

ONE

SNEAKING INTO CASTLE ARMORIES was one of Aster's specialties—not because he'd ever done it before, but because necessity had a knack for inspiring his foolproof plans.

He hurried down the spiral staircase of Scholar's Tower until he hit unpolished stone at the bottom. Entering Armory Hall was like stepping into the pages of an illustrated history book. Flickering sconces cast paintings and life-size sculptures of Aprival Kingdom's famous warriors in soft, golden glows. A painting of Captain Thorne laughing as blood gushed from a wound in his neck marked the first junction. Lady Evanna glared from another looming canvas, iron fist clasped over her chest while a broad-winged minnix, a descendant of the legendary phoenix, perched on her shoulder. The pair watched as if they'd known two centuries previous what he would be up to. Fortunately for him, neither could raise the alarm.

Even Father was down here, memorial standing guard at the next turn. Mounted on cavalry with a sword arcing above his head, Captain Ausmond's sharp jaw, steely eyes, and broad frame were nearly identical to Grifan's. Unlike his older brother, Aster hadn't been lucky enough to inherit any physical resemblance.

He'd been too young when siraclese monsters gored Father to death to retain any memories of him, but he knew Father was a great warrior, one whose strength and bravery could turn the tide of almost any battle. When the siraclese attacked Ironpoint Peninsula, it was supposed to be his big chance to make his mark on history. Instead, as colorfully depicted in the oil painting behind his statue, Captain Ausmond and a

hundred other soldiers under his command perished, and the campaign failed to stop the siraclese from spreading to Fallen Star Isles. If Father hadn't saved Lord Reeves of Redwing Castle during one of his earlier skirmishes, he wouldn't have been memorialized at all.

Regardless, Aster stamped a fist three times over his chest to pay homage. No matter what the people of Aprival said about his father, he would always remember the good which Captain Ausmond had stood for.

After passing a bloodstained suit of armor, a relic from an ancient warlord, Aster hid inside an alcove behind General Piercelly's statue—aptly named, for his arrows never missed the hearts of his challengers. He peered through the space between the wall and Piercelly's quiver.

Iron doors sealed the armory shut. His cousin Clay, stocky with eyes grayer than a storm cloud, stood guard on the left. Gerrard covered the right, his mustached face turned upward in that expression of self-importance that never failed to amuse Aster.

Guards rotated every hour, so the next pair would arrive in seven minutes. The timing had to be perfect to pull this off. All he needed now was Clay's signal.

One minute passed, then two. Clay's rigid posture could put every statue in this hall to shame. His cousin glanced at Piercelly, grimacing. He had been reluctant to agree to this and was no doubt entertaining second thoughts. But whenever push came to shove, Aster could always count on him to follow through.

Clay closed his eyes and exhaled. "Gerrard, do you know who painted that?"

Heart kicking, Aster reached inside his leather satchel and grabbed a wooden ball.

"Which one? *The Battle for Vaultria*? Should say, most of these are signed." Gerrard left his post to squint at the painting's tiny signature.

Turning, Aster threw the ball at the bloodstained armor. The display collapsed in a rattling symphony.

Gerrard whirled around, nostrils flaring. "You keep watch," he told Clay. "I'll take care of this." He stalked past Piercelly toward the mess.

“Aster! I will petition to have you banned from this hall if you keep knocking things over!”

Aster stifled a laugh. Petitioning was Gerrard’s favorite threat, but it never worked. Once Gerrard turned the corner, Clay opened one of the doors.

“Excellently done,” Aster whispered.

Clay’s mouth flattened into a line. “You’re going to give him an aneurysm one of these days.”

“His life’s as dull as a loaf of bread,” Aster replied with a grin. “A little excitement’s good for him.”

As soon as he got inside, the door clunked shut. With the light cut off, he couldn’t see a thing, but he’d toured this room with his older brother enough times that he wouldn’t need to. The sword of Callum, Lady Evanna’s youngest and noblest son, would be on a shelf straight ahead and to the left. His knee hit something that fell over with a loud crash. No need to panic, Gerrard wouldn’t hear that through the thick walls.

A shelf jammed into his stomach. Aha. Dusty leather scabbards, cracked with age, scratched his fingertips. The first three were short enough to conceal daggers, but the fourth was long and slim. This had to be it. He carefully drew out the sword and felt for the smooth aurum inlaid along the blade. Although the darkness hid its color, he knew the aurum was red.

“Okay.” From his satchel, he took one of his sister’s sewing needles and pricked his fingertip. As his blood welled, his breathing shallowed.

Like gold, aurum was a soft metal, ideal for ornamenting weapons. But it functioned as more than decoration. All aurum started out with an iridescent rainbow hue, but when touched by the blood of a particular wielder, it changed into one of five colors. Callum’s blood always turned his aurum red, enabling him to create powerful blasts. Aprival’s best warriors tended to be red users, and since Father, Grifan, and Clay all wielded red, Aster had a good chance of wielding it, too.

Holding his breath, Aster touched his bleeding finger to the vein of aurum. Then he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Was it supposed to take this long? Swallowing, he rubbed his finger in circles over the aurum. Perhaps the blood needed to be worked in.

A faint ringing, softer than the murmuring of a brook, stole the air from his lungs. Yes, it was working! When he touched the hilt, a thrilling warmth filled his palm, and a purple gleam pierced the dark.

His stomach plummeted. *Purple*? Blinking to make sure his eyes fully adjusted, he raised the sword. Light streaked through delicate curves along the blade, forming a glittering, violet phoenix.

This wasn't Callum's sword. He must have grabbed the wrong scabbard. And purple? Really? Of all the colors he could have wielded, he got stuck with the only one the Aurum Order hadn't called to the battle lines? How was he supposed to get recruited now?

Clay's knock on the door warned that he had less than a minute to leave undetected. He took a deep breath, reason attempting to displace anger. Aurum was aurum; he could work with this. Not like he had much of a choice, right? Attaching the scabbard to his belt, he used the sword to illuminate all the weapon-laden shelves and chests in his way. Navigating back to the entrance was much easier.

Outside, light from the blazing sconces stabbed his eyes. As Aster slid into Piercely's alcove, the scabbard caught between the statue's leg and the wall. He freed it seconds before Gerrard returned.

"Did you find him?" Clay's voice cracked.

"No," Gerrard grunted. "The little blighter's long gone now. But he'll get what's coming to him."

"Yes, of course," Aster whispered under his breath, smirking. "You're absolutely right, Gerrard."

Exactly on time, the next pair of guards came to relieve them. Aster collected his satchel, slipped out of his hiding spot, and sneaked back the way he came, keeping a safe distance behind Gerrard. Clay incrementally slowed his pace until Gerrard was no longer in sight, and then he and Aster walked side by side up the winding staircase of Scholar's Tower.

Aster couldn't help laughing as the rush in his veins wore off. "Told you we could do it."

"I still think this is a bad idea," Clay grumbled for the twelfth time that week.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Aster elbowed him in the ribs. “Even though it was an epic success?” Other than getting purple. Referred to as “servant’s aurum,” it enabled its users to move objects with their minds. Compared to more powerful abilities bestowed by red, green, and orange, purple’s effectiveness on the battlefield was limited, thus commonly relegated to domestic tasks.

“That’s only half of it, you still have to convince Curtis.” Clay scowled at the sword as if it intended to jab his liver. “And if anyone catches you with that—”

“They won’t,” Aster reassured his worrywart of a cousin. “It’s been collecting dust for centuries, so no one will notice it’s missing. Besides, since I’m working at the smithy, I can pass it off as one of my newest projects.”

“You only have a few more months before you come of age,” Clay said. “You could wait for Griffan to get you aurum then.”

“Even when I turn seventeen, my brother won’t get me any aurum unless I sign up for a local post,” Aster reminded him. Which would be a waste. Sometimes siraclese sneaked inland, but none had trespassed Redwing Castle or its surrounding areas since Father’s time.

“And if you never return?” Clay paled the slightest bit. “If you get torn to pieces and your blood sucked out?”

Aster shrugged. “Better me than my sister. Or anyone else in the kingdom, right?”

Clay sighed. “Right.”

His cousin would be out on the front lines soon, more so by necessity than desire. Aster elbowed him again. “You don’t have to worry. No monster can stop the army of Aprival. Not you and me, anyway.”

“Don’t know about that,” Clay mumbled, though some of the gloom lifted from his expression. “Gerrard came awfully close.”

“With the power of petitioning.” His grin grew at Clay’s smile. “You want to stay behind and face that?”

Clay chuckled. “I don’t think even Captain Curtis would care to deal with that.”

The stairs stopped at the highest floor. Aster perched on the wide sill of an open window and pulled a grappling hook from his satchel. Interweaving patterns he had etched himself swirled down each of its four points.

“What are you doing?” Clay asked.

“Taking a shortcut.” This view would never get old. Redwing Castle sat on top of a high, rocky hill overlooking multiple villages and farms. Azure Woods stretched all the way to the horizon on the southeast side, and as the sun dipped closer, shades of bronze layered the blue-topped branches. He doubted that even Vaultria, the capital city, had this grand a view.

Once he secured the prongs in the stone, he dropped the rope down the side. “Can you toss me the hook once I reach the bottom?”

Clay’s eyebrows contracted. “As long as you don’t plummet to your death.”

Aster laughed. “So little faith.” With that, he pushed off the ledge.

He slid three stories down the gleaming white tower, breathing in the sweet scent of woodland blossoms as the wind ruffled his cinnamon brown hair. After he landed on one of the walkways, Clay detached the hook. Aster caught it and looped the rope around his wrist before continuing.

Once he reached the wall facing Jousting Square, he fed the rope through an arrow slit and climbed over the battlements, taking care not to upset a nest of screeching splotchbill fledglings. He lowered himself to the ground and picked his way across the rocky slope until he hit the main path. Soldiers in gleaming iron and burgundy uniforms rode snowy dihornes with turquoise manes styled to emphasize the two long points sprouting from their heads. Aster stepped aside so they could clop past. He imagined himself riding his own dihorn, Aprival’s phoenix crest emblazoned on his polished breastplate, people stopping him to ask about his heroic exploits.

Jousting Square encompassed a huge training field, rows upon rows of barracks, and smelly stables. The path led him to the open doorway of its main stone structure. He poked his head far enough inside to see without being seen. Young men from noble families filled a long line to the registration desk. Quite unfortunately, he recognized the inseparable trio at the tail: Braid Beard, Hook Nose, and Chipped Tooth. He used their nicknames so much that he’d forgotten their actual names.

Chewing his bottom lip, he considered waiting for them to leave, but the sign-ups might be over by then. He squared his shoulders. “You

can do this. You're a son of Captain Ausmond, after all." And Captain Ausmond never backed down.

Much to his detriment, some might add.

"What are you doing here, Your Lowliness?" Braid Beard smirked as he stepped in line. "Shouldn't you be at the smithy sewing our scabbards?"

"Your arms are a much better fit for that," Chipped Tooth commented, and all three laughed.

"Good one," Aster chuckled, smothering the sting. It was better to roll with it than dwell on it. "For the record, I do impressive work. Master Isham said so himself."

"Who cares what the weapons look like?" Hook Nose scoffed. "Impressive design won't give you an edge in a fight."

"But it *does* ensure you're the most decorated person on the battlefield," Aster put in with his most charming tone. "You'll impress all the young maidens when you come marching home."

"Better hope you impress Curtis up there with your artistry," Braid Beard nodded at the desk. "Maybe he'll decide he wants his sword handles wrapped in different colors."

Again, Aster joined their chorus of laughter. "Trust me, you'll be singing a different tune when we're out fighting siraclese together."

"I'll have Klax deck me again if that happens," Chipped Tooth declared.

"I'll hold you to it," Aster replied, his smile starting to hurt.

After a few more disparaging remarks, they lost interest in him and turned their attention to other people. He resisted comparing his arms with anyone else's—he knew he'd be disappointed—and unfurled a scroll from his satchel.

Shimmering ink in his best handwriting made up his application. Aster, son of Captain Ausmond, seventeen autumns old—well, okay, that was a bit of a stretch, but with his birthday only four months away, he was closer to seventeen than sixteen. After spending the last two and a half years as Master Isham's apprentice and one year as Grifan's armor keeper, he was proficient in weapon repairs as well as swordsmanship.

It was decent enough. As long as Curtis didn't object to his aurum color, he had a good shot.

“Next.” Captain Curtis sat with folded hands atop his desk. Captain Walden stood beside him. The latter’s gaze cut Aster from head to toe.

He put on a not-at-all-nervous smile. “Good evening.”

“You in the right line, twiggys?” Walden answered.

That familiar sting soured into bitterness. “I’m here to sign up for the army.”

“Application, please.” Curtis took the scroll Aster handed him. Keen eyes perused his careful strokes.

Watching Curtis’s face for signs of approval wasn’t helping him relax. He cleared his throat. “It looks like you had a decent turnout today. I bet the Aurum Order will be pleased.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have the right credentials.” Curtis slid the parchment back. “You need to have at least one year of practical experience.”

He refused to panic, even with Braid Beard and Chipped Tooth nudging each other from the corner of his eye. “I served as Lieutenant Grifitan’s armor keeper for a year.” He would have served longer if Grifitan hadn’t passed him on to the blacksmith. “That counts.”

“Not for a son of Ausmond,” Walden said with another condescending look.

It took all Aster’s willpower not to clench his fists.

“It would,” Curtis answered, shooting his fellow captain a glare, “for a local station. Not for the front lines at Fallen Stars.”

He’d hoped Curtis would overlook that little detail. “I’m a fast learner.” It would take a few weeks of traveling before they arrived at the fort, so he could pick up any necessary skills along the way. “I’ll do whatever needs to be done—just put me wherever I’m needed.”

Curtis shook his head. “All of our soldiers must be able to handle themselves against siraclese. Your lack of experience would put not only yourself but also your comrades at risk.”

“That’s an understatement,” Walden muttered.

Aster’s ears began to warm. “I have aurum.” Given how difficult aurum was to get ahold of nowadays, it should have made Curtis reconsider.

By the raising of both eyebrows, it did—for a moment. “What color?”

He pulled the blade just enough to reveal its sparkling violet veins. Walden scoffed.

“The Aurum Order did not call for purple users. However,” Curtis tapped the bottom of the parchment, “if you could provide a recommendation from a reputable source, then I might be able to approve your application.”

Aster tried not to grimace.

“Can you do that?” Curtis asked.

No. “Yes. Yes, I’ll talk to Grifitan. Let me go get him—or I can get a letter of recommendation, if you’ll just give me ten, fifteen minutes—”

“Aster.”

A chill skittered down Aster’s back. Cursing under his breath, he faced the doorway.

The recruits all parted to make way as Grifitan himself marched through. In his red cape and shining armor, one gold minnix shy of a captain’s rank, the strength and regality Father had passed down to his eldest son was only magnified.

Also magnified was the annoyance tightening his jaw. More than once, Grifitan had forbidden him from signing up.

Grifitan stamped his fist over his heart. “Captain Curtis. Captain Walden.”

“Lieutenant,” Curtis returned.

“I didn’t expect to find you here,” Grifitan said, claspings Aster’s shoulder. Hard. “But I’m glad I did. I’ve been looking for you.”

“What for?” he asked a little too innocently.

“One of our castle guards said there’s been a disturbance in the armory.” Grifitan could play the innocent card, too—sometimes even better. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, little brother?”

Aster hoped the flush creeping down his neck wasn’t obvious to anyone else. “No, of course not. I haven’t visited in a long time.”

“How odd. Gerrard mentioned he saw you down there.”

No, Gerrard only *suspected* he’d been down there. Aster was careful to make sure Gerrard never laid eyes on him. “I tend to be his favorite person to blame.”

“My mistake, then.” A shrewd glance at the scabbard betrayed his casual tone. “What have you got there?”

“Oh, one of my sword projects. I finished it yesterday.”

“Can I take a look?”

Saying “no” would be a dead giveaway, but showing the engraving would be, too. Either way, Grifan had his neck in a noose.

When he handed over the sword, Grifan examined it from hilt to base to tip. “Impressive work, little brother. Very professional finish, it’s even got that vintage rust along the iron here.”

Walden’s brow scrunched in puzzlement, but Curtis frowned in a way that suggested he caught Grifan’s drift.

Grifan handed it back. “Why don’t you show us how to use it? A quick duel between you and me to properly show off those skills you’ve honed. Everyone, back up.” He motioned before Aster could protest. “Give us some room.”

Two

A CROWDED, JOSTLING CIRCLE formed around them. Sweat broke out along Aster's back, and his heart thumped as frantically as a minnix caught in a snare. He couldn't beat Griftan in a duel. Griftan would whip his sorry hide before he could so much as raise the blade.

"Griftan," Curtis said, forehead furrowing, "if you doubt the boy's ready..."

"If he's confident he can fight siraclese, then he can certainly face me." Griftan's eyes locked with Aster's.

Hidden in that glare was his brother's last offer to admit wrong and leave before it got worse. But dozens of other expectant gazes fell on him. If he backed down now, they'd call him a coward. Weak. He wrapped his hand around the hilt to hide the tremor in his fingers. "Yes, that's right."

Griftan pulled his own sword, two inches broader than Aster's and glowing crimson. "Then show us what you've got."

Aster plastered on a confident smirk he hardly felt. "Ready to taste steel?"

Griftan generously gestured for him to make the first move. His mind stalled like jelly in cogs before he remembered, at the very least, to shift into a proper stance. Now what? Holding the enchanted sword felt like poisoning a quill over parchment without knowing what word, let alone which letters, to write. Energy thrummed in the palm of his hand, but tapping into it was another matter altogether.

"That color suits you, servant boy," Braid Beard said, evoking a chuckle from the crowd.

Face hot, Aster advanced with a thrust, hoping for the best.

Grifan parried smoothly, energy from his aurum-inlaid sword crackling through Aster's arms and knocking him to one knee. Recovering, he swung again but earned the same result. His brother didn't even try striking back, choosing instead to flourish his sword in a way that left him wide open.

"Nothing else up those baggy sleeves of yours?" Hook Nose taunted.

Low jeers rippled through the onlookers. A fire burned in the hollow of Aster's stomach, tightening every muscle. He swung, thrust, and cut as hard as he could, again and again, fighting in vain for a single hit.

In one stroke, Grifan sliced his forearm. He sucked in a breath. Grifan's next two moves disarmed him and sent him sprawling in front of the spectators. Rowdy laughter and whistles filled his ears, spreading the heat in his face down his back and shoulders. Burning at the stake would have been preferable to this.

Above him, Grifan tsked. "Perhaps a little more practice is necessary."

"Alright, that's enough," Curtis barked, and the noise died down. "Back to your business."

Grifan offered his hand. Aster slapped it away, grabbed his sword, and stood up on his own. He wanted to keep some shred of dignity. The cut on his arm, though it stung, wasn't deep enough to need gauze.

Curtis returned the application. "I'd appreciate you not wasting my time."

Aster lowered his head to hide his scowl. "My apologies, Captain."

"What was that about singing a different tune?" Chipped Tooth called as Aster followed his brother out into the cool evening.

"And that," Grifan said, sheathing his sword, "is for lying."

He doubted he could hate Grifan any more than he did at that moment. "As impressive a swordsman you are, dear brother, you could have just, you know, called me out."

"Wouldn't have had the same effect."

His temper spiked. "I'm sorry, *Father*, since when is it your job to punish me?" Even if Grifan was thirteen years older, that didn't give him the right to treat Aster like a child.

"You're lucky all you suffered today was humiliation." Grifan stopped in the middle of the road to glare at him directly. "Need I remind

you that Lord Reeves promised the Order all the contents of his armory? What do you think would have happened if I hadn't been the one to catch you first?"

Unlike other kingdoms, Aprival was not ruled by a mere king or queen. Every Aprivalian pledged allegiance to Treasurer Romilda and her Aurum Order. Along with establishing laws and securing justice, they alone had access to raw aurum and the right to distribute—or redistribute, especially after the shortage in the mines was announced—the precious metal as they deemed necessary. If Aster had been caught stealing from what the Treasurer claimed as her own, he could have ended up in a dungeon, maybe even risked Grifan's chances at promotion.

Still, he argued, "It's been sitting in the armory for centuries. No one would have known if it went missing." And it wasn't like he took it for selfish gain. He would have used it for the good of Aprival.

Grifan held his hand out. "I think I ought to return that to the armory where it belongs. It would be a shame if our cousin were to be reprimanded for theft."

Aster shook his head. "No, Clay had nothing to do with this, this was all me—"

"I thought we learned our lesson about lying?"

"You're not Father, so stop acting like it!" Aster snapped.

Grifan's scowl deepened.

Aster shoved the sword at him. "Take it. It's useless, anyway."

"For the last time, stay out of trouble." Grifan glared from those steel blue eyes of his, painfully identical to Father's. "We can't afford another blot on our family name."

With that, he stalked away, leaving Aster alone in the dust.

By the time Aster returned to the wall to get his grappling hook, the sun had fallen below the horizon. Anger fueled his climb back over the parapets, and he almost chucked the hook as far as he could, but he reined that impulse in. He used his shirt sleeve to dab at the blood from the wound on his arm. Nobody would let him live that pathetic duel down.

He could have avoided all this trouble if Grifan had kept him on as his armor keeper. When he was recruited to help defend Fallen Stars three years ago, Grifan shunted him off to the castle blacksmith and left without him. Either Grifan was trying to be the responsible older

brother by keeping Aster out of harm's way or he wanted a stronger armor keeper to accompany him. He was inclined to think both were true—Grifan wouldn't keep shielding him from the war if he believed Aster was tough enough to take care of himself.

Whatever the reason, Aster had yet to forgive him. And after tonight, he might never.

Shadows from the towers high above swallowed him. Tiny flitter-sprites and emberflies with full, shimmering wings ignored him as they darted past. He looked up. Stars appeared one by one in the darkening twilight. The constellation nicknamed Rising Phoenix was easiest to find. According to legend, Rising Phoenix struggled and won against Blazing Dragon, whose fanged mouth gaped directly across from the tip of Phoenix's beak. His namesake formed Phoenix's eye—Aster, the brightest star in the northern sky.

Only in mythology.

On the ground, guards ignited torches along the wall. Aster continued toward the gatekeep. News of his disgrace likely hadn't traveled that far, but avoiding people felt best given the circumstances. Taking a shortcut would risk less interaction than trekking all the way down to the foyer and through countless galleries and halls to get to the wing where his family resided. Which shortcut, though?

His rumbling stomach presented a solution.

The kitchen had a particular appeal that no other part of the castle matched—it alone smelled of baking bread, the most heavenly aroma in the world. Its windows, often thrown open when it got too stuffy, were accessible via a strong jump and grasp of the sill.

Normally, servants swarmed the kitchen, but tonight, it was only his older sister Cherise, kneading a ball of sticky dough. Twenty-four springs old, she had a stout build like Mother, waves of pale gold spilling down her back. The arched stone oven behind her radiated warmth and the scent of cinnamon. As maid-in-waiting to the lady of Redwing Castle, Cherise had multiple duties and a few privileges, including access to the kitchen.

"Where is everyone?" Aster asked.

She didn't so much as flinch at his sudden appearance. "On break. I wanted to do some baking myself." Picking up a long paddle, she opened

the oven door and slid it deep inside. Six fist-sized cinnamon puffs came out, which she set on the counter to cool. "Need anything?"

"Only something to eat." With the iron pots and pans lining the walls, he could boil or fry a couple eggs.

"Did you miss supper?" she asked, surprised.

He shrugged. "I was busy."

Her eyes, green like polished sea glass, took him in. "Bad day?"

"I've had better." He smiled even though Cherise would see through it.

She glanced at the cooling puffs before picking up a bowl and whisk. "Help me with the glaze, and you can have one when they're finished."

"Deal." He grabbed an apron and joined her at the counter. In the mixing bowl, he poured sifted sugar, melted butter, and milk. He stirred so vigorously that Cherise had to remind him that they wanted to glaze the puffs, not the countertop.

She added three beads of imported vanilla. "Why did you skip supper?"

He lifted the whisk, watching the glaze drip-drop. "I might have...tried to sign up. For Captain Curtis's company."

Disapproval creased her eyebrows for a moment. She divided the rest of the dough into six more puffs and slid them into the heat. "Don't you need to find someone to teach you how to use aurum first?"

"Grifitan was supposed to." He couldn't keep the sullenness out of his tone.

"Grifitan's not the only one who knows how to use aurum." With a spoon, she coated one of the pastries. "You could find someone else."

"I tried that already." Every spring, seasoned soldiers provided opportunities for youths to become their armor keepers, but the selected recruits tended to be those from highborn families with connections and enough money to afford substantial amounts of aurum. "No one chose me."

"Their loss, then. You'd be a great choice." She set the bowl of glaze aside. "But you shouldn't be rushing out into danger before you're ready."

"Everyone else is going out risking their lives for Aprival." Equal parts frustration and longing raged deep in his core. "I'm almost seventeen. I

should be out there fighting with Clay and Grifan, but I'm stuck here because everyone thinks I'm useless."

"You're not useless." She reached to brush the hair from his brow, a habit she'd picked up after Mother got sick, but then paused, glancing at her floured hands. "Even if you don't fight today, one day, you'll have to."

"Not as a purple user," he muttered.

She raised an eyebrow at his revelation but recovered quickly. "Purple users are just as necessary as all the rest. Not everyone has to have the same gifts to serve the kingdom." Setting a kettle to boil, she added, "Perhaps your path is simply a little different from everyone else's."

He sighed. He'd rather be on the same path as everyone else if that meant he actually got his shot on the battlefield. With servant's aurum, he had little hope of making his mark on history. How else would he prove that his life counted for something?

With the first batch of puffs coated and Cherise's attention on a cabinet stocked with different teas, he sampled the glaze. "Special occasion for these puffs?"

A palmful of dried sundrop petals went into a teapot. Under steaming water, they seeped gold. "Lady Reeves is hosting another social."

He couldn't help a knowing smirk. "So, another matchmaking attempt?"

Cherise rolled her eyes. "One of these days she'll get tired of trying to marry me off."

Lady Reeves considered it a personal challenge to have Cherise marry higher up. She'd been trying to find the perfect match ever since Cherise turned of age.

When Cherise set a finished puff on a plate and poured him a cup of tea, he said, "I understand that you don't appreciate Lady Reeves's meddling. But what if she found someone you liked? Would you consider it?"

Hefting the paddle once more, she slid the last of the cinnamon puffs out of the oven. "I'm privy to enough scandal to know that marriage isn't for me."

Her concerns were valid. He himself had heard rumors of infidelity and abuse. But as someone who aspired to find a wife someday—granted

he survived the battlefield—he encouraged a more optimistic approach. “Mother and Father were happy together.”

“They were.” Sighing, she gathered all the puffs onto two serving trays. “I don’t know. It would have to be the right person. But that’s not Lady Reeves’s concern.” She prepared another teapot and found matching cups. “How is it?” She gestured to the puff in his hand.

“It’s wonderful.” The puff’s delicate glaze, airy bread, and rich cinnamon melted in harmony on his tongue. Sundrop tea’s light, cheery flavor paired perfectly.

She smiled. Delicately, she set the porcelain on each tray, taking care not to chip or scratch. “I found something while cleaning Mother’s room today.”

His emotions cycled like the pointer of a broken compass, but instead of hitting north, it swung between stale grief and curiosity. Cherise sometimes went in to erase the layers of accumulated dust, but he hadn’t braved Mother’s room since she died eight years ago. Clean bedsheets and scoured floors did nothing to block the blood splotches and rotting, stinking scabs forever seared into his memory. “What did you find?”

Expertly, she balanced the trays on both arms. He pushed one of the heavy wooden doors open and, once she was striding across the marble floor of the hall, joined her. “There’s a hole beneath the floorboards under her bed. She hid her most prized possessions inside, like her favorite jewelry, letters from Father—”

Excitement sparked. “You found letters from Father?”

“I left them on the table in the sitting room if you want to take a look.”

“Yes, I—of course I do!” He started to run but paused. “Unless you need help carrying all that?”

“I’ve got it,” she reassured him. “I’ll call for one of the guards if I need to. You go on.”

If it weren’t for the echoes of his steps on marble, he wouldn’t have known his feet touched the floor. He flew through what felt like endless halls of the Sunset Wing, risking a leaping turn that resulted in a couple scuff marks on the tiles before arriving at the door to their residence.

Cherise had organized the hidden treasures on the low table he always knocked his knee into: a stack of letters, a leather journal, earrings, and a

tarnished copper ring with a tiny diamond. Sitting on the faded couch, he pulled the bounty onto his lap with trembling fingers. Where to start?

He read through a couple letters. Huh. He didn't know Father was such a romantic. Some of these lines would have made good lyrics. As desperate as Aster was to gather any information on Father, though, he couldn't help feeling uncomfortable knowing that these words were intended for Mother's eyes alone, so he stashed those and leafed through the journal instead.

There were only a few entries. Most had to do with scheduling, meetings with names that must have belonged to friends, shopping lists, birthday reminders. Did Father have a tendency to get distracted? Like he did? He couldn't count the number of times he went to the market for Cherise's fabrics or silver polish only to get caught up in new wares and forget why he was there in the first place.

Disappointingly, the pages blanked a third of the way through. He flipped through the rest of the journal to make sure he didn't miss anything, not expecting to find much but still hoping.

An envelope slipped from between the pages and landed on the floor.