skull and on my leg. Gasping for air, I returned my attention to Sir Anwir.

I hadn't had time nor interest to look at the knife before I used it, but as Sir Anwir pulled the weapon out of his side, allowing blood to pour out, I noticed how small it was.

Only an inch or two, the knife was too small to do too much damage unless it was used for a well-placed stab. I didn't want to be on the receiving end of one. Sir Anwir rushed at me, swinging the knife and I stumbled to my feet. Dodging to the right and ducking my head, the knife cut me on the cheek and a punch landed directly on my chin and I tumbled back.

Where were my guards? They must have heard something by now and realized I was in trouble?

My knife was laying on the ground behind Sir Anwir so that weapon was out of the question. My jaw ached from the punch, my head reeled from the drug and I was still gasping for air. I doubted I'd be able to form words for several seconds. No calling for help then.

I looked around, evading Sir Anwir's attacks to my best abilities. I managed to get in a good hit over his wounded side, sending him crying out and swept his legs from beneath him, sending him crashing into the ground.

The reaction to the crash was immediate and a pounding came from the door as the guards tried to rush in, only to find the door locked. Unable to get inside.

I'd been wondering how long the devils could go on without their usual entertainment. After a year's worth of peace, it seemed they were finally ready to stir up the usual amount of trouble for me.

Sir Anwir pushed himself back to his feet and I backed away towards the door to be near the guards once they busted through. I could only hope they'd get through before I was gutted.

I fumbled for a weapon and grabbed a book from the bookshelf. I narrowly dodged Sir Anwir's next attack, and as he stumbled I brought the heavy tome onto the back of his head.

The knife fell out of his hand and he collapsed to the ground, dazed.

I reached behind me and unlocked the door, sending the guards tumbling into my room, stumbling over each other. I'd have to remember to give them a spare key in case of something like this ever happening again.

The guards quickly separated me from Sir Anwir, and found all the weapons still hidden on his body and made sure to put them as far away from him as possible. Someone was sent to fetch the castle physician once they saw my wounds and within minutes the castle physician rushed into the room, Tobias trailing behind.

Tobias gasped at the sight of my leg and cheek, and the bruising on my neck. "Jaron!" he breathed. I wobbled over to him, the pain in my leg starting to set in and my world tilting dangerously.

"I'm getting too old for this," I joked, closing my eyes to hold off the growing ache in my head.

"If anyone's too old for this, it's me." Tobias sighed. "You'll give me grey hair before I turn twenty!"

I flashed him a tired grin, but didn't apologize. He was the one who decided to become an apprentice to the castle physician. As long as he was in that role, he would have to deal with my injuries.

Tobias hooked his arms under mine and guided me from the room, while the physician followed close behind, prodding and assessing my wounds. Sir Anwir and the guards were left behind and by the sounds of it, he was recovering from my hit with the book.

I was being directed towards a seat in the hallway when a patter of footsteps echoed through the wall and a body barreled into me. My leg screamed in protest at the sudden weight, but I ignored it and wrapped my arms around Imogen, holding her close and breathing in the scent of her hair. Calm washed over me.

Imogen looked up at me, eyes wide. “They said someone tried to kill you,” she breathed, cupping my face in her hands.

I tried to reassure her. “I’m still here, aren’t I? Seems to me that the keyword is ‘tried’. It’ll take a lot more than some drugs to kill me.”

“He had a knife,” Tobias butted in, inspecting the wound on my thigh while the physician roamed through his bag. “That could have done the job.”

I glared at him. He wasn’t helping the situation. I returned my attention to Imogen. Her honey-brown eyes were wide as they roamed my face and her fingers hovered over the cut on my cheek.

“Are you okay?” she finally asked.

“A little roughed up, but I’m fine. Really.”

I heard Tobias mutter something under his breath and I could imagine he didn’t agree with my statement. A smile crept onto my face and I held Imogen closer. The thought of how close I had been to never seeing her again made my knees quake.

Imogen pushed away from me and looked down at my leg. “Should you even be standing up with a leg like that?”

I ran my hands down her arms to calm her nerves. “Tobias will get me patched up. Then, unfortunately, we’re going to have to speed up that meeting with King Humphrey.”

The drug’s effects did not last long after the situation had calmed down. Other than one or two waves of dizziness, I was back to normal. The wound on my thigh thrummed painfully and my throat ached, but with the

expert care from the physician and Tobias, the pain was diminishing already.

I drummed my fingers against the armrest of my throne in the council room, as Mott explained what had taken place less than an hour ago. My regents sat in silence as they heard the events in full for the first time. I watched in silence as King Humphrey's eyes widened in shock and his eyes flew to my leg and the bandages around it.

"Sir Anwir did this?" he clarified, before leaning back in his chair and a troubled look fell over his face. Mott moved to my side.

I spoke up for the first time during the gathering. "I take it you had nothing to do with what happened?"

King Humphrey shook his head fiercely and frowned. "You dare make such accusations?"

I tilted my head. "I highly doubt it was you, but you must understand my suspicions."

"He *is* one of your regents," Mott added, stepping closer to me.

King Humphrey lifted his chin. "I had no part in what was transpired earlier today. I will take immediate action to punish Sir Anwir, once we've unearthed his motive for his actions."

I lifted my hand to interrupt him. "His attempt wasn't perfectly planned, which meant that it most likely wasn't operated by a large group, if a group at all. Sir Anwir was most likely working alone, either from hatred towards me or a wish for conflict between our countries. Whether he would succeed or not, the chance of him getting caught was high, so most likely he is willing to pay the price for his attempt. I don't believe he is working with anyone else."

Mott looked troubled. "This should never have happened. If someone working alone to kill you passed into the castle so easily, we must improve our defenses. We can't let this happen again"

I nodded. "That'll be a matter for later. But for now, I ask that we put this all behind us and focus on the matters we came to discuss in the first place."

Mott stepped up his face darkening. “Jaron, there was an assassination attempt. Someone tried to kill you!”

“I tend not dying when people want me to,” I told him with a smile, before I grew serious again. “I do not believe King Humphrey had anything to do with Sir Anwir’s actions. Sir Anwir is spending time in the dungeons and the dinner food is being disposed of as a safety percussion in case other dishes were somehow poisoned. There is no danger as of the moment and I would appreciate being able to get an early night’s sleep tonight by getting this meeting out of the way. Besides, the faster we get everything solved, Sir Anwir can be taken back to Mendenwall where he will serve the punishment King Humphrey finds suitable.”

King Humphrey nodded and Mott, with a stern look at me, fell back to my side.

My mind still reeled from everything that had happened in the last hour, but I focused my mind on the stack of papers that was being carried into the room. I suppressed a sigh. The devils were not being generous to me today.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled out the first paper from the pile, addressing the entire room.

“Let’s begin with the treaty regarding trading routes. I believe the best course of action for us to take is. . .”