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THE HOUNDS AT
OUR HEELS...

...WILL SOON
KNOW WE
ARE LIONS.

THE CRIMSON CAMPAIGN

BOOK TWO OF THE POWDER MAGE TRILOGY

BRIAN McCLELLAN

THE CRIMSON CAMPAIGN

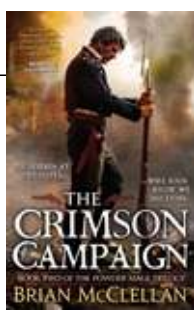


THE POWDER MAGE TRILOGY:
BOOK 2

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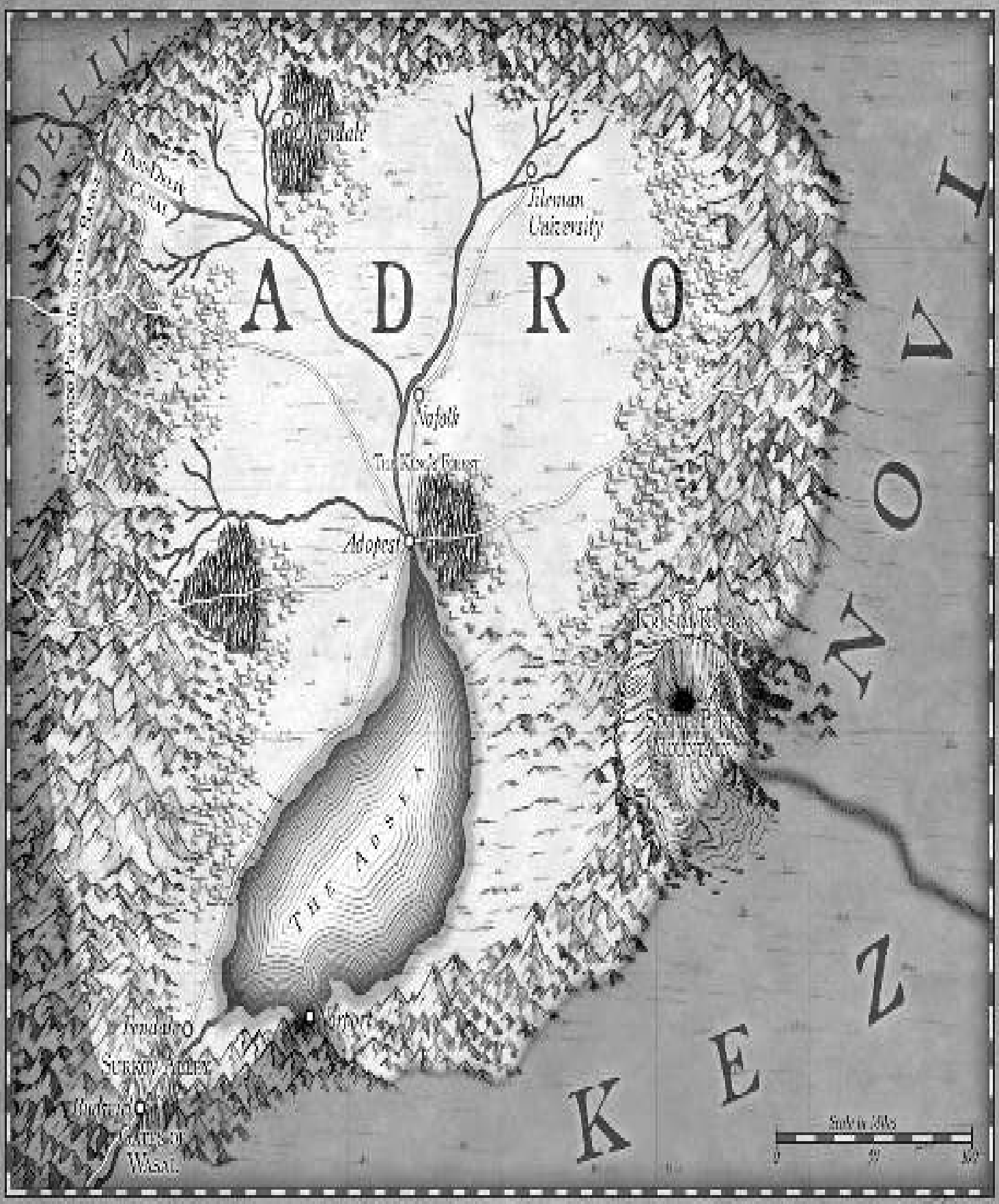
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*For Michele,
My one and only
My friend, my collaborator, and my love*



CITY OF ADOPEST

AND SURROUNDINGS

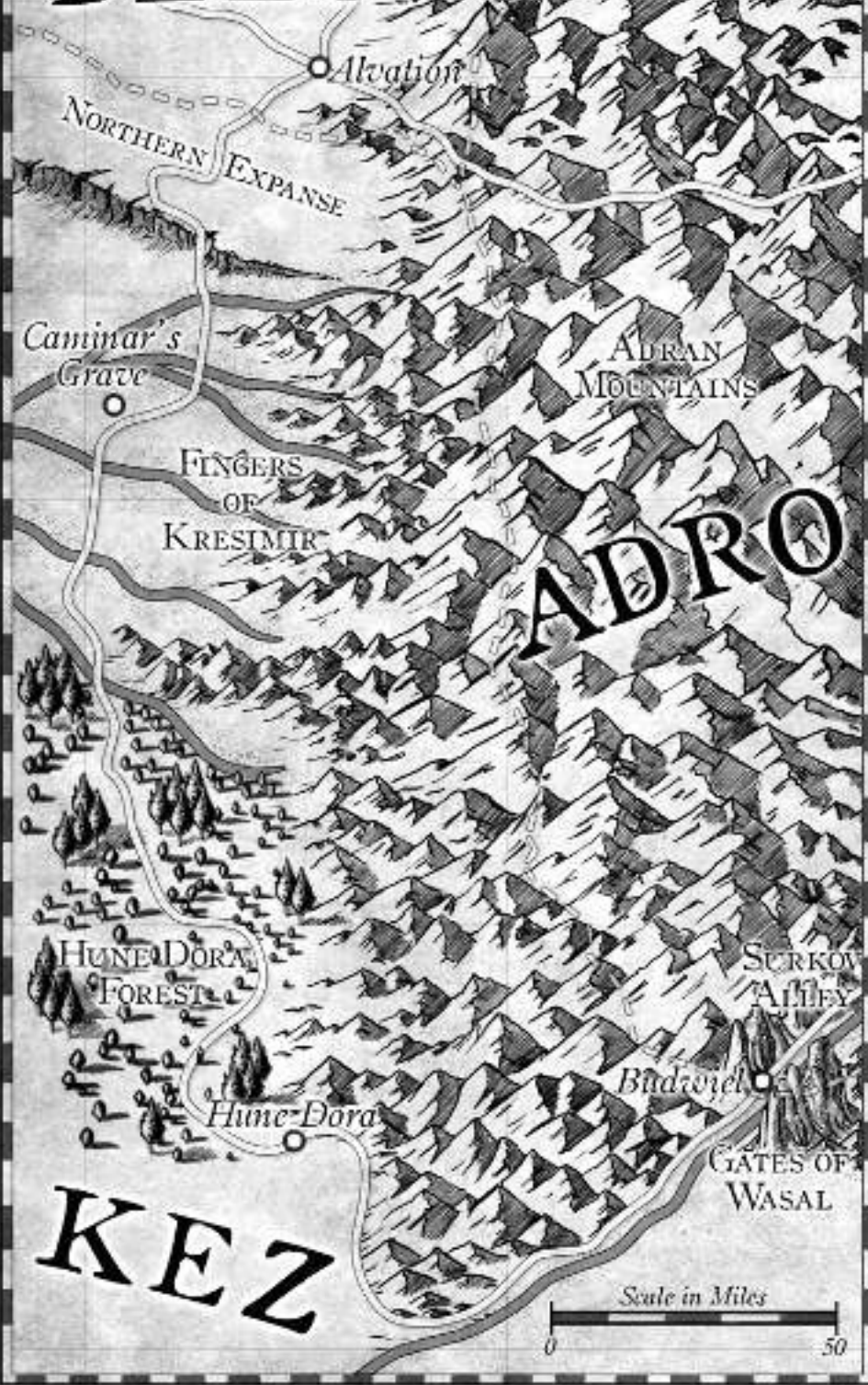
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| 1. Kirkamshire | 8. Baker's Town |
| Adopest University | 9. The Routs |
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THE ADSEA

NORTHERN KEZ

DELIV



Caminar's
Grave

Alvation

NORTHERN
EXPANSE

ALDRAN
MOUNTAINS

FINGERS
OF
KRESMIR

ADRO

HUNE-DORA
FOREST

Hune-Dora

SERKOV
ALLEY

Budwiel

GATES OF
WASAL

KEZ

Scale in Miles



CHAPTER

1



Adamat stood perfectly still in the middle of a deep hedgerow outside of his own summer house and stared through the windows at the men in the dining room. The house was a two-story, three-bedroom affair sitting by itself in the woods at the end of a dirt path. It was a twenty-minute walk into town from here. Unlikely anyone would hear gunshots.

Or screams.

Four of Lord Vetas's men milled about in the dining room, drinking and playing cards. Two of them were large and well-muscled as draft horses. A third was of middling height, with a heavy goatee hanging out of his shirt and a thick black beard.

The final man was the only one Adamat recognized. He had a square face and a head that was almost comically small. His name was Roja the Fox, and he was the smallest boxer in the bareknuckle-boxing circuit run by the Proprietor back in Adopest. He could move faster than most boxers, by necessity, but he wasn't popular with the crowds and did not fight often. What he was doing here, Adamat had no idea.

What he did know was that he feared for the safety of his children—especially his daughters—with a group of malcontents like this.

“Sergeant,” Adamat whispered.

The hedgerow rustled, and Adamat caught a glimpse of Sergeant Oldrich's face. He had a sharp jawline, and the dim moonlight betrayed the bulge of tobacco in one cheek. “My men are in place,” Oldrich responded. “Are they all in the dining room?”

“Yes.” Adamat had observed the house for three days now. All that time he'd stood by and watched these men yell at his children and smoke cigars in his house, dropping ash and spilling beer on Faye's good tablecloth. He knew their habits.

He knew that the fat, bearded one stayed upstairs, keeping an eye on the children all day. He knew the two big thugs escorted the children to the outhouse while Roja the Fox kept watch. He knew that four of them wouldn't leave the children by themselves until after dark, when they'd set up the nightly card game on the dining room table.

He also knew that in three days, he'd seen no sign of his wife or his oldest son.

Sergeant Oldrich pressed a loaded pistol into Adamat's hand. “Are you sure you want to lead on this? My men are good. They'll get the children out unharmed.”

“I’m sure,” Adamat said. “They’re my family. My responsibility.”

~~“Don’t hesitate to pull the trigger if they head toward the stairs,” Oldrich said. “We don’t want~~
them to take hostages.”

The children were already hostages, Adamat wanted to say. He bit back his words and smoothed the front of his shirt with one hand. The sky was cloudy, and now that the sun had set there would be no light to betray his presence to those inside. He stepped out of the hedgerow and was suddenly reminded of the night he’d been summoned to Skyline Palace. That was the night all this had begun: the coup, then the traitor, then Lord Vetas. Silently, he cursed Field Marshal Tamas for drawing him and his family into this.

Sergeant Oldrich’s soldiers crept out across the worn dirt path with Adamat, heading toward the front of the house. Adamat knew there were another eight behind the house. Sixteen men in total. They had the numbers. They had the element of surprise.

Lord Vetas’s goons had Adamat’s children.

Adamat paused at the front door. Adran soldiers, their dark-blue uniforms almost impossible to see in the darkness, took up spots beneath the dining room windows, their muskets at the ready. Adamat looked down at the door. Faye had chosen this house, instead of one closer to town, in part because of the door. It was a sturdy oak door with iron hinges. She felt that a strong door made her family safer.

He’d never had the heart to tell her the door frame was riddled with termites. In fact, Adamat had always meant to have it replaced.

Adamat stepped back and kicked right next to the doorknob.

The rotten wood exploded with the impact. Adamat ducked into the front hall and brought his pistol up as he rounded the corner.

All four of the goons burst into action. One of the big men leapt toward the back doorway leading to the staircase. Adamat held his pistol steady and fired and the man dropped.

“Don’t move,” Adamat said. “You’re surrounded!”

The remaining three goons stared back at him, frozen in place. He saw their eyes go to his speared pistol, and then they all went for him at once.

The volley of musket balls from the soldiers outside burst the window and glass showered the room like frost. The remaining goons went down, except for Roja the Fox. He stumbled toward Adamat with a knife drawn, blood soaking the sleeve of one arm.

Adamat reversed the grip on his pistol and brought the butt down on Roja’s head.

Just like that, it was over.

Soldiers spilled into the dining room. Adamat pushed past them and bolted up the stairs. He checked the children’s rooms first: all empty. Finally, the master bedroom. He flung the door open with such force it nearly flew off the hinges.

The children were huddled together in the narrow space between the bed and the wall. The older siblings embraced the younger ones, shielding them in their arms as best they could. Seven frightened faces stared up at Adamat. One of the twins was crying, no doubt from the crack of the muskets. Silent tears streamed down his chubby cheeks. The other poked his head out timidly from his hiding place beneath the bed.

Adamat breathed a sigh of relief and fell to his knees. They were alive. His children. He felt the tears come unbidden as he was mobbed by small bodies. Tiny hands reached out and touched his face. He threw his arms wide, grabbing as many of them as possible and pulling them closer.

Adamat wiped the tears from his cheeks. It wasn’t seemly to cry in front of the children. He took a great breath to compose himself and said, “I’m here. You’re safe. I’ve come with Field Marshal

Tamas's men."

Another round of happy sobs and hugs followed before Adamat was able to restore order.

"Where is your mother? Where's Josep?"

Fanish, his second oldest, helped to shush the other children. "They took Astrit a few weeks ago," she said, pulling at her long black braid with shaking fingers. "Just last week they came and took Mama and Josep."

"Astrit is safe," Adamat said. "Don't worry. Did they say where they were taking Mama and Josep?"

Fanish shook her head.

Adamat felt his heart fall, but he didn't let it show on his face. "Did they hurt you? Any of you?" He was most concerned for Fanish. She was fourteen, practically a woman. Her shoulders were bare beneath her thin nightgown. Adamat searched for bruises and breathed a word of thanks there were none.

"No, Papa," Fanish said. "I heard the men talking. They wanted to, but..."

"But what?"

"A man came when they took away Mama and Josep. I didn't hear his name, but he was dressed like a gentleman and he spoke very quietly. He told them that if they touched us before he gave them permission, he'd..." She trailed off and her face went pale.

Adamat patted her on the cheek. "You've been very brave," he reassured her gently. Inside Adamat fumed. Once Adamat was no longer any use to him, Vetas no doubt would have turned those goons loose on the children without a second thought.

"I'm going to find them," he said. He patted Fanish on the cheek again and stood up. One of the twins grabbed his hand.

"Don't go," he begged.

Adamat wiped the little one's tears. "I'll be right back. Stay with Fanish." Adamat wrenched himself away. There was still one more child and his wife to save—more battles to win before they were all safely reunited.

He found Sergeant Oldrich just outside the upstairs bedroom, waiting respectfully with his hat in his hands.

"They took Faye and my oldest son," Adamat said. "The rest of the children are safe. Are any of those animals alive?"

Oldrich kept his voice low so the children wouldn't overhear. "One of them took a bullet to the eye. Another, the heart. It was a lucky volley." He scratched the back of his head. Oldrich wasn't old by any means, but his hair was already graying just above his ears. His cheeks were flushed from the storm of violence. His voice, though, was even.

"Too lucky," Adamat said. "I needed one of them alive."

"One's alive," Oldrich said.

When Adamat reached the kitchen, he found Roja sitting in one of the chairs, his hands tied behind his back, bleeding from bullet wounds to the shoulder and hip.

Adamat retrieved a cane from the umbrella stand beside the front door. Roja stared balefully at the floor. He was a boxer, a fighter. He wouldn't go down easy.

"You're lucky, Roja," Adamat said, pointing to the bullet wounds with the tip of his cane. "You might survive these. If you receive medical attention quickly enough."

"I know you?" Roja said, snorting. Blood speckled his dirty linen shirt.

"No, you don't. But I know you. I've watched you fight. Where's Vetas?"

Roja turned his neck to the side and popped it. His eyes held a challenge. "Vetas? Don't know him."

Beneath the feigned ignorance, Adamat thought he caught a note of recognition in the boxer's voice.

Adamat placed the tip of his cane against Roja's shoulder, right next to the bullet wound. "You're my employer."

"Eat shit," Roja said.

Adamat pressed on his cane. He could feel the ball still in there, up against the bone. Roja squirmed. To his credit, he didn't make a sound. A bareknuckle boxer, if he was any good, learned to embrace pain.

"Where's Vetas?"

Roja didn't respond. Adamat stepped closer. "You want to live through the night, don't you?"

"He'll do worse to me than you ever could," Roja said. "Besides, I don't know nothin'."

Adamat stepped away from Roja, turning his back. He heard Oldrich step forward, followed by the heavy thump of a musket butt slamming into Roja's gut. He let the beating continue for a few moments before turning back and waving Oldrich away.

Roja's face looked like he'd been through a few rounds with SouSmith. He doubled over, spitting blood.

"Where did they take Faye?" *Tell me*, Adamat begged silently. *For your sake, hers, and mine. Tell me where she is.* "The boy, Josep? Where is he?"

Roja spit on the floor. "You're him, aren't you? The father of these stupid brats?" He didn't wait for Adamat to answer. "We were gonna bugger all those kids. Startin' with the small ones first. Vetas wouldn't let us. But your wife..." Roja ran his tongue along his broken lips. "She was willing. Thought we'd go easy on the babies if she took us all."

Oldrich stepped forward and slammed the butt of his musket across Roja's face. Roja jerked to one side and let out a choked groan.

Adamat felt his whole body shaking with rage. Not Faye. Not his beautiful wife, his friend and partner, his confidante and the mother of his children. He held up his hand when Oldrich wound up to hit Roja again.

"No," Adamat said. "That's just an average day for this one. Get me a lantern."

He grabbed Roja by the back of the neck and dragged him out of the chair, pushing him outside through the back door. Roja stumbled into an overgrown rosebush in the garden. Adamat lifted him by his feet, sure to use his wounded shoulder, and shoved him along. Toward the outhouse.

"Keep the children inside," Adamat said to Oldrich, "and bring a few men."

The outhouse was wide enough for two seats, a necessity for a household with nine children. Adamat opened the door while two of Oldrich's soldiers held Roja up between them. He took a lantern from Oldrich and let it illuminate the inside of the outhouse for Roja to see.

Adamat grabbed the board that covered the outhouse hole and tossed it on the ground. The smell was putrid. Even after sundown the walls crawled with flies.

"I dug this hole myself," Adamat said. "It's eight feet deep. I should have cut a new one years ago and the family has been using it a lot lately. They were here all summer." He shined the lantern into the hole and gave an exaggerated sniff. "Almost full," he said. "Where is Vetas? Where did they take Faye?"

Roja sneered at Adamat. "Go to the pit."

"We're already there," Adamat said. He grabbed Roja by the back of the neck and forced him into

the outhouse. It was barely big enough for the two of them. Roja struggled, but Adamat's strength was fueled by his rage. He kicked Roja's knees out from under him and shoved the boxer's head into the hole.

"Tell me where he is," Adamat hissed.

No answer.

"Tell me!"

"No!" Roja's voice echoed in the box that formed the outhouse seat.

Adamat pushed on the back of Roja's head. A few more inches and Roja would get a face full of human waste. Adamat choked back his own disgust. This was cruel. Inhuman. Then again, so was taking a man's wife and children hostage.

Roja's forehead touched the top of the shit and he let out a sob.

"Where is Vetas? I won't ask again!"

"I don't know! He didn't tell me anything. Just paid me to keep the kids here."

"How were you paid?" Adamat heard Roja retch. The boxer's body shuddered.

"Krana notes."

"You're one of the Proprietor's boxers," Adamat said. "Does he know about any of this?"

"Vetas said we were recommended. No one hires us for the job unless the Proprietor gives the go-ahead."

Adamat gritted his teeth. The Proprietor. The head of the Adran criminal world, and a member of Tamas's council. He was one of the most powerful men in Adro. If he knew about Lord Vetas, it could mean he'd been a traitor all along.

"What else do you know?"

"I barely spoke twenty words with the guy," Roja said. His words were coming out in broken gasps as he sputtered through his tears. "Don't know anything else!"

Adamat struck Roja on the back of the head. He sagged, but he was not unconscious. Adamat lifted him by his belt and shoved his face down into the muck. He lifted him again and pushed. Roja flailed his legs kicking hard as he tried to breathe through the piss and shit. Adamat grabbed the boxer by the ankles and pushed down, jamming Roja in the hole.

Adamat turned and walked out of the outhouse. He couldn't think through his fury. He was going to destroy Vetas for putting his wife and children through this.

Oldrich and his men stood by, watching Roja drown in filth. One of them looked ill in the dim lantern light. Another was nodding in approval. The night was quiet now, and Adamat could hear the steady chirp of crickets in the forest.

"Aren't you going to ask him more questions?" Oldrich said.

"He said himself, he doesn't know anything else." Adamat felt his stomach turn and he looked back at Roja's kicking legs. The mental image of Roja forcing himself on Faye almost stopped Adamat, and then he said to Oldrich, "Pull him out before he dies. Then ship him to the deepest coal mine you can find on the Mountainwatch."

Adamat swore to do worse to Vetas when he caught him.

CHAPTER

2



Field Marshal Tamas stood above Budwiel's southern gate and surveyed the Kez army. This was marked the southernmost point of Adro. If he tossed a stone in front of him, it would land on Kez soil, perhaps rolling down the slope of the Great Northern Road until it reached the Kez pickets on the edge of their army.

The Gates of Wasal, a pair of five-hundred-foot-tall cliffs, rose to either side of him, divided by thousands of years of flowing water coming out of the Adsea, cutting through Surkov's Alley, and feeding the grain fields of the Amber Expanse in northern Kez.

The Kez army had left the smoldering ruins of South Pike Mountain only three weeks ago. Official reports estimated the number of men in the army that had besieged Shouldercrown as two hundred thousand soldiers, accompanied by camp followers that swelled that number to almost three-quarters of a million.

His scouts told him that the total number was over a million now.

A small part of Tamas cowered at such a number. The world had not seen an army of that size since the wars of the Bleakening over fourteen hundred years ago. And here it was at his doorstep, trying to take his country from him.

Tamas could recognize a new soldier on the walls by how loud they gasped upon seeing the Kez army. He could smell the fear of his own men. The anticipation. The dread. This was not Shouldercrown, a fortress easily held by a few companies of soldiers. This was Budwiel, a trading city of some hundred thousand people. The walls were in disrepair, the gates too numerous and too wide.

Tamas did not let that fear show on his own face. He didn't dare. He buried his tactical concerns behind the terror he felt that his only son lay in Adopest deep in a coma; the pain that still ached in his leg despite the healing powers of a god. Nothing showed on his countenance but contempt for the audacity of the Kez commanders.

Steady footfalls sounded on the stone stairs behind him, and Tamas was joined by General Hilanska, the commander of Budwiel's artillery and the Second Brigade.

Hilanska was an extremely portly man of about forty years old, a widower of ten years, and a veteran of the Gurlish Campaigns. He was missing his left arm at the shoulder, taken clean off by a cannonball thirty years ago when Hilanska was not yet a captain. He had never let his arm nor his weight affect his performance on a battlefield, and for that alone he had Tamas's respect. Never mind

that his gun crews could knock the head off a charging cavalryman at eight hundred yards.

~~Among Tamas's General Staff, most of whom had been chosen for their skill and not the personalities,~~ Hilanska was the closest thing Tamas had to a friend.

"Been watching them gather there for weeks and it still doesn't cease to impress me," Hilanska said.

"Their numbers?" Tamas asked.

Hilanska leaned over the edge of the wall and spit. "Their discipline." He removed his looking glass from his belt and slid it open with a well-practiced jerk of his one hand, then held it up to his eye. "All those damned paper-white tents lined up as far as the eye can see. Looks like a model."

"Lining up a half-million tents doesn't make an army disciplined," Tamas said. "I've worked with Kez commanders before. In Gurla. They keep their men in line with fear. It makes for a clean and pretty camp, but when armies clash, there's no steel in their spine. They break by the third volley. *Not like my men, he thought. Not like the Adran brigades.*

"Hope you're right," Hilanska said.

Tamas watched the Kez sentries make their rounds a half mile away, well in range of Hilanska's guns, but not worth the ammunition. The main army camped almost two whole miles back; the officers feared Tamas's powder mages more than they did Hilanska's guns.

Tamas gripped the lip of the stone wall and opened his third eye. A wave of dizziness passed over him before he could see clearly into the Else. The world took on a pastel glow. In the distance there were lights, glimmering like the fires of an enemy patrol at night—the glow of Kez Privileged and Wardens. He closed his third eye and rubbed at his temple.

"You're still thinking about it, aren't you?" Hilanska asked.

"What?"

"Invading."

"Invade?" Tamas scoffed. "I'd have to be mad to launch an attack against an army ten times our size."

"You've got that look to you, Tamas," Hilanska said. "Like a dog pulling at its chain. I've known you too long. You've made no secret that you intend to invade Kez given the opportunity."

Tamas eyed those pickets. The Kez army was set so far back it would be almost impossible to catch them unawares. The terrain gave no good cover for a night attack.

"If I could get the Seventh and Ninth in there with the element of surprise, I could carve through the heart of their army and be back in Budwiel before they knew what hit them," Tamas said quietly. His heart quickened at the thought. The Kez were not to be underestimated. They had the numbers. They still had a few Privileged, even after the Battle of Shouldercrown.

But Tamas knew what his best brigades were capable of. He knew Kez strategies, and he knew the weaknesses. Kez soldiers were levies from their immense peasant population. Their officers were nobles who'd bought their commissions. Not like his men: patriots, men of steel and iron.

"A few of my boys did some exploring," Hilanska said.

"They did?" Tamas quelled the annoyance of having his thoughts interrupted.

"You know about Budwiel's catacombs?"

Tamas grunted in acknowledgment. The catacombs stretched under the West Pillar, one of the two mountains that made up the Gates of Wasal. They were a mixture of natural and man-made caverns used to house Budwiel's dead.

"They're off limits to soldiers," Tamas said, unable to keep the reproach from his voice.

"I'll deal with my boys, but you might want to hear what they have to say before we have the

flogged.”

“Unless they discovered a Kez spy ring, I doubt it’s relevant.”

“Better,” Hilanska said. “They found a way for you to get your men into Kez.”

Tamas felt his heart jump at the possibility. “Take me to them.”

CHAPTER

3



Taniel stared at the ceiling only a foot above him, counting each time he swung, side to side, in the hemp-rope hammock, listening to the Gurlish pipes that filled the room with a soft, whistling music.

He hated that music. It seemed to echo in his ears, all at once too soft to hear well but loud enough to make him grind his molars together. He lost count of the hammock swings somewhere around ten and exhaled. Warm smoke curled out from between his lips and against the crumbling mortar in the ceiling. He watched the smoke escape the roof of his niche and swirl into the middle of the mala den.

There were a dozen such niches in the room. Two were occupied. In the two weeks he'd been there, Taniel had yet to see the occupants get up to piss or eat or do anything other than suck on the long-stemmed mala pipes and flag the den's owner over for a refill.

He leaned over, his hand reaching for a refill for his own mala pipe. The table next to his hammock held a plate with a few scraps of dark mala, an empty purse, and a pistol. He couldn't remember where the pistol came from.

Taniel gathered the bits of mala together into one small, sticky ball and pushed it into the end of his pipe. It lit instantly, and he took a long pull into his lungs.

"Want more?"

The den's owner sidled up to Taniel's hammock. He was Gurlish, his skin brown but not as dark as a Deliv's, with a lighter tone under his eyes and on his palms. He was tall, like most Gurlish, and skinny, his back bent from years of leaning into the niches of his mala den to clean them out or light an addict's pipe. His name was Kin.

Taniel reached for his purse, wiggled his fingers around inside before remembering that it was empty. "No money," he said, his own voice ragged in his ears.

How long had he been here? Two weeks, Taniel decided after putting his mind to the question. More importantly, how did he get here?

Not *here*, the mala den, but here in Adopest. Taniel remembered the fight on top of Kresimir's palace as Ka-poel destroyed the Kez Cabal, and he remembered pulling the trigger of his rifle and watching a bullet take the god Kresimir in the eye.

It was all darkness after that until he woke up, covered in sweat, Ka-poel straddling him with fresh blood on her hands. He remembered bodies in the hallway of the hotel—his father's soldiers with unfamiliar insignia on their jackets. He'd left the hotel and stumbled here, where he'd hoped to forge

Of course, if he still remembered all that, then the mala wasn't doing its job.

"Army jacket," Kin said, fingering his lapel. "Your buttons."

Taniel looked down at the jacket he wore. It was Adran-army dark blue, with silver trim and buttons. He'd taken it from the hotel. It wasn't his—too big. There was a powder mage pin—a silver powder keg—pinned to the lapel. Maybe it was his. Had he lost weight?

The jacket had been clean two days ago. He remembered that much. Now it was stained with droplets of food, and small burns from mala embers. When the pit had he eaten?

Taniel pulled his belt knife and took one of the buttons in his fingers. He paused. Kin's daughter had walked through the room. She wore a faded white dress, clean despite the squalor of the den. She must have been a few years older than Taniel, but no children clung to her skirts.

"Do you like my daughter?" Kin asked. "She will dance for you. Two buttons!" He held up two fingers for emphasis. "Much prettier than the Fatrastan witch."

Kin's wife, sitting in the corner and playing the Gurlish pipes, stopped the music long enough to say something to Kin. They exchanged a few words in Gurlish, then Kin turned back to Taniel. "Two buttons!" he reiterated.

Taniel cut a button loose and put it in Kin's hand. Dance, eh? Taniel wondered if Kin had a strong enough grasp of Adran for euphemism, or if dance was indeed all she'd do.

"Maybe later," Taniel said, settling back in the hammock with a fresh ball of mala the size of a child's fist. "Ka-poel isn't a witch. She's..." He paused, trying to figure out a way to describe her to Kin in Gurlish. His thoughts moved slowly, sluggish from the mala. "All right," he conceded. "She's a witch."

Taniel topped off his mala pipe. Kin's daughter was watching him. He returned her open stare with a half-lidded gaze. She was pretty, by some standards. Too tall by far for Taniel, and much too gaunt—most Gurlish were. She stayed there, laundry balanced on her hip, until her father shooed her out.

How long had it been since he'd had a woman?

A woman? He laughed, smoke curling out his nose. The laugh ended in a cough and received more than a curious glance from Kin. No, not *a* woman. *The* woman. Vlora. How long had it been since? Two and a half years now? Three?

He sat back up and fished around in his pocket for a powder charge, wondering where Vlora was now. Probably still with Tamas and the rest of the powder cabal.

Tamas would want Taniel back on the front line.

To the pit with that. Let Tamas come to Adopest looking for Taniel. The last place he'd look was the mala den.

There wasn't a powder charge in Taniel's pocket. Ka-poel had cleaned him out. He'd not had a smidgen of powder since she brought him out of that goddamned coma. Not even his pistol was loaded. He could go out and get some. Find a barracks, show them his powder-mage pin.

The very idea of getting out of the hammock made his head spin.

Ka-poel came down the steps into the mala den just as Taniel was beginning to drift off. He kept his eyes mostly closed, the smoke curling from his lips. She stopped and examined him.

She was short, her features petite. Her skin was white, with ashen freckles and her red hair was no more than an inch long. He didn't like it so short, it made her look boyish. *No mistaking her for a boy*, Taniel thought as she shrugged out of her long black duster. Underneath she wore a white sleeveless shirt, scrounged from who-knew-where, and close-fitting black pants.

Ka-poel touched Taniel's shoulder. He ignored her. Let her think him asleep, or too deep in a mala haze to notice her. All the better.

She reached out and squeezed his nose shut with one hand, pushing his mouth closed with the other.

He jerked up, taking a breath when she let go. "What the pit, Pole? Trying to kill me?"

She smiled, and it wasn't the first time under the mala haze that he'd stared into those glass-green eyes with less than proper thoughts. He shook them away. She was his ward. He was her protector. Could it be the other way around? She was the one who'd done the protecting up on South Pike.

Taniel settled back into the hammock. "What do you want?"

She held up a thick pad of paper, bound in leather. A sketchbook. To replace the one lost on South Pike Mountain. He felt a pang at that. Sketches from eight years of his life. People he'd known, many of them long dead. Some friends, some enemies. Losing that sketchbook hurt almost as much as losing his genuine Hrusch rifle.

Almost as much as...

He pushed the stem of his mala pipe between his teeth and sucked in hard. He shivered as the smoke burned his throat and lungs and seeped into his body, deadening the memories.

When he reached out for the sketchbook, he saw that his hand was shaking. He snatched it back quickly.

Ka-poel's eyes narrowed. She set the sketchbook on his stomach, followed by a pack of charcoal pencils. Finer sketching tools than he'd ever had in Fatrasta. She pointed at them, and mimed him sketching.

Taniel made his right hand into a fist. He didn't want her to see him shaking. "I... not now, Pole."

She pointed again, more insistently.

Taniel took another deep breath of mala and closed his eyes. He felt tears roll down his cheeks.

He felt her take the book and pencils off his chest. Heard the table move. He expected a reproach. A punch. Something. When he opened his eyes again, he saw her bare feet disappearing up the stairs of the mala den and she was gone. He took another deep breath of mala and wiped the tears off his face.

The room began to fade into the mala haze along with his memories; all the people he'd killed, all the friends he'd seen die. The god he'd seen with his own eyes, and then put down with an ensorcelled bullet. He didn't want to remember any of that.

Just another few days in the mala den, then he'd be fine. Back to his old self. He'd report to Tamas and get back to what he was good at: killing Kez.

Tamas found himself a quarter mile under a thousand tons of rock just a few hours after leaving Budwiel's walls. His torch flickered in the darkness, casting light and shadows across the row after row of recessed graves carved into the walls of the caverns. Skulls hung from the ceilings by the hundred in a grisly tribute to the dead, and he wondered if this was what the pathway to the afterlife looked like.

More fire, he imagined.

He fought off his initial claustrophobia by reminding himself that these catacombs had been used for a thousand years. They weren't likely to collapse anytime soon.

The size of the passageway surprised him. At times the rooms were wide enough to hold hundreds of men. At their narrowest, even a carriage could pass through them without scraping the sides.

The two artillery men Hilanska had spoken of walked on ahead. They carried their own torches and they talked excitedly, their voices echoing as they passed through the varied chambers. Beside Tamas

his bodyguard Olem kept pace with a hand on his pistol and a suspicious eye on the two soldiers ahead of him. Bringing up the rear were two of Tamas's best powder mages: Vlora and Andriya.

"These caverns," Olem said, running his fingers along the stone walls, "were widened with tools. But look at the ceiling." He pointed upward. "No tool marks."

"They were carved out by water," Tamas said. "Probably thousands of years ago." He let his eyes run over the ceiling and then down to the floor. Their path sloped gently downward, punctuated from time to time by steps cut into the floor and worn by the passing of thousands of pilgrims, families, and priests every year. Despite these signs of use, these catacombs were empty of anything living—the priests had suspended burials during the siege, worried that artillery fire might collapse some of the caves.

Tamas used to play in caverns like these when his father, an apothecary, searched the mountains every summer for rare flowers, mushrooms, and fungus. Some cave systems went incredibly deep into the heart of the mountain. Others ended abruptly, just when things seemed to be getting interesting.

The passageway opened up into a wide cavern. The torchlight no longer danced on the ceiling and the far walls, but disappeared into the darkness above. They stood on the edge of a pool of still water blacker than a moonless night. Their voices echoed in the great hollow space.

Tamas came to a stop beside the waiting artillery men. He cracked a powder charge in between his fingers and sprinkled it on his tongue. The trance swept through him, bringing dizziness and clarity all at once. The ache of his leg disappeared and the tendrils of light caused by the torches were suddenly more than enough for him to examine the cavern in its entirety.

The walls were lined with stone sarcophagi, stacked almost haphazardly upon one another thirty or maybe forty feet into the air. A dripping sound echoed through the chamber: the source of the underground lake. Tamas could see no exit but the one through which they'd come.

"Sir?" one of the artillerymen said. His name was Ludik, and he held his torch over the pool, trying to gauge the depths.

"We're thousands of feet beneath the West Pillar," Tamas said. "And no closer to Kez. I don't like being led into strange places."

The cock of Olem's pistol stirred the silence of the cave. Behind Tamas, Vlora and Andriya stood with their rifles at the ready. Ludik exchanged a nervous glance with his comrade and swallowed hard.

"It looks like the cave system ends," Ludik said, pointing with his torch across the pond. "But it doesn't. It keeps going, and goes straight toward Kez."

"How do you know?" Tamas asked.

Ludik hesitated, expecting reproach. "Because, sir, we followed it through."

"Show me."

They passed behind a pair of sarcophagi on the other side of the pond and ducked beneath a ledge that proved deeper than it looked. A moment later, and Tamas was standing on the other side. The cavern opened up again and led down into the dark.

Tamas turned to the bodyguard at his shoulder. "Try not to shoot anyone unless I say so."

Olem stroked his neatly trimmed beard, eyeing the artillerymen. "Of course, sir." His hand didn't leave the butt of his pistol. Olem wasn't the trusting sort these days.

An hour later, Tamas left the cavern and climbed up through brush and scree into daylight. The sun had passed over the mountains to the east and the valley was in shadow.

"All clear, sir," Olem said, helping him up to steady footing.

Tamas checked his pistol, then absently thumbed the contents of another powder charge onto his tongue. They stood in a steep valley on the southern slope of the Adran Mountains. By his guess, the

were less than two miles from Budwiel. If that was correct, they now flanked the Kez army perfectly.

~~“An old riverbed, sir,” Vloro said, picking her way among the small boulders. “It points to the west, then cuts south. The base of the valley is obscured by a hillock. We’re not more than a half mile from the Kez right now, but there’s no sign they’ve even bothered scouting this valley.”~~

“Sir!” a voice called from within the cave.

Tamas whirled. Vloro, Olem, and Andriya all raised their rifles, pointing into the darkness.

An Adran soldier emerged. His shoulder sported a chevron with a powder horn beneath it. The man was a lance corporal, one of Olem’s new company of elite soldiers, the Riflejacks.

“Quiet, fool,” Olem hissed. “You want all of Kez to hear?”

The messenger wiped the sweat from his brow, blinking up at the brightness of day. “Sorry, sir,” he said to Tamas. “I got lost in the mountain. General Hilanska sent me after you not more than a moment after you left.”

“What is it, man?” Tamas demanded. Gasping messengers were never a good sign. They never hurried unless it was of utmost importance.

“The Kez, sir,” the messenger said. “Our spies report they will attack en masse the day after tomorrow. General Hilanska requests you back at the wall immediately.”

Tamas ran his eyes across the steep valley in which they stood. “How many men do you think you could bring through here in two days?”

“Thousands,” Vloro said.

“Ten thousand,” Olem added.

“A hammer of two brigades,” Tamas said. “And Budwiel will be the anvil.”

Vloro seemed doubtful. “That’s a small hammer, sir, compared with that monstrous force out there.”

“Then we’ll have to strike hard and fast.” Tamas examined the valley one more time. “Let’s head back. Have the engineers start widening the tunnel. Get some men up here to shore up this scree so our passage won’t cause a ruckus. When the Kez attack, we’ll smash them against the gates of Budwiel.”

CHAPTER

4



There were few things in the world more tedious, Nila reflected as she sat on the kitchen floor and watched flames curl around the base of the immense iron pot hanging over the fire, than waiting for water to boil.

Most manor houses would be silent at this hour. She'd always relished the quiet—the still night air that insulated her from the chaos of a servant's life when the master and mistress were at home and the house bustled with movement. There was a night not more than a few months past, though it felt like years, that Nila had known no life but the one in which she boiled water and did the laundry every week for Duke Eldaminse's family and the serving staff.

Lord Eldaminse was dead now, his servants scattered and his home burned. Everything Nila had ever known was gone.

Here in Lord Vetas's city manor on a side street in the middle of Adopest, the household never slept.

Somewhere in the enormous house a man was shouting. Nila couldn't make out the words, but they were spoken in anger. Probably Dourford, the Privileged. He was one of Lord Vetas's lieutenants, and he had a temper like Nila had never seen. He had a habit of beating the cooks. Everyone in the household feared him, even the hulking bodyguards who accompanied Lord Vetas on his errands.

Everyone feared Dourford except, of course, for Vetas.

As far as Nila could tell, Lord Vetas feared nothing.

"Jakob," Nila said, speaking to the six-year-old boy sitting beside her on the kitchen floor, "hand me the lye."

Jakob got to his feet and paused, frowning at her. "Where?" he asked.

"Under the washbasin," Nila said. "The glass jar."

Jakob rummaged around beneath the washbasin before finding the jar. He grabbed it by the lid and pulled.

"Careful!" Nila said. She was on her feet and beside him in a moment, and caught him by the shoulders as the jar came loose and he stumbled backward. She put a hand beneath the jar. "Got you," she said, and took the jar. It wasn't very heavy, but Jakob had never been the strongest child.

She unscrewed the lid and doled out a measure for the laundry with a spoon.

"No," she said when Jakob reached for the open jar. "You don't want to touch that. It's very

poisonous. It'll eat right through your pink fingers." She snatched him by the hand and playfully bit his fingers. "Like an angry dog!"

Jakob giggled and retreated across the room. Nila put the lye away on a high shelf. They shouldn't keep materials like this within reach of children. Even if Jakob *was* the only child in the house.

Nila wondered what life would be like if she was still in the Eldaminse manor. There would have been a party for Jakob's sixth birthday two weeks ago. The house staff would have been given a stipend and an extra afternoon off. Duke Eldaminse would have likely made another pass at Nila—two, or three—and Lady Eldaminse would have considered putting her out on the street.

Nila missed the quiet of the nights doing laundry for the Eldaminse house. She didn't mind the backbiting and jealousy among the serving staff, or Lord Eldaminse's groping hands. But she exchanged it for something worse.

Lord Vetas's manor.

There was a scream from somewhere in the basement, where Lord Vetas kept his... room.

"Pit," Nila said softly to herself, eyes back on the flame of the kitchen fire.

"A lady doesn't curse."

Nila felt her spine stiffen. The voice was quiet, calm. Deceptively placid, like the surface of the ocean undisturbed by the sharks circling beneath.

"Lord Vetas." She turned and curtsied to the man standing in the kitchen door.

Vetas was a Rosvelean with dusty-yellow skin. His back was straight, one hand tucked into his vest pocket and the other holding his evening glass of red wine with casual familiarity. Seen on the street he might be mistaken for a well-dressed clerk or merchant with his white shirt, dark-blue vest, and black pants that she'd neatly pressed herself.

Nila knew that to assume anything about Vetas was a deadly mistake. He was a killer. She'd felt his hands on her throat. She'd looked into his eyes—eyes that seemed to see everything at once—and seen the dispassion with which he regarded living things.

"I'm not a lady, my lord," Nila said.

Vetas's eyes examined her clinically. Nila felt stripped beneath that gaze. She felt like a piece of meat on the butcher's block. It frightened her.

And it made her angry. She wondered for a moment if Lord Vetas would look that calm and collected in his casket.

"Do you know why you're here?" Vetas said.

"To watch over Jakob." She cast a glance at the boy. Jakob watched Vetas curiously.

"That's right." A smile suddenly split Vetas's face, warmth flooding his expression without touching his eyes. "Come here, boy," Vetas said, kneeling. "It's all right, Jakob. Don't be afraid."

Jakob's training as a noble's son left him no choice but to obey. He started toward Vetas, looking back to Nila for direction.

Nila felt her chest go cold. She wanted to throw herself between them, to take a hot iron from the fire and beat Vetas back. The false smile on his face was far more frightening to her than his customary stoic gaze.

"Go ahead," she heard herself say in a small voice.

"I brought you a candy." Vetas handed Jakob a treat wrapped in colored paper.

"Jakob, don't..." Nila started.

Vetas fixed her with his eyes. There was no threat behind them, no emotion. Just a cold glance.

"You can have it," Nila said, "but you should save it for tomorrow, after breakfast."

Vetas gave Jakob the candy and tousled his hair.

Don't touch him, Nila screamed inside. She forced herself to smile at Vetas.

“Why is Jakob here, my lord?” Nila said, pushing the question through her fear.

Vetas got to his feet. “That’s no concern of yours. Do you know how to behave like a lady, Nila?” he asked.

“I... I suppose. I’m just a laundress.”

“I think you’re more than that,” Vetas said. “Everyone has the ability to rise above their station. You survived the royalist barricades, then infiltrated Field Marshal Tamas’s headquarters with the aim of rescuing young Jakob here. And you’re pretty. No one ever looks past beauty, if it’s dressed right.”

Nila wondered how Vetas could possibly have known about the royalist barricades. She’d told him about Tamas’s headquarters, but... what exactly did he mean about beauty?

“I may have further use for you than just”—he made a gesture toward Jakob and the laundress—“this.”

Jakob was too busy trying to nibble at his candy as discreetly as possible to notice the disdain in Vetas’s voice. Nila wasn’t. And she feared what he meant by “further use.”

“My lord.” She curtsied again, and tried not to let her hatred show on her face. She might be able to kill him in the bath. Like she’d read in those mystery novels she’d borrowed from the butler’s son at the Eldaminse house.

“In the meantime,” Vetas said. He stepped into the hall outside the kitchen, keeping the door open with one foot. “Bring her in here,” he called.

Someone cursed. A woman screamed in anger—an angry-wildcat yell. There was a struggle in the hall and two of Vetas’s bodyguards dragged a woman into the kitchen. She was in her forties perhaps, her body sagging in all the wrong places from having had too many children, her skin wrinkled from work but unweathered by the sun. Her curly black hair was tucked back behind her head in a bun and the bags beneath her eyes spoke of little sleep.

The woman stopped when she caught sight of Nila and Jakob.

“Where is my son?” she spat at Vetas.

“In the basement,” Vetas said, “and he won’t be harmed as long as you cooperate.”

“Liar!”

A patronizing smile touched Vetas’s lips. “Nila, Jakob. This is Faye. She is unwell and must be watched at all times, lest she hurt herself. She’s going to share your room, Jakob. Can you help watch her, my boy?”

Jakob nodded solemnly.

“Good lad.”

“I’ll kill you,” Faye said to Vetas.

Vetas stepped to Faye and whispered something in her ear. She stiffened, the color draining from her face.

“Now,” Vetas said, “Faye is going to take over your responsibilities, Nila. She’ll do the laundry and help with Jakob.”

Nila exchanged a glance with the woman. She felt the knot of fear in her belly reflected on Faye’s face.

“And me?” Nila knew what Vetas would do with someone who didn’t have a use. She still remembered Jakob’s dead nurse—the one who’d refused to go along with Vetas’s schemes.

Vetas suddenly crossed the room. He took Nila by the chin, turning her face one way and then another. He forced his thumb into her mouth and she had to keep herself from biting down as he examined her teeth. He stepped away suddenly, and wiped his hands on a kitchen towel as if he’d just

handled an animal.

~~“Your hands show very little wear from the laundering. Remarkably little, to be honest. I’ll give you some lotion in the morning and you’ll apply it every hour. We’ll have those hands looking soft like a noblewoman’s, in no time.”~~ He patted her on the cheek.

Nila resisted the urge to spit in his eye.

Vetas leaned forward and spoke quietly so that Jakob could not hear. “This woman,” Vetas said, pointing to Faye, “is your responsibility, Nila. If she displeases me, you’ll suffer for it. Jakob will suffer for it. And believe me, I know how to make people suffer.”

Vetas stepped away, throwing a smile toward Jakob. More loudly he said, “I think you need some new clothes, Jakob. Would you like that?”

“Very much, sir,” Jakob said.

“We’ll do that tomorrow. Some toys, too.”

Vetas glanced at Nila, his eyes holding a silent warning, and he left the room with his bodyguards.

Faye adjusted her dress and took a deep breath. Her eyes traveled around the room. A mix of emotions ranged across her face: anger, panic, and fear. For a moment Nila thought she might snatch up a frying pan and attack her.

Nila wondered who she was. Why was she here? Obviously another prisoner. Another player in Vetas’s schemes. Could Nila trust her?

“I’m Nila,” she said. “And this is Jakob.”

Faye’s eyes settled on Nila and she nodded with a frown. “I’m Faye. And I’m going to kill that bastard.”

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