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SHERRILYN
KENYON

A
LEAGUE
NOVEL



Born of shadows

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KENYON



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*As always for my boys and husband and to you the reader for taking another journey with me
into another universe.*



PROLOGUE



“Watch out!”

Caillen Dagan barely got out of the way before three blaster shots whizzed past his head. His heart thumped wildly as he realized he and his father were trapped by what they assumed were loaners out to collect money. It wasn't the first time his father's debts had caused them to be chased. The men after them seemed to be everywhere. And they seemed to be multiplying...

Terror made his breathing ragged as tears welled in his young eyes.

What are we going to do?

His dad grabbed him by the front of his shirt and hauled him into the shadows to crouch down behind him.

Caillen looked around, his entire body shaking as he tried to find an escape for them. There didn't seem to be one, but he had faith. No one was better at getting through tough situations than his dad.

His father shook him roughly to get his attention. “Listen to me, boy. I need you to take care of your sisters. You hear me?”

Even though he was the youngest of the Dagan children and only eight years old, it was something his dad always said to him. “Yeah, I know.”

“No, Cai, you don't. You're too young to comprehend what I'm trying to tell you, but you have to try.” There was a sadness in his father's eyes that scared him. A resignation that had never been there before and it made him want to cry. But Dagens didn't cry and he wasn't about to let his dad see him act like one of his sisters.

His father cupped his face in his calloused palm. “It'll be years before you understand what's happening—if even then. But I need you to listen to me and trust me. I won't be here to protect you anymore.”

Caillen frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Listen! Don't speak. We only have a few more seconds. What I need is for you to make sure that you never get into any system for any government for any reason. Keep a low profile. Live off-grid. Don't let anyone have a way to track you. Ever. Not your address. Your likeness. Nothing. Especially not your retina, fingerprints or DNA.”

His father's insistence scared him almost as much as the men with blasters looking for them. “Why?”

“They'll kill you. You understand? Governments use that to track people and they will hurt you if they find you.”

Those words terrified him even more. “Who will hurt me?”

“My enemies. They'll come for you too. It's why I've never treated you like a kid and why I've made you train so hard. I knew this day would come, but I'd hoped it wouldn't be until you were older. Unfortunately they've found me. Just take what I've taught you and use it to stay alive. I need you to live, Cai. For me. I've risked everything to keep you breathing. Don't let it be for nothing. Not after all I sacrificed for you. I know I did the right thing. I know it. Now run home. Let no one follow you

and keep your sisters safe. Okay? I know it's a lot of responsibility for a little boy, but I have faith in you."

"Dad—"

"Just do it, Cai." His dad pulled him tightly to his chest and held him close. "I love you, boy. You've been a good son. Better than I ever deserved. Watch over your sisters, especially Shahara. She'd be lost without you. You're the only one she'll have to depend on now." He kissed Caillen on the head before he released him. He pulled out his wallet and handed it to him. "There's enough money in there to bribe the doctors. Tell them to say I died of pneumonia."

"I don't understand."

"I know, son. Just do exactly what I tell you. Okay? If anyone thinks I died of anything other than natural cause, they'll come for your sisters and hurt them. You can't let that happen. Remember. Pneumonia. You have to keep my face off the news."

Caillen hated the tears that started falling. He wiped them away with the dirty sleeve of his shirt. His father was right, he didn't understand any of this, but he would obey. "Okay."

His father kissed him again. "Now scurry like I showed you."

"But—"

"Don't argue!" His voice shook as tears gathered in his eyes too. "Just stay alive, Caillen."

Caillen nodded before he darted into a hole in the side of the building to their right. He'd just stood up to run when he heard voices that made him stop and listen.

"Dagan... you treacherous bastard. Where's the money?"

"I never got the money."

A blaster shot echoed.

Caillen heard his father cry out. Even though he'd promised not to stay, he crept back toward the hole in the wall to see his father on the ground, cursing the man who'd shot him as he tried to crawl away.

There was a group of men and women behind him who watched with an apathy that was sickening.

The man kicked his father over and held him in place with one foot planted solidly against his father's bleeding chest. He angled the blaster at his heart. "You're a crafty bastard. I'll give you that. Spent six years of my life trying to find you. Now tell me what you did with our package."

"I don't know. It got away from me... It-it vanished. I didn't get the money for it. Someone else took it. I swear to you. Please... I have little girls who—"

The man killed him.

Caillen clapped his hand over his mouth to keep from screaming out as pain racked him.

His father was dead.

Dead.

Just like his mother.

Tears fell down his face as he wished he was big enough to go out there and kill the ones who'd taken his father from him. But he knew he couldn't fight them. He was just a kid. And if he tried, his sisters would be alone without a man to watch over them.

"Protect my girls for me..."

He'd promised his dad and he wasn't about to let him down.

"That was stupid." A woman moved forward to glare at the man as he holstered his weapon and wiped the blood on his shoes against his father's pants. The others withdrew, leaving just the two of them to spit on his father's remains. "You should have made sure he wasn't lying before you killed him."

“I doubt he has the money. You saw his ship. He doesn’t live like someone who stole ten million credits.”

She sighed. “That wasn’t the most important part of this and you know it. If—”

“Even if the package escaped him, it won’t last long on the street. Trust me. We eat our young out here. I doubt it’s even around now. Garbage always burns.”

A clap of thunder sounded an instant before the rain that had been threatening to fall all day poured down over them. The man and woman ran off toward the street to seek shelter.

Cailen didn’t move. Not for a long time as he sat there, staring at his father’s lifeless body while the rain pelted it and made the ground run red from his blood.

What were he and his sisters going to do now? They were just kids...

He tightened his grip on the wallet. *I will do what Dad said.* Even though he didn’t understand the reasons behind his orders. It was to protect his sisters. That was good enough for him. He just hoped Shahara never found out that he’d used money to bribe a doctor ’cause she’d be really mad at the waste when they had so little.

He sniffed back his tears. *I’m the man of the house.* There was no one else...

“I’ll keep them safe, Daddy.”

His only question though was who would watch after *him*?

Twenty-two Years Later

“Thank the gods you’re here. I’ve been running arou—”

Without flinching or breaking his stride as he walked down a filthy, dark alley, Caillen jerked his blaster out and fired straight into his sister’s shoulder, cutting her words off before she wasted his time.

Not to kill her or hurt her. Just to shut her up before she made things worse for both of them.

Right now, he didn’t have time to listen to her bullshit. He was here to save her life.

And hopefully his too.

Gasping, she crumpled toward the trash-laden street. In one smooth move that caused his light-armored brown coat to flare out around his feet, he caught her against him and lifted her into his arm. He groaned under her weight. “Damn, Kase, quit working out so much and lay off the frigs. I’ve carried men who weighed less.” Not that he made a habit out of carrying men, but still...

Even though she was six inches shorter, she outweighed him by a good twenty pounds and *he* carried less than two percent body fat on a lean six-foot-four frame. His muscles screamed out in protest of his heroics as he heard the Enforcers moving in.

This was getting bad.

He glared down at her unconscious body while her brown hair spilled over his sleeve. Her plain features were so peaceful in spite of the hell she’d unleashed that it really made him want to hurt her.

But he couldn’t do that.

Blood was blood.

Sighing, he moved fast to stash her behind a Dumpster and to cover her with his coat. On top of that, he added enough trash to keep the Enforcers from seeing her. Yeah, she’d bitch-slap him later for the stench... and the headache his stun blast would leave her with but it would keep her safe and right now that was all that mattered to him.

Well, there was the urge he had to wring her neck until she turned blue—that mattered to him too, but that could wait.

A beep from his wrist alerted him that his hacked paperwork for her ship and cargo had gone through. Kasen’s IDs were removed from everything and his were registered in her place.

I’m a fucking idiot. By doing all of this, he’d just put his neck in a noose and he knew it.

What the hell? *Who wants to live forever?*

For the record and in case any higher deity was listening and taking notes, *he* did. But he was definitely going to cut his life short if he kept rescuing his sisters. Or at the very least cut his freedom down to the size of a ten-square-foot cell.

Yeah well, at least then I’d get three meals a day instead of six a week.

Pushing that thought away, he pulled his blasters out and set them to stun to do what he did best.

Survive and escape.

“Drop your weapon!” an Enforcer shouted from his left.

~~Yeah, right. Like he'd ever followed orders. Caillen opened fire as he dodged into a vacant alley that was as run down as the one he'd stashed Kasen in. Their return fire and the holes it left in the walls, street and trash around him let him know fast their blasters weren't set for stun.~~

They were trying to kill him.

He considered resetting his to return the favor, but he didn't want to kill the drones out to make rent. They didn't deserve to die for supporting a corrupt system. Even the mindless needed to eat and it took more guts than most people had to stand and fight against the League and its sycophantic governments. He wouldn't hold their cowardice against them.

Much.

Jerking his head to the right, he felt the heat from a blast that narrowly missed his face. Strangely enough, he was completely calm as he fought. His sister Shahara called him Eritale—a Gondarion term that meant made of ice. And he was. Since the day he'd seen his father killed, he'd never panicked again in a confrontation.

No idea why. It was like the fear inside him had shattered that day and left something freakishly copacetic in its place, something that set in during a fight and left him totally rational.

He shot at three Enforcers before he holstered his right blaster and launched a grappling hook to the roof of a decaying building. The further he could get them from his sister the less likely they were to find her unconscious body and question her.

The hook caught and set.

Caillen pushed the recoil button on the hook's handle and fired at the Enforcers with his left hand as he sped toward the roof. Return blasts came close to him, but none hit the mark as he quickly zigzagged up the chipped brick wall to the top. Thankfully none of the drones were bright enough to shoot his cord—that would have left an ugly stain on the street and ruined his already screwed up day.

At the top, he scrambled over the lip, dislodged the hook, recoiled it completely, then took off running toward the river across the roofs, jumping from one to another with the grace and flexibility of a gymnast—something he trained hard every day to maintain.

The deep whirring of an engine overhead let him know air support was on its way and it was coming in low and fast. From his vantage point, he could see the number of Enforcers after him. And it was impressive. They ran on the streets below and across the rooftops, all trying to get a shot at him.

What? Was it a slow day? Didn't this place have any real criminals?

No, let's go after the smugglers 'cause they were so much more dangerous than, say, a rapist or murderer.

“What the hell was in your ship, Kase?”

He should have checked the manifest because this was looking bad.

Real bad.

More shots rained down as the airlift spotted him and came in as fast as it could fly. Damn the bright daylight of a double sun. It left him totally exposed without a single dark shadow to crawl into.

Ducking the door gunner's shots, he took off at a dead run as he dodged fire.

Caillen jumped to a roof and rolled to his feet an instant before the door opened and six Enforcers spilled through, aiming and firing at him. He turned to go back, but there were more coming in behind. The gunship was on his right and about to pin him into one seriously nasty situation. Dodging left, he sucked his breath in at the distance to the next rooftop. If he missed that, it was going to hurt.

Who wants to live forever?

Ignoring his favorite motto whenever a dose of extreme stupidity was called for, he pulled his

javelin off his belt and extended it so that he could use it to pole-vault over. He held his breath as he soared over the street so far below.

Thankfully years of dodging authority and living his life one half step this side of death had left him with enough skill to make it to the other side. As soon as he was safe on the rooftop, he collapsed the javelin and kept going as shots whizzed past him. Several grazed off his armored shirt and backpack, and would have brought him down but for their protection. Still, it stung like hell and a couple burned his arm.

You know, a sane man would be wetting his pants.

Good thing he was crazy as hell.

He ran to the ledge and in a well-practiced move, planted the hook into the wall. Without pausing, he jumped over the side and rappelled down to the street where he'd have some cover. He jerked the hook free and let it recoil back into the case on his forearm.

At least the city was more crowded here.

Yeah, but it's hard to melt into them while your coat's lying on top of your sister.

True. Without its camouflage, his weapons were out and visible. Something that caused the people around him to cringe, scream and flee as they saw his short-sleeved armored shirt that was covered with light bombs, ammunition clips, four blasters (in addition to the one in his hand), his rappelling gear and all the other "just in case" things he carried in addition to his backpack. Leather straps crisscrossed both of his arms from wrist to biceps.

Badass came at a price and today that price just might be his freedom.

Or his life.

He ran with the crowd which panicked the innocent people even more—no doubt because they were afraid he'd take one of them hostage.

As if. The only life he gambled with was his own.

The Enforcers flanked them, trying to get an aim on his head which he kept low. He could hear from the earwig he had tuned to their frequency that they were setting up blockades around the city.

But that wasn't what concerned him...

They had a Trisani tracker with them that they were about to drop in on the chase.

Damn.

Unless it was Nero, he was a dead man. Trisani had psychic powers that pretty much no one except another Trisani could fight. Nero could actually get into someone's head, shut down all brain activity and, if he was really pissed, melt it and leave his vic a vegetable, sucking his thumb on the floor.

Luckily, Nero was one of Caillen's few friends and no matter what they might have paid him, Nero wouldn't bring him in.

He hoped.

Every life has a price...

And he knew that better than most.

Caillen felt the fissure of power as the Trisani stepped out of a transport and eyed the crowd, reading them as he sought Caillen's position.

Yeah it wasn't Nero... He'd never seen this tracker before.

Shit.

Caillen slowed as he saw the dark blond man with sharp features dressed all in black. Curling his lip as he locked gazes with Caillen, the tracker sent a plasma blast at him that barely missed his head. It ignited then exploded the transport behind him.

Hope no one was in that. Otherwise they were having a worse day than he was.

Caillen pulled out another blaster and opened both up all over the tracker. But the bastard threw up a force field to block it.

“I hate the Trisani.” No wonder most of them had been hunted down to a small handful. At the moment, he’d like to add one more to their extinction list.

But that was all right—he still had tricks up his sleeves. Literally. He holstered his right blaster and jerked a light bomb off the chain. He lobbed it at the Trisani and then followed it with a pulse grenade.

The light temporarily blinded the Trisani and the pulse exploded against the force field. Even though it didn’t break through it, it was enough to send the Trisani reeling backward.

Yeah, don’t screw with someone whose closest friend was an explosives engineer renowned for making the best toys in the universe. Darling lived and breathed for one purpose only. Making shit blow up.

Before the Trisani could recover, Caillen ducked into the next alley.

Which was crawling with Enforcers.

Damn. Damn.

Double damn.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, he turned to head back to the street.

He couldn’t. They’d closed in on him and the air transport was directly above with snipers taking positions on the building’s roof.

“Surrender!”

Ah now this was just galling.

“Lay down your weapons!”

That was easier said than done. He was covered in them. Took him two hours to get all this gear on...

Only thing that could induce him to take it off fast was a hot naked woman in his bed, clawing at his back. Definitely not one of those here and he had no interest in being defenseless with this much artillery pointed at him.

A warning blast shot over his head.

“The next one will be right between your eyes.” Targeting lasers let him know exactly what they were aiming for. Honestly it wasn’t the one at his forehead that gave him pause as much as the one at his crotch.

“Put your hands behind your head!”

Caillen frowned. “If I put my hands behind my head, I can’t drop my weapons, people. Someone needs to make up their mind here. What do you want me to do and in what order?”

“Drop the weapon in your hand, then put your hands behind your head!”

He did as instructed.

They moved in closer.

Yeah, come to Papa, baby. Closer... closer...

Don’t be shy.

When one of them went to cuff him, Caillen grabbed him and used him as a shield. Three sniper rounds went into the man’s chest. Caillen flung the body at the Enforcer coming in at his back. Twisting, he grabbed another man, disarmed him and knocked him flying. His morals on killing drones out the window under this assault, Caillen used his spring loader to pop his fighting knife into his palm and took out five more before the Trisani grabbed him by the neck without touching him and paralyzed him where he stood.

The Trisani tsked at him. "I almost hate to hand someone with your skills over to the drones."

"Fuck you."

The Trisani laughed. "Sorry. In this the only one getting screwed is you."

Caillen locked gazes with the Trisani. The moment he did, he felt the surge of power that Nero had taught him. It was the only weapon anyone could really use against the Trisani species—unless this guy was as strong as Nero this would work.

Here's hoping he's not.

He focused it with everything he had. One second the Trisani had him, the next, Caillen was free and slamming the Enforcers into each other. He shot his cord up the wall and started to leave them in his wake... until he heard something in his ear that gave him pause.

"There's an unconscious woman here in the street, under some garbage. Not sure if she's with our perp or not. But she is covered up by what appears to be a man's coat."

Fu-fu-frick.

They'd found Kasen. If he escaped, they'd take her in and she'd never stand up to their questioning. She was the kind of witness who spilled more guts than a butcher.

Of all the flying-ass bad luck.

Caillen sighed as he flicked his wrist to miss the shot and allowed the hook to fall back to the pavement. He let them think they'd done it when the truth burned deep inside him. But for Kasen's discovery, he'd have made it out.

They cuffed his hands, then carefully disarmed him over the next twenty-eight minutes.

"Damn, boy," one of the officers said as they continued to find weapons hidden on him. "It's like disarming an assassin. You sure you ain't in the League?"

He had to force himself not to lash out and escape again. Submission was not in his nature.

Think of Kasen...

Yeah, what he was really thinking about her was how badly he wanted to beat her.

The Enforcer jerked his cuffed hands. "Who's with you?"

Caillen met the Enforcer's gaze without flinching or hesitating. "No one. I fly alone. Check the logs." Thank the gods he was good at what he did. They wouldn't find a trace of anyone except him.

"What about the woman?"

"Nameless vic. I stole her wallet. You check my pocket, you'll find it." He always had a fake ID and wallet for his sisters with aliases.

Just in case.

The Enforcer pulled it out, then lifted his arm to speak into the mic in his cuff. "She's innocent. Get her to a hospital."

"You want me to take a report from her?" the voice asked.

"No. We have a confession and mugging is the least of what we're taking him in for. Just dump her and go."

Caillen met the Trisani's frown. The bastard either suspected he was lying or knew it for a fact, but for whatever reason, he kept it to himself.

End of the day, the Trisani was definitely right about one thing. He was royally screwed and they hadn't even fondled him yet.

That was bad enough.

Worse than bad came as they were hauling him toward the transport and they began reading him his charges.

"... and for smuggling prillion."

He felt his stomach shrink. Shit.

His sister's contraband carried a death sentence...



Three Weeks Later

How bad would decapitation hurt?

From the window of his pathetically small, sparse cell that barely accommodated a bunk, sink and toilet, Caillen stared out across the yard teeming with people, at the heavy electronic blade that was being charged and sharpened in preparation for his execution.

Yeah, that was definitely going to leave a mark.

Don't worry, Cai. In just a few more measly minutes your problems will be over.

Forever.

His neck tingled in expectation of the coming blow, which would end a life that really hadn't been all that great. Strange thing though, bad as it was, he wasn't ready for it to be over. Not by a long shot.

I could have been something.

Ah hell, who was he fooling? He was a third-generation smuggler with a gambling problem his family knew nothing about...

Yeah? So what? He was still the best damned pilot in all the United Systems. There was nothing he couldn't fly and no one he couldn't outmaneuver when he was in a ship.

He never missed a target. Ever.

None of that matters now. Not while he was standing toe to toe with death.

What a way for a warrior to go...

Forget a last meal, what he really wanted before he checked out was a good lay. One last bang to end all others.

He laughed evilly under his breath as he remembered the look of dumbfounded shock on the warden's face when they'd asked him for his last request.

"Any of your daughters horny?"

That had been answered with a vicious head slam to the wall. Not that he wouldn't have done the same, or more to the point, worse, had someone asked *him* that about one of his sisters. But...

He was ever a thorn in the ass of those he hated and that was basically anyone who had any kind of authority.

Yeah well, that's about to end too.

He sighed as he stared through the small open window covered in bars, watching the soldiers outside rush around in last-minute prep. There was a part of him terrified about dying. Okay, there was a lot of him terrified about dying. He'd always hoped it would be when he was really old and in his sleep. But practically speaking, the alternative druther would have been in a brutal fight where he took out as many of his enemies with him as he could.

At least you're not dying alone in the gutter.

He flinched at a memory he always did his best not to think about. If he lived a thousand years he never forget watching his father die alone like he was nothing but trash. And in all the morbid

scenarios he'd conjured over the years for his own death never had execution entered his mind.

Even now he could hear his sister's desperate call. "Cai, I'm in the Garvon sector and running from their Enforcers. Can you help me?"

Kasen had omitted the fact she was transporting prillion—an antibiotic so potent it was outlawed by every government that took payoffs from the medical communities who feared the dent it would put into their profit margins. But to smugglers like him and his sister, it was pay dirt. One shipment would leave you flush for at least a year.

And it was a death sentence to carry it through certain systems.

Garvon happened to be one of them.

Even if she'd told him when she called what she had on board, it would have changed nothing. He'd have still taken her place in the noose.

Altruism sucks.

Right now he was thinking he should have learned some self-preservation and been about ten minutes late. But at the end of the day, his sisters were his world and even though he might like to pretend otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to live had he let one of them die.

Even Kasen's crabby ass.

He checked his chronometer and felt sick again. Thirty more minutes and everything was over. Thirty minutes.

He remembered times in the past when that had seemed like an eternity and now...

He wished he had the power to stop time. To teleport himself out of here and see his rat-infested dive one more time. To have his sister Shahara tell him he was an idiot.

Well, at least he wouldn't have to stare at the drab tan walls and that nasty crusted-over toilet anymore.

Boy, are my creditors going to be pissed. He still owed two years of payments on his ship that had been impounded by the Garvons after his arrest. And face it, he'd dogged the absolute shit out of it and it still had blast marks down both rear stabilizers from his last run-in with the authorities.

He sighed again.

His friends and family had tried everything to negotiate a stay of execution. But the Garvon governor had been adamant that they make an example of him.

"This is to stand as a lesson to any outsider who thinks they can travel through our system and not obey our laws. We might be a small system, but we are big on intolerance."

Caillen shook his head as the governor reiterated those words he was obviously proud of just a few feet away from his window to the news crews surrounding him. What an effing idiot. Whatever aide was supposed to keep the governor on a leash was failing epically.

One of the female reporters panned her camera Caillen's way to catch a shot of his reaction to the governor's speech while he watched from his cell.

Caillen flipped the camera off.

The governor sputtered in indignation, letting Caillen know he'd struck a nerve with his silent defiance.

Big mistake on the governor's part. That was like baiting a wild predator and the little brother in him kicked into overdrive.

Never let me see your underbelly.

Flashing a wicked grin, Caillen couldn't resist shouting to them. "It's not my friends in high places you need to worry about, Gov. It's the low ones who are going to crawl up from the sewers to cut your throat. You know, my brother assassins who'll be honor bound to come after you and the rest of your

sycophantic morons while you sleep. Forever Sentella! We're cleaning the gene pool one fatality at a time."

The mention of the phantom rogue agency of assassins out to challenge the corrupt governments that were led by the League and her goons sent the media into a frenzy and made the governor look around as if trying to find an assassin in the crowd. Like he'd be able to ID one. Beautiful thing about Caillen's friends—by the time you saw them coming for you, your head was already rolling across the floor.

But as much as Caillen wanted to pretend otherwise, he knew his friends couldn't help him today. He'd gotten himself into this and for once there was no escape.

I'm dead. Completely. Utterly...

Painfully.

Twenty minutes and counting...

Might as well accept it. It was what it was and he'd volunteered for it.

"I'm so sorry, Cai." Kasen's tear-filled words whispered through his mind from her last visit.

Not half as sorry as I am. Darling always said his sisters would be the death of him. Little bugger had been right.

C'mon. Better you than her. You know that.

Yeah, that thought not really comforting right now. *I should have drowned her when she broke my favorite toy fighter as a kid.* It'd been the only toy he'd had and she'd stomped it into pieces in a fit of anger because he'd stuck his tongue out at her.

It's all right, Cai. Calm down. You've faced worse.

Yeah, but I didn't die then.

There was that and he was getting tired of his brain bitching at him over things he couldn't change. He'd kept his promise to his dad. Kasen was safe.

Him, not so much.

Sliding down the wall to crouch in the small space between it and his bunk, Caillen banged his head against the wall, welcoming the distracting pain. Why couldn't the bastards just come and kill him already? The waiting was the worst part. No doubt that was their intention. Make it as miserable as possible.

Closing his eyes, he rubbed his hand over his face. At least he wasn't leaving Shahara in a bind. Now that she was married, she had someone else who could protect and take care of her.

Which was what really pissed him off at Kasen. There'd been no sense in her making that run. Yeah, money was good. But it wasn't worth your life and it wasn't like they were in dire straits for it. Not like they'd been in the past. Their freakishly rich brother-in-law would have gladly given her the money had she only asked Syn for it.

Stupid moronic idiot.

Selfish—

"You ready, convict?"

He dropped his hand and opened his eyes to see the warden in front of his cell with six guards. He was flattered they thought he'd be that much trouble. And his spirit was certainly willing to give them a fight and then some. However, they had a neuroinhibitor on him that prevented him from doing anything other than glaring at them. If he tried to attack, the inhibitors would bite down, flood his body with pain, lock his muscles tight and send him straight to the floor.

Worst of all, it'd make him piss his pants.

They would never have *that* satisfaction—not until he was dead and couldn't control his bladder

anymore. After all, he was a Dagan and Dagens, no matter the poverty or situation, were proud people.

Show no fear to your enemies. Only contempt. Never let anyone look down on you. You're just as good as any of them. I don't care who they are. Better in fact. In our world, Dagens are royalty and you, my son, are a prince.

His father had trained him on that and he held those words tight as he faced them.

Activating the electromagnets in his cuffs that caused his hands to lock together behind his back, the guards lowered the force field that kept him inside his cell.

Caillen curled his lip as he looked at them. "You could have waited until I stood up, guys. Kind of hard now."

The warden returned his smug glare with one of his own. "We'll wait."

He snorted. Were they really that afraid of him that he couldn't even stand up without them sweating?

Wow, Cai, even a hard-ass assassin like Nykyrian would be impressed with that feat.

Then again, they had good reason to fear. But for the inhibitor, he'd already be free and they'd all be bleeding or dead.

But not today.

Caillen leaned his back against the wall and wiggled his shoulders until he made it to his feet. The guards moved forward with trilassos—a noose attached to the end of a three-foot pole—to put around his neck so that they could drag him forward and keep him six feet away from them.

He laughed at them and their fear. "Bloody wankers."

They tightened the noose around his neck until he was coughing from lack of oxygen.

"Careful, men. We don't want to kill him in here."

The warden might feel that way, but the look on the guards' faces said they'd be more than happy to send him to death fifteen minutes early.

Caillen wheezed and coughed as they dragged him down the lackluster hallway and out into the common ground where spectators, dignitaries and newspeople waited to catch a glimpse of the legendary smuggler who, until now, had been more myth than real. The networks would make a fortune charging for this show.

Ironic really. He'd had to fight every minute of his life to scrape together two credits, but his death would make some asshole a nice rent payment for a few months.

I should have taken them up on the offer for a tranq. 'Cause right now as he walked up the platform and neared that gleaming blade, his panic was seriously setting in.

Ignore it.

How? Look around you, moron. You're about to die. And there was at least a hundred people here to witness and gloat. Damn them all for their sadistic entertainment.

Don't think about it.

Something hard to do since he was being forced to kneel under a ten-foot blade that was shining with metallic bloodlust over his head.

You can do this...

I don't want to die. I don't. I need to live. I got plans. Well, not really, but I could make some. Some that don't include my head rolling into a plastic bucket that still bears stains from the last execution.

He ground his teeth together to keep from begging for his life. He wouldn't give them that satisfaction either.

"Any last words?"

Caillen glared at the warden. "Yeah... See you in hell." He looked over to the group of three

giggling young women standing in the dignitary section. One of them bore a striking resemblance to the warden. “And for the record... your daughter has a hot ass.”

She let out an excited shriek.

The warden’s face flushed with rage.

The guards tightened the noose again, choking off the rest of his words.

Caillen’s sight dimmed as his ears buzzed. Oh yeah, much better to strangle to death.

Not.

They forced him to his knees, then bent his head down on the arc that had been designed to cradle necks and hold them in place until the blade fell. Still, he choked as the guards refused to loosen the noose. He heard something loud, like maybe someone shouting, but he couldn’t tell what it was or where it came from.

It was almost over.

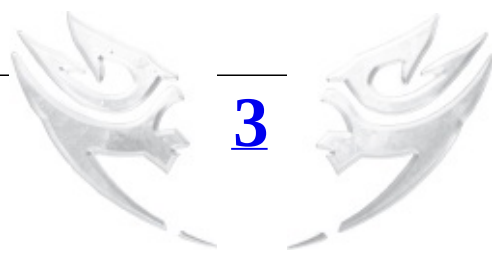
A few seconds more.

Just let go.

Relax...

He was too much of a fighter for that. He tried to hang on to every gasping, ragged pain-filled breath. But the fight was useless as he heard a loud clattering sound.

In the end, the darkness took him under.



Caillen came awake to a vicious pain throbbing around his throat and a worse one pounding in his head. Yeah, he was in hell. He had to be to hurt this badly.

“Is he coming around?”

He didn't recognize the concerned tone that belonged to an older man.

Someone pried open his eyelid and rudely flashed a light in his eye that made his headache pound even harder. Groaning, he flinched, moving his head away.

Gently, the doctor turned his head back and held it in place while he continued to test the dilation of his eye. Good thing Caillen's arms were strapped down or the man would be bleeding over the intrusion and that light would be shining out of an orifice the gods had never meant to hold it.

“He's conscious.” The doctor lowered his voice as he stepped back from the bed and gave Caillen reprieve from that vicious light. “Do you know who you are, son?”

He licked his dry lips and cleared his sore throat before he answered raggedly. “Caillen. Dagan.” Or rather that was who he'd been before they beheaded him.

Did the keepers of hell not know who was sent to them?

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

Caillen had to blink several times before the doctor's pudgy phalanges came into focus. At least he hoped that's what he was seeing...

If not, that man was real popular with women.

“Three.”

The doctor turned to his right and bowed low. “He's awake and alert. But he's still weak from the asphyxiation and the subsequent resuscitation.”

Resuscitation? From beheading? What the hell had they done to him and why would they bring him back?

More torture?

Gah, what did I do now?

Oh wait, that was too much to count. The point was what had they *caught* him doing now...

Caillen scowled as an older man stepped out of the shadows and approached his bed. Clean-shaven and well-kempt, he had finely boned features and vivid blue eyes. There was an air of refinement that seemed to emanate straight from the man's DNA. Yeah, he was definitely an aristo. A major one at that.

Why would someone so high ranking be here to see a common piece of condemned filth?

The man's lips trembled as his eyes misted—that concerned Caillen more than anything else. Was the man that angry or that upset?

Oh shit, don't tell me I slept with his wife.

Or worse, his daughter.

The other thing Darling always complained about was that one day Caillen's wandering penis was going to get him killed...

Was this the day?

“Do you remember me?” the man asked hesitantly. “Even a little?”

Did he owe him money? Caillen searched his mind, but couldn't think of any time or place he'd have seen this man. “Uh... no. Should I?”

The old man's lips quivered as he took Caillen's hand that was bound in a padded leather cuff to the bed rail and held it in a cold grasp.

Completely weirded out by that, Caillen jerked his hand away from his grasp and balled it into a fist. But because of the restraints, he couldn't move it far.

“You're my son, Radek. Don't you remember?”

Oh yeah. The man was high. He had to be sucking in some kind of serious fumes for that delusion. “I'm Caillen Dagan. My father was a smuggler.”

“No.” There was no missing the anger underlying his defensive tone. “You are Kaden Radek Aluzahn de Orczy,” he carefully enunciated each name as if trying to impress it on Caillen, “and you are *my* son. You were only a toddler when you were kidnapped. I paid the ransom they demanded. All of it. I followed every stipulation they made but they never returned you. My security detail assumed they'd killed you. Even so, I searched relentlessly for some sign of you for years. Nothing was ever found. Not a single trace... Not until now.”

Baffled, Caillen turned to the doctor. “Bullshit.”

The doctor shook his head. “You're a lucky man. When the prison staff ran your DNA to see if you were a match for any unsolved crimes, it popped up your old kidnapping report and the DNA that was on file from your childhood hairs they'd collected. You are indeed his missing son.”

No, no, no, no, no.

“I came as soon as they notified me they'd found you,” the man interjected.

The doctor inclined his head respectfully before he continued. “His Majesty arrived right before they issued the order to behead you. One more second and it would have been too late.”

Majesty... That title permeated the fog in Caillen's mind. If this guy was an emperor and he was his son...

That would make him a...

Oh yeah, right. They were so screwing with him. This was complete and utter crap. “I'm not a prince.” No krikkin way. Fate would not be that bored today.

Nah, this was some shit one of his friends was pulling. “Who put you up to this? Nykyrian or Darling?”

The doctor smiled. “You are indeed a prince, Your Highness. We double-checked your DNA against your father's when you were brought in and there is no doubt whatsoever. You are Emperor Evzen's son. His *only* son.”

Caillen's mind reeled. He might not recognize the man, but he knew the name Reginahn Evzen Tyralehn de Orczy. Emperor to both the Garvon and Exeter systems, his name was synonymous with power and wealth.

Was it really possible?

No. No way. His sisters and parents had always said he was family. If he'd been a foundling, wouldn't they have told him? Given how poor they were why would his father take in another mouth to—

“*You are the son I always dreamed of. I'm so glad to have you as part of my family...*” His father's often uttered words now took on a whole new meaning. All his life he'd assumed his dad was grateful for the additional Y chromosome in their all-female home. But if he'd taken him in...

“I’ve risked everything to keep you alive. Don’t let it be for nothing. Not after all I’ve given to keep you with us.” Was that what his dad had meant when he’d said that one day Caillen would understand?

Was that why his father had been so adamant that he never disclose his DNA? Why his father had been so damn paranoid about everything? When it came to conspiracies, the man was as creative as he was psychotic. But if he’d known who Caillen really was...

It all made sense.

Caillen couldn’t breathe as reality assaulted him.

Holy crap. I’m a prince.

Now ain’t that a bitch? All the times in his life he’d had to scrape for every credit and here he was related to one of the richest men in the Nine Systems.

Yeah, that would be my luck.

The emperor took his hand again. “Don’t you remember anything about your life before you were kidnapped?”

“No. Sorry. Are you sure you have the right person?”

He let go of Caillen’s hand to pull out his wallet. He flipped it open to a picture and pressed it.

There was a beautiful woman in royal robes holding a bald baby boy who couldn’t even sit up on his own. She was smiling and waving the baby’s hand. “Radek... say, ‘Hello, Daddy.’ ” But what held Caillen entranced was how much the woman favored him. They had the same coloring, the same eyes, nose and lips. Same dark hair...

Something he’d never shared with his sisters or parents. His dad had told him he took his coloring from a great-grandparent who’d died before his birth.

Now he knew that had been a major lie too. He saw his real mother’s face and there was no denying it.

She was his mother.

And with that came a forgotten memory of his sister Kasen telling him once when they were kids and she’d been angry at him that he’d been found abandoned in a garbage dump. That had garnered her the worst beating of her childhood. He’d written it off as typical sibling harassment and a stressed parent’s overreaction.

But if he really had been found in the garbage, that explained why his father had gone ballistic over her taunt.

Weird as it was, a lot of things he’d questioned over the years now made total sense.

Shit...

I am royalty.

Overwhelmed by his new reality, he looked up at the father he’d never met and wondered about the rest of his blood family. “That’s my mother?”

His father nodded as sadness darkened his gaze. It was obvious that even after all this time, the event still hurt him. “She died trying to fight off your kidnappers. I found her in your nursery, and...” He clenched his eyes shut as if trying to blot out that memory. “I lost everything that mattered to me that day. And I do mean everything. What good is it to rule the world when you can’t even protect the ones you love?”

Caillen turned his attention back to the smiling image of the mother he’d never known—he’d been just a kid when his adoptive mother had died. Even though he’d lived with her, he barely remembered her either, and he had no memory whatsoever of the woman who’d given him life and then died trying to protect him. He didn’t know which one of those scenarios saddened him most.

His father blinked back his tears and swallowed hard. “I loved your mother, Radek. She was beautiful.”

incarnate. And I've never remarried. No woman ever came close to her in any way and I didn't want to shame her memory by marrying someone else to fulfill an obligation. Even a royal one. Not when she gave her life for us." He closed the wallet and held it over his heart. "I wish she'd lived to see this moment. To see *you*. You favor her so much that it's like I have you both back at once. I can't believe I finally found you after all these years."

What should he say to that?

Thanks?

Yeah, no, that was stupid. For the first time in his life, words failed him.

It was so surreal. Things like this didn't happen to people like him. Kicks in the groin.

Imprisonment. Clients turning you into the authorities. Collectors shooting you dead in the street... that was what happened to third-generation smugglers.

They didn't wake up from an execution to become a prince. It just didn't happen.

Caillen tried to reach for the photo wallet and cursed at his bound hands. "Why am I restrained?"

The doctor came forward to free him. "Sorry, Your Highness. It was only a precaution. We didn't want you to wake up and hurt yourself."

Right... more likely they were afraid he'd wake up and attack them.

As soon as his arms were freed, Caillen rubbed his wrists and stared at his father. "This isn't some weird-ass joke or prank one of my friends is pulling on me, right?"

There was no feigning the sincere offense on his father's face or in his stance. "I would never joke about something like this."

No, he guessed not. Still, it was a hard fact to accept. Everything he thought he knew about himself was now brought into question. It was such a strange, lost feeling. Everyone he'd ever trusted had lied to him. His parents. His sisters.

He wasn't who and what he thought. Everything he'd been told about his family and his past was a lie...

Everything.

But for one freak event that'd happened at a point in his life he couldn't remember, his entire childhood and past would have been completely different. *He* would have been completely different. There would have been no poverty. No hiding.

He wouldn't have had any of his teen trauma. He wouldn't have been there to help his sisters...

It was overwhelming to contemplate that he was now someone else.

Someone he didn't know.

I have a father...

Caillen glanced to the doctor before he returned his gaze to his father's. "So what does this mean exactly?"

His father smiled. "This means you're about to have a whole new world, my boy. You're finally going to live the life you were born to."

Caillen wasn't sure that was a good thing. In his experience, change came in with a furry harbinger that usually sprayed crap all over him. Seldom was change for the better.

But at least he wasn't dead.

Yet.

One second more though, according to the doctor, and he would have been.

I'm a prince. That reality kept circling in his head.

You thought you had enemies before? Buddy, you ain't seen enemies yet. This kind of money made people stupid. Most of all, it made them mean. Angry. Jealous and cruel. Everybody wanted to take

rather than earn. When they couldn't do that, they just wanted to spew venom and animosity.

~~Yeah, he was definitely cursed and things were going to get ugly.~~

Fast.

Two Months Later

“Sit up straight in the chair.”

What am I?

Five?

Grinding his teeth to keep from lashing out, Caillen did as instructed. A little belligerently, granted, still he did obey as he'd promised his father he would. But it was hard to sit up straight when what he really wanted to do was give the pompous ass in front of him a goblet enema. He felt like he was drowning in nine million layers of heavy fabric. Honestly, how could any aristocrat be fat if they carried this much clothing weight on their bodies all the time? How much food would you have to eat to gain weight? Forget the gym, he felt like he was bench-pressing a ton.

And it wasn't even weight you could use to blow shit up. *That* he could understand hauling around. This? This was ridiculous. He rubbed at his neck where hives were forming from the high starched collar.

At least you still have your head.

Yeah, but that wasn't as appealing right now as it'd been a few months ago. He glanced over to two of his best friends who watched him and the cultural advisor with a stoicism that didn't match the amused gleam in their traitorous eyes. Little bastards were enjoying every minute of his misery.

Eat it up, assholes. My vengeance will come. And you will bleed.

But he knew the truth. He'd never hurt either of them. He'd only imagine the strangulation. They'd been through too much together for him to hold something like this against them.

Lean with dark red hair, Darling Cruel was as reserved and regal as any monarch could be which made sense since he was from one of the oldest aristocratic families. He was immaculately dressed in a black suit trimmed with white that was covered with a lightweight, flowing black dignitary robe. The son of a royal governor and a high prince himself, he was used to crap like this. Yet for all of Darling's breeding, Caillen knew the truth of his renegade friend—a rebellious side no one would even suspect of him. Darling's shoulder-length hair covered one side of his face and hid a bad scar that Darling never spoke about. Caillen was one of the few who knew how he'd gotten it.

With perfect, unblemished features that would make any woman proud, Maris Sulle was much more flamboyant. His long black hair was tied back and braided with silver beads running through it. He wore a vibrant orange-and-yellow robe that trailed on the ground and pooled in a graceful mess around his red-booted feet. Obviously Maris wasn't concerned about mobility 'cause he'd never had to run a day in *his* extravagant life. Rather he ordered other people to run for him.

Maris's and Darling's friendship went back to early childhood. Caillen had met Maris about ten years ago and had hated him at first because of that spoiled arrogance that bled out of every gesture he made and from every piece of expensive fabric he wore. But Maris was like Gondarion spiderweed—he clung to you and after a while you learned to appreciate the strange beauty that was his quirky

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