



CHAPTER 1

Froi's head was ringing.

A fist against his jaw, an elbow to his nose, a knee to his face, and they kept on coming and coming, these old men, he had called them. They came for him one after the other, and there was no mercy to be had this day. But Froi of the Exiles wasn't born for mercy. Not to receive nor to deliver it.

Behind his attackers was a sycamore tree waiting to die, its limbs half dragging on the dry ground beneath it, and Froi took his chance, diving high between two of the men, his hands reaching for one of the branches, his body swinging, legs jutting out. A boot to a face, one man down, then he pounded into another before the branch collapsed under his weight. He pulled it free from the tree, swinging the limb high over his head. A third man down and then the fourth. He heard a curse and a muttered threat before the flat of his palm smashed the next man who came forward. Smashed him on the bridge of the nose, and Froi danced with glee.

Until he was left facing Finnikin of Lumaterre and Froi felt the feralness of his nature rise to the surface. "No rules," they had



declared, and the dark goddess knew that Froi loved to play games with no rules. And so with eyes locked, they circled each other, hands out, waiting to pounce in the way the wolves in the Forest of Lumatere fought for their prey. Froi saw a bead of sweat appear on the brow of the man they called the queen's consort, saw the quick fist come his way, and so he ducked, his own fist connecting with precision. But all it took was the thought of the queen, her head shaking with bemusement and a smile entering her eyes, to make Froi think again about where to land his second blow. In that moment's hesitation, his legs were kicked out from under him and he felt his face pressed into the earth.

"You let me win," Finnikin growled, and Froi heard anger in his voice.

"Only because she'll kill me if I bruise that lily-white skin," Froi mocked through gasps.

Finnikin pressed harder, but after a moment, Froi could feel that he was shaking from laughter. "She'll thank you for it, knowing Isaboe." Finnikin leaped to his feet. They exchanged a grin, and Froi took the hand held out to him.

"Old man, did you call me?" Perri, the captain's second-in-charge, asked behind him. "Because I'm sure I heard those words come out of your mouth."

"Not out of my mouth," Froi said, feigning innocence and spitting blood to the ground from a cut in his lip. "Must have been someone else."

Around the sycamore, soldiers of the Guard were picking themselves up, curses ringing the air while the lads in training began collecting the practice swords and shields.

"If he goes for my nose again, I *fin*k I'll hang him up by his little balls," one of the Guard said, getting to his feet. Froi tried to ignore the mockery.

"Nothing little about me," he grunted. "Don't take my word



for it, Hindley. Ask your wife. She seemed happy last night, you know, with the size and all.”

Hindley snarled, knowing there was no truth in the words, but the danger was in having spoken them. Froi saw the snarl as an invitation, and all hope of ignoring it failed as he lunged at the man, wanting nothing more than to connect a fist to Hindley’s nose for the third time that day. Because no matter what, the taunts still stung. Three years ago, when he hardly knew a word of Lumateran, his tongue would twist around all the strange pronunciations of his new language, causing great amusement among those who saw Froi as nothing more than street scum. *Here comes the feef wif nofing to show for*, they’d taunt. Finnikin had once told Froi that the greatest weapon against big stupid men was a sharp mind. It was one of the reasons Froi had agreed to continue his lessons with the priest-king. Three years on, he had exceeded everyone’s expectations, including his own.

Today they had set up their drills in a meadow close to the foot of the mountains. Finnikin and Sir Topher had business with the ambassador from the neighboring kingdom of Sarnak, and they had chosen the inn of Balconio as the meeting place.

“You’re not as nimble as you used to be,” Perri said as they walked toward the horse posts by the rock hedges of a Flatland farm that had long been deserted. Lumateran was filled with empty farms and cottages, a testament to those who had died during the ten years of terror, which ended three years ago, when Finnikin and the queen broke the curse and freed their people.

“He’s talking to you,” Finnikin said with a shove.

“No, he’s talking to you,” Froi replied with an even greater shove. “Because I’d probably kill a man who called me nimble.”

Perri stopped in his tracks, and Froi knew he had gone too



far. Perri had a stare that could rip the guts out of a man, and Froi felt it now. He knew he would have to wait it out under Perri's cold scrutiny.

"Except if it came from you, Perri," he said seriously. "I'd prefer the word *swift*, though. And you can't say I'm not swift."

"What have I told you about talking back?" Perri's voice was cold and hard.

"Not to," Froi muttered.

He knew he should have counted. It was the rule to count to ten in his head before he opened his mouth. It was the rule to count to ten if he wanted to smash a man in the face for saying something he didn't like. It was the rule to count to ten if instinct wasn't needed but common sense was. It was part of his bond to Trevanion and Perri and the Queen's Guard. Froi did a lot of counting.

They began walking again, silent for what seemed too long a time. Then Finnikin shoved him with a shoulder and Froi stumbled, laughing.

"He's filling out more than we imagined, Perri," Finnikin said. "Perhaps it's true what they say, after all. That he comes from River folk."

"Wouldn't mind being known as a River man," Froi said. Still nothing from Perri.

"Not as a Flatlander?" Finnikin asked.

Froi thought about it for a moment. "Perhaps both."

He saw Perri's look of disapproval.

"You can't stay working on Augie's farm much longer," Perri said firmly. "Sooner or later, you'll have to join the Guard."

The topic of where Froi belonged came up more often these days. What had begun as a roof over his head three years ago with Lord August and his family had become home. And Froi's kinship with the village of Sayles had strengthened as he toiled



alongside them, day in and day out, to restore Lumatere to what it had been before the unspeakable. But Froi's place was also with the captain and Perri and the men of the Guard in the barracks of the palace, protecting the queen and Finnikin and their daughter, Princess Jasmina. Once a boy with no home, Froi now found himself torn between two.

"I can do both."

"No, you can't," Perri said.

"I can do both, I tell you!"

"You've a warrior's instinct and the skill of a marksman, Froi," Perri said. "You're wasted as a farm boy. It's what I tell Augie every time I see him."

"Lady Abian says I'm probably eighteen by now, so you'll have to start treating me as one of the men," Froi muttered. He hated being called a boy.

This was followed by another starve from Perri. Another round of counting to ten from Froi.

"I'll treat you like a man when you act like one," Perri said. "Agreed?"

Finnikin shoved him again, and Froi tried not to laugh because Perri hated it when Froi didn't take things seriously.

"When I'm as old as my father, they'll still be calling me a boy," Finnikin said. "So why shouldn't you endure the indignity of it all as well?"

"Oh, Finn, Finn, the indignity of it all," Froi mocked, and Finnikin grabbed him around the neck, squeezing tight.

At the horse posts, Froi tossed the stable boy a coin as they collected their mounts. The boy gave Finnikin a note, and Froi saw irritation and then a ghost of a smile appear on his friend's face.

"I'll ride ahead to the inn," Finnikin said.

"Not unescorted, you won't," Perri said.



"It's around the bend in this road. Nothing can happen to me from here to there."

Froi rubbed noses with his horse. He knew this argument would last a moment or two.

"Anything can happen," Perri said.

"Suppose around the bend are ten Charynite scumsters, waiting to jump you," Froi said, mounting the horse.

Finnikin shot Froi a scathing look. "You're supposed to be on my side, Froi. And how do you suppose Charynite—"

"Scumsters," Froi finished.

"How do you suppose Charynite scumsters got up the mountain and passed the Mont sentinels?"

"All it takes is for one of them to slip through," Perri said.

But Finnikin was already on the horse, trotting away.

"I'll see you at the inn," he called out over his shoulder. He broke into a gallop and was gone.

"I think he for gets his place sometimes," Perri murmured, staring after Finnikin. "He still believes he can come and go as though he's some messenger boy."

There was silence between them again as they rode to the inn. Froi watched Perri carefully. He wondered if Perri would stay mad for long. Despite most things from Froi's mouth coming out wrong, he hated disappointing Perri or the captain.

"I can take leave from the farm, Perri," he said quietly "Especially when it comes time to travel into Charyn and do what we have to do."

Perri was silent for a moment. "What makes you think I'm taking you to Charyn?"

"Because you've taught me everything I know about . . ." Froi shrugged. "You know."

"Killing," Perri said bitterly.

"And when I'm not training with you or working on the



farm, then I'm with the priest-king being taught to speak the tongue of our enemy." He gave Perri a sideward glance. "So the way I see it, *that* says you're taking me to Charyn."

Perri was silent for a moment. "You know what the priest-king says?"

"*Sagra!*" Froi cursed. He knew he was going to get another serving from Perri.

"He says that you don't have time for your studies anymore. That you think there's no merit in learning and stories."

"I've learned all I need to," Froi said. "Studies and learning and stories won't protect the kingdom, and they won't reap harvests."

Perri shook his head. "I would have given anything to be taught at your age. The priest-king says you're a natural, Froi. That you pick up facts and foreign words and that you understand ideas that are beyond many of us. Who would have thought that hidden beneath all the talking back and fighting was a sharp mind? But it means nothing to the captain or me when you show little control over your actions and words."

Froi took a deep breath and counted, making sure he didn't take it out on the horse.

"You're not training anyone else, are you, Perri?" he managed to ask, trying to hold back his fury at the thought. "Not Sefton or that scrawny fool from the Rock? They think too much. You can see it on their faces. And they'd never bear a torture. Never."

Perri looked at him and Froi saw his eyes soften.

"And you would?"

"You know me, Perri," Froi said fiercely. "You know that if you wrote me a bond and told me what to bear, I'd bear it. You know me. Have I let you or the captain down once these past three years, hunting those traitors?"



In the distance, a Flatlander was harnessed to his plow, working a field on his own. Froi and Perri held up a hand in acknowledgment, and the man waved back.

“When the time comes, we will have only one chance to get into that palace,” Perri said. “There will be no room for mistakes. Their army combined is more than our entire people, and if we make the slightest of errors, there will be a war to end all wars across this land.”

There was a flash of anguish on Perri’s face. Froi saw it in everyone’s expression once in a while, especially those who remembered life as it once was. Froi didn’t feel the sadness. Despite Isaboe and Finnikin’s belief that he was one of the children lost to the kingdom thirteen years ago, when the impostor king took control, Froi remembered nothing about Lumaterre. All he had known was life on the streets in another kingdom, where a chance meeting with Finnikin and the queen changed his life. In a secret part of him, Froi reveled in what he had gained from Lumaterre’s curse. He never looked back, because if he did, he would have to think of the shame and the baseness of who he had once been without his bond. He would do anything to prove his worth to the queen and Finnikin. Even kill. It was what he had been taught to do these past years. Over and over again.

Although every Lumateran had been trained to use a bow to defend the kingdom, Froi had stood out and was handpicked by Trevanion and Perri to work alongside them. He was swift and had mastered any skill thrown his way. The first time Froi was sent into the home of a traitor with a dagger and sword, Captain Trevanion had made him vow it would not end with death. They needed the man alive. What they required was information about the bodies of ten Flatland lads who had gone missing in the fifth year of the curse under the cruel reign of



the impostor king. Froi studied the information and had gone in with vengeance in his heart. This man had been a traitor, a collaborator. He had spied for the impostor king and betrayed his neighbors. In the end, Froi had kept the man alive. Barely. From the information he forced out of him, they found the remains of the lads and were able to put them to rest seven years after they were slain. If the lads had lived, they would have been a year or two older than Froi today. Despite the passing of time, the grief from the families on the day of the burials was indescribable. What Froi had done to get that confession was worse.

But the punishment of most other traitors was different. When the palace was certain beyond doubt of their guilt, Captain Trevanion and Perri would ensure that retribution was quick and out of plain sight of the people of Lumatere, who had already seen enough bloodshed.

“Don’t you just want to tear out their hearts?” Froi had asked both his captain and Perri one day when they had marked a traitor from a distance and shot an arrow into his chest. That the man died quickly with no fear or pain disturbed Froi.

“You can’t go around feeling too much,” Captain Trevanion had explained, watching a moment to ensure that the man was indeed dead. “Because if you feel too much, enough to want to kill them so savagely, then one day you’re going to feel enough to spare their lives. Don’t ever let emotion get in the way. Just follow orders. Most times the orders you follow will be the right ones.”

Most times.

Sometimes it was a snap of the neck. Other times a dagger across the throat or a blade piercing the heart. But it was always clean and quick. More than once they had found a small band of the dead impostor king’s soldiers in hiding, deserters from his army, seeking refuge in the forest at the far corner of the western



border. Many of them had fled when Trevanion and his Guard had entered the kingdom to set their people free. Although the impostor king was half Lumateran, he was also a Charynite and his army was mostly made up of Charynites. Those soldiers now filled Lumatere's prison while Finnikin and Sir Tophier endeavored to prove guilt or innocence by collecting evidence and testimonials. More than a hundred prisoners had been released and returned to Charyn.

Perri and Froi came to the outskirts of Balconio, where cottages began to appear. They passed a fallow field, and Froi heard Perri murmur words that he had heard over and over again each time anyone passed a fallow field. It was a prayer to the goddess that the soil would regain its fertility. In the last days of the curse, the impostor king had set alight most of the Flatlands.

"There's talk that Isaboe and Finn will sell the village of Fenton," Froi said.

"Queen Isaboe and the queen's consort," Perri corrected.

Froi made a rude sound. "Every time I call Finn the consort anything, he wrestles me, and he's no skinny thing anymore."

"It's hard for him," Perri said quietly. "No matter how strong his union with the queen, he has much to prove."

"He doesn't have to prove himself to her," Froi said.

"But he has to prove himself *because* of her."

Froi was distracted a moment by the rotted crop of cabbage that lined the road. He leaped off his horse and crouched, feeling the soil, shaking his head at the waste of it all. This year Lord August had decided to use a water system created by a soldier in the impostor king's army. It was the only thing of worth the enemy had contributed, apart from some of the most stunning horses Froi had ever seen. But many of the Flatlanders refused to adopt the Charynite methods, despite the fact that their crops were dying.



"They are fools," Froi said, looking up at Perri.

"Don't underestimate how deeply felt the hatred is," Perri said. "They see it as the method of an enemy, and they don't want a part of it."

"So they'd prefer that their crops die and their people half starve! I told Gar do of the Flatlands that he was a horse's arse just the other day. What kind of man wastes his crop for the sake of pride?"

"You need to refrain from insulting the villagers, Froi," Perri said, laughing. "They have daughters. You're going to have to bond yourself to one of them sooner or later."

Froi stiffened. "I have a bond to my queen." He mounted his horse and steered it back onto the road.

He heard Perri sigh. "Froi, it was a worthy promise at the time, but you can't spend the rest of your life refusing the pleasures of lying with a woman."

"Why not?"

"Because it alters nothing of the past," Perri said firmly. "You can't change who you were. If anyone realizes that, I do."

Froi looked away. He didn't know how much Perri knew. Didn't want to know, really. It brought him too much shame. Three years ago on their travels, when the queen was disguised as the novice Evanjalín, and Froi was a filthy thief they had picked up along the way, he had tried to force himself on her. On the streets of the Sarnak capital, where he grew up, the men had taught him that power was survival. The Lumaterans had spent three years trying to unteach what he knew. Some nights he woke in a sweat remembering what he had done. The queen had spoken about it only once since they entered Lumatere. It was when a member of her Guard, Aldron, was sent on palace business with Finnikin, and Froi had been chosen to replace Aldron.



“Are you sure?” he had asked her quietly as they stood at the bailey, watching Finnikin and Aldron ride away.

“That you can protect me?” she said, her eyes still out in the distance where Finnikin and Aldron were tiny specks on the horizon. “Trevanion claims there’s no one better than you, Froi. But if you’re asking if I’m sure you won’t hurt me, then yes, I am.”

Froi had felt pride and relief.

Her dark eyes were suddenly on him, and he shivered at the memory of their fierceness. “But I’ve told you before, I will never forget. *Ever*. And nor will you. It’s part of the bond you made to me that day we freed you from the slave traders. Do you remember?”

Froi would never forget. “That if I ever harm a woman, you’ll have me hanged and quartered.” And she would. That he knew.

Most days, he feared that a monster of great baseness lived inside him, fighting to set itself free. Killing the traitors of Lumatere for Isaboe made sense. But killing also fed the monster. He could not bear the idea of letting that monster free among the girls of Lumatere. So Froi kept away from them.

“It’s the only way of proving myself to the queen,” he muttered to Perri as they entered Balconio.

“Find another way,” Perri said.

Froi shook his head. “I don’t trust myself.”

They reached the inn, where they would wait until Finnikin’s meeting with the ambassador of Sarnak was over. The village of Balconio sat on the Skuldenore River, at the foot of mountains. It could easily have been a village of ghosts. Many of its people had died in exile. But the queen and Finnikin had decided that an inn in such a place would attract customers and give life to Balconio. They had approached the people of one of the surviving villages and proposed their plan. Froi had once heard Lord August tell



Lady Abian that it was a smart decision. One day, when the gates of Lumatere were open to the rest of the land, the inn would be the perfect place for trade. Despite their wariness of foreigners, the queen and Finnikin knew that to survive they would have to do business with neighbors. This inn and the export of silver from the mines to their neighboring allies, Belegonia and Osteria, was the first step. Most nights, the Balconio Inn was filled with Monts on their way to the palace village or merchants and farmers trading their goods and skills, but this past year, the people of the neighboring villages had begun to venture out of their homes for enjoyment rather than necessity. It helped that the inn also boasted the best ale in the kingdom.

Captain Trevanion met them at the gate of the inn. He was one of the most impressive men Froi had ever seen: mighty in build, with a face that even men would call handsome. He was Finnikin's beloved father, and Froi knew they still felt the pain of having been separated from each other when Finnikin was a lad of nine. The captain had also believed for ten long years that his beloved Lady Beatriss was dead, but she had lived, and during the past three years, there had been much talk about whether they would rekindle their love.

"We're old men, I hear," Trevanion said, cuffing Froi.

Froi laughed. "If you and some of the Guard weren't old men, then being called old men wouldn't insult you so much."

"We're only some forty years, Froi."

"He calls Aldron an old man, and he's not even ten years older than him," Perri mused, looking around. "Where's Finn?"

"I thought he was with you."

"He rode ahead."

Froi watched the two men exchange worried looks and followed them into the inn.

Inside, they jostled through a crowd. Tonight it was mostly



filled with the Queen's Guard, but Froi also recognized a handful of Rock villagers and the lads who traveled with the queen's cousin, Lucian of the Monts, which meant the Mont leader was somewhere in the vicinity.

In a corner close to where the innkeeper was serving from barrels of ale, Froi saw the Monts speaking tensely among themselves. Most were cousins to Finnikin through his marriage to the queen, but Finnikin and Lucian were nowhere to be seen. Froi sensed Trevanion and Perri's unease and followed them to the bar. The lad assisting the innkeeper looked up when they approached. He was young and nervous, and it was evident that he had never come face-to-face with the captain of the Guard before.

"You're new," Trevanion said.

"Yes, sir. Just started."

"Did you recognize the queen's consort?"

"No . . . no, sir, but he introduced himself."

Trevanion looked relieved. "Where is he?"

"He's with a . . . a . . . w-w- woman, sir."

Perri, Froi, and Trevanion stared at the lad in disbelief.

"A woman?" Trevanion snapped. "What woman?"

"A woman waiting in his room, sir. She had left a message."

"What room?" Trevanion demanded, already halfway up the staircase.

Perri dragged the nervous lad along with them. "Was she armed?" Perri barked.

"What message?" Trevanion shouted.

"She said, 'Tell my king I'm w-waiting in his chamber.'"

Trevanion stopped just as they reached the top of the stairs. Froi watched the captain's expression change from fear to exasperation.

"Her king?"

Trevanion muttered his favorite string of curses. The Captain



had spent years in a foreign prison among lowlifes from every kingdom of the land, and at times, even the Guard flinched at some of his expressions.

A palace soldier stood outside one of the chamber doors, shrugging haplessly when he saw his captain.

"I can't control her any more than you can control him, sir," he tried to say. Trevanion pushed him out of the way, knocking sharply before entering the room.

Near the window, Finnikin stood with both hands against the wall, his head bent over her. As always, the intimacy between them made Froi ache.

"I promise you," Finnikin said. "I've already shouted at her and used a very, *very* reprimanding tone."

"I was quivering," the queen said, stepping out from behind Finnikin.

Froi hid a grin, but Trevanion and Perri failed to hide their anger.

Isaboe was dressed more for comfort than for style, but still she managed to take Froi's breath away. When he had first laid eyes on her in that Sarnak alleyway, her head had been bare. Now her hair was thick and black and fell down her back, contrasting with the deep purple of her simple dress that fell loose, from her shoulders.

"Surround the entire inn and send away every person who does not belong to the Guard or the Mont cousins," Perri barked out the order to the soldier outside. Trevanion disappeared with the man.

"That will make us popular," Finnikin said, his arm around his wife. "Not only have we finally decided to collect taxes, but now we're getting in the way of their drinking."

Isaboe caught Froi's eye. She grabbed Finnikin's face to reveal to Froi an already purple eye.



"You?"

Froi pointed to himself questioningly, feigning surprise and hurt.

"Where are his bruises?" she asked Finnikin.

Froi made a scoffing sound at the thought.

Trevanion returned to the room. "Where's Jasmina?"

"In the next chamber," the queen said, "and if any of you wake her, Captain, I will have to kill someone tonight."

"I need to check—"

"No," both Isaboe and Finnikin said.

Trevanion stared at them.

"I'll see that—"

"No," the queen said again. "You can see your granddaughter when she wakes up."

Trevanion looked disgruntled.

"She'll know it's you the moment you walk in," Finnikin complained, "and she'll think it's a game and call out 'Par du Tvevanion' all night. I've not slept for two years!"

Trevanion fixed his stare on the queen, his anger still present.

"I finished the business with the Osterians earlier than predicted," she explained with a sigh. "I thought I'd come and visit before Finnikin's meeting with the Sarnaks. Coincidentally, Lucian is also here, so I get to see my husband and my cousin. I'm very lucky in that way."

Finnikin and Froi laughed. Trevanion and Perri didn't.

"Where is Lucian?" Trevanion asked.

"Apparently checking the privy and mouse holes for Charynites."

"I'm glad you're amused about the safekeeping of this family, my queen," Trevanion said.

The queen regarded him coolly, and in an instant the mood in the room changed.



“Not amused at all, Captain,” she said. “I’m never amused about the safety of our family.”

Froi saw a flicker of regret on Trevanion’s face.

“It’s just safer for you and the child to be in the palace, Isaboe,” he said, his voice softening.

“I’m sorry,” she said with remorse. “But it seemed so harmless, and you know what it feels like after three days speaking about mines and goats with the Osterians. It’s what keeps them protected from invasion—the ability to bore the enemy to tears.”

There was a knock, and without so much as an invitation to enter, Lucian of the Monts joined them, his star eye going straight to the bruise on Finnikin’s face. Although not as tall as the River lads, Lucian had an imposing build and a temper to match. There was ruddiness to his cheeks, courtesy of the mountain weather, and a bluntness in all things about him that set Lucian apart from the other leaders of Lumatere. Froi remembered little of Lucian from those few days he spent with the Monts before Lucian’s father died in the battle to reclaim Lumatere. But many believed he was a changed lad since. Lord Augie said over and over again to Lady Abian that he was too young to control his kin on the mountain and protect the kingdom from the Charynites.

“*Bastard,*” Lucian said, turning to Froi. “Bastards, both of you. Fists only?”

“Bit of wrestling thrown in,” Finnikin said. “You can’t see his bruises, but I promise they’re there.”

Lucian had been the childhood companion of both Finnikin and Isaboe’s brother, Balthazar. The two friends still spoke of the slaughtered heir to the throne as if he were there among them, but Froi had never heard them mention Balthazar in front of Isaboe.

“How’s Yata?” she asked, pecking her cousin’s cheek with a kiss.

Lucian sighed. “The Guard is going to have to come up the



mountain after all," he said, not wasting time. "There's been an incident."

Froi recalled the tenseness of the Mont lads downstairs. He knew it could only mean one thing. At the foot of Lucian's mountain on the Charyn side was a cavernous valley that belonged to Lumatere. Half a day's ride east on horseback was the closest Charyn province, and at the end of winter, Charynites had begun to take refuge in the caves that perched over the valley and alongside the stream. A bold, desperate few had sent messages through Lucian, asking for refuge in Lumatere. The queen declined, but the Charynites refused to go away and their numbers grew each day.

Froi saw fear on the queen's face. The threat of the Charynites was always, *always* on her mind.

"For two weeks now, we've had a message sent up from the valley through Tesadora. A Charynite, through a contact, has requested to meet with the queen or Finnikin."

"Since when does a Charynite request anything of us?" the queen demanded. "They're fortunate enough to be using our valley."

"Who is the contact?" Finnikin asked.

Lucian looked away, and Froi realized he was avoiding the question.

"Lucian?" the queen ordered.

The Mont turned back to her and still there was a moment of hesitation. "Phaedra."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"The wife you sent back?" the queen asked.

"Do not call her that," Lucian snapped.

"Watch your tone, Lucian," Finnikin warned.

The Charynite girl was an unspoken source of tension between the Monts and the queen. At the beginning of spring the



leader of Alonso, the closest Charynite province, had traveled up the mountain with his daughter Phaedra in tow, insisting on a meeting with Lucian. The *provincaro* claimed that when his daughter was born, he had entered a pact with Lucian's father to betroth their children. After almost two years of petty skirmishes between the Mont lads and the sentinels of Alonso, and talk that the *provincaro* of Alonso was out of sorts with his own king, Finnikin and Isaboe had agreed that perhaps they could use the situation to Lumater's advantage. Lucian had been furious. The girl was said to be frightened of her own shadow, spending most of her day sobbing in the corner of Lucian's cottage. Froi had met her once. She had politely spoken to him in Lumateran about the endless rain, her pronunciation poor at times. Froi had repeated to her a lesson taught by the priest-king about what to do with particularly strange pairings of sounds. Phaedra had thanked him, and he saw gratitude and kindness in her eyes.

The Monts despised Phaedra for more than being a Charynite. Mont women were strong and walked side by side with their men. Phaedra could barely boil water. Six weeks later, the girl left. Some said that Lucian threw her out, others that she walked out herself, but this was the first time her name had been mentioned by Lucian.

"And what is Phaedra doing in an unprotected valley when one would presume she should be back in her province living with her father?"

"She works alongside Tesadora as a translator and registers the newcomers as they arrive."

Froi watched the queen pretend to be confused. He knew that Lucian didn't stand a chance in this exchange.

"Let me get this right. Phaedra failed at being a good Mont wife, but she can run a camp of hundreds of fleeing Charynites,



translate for Tesadora, and has somehow managed to be affiliated with a faction demanding a meeting with my king and me?"

Lucian turned to Finnikin for support.

"Don't look at me, Lucian," Finnikin said. "Don't even try to involve me in this one."

Lucian held up his hands in exasperation. "She was useless, I tell you! Even Yata would agree."

"Why is she still in the valley?" Isaboe demanded.

Froi watched the flicker of regret cross the Mont's face.

"According to Tesadora's girls, the *provincaro* refused to take his daughter back into his home. Phaedra lives in the caves now"

The queen nodded. Froi knew that nod. It was the gesture she used when simmering with fury.

"The wife of the Mont leader is living in a filthy cave?"

"You show respect for her now, my queen," Lucian said angrily. "Yet you failed to attend my bonding ceremony."

"You married her in Alonso, Lucian." The stare she sent him was cold, and apart from Finnikin, Lucian was the only man who ever dared to match it. Isaboe and her Mont cousins did this often. All of them. They fought fiercely. Loved each other fiercely. Laughed fiercely. Finnikin said it was best to leave the room and let them shout. It would all blow over soon, but for Lucian's sake, Froi would have welcomed sooner rather than later.

"Tell the girl that I do not meet with Charynites, and if they dare make the command again—"

"I haven't actually told you the worst of it," Lucian interrupted.

The room grew quiet. Tense. Froi felt the hairs on his arm rise.

Lucian kept his stare focused on his cousin. "And may I stress that no one is hurt."

There was a deadly silence in the room.

"This morning in the valley, a Charynite took a dagger to



Japhra's throat," he said, referring to one of Tesadora's novices.

Froi leaped to his feet. He heard the queen's cry, Finnikin's hiss of fury. The captain's fists were clenched tight. Perri was gone from the room before another word was spoken.

"Japhra's staying in Yata's home for the night but insists on returning with Tesadora to the valley tomorrow."

"And the Charynite?" Trevanion asked.

"He's under guard."

The queen looked at Finnikin. Froi saw fear in Isaboe's expression that sickened him. The queen's anxiety about a possible attack from the Charynites had grown tenfold since the birth of her child.

"You go with your father and Perri," she said to Finnikin.

Finnikin looked torn. "The Sarnak ambassador—"

"I'll speak to the Sarnak ambassador," she said.

"No!" Finnikin shouted.

"And what would you prefer?" she asked him sharply. "That I travel up to the mountain and interview a potential Charyn assassin?"

"I'd prefer that Aldron take you and Jasmina back to the palace," Finnikin said. "I'll speak to the ambassador, shorten our meeting and then travel up to the mountain."

"And while you're at it, why don't you plow every field in the kingdom and check the nets in the river?" she said sharply. "Then go up to the Rock quarry and break your back working alongside your kin. And perhaps work in the mines after that."

She was no different from Finnikin. Froi knew everyone in the room wanted to say that. Both the queen and Finnikin refused to believe they had the privilege of palace life, and both could be found at any time working alongside their people during their visits across the kingdom.



“I don’t want you dealing with the Sarnaks, Isaboe,” Finnikin said. “Don’t let me have to imagine how it will feel for you to be in their presence.”

“And it feels any different for you?” she cried. “You can’t be everywhere at the same time, Finnikin. I will take care of Sarnak. They are no threat to us. You take care of Charyn, and perhaps sometime this week we may be able to pass each other on the road and wave from a distance.”

Finnikin sighed, and Froi watched the queen’s expression soften.

“This is an attack from the Charynites, my love,” she said. “Heed my words. This is the beginning.”