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Books by Kate Cudahy

*Hal* – 2015

*Hannac* (The sequel to Hal) – Coming soon

# *Hal*

Kate Cudahy

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# Chapter One

## The Duellist

With a sudden roar the crowd erupted, the duelling arena resounding to the clink and ring of money exchanging hands as bets were paid. Hal sank in exhaustion, her knees making painful contact with the splintered wood of the duelling circle. The arena's high arched roof broke into a dizzying spin above her, and she almost vomited with fatigue as her opponent staggered away, collapsing amongst the jeering groups of spectators.

Hal eyed his burly mass as they hauled him upright. What the Easterner had lacked in skill, he had more than made up for in strength. Gathering her final reserves of energy, she struggled to her feet, slumping down once more on the edge of the circle,



its arched edge digging into the backs of her legs. Why did Beric always pit her against such giants?

A novice hovered before her, clutching a flagon of water to his chest. She nodded to him, seized the vessel from his hands, and gulped down the contents in long, thirsty draughts. Dragging her arm across her eyes she wiped them free of sweat, and scanned the room. The buzz of conversation slowly died away as spectators filed out, and from the back of the hall, someone called down to her: "Thought he had you for a minute there, girl!"

Hal twisted around to observe the man who was now threading his way between empty seats and benches towards her – a tall, slim figure darkly clad in senatorial robes. She barely managed a nod as Senator Marc Remigius approached the circle and beamed down at her. Aging with little dignity, Marc exuded an energy which never seemed to desert him. The greying tips of his hair were always lightly powdered, as was his face, once handsome features now creased with wrinkles. She continued to drink, too drained to reply. He frowned, lowering himself onto the platform beside her.

"Fancy celebrating?"

Hal's thoughts were finally clearing, her heart no longer hammering against the walls of her ribcage. She contemplated his suggestion. "Where did you have in mind?"

“My place? I’ve been looking for an excuse to organise a party for some time now. You just handed me the opportunity.”

“Really, Marc, you don’t need an excuse for that. Besides, your ‘surprise’ parties always seem to attract an indecent number of people.”

“Hal Thæc, you may doubt my sincerity, but you can never deny my capacity to entertain. I’ll be expecting you at eight. In the meantime, I suggest you bathe.”

She sighed, knowing full well that her friend would brook no excuse.

“I’ll think about it.”

“I know you will.”

Both rose, Hal with some difficulty. The Senator climbed up between steep, arching rows of benches, letting himself out of the arena through a large pair of double doors at the back end of the building. Hal crossed the arena to greet her duelling master, Beric Thælda, who was studying the tally of bets with satisfaction.

“Well Hal, looks like you’ve done us proud today, girl.” She winced as he squeezed her shoulder beneath a bear-like paw. Beric’s silvery hair and beard gave him an unnervingly metallic appearance which, combined with brutish strength made him an intimidating character. That was, at least, how the young novices in his duelling academy saw him. But

Hal had learned long ago that beneath the rough exterior lurked a paternal spirit, if not a soft heart.

“You know,” he continued, “I was a mite worried in that last round, girl. Tiring were you?” He leant forward, his eyes narrowing to slits as he scrutinised her. Hal looked away.

“I won. That’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

“No, lass, as I’ve told you many times: style can make or break a good fight, especially as far as the punters are concerned. Now, I suppose you’ll be wanting your prize money?”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Half for you, half for me, right?” He leaned back again, a tight, provocative smile concealed beneath his brindled moustache.

“As always.” Tired and irritated, Hal was in no mood for banter.

“Very well. Don’t go throwing it away like the last time. I won’t be bailing you out again before the next fight.”

“Beric, please just give me the cursed money, I’m tired.” Crossing her arms she glared at him, aware of how much pleasure he derived from dragging out these little deals.

Beric shook his head, apparently not offended, and handed her the winnings.

“There you go, just give me another such success in your next duel.”

“Your confidence in my abilities is overwhelming, Beric.” Snatching the bag of coins from his outstretched hand, she turned to go.

“And your respect for your elders and betters is the talk of the town, girl.” She stopped, contemplating a response, but then thought better of it. The prospect of quarrelling with Beric was not an appealing one. Instead, she made her weary way across the arena, aware that she had just granted another victory to the old master.

A very small part of her conceded that he was right. Sometimes vanity got the better of her and she flaunted her skills instead of reserving her strength. Only the previous month her opponent had sliced open her arm as she attempted to somersault across the circle. Beric had been furious.

“I can see you don’t need any more training,” he’d yelled, “when you’re prepared to throw away a duel for the sake of looking like a damned acrobat!”

Although she would never have admitted it, the reprimand had remained with her during this fight. As the Easterner had swung, blocked and parried she focussed upon his weaknesses, using his own strength against him to bring him down. Not such spectacular fighting, but certainly more effective. The last thing she wanted was another armful of Beric’s crooked stitching.

Doors on the far side of the arena opened onto

public baths, the women's divided from the men's by a thin partition wall. Pulling off her boots, Hal gasped as her feet encountered the cool chill of marble. The sound of water lapping at the walls of the pool seemed to have a calming effect on nerves still frayed after the duel. A small group of women bathed and gossiped, releasing occasional cascades of laughter around the stone chamber. Recognising one or two of them from the palace, Hal decided against joining them. Few courtiers ever acknowledged her with more than a stiff, cold nod.

Hal stripped, leaving her clothes in a pile, and lowered her body into the water, aware of the sly glances the women threw her, their curiosity overcoming disdain. She slid from sight beneath the surface, only too aware of the strange figure she must cut: boyish grace combined with an athletic physique, intense blue eyes contrasting with a pale, almost white complexion. City-dwellers saw little of the sun. With a gasp, she rose again to stand at waist height in the water, raking wet fingers through cropped, coal-black hair. Finally, allowing herself to sink lower, she leant her head against the pool's edge, sensing the sweat and vigour of the fight drain out into the water. The women lost interest and resumed their chatting, leaving Hal alone to debate with herself whether she had strength enough for the Senator's celebration.

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It was early summer. The evening had taken on a hazed appearance as the sun wound its way downwards, yet the city seemed to resonate with excitement: the commerce of the day exchanged for the entertainments and pleasures of the night. While some citizens scurried home, others were evidently heading for masked balls, parties or concerts. Hal travelled against the human current as she entered the senators' district with its elegant, sandstone townhouses, wide clean boulevards and green parks.

She had bathed and felt more refreshed, hoping that the fresh linen shirt and leather trousers she now wore made her appear more respectable. But the constant ache in the pit of her stomach was a reminder of how much Hal dreaded such occasions. Lacking the natural social graces of her friend, she found it difficult to appear relaxed and carefree when faced with his distinguished guests. And as the burble of conversation and laughter drifted down the street towards her, her stomach lurched and she almost turned back.

Marc's town house was a tall, free standing building surrounded by a high-walled garden. Topiary birds fronted the terrace which led to a sweeping semi-circle of steps. All three floors were

lined with rows of high, latticed windows, and the roof was decorated with ornate statues: ostentatious touches which Marc had added to improve the grandeur of the place.

Realising how late she already was, Hal bounded along the terrace and found the doors to the main salon thrown wide open. She craned back her neck, taking in the grand scale and spectacle of the party. A wooden gallery ran beneath the entire length of the ornate ceiling, enabling guests to group along it and gaze down at the swaying pairs of dancers, as the court's finest musicians entertained from a corner of the room.

Servants swarmed around her, overburdened with food arranged on silver platters, or carrying crystalline pitchers of wine. Hal caught her breath. Her friend had truly surpassed himself.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and she span round to face the Senator. Marc was dressed in a long silver frock coat threaded with gold brocade at its cuffs and collar, his hair and face delicately powdered. He could easily have passed for the Emperor himself.

"Late as usual." He shook his head in mock disapproval. "For that, I'm afraid you're going to have to dance."

"Marc, you know I can't." What was he thinking of? "Anyway, I'm tired. I only came out of courtesy."

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “I saw the way you leaped up those steps. Don’t even begin to pretend that you’re so far above us lesser mortals you don’t enjoy a good party when you see one.”

Hal laughed. “Fine, I’ll dance, once I’ve seen the quality of your guests. Last time you just invited a bunch of second-rate hangers-on from the court!”

Marc threw her an indulgent smile. “I don’t think you’ll find them lacking. Allow me to introduce you to one or two of them.”

He led her on a precarious course between dancing couples towards two wealthy looking women and a short, round, well-dressed man, who were talking animatedly to each other – or at each other. Hal couldn’t tell.

“I would like you to meet Master Braint, an eminent merchant from the East, his wife and sister. Ladies, Master Braint, this is the renowned duellist, Halanya Thæc.”

“I know,” Braint returned with a hint of bitterness.

“Oh really?” Marc sounded surprised. “Have you met before?”

“No, I just lost a lot of money betting on her opponent in the fight today.”

“Ah.” Marc looked at his feet. The conversation ground to an awkward halt.

Hal offered them a thin smile. “Well, you’ll know



who to bet on next time, won't you?"

"In my opinion," Braint's wife began, "The duelling circle is not a place for..."

"Yes, let's be moving on, shall we?" Marc caught hold of her elbow. "Come along Hal, there are so many people I'd like you to meet."

He whisked her away. Braint and the two women remained silent for a few brief moments and she held her breath, sensing their glares. Eventually their conversation picked up again, louder and more frantic than before.

"What the devil did you have to say that for?" Marc asked in agitation. "You stirred them up. Could you not be more diplomatic occasionally?"

"Very well," Hal sighed in resignation. "For you, Marc, I can be diplomatic. I can start being diplomatic with that girl over there."

"What girl, where?"

"That one who's watching us. Who's she?"

Marc followed her gaze across the room to where a young woman stood alone by a window, her light-brown eyes flecked with amusement as she took furtive sips from a glass of wine. The simple cut of her black dress contrasted with her fair hair, which was twisted intricately about her head, caught in a knot at the nape of her neck. Hal noted a certain defensive pride in the girl's eyes, in the way she kept herself at a distance from the party.

“Well, Hal, that is definitely someone you do not want to talk to, diplomatically or otherwise.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Marc repeated Hal’s question, his voice edged with disbelief. “I’ll tell you why not. Her name is Meracad and she just happens to be the daughter of Master Salius Léac, one of our great city’s most esteemed burghers. That’s him over there.”

He nodded in the direction of a burly man in his fifties who was drinking heartily with a group of merchants. Their peals of coarse laughter struck the air. Prime examples, Hal recognised, of the new money which was beginning to challenge the authority of the court.

“Now, to you and me,” Marc continued, his tone laced with sarcasm, “he may appear a brutish oaf, but in fact beneath that somewhat bullish exterior lies the ingenious mind of a brilliant and utterly ruthless man of business. So ruthless, in fact, that his daughter, Meracad, is pretty much the financial jewel in his crown.”

She stared at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that, when the occasion arises, he will almost certainly sell her to the highest bidder in order to secure the business deal of his dreams.”

“What a bastard.”

“Maybe, Hal, you did not express that quite as elegantly as I would have done, but in not so many words, you hit the very nail upon its head, which is every reason for you to stay away from both him and his daughter. Anyway, she’s not your type.”

“And how would you know about that?”

“Hal, there was gossip about your latest entanglement from here to the city gates. Scullery maid in the court kitchens, wasn’t it? Freckles, curly hair...”

“Yes, alright, there’s no need to go on. Anyway, I’ve no intention of going to speak to her when she’s coming over here instead.”

“Oh by the Emperor himself!” Marc groaned, as the girl paced towards them in a graceful arc. “Her father will have me by the testicles. The only purpose in her being here tonight is so that Léac may show her off to his business associates.” Marc nodded toward the group of men gathered around Meracad’s father.

Meracad reached them and inclined her head in a polite nod. “Well, Senator,” she began, “you never told me that you played host to such famous guests at your parties. This is, I believe, Hal Thæc?”

“I am. And the Senator here has just been informing me as to your own identity. Meracad Léac, I believe?”

“That’s correct. I heard that your duelling today

was spectacular. I'm pleased you won."

"In that case, I'm pleased to have entertained."

"I shall have to come to more of your parties, Senator." She turned away from them for a moment and then looked back, her brow creased with worry. "I believe my father wishes to speak to me. I'm sorry, please excuse me."

"Of course." Hal peered across the room at Meracad's father. A scowl drawn across his face, he stared back at her.

Marc gulped down an entire glass of wine in haste as the girl left them to re-join Léac.

"Oh come on Marc, you don't mean to tell me you of all people are scared of an old brute like that?" Hal joked.

"I'm not scared of him, Hal Thæc," Marc replied gravely. "I'm scared for you."

## Chapter Two

### An Invitation

Hal awoke the following day feeling that her head had been beaten open from the inside with a mallet. She came round lying on a couch in the main salon. Emptied of guests the room was in disarray, the remains of the feast now cold upon the tables, puddles of wine upon the floor and chairs overturned. It was always the same. Once Marc's more official guests had left for the evening, the drinking and dancing grew wilder, and the Senator was famed for increasing the pace of the festivities to a dangerous level.

Hal forced herself to remember the previous night. Meracad, the fair-haired girl, had disappeared with her father quite early on. This had been

disappointing for some reason but she could not recall why. She had consoled herself with taunting Braint and his wife, who left soon after, and that in turn had angered Marc. He wanted her to apologise. She refused, of course. The discussion had grown heated and they had drunk even more wine in consequence. By the early hours, maudlin and sentimental, they vowed never to argue again. A familiar story.

Fighting back waves of nausea she attempted to sit upright, the room orbiting her head in a dizzying whirl. The ghastly noise of somebody retching came from the far end of the room and then Marc himself staggered in, pasty-faced and sweating. He slumped in the chair opposite her.

“Quite a party,” he said. Hal managed a single nod in agreement. “Not that I can remember it of course,” Marc added. “I must be getting old, you know. There was once a time when I could party the night away and actually remember who I’d insulted the following day.”

“In that case perhaps memory loss has its advantages,” Hal speculated. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know – sometime after ten I expect.”

In spite of the queasiness in her belly she sprang up and hunted around for her jacket. “Ten o’clock? Beric will kill me.”

“Why?”

“I’ll be late for the academy.”

“Couldn’t you even stay for a post-celebration drink?”

“Sorry, I have to go.”

Marc sighed and lay back with a groan, burying his face in his hands as she dashed unsteadily out of the room.

Hal charged through the main entrance, bolted across the garden and out onto the streets, attempting to keep her swirling belly in check. As far as Beric was concerned, being late for training was a sin, no matter who the duellist or how great their experience.

She almost lost her balance as she sped around the corner of the city guild hall, slamming into a heavy pair of oak gates which led to the academy above. Ignoring her bruised arm, Hal flung open the doors and raced up the steps leading from the busy street outside. The door to Beric’s chamber, a poky little room at the top of the stairs, was still closed, she noted with relief. She crept past and into the academy.

The hall was full of novices training: the air singing to the swish of blades slicing the air, morning sun streaming down through tall, arched windows that ran the length of the room. One or two of the younger boys turned to greet her as she entered, and then an older man ran forward, his

striking green eyes punctuating a thin, sharply-defined face. Beric's deputy, Finn, was possessed of an almost feline grace which defined all his movements.

"Hal, where have you been? Beric's furious!"

"Marc had one of his parties," she replied, as if that explained everything.

"It's not the first time, Hal. He'll have something to say about it."

"Let him."

Finn shook his head in near desperation. "I'll not defend you again, Hal."

"Where the devil have you been?" Beric's voice roared out across the hall. The clink of metal on metal ground to a halt, the room encompassed by still, tremulous silence.

"Celebrating my win on your behalf," she offered. Nervous glances passed between some of the younger boys. Having experienced a few similar tirades, older duellists looked on in amusement.

Beric stormed over. "I'll hear no excuses for her this time, Finn. I'll not have her setting this kind of example to these lads here. You do know, Hal, what penalty I exact for lateness?"

"I've heard this before, Beric," Hal retorted, feigning disinterest.

"Well, if you've heard it before, how come you're so stupid you want to hear it all again? I'll be taking



sixty percent of your next winnings.”

In spite of Finn’s frantic gestures to keep quiet, Hal was outraged. “No wonder your reputation as the meanest man in the city goes before you, Beric. You know full well I need that money.”

“I’ll make that seventy percent for your insolence. If you carry on as you are doing, you’ll be living a pauper’s life for the months to come.”

She made a petty show of flinging her jacket to the ground, turned her back on the training master and began rifling through the racks in search of blades.

“And I trust you’ll be training until the evening as you see fit to waste the morning away.” Satisfied that he’d won the argument, Beric turned to a clique of young novices who stood with mouths rounded into ‘Os’ of shock. “Well, what are you all gawping at? Get back to your work, the lot of you.”

Finn let out a sigh of exasperation. “Hal, you should know better than to argue with him. You’ll always lose.”

“And he should know better than to treat me like a hired servant!” She narrowed her eyes, examining a rapier she had just pulled from the rack.

“Why don’t you ask yourself where you would be now if it wasn’t for Beric? After all, he was the one who saved you from a life at court. No one else would have done that.”

“I would have managed.”

“Like hell. You’d be either mad, dead or wearing a dress.”

She grimaced, whipping the sword through a few tentative arcs. “Let’s get started. The old goat already seems to think I’m slacking.”

Exhaustion dogged Hal’s heels as she parried, lunged and blocked her way across the wooden floor of the academy. As tiredness crept up on her, her concentration wavered, her mind wandering back to the previous night. What had been the name of that merchant’s daughter? Meracad. She wasn’t a typical heiress, that was certain. The newly rich of Colvé were normally so bold, so confident in their status and wealth. But Meracad had seemed watchful and distant, unsure of her place and role. She looked fragile, so vulnerable standing alone, her modest black dress clinging to her slim, waifish frame. And yet when she spoke, Hal sensed an independence of spirit, determination, power even. What a web of contradictions!

“Hal!” Finn yelled out in frustration as she lost her grip on the hilt of the rapier. It fell, skittering away across the floor, almost piercing the foot of a novice, who sprang from its path in a lithe leap.

“You’d best go home.” Groaning, Finn picked up the sword and dropped it back into the rack. “You fight like a novice. And you’ve a duel in a week’s

time. Beric'll be lucky if he takes any money at all."

With a sullen nod she pulled on her jacket, aware that sunlight now flooded the western windows of the academy and that it must be early evening.

Weariness hit her like a wall as she trudged back home along darkening streets towards the rooms she had rented ever since she won her first prize money. Her home was a squat, ramshackle place by the river in a run-down district of the city. It boiled in summer and was as cold as an ice-block in the winter. Yet she loved it for the anonymity and independence it afforded her.

Just one small chamber served as both living quarters and kitchen, furnished with no more than a bench, a table and a pair of chairs. In the winter she slept above it in a cavity below the roof. During the summer, however, she preferred the coolness of the ground floor, its bare stone walls offering her some relief from the sweltering heat. A tiny leaded window beneath the ceiling let in a little light, but the room would be pitched into darkness when night fell.

She poured some water into a bowl on the table, splashed her face with it, and then drank the remainder straight from the jug. From a linen sack beneath the bench she pulled out some bread and fruit, devouring it gratefully. Then she lay back upon the bench and had almost dropped off to sleep when the sound of someone knocking startled her.

Groaning, she dragged herself up once again and opened the door which led directly into the street. Marc stood on the threshold, apparently recovered from the previous night's indulgences. Without waiting for an invitation he stepped inside, shaking his head in mock surprise.

"Hal, please don't tell me you still feel ill. I myself am remarkably recovered." His lips twitched upwards into a smug smile.

"I've been training all day," Hal moaned. "Unlike some of us, I have to work for my keep. And now Beric is taking seventy percent of my next earnings for being late this morning— for which I hold you responsible."

"Me?" Marc looked aghast. "My dear girl, you can hardly claim that I physically poured alcohol down your throat, now can you?"

"Maybe not," Hal said, slumping back down onto the bench, "but it was your party."

"In which case, allow me to make it up to you." Marc pulled up a chair opposite her and leaned forward with a conspiratorial air. "Now," he began, "you know how we senators like to entertain ourselves now and again."

"It has been observed," she said drily.

"Yes, well, we're having one of our functions tomorrow night in the court."

"Oh by all the ancestors!" Hal groaned again.

“Not another one of your charity events for down-at-heel aristocrats?”

Marc looked at her with a pained expression. “Could you please try not to be so cynical? Besides, I’d have thought you’d be the first in support of down-at-heel, disinherited aristocrats.”

“That,” Hal retorted, “is a little below the belt.”

“Be that as it may, I wouldn’t mind it if you came and, well, lent a little moral support.”

“Marc, you don’t need any moral support. All you have to do is sit there and commiserate with them while they moan on about how the Emperor is constantly reducing their rights to steal yet more land off their tenants.”

“Wasn’t that moral support you provided when I had the argument with the Master of Réac over his taxation rights last month?”

“It was protection,” countered Hal. “He came at you with a knife.”

“Same difference,” Marc sniffed. “Now, Hal, you know I won’t give in so easily, so why don’t you look at it in another way? You say that Beric has fined you for being late?”

Hal nodded, unsure of where the conversation was leading.

“Well, I’d say in that case, you’re going to be a little hard up, which means you need all the free food and drink you can get.”

“I suppose so,” she conceded grudgingly. “Alright, I’ll come if you stop bothering me about it.”

“Excellent decision.” Marc rose to leave. “I knew you’d see things my way eventually.”

“You’ll regret it!” she called after him as he left the room.

“Surely not,” his voice trailed back. “And I’d get some sleep if I were you. You look like a woman who can’t take her drink to me.”

She threw the empty sack across the room, but he had already closed the door behind him and it slid in a crumpled heap onto the floor. Hal released a long, low growl of frustration and then stretched back out along the bench, one arm covering her face. Within minutes she was asleep.

## Chapter Three

### Books

“Was this the book you requested, Miss Léac?”

The librarian craned down at Meracad from his ladder, swaying beneath the dusty weight of a leather-bound volume. Standing on tiptoes, she studied the engraving on its spine: *The Imperial Chronicles, Volume Two*.

“Yes. That’s it. Thank you.”

He staggered down the rungs, laying it with reverence upon the reading desk. “Are you certain that you wish to read this?” Grey-flecked eyebrows shot up above a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

“And why not?” Her voice echoed around the silent, empty vault of the reading room.

“It is not common reading matter for young

ladies, Miss Léac.”

“And who would it be common reading matter for, then?” Try as she might, she could not quite keep the defensive note out of her voice.

He shrugged. “Senators, courtiers...”

“I wish to know how my ancestors lived, Sir. How our empire came into being...why Colvé was built.”

The librarian raised a bony, nervous hand to his thinning hair, patting down a few loose strands. “Of course, Miss Léac. An admirable pursuit, if I might say so. Now I really must be...” he gazed around absently as if he had forgotten what he ought to be doing. “I must get back to my work.”

She sat down and began to leaf through *The Chronicles*, inhaling the delicate, woody scent of ancient parchment. She disturbed him: she could see it in his milky, half-seeing eyes. Every time she entered the library he studied her, followed her, interrogated her with stammering questions about her choice of reading material. Would she not, perhaps, prefer some courtly romance? That was what the young ladies craved these days. Or Mistress Egré’s latest guide to etiquette. He was not, after all, certain that Master Léac would approve of her choice of books.

Meracad stifled a sigh, pressing down a time-stained page to reveal a fresh chapter in the empire’s glorious history. Would he pass on details of her



reading habits to her father, she wondered? Would she now find herself forbidden to enter the library? Colvé was a maze. She ran along its avenues, only to find them sealed.

“I thought it was you.” The voice pulled her from a world of battles and sieges and back into the cool, musty reality of the library. Frowning, she raised her head and stared at Hal Thæc who had planted herself on the opposite side of the desk.

“I’m sorry,” Meracad said, her fingers fidgeting with the edges of the parchment. “I didn’t see you.”

Hal Thæc offered her a lop-sided grin in response. “Must be a good book.”

“It is - The Imperial Chronicles.”

“*The Chronicles?*” Hal feigned a yawn. “They made us read some of those when I was a ward.”

“You didn’t enjoy them, I take it?”

“Well I wouldn’t read them out of choice.”

Meracad closed the book, running her fingers along the impressions upon its spine. “So if you’re not fond of reading, what are you doing in a library?”

Folding her hands behind her head, Hal leant against the backrest of the chair. “It’s cool in here.” Her blue eyes danced with irony. “And it’s hot out there.”

Meracad smiled in spite of herself. The duellist appeared calmer, less frantic than she had done a few days before at Remigius’s party. Cropped, coal-

black hair threw the paleness of her skin into relief. Her long-limbed, wiry frame was wrapped in leather vest and trousers.

“The public baths are the place to cool off, I believe,” Meracad said.

“I’ve tried them. They’re full of courtiers.”

“Oh yes. I’d heard you had an aversion to courtiers.”

Hal leant forward, her bare arms forming a frame upon which to rest her chin. “Really? Who told you that?”

The conversation was already sliding into treacherous terrain. Meracad shrugged. “I thought it was common knowledge. You left the court because you couldn’t stand it.”

“I left the court in order to duel.”

The librarian limped forward, hobnails clipping on the polished marble of the floor. Hal raised her head, acknowledging him, Meracad noticed, with a provocative grin.

“Mistress Thæc,” the old man began, “you seem to be making a habit of turning the library into your own private forum.”

“I was sharing my appreciation of *The Chronicles* with Miss Léac,” she replied, her voice low and lazy.

“Miss Léac’s devotion to the library is admirable. She comes here to read!”

“Miss Léac is to be admired, I agree.”

The librarian turned on his heel and stamped away, fuming. Meracad grew uncomfortably aware of the blush which now worked its way up her neck, and of Hal's steady gaze.

The duellist leant forward as if conspiring against the librarian. "Why do you love to read so much?" She asked, tapping a finger upon the cover of *The Chronicles*. Meracad smiled, sensing that the conversation was back on safer ground.

"To take myself beyond this cess-pit of a city."

The duellist's eyes rounded in surprise. "You hate it so much?"

Meracad felt her pulse quicken. No one, she had learnt, was to be trusted — not maids, dancing tutors, librarians, servants. Not senators, courtiers or her father's fellow merchants. Gossip ran rife as plague around the city. A single word whispered in a moment of forgetfulness would work its way back to her father's house. So why did she now find herself so desperate to reveal it all — all the misery and frustration — to this strange woman?

"Don't all prisoners hate their cells?" The words slipped out as if on their own accord. And once out, they couldn't be unsaid.

Hal's sharp features softened, the easy smile dropped from her face, she ran her fingers through her hair. "Your prison is in here, Meracad." She put her fingertips to her temples. "Within, not without."

“Easy for you to say.”

“Why easy? We live in the same city, don’t we? We’re bound by the same rules.”

“Not you. You’re of noble birth. Your privileges are assumed — were assumed until you left court. My father clawed his way up to wealth and position. He expects my appreciation — he demands my respect.”

The smile returned to Hal’s lips. She stretched with fluid grace. “So you’ll simply do as you’re told then? Lie to yourself that these books offer you freedom, however fake that freedom really is? You’ll marry who you’re told to marry and move from one prison to the next?”

“It might get better.”

“It won’t.”

The librarian was hurrying towards them again, huffing and snorting like a small, irate dragon.

“Miss Thæc, I must ask you to leave! This is a library, not a public house.”

“Well I’m certain Miss Léac would never find herself in a public house,” Hal drawled.

Meracad glared at her, resenting the jibe, wishing Hal gone and at the same time willing her to stay.

Hal rose but kept both hands flat on the desk as she stared down at the merchant’s daughter, her eyes flecked with a cool arrogance. The librarian put a hand to her arm, guiding her away.

“I don’t expect to see you in here soon, Miss

Thæc.”

“I don’t expect to return. But if Miss Léac wishes to discuss the empire’s history with me some more, she knows where to find me.”

“Why would I want to find you?” Meracad called out to Hal’s departing back.

The duellist turned round and shrugged. “I have no idea.”

The doors opened, rays of sun channelling through the library’s dusty haze, and for a moment Meracad saw Hal’s sleek form silhouetted against the light. Then the doors slammed shut and all was silence.

“My apologies, Miss Léac.” The librarian bustled forward once more, smoothing his hands down his apron as if to wipe them clean. “The woman knows no bounds, it would seem.”

“No, Sir. She doesn’t,” murmured Meracad, gnawing on a nail. A sudden wave of disappointment descended upon her, like clouds cancelling out a sunny day. *The Imperial Chronicles* no longer seemed a haven of romance and adventure to which she might escape. Grimacing, she pushed the volume back towards the librarian. “My father will be expecting me. I had better go.”

“Should I keep the book for your return?” His gaze was, she felt, just a little too intrusive.

“No, Sir. That won’t be necessary.”

Meracad threaded her way between the reading desks, eager to escape the suffocating gloom of the library. What had appeared a place of refuge now seemed just one more closed avenue of the maze, an illusion of freedom. Pushing open the door she lost herself amongst the dizzying play of courtiers, merchants, street-hawkers, of children, senators and thieves, the heat so intense it carried almost solid weight. She peered up and down the street but the duellist had disappeared. Biting her lip, Meracad set off in the direction of home, confused and alone.

## Chapter Four

### Cara

Marc was already waiting in his carriage by the time Hal reached the main square. Dressed in the dark, sober gown of a senator, he seemed more formal and serious than usual. Hal climbed in and took the seat opposite him, biting her nails and staring out of the window to avoid his gaze.

He contemplated her for a moment. “I fail to see what you find so daunting about a little trip to the palace, Hal,” he said at last.

Failing to get a response, he tried again. “I mean the place is all you knew as a child. And you could make life a bit easier for yourself if you attempted to make it your home once again.”

She turned to him, jaw clenched, her lips tight.

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Oh, you know, the luxury of court apartments, servants — it’s your entitlement after all. I’m just saying...” he raised his hands defensively as she cut into his speech.

“Save yourself the trouble, Marc. We’ve had this conversation so many times I’m sick to death of it. You know why I left the place, you know what I think of it, and I have absolutely no intention of returning there.”

He shook his head and hissed through his teeth in irritation before settling back against the plush upholstery of the carriage. They trundled slowly amongst crowds hurrying home from work, or in many cases leaving their homes for the night ahead.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. Franc’s coming tonight.” His words broke the painful silence. “He arrived this morning.”

“Franc? Why didn’t you say? You wouldn’t have had to persuade me if I’d known he’d be coming.”

“It’s just a fleeting visit. He’s down here from those barbaric northern provinces on business.”

“He’s hardly a barbarian, now, is he?” Sometimes Marc’s snobbishness got under Hal’s skin.

“Each to their own,” he commented drily. “Well, here we are. Steel yourself, girl.”

Spiralling turrets carved of marble and granite span into the air, soaring above the roof-tops, busy



streets and market places. Grandiose in scale and design, the palace was not only the official residence of the Emperor and his family, but of all the courtiers and hangers-on who could afford to take advantage of its chambers, halls and banqueting suites. It was here that Hal had spent her early years sleeping in the wards' dormitory with the twenty or so other children who were, through accidents of birth, entitled to grow up in the charge of the court. Yet the palace had always been too overwhelming in size, too absurd in structure to call a home.

Marc's carriage pulled in through a massive pair of iron-wrought gates. An impressive array of vehicles already lined the courtyard, the simpler belonging to senators, the more extravagant in the possession of provincial aristocrats. They halted directly in front of curved marble stairs which swept up towards the main entrance. Hal jumped out, her stomach churning with nerves as her friend stepped down in a more demure manner, nodding immediately in the direction of new arrivals as he spotted acquaintances amongst them.

Ascending the staircase they passed beneath the gaudy portico with its fanciful statues and ornaments and into a high vaulted chamber lit with candles. The heat of the summer's evening gave way to the cooler air of the banqueting hall. Long trestles lined every wall, weighted with food: sculptures

comprised of fruit lay interspersed amongst curiously devised dishes of meat and fish. Pages and servants rushed about the place bearing jugs of wine and water, dressed in costume as heroes and heroines of the empire's glorious past: as famous rulers, warriors or artists. A small orchestra had already struck up some refined melodies, while everywhere courtiers and senators mixed, the hum of voices and the clink of glasses occasionally drowning out the music.

"You're right." Hal raised her voice above the din. "You senators definitely know how to enjoy yourselves."

"The Emperor lent us the room for the evening," Marc explained. "He needs to placate a few of these aristocrats, so he thought he'd let us put on a bit of a show. He wants them to think they're appreciated."

"Of course. Oh, there's Franc." Hal gestured in the direction of a tall, well-built man of middle-age: coarsely handsome with a shock of raven-black hair which contrasted sharply with the piercing blue of his eyes. It was on account of those eyes and those tanned swarthy features that Franc Hannac was said to have received considerable attention from female members of the court — or at least that was what Hal had heard. His more attractive assets were, however, rarely mentioned: an unmarried, wealthy aristocrat was inevitably to be viewed in a favourable light. Yet

he led an obstinately single, and some said, fairly reclusive life on his estates in the North.

Franc was nodding, grave and sympathetic, as two elderly ladies complained about changes at court — of how the old ways were being forgotten, challenged by the rude manners and ill-breeding of young aristocrats. Standing behind the two ancient courtiers, Hal winked at him. He caught her gaze and made his excuses to the old women. On noticing Hal, their faces soured, and they pulled away. Hal's grin broadened. She had long grown used to such snubs.

“Marc, Hal!” Franc saluted them.

Hal shook his hand with warmth. “You promised us all you'd be back several months ago. I took you for a man of your word.”

“In that case, I'm sorry to have disappointed.” The slight hint of a smile played on his lips. His voice, tinged with the country accent of the North contrasted pleasantly with the icy tones of the court.

“I hope you've been keeping an eye on her, Senator.”

“As much as possible, Franc. It's not always easy, you know.”

“What are you talking about?” Hal rounded on Marc. “I never asked to be looked after!”

“You may not have asked, Hal.” Marc's lips twitched in amusement. “That doesn't mean you

don't need looking after."

Rubbing his chin, Franc studied her thoughtfully. "You know, lass, if you're ever feeling tired of city life, you can always come and stay with me some time."

Marc choked on his drink.

"Are you alright, Senator?" Franc asked, concerned.

"Yes, I'm fine. It's just, well, I really can't imagine Hal outside the city."

"And why not?" she demanded, furious. Marc could be so smug, so patronising. "I'm sure I could manage perfectly well beyond the city walls, thank you very much."

"Hal, please, the city's in your blood. One whiff of that fresh northern air and you'd be hammering at the gates begging to be let back in."

Franc grinned, familiar with the banter which passed between the strange pair.

"Well," he said, "just think about it. Of course you're welcome too, Senator."

"Now that," Hal stated flatly, "I do find funny."

It was at that moment that she noticed a new guest had entered the room: a woman of middle age, grey-brown hair sleeked tightly back behind her head, a silver dress trailing to the floor, emerald jewels at her ears and neck complementing the vivid green of her eyes. The woman surveyed the room

with a kind of cold contempt. An icy pang of despair coursed through Hal, hitting the very pit of her stomach.

“Marc,” she whispered, “you didn’t tell me she’d be here.”

“I didn’t know,” he stammered.

“You think my mother would forgo the opportunity of ensnaring a few provincial aristocrats?” Hal turned to leave, but Franc touched her shoulder and shook his head. She sighed, knowing only too well what would happen if Cara Thæc spotted her amongst the crowd.

Cara took a few sedate steps into the room and struck up a conversation with the pair of grumbling courtiers. In spite of Franc’s hint for her to stay, Hal knew that to do so would be to risk pain and humiliation. But as she headed towards the main doors, a high-pitched voice cut through the air like a blade.

Cara’s tone was strident, outraged. “I do wonder about the senate these days. They seem to permit anyone to walk through these doors. You know I really don’t believe I can attend such functions when anything off the street is let in.”

Hal stopped, her heart hammering out a wild, frantic rhythm. After a life time of enduring these verbal beatings, she’d developed a thick skin. Often enough she would swallow her pride, aware of how

lucky she was to have her own rooms in the city. No longer constrained to suffer her mother's scorn and loathing, she could now escape the torments of the palace. Yet today she was reluctant to allow Cara her own way. After all, Franc's visits to Colvé were rare events. Why shouldn't she stay and speak to him? Marc gestured frantically at her to leave, but she didn't want to. Not this time. Turning around, she faced the older woman in defiance.

"Well, Lady Cara, if you don't like the company, maybe you ought to leave?"

The buzz of conversation died away, the orchestra slowed in pace, the music stopped. This was just the kind of entertainment courtiers enjoyed the most: an argument which would provide the meat for gossip over the coming weeks.

"I don't believe, young woman, that anyone here asked for your opinion. Your presence here tonight is yet another demonstration of your complete disrespect for the court — a court which, it is now clear, nourished an ingrate, a creature incapable of civilised behaviour." Cara's expression was indignant, her face white with anger

The courtiers turned their collective attention to Hal, waiting for a response.

"Is it, Cara, civilised behaviour to break up a meeting with this sort of tirade?"

"It is my duty," Cara continued, pretentiously, "to

reveal the rebellion in our midst, if no one else will do so.”

As hard as she tried, Hal could not hold back her laughter. Yet she knew how much it would provoke her mother.

“Stop it!” Cara fumed, working herself into an indignant fury. “You see, ladies and gentlemen of the court, how she mocks us all with her very presence. I demand she is removed immediately.”

“Don’t worry Cara,” Hal threw back, feeling that the courtiers had been served enough of a spectacle for one evening. Franc’s conversation would have to wait. “Don’t worry, I’ll remove myself.”

“Please do.”

“Just tell me one thing – why do you despise me so much? What have I ever done to you? I’m sure we’d all love to know.”

She knew that she would never hear the real answer to her question from Cara’s lips. Yet deep down, Hal understood the reason for the hatred which shone from her own mother’s eyes. The existence of an illegitimate child threw Cara’s reputation as a courtier and an aristocrat into jeopardy. Hal was an inconvenient reminder of her own shame: a living stain upon her honour.

Cara shook with the effort of self-control, choosing her words with vicious purpose, spitting them out as if they were poison. “I find your

behaviour abhorrent and undignified.”

Hal smiled and shook her head. “Well, it’s a shame you didn’t find my father’s behaviour abhorrent and undignified. If you had done, I wouldn’t be troubling you with my presence now, would I?”

The court held its breath. No one had ever dared voice the truth in public. Not even Hal. Cara’s face paled even further, her hands trembled, and she took on the appearance of one who would surely commit murder, were it not for the presence of others. Then she walked over to where Hal stood and slapped her hard across the face.

Franc and Marc moved to pull Hal away, perhaps worried that her reaction would be equally violent, but she stared, ashen-faced at the floor. Cara stalked from the room, her head held high.

“Come on, Hal, I’ll take you home,” Marc offered gently.

“I told you that you’d regret it,” she muttered.



## Chapter Five

### Preparations

Finn was worried. Hal was already at the academy when he arrived that morning, grimly repeating a series of cuts, thrusts and parries. She trained in silence, submitting to exhaustion only when evening fell. He made some futile efforts to engage her in conversation, but she responded with shrugs and grunts. Eventually he gave up, resorting to a few terse comments on her technique. Finn reasoned she would drink away the evening with her friends in the city or with Marc, and overcome her poor humour. But the following day she returned to repeat the process.

“Hal!” he yelled out in sudden frustration.

It was early evening and she was showing no sign

of relenting. The tell-tale shadows around her eyes indicated that she had not slept. Nor did she appear to have a hangover, which meant that she had spent the evening alone.

“Hal, stop would you?”

“What?” She turned to face him. Her eyes flashed with irritation.

“If you carry on like this, you’ll exhaust yourself beyond repair. There are only a few days yet before your duel with the Easterner.”

“I know what I’m doing.” She turned her back on him and continued.

It wasn’t the first time he had seen her like this. Only a few months ago she had trained for two solid weeks, twelve hours a day. She hadn’t even bothered to return home, spending the nights curled up on a sleeping mat on the academy floor. Eventually, Finn learned from Beric that Cara had been amongst the spectators during a public duel. Hal had lost, and the courtier walked away in satisfaction, a richer woman.

He tried again. “Just tell me what’s wrong, Hal. How can you fight if your mind is troubled?”

“Nothing is wrong, I tell you!” She hurled her sword to the floor before stalking from the hall and out onto the street. Disturbed by the argument, Beric emerged from his tiny enclave just as Finn turned to follow her. The old duelling master laid a

hand upon his deputy's shoulder.

“Just let her alone, lad. There's no point in trying to smooth her out. Whatever the problem is, she'll be back. Where else can she go?”

He was right, for Hal returned an hour later, wordlessly pulling a sword from the rack to resume her practice. She spent another night on the academy floor. Finn worried himself sick that her duel would be ruined through nerves and exhaustion, but decided to keep his thoughts to himself. As was so often the case, she would have to learn the hard way.

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It was a fine summer's morning in the market place. The stall holders tended their wares, shouting to customers with promises of the freshest fruit, the finest wines and the most succulent meats from across the entire empire. Shoppers moved from table to table, commenting upon a particular bargain here, an unusual delicacy there: haggling with the sellers, or settling on a deal.

Meracad followed in Agata's footsteps as her maid cut a meandering route amongst the vendors and street-hawkers, occasionally stopping to admire a swathe of rich material or to inhale the scents of a new perfume which had arrived from the South.

Agata dabbed a few drops upon her wrist and held it to her mistress's face. Meracad smiled as she closed her eyes, the scent evoking the exotic spices and jasmine of the Yegdanian provinces.

“Like it, Miss?”

“It's delicious.” Meracad opened her eyes again and was back in the market place. “I'll buy it for you if you want.”

Agata's round, ruddy face beamed with pleasure. “Well, thank you, Miss. I'll wear it when I attend the duelling next.”

Meracad turned to her in surprise, alert to the sudden quickening of her own heart. “The duelling? Since when did you interest yourself in such things, Agata?”

Agata held herself up proudly and her eyes grew a little brighter. “Since I started walking out with Lord Ceadda's groom.”

“Ah.” Meracad cast her a sly look, but thought better of pursuing the conversation. Agata could talk for hours about her latest conquest, if given the chance. Besides, Meracad was more curious about the duel itself than her maid's love life. She feigned an interest in some silk gowns on a nearby stall before asking, “will Hal Thæc be duelling?”

Agata turned to her, her eyes dancing with amusement. “You seem rather taken by the idea of duelling yourself, Miss Meracad.”

“Oh no, I’m not. It’s just...it’s rather unusual, don’t you think? A woman fighting on the circle?”

“Unnatural if you ask me, Miss. I’m only going as my man’s so keen on the whole thing. Girls duelling – they’ll be conscripting us for the army, next. As if we haven’t got enough troubles.”

Agata turned away and busied herself with some of the neighbouring stalls. Meracad watched her maid’s plump little figure disappear amongst piles of fabrics, stopping occasionally to scrutinise strips of gauze, velvet and cotton with a practised eye.

A figure clad in white shirt and dark trousers crossed Meracad’s path. She jumped in surprise. Could it be? Meracad sighed in disappointment as the boy turned to look at her and threw her a smile. A novice, perhaps: an unsheathed sword hung from a belt at his side, his hair was dark and cropped. The wrong duellist.

She bit her lip and turned away. Her father, she realised, would never permit her to attend the circle. She had not even asked him: it was pointless to do so. But, like a recurring dream, her mind hovered over that conversation in the library. It had been almost as if Hal had laid down a challenge: “Miss Léac knows where to find me.” In spite of the heat, Meracad shivered, remembering Hal’s slim frame silhouetted against the light.

A vendor was grinning at her, she realised,

perhaps hoping to tempt her into a bargain. Meracad surveyed the wares on his stall: not the lush indigos and crimsons of women's dresses, but drab linen and dark leather, servants' rough garments. She picked up a brown cloth cap and examined it, turning it over in the sunlight for a few moments. An idea pricked at the edge of her consciousness. At first she refused to countenance it. Such a risk: so outrageous. She entertained it a while longer. It became real: acquired a kind of solidity in her imagination. She eyed the trader speculatively.

“How much?” She asked.

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Hal's shadow danced beneath her, disappearing and reappearing as she span between patches of light, her sword catching the beams, flickering as it sliced the air. Repeatedly she laced back and forth, the tip of the blade aiming for a tiny cross etched in the wall which she struck with ever keener precision.

The sound of clapping broke through her concentration, and she whirled around to observe Franc leaning against the frame of the doors dressed in the simple work clothes of a northern farmer — a pair of faded canvas breeches, his shirt bleached by the sun, the sleeves rolled up as if prepared for a day in the fields. He could have been observing her

training for some time, she realised with a slight stab of embarrassment, for the novices and other duellists had already left, Beric granting them a free day.

Knowing full well that nothing would keep her from training just days before a duel, the old master had given her the keys to the academy and left her alone. And so she had continued, oblivious to Franc's presence as she sparred with an imaginary adversary.

"You'll wear yourself out, girl."

Franc appeared intense and serious, but his eyes were flecked with irony. It was an expression which invoked anxiety amongst his friends. Was he laughing inwardly at them when he seemed to be listening in such earnest? No one would ever understand Franc Hannac, Hal thought.

"I've a duel in a few days' time." She returned her sword to its rack, and shook his hand.

"So I heard. I'm afraid I'll miss it — I must return to Hannac," he apologised, a genuine hint of regret in his voice. "But I thought I might spend my remaining afternoon in the city with my favourite imperial ward. If, of course, she has the time to spare."

Hal struggled with herself for a moment. Her commitment to training before a duel verged on the point of superstition.

“Come on, Halanya! If you’re not prepared now, you never will be.” Franc cut into her thoughts.

“No one ever uses that name,” she protested. “It was lost a long time ago.”

“Well, I may have to spread the rumour that you’ve taken a liking to it again, unless you agree to come with me.”

She offered him an apologetic grin before shaking her head. “Sorry, Franc. You know how it is.” She spread her arms expansively by way of explanation.

His face soured in disappointment, but then he seemed to recover his good humour. “No, I don’t. Well, never mind, Hal. Good luck with your duel.”

He bowed flamboyantly and then pulled on a broad-rimmed hat. She gave an awkward curtsy in response. He laughed at that. “Don’t even try, Halanya. You know it doesn’t suit you.” He turned to go. “Come and see me at Hannac some day!” He yelled over his shoulder as he wandered back across the training hall.

She heard his footsteps as he headed down the stairs. Then with a snap, the door closed shut. For a brief moment, she tried to imagine a world beyond Colvé: the wide open moors of the North that he had described to her once. Hannac fortress looming above a broad plateau. Hal shuddered. Perhaps Marc had been right after all. One whiff of that fresh country air and she would be hammering at the



gates to be let back in!

Hal turned and pulled her sword from its rack once again. She knew her place: it was on the duelling circle. Nothing Franc could say would ever tempt her away from that.

## Chapter Six

### Faith

Hal was passing the temple on her way to the academy when a flood of harmony spilled out onto the street. She stopped, cocking her head on one side, and listened to the melodies soar and diminish. Women's high, throaty voices worked in counterpoint above the men's deeper notes.

It was a hymn to the Emperor — the human manifestation of the divine — his praises set to music by templar composers. Hal smirked, thinking of his majesty Diodiné, third of that name. The Emperor was a slight, stooping man renowned for his quick wits and short temper. Not an obvious vessel for divine authority. But as to question that authority was heresy, she chose to keep her doubts to herself,

and enjoyed the singing as it reached its climax before it drifted away into silence.

The high priest intoned a few muffled words to mark the end of the ceremony, doors were thrown open wide, and worshippers streamed out between wide sandstone columns accompanied by the heady scent of incense. She slouched against the temple wall, wrestling with an uncomfortable sense of guilt as she observed them. Since becoming a duellist, Hal had not stepped foot inside the temple, just as she had never returned to the court.

A small group of worshippers had collected on the temple stairs — she noticed one of Marc's friends, a senator, amongst them. His face was tense, etched with worry. A merchant stood with his back to her, arguing with the man. She recognised Léac's broad shoulders, his legs set apart at a confident stance. He rocked back and forth on his heels, hands clasped firmly behind his back. As the conversation grew heated, the senator paled, and she felt her own blood race. Evidently their discussion had more to do with the worldly than the spiritual.

A pang of remorse struck Hal like a blow. She had goaded Léac's daughter in the library, almost accusing her of cowardice. But Meracad was this dangerous man's only child and she had every reason to be afraid. He intimidated everyone, even senators.

Léac's head snapped round and he glared up the temple steps. Meracad was descending, accompanied by a portly blonde girl — probably her maid. Hal sank back further into the shadows, sucking in her breath, almost flattening herself behind a column. When Meracad reached her father and the senator she dropped into a graceful curtsy. Léac uttered a few sharp, angry words but Hal could not catch them.

She noticed Meracad's already slight frame shrink even further, the maid giving her mistress's hand a covert squeeze of support. Then they all turned to go.

Against her better instincts, Hal released herself from the shade, following them as they moved through the crowd away from the forum in the direction of the merchant's district. She would be late for training again, but she didn't care.

A street hawker set down his cart of votive relics right in front of her, blocking her path. She gave him an angry shove and wound onwards through the mill of citizens, but she had already lost them. They were too far away, heading down a distant boulevard.

Hal stopped, kicking at a loose cobble in frustration. It skittered free of the road and bounced beneath the feet of passers-by. Meracad had almost disappeared from view. But as she turned a corner, she looked back straight through the crowd as if

searching for someone.

Hal stood, rooted, ignoring the bumping and jostling, the heat and noise, her gaze fixed on Meracad's face. The girl scanned the crowd with troubled eyes, but then her maid slipped an arm around her waist, drawing her away and out of sight.

Hal turned slowly and trudged back in the direction of the duelling academy. Had Meracad seen her? She doubted it. The throngs of people had been densely-packed. Who had she been looking for? Was there some young man in the city who had caught her attention? Perhaps Meracad had not been entirely truthful, that day in the library. Perhaps she had been protecting herself — or someone else. Her father was too powerful, she had claimed. He demanded her absolute respect, her obedience. She had implied that she had no choice but to do as she was told, even in the question of her own marriage. And Hal had just witnessed her search the crowd — evidently for someone she knew, and her father, presumably, didn't. A feeling not unlike jealousy dogged Hal's heels as she headed for Beric and the academy.

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“Hal! You've a visitor.”

Resting her sword on the ground, Hal wiped the

sweat from her eyes. “Who is it?”

A toothy grin laid claim to the cadet’s freckled face. “A pretty one.”

“Pretty?” Confused, Hal wrinkled her brow into a frown. Finn shook his head. “You’d better go, Hal.” He threw her an indulgent smile.

She followed the boy to the top of the stairs. It took her several moments to recognise the woman who was standing with her back to the hall. Long, straw-coloured hair cascaded down her bare shoulders and she wore a sleeveless, pale blue dress. She turned around and smiled.

“Meracad!”

“You remembered.” Meracad’s brown eyes betrayed her relief. The smile vanished. “You said I’d know where to find you.”

“I didn’t mean...” Hal immediately regretted opening her mouth.

“You didn’t mean what?” Meracad studied her. “That I should come here? That’s a pity. I must have misunderstood.” She moved towards the steps.

“No. Wait.” Without thinking, Hal reached out and put a hand to the girl’s shoulder. Her skin was soft, kissed warm by the sun. “I mean — I didn’t want you to take such a risk.” She leaned over the balcony and peered downwards through open doors onto the street. No one was there. She was aware of the kicking of her pulse.

“Strange.” Meracad’s eyes posed a challenge. “When I met you in the library I had the impression you believed freedom was worth any risk.”

For once in her life, Hal was at a loss for words. A smile graced the corners of Meracad’s mouth for a few moments and then disappeared.

“Why did you come here?” Hal asked at last.

“To prove you wrong. I’m not afraid.”

“I can see that.” She knew that she ought to tell Meracad to leave. She had witnessed Léac’s angry treatment of his daughter outside the temple that very morning. If he knew that Meracad had paid an unaccompanied visit to the academy, she could be forbidden from ever leaving his house again. But then another memory hovered on the fringes of her consciousness. She remembered Meracad peering earnestly amongst the crowds of people that morning: looking for someone, searching.

“Would you like to see the academy?” The words were out before she could stop them.

Meracad paused, searching Hal’s face. “Yes,” she said at last. “I would like that very much.”

Hal led her through the hall amongst pairs of duellists and novices. More than once she put out her arm to stop the merchant’s daughter from being swept along with them as the young men worked their furious way around the room, lunging and slicing at one another.

“Who are they?” Meracad yelled above the din.

“Some of them are aristocrats with too much time on their hands,” Hal called back. “Others will join the Emperor’s elite forces. And then there are the professional duellists, like myself. We make our living entertaining the crowds in the arena.”

A space had cleared ahead and Hal spotted Finn resting against the wall, a sly smile stretched across his face.

“Finn, this is Meracad. She was at Marc Remigius’s party.”

Finn shook Meracad’s hand. “Hal is normally rather coy about the company she keeps,” he observed, winking at the duellist. “I cannot, for the life of me, imagine why.”

“But we’re not...”

Before Meracad had a chance to continue, Hal cut in hurriedly. “We use rapiers as a rule.” She threw Finn a warning glance. He grinned and backed away. “They are light, dynamic – the spectators love them. Here,” she passed one to Meracad. “You see? Like a feather.”

Meracad turned the sword around, holding it to the light. “Well, maybe not quite a feather but it certainly weighs less than I had imagined.”

“Here,” Hal indicated a dark cross etched into the wall. “Try aiming for it. Lunge with your whole body. Like this.” She stood, legs spread apart, right arm



held at length and leaned towards the cross. Meracad repeated the action but came shy of the mark.

“You need to straighten your arm a little.” The duellist stood behind the girl and took her forearm, gently stretching it out. She noticed Meracad’s long, slender neck, the light downy hairs upon it, the way her entire body shivered at her touch.

Meracad brought the sword to the centre of the cross.

“Congratulations!” Finn said. “We’ll make a duellist of you, too.”

“I doubt it, Sir.” Meracad shook her head, laughing.

“Perhaps you would like to watch a duel, Meracad?” The trainer asked, his green eyes now cast with irony. “I’m sure Hal will be eager to oblige.”

“I’m sure Finn relishes the opportunity to demonstrate his own prowess,” Hal muttered in irritation.

“I would love to watch.” Meracad turned to Hal.

The duellist’s heart gave an unexpected leap. She took the rapier from Meracad’s hands and levelled it at Finn. “Best of three hits, Finn?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

They took up defensive positions, circling warily before engaging in a frantic rain of blows that led

them around the entire chamber. Meracad's presence made Hal nervous, edgy, impulsive. She carved wild arcs from the air with her sword, span and dropped, then rose, thrusting out her blade, aware of the girl's intent gaze. Was Meracad impressed by her skill and agility, she wondered, or did the girl think it ridiculous of a court brat to play at duelling? Hal stole a look across the hall, searching Meracad out amongst the sea of duellists as they clashed and swayed and parted. She caught the girl's gaze for a brief moment, held it, noting the anxious, fraught appeal in Meracad's eyes.

A searing stab of pain drew her back into the moment. Finn had lowered his blade. Hal looked down to watch a thin line of red streak her sleeve. She dropped her sword and tried to pull her left arm into view.

Finn inspected the wound, the pressure of his fingers causing her to wince. "You'll live," he said at last. "It's little more than a graze. That should teach you not to show off so much."

"I wasn't showing off!" she protested.

"Please, Hal! All that energy you were wasting. On the circle you'd be finished in minutes. Well, perhaps you had your reasons." He cast Meracad a sly look.

"Get me a bandage,' Hal snarled.

Finn grinned at Meracad and sought for dressings

and ointment in a cupboard. "I must go now," he said. "I have to speak to Beric before I leave for the evening. Could you help her?" He handed Meracad a roll of cloth and a cork-stoppered clay bottle.

"I'll try. It was a pleasure to meet you, Finn."

"The pleasure was mine." With a low, ironic bow he headed for Beric's office.

"Curse it!" Hal threw herself down on the floor, still vainly tugging on her own shoulder as she attempted to examine her arm. "You don't have to, you know. I'll manage."

"It's rather difficult to do it with one hand. Here," Meracad put some of the ointment onto a dressing, parted the torn linen of Hal's shirt and dabbed at the cut. Hal winced again as the salve worked its way inside the wound.

"You're risking a great deal in coming here," she whispered through gritted teeth.

"Oh, I believe the risk to be worth it." Meracad caught her gaze and held it as she wrapped the bandage around Hal's arm. She was so close now. Her breath brushed against Hal's neck, her fingers working away with a light, nimble delicacy. Closing her eyes, Hal leant her head against the wall.

"I'll be duelling in a few days." The words tumbled from Hal's lips before she could hold them back. "Perhaps you might persuade your father to let you attend." *Fool, you shouldn't be doing this.*

Meracad's fingers froze for a moment and then continued, less steadily this time. "You know he wouldn't let me."

Something snapped inside Hal. The energy, the madness, the excitement which had welled within her burst. She realised how exhausted she now was, and how much she would like to be lying face down on her bench in her cramped little room, her head buried in her arms. Well, at least the girl had more sense than she did. Of course it had been an absurd suggestion. She grimaced in embarrassment.

"But that doesn't mean I won't come."

Had she imagined that? Meracad had placed her lips to Hal's ear, whispering. Hal raised her head with a struggle, staring at the girl, searching her face. Was she mocking?

"All done." Meracad tied the bandages with an inexpert knot. She climbed to her feet.

Trembling, Hal rose. "Thank you. I'll show you out."

The room was almost empty of duellists and cadets. Hal followed Meracad through the hall, admiring the girl's easy grace, the blue gauze of her dress rippling as she walked. When they reached the top of the stairs Meracad turned, and Hal noticed that gold flecked the girl's brown irises. The air hung between them, still and heavy.

"I may not win." Desperate to break the silence,

Hal scabbled around for words. “My opponent comes from the Easterners, our rival academy. They are...”

“I have faith in you.” Meracad’s lips flickered upwards into the ghost of a smile. Then without another word, she headed down the steps, her shoes clipping on the wood and then upon the cobbles of the street. Hal leant over the balustrade once more as far as she dared, glimpsing the hem of Meracad’s blue dress as it slipped around the door frame before disappearing.

She drew herself back, turned, and found herself staring into Beric’s sneering face. “I have faith in you,” he jeered. “Well, thank the spirits someone does. Who is she, anyway?”

“Meracad – she’s the daughter of some merchant – Salius Léac.”

“Léac, Léac” Beric repeated the name a couple of times, rolling it across his tongue. He cleared his throat as if to speak and then stopped.

“What?” Hal asked, irritated.

“Nothing.” He looked at her intently. For once, he seemed at a loss for words.

## Chapter Seven

### A Duel

The arena was already full by noon. Duels attracted spectators from across Colvé, with courtiers, senators, merchants and servants often sharing the same benches. Hooting, catcalls and laughter consumed the chamber as the entire city spilled in through the doors, many heading directly for touts who stood around the fringes taking bets. The odds were stacked against Hal. Her opponent, the Easterner, had a fearsome reputation. A tall, muscular duellist with a square-set, implacable face, he began to limber up on the other side of the chamber.

Hal observed the Easterner across the circle with Finn at her side. “Looks strong,” she remarked,

gulping down her nerves and weighing up her own odds.

Finn agreed. “He’ll take a bit of wearing down, this one will. Don’t worry though, girl. You’ll do alright.”

She peered out across the spectators, noticing that Marc had already taken his seat on the very edge of the circle. He waved at her and she winked back. But it was someone else she looked for amongst the crowd. What had Meracad said back there at the academy? *You know my father wouldn’t let me.* Of course Hal had been a fool to imagine she would be here. She would never have been able to slip past Léac: to risk his fury.

Yet Hal continued to scan the restless crowds, pushing against the deep, bitter disappointment that now threatened to overwhelm her. The same faces as always, she noticed, locked into expressions of excitement, of anticipation for the fight to come. Some, no doubt, hoping that blood might be shed — which often happened. A woundless duel was considered a poor show.

Her gaze swept across a small clique of apprentices, already quite drunk, laughing, spitting, back-slapping each other in camaraderie. One of them seemed different — intent, quiet, motionless. She stared at him, taking in the poor rags, a dun-coloured cap pulled down over tawny hair, brown

eyes which were — of course! It was her! She'd come in disguise.

Shock coursed through Hal's veins. Meracad grinned at her, and Hal shook her head in mock reproof. And yet a strange unease ate at her excitement. If Meracad were seen, if she were noticed...Hal imagined an apprentice plucking off the girl's cap as a joke, fawn hair spilling over her shoulders, the crowd sucking in its collective breath. Léac would be called for, what little freedom Meracad had left would be taken from her. In spite of the humid, sweaty atmosphere of the arena, Hal shuddered.

Finn followed her line of gaze. "Who's that?"

"Just an acquaintance."

He frowned. "Focus, Hal."

With a swift nod she removed her jacket and jumped onto the circle, clad in leather trousers and a sleeveless black vest. Similarly dressed, the Easterner clambered onto the platform, his eyes narrowing in contempt. Not all duellists appreciated being pitted against a woman.

The fight began, spectators screaming out encouragement or threats. Unable to contain their excitement, some stood on benches shaking their fists. The two duellists prowled the circle's edge, both searching for a weakness. It was the Easterner who made the first move, aiming for Hal's



unguarded left flank.

She blocked but then stepped back, overwhelmed by his strength as he brought his blade down against her own. They broke apart, the Easterner re-entering the fray with a rain of blows, forcing her to take the weight of man and metal on her forearm. Concentrate, she told herself, looking for a weakness. But what weakness? The Easterner fought with all the wild fury of a beast. She blocked again, but he slid his sword across her blade. With the tip of his rapier poised at her throat, he claimed the first point.

The crowd cheered. Panting for breath, Hal glanced at Finn, noticing the wrinkles of worry which lined his brow. Three points would win a round, and there were still two more rounds to come. Warming to his theme, the Easterner took advantage of her sudden dip in confidence. With an onslaught of blows he gained a second point, his sword scraping across her right arm.

Blood now dribbled down Hal's elbow as she vainly fought to gain a point, dodging and twisting against a barrage of thrusts and swipes, but it was no use. When she raised her sword to fend him off, he struck back with all his strength, forcing her arm down and completing the manoeuvre with his sword aimed at her shoulder. The crowd, most of whom were cheering the Easterner, grew frantic. Those few

who had bet on Hal cursed and shouted.

She dropped her sword and sagged, hands on knees, sweat running into her eyes, dimly aware that Beric and Finn had now joined her on the circle.

“Well, girl, what did you expect?” Beric clamped a hand down on her shoulder, pushing her upright. “Finn warned you not to train so hard, but you wouldn’t listen, would you? Look at you, you’ve barely strength to stand. Your man over there’s running rings around you!”

Hal bit her lip, too tired to even think of arguing with Beric.

Finn was studying the Easterner with an experienced eye. “You know I’ve met this type before,” he said at last. “He’s strong, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean the fight is over. I think Hal may actually have an advantage over him.”

“What’s that?” Steadying her breathing, Hal looked at Finn in hope.

“Well, remember those acrobatics you were told had no place in the circle?” He turned to the old training master. “I hate to argue with you, Beric, but I think they might earn Hal a few points here.”

“I’ve told you before, I won’t see my duellists turned into circus tumblers.”

“Yes, I realise that boss, but your man might well be surprised by such antics. After all, he’s hardly capable of them himself, is he?”

They turned and stared at the well-built Easterner, who scowled back, arms crossed, clearly losing patience.

“Well,” Beric began, his tone grudging, “I suppose she hasn’t got anything to lose by trying. Well, only the remaining thirty percent of her prize money. Go on, then girl. Let’s see what you can do.”

Beric and Finn jumped back down, leaving Hal to face her opponent once more. Maybe Finn was right. It was just conceivable that she could turn the man’s advantage – his sheer force – against him.

The second round began with the Easterner’s advance, but instead of blocking, Hal made a graceful leap to her right. As her opponent turned to follow suit she bounded back across the floor, bringing her sword in light contact with his stomach: her first point.

Surprised at the change in tactics, the Easterner responded with a clumsy swipe of his blade. Hal mustered all her strength in response, somersaulting away before dropping to her knees and thrusting the tip of her rapier into the duellist’s thigh. He grunted in anger and pain.

The spectators swore and screamed in excitement. She sprang to her feet just as he ran at her, enraged. Hal hurled herself down onto the sweat-soaked platform, sliding across it on her knees. The Easterner backed away just before she

crashed into him, but lost his balance and dropped like a felled tree to the floor. Hovering above him, a grin peeling across her face, she traced a line down his vest front with her sword and took the second round.

The Easterner's trainer leapt onto the circle, forcing the big man to his feet with a vicious kick to the ribs. "Get up! What are you doing, letting her dance round you like that?"

Wiping the sweat from his brow, The Easterner shook his head, whirling round to stare in stunned surprise at Hal.

"Well done, girl." Finn was at her side once more, yelling above the din into her ear. "It worked, but you've still got the third round, and you made him as angry as a wild boar. Don't let him use his strength against you."

Beric nodded in gruff appreciation. "Well, I'll not say it would work in every situation, but that wasn't too bad, girl. Now finish it."

Every muscle in Hal's body protested as she turned once again towards the Easterner. He edged towards her, wary now, but with a swift spin she twisted herself round to win the first point, her sword jabbing beneath his outstretched arm. He growled and swung back, leaving her no time to block or dodge, his sword ripping through the leather of her trousers and gashing open her left

thigh. She yelped, blood already soaking through the frayed strands of material and running in a hot, pulsing flow down her leg.

Leaving her no time to think about the pain, he rained down blow after blow, finishing with the tip of his rapier pressed into the bare skin of her throat.

She heard Finn's distant calls of encouragement and Beric's threats, and caught sight of Meracad now standing on a bench, her voice hoarse with shouting, her face strained. The Easterner clicked his tongue, as one might do when summoning a dog. In spite of her exhaustion, anger surged, claiming her entire body. Drawing on her last ounce of energy she span round, dropped low, and with perfect aim scored a clear hit against the back of his hand.

For the first time that afternoon the arena fell silent, the duel now hinging upon one final point. With all possible speed and strength, the Easterner whipped his sword down towards Hal's waist. She side-leaped to the left and saw him follow suit. Edging back again as close as she dared, Hal flicked the tip of her rapier into the palm of his hand. He jerked away in an angry spasm of pain, his weapon spiralling into the air and out of his grasp. She sprang, caught it, and finished with both swords levelled at her opponent's chest. The fight was hers.

For a brief moment even those spectators who had money on the Easterner were stunned. Then

those who had bet on Hal roared and screamed in ecstasy.

Racing from his seat, Marc pushed through the crowd to congratulate her. “Unbelievable! I was certain you were doomed after the first round!”

Her breathing wild and uneven, Hal could do no more than grin as her legs gave way beneath her. He slid an arm around her waist and helped her to the edge of the circle, sitting down beside her. She choked back on a pitcher of water, her mind still swimming with the heady flow of the fight and her victory.

“Listen, Hal.” Marc was yelling something into her ear. She screwed up her face, struggling to concentrate on his words.

“I’m truly sorry about the other night,” he shouted. “About Cara and all of that. Let me make it up to you. Visit me tonight. It’ll just be a few guests — nothing wild.”

She felt her body numb as if the blood itself had ceased to flow. “Marc, not now. Please?”

“As you wish,” he conceded. “You’re welcome, you know. If you change your mind.”

She shook his hand and he threaded out through the crowds.

Satisfied that she was now fit enough to stand, Finn also turned to leave. “That was one in the eye for the old devil, eh?” he whispered, nodding at

Beric.

“I owe you. I would have lost the duel without your suggestion.”

Finn shrugged. “It was your victory, Hal. Enjoy it. I’d better go. My wife’ll be wondering where I got to!”

Pulling on his jacket, he ran up the arena stairs towards the open doors. Hal smiled, pleased not to have disappointed him. She worked her shirt back on over her vest, pushed damp, lank locks of hair from her eyes and gathered up her swords. There was no more to be said or done. It was over. Even Beric might be satisfied for once. And yet something nagged at the fringes of her consciousness. A strange sense of something missed, of somebody lacked. She shook her head, pushing the feeling aside.

Fingers reached down, lightly tapping her shoulder. She froze and then stood again, turning, her mind at sea. Meracad had silently stolen up onto the circle, was watching her from above. Hal stared up at her, her thoughts refusing to translate themselves into spoken words.

“Well,” the girl smiled. “You did it. I said I had faith in you.”

“I was afraid that not even your faith would be enough.” Hal looked away, embarrassed.

“No, you’re good, Hal Thæc. And...I enjoyed watching you fight.”

“I’m honoured.” Did that sound genuine? Or sarcastic?

“Yes, and I wonder if we might meet again.”

Hal bit her lip. Meracad’s face shone with expectation, with the prospect of doors opening: doors which had remained locked her entire life. The expression of hope transformed itself into one of near desperation.

“You should go home, Meracad.”

Meracad’s brow wrinkled in confusion. Her eyes grew wet, her lips trembling. Hal understood that her words were already burrowing deep beneath that fragile exterior, carried along raw, quivering fibres and directly into the girl’s heart.

It was for Meracad’s own good, she told herself: for her protection. Hal had seen too many fine women ruined by the hypocrisy of a scandalised court. She could not allow Meracad to become its next victim.

A few strands of fair hair had come loose from the girl’s cap. Hal longed to push them back into place, to pull Meracad towards her and apologise. She would reassure her that if this had been a different time and place she would have taken her by the hand and led her out into the sunshine, and into a life determined by freedom and love alone. But she knew such a gesture was impossible.

For a few tremulous moments, Meracad stared at



her in shock and disappointment. And then she turned and left without another word. Hal watched her go, her own heart pounding against her ribcage faster than it had done during the duel. A dull voice repeated the same words inside her head. *You had to do it. It was for her sake.*

The silence was broken by irritable coughing. Hal raised her head to observe Beric standing, hands on waist, glaring down at her from the peak of the spectator hall. Why did he always seem to catch her at such moments of weakness? But for some reason she wanted him to berate her, to yell at her, to bring her back to a place she could understand. Grimacing, she dragged herself up to meet him, swinging the bag of blades across her shoulder in readiness to leave.

“So, are you going to increase my prize money for putting on such a good show today?” She was surprised at her own bitterness.

“As you know, Hal Thæc, I’m a man of my word. I said I’ll take seventy percent, and that’s what I’ll take. You broke the rules, you pay the price.”

“Bastard.” It came out in a half-whisper, but she harboured a secret hope that he might have heard.

“Just before you go, a word of advice.” The grizzled old man paused a moment, looking down at her. “I’d bet my life that was Léac’s daughter.”

“That’s none of your business, Beric. Just give me

the winnings.”

“Let me tell you something, Hal,” he continued, ignoring her. “Leave her alone. Don’t go near her.”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

“You shouldn’t have to ask me that question. If you take up with her, you’re a bigger fool than I imagined.”

His words broke the seal on her self-restraint, setting loose all those feelings of shame, disappointment, desire. “You know what, Beric?” she headed for the door. “Keep your damned, filthy money. I don’t want it. Keep it all.”

She strode away, making for the doors, half-blinded by the sunlight as she flung them open and stepped outside.

“You’re headed for trouble, girl!” his words reached her even as she stood in the street. With a yell of frustration she slammed the doors shut behind her and trudged off home.

## Chapter Eight

### Maids and Mistresses

The market was always busiest at this hour, filled with the shouts and laughter of stall tenders, the air rich with the heady scents of roasting meat, ale and sweat as people jostled together fighting over bargains, sweltering beneath the relentless glare of the midday sun. Meracad had thrown on the pale, sleeveless blue dress she always wore during the summer when she was in no need of fine clothes or jewellery: those visible signs of wealth which, her father claimed, it was her duty to display.

“You’re not to disgrace me in public wearing such rags,” he’d fumed more than once, catching her returning from the market in an old frock more suited to a servant than the child of a wealthy

merchant. She took pleasure in disobeying him. She knew it was a hollow victory, but somehow such small acts of self-will made her everyday life more bearable.

Agata was busy examining some materials she thought might serve to upholster the furnishings of Meracad's rooms. Meracad had always considered herself blessed with a maid who had an eye for design and colour. Rich young women, she understood, were expected to take an interest in the running and furnishing of their family home in preparation for their future roles as wives and mothers. But when Agata swooned over velvet drapes and satin bed sheets or the latest fashions for veils and fans, Meracad yawned with boredom.

"You're out of sorts today, Miss?" Agata sounded worried.

"I'm fine, Agata," Meracad lied. Her heart felt as if it were on the very brink of exploding. Nothing had interested her any more since the duel. The restrictions of her daily life now weighed upon her more than ever, while those few pleasures which she had once enjoyed — the books she bought from the market, her dancing lessons, the hours spent with her private tutor — all these now seemed so banal, pointless, leading her towards a future which she did not want.

For a few brief moments, she had held in her

hands the prospect of a different future — a life shared with another human being whose very presence ignited her deepest emotions. And suddenly all that had gone, and she had been left with the dry remnants of an existence drained of passion or adventure.

Agata suddenly grabbed her arm. “Here, Miss, isn’t that the duellist?”

Meracad froze. In spite of the day’s heat, a chill shiver crawled up her spine. “Where?” She sounded hoarse, she realised: the word barely a whisper.

“Over there, looking at those swords. Georgie took me to watch her duel. Never been to the arena before. Was on the edge of my seat the whole time.”

Meracad edged out of sight behind some heavy velvet drapes on a nearby stall. Peeping around them, she observed Hal who was holding a blade to the light, discussing its merits with the stall holder. Dressed in a deer hide jacket thrown over a plain dark vest and leather trousers, she might have been mistaken for a servant or trader. Clearly, like Meracad, she aimed to keep herself well-hidden in a crowd.

“Georgie?” Meracad whispered to Agata.

“That groom from Lord Ceadda’s service,” Agata replied, evidently surprised that her mistress had chosen such a moment to busy herself with soft furnishings. Meracad decided against any further

comments on the subject of Georgie. Agata had a tendency to court vain young men who always left her weeping and lonely. But she resented being reminded of that fact.

“Let’s speak to her!” Agata urged, strangely enthused at the idea of starting a conversation with Hal. Meracad backed away in horror.

“Certainly not! My father would hear of it.!”

Agata looked at her slyly. “Strange, Miss M., because a few days ago, you were so full of talk about her, all I could hear was Hal this and Hal that. And I could’ve sworn you’d have given your right arm to speak to her.”

Meracad threw Agata a warning glance. “That was then, Agata, and this is now. And I’ve absolutely no desire to talk to her whatsoever.”

Agata raised her eyebrows, a malicious streak entering her eyes. “Maybe you don’t, Miss. But I do.”

Before Meracad could hold her back, Agata was marching straight up to Hal.

Meracad ground her teeth and concealed herself further behind the drapes. She knew she ought to leave. If Hal discovered her lurking behind a stall the humiliation would be unbearable. And yet for some reason she remained rooted to the spot, unable to turn away.

“Hal Thæc?” Agata tapped Hal on the shoulder. The duellist span round, eyes widening in surprise.

Meracad groaned inwardly.

“Yes, that’s right. And you are?”

“Name’s Agata. I saw you duel a few days’ past.”

“Really?” Hal offered an indulgent smile, still fingering the sword’s blade.

“Yes. Really. My man Georgie wanted to go. And I wanted to ask you something, Miss.”

“Ask away.”

“Well, why do you do it?”

Hal put down the sword and stuffed her hands into her pockets. The indulgent smile became a lopsided grin. “Well, why wouldn’t I do it?”

Agata shook her head, clearly suspecting Hal to be a half-wit. “I mean, you’ll never find a husband like that. I believe it’s the men who prefer to wield the sword. Especially in the bedroom, if you know what I mean.” She giggled and nudged Hal on the arm. Cringing in embarrassment, Meracad edged further behind the curtain, her cheeks breaking into a blush. Hal’s eyes indicated a mirth she was attempting to suppress.

“Well, Agata, I don’t particularly care for a husband.”

Agata’s mouth rounded in shock. Meracad knew from experience that her maid’s entire existence revolved around finding herself a good man; a man who’d offer her security, comfort, and nights of unremitting pleasure.

“But you must! In Lady de Valius’ book on courting and marriage, she writes that we are to be wary of all those who lack a husband or wife. She says they carry with them the spirit of misfortune and shattered dreams.”

Meracad’s face felt hot. Her father had given her that book, hoping it would instruct her in the ways of wifely duty. But she had passed it on to Agata, who read it in a matter of days and was always keen to quote passages from it at her mistress.

Hal seemed to tire of the conversation, for she picked up the sword once again, closing one eye and examining its edge. “Would that be the same Lady de Valius whose husband is suing for divorce after he caught her in bed with a palace guard?”

Agata’s face crumbled. “He never!”

Hal leaned towards her, feigning the air of a court gossip. “He did!”

“Well I’ll be damned! With a guard, you say? Still, they do say a change is as good as a rest, eh?” She gave Hal another salacious little nudge. “Anyway, I can’t stand here gossiping all day. My mistress will be wondering where I am.”

“And who would your mistress be?”

Meracad held her breath. The heat, the stench of the market, and now this. Her head swam, her stomach clenching back nausea.

“Meracad Léac.”



Agata turned to go. Hal caught her arm. “Meracad Léac?” She scanned the market place keenly. “Is she here?”

Agata extricated herself from Hal’s grasp. “She’s somewhere abouts, Miss. But she’s shy of meeting strangers and she makes amusement for herself by slipping away when I’m not watching.”

Strips of cloth wafted across Meracad’s face, obscuring her view. She pushed them aside, noticing that Hal’s eyes had grown serious, her face shaded with disappointment. For some reason, Meracad’s heart gave an unexpected leap.

“She’s not a stranger. I met her once or twice,” Hal murmured, all traces of good humour now lost.

“Did you? She never said. I must ask her. Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Hal seized her elbow again. This time Agata seemed impatient to be gone.

“What?” She snatched her arm away in irritation.

“I think, perhaps, something I said may have given her cause for offence. Perhaps you could tell her I’m sorry.”

Meracad buried her face in the soft, comforting mass of material. She did not even hear Agata’s reply. When she had found the strength to sneak another glance at the market stall she noticed that Hal had gone, leaving the sword unpurchased. Agata bustled back towards her. Meracad straightened

herself up, smoothed down her hair, took some deep breaths and battled her racing heart.

“I suppose you heard all of that, Miss,” Agata gasped, now breathless. “What did she mean?”

Meracad wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “Oh, nothing,” she lied. “She has a habit of speaking out of turn, that’s all.”

Agata raised an unconvinced eyebrow.

“Come on, I’ve had enough of this place.” Meracad slid an arm around Agata’s waist and led her back through the stalls. And in her mind’s eye, and at her nerves’ ends, it was Hal that she guided through the busy throngs of traders and shoppers.

## Chapter Nine

### Swimming

These early morning trips to the public baths had become something of a personal ritual for Meracad. She threaded her way along half-awakened streets, anticipating with a thrill of pleasure the prospect of submerging herself beneath the chill water, the splash of her own limbs as she swam across its surface, and above all the absence of other human beings.

At such an hour the place was often empty, and Agata would never accompany her inside, preferring instead to catch up on some gossip at the bakery around the corner. And so she often had the place to herself, enjoying a few precious solitary moments before returning to the beautiful, jewel-encrusted

cage which was her father's house.

She watched Agata disappear around the corner and then pushed back the heavy, oak-panelled door leading to the women's pools. Once inside, the silence seemed dense, thick — almost solid. The shouts and chatter of the street were gone, and she stood, listening to the slow, inconstant drip of water.

Turning to her left, Meracad continued down a short corridor into the main chamber, and was on the verge of removing her dress when she noticed that she was not alone. Clothes had been folded in a neat pile at the water's edge, and she looked down to see a figure gliding along beneath the surface. She drew away as the swimmer kicked out with arms and legs, propelling her way upwards before rising to stand at chest height in the water, gasping for air and rubbing her eyes.

Meracad stared for a few moments, unsure if she should run, or make a pointed display of bathing in proud silence. Finally, her resolve crumbling, she turned around and headed back to the doors, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes.

"Meracad!" Hal's voice echoed around the still, stone chamber. Meracad halted, but she did not turn round.

"Just let me explain."

She continued to hesitate, the open corridor beckoning her back to her old life.

“Please, Meracad.”

Biting her lip, she hugged her arms around her own waist, common sense screaming at her to leave. And it was almost in a trance that she turned round towards Hal, who was leaning against the edge of the pool with her head resting on the backs of her hands.

“I don’t think you need to explain, Hal. You made your position very clear.” Her voice quavered and shook.

“I was only thinking of you. I was trying to protect you.” Hal gazed up at her then. Meracad could not fail to notice the intense blue of her eyes, the way in which Hal seemed to look inside her, not at her. She turned away, embarrassed.

“I don’t need protecting, Hal! I’ve been protected all my life. It’s freedom I crave. And if that freedom is possible for you, why not for me as well?”

“Do you not believe that such freedom may come at a price?”

Meracad was quiet for a moment, attempting to read in Hal’s face the experiences which could have prompted such a confession. “I’m prepared to pay any price for it, Hal, believe me. I’m not afraid,” she said at last.

“You should be.”

Meracad made no reply, and the place was plunged into silence once again, saving the erratic drips of water as it condensed on the ceiling above

them and fell, hitting the surface of the pool. It trickled, she noticed, down Hal's back and from her arms and hair. Hal's words after the duel repeated over and over in her mind: *Go home, Meracad*. She flinched, the wound still open, raw and bleeding.

"What are you doing here? I expected to be alone." Her own voice mocked her as it echoed around the walls: "Alone, alone, alone."

Hal released her grip on the pool's edge, swimming away on her back. "These are public baths, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, they are, but..."

"But what?" The duellist smiled that lop-sided grin she had displayed to Agata in the market place and then dived beneath the surface, rising suddenly again at Meracad's feet. She gasped in surprise and took a step backwards.

"Did you follow me here?" she asked, immediately regretting the question. *Fool!* Opening herself up to further humiliation — the idea that Hal would have followed her: that Hal might genuinely have wanted to meet her here. This was just a coincidence, surely.

"Yes, I did."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said yes, I followed you here. That is, I noticed you come in here once or twice when I was on my way to the academy."

Meracad opened her lips and then closed them again a few times. Somehow her mouth was full of words and yet she found she could not express them. She knew then that something was about to give, something must change. She had heard that when people began to drown, their entire lives were said to pass before their eyes. Now the days and years flew past her like pages from a book she might have skimmed through, and she saw nothing but a monotonous tale of her father's brute power and her own submission to it. But here, before her now, it seemed as if Hal might be stretching out her hands and inviting her to step beyond all of that into a world of passion and love and freedom.

"Aren't you going to bathe?" Hal cocked her head on one side and stared up in expectation. Meracad dipped a hand in the water.

"No, I don't think so. It's freezing," she lied.

"It's not so bad once you're in."

Meracad raised her dress slightly and sat down, lowering her feet and ankles just below the surface. "That's as far as I'm going."

"Suit yourself." Hal ducked her head beneath the water to hide her expression. When she rose to the surface again, her eyes were serious, questioning. "I know I hurt you, Meracad. And I'm sorry for it. More than you can imagine. But your father, I've heard, is a powerful man. I could cause you a lot of

problems.”

Her hand moved, hesitantly, towards Meracad’s. Hal’s skin felt cool, her fingers slim and wiry as they weaved between her own. Thrilled and terrified, Meracad drew her own hand away. “A life in which I’m not free to make my own decisions is no life at all. That much I’ve learnt from you, Hal. And if I were to confess how I feel at this moment, I would run out of words.”

Hal’s face softened. She moved closer towards Meracad, placed her hands around the back of the girl’s calves, and leaning forward, kissed her knees. The hem of Meracad’s dress trailed below the surface, absorbing water, soaking her through the material, but she did not care.

Hal looked up at her again. “You should also know that I have never done what I do for anyone else’s sake. I live as I live to please myself. I’ve never had any intention of proving something to other people.”

“Well, maybe it’s time you tried.”

Hal began to reply, but then seemed to think better of it. Instead, sinking beneath the water level once more, she gently kissed Meracad’s foot. Then she rose, and as she did so, Meracad leant down and brought her hands together behind Hal’s head. They drew closer until their foreheads were touching.

“My father is leaving tomorrow on business. He’ll



be gone for a month, to the North. It is a gift, Hal. Let us take it.”

In answer, Hal raised her lips to Meracad’s. They kissed, the duellist’s wet hands saturating the thin cotton of her dress as rivulets of water ran down her naked back. Finally, they broke away, staring at each other as if a miracle had occurred.

“When does your father leave?” Hal asked finally, her voice shaking.

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“If you may leave his house for some time, you know where to find me.”

“So you’ve changed your mind about me?” Meracad asked, smiling at last.

“I’ve never changed my mind about you,” she replied.

Meracad rose, dimly aware that the hem of her dress now sagged as she walked, its hem soaked. Her eyes seemed wet too, although she could not tell why that should be. For her heart seemed full of fire, not water. The shape and form of the chamber blurred and disappeared behind the wall of her own tears.

She turned back, but Hal had sunk beneath the surface again, like some strange, mythic character from a fable of the sea. Clutching at the sides of the corridor for support, Meracad pushed herself back outside onto the street, and into the sunlight.

# Chapter Ten

## Liaisons

“Your carriage is ready, Sir.” Master Léac’s boy entered his office.

“I thought I told you to knock first, fool.” Travel preparations always irritated Léac. How much easier business would be if it were a mere question of negotiating, of buying and selling — the game itself. But he knew that such journeys were a part of the game, and at this particular stage he was about to make his sharpest play so far.

“Sorry, Sir.” The boy’s face flashed with fear.

“You will be.”

Léac’s thoughts returned to his negotiations with Bruno Nérac, Lord of Dal Reniac. Success would ensure exclusive rights to imports travelling south: a

licence to act as agent between the North and Colvé. Now was the time to play that extra card, the one he had held back, waiting for the perfect moment — Meracad. A marriage would confirm his commitment, and it would complicate Nérac's future attempts to renege on the agreement.

Besides, his Lordship was first grade aristocracy — the as yet unmarried son of the House of Nérac, a lineage that could be traced back for centuries. Of course the aristocracy were penniless snobs who flaunted their heritage because they had nothing else left. But such an alliance would bring all the privileges of high station. Who now would dare to laugh at Léac — the arriviste, the apprentice made good?

Anyway, he reasoned, it was time to play that card. The older she was, the less marketable she became. Even worse, he thought with bitterness, was the prospect that she might follow in her mother's footsteps. She had grown restless over the past few years, and more ready to question him.

In recent months, she had taken to visiting the city alone — only a few trips to the market, it was true, but worrying nevertheless. She had visited the baths without his permission that very morning. If she should go her mother's way, she would be worse than useless to him.

A memory rose, unbidden. Screaming — a body

tumbling down stairs, breaking as she hit the lower rungs. The light fading from her eyes as she lay in his arms dying, craving forgiveness.

Cursing, he willed the vision away. No, he decided, his thoughts scrabbling around business once again. The sooner this deal was finalised, the better. His major asset was becoming a liability.

The boy scurried downstairs, Léac slowly following. Meracad was waiting for him in the courtyard, arms crossed and head held high, a strange confidence about her, the source of which she would never reveal to him. Not that he cared.

“Behave,” he ordered sternly.

“I always do,” she countered.

The carriage pulled into the courtyard, and Léac climbed in. “I’ll know if you don’t,” he said, ignoring her. He banged on the carriage roof. “Ride on.”

Grimacing, the merchant settled down against the plush upholstery of the carriage. It would be a long ride north, he realised. But when he came back, he would wipe that strange smile off her face.

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“Take it, girl, go on.”

Beric shoved a bag of coins into Hal’s hands. “I may be mean, but I’m not a thief. Go on, take it, it’s yours – thirty percent of the last duel.”

She thrust the money away and turned her back on him. "If you don't mind, Beric, I need to train."

"I won't beg you, girl." His voice grew sharp. "But if you don't take this you'll be living off the Senator's charity. Think how embarrassing that will be."

Sometimes, Beric had a knack of tugging at exactly the right strings. Sighing, she dropped her sword back into the rack and stared at the bag which he swung between his fingers and thumb like a pendulum. "Alright!" She swiped it off him. "Anything to avoid sponging off Marc. But that doesn't mean you were right."

"We'll see about that," he muttered.

She trained all morning until Marc himself appeared at noon.

"My dear girl, you never stop, do you?" He lounged against a wall, arms crossed, and observed her as she continued to lunge and parry in silence.

"Can I help you, Marc?"

"Well, I thought we might celebrate your recent duel – a few drinks? I mean the sprits know you could probably do with it."

Her mind drifted to the public baths. She thought of Meracad's wet dress, the hesitance of her kiss, its warmth and passion. "Sorry, Marc. Not tonight."

Marc's eyes rounded in surprise. "Don't tell me you have a life that extends beyond the academy!"

"I'm serious."

He shrugged. "Have it your way."

"I usually do."

He left, shaking his head.

Hal spent the day in training, her duelling fuelled by a vigour and energy which left even Finn breathless. He suggested she practise with a few of the novices which while he looked on, encouraging, scolding or applauding.

Light had begun to fade from the hall when one of the boys ran in yelling, "visitor for you, Hal. Young fella. Says you'll know what it's about."

"Tell him I'll be with him shortly," she replied, dropping her sword into the rack. Visibly relieved, Finn wished her a good evening. Hal headed for a wash stand at the far end of the hall, splashed some cold water on her face and then hurried downstairs.

A few stray wisps of fair hair escaped from the brown cap which Meracad wore low on her forehead, shading her eyes. Her shirt was too big for her, her linen trousers faded and creased. If Hal had not known better, she would have taken the merchant's daughter for a down at heel servant.

Hal fought back a deep urge to kiss her once more – she had replayed their poolside embrace time and again in her mind – but she knew where such recklessness would lead. "You convinced our novice, anyway," she smiled.

"I nearly fooled myself. Shall we go?"

As they strolled away down the street, Hal turned round, catching sight of a figure watching them from one of the windows of the academy. She grimaced and then turned back. If Beric hoped to stop her now, he was very much mistaken.

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The girl was still asleep, long tresses of blonde hair wound over pale skin, her mouth open in surrender, her breathing still heavy with the exertions of love making.

“Get up.” Cara stared down at her, wrapping a gown around her own naked body.

“What?” The maid stirred, stretched, blue eyes slowly revealed beneath sleep-heavy lids.

“I said get up.” Cara picked up a dress, dropping it on the bed. “I’ve a visitor coming.”

“But I could stay. I could wait on you and your guest...” the girl rose, tucking loose strands of hair behind her ears, her neck and breasts nipped red with love bites.

“I changed my mind.” A few coins trickled from Cara’s outstretched palm onto the bed. “If you value your work here, you’ll say nothing of this.”

“But...Cara...” the maid’s lips trembled, tears now lining the rims of her eyes, ready to spill.

“How dare you speak my name!” Reaching

forward, Cara seized the girl by the neck, dragging her across the bed. “I am Lady Cara Thæc.” Her lips thinned, her nostrils flaring as she spoke. “You’re a kitchen slut. And a stupid one at that.” With a twist of her arm, she had hurled the girl down amongst the swathes of sheets and blankets. “Now get dressed and get out. You may leave by the back door.”

Deaf to the girl’s whimpers she stalked out, slamming the door behind her, an emotion not unlike triumph rising within. They were all the same, these girls – all so naïve and foolish. Only one of them had ever had the gall to blackmail her. She doubted this one had it in her. And if she did...well, no one ever really wailed over a missing scullery maid.

Throwing open the windows, Cara stepped out onto the balcony of her court apartments, greeted by the scents of honeysuckle and lavender wafting up from the gardens below. A faint rustling, and then a click of the bedroom door behind her told her the girl had gone.

Cara stretched, sighed, enjoyed the silence which now resettled upon her chambers. They came and they went, these young men and women, all so flattered at having caught the eye of an aristocrat, all so vain and stupid. And they all left with that same expression of confusion. It were as if they thought a



single night of lovemaking would raise them above the ranks: would set them upon an easy path to wealth and privilege. More fool them.

Three sharp raps on the door. Cara turned, enveloping herself within the gown before dropping onto a silk-upholstered chaise-longue. “Enter!”

The hinges creaked and then a slight, waifish young woman entered, a well-tailored dress clinging to her slim frame, her hair caught beneath a fashionable gauze veil which she raised to reveal dark, experienced eyes, and a full, sensuous mouth.

“I heard you requested my services, Ma’am.”

“Indeed I did.” Cara did not stand. Instead, she poured wine into two glasses which stood, prepared on the pedestal table at her side. The young woman seemed to glide across the room before daintily folding herself into an armchair.

“You’re a pretty girl.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“I’ve heard you’re quite the little spy.” Cara passed a glass to the girl who took it, her lips pursed, her eyes unreadable.

“I’ve worked for a senator, and for a merchant who....”

“That’s alright. I know exactly what you’ve done. The question is, will you work for me?”

The girl reclined in the chair, boldness entering her manner. “That would depend upon whether your

ladyship can afford me.”

“Fifty shillings now, fifty when you deliver the information I require.”

The girl nodded, her face still frozen and unchanging. “As I would expect. Of course it would also depend upon the nature of the work.”

Cara eyed her speculatively. “I simply wish you to follow the duellist known as Halanya or Hal.”

“Very well.”

If the girl had heard the court gossip concerning Hal’s parentage, she did not show it.

“I want you to watch her, and report back to me – I want to know where she goes, and more importantly, who she spends her time with.” She handed the spy a pouch of coins. “I expect to see you in a few days.”

“Very good, Ma’am.” Draining her glass, the girl rose and left.

Cara lay back on the chaise-longue, her thoughts now feverish. This young spy’s reputation went before her. She had informed on senators, businessmen, aristocrats...and Cara was certain that Hal must have her secrets. Enough, at least, to see the duellist exiled, or facing a lengthy prison sentence.

Yet until now, Cara had only dug up valueless tales of trysts with maids and soldiers. And to accuse Hal of immoral behaviour was to invite accusations

of hypocrisy. After all, Cara could hardly represent herself to the court as a paragon of virtue.

Hissing, she plucked her wine glass by the stem and swallowed down the contents, hurling the glass into the empty fireplace. It shattered against the brickwork, shards descending upon cold lumps of coal and burnt wood. It was the duellist who had, after so many years of silence, publically humiliated Cara with her snide remark about “abhorrent and undignified behaviour.” And Cara would never, ever bear public insult from anyone — especially not from that walking disgrace.

If the bitch had only known what she must endure. How on earth could she forgive the girl when her mere existence was a living stain on her reputation? Hal must be removed, she told herself, at all odds. And in removing Hal, she concluded, she would also complete her revenge over the girl’s father.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Emperor

“How did you get out?” Hal focussed on the road, resisting the temptation to look at Meracad as they meandered along the city’s streets.

“My father left this morning and Agata was planning to spend an evening with Georgie — if he hasn’t already broken her heart, of course.”

Smiling, Hal put out an arm to guide Meracad around a street cart that blocked their way. Her palm made brief contact with the graceful arch of the girl’s lower back. She quickly drew away, knowing better than to attract the prying gaze of passers-by.

“I feigned a head-ache and locked my door from the inside. They won’t try to disturb me — they’re all as relieved as I am that father is away.”

“And then what did you do? Climb out of the window?” Hal laughed.

Meracad threw her a long, side-ways glance, one eyebrow raised.

“You did?” Hal asked, unnerved.

“I have my ways.” Meracad unfurled a secretive smile. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Have you heard of an inn called ‘*The Emperor*?’”

“No.”

“Not surprising really. It’s certainly not the kind of place your father would want you seen in, so if you’re worried, we can turn back now.”

“I’m not worried.” Meracad’s smile grew taut. “Maybe *you* are?”

Hal thought better of replying. They headed further from the heart of the city with its lean sandstone facades and paved streets. The workshops and slums they now passed appeared half-neglected and slum like, leading onto the dark, brooding alleys, gambling dens and brothels of Riverside. Meracad’s eyes grew anxious, her pose tense, her face strained. She kept up the stream of conversation, Hal assumed, to hide her nerves.

“Why do people call you Thæc?”

“Well, that’s my name, isn’t it? I have no other.”

“But I heard that Cara Thæc claims you’re not her daughter. So why do you still use her family’s name?”

Hal balked at being drawn on the subject. She hated speaking of her parentage with anyone, but Meracad would only ask again in the future. “Cara was not the only person who made my life a misery at court. The whole place is a cesspit. Courtiers will turn against anyone they deem an outsider. My only friends there were the imperial guards. They taught me how to duel, and when they realised I had talent, they told Beric. As soon as he had seen me fight, he offered me a place in his academy. But the other cadets were none too happy about having a girl in their midst – they made my life difficult too.” She shuddered, the memory of taunts, of blows and insults still fresh and vivid. It had taken her own skill, years of practice, victory after victory on the duelling circle to prove them wrong.

“But you haven’t answered my question. Surely keeping Cara’s name just made things worst!”

“I didn’t give it to myself!” Hal drew up in the street, the past now too raw and too painful to bear. “The novices started naming me after Cara. They thought it would frustrate me or make me cry. Whatever they expected, it didn’t work. I just ignored them. I had to! But the name stuck.” Her smile was bitter. “I don’t have any other family name. I have no idea who my father was. And Hal the ward of the imperial court is too much of a mouthful. Anyway it makes Cara furious when

people call me Thæc.”

“So, it’s true that you and Cara don’t hold each other in regard?”

Meracad had pushed the matter too far. Frowning, Hal turned to her. “That’s more than I can say.”

They walked on in uncomfortable silence until Meracad asked: “So why are we heading for a tavern in the wildest district of Colvé?”

“You’ll see.”

Turning a corner, they approached the river bank. A line of disreputable looking houses lined the docks. Creaking on rusty chains, a tavern sign hung outside one of them, a poor caricature of the Emperor pasted across its decrepit boards. A rickety old balcony sagged above the sign, supporting many of *The Emperor’s* patrons who danced, talked, drank, or in some cases attempted to do all three.

Hal pushed against a heavy, studded door, entering the tavern to the roar of voices and the overpowering stench of stale ale and smoke. Revellers squeezed against walls or lined the long, low benches, sloshing froth-coated tankards of beer onto the floor. A long bar ran the length of one wall, worked by a few girls who ran its length in a frantic bid to keep up with the demands for drinks.

“Hey!” Hal yelled out, almost knocked off her feet as a short, wiry-framed young woman barged into

her.

“Mind where you’re going, won’t you?” The girl shouldered up to the duellist, all tightly cropped blonde hair and grimaces.

“Kris?” Hal stared at the girl, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Hal?” The girl’s frown resolved into a smile and she flung her arms around Hal’s shoulders. “It’s been ages! Where’ve you been? Too busy to visit us I see!” She threw a wry glance at Meracad.

“Some of us have to work for our living,” Hal laughed, extricating herself from the girl’s embrace.

Kris gave a shrug. “It ain’t all easy for us either, you know. Anyway, follow me. Jools is here too, and Orla.”

She led them to a table in a far corner of the room and introduced Meracad to a stocky girl with a swarthy complexion who was busy draining the dregs of a tankard. “This here is Jools.”

Jools nodded politely to Meracad and then turned to Hal. “Where the hell have you been?” she asked, breaking into a broad grin. “Thought you’d deserted us.”

“Oh you know Hal — far too busy to spend time with the likes of us.” Kris winked at Hal. “This is Orla,” she continued, turning to Meracad again,

Orla sat at the opposite end of the table, her long brown hair braided into a series of thin plaits,



leather jacket and trousers wrapped around a powerful set of limbs. She raised her pipe towards Hal, who responded with a curt nod. Hoping that Meracad had not noticed the coldness of their exchange, Hal gestured to an empty chair before sinking down beside the merchant's daughter. Kris hurried off to buy beer.

“So,” Orla turned to Hal, one eyebrow raised. “Still doing your dancing routine?”

“Do you dance, Hal?” Meracad asked, her voice raised in surprise. Orla and Jools both laughed out loud, and she turned to Hal, her eyes registering confusion.

“Aye,” Orla went on, a sardonic edge to her voice. “She dances, and prances, with those strips of metal she calls swords.”

Hal shook her head, tensing in irritation. “Orla's a professional soldier in the Emperor's army,” she explained to Meracad. “Soldiers have a tendency to believe that duellists are mere acrobats — or dancers.”

“Well it is true that Orla floored you in a hand to hand fight,” Jools cut in.

“Aye, I expect you don't care to remember that, do you Hal?” Orla smirked. “The entire inn bet on Hal going down after two rounds. She was out cold after the first.”

Her pride well and truly pricked, Hal slammed a

palm down on the table. “You fight dirty, Orla!”

“Ladies, ladies!” Kris was struggling back, pushing her way through the crowd with four filled tankards. “Give me an 'and, would you?” They took the drinks off her.

“Actually you need to be a bit careful at the moment Hal,” Jools said, her voice low.

“Why?” Hal asked, gulping back a mouthful of the beer in an attempt to calm down.

“Well, one of your mother’s spies was in 'ere earlier, asking after you.”

Tiny claws seemed to scratch at Hal’s stomach. She felt ill. “How could you tell?”

“Oh you know, pretty girl, young. Came over to ask a few questions – if we knew you, if you ever came in here. That kind of thing. Course we denied everything, didn’t we, ladies?” The other women nodded in agreement. Meracad appeared shocked. “Your mother sends spies after you?”

Hal opened her mouth to speak, but Orla cut in. “Yeah, the old bitch thinks she’ll find something on Hal which will fix her for good. Hasn’t worked so far, mind.”

The air seemed to thicken with tension. Hal busied herself with her beer, hoping it potent enough to deaden her fears. No doubt Cara was doubling her efforts after their confrontation at the senate’s reception.

“Saw you the other day Hal, in that fight with the Easterner,” Jools said after a while. “Made quite a lot of money.”

“Really?” Hal placed down her tankard and stretched her arms above her head, attempting to shake off her worries. “Well at least someone placed their bets on my side.”

“Nah, didn’t win it on you. Lot of rich nobbs watch the duels. It’s very, 'ow do you call it? Lucrative.”

Hal laughed. “Jools and Kris are thieves,” she explained to Meracad. “So hold onto your purse.”

Kris threw her a pained expression. “Please, Hal, thieves – it sounds so common – we prefer the term liberators, don’t we, Jools?”

“Exactly. They’re weighed down with their money, the poor dears. We’re just helping them take the strain off a little.”

To Hal’s relief, Meracad laughed. If the merchant’s daughter had been uneasy about her introduction to the Colvé underworld, she no longer showed it. Her cheeks had grown rosy from the alcohol, her eyes shone with excitement. Hal grinned at her and Meracad threw back an easy smile.

“Listen, Hal, I need to talk to you.”

Hal swivelled around to face Orla. “You need to?”

“I must. Outside.”

Orla was clenching the handle of her tankard so hard her knuckles had turned white. With a pang of

remorse, Hal nodded, resenting the ironic bow Orla paid Meracad as she rose. She put a hand to Meracad's arm. "I'll be right back," she whispered.

Orla wound her way through the swaying, drink-sodden crowds and then Hal stood and followed in the soldier's wake with a heavy heart. She watched as Orla mounted the precarious spiral staircase which fed up from the floor onto the balcony above, her boots disappearing through a trapdoor above their heads. With ever greater reluctance, Hal dragged herself up the steps to find Orla already leaning against the railing, puffing contemplatively on her pipe. The air was fresher up here — sharp and brisk, after the sweaty, stagnant atmosphere of the inn below. Hal leaned over the balustrades and stared down at the cold, dark water. Behind them, the noise and bustle of *The Emperor* seemed a long way off.

"So," Orla raised her voice above the din of drunken conversation. "Do you like this girl?"

Turning round, Hal rested her back and elbows on the railings. "Maybe. I don't know. Listen, Orla, I'm sorry."

"You should be."

Hal experienced a sudden stab of guilt. She had not expected Orla to be at *The Emperor*. The soldier was away so often these days, training with her battalion. It had never occurred to her that she

might be back in Colvé. The pungent scent of tobacco smoke drifted into the air around them. Finally, Orla said: “I suppose it doesn’t matter now. It wouldn’t have worked anyway. We get sent places. You never know where, or for how long.”

“I know you were angry with me for spending so much time at the academy when you were back in town on leave.”

“Angry? I was furious. And they think that fight we had was a joke.” Her laugh was harsh, contemptuous. She drew in another mouthful of pipe smoke.

“I realised it was no joke as soon as we started.” Hal rubbed her hand over her rib cage as if still feeling the blows.

“I suppose I was guilty too,” Orla admitted. “I probably wanted to change you. Or to protect you.”

“From what?”

“I don’t know. From yourself, maybe. Listen, Hal, she seems like a fine girl but how do you know you can trust her? She might be one of your mother’s spies.”

“I doubt it,” Hal returned. “If she is, she’s risking more than I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her father’s a rich merchant. He wants to marry her off as part of a business deal. And if anyone finds out she’s with me, she’ll be...”

“Spoiled goods.” Orla spat into the river in distaste. “In that case, I’d say you really do need protection. But I’m afraid, dear Hal” she looked her former lover in the eye at last, “I can’t help you there. My battalion’s heading south for training soon.”

Hal made no reply. She shivered in spite of the evening’s warmth. “I’ve never asked for your protection Orla,” she said quietly.

Orla gripped the balcony rail tightly. Her cheeks paled, and she stared out across the river to the lights of bars and houses on the opposite bank, her expression unreadable.

“No. You never have,” she said at last. “More’s the pity.”

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Meracad was giddy with drink. At least, she told herself it was the alcohol. But her entire body seemed to resonate, to sing like the plucked string of a harp. Could one tankard of ale do that to a person? Or was it the thrill of these dangerous, unfamiliar surroundings, the excitement of Hal’s company, the experience of a freedom she had never previously imagined? And as Hal pursued Orla through the crowds of revellers, another emotion worked its way into the heady mix. It were as if she had opened a

book only to realise that the first few pages were missing. A nagging unease left her feeling alone and vulnerable.

“What’s the problem?” she asked Kris.

The blonde girl winked at Jools before turning to Meracad. “Dunno. Maybe Hal’s giving her a betting tip. Anyway, you’re a mysterious one, ain’t you? We haven’t seen you before, have we Jools? How long you known Hal, then?”

“Not long. I just saw her duel once.” Meracad was aware of the blush sprouting up her neck and face. She bit her lip and studied the inside of her tankard.

“Oh, I see. What kind of work are you in then?”

“I’m in business,” she muttered. A half-truth or a half-lie?

“Business, eh?”

Meracad willed the interrogation to stop. There was a pause, and then with a bold grin, Kris asked: “You like Hal, do you?”

Her stomach gave a queasy flip. How to reply to such a question? She was not sure she knew the answer herself. “I think that’s between me and her, isn’t it?”

“Course it is.” Kris busied herself with her ale again, apparently not offended.

Subdued, Meracad stared gloomily into her tankard, swilling the dregs of her drink around its base. She had just passed over the chance to address

her feelings, to give them voice and in doing so to understand them. She looked up at the two thieves who now sat, arms draped around each other's shoulders, their heads pressed together, meeting at the temples.

"The truth is..." she trailed off, embarrassed.

Jools raised an eyebrow. "What is the truth?"

"The truth is, I don't quite know how I feel. It's the first time I ever..."

"The first time you thought that you couldn't be without a partic'lar person?"

She flinched under Jools's piercing gaze, managing a mere nod in response.

"The first time you ever wanted to kiss a girl like this?" Wrapping her arms around Kris, Jools settled her lips upon the other woman's mouth. Meracad watched, her heart racing. Yes, that was exactly what she wanted to do.

Kris disentangled herself from Jools' embrace, smiled and turned to Meracad. "Well, I reckon you've got a hard task ahead of you in that case. She takes a lot of looking after, does Hal. She might not admit it, but she needs it. Who knows, maybe you're just the girl to give her that?"



## Chapter Twelve

### Dawn

The streets were now silent, save for the faint licking of the river against its banks. Hal closed her eyes, inhaling the cooler, fresher airs of the night, her shirt still clinging to her arms, damp with sweat. The heat inside *The Emperor* had been intolerable.

She stole a glance at Meracad whose long, fawn-toned hair now hung free of her cap. The girl's cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone with a brightness Hal had never witnessed before. The evening had grown merrier as soon as Orla left the inn and Meracad had chatted, laughed and joked with the thieves as if they were old friends. With the heady, drink-fuelled atmosphere of *The Emperor* behind them, however, the conversation dried up.

Hal fixed her gaze on the moonlit road ahead, not quite knowing where the night would lead.

“Perhaps we could...talk some more?”

She rejoiced inwardly at Meracad’s words, but chose not to show it. “Have we not talked a great deal this evening?”

“Oh, you must know what I mean, Hal.” Meracad stopped, reached out and laid an uncertain hand on the duellist’s shoulder, her lips curling into a brief, wistful smile. “I never felt such freedom before this evening. But we were not alone.”

Her words burrowed their way into Hal’s mind, their implication plain. She felt naked, raw, alive to the night and all its temptations, aware of the throbbing of her own pulse and the pressure of Meracad’s fingers against her arm. “Is it safe for you to be out so long?” she finally asked.

“I told you — they all think I’m asleep. I complained of a headache and went to bed. They’d never think to disturb me. They’re as grateful for my father’s absence as I am.”

Denying herself the luxury of logic, Hal pulled Meracad close, suddenly aware of how violently the girl was trembling as she pressed her against her own body. “We can go back to my lodgings,” she whispered.

“I must be back before dawn.”

Nodding, she took Meracad’s hand, leading her

along a series of narrow side streets until they had reached the half-timbered hut which passed for her own quarters. She fished in her pocket for the key before pushing open the door and followed Meracad over the threshold into the one room she called home.

“Not as grand as a court apartment, but it serves me well enough. I’m only here to eat and sleep.” Embarrassed, she laughed off the poorly-furnished chamber with its plain, whitewashed walls and bare floorboards.

Meracad turned around, surveying Hal’s humble lodgings as if they were a grand reception room. “Who needs luxury when you have freedom?” she asked softly.

“You are right. Here, sit down.” Hal gestured to the bench. “Perhaps I have some wine somewhere. I don’t exactly do any entertaining here but Marc sometimes appears and then I have to appease him with alcohol.”

“Appease him?”

“Unlike you, he doesn’t appreciate my choice of accommodation. He believes I should have taken rooms at court.”

Meracad smiled. “He must worry about you.”

“Oh, he does. Too much.” She reached beneath the bench and pulled out a flagon and wine glasses. “Here. This is also not to his palate, but then he does

have rather expensive tastes.”

Meracad took a sip. “It’s fine country wine. Where did you get it?”

“Franc Hannac supplies me with a bottle from time to time.” She sat down on the bench, their arms brushing. Silence descended on the little room, and Hal leant forward, resting her chin on her hands, her brow knotted as she struggled to make sense of the situation. She could still tell Meracad to go, to leave before it was too late. Her heart fluttered like a caged bird against her chest.

“You can walk away now if you like.” She forced herself to turn around and face Meracad, noting the frustrated which entered the girl’s eyes. “I wouldn’t try to stop you. We could walk back together to your father’s house and pretend that this never happened.”

Meracad shook her head. With a gentle sigh of impatience, she placed her fingers to the collar of Hal’s shirt, drew her close and kissed her. Hal sank into the kiss, tasting the alcohol on the girl’s breath, pressing her own warm lips to Meracad’s soft skin.

“I’ve made my choice,” Meracad said at last. She tugged at her cap, her fair hair falling across Hal’s face, releasing the smoky scents of spices and tobacco, of perspiration and her own fragrant warmth. Hal planted light kisses along the girl’s slender cheek bones, upon her closed eyelids and her

forehead: her lips drawn to Meracad's soft skin. She shivered, sensing Meracad draw open the lacing on the front of her shirt, nipping at her exposed neck and shoulders with light, delicate bites.

"Have you not, perhaps, done this before?" Hal whispered into her ear.

"Never. I swear."

"You must be a natural."

She rested her back against the bench, folding her arms behind her head, allowing Meracad to explore her body: curious fingers delving beneath the folds of her shirt, tracing maddening patterns along her collar bone. Meracad cupped Hal's breasts between delicate finger tips, briefly lingering on the hard sensitivity of her nipples, smiling when Hal let out a light yelp of pleasure. Her hands roved and drew lower, tugging at the hem of Hal's shirt. Hal allowed herself to be stripped, aware of the moonlight settling upon the contours of her half naked body, as Meracad brushed her lips across her breasts, across the scars of duelling, and over the taut muscles of her torso. Then, sliding from the bench, she knelt on the floor, fingers resting, teasing, encircling the inside of Hal's thighs.

"Should I?"

Hal could only nod in response, unable to speak as her belt was loosened and pulled from her waist. She raised her hips, allowing Meracad to peel her

trousers away. Then she rose at last, her heart dancing on a string, an intense energy coursing through her veins, her excitement fuelling a curious sense of power. She pressed Meracad's head to her skin, gasping as the girl's hot breath flickered across her abdomen. Hands entwined her legs, creeping like ivy around her body, sweeping down across her stomach, between her thighs, first tentatively and then with greater confidence, greater force. Head thrown back, eyes half closed, half open to the moonlight, Hal nearly wept as Meracad kissed those places her hands had left untouched.

It was almost unbearable. She sank to her knees, seizing Meracad's hair and bringing the girl's face within an inch of her own, denying her the satisfaction of a kiss as she stared into her eyes. Then their lips came together again at last, as she pulled roughly at Meracad's clothes, dragging off her shirt and forcing her onto the floor, her teeth pulling lightly at the girl's pale, warm skin: at her neck, her throat and finally her breasts.

Meracad moaned, her breath catching in short, sharp intakes, goose bumps rising along her bare stomach and arms as Hal kissed and licked and nipped. Piece by piece the elements of her disguise were cast aside: boots and trousers, then undergarments, until she lay naked on the floor, eyes pleading as she gazed up at Hal who straddled

her waist. With a brief, tight smile, the duellist lowered her head, trailing her lips between the furrow of Meracad's breasts, over the downy softness of her stomach, gently parting the girl's thighs before placing her tongue to the wet, musky heat between her legs. And when Meracad bucked and writhed, Hal reached up again to seize her wrists, holding her down as she brought her lover to the brink, only to release her again.

Meracad moaned in frustration. Smiling, Hal crawled her way across the floor until they were level once again. "Sshh," she breathed into Meracad's ear. "The walls are thin."

"Will you leave me unsatisfied?" Unchecked tears ran from the girl's eyes.

In response, Hal ran her palms along the subtle curves of Meracad's body, sensing her quiver and tremble as she slid inside, her fingers stroking, teasing and finally laying claim to the girl. Before Meracad could cry out, she stopped her mouth with her own.

Submitting to the kiss, Meracad seized Hal's arms, clinging to her as if she were drowning. Limbs twisted together, they lay upon the stone floor until suddenly, incapable of holding back, Hal called out into the night: a cry of ecstasy, of freedom, of utter abandonment. A beauty unfurled in her stomach, consuming her entire body. Beside her, Meracad

shuddered, jerked and groaned, gripped by the same hard, wild thrill of pleasure. The shaking subsided, her breathing slowed, sweat clung like drops of resin to her forehead, and they clung together for what seemed like hours, unable to let go.

“I thought you said the walls were thin,” Meracad whispered after some time.

Hal did not reply. She was choking back tears.

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Dawn’s grey light flickered over rooftops and chimneys as they made their way back to the merchants’ district. At such an hour, the streets were mercifully quiet and still. Neither spoke, and they held hands tightly, as if letting go would be forever. That threat of such a loss now seemed to prowl alongside Hal like a restless animal waiting to pounce.

Léac’s town house was not so grand as Marc’s, yet its presence loomed, large and imposing above the other residences in the district. Hal strained her neck to peer over the high, sandstone reaches of the garden wall, but could make out only a dull, sloping roof and mullioned windows.

They turned a corner, reaching the join between wall and house and stopped.

“I’d better go now. I wouldn’t want you to risk



being seen near the house.” Meracad cupped Hal’s face between her palms, drawing her close. Their kiss was brief, but sweet.

“I understand. Will you be alright?”

“Of course.” Still holding Hal’s hands, she drew back. “I will find you again soon.”

“You promise?”

“I do. How could I not?”

“So go, then.” They kissed once more. “Be careful.”

“You too.” Meracad’s face lit up in a sudden grin. “Watch how careful I can be!”

Turning to face the wall, she scanned it with a practised eye and then began to climb, fingers and feet seeking purchase amongst cracks and faults in the stonework. Hal found herself holding her breath, releasing it only when Meracad had reached the top of the wall, just a foot above her head. Then, with the poise of an imperial dancer, she paced along the top until she had reached the side of the house. Spinning around breathlessly, she dropped into a crouch and peered down at Hal. “Kiss me one last time,” she whispered.

Hal clambered up to meet her, and their lips met in one last, passionate understanding. The duellist jumped back down into the road. With studied grace, Meracad climbed several feet up the wall of the house. Hal’s stomach gave an uneasy lurch, and

she chewed on her fingernails, releasing them only when she saw that Meracad had reached the sill of her bedroom window. Easing back the pane, she slid inside, waved to Hal, and then she was gone.

Hit by a sudden wave of exhaustion, Hal rested for a moment with her back to the wall, wiping away the film of sweat which had gathered across her cheeks and forehead. From a distant corner of the district came the faint rumble of cart wheels. The sight of her wandering, alone and dishevelled around the area at such an hour would only prompt unwelcome questions. And so, wearily, she headed back once more in the direction of Riverside, her head and heart bursting with love.

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Shark's Tooth

“She’s behaving like a damned fool!” Beric stormed across the floor of Marc’s grand reception room.

“Beric, please, sit down. Take a glass of wine. Who’s behaving like a fool?”

The old duelling master threw himself into an ornate armchair, almost crushing it in the process, and drained the wine in seconds, dumping the glass down without ceremony on the table before him. Glowering, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Who do you think? Thæc, of course.”

“Oh in the name of all the spirits,” Marc groaned. “What’s she done now? Can’t you two ever agree on anything?”

“This time it’s different. What do you imagine

she's been up to the past few nights?"

Marc shrugged. "I have no idea. I haven't seen hide nor hair of her. I assumed she was seeing in the late hours with her dubious collection of friends at *The Emperor*."

"Maybe, she was." Beric leaned forward, one bushy eyebrow raised enigmatically. "But who else was she with?"

Sighing, Marc sank down on the couch opposite and tugged at the end of his nose in impatience. "Beric, I really have no intention of playing guessing games with you."

"Alright then, I'll tell you who." Beric leaned back in his chair, steepling a chubby set of fingers beneath his chin. "She's been meeting up with Léac's daughter."

"Are you sure?" Marc choked back his disbelief. "I warned her not to go near the girl."

"So did I, but she wouldn't listen. Léac'll string her up if he finds out."

Marc remained silent for a few moments, doing his best to absorb this disturbing piece of news. "I hear Léac's not in town right now," he mused, half to himself. He poured Beric another glass of wine and then turned to him. "Listen, old man, maybe we should give the girl a little time to herself."

"Enough time to do what? Commit a fatal error?" Beric spluttered. "I can't believe what you're

suggesting, Senator.”

“I’m serious, Beric. Léac is on business, far away in the North from what I’ve heard. Let the two girls have their fun. If you go blustering in now, you’ll only make matters worse.”

Beric drained the wine moodily, shaking his head. “I’m not convinced you’re right about this, Senator. Even if Léac is away, he’s sure to catch wind of such a development. And if Cara Thæc were to find out...”

“Léac is out of the city for at least a month. I know Hal as well as you do. These trysts of hers never last – I’d give them a couple of weeks at best. If nothing changes, we’ll speak to her together. I promise.”

Beric knocked back the dregs of the wine and then got to his feet. “Well, I bow to your better judgement, Senator. But if she won’t end with her foolishness, I’ll be damned if I’ll sit idly by and watch her destroy herself.”

“She should be grateful to you.” Marc rose to see Beric out, uncomfortably aware that there was little he could say to put the older man’s mind at rest. Hal would always go her own way – they had both known her long enough to realise that.

“Aye, well, maybe she is in her way.” He cleared his throat, evidently embarrassed now, rose and slapped his hat on his head. Marc watched him navigate his way out, sidling around ornaments and

furniture, his broad shoulders and rough manner out of place against the refined backdrop of the room. The salon doors swung to behind him and Marc returned to the couch, dropping back down with a long, drawn out sigh. He poured himself another glass of wine, drinking it straight down, but it was too late. Anxiety had already wormed its way inside his mind, and no amount of alcohol would serve to soothe his fraying nerves.

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“How much is this one?”

The stall tender took the pendant from Hal’s fingers, scrutinised it and then passed it back. “Well now, that one is special.”

“Obviously. They’re all special. How much is it?”

Hal was growing fractious. She had set her mind upon presenting Meracad with a gift. Nothing too flamboyant – she was embarrassed enough already, unsure even of how to approach such a task; the entire business seemed fraught with difficulty. Yet they saw so little of each other, she reasoned. Just to pass on some token of her feelings would ease her mind a little. In spite of Léac’s absence, Meracad still found it difficult to evade Agata or her father’s servants. And who knew what would happen if Léac were to return?

If he decided to marry Meracad off, they would have to resort to desperate measures. Every waking moment seemed occupied with thinking of the merchant's daughter — whether she trained at the academy, fought a duel, or closed her eyes, trying to sleep. These were feelings she had never experienced before. They disturbed her, frightened her even. But she had already been carried so far from her own orbit that there was no hope of return. For the first time, she realised that she could give it all up — the duelling, her own quarters, Colvé itself. Yes, she could and she would leave it all behind if she had to. The thought both shocked and elated her.

“You see, laddy, this piece here is no jewel. It's a shark's tooth.”

The stall holder pulled her back into reality. As so often with strangers, he had mistaken her for a boy. She decided against apprising him of the truth.

“A what?”

“A shark's tooth. Sharks are dangerous creatures which, I am told, swim in the great oceans to the east. They'd have your leg off before you even knew it was gone.”

“Really? So this wouldn't be just some piece of wood you'd fashioned for the sake of a tall story?”

“Have a look at it, lad. If I could make such things I'd be a richer man than I am now.”

She held it up to the light. It bore resemblance to

a translucent arrowhead. Never in her life had she been out of the city, much less to the east, and the idea of an underwater world through which the former owner of this tooth had once glided played upon her imagination. Maybe, she thought, if they were to leave the city, to escape to the hinterlands and beyond, she would witness for herself the vast stretches of water that marked the eastern frontier of the empire. Suddenly, the shark's tooth came to represent a new kind of freedom.

“For yourself, is it?”

“For someone else.”

“I see. Well, seeing as it's a present for some lucky girl, what say you to eight shiny shillings?”

“Eight shillings? I still don't even know if its genuine or not.” She had set her heart upon buying it, but she knew full well that stallholders never expected a straight deal, nor respected one.

“Well, sometimes you've got to take a few risks, ain't you?” Brown eyes peered out at her from a tanned, weathered face. She looked away.

“Four shillings. No more. I'll bet you've got a whole pot of the things under your table.”

“Well now, ain't you the suspicious one? Six and we'll call it a day, sonny.”

She turned it over in her fingers once more and then sought in her pocket for some coins.

“Very well. But if I find you've cheated me, I'll be



back for my money. With this.” She indicated her sword.

The man grinned. “I’m sure she’ll love it. Whoever she is.”

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*The Emperor* heaved beneath the burden of its clientele who danced, sang, fought or slumbered in corners. Her apprentice’s cap tugged down over her eyes, Meracad sat beside Hal on a bench, smiling as Kris regaled them with tales of the week’s thefts. “So he walks over to Jools, who was dressed up like a blasted tart, all powder and wigs, and the like. She can play the whore can Jools – sometimes I wonder if she’s not actually had some real practice at it.

“Where is she tonight?” Meracad scanned the tavern, looking for the thief.

“Couldn’t resist her chances up at the court this evening. She passes herself off as a serving maid quite good and all. Bit too risky, mind. I keep telling her, but she won’t listen. More stubborn than you are Hal, she is. Anyway, as I was saying, she’s the mistress of disguise, our Jools. She keeps your fellow talking, and I managed to frisk him for everything he was worth. Even got his belt off him. We had to give it up in the end ‘cos he couldn’t work out why his trousers wouldn’t stay up.”

Grinning, Hal shook her head. "You're terrible."

Kris shrugged. "Ah, speak of the devil, here she comes."

Decked in a long blonde wig and crimson dress, her cheeks heavily rouged, Jools minced towards them. Sinking down on Hal's left, she slinked an arm around the duellist's shoulders and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Alright, handsome? Can I get you anything?"

"Well you can give me back my wallet."

Jools scowled and pulled off her wig to reveal her closely shorn black hair. "There's no getting past you. You'd make a good thief yourself, actually." She turned to Meracad. "I'd look to your purse, if I were you."

"I've got my eye on her, Jools." Meracad was now used to the banter which passed between her new friends. "You were right," she added, her mind wandering back to her first conversation with the thieves.

"Right about what?" Hal turned to Jools, but the girl had already headed off in the direction of the bar. "What did she say to you?"

Shaking her head, Meracad busied herself with drinking. Kris hummed awkwardly.

"I see." Hal stiffened. "No doubt she told you I needed looking after, watching over, some such rubbish? That's the usual drivel she comes out with."

“You’re your own worst enemy, Hal. Jools just worries about you from time to time, as do we all I believe.” Kris winked at Meracad.

“You needn’t.” Hal scowled and took a swig of beer. Embarrassed, Meracad peered down at the floor. The conversation ground to a halt.

“Orla’s gone back to barracks, by the way.” Kris’s attempt to change the subject fell flat.

“I know.”

“You didn’t want to wish her goodbye?”

“Not particularly.”

Meracad was plagued by a sudden stab of unease. What was so important about Orla anyway? A disturbing, menacing knot of envy tightened its hold on her thoughts. Here she was sat amongst strangers after all, with their long-standing relationships, the jokes and secrets they would always share with each other but never with her.

“Why would she wish her goodbye?” Meracad asked, her tone chill.

“Oh no particular reason.” Jools had returned with a glass of beer. “You was just good friends, wasn’t you, Hal?”

“I’m not an idiot!” Meracad suddenly fumed, her own anger catching her by surprise. “I’ve got eyes. She was your lover, wasn’t she?”

“And if she was?” Hal slammed her tankard down on the bench, beer sloshing over its rim. “She’s not

anymore, is she?"

"I think this is time we took our leave, Jools." Kris curled a palm beneath Jools's elbow, hauling the thief to her feet.

"Was it something I said?"

"Come on, Jools." Kris's voice carried the vaguest hint of a threat. Sighing, Jools allowed herself to be dragged away.

Turning slowly to Hal, Meracad's fury subsided. The duellist's eyes were hard, embittered, expressive of a regret so deep it was not to be fathomed.

"Alright, it's true. You wish me to admit it – I don't see why it matters, but it's true. We were together. But she was so often away with her battalion and I was duelling all the time – and she...she wanted something from me that I simply couldn't give her." Hal's voice trailed away. She slumped forward, burying her face in her hands before raking her fingers through her hair.

"And yet our situation is even more complicated, isn't it, Hal? And what guarantee do I have that in a few days, weeks or months, you won't sit here with Jools and Kris reminiscing about me in the same way as you do of Orla?"

"Because it's different!" Once again that defensive, angry tone.

"Different to Orla?"

"I can't explain. Look, I want you to know

something, Meracad. You *are* right. Our situation is more ‘complicated’ as you put it. But whatever happens — if your father returns, if he wants you to marry — you must know that I won’t desert you. I simply can’t.”

Grimacing, she drained the dregs of her beer. Meracad remained silent, absorbing the significance of Hal’s words. Did that mean...was Hal suggesting that she would sacrifice it all: the duelling, her reputation on the circle, everything? A pang of guilt caused her to shiver. They had come this far, so soon.

“I don’t know what to do with myself when you’re not here,” Hal continued. “In the past, I trained. That was all. I came here, I argued with Marc or Beric, I duelled — it all seemed enough. Now, I can’t concentrate on any of that — Beric sees it,” she added, rueful. “But whatever happens, I’m not going to let you go. If Léac comes back and tells you to prepare for marriage, what will you do?”

“I don’t know.” Meracad stared across the room — into the smoke, the heat, the wild, swaying manic crowds, Hal’s words now racing through her thoughts, throwing up consequences, some glorious, others tragic. “I suppose we’d have to escape,” she said at last, her voice hoarse, barely a whisper.

“Exactly. Together.” Hal seized her hands, her eyes now darting with excitement. “I don’t know

where we'll go, but we'll do it if we have to."

Meracad froze, drawing away, almost feverish with fear. Her father rose spectre-like in her imagination, taking his seat upon the bench opposite, glaring at them with angry, murderous eyes. "Hal, maybe we ought to think first. You don't know my father, or what he is capable of."

Her eyes rounding in dismay, Hal folded her arms onto the table before her, resting her chin upon her hands, her expression almost sulky. "Would you not take the risk? Would you just let him marry you off and leave me here alone, for good?"

Meracad stared at her for a moment, taking in Hal's slim, limp limbs, her whole body sagging as if in defeat. Then, threading an arm around the duellist's waist, she gently kissed her cheek.

"Hal Thæc, I would live anywhere with you — amongst southern barbarians or on the shores of the eastern ocean — anywhere, rather than spend one day married to a man I could never love."

Hal seemed to almost choke with relief, burying her face in Meracad's shoulder. They clung together for a moment — the warmth of Hal's breath tickling the nape of her neck. "I've got something for you," the duellist whispered. She fished in her pocket, dragging out a silver chain with a strange semi-translucent pendant swinging upon it like a pendulum.

“Spirits alive, what is it?”

“It once graced the mouth of a beast of the sea.” Hal smiled her lop-sided grin and then bit her lips, evidently embarrassed. “I know it is unusual, but I hoped you would like it.”

“I love it.” She took it and turned it over on the palm of her hand. “Put it round my neck.”

Raising the pendant, Hal fumbled with the clasp before fastening it beneath the collar of Meracad’s shirt, her fingers lingering on her shoulders for a few moments before withdrawing.

“I promise I’ll keep it. Even if I may not always show it, but I’ll keep it.”

“Thank you. Shall we go? I’ve had enough of this place for one night.”

“Me too. Perhaps, for a change, you might visit me? You could climb back over the wall before dawn. It’s late — no one will see you.”

She held her breath, observing Hal as she considered the idea. Meracad had spent a few feverish nights dreaming of love making with the duellist in her own rooms, of letting her into this most private of spaces, her door locked against the prying gaze of servants. A shadow passed across Hal’s face and Meracad’s heart sank. But then the duellist raised her head, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“Why not?” she grinned.





## Chapter Fourteen

### Dancing

Cara clapped her hands in delight. “You’re certain it’s Léac’s daughter?”

“No doubt, Ma’am. Sat behind them in *The Emperor*, I did. Then I followed them back after they left. I was careful, mind. They didn’t know I was there, they were so wrapped up in each other. They went back to Léac’s place. I followed them several times. It’s Meracad alright.”

Cara fell silent for a moment, stunned at the intelligence. She had caught the bitch out — just as she had embarked on the riskiest liaison of her life. It was all there: the potential for scandal, for public ruin, not to mention the prospect of a double revenge. For the girl’s coward of a father would no

doubt watch the whole sorry story unfold without raising a finger to stop it. His reputation was, after all, of greater value than the girl's. She almost burst with the news.

"Here, take this." She handed the spy her promised fifty shillings. "I'm immensely pleased with your work. I take it you won't mention what you've seen to a soul?"

"My word's good, Ma'am."

"Excellent. I may require you to repeat what you have said to someone, but all in good time."

"I understand."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

The girl left the room, and Cara turned immediately to her writing bureau. There was not a moment to waste. Léac was in the North, she had heard, and it might take him several days to return. Pulling out a quill, she began to pen a letter.

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Hal sat on a wall beside the fountain in the main square, thankful for the refreshing sensation of water as it billowed out into spray behind her back. The day's merciless heat had transformed unpaved streets into dusty tracks, rendering stonework and masonry so hot they brought blisters to the fingers of those who touched them. The evening shade now

provided some welcome relief against the cruel intensity of the sun, and Hal closed her eyes, inhaling the heady sounds and scents of early dusk: the perfumes of rich women as they crossed the square, perhaps on their way to secret assignations, and the constant ebb and fall of voices coming, it seemed, from every corner of the city.

To her left, a cluster of poor musicians struck up an impromptu melody. She caught the strain of a fiddle working busily above the low-plucked harmonies of a lute, and when she opened her eyes a couple were dancing before the minstrels. The woman's scarlet and olive dress flared out as she swayed and twisted to the music. Her partner, dressed in linen shirt and ragged canvas breeches was clearly another poor arrival from the provinces, seeking to make his fortune in the city.

Hal leaned forward, cupping her face in her hands as she admired the carefree agility with which the couple moved, as if dancing were as natural an activity as breathing for them. Her attention wavering, she turned to the opposite side of the square, squinting hard against the sunlight filtering down between rooftops and buildings. No sign of Meracad. And she had promised...she had promised! With a nervous little tapping of her feet, she gazed intently at the wide boulevard which linked the square with the merchants' district. Perhaps

Meracad had persuaded herself that meeting in such a public square carried too great a risk. But surely there were few better places to remain concealed than in a crowd? Besides, they could always head over to her quarters on Riverside or to *The Emperor*.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and she started in surprise at the sudden interruption to her thoughts.

“Not like you to sit around idly, Hal.”

Hal froze. That was not Meracad’s voice. “Good evening, Orla.” She forced her lips into a fixed smile before twisting round to face her former lover.

She was blinded briefly by the last rays of sun as they fell across her line of sight. Orla’s face was shadowed, and Hal shielded her eyes with her hands, tracing the lean, wiry outline of the soldier’s silhouette. The light dropped away altogether, giving way to the grainy haze of dusk. Orla’s hair hung loose, plastered to her forehead with sweat, her angular features tanned to golden brown by months spent fighting rebels on the empire’s southern frontier.

“Expecting someone?” The soldier’s tone was dry, laconic.

“Well perhaps, maybe...I thought your battalion had left already.”

With a shake of her head, Orla sat down beside Hal, her bare arm lightly brushing against the

duellist's jacket. Without thinking, Hal pulled away, the reflex drawing such an expression of pain and irritation from Orla that she regretted it instantly.

"Don't worry, Hal." Her voice was now laced with sarcasm and suppressed fury. "I was hardly going to ravish you."

Biting her lip, Hal stared at the ground. "I know that, Orla," she said quietly.

"What does it matter if I've left or not?" Orla continued, half to herself. "If you had wished to, you could have sought me out days ago."

"You seemed content enough a few nights' past, Orla. What's changed?" Hal peered out across the square again. If Meracad were to come now...she immediately cursed her own selfishness. She had shared Orla's thoughts, her bed, her life. Now she saw her as no more than a mere obstacle, lodged between herself and a new love.

"It's not too late you know." Ignoring Hal's question, Orla suddenly seized her hand. In half-despair the duellist closed her eyes, already knowing what was to follow.

"Come with me, Hal. Sign up for the army. I'll give you a reference. You have no idea..." Orla's voice trailed away. "You have no idea how long and lonely those southern nights can be without you lying by my side." For a brief moment the pain in her eyes disappeared, replaced by hope. Hal felt her own

heart crumple; how could Orla fail to understand?

“I cannot give you what you want, Orla.” The words came out as little more than a whisper. Orla continued to hold her hand for a few moments and then let go, that wan light of hope in her eyes fading as quickly as it had appeared. She followed Hal’s gaze to observe a girl in a faded blue dress pacing across the square towards them, her fawn-coloured hair spilling out in waves across her bare shoulders and down her back.

“I understand.” She hissed through gritted teeth as Meracad picked her way through the throngs of city dwellers towards them.

“No, Orla.” Hal turned to her at last. “You don’t understand. And you never did. I can’t just blithely follow you to the South. I can’t leave everything I have here.”

“You mean you can’t leave *her*,” Orla growled with a nod at Meracad. Her face now clouded and distant, she rose. “You could at least pay me the respect of honesty, Hal.”

Meracad had almost reached them, her smile giving way to confusion on witnessing Hal’s joyless expression, the passive aggression implicit in Orla’s stony face and clenched fists.

“I wish you joy of her.” The soldier threw a look of disgust and disappointment in Hal’s direction before storming away across the square. Hal watched her

go, gripped for a brief moment by a strange, unfathomable fear.

“You came,” she said at last, attempting a grin, but she knew that her voice betrayed her anxiety.

“Did you doubt me?” Meracad sank down next to Hal in the place that Orla had just left.

“No. No, of course not.”

Meracad shook her head. “You’re a terrible liar, Hal,” she said at last. “What just happened?”

Sighing, Hal arched her back in a long, drawn out stretch, raising her hands above her head. “She wanted me to join the army and fight southern rebels alongside her,” she said at last.

Meracad gasped. “And what did you say?” Her eyes searched Hal’s face in desperation.

Hal threaded her arm around Meracad’s waist. “I told her that I would not go,” she said at last. “Not now. Not ever.” She felt the release of tension as Meracad relaxed against her, closed her eyes, inhaling the herby scent of her hair.

“Did you love her?” Meracad asked quietly. Hal stared down at her feet in quiet embarrassment. Then she raised her head to observe the dancers for a few moments. They had been joined by several more couples who swirled and swayed to the music, separating and meeting again, parting and returning in a frenetic whirl of arms and legs.

“I don’t know,” Hal said at last. “I thought

perhaps I did but...she wanted more than I could give her.”

“I’ll not place such demands on you. I promise.”

“You don’t have to,” Hal said. “This is different.”

“In what way?” Meracad twisted around to face her.

“Orla fed off me. She left me drained.” Instinctively, Hal caught Meracad’s hands in her own, entwining their fingers together. “And when I’d given her all I could, she still wanted more.” She had never spoken to anyone of her feelings for Orla: not to Kris or Jools and certainly not to Marc. It felt as if she were closing a door on the past.

“Orla thinks she’s strong because she’s a soldier; because she fights for the good cause of the empire. But in fact she’s the weakest person I know.” Hal gave a rueful smile. “She can’t survive alone; she needs the energy and attention of others to keep going. I tried. The ancestors alone know that I tried. But whatever I did, it just wasn’t enough.”

She stopped for a moment, having surprised herself at the release of thoughts which had claimed such a hold on her for so long. Meracad made no reply, patiently waiting for her to continue.

“You’re different,” Hal said at last. “You have a kind of power inside you; you burn with a fire all your own. Perhaps you don’t see it yourself, but...what?” She stopped, confused, for Meracad had



just begun to smile, her body shaking with suppressed laughter.

“What is it?”

“Oh, you poet, Hal. That’s a side of you I never expected to see.”

Her pride piqued, Hal rose abruptly, nerves still jarred after the earlier conversation with Orla. “Fine. I never told anyone what I just told you now. I’m pleased you find it so amusing.”

She turned to go, bristling with anger. How could Meracad find it in her heart to laugh at words which had cost her so much?

“Wait, Hal. Please!” Meracad grabbed her hand, pulling her backwards with such force she almost landed in the fountain. “Hal, I never meant to mock you. I was just surprised. You never seemed given to eloquence before.”

“I never met you before.”

Meracad rose and they stood, facing each other. “I hear what you’re trying to tell me, Hal.” Once again, Meracad’s fingers worked their way between Hal’s. “I think perhaps you overestimate me. But your words touch me here.” She put her other hand to her chest. “No one ever said such things to me before. And I reacted in the way I did because I am unused to such praise.”

Hal relented. She had no genuine desire to leave Meracad alone in the square. In fact, she would have

stayed with the girl all night, until the music and dancing had faded away and the starlight caved into day. She put her two arms around the girl's waist, drawing her close. "You'd better get used to my poor attempts at praise. I don't have words enough to tell you how I feel."

Smiling, Meracad buried her head against Hal's shoulder. "We'll be seen," she whispered in her ear.

"Let them look. I haven't the strength for secrecy tonight." She lifted Meracad's face up to her own and they kissed, lightly and quickly. The musicians had altered their melody now from a fast-paced reel to a slower, measured pavane, a more sensual variant on a dance fashionable amongst courtiers. Hal felt Meracad sway in her arms to the music.

"What are you doing?" She whispered.

"I thought all you courtiers knew how to dance, Hal."

"Not this one. Besides, I'm very much an ex-courtier."

"It's never too late to learn." Meracad tried to pull her in the direction of the dancers, but she refused to follow, peering over in trepidation at the couples and the fluid, natural grace with which they moved. She felt a tug on her hand and Meracad cast her an ironic smile.

*No better place to remain concealed than in a crowd.* With a sigh, she allowed herself to be led

towards the dancers and once in the midst of the tapping feet and waving arms, caught hold of Meracad again. She felt the girl submit to the rhythmic pulsing of the music, found herself mirroring Meracad's steps until they moved as one, caught up in the midst of the gyring, rippling motions of the dancers.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Warnings

Hal was surprised to find Marc loitering in the duelling hall when she arrived for training the next day. Strangely ill at ease he paced the room, almost colliding with some of the novices who were already honing their skills to perfection under Finn's watchful eye.

Amused, she observed his nervous, strained expression and troubled eyes. It was not until she had tapped him on the shoulder that he span round in surprise to greet her.

“What are you doing here?” She grinned. “Felt like putting in some practice did you?”

Marc's smile was thin. “I'm here to talk, Hal.”

“Oh yes? Really?”

Slinging her jacket down in one corner of the room, she began to pull swords from the rack, unnerved at his unexpected visit.

“Maybe we can head into Beric’s little sanctuary? It would be more private.”

She took a sword and eyed it critically, hiding her misgivings. “I’m not sure that’s necessary, Marc. What did you want to say?”

As he opened his mouth to speak, the door to Beric’s room suddenly flew open, his grizzled face flushed and creased into a scowl. “Get in here now!” he roared. Shocked into silence, the novices turned their attention to the unfolding drama.

Hal replaced the sword as slowly as she dared and then walked from the hall, Marc traipsing behind her. The “office,” as it was termed, was really no more than a cupboard, its windows set at vantage points enabling the old master to keep an eye on his charges. A battered chair rested against the wall, a small table littered with ink wells, paper and empty wine bottles provided the only remaining furniture.

For a few moments Beric fumed in silence, his arms folded, glaring at the duellist. Marc closed the door behind him and leant against it. “It’s about Meracad Léac.”

She caught the tension in his voice, and realised that he knew everything. Both he and Beric must have been aware of her nightly trysts. The thought

made her shudder. If Marc and Beric had found out, who else might know?

“Well, Marc,” she began carefully, “I believe that is none of your business.”

“I’m afraid it is, Hal. Because it seems that I may be losing a very good friend.”

“Oh, really? I was not aware that any conditions had ever been attached to our friendship. Excuse me, gentlemen.”

She moved to leave, but Beric grabbed her arm. “Sit down, Hal Thæc,” he growled, pushing her into the chair. She winced as his fingernails dug through the fabric of her shirt. “We’re going to have this out with you now, and you’re going to listen, whether you like it or not.”

Protesting again, she rose from the seat, but Beric shoved her back. Leaning down, he peered into her face, his whiskers almost touching her nose. “Do you know who Léac is?” He asked.

She bit down on her lips and turned her head, staring in sulky silence at the training hall, willing herself out there again. He caught her hair in one bear-like fist and forced her to look at him once again.

“Well, do you?”

“Yes I know,” she spat out, her temper rising, her pulse now racing. “He’s some rich merchant who wants to marry his daughter to the highest bidder.

Any more questions, or may I go?”

Marc lifted the old duelling master’s hand free from the girl’s hair. “I think that master Beric should have rephrased the question,” he said evenly. “He might rather have asked if you know what Léac is capable of doing?”

She stared up at them, fingers pressing into the arms of the chair until her knuckles grew white. Both men now blocked the door, and she realised any chance of escape had passed. She shrugged. “No. What?”

“Ha!” Beric’s laugh was bitter. “She doesn’t know what the man can do, and she’s bedding his daughter. That goes beyond even your levels of stupidity, Hal Thæc.”

“I think it would be best just to explain the matter briefly, master Beric,” Marc cut in with haste, as Hal readied herself to lunge at the old training master.

“Alright, I’ll tell her. And you, you young idiot, you’d better listen to me for once. Nearly twenty years ago, your friend’s mother was as pretty a piece as any in the city.”

The conversation had become so distasteful now, so prying — a slight, almost, on her feelings, which she knew to be pure and right. She snorted. “Are we telling fairy tales now?”

With a growl of frustration, Beric grabbed her by the shirt front. “I said listen!”

“Alright, Master Beric, this is an emotional subject I know, but...as Beric was saying, Hal, Meracad’s mother was something of a beauty, and some people say her marriage was hardly a loving one, which easily spells disaster.”

“Aye,” Beric continued, releasing Hal in his apparent eagerness to continue the story. “And that young beauty, she had an affair with a city boy, a duellist like yourself. A handsome lad, energetic, impulsive, also like yourself.”

His tone was one of genuine regret. He cleared his throat and continued. “Well, that boy, of course, he didn’t last too long. You might’ve guessed that part by now. They found him washed up in Riverside. He’d been beaten like a dog.”

These last words were spoken with a bitterness so deep Hal could do no more than stare at him in dumb surprise. He turned his back on her and busied himself with peering through one of the crooked little windows. Marc took over the narration.

“Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. A day after the boy had been found, Meracad’s mother had an accident. She fell down an entire flight of steps. So you see, Hal, this man, Léac, has something of a reputation.”

It were as if a bucket of freezing water had been thrown over her thoughts. She began to see with



awful clarity just how much danger Meracad was now in. If Léac were capable of murdering his own wife, what might he do to his daughter? And as for her own safety — he would have no qualms about crushing her as he might do an insect. Her friends' concern, she realised to her shame, had been well-motivated.

“How do you know about this?” she gasped, her anger giving way to shock.

“How do we know?” As Beric turned from the window, he roughly dragged his hand across his eyes. “I know because that boy was my friend at the time, my fellow duellist. He was almost my brother. And I'm not prepared to lose his type again.”

She felt, rather than heard, the pride and compassion in Beric's voice, and stared at him in wonder. “Aye, girl,” Beric whispered. “I won't lose another friend in such a way.”

Marc gave an embarrassed little cough. “And nor will I. You have to finish this, Hal, before it is too late. For both your sakes.”

She opened her mouth to speak, turning from one man to the other, but the words she knew they hoped to hear stuck in her throat.

“Hal!” Beric's brow creased in a deep series of furrows, his eyes red where he had rubbed them. “Promise us, lass, you'll leave the girl alone.” He grasped her by the shoulders and shook her.

“Alright! I promise!” The words came out before she could stop them.

Beric sighed, his shoulders sagging in relief. “A wise decision, lass. A wise decision. I know it’s not easy, Hal, but you have to do it. Break it off. If you think so much of her, you’ll do it for her sake.”

“Alright,” she muttered. “I said I’ll do it.”

“Come and see me when you’ve told her.” Marc seemed to have regained some of his old humour. “We’ll have a few drinks together — you’ll feel better for it, I promise. Anyway, I’ve not seen a trace of you over the last few weeks. I’ll be throwing a party in a few days. Just a few guests, you know — nothing too extravagant. If you want to prove to me that you’ve really made a break from her, you’ll be there.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll come.” Her voice was monotone, distant. She raised herself from the chair as if in a trance. Beric now roused himself from the reverie into which he had lapsed.

“Get back to your training, girl.” he said firmly. She nodded and half-stumbled from the office, dimly aware of the novices gathering around her, whispering and nudging each other. She heard the door wheeze behind her, and Beric’s words before it slammed shut: “Thank you, Senator. Perhaps she’ll listen to us, this time.”

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“And the lady herself has been apprised of the match?”

Léac jumped as if he had been stung. Eyes rounding in surprise, he stared across the table at his future son in law.

“My Lord Nérac, it was for such a marriage that she came into the world.”

“I see.” Bruno Nérac fidgeted with the quill pen before him, twisting it between long, almost feminine fingers. A handsome man, Léac surmised, with his olive-toned skin and wiry black curls. But then again, were he ugly the match would never be in question. After all, this was the deal Léac had dreamt of for years. And there was no better way to seal it than with the promise of his own daughter as security.

Nérac sank back into his chair, tapping the quill against the side of his nose. Sun filtered in through low mullioned windows, playing over the scattered scrolls of parchment which littered the desk, and Léac sweated in his most formal of doublets, a thin layer of perspiration lining his shaved upper lip. It was all there waiting for the man to sign — an exchange of powers over imports of crops from the North into the capital. Just a few flicks of that quill pen would confirm Léac as Nérac’s man in Colvé. He

dug his fingernails into the carved oak arms of his chair and waited.

“Your daughter loves to read, I hear.”

“That is true, my Lord.” What of her reading habits? Just sign the damn treaty. Of course Nérac was enjoying this, stringing out the negotiations so much it physically hurt. Léac had already promised away all his estates in the North as security against the deal. What more could the man want?

The younger man’s lips twisted into a chill, tight smile. “My palace library is the finest the North can provide.”

“She will be honoured, my Lord.”

Nérac leant forward, his shirt sleeves obscuring the treaty. Léac could have wept.

“The Nérac dynasty, Sir, has a long and dignified history. And while I know you to be an honourable man, there will be the inevitable questions at court — Why didn’t I choose the daughter of a noble house? How could I have married the child of a mere merchant? — you know the kind of thing.” Though he shook his head in disapproval of such snobbery, his eyes shone with all the arrogance of a thoroughbred aristocrat.

Léac fumed but kept his face still, his lips pressed together against the angry retort that would destroy all he had achieved so far. Nérac, he knew, was testing him — taunting, preying on his weaknesses,

his own insecurities. “My daughter has long been advised as to her future role, my Lord,” he replied stiffly. “I am certain she will satisfy you in every respect.”

For the briefest of moments, Meracad hovered on the fringes of his imagination, dressed in those blue rags she wore to the market place, her hair loose about her shoulders. Well, now at least she would finally have to learn.

Stretching out his arms, Bruno Nérac stifled a yawn as if this were just some workaday meeting of friends at a public house. Léac’s heart had pumped its way up to a crescendo. His eyes fell on the quill which still dangled from Nérac’s fingers.

“Very well.” With sudden vigour, the Lord of Dal Reniac dragged the parchment before him and scribbled out his name, dripped candle wax below it and pressed down his signet. And with that, after all the tortuous days of negotiation, the long-fought over clauses and concessions, the whole glorious business drew to a close. Léac’s heart slowed in measure and he blotted his forehead and upper lip with a handkerchief.

Three sharp raps on the door caused Nérac to glance upwards. “Enter!”

The hinges groaned and a head appeared around the door. Léac hissed in irritation. “I thought I told you we were not to be disturbed, boy. I have

important business with Lord Nérac.”

The lad flinched, not daring to enter the room, his pale features comically squeezed between the door and the frame. “I know, Sir. It’s just...”

“Well step inside, boy.” Nérac was all gentility and warmth now the deal had been signed.

“Yes, Sir.” Clutching his cap between two white, bony hands, Léac’s servant took a few tentative steps into the room. “Sorry, Sir.” He bobbed his head nervously. “It’s just there’s an urgent message for you, Master Léac.”

“Well pass it here, boy.”

“I think...I left it upstairs for you, Sir. In your apartments.”

A lump caught in Léac’s throat. A message so serious that Nérac should not hear it. But if the Lord of Dal Reniac had registered that fact, he did not show it.

“I believe our business is concluded here anyway, Master Léac. We shall see each other at dinner, shall we not?”

“Of course,” he said, a curt nod in place of a smile. Rising, he followed the boy out into the corridor, taking care to put distance between himself and Nérac’s counsel chamber before he spoke again.

“Who is it from, idiot?”

“I don’t know, Sir. It arrived from Colvé this morning.”

“Very well.”

The boy scuffled away into the dark recesses of the keep and Léac climbed the stairs to the apartments Nérac had granted him during his stay. On the highest floor of the building, these would be Meracad’s own rooms after her wedding. He pushed open the door to the reception chamber with its delicate furnishings, satin hangings gracing the walls. The message lay, waiting on a carved, ornamental side table. He picked it up, broke the seal and sat down to read:

Sir, I believe it would be in your interests to return to the city immediately. A serious matter has arisen concerning your daughter. I write as a friend.

Cara Thæc.

Léac cast his eyes over the letter once more before crumpling it up and stuffing it into his pocket. This woman – Cara Thæc. He had encountered her once or twice during meetings at the palace. Haughty, vain, aloof: in short, a typical courtier. Could she be trusted? Hardly. Yet why would she go to the trouble of concerning herself with Meracad? These main negotiations concluded, he could hardly afford to take any risks over that particular clause.

He pulled on a long rope at the side of the door. Somewhere above his head a bell rang and within

minutes the boy had reappeared, peeking timidly into the chamber.

“Tell the groom to prepare the horses,” Léac barked gruffly. “We ride tonight.”

“Yes Sir.” The boy disappeared again, leaving his master to pace his room in frustration.



## Chapter Sixteen

### Mothers and Fathers

“Please Meracad, I’m just trying to explain what Beric and Marc told me.”

This was far harder than Hal had expected. Meracad refused to listen.

“I don’t see what my mother has to do with *us*. She fell, simply. It was an accident. My father might have many faults, but he would never have killed his own wife.”

They sat facing each other on the floor of Hal’s Riverside quarters, a half-empty bottle of wine between them. Léac, who had once appeared so distant, almost at times a mere irrelevance, now seemed to loom over them as if he were actually in the room.

“So do you not think it’s significant that a day after her lover was found beaten and drowned, she had a fatal ‘accident’?”

“How do you know that man was her lover?”

“Beric told me.”

“Oh, so now Beric knows everything, does he?”

“He has his reasons.” Hal was losing patience. “Don’t you think we might be taking too many risks? I mean, your father is back in a few days, and...I’m just worried about you.”

“And what do *you* think? That I’m not worried? That my father will return and wish us all the best? Please, Hal, I’m not so naive. But we can’t stop now!” She grasped Hal’s hands in her own, holding them tightly as if letting go would be forever. A sense of desperation seemed to envelop them both. Reality had found a way of encroaching upon their little world and was threatening to destroy it.

“I know we can’t stop,” the duellist replied at last, attempting to scrape together her shattered thoughts as she drew the girl close. She smoothed Meracad’s hair down and kissed her, relishing the warmth of the girl’s lips against her own. Time could move at its own pace but here, at this moment, it seemed to have stopped. Let Léac come. He could not take this from them.

Meracad ran her hands over the contours of her breasts, lowering them to tug at the duellist’s belt.

Inhaling sharply, Hal bit her lip, a wave of arousal flooding her body. She lay back, the sun's warmth embracing her naked limbs as Meracad pulled away her trousers and dragged open her shirt. Wet, open lips brushed across her body. She arched her back, submitting to pleasure as the girl's tongue curled around her breasts, teeth nipping at the sensitivity of her hips and abdomen, her mouth working lower, exploring Hal's inner thighs until her tongue had found its mark. Easing her hands between Hal's legs, she forced them further apart. Hal offered no resistance as Meracad stroked and teased and then took her, pushing her fingers deeper and deeper, pinning her to the floor, forcing out a cry of relief. Then, her lips retracing their route, Meracad lay beside her once more, still in her faded blue summer dress, while beads of sweat dripped from Hal's naked body.

"This is how I think of you," Meracad said at last, her fingers tracing ripples across Hal's stomach. "Not high up on the circle, stunning the crowds with your sword, but here, lying naked beside me." She ran her eyes the length of Hal's body and then bent forward, pressing her lips to the furrow between her breasts. Hal pressed her hand to the girl's hair, absorbing the kiss with her entire being.

With a sudden jolt she opened her eyes, breaking the trance-like state into which they had both

lapsed. She raised herself, leaning upon her elbows and kissed Meracad once more.

“How much do you love the city?” she asked. The girl stared up at her in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean is there anything that would keep you here?”

Meracad shook her head. “It’s all I know, but I have no real friends here – apart from you of course. Hal, are you thinking about leaving?” Her eyes grew troubled. “I could never ask it of you. It would be too great a sacrifice.”

“We have no choice. Once Léac is back, there’ll be nowhere left to hide. Listen, I have a friend in the North: Franc, the Master of Hannac. He’s always inviting me to visit but I never really had cause – or the time. Maybe we could stay with him, at least until we’ve planned what to do.”

“Does he know my father?”

“Not personally, and even if he did, we could trust him not to tell him. When does your father return?”

“He’s due back in a week.”

“So we have some time.”

“But you’ve never left Colvé before!”

“Never.”

“Your life is here, Hal. You’re a duellist. Your work is here, your friends: the Senator, Jools, Kris, all of them. You can’t run now. We may never come

back.”

“I know. And I don’t expect them to understand, but I simply can’t give you up.” She pressed her finger tips to Meracad’s cheeks. “I couldn’t stay here, knowing that you were married to some idiot you’ve never even met. It would be a greater agony than leaving the city.”

“You can’t do it. It’s too much to ask, Hal.”

“Meracad, I’ve made up my mind. And you should know by now that I’m too stubborn to change it. I’ll think of something. Meet me if you can at the academy in two days’ time. Tomorrow I must visit Marc – I promised him that I would, and I can’t arouse my friends’ suspicions any further if we’re to leave. They may try to stop us.”

She drew her towards her once again and they kissed. “Try not to be so anxious.”

With a long, low sigh, Meracad lay back down on the floor, resting her arm across her forehead, her chest still rising and falling with the exertions of their love making. “I’ll try,” she whispered.

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Cara Thæc gazed down from the windows of her court apartments, a smile tugging at the edges of her lips. Just beyond the hedgerows of the palace gardens, she observed the roof of a carriage as the

vehicle ground to a halt upon the gravelled courtyard beyond. Its door slammed shut, and then a wicket gate was pushed back as Salius Léac entered the rose garden below, his burly, bullish figure out of place amongst the delicate petals, the trellises and lush colours. An impressive man, she observed, noting Léac's sheer presence, his bulk and confident stride. But, well...common. There was no getting past that fact. After all, she'd learnt, he'd started in business as no more than an apprentice.

Yet there was an appealing energy to him: a man of power, influence, and above all, of financial mastery. And funds would prove useful once Hal was gone. After all, she would no longer be able to blackmail the girl's father.

She heard doors jerked open below and then swing to, Léac's heavy footfalls upon the palace stairs and then the man himself burst in unannounced, clutching the torn remnants of Cara's letter.

"Lady Thæc," he began breathlessly, waving the parchment in her face. "I would like to know the meaning of this."

With utter composure, she urged Léac to take a seat.

"I'll stand, thank you." He waved his hand, rejecting the wine she offered. "Please, Lady Cara, I have no time for socialising. What about my

daughter?”

Cara sighed theatrically. “It grieves me to tell you, Sir, but tell you I must if you wish to preserve your daughter’s reputation. I’m sure you will have heard of a certain freakish female who masquerades as a duellist?”

“The girl people say is your daughter?” Léac leered at her then, and she drew away, indignant.

“She is not, Sir, my daughter.”

“Very well – daughter or no daughter, what of *my* daughter?”

Now irritated, Cara savoured the information before imparting it with a sadistic kind of relish. “Your daughter is, let us say, involved with Halanya. They have been seen together, publically. There can be no doubt of the matter. Meracad’s good name – which means your good name – has already been tarnished, and could have been irreparably damaged by such outrageous behaviour.”

She held her breath, waiting for a reaction, but Léac did not erupt in the manner she had hoped. Instead his expression had become cold, implacable upon receiving the news.

“Do you have evidence for this?”

“I have witnesses. Reliable witnesses. I can call for them now, if you wish.”

“No, no. That won’t be necessary,” Léac murmured. “I believe you. In fact I’d like to speak to

Halanya myself. Do you know where she may be found?”

“She is, I believe, to be found training during the day at Beric Thælda’s duelling academy. She spends her nights drinking in the company of thieves at *The Emperor* inn, or occasionally with her friend the Senator Marc Remgius – when, of course, she is not corrupting the young women of this city.”

That, she was pleased to note, brought some colour to the man’s cheeks. But even if her barb had found its mark, his expression did not alter.

“Of course. Well, thank you for your information, Lady Cara. From now on, I shall consider you a true friend of my family.”

“My only hope is that you still have time enough to save your daughter’s reputation – I know how precious she is to you.”

“Indeed she is. Good day, Lady Cara.”

Léac turned on his heel and left the room without a further word, still holding the letter in his thick, stubby fingers. Hardly the reaction Cara had expected; she had hoped for fury, for an uncontrolled display of rage that would spell certain disaster for Hal. Yet, she reasoned, he was a man of business. And perhaps this measured, calculating response was even more dangerous. Just as importantly, he claimed to have acknowledged Cara as an ally. And it was contacts such as Léac, she



concluded, who would help her redeem her fortunes and preserve her good name, once the bitch was no longer alive to stain it.

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“To my offices,” Léac informed the coachman as he clambered into the carriage. If he returned home early from the North, Meracad would have every reason to believe that something was afoot. The vehicle crunched its way back across the forecourt, rolled out through the palace gates, and then on into the familiar territory of the city. Sitting back, he weighed up the possible consequences of Cara Thæc’s intelligence. Of course, he was aware of Thæc’s reputation as a court whore — there was no reason to believe that she was beyond the spreading of poisonous gossip. And he also knew that her wayward daughter had long been a thorn in the woman’s side. She had every reason to pray for the duellist’s disappearance. But on the other hand, if there were some truth to her claim...if Meracad had disobeyed him, if she had stooped so low as to form an understanding with a freak like Halanya Thæc! Not only would she have devalued herself, but she would have done so in the grossest, clumsiest manner imaginable.

Well, he had given his daughter too much licence.

She was, after all, blessed with good looks, and given enough time and freedom she would have found some young servant or courtier who was to her liking. He already knew, to his cost, how such liaisons began, and how they had to end. But another woman, for the Emperor's sake? He swore volubly as the carriage bumped its way across cobbled streets. And a woman notorious for flouting the rules of both court and city: for her arrogant, perverted duelling. No wonder Cara wanted her destroyed.

His thoughts returned to the deal. It would take a few weeks before news of Meracad's betrayal were to travel north. And what sweeter revenge than to marry her immediately, and seal the deal? Such haste could be interpreted as honest commitment. And even if the Lord of Dal Reniac were eventually to find out about his bride's indiscretion, Léac could always claim he had known nothing of her relationship with Hal. Anyway, a liaison with another woman might be passed off as an immature passion rather than some full-blooded romance. Perhaps that was all it had been after all.

This duellist, this Hal Thæc — he had seen her once, he recalled, at Remigius's party. That must have been where it had all started. By the Emperor's own eyes, it had been his decision to take Meracad there in the first place! The thought infuriated him

further, steeling his resolve to deliver a double blow – first to his daughter, and then to her lover. He would send the duellist a message, a very clear message, just like the one he had sent to another duellist, nearly twenty years before.

The carriage pulled up outside the office: a plain, low-roofed building in a quiet corner of the merchant's district. Jumping out, Léac strode inside and threw himself into a chair, staring moodily at the desk. Then he seized quill and parchment and began to write, sealing the missive with candle wax.

“Boy!” He called. A lad entered from an antechamber to his right. “Take this to the address written on the back. Tell them it’s urgent.”

The boy turned the paper over, read the address carefully, and then left without a further word. Léac waited until he was gone, the door closed against the busy street beyond. Then, for the first moment that day, he smiled.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Punishment

Hal finished her training late that evening. The hall was deserted by the time she finally racked up her swords, splashed water across her face and changed into a fresh shirt and trousers. There was clearly no point in returning home, she realised. She knew Marc would take her lateness for a snub, and she certainly had no desire to give him further cause for offence.

Locking the main doors, she descended to the streets below, wrestling with forces which seemed to drag her in so many directions. If Meracad had sufficient courage, then these could be the last days she ever spent at Beric's academy, amongst people who had given her the support and respect she had

so badly lacked at court. How would they interpret her decision to leave? As an act of love, or one of betrayal?

She stopped for a moment. Grasping the rail of the stairs, she clenched her teeth, dragging the back of her sleeve across her eyes. Would she now give then genuine cause to rue the chances they had given her? Courtiers would snicker behind their peacock feather fans and bejewelled masks, jibing Marc with reminders of her selfishness. *We always knew that she had no one's interests at heart but her own. She had no place at the court or outside it. She does nothing but hurt those around her.* She would explain everything to Marc before she left. She owed him that much. She knew how disappointed it would make him, but at least she could pay him the respect of honesty.

The summer heat was gradually losing its intensity as the sun wound its way down behind the city roof-tops. Yet as always, crowds still thronged the streets. This was all she had ever known, she realised, as she stepped out into the heady maelstrom of Colvé once more. The flow and flux of the metropolis: a place where nothing could remain still for more than a few moments. Constant movement, conversation, sounds of laughter, shouts of anger, the intense stink of the city: a melting pot in which society came together and produced its own

rich impressions.

The weather would soon break. Something had to give. Her thoughts turned once again to the journey that lay ahead. For all that she loved this life, she knew in her heart that if she stayed it would become a burden. Her training, her duelling, the double existence, moving amongst thieves and senators: the appeal of it all would begin to fade. Instead, she would be constantly looking for someone and never finding her, always painfully aware of the distance between herself and Meracad. The best she could hope for would be an even more dangerous game of covert meetings – of attempts to evade Léac and Meracad's husband. No, she told herself, as she cut across the city square. However painful it would be, they had to leave. There was no other way.

She looked around, such thoughts making her nervous, noticing a well-dressed, almost dandyish figure lounging against the central fountain. People hurried by in front of him, yet he seemed to observe her intently, and when she stared at him, he doffed his feathered cap, bowing with a flourish. She picked up her speed and continued.

Cara's spy, perhaps? But Cara was extremely subtle in placing tails on Hal. Well, she thought sourly, at least if she were to leave, she would no longer have to worry about that particular menace. Her mother would be more than relieved to hear

that she had left the city for good.

She turned again. Nobody there. How stupid she had been. Or perhaps nerves were making her imagine things. She headed down an alley that led from the square: a more direct route to Marc's town house than the main road. It was not far now, a matter of minutes. She felt tempted to break into a run, but reasoned with herself. There was nobody to fear. Who could know where she was headed, or why?

That was when she felt the cold steel of a knife's blade levelled against her waist. Her heart kicked and she twisted around to witness her assailant grin down at her, a mouthful of black, rotten teeth set in a tanned, weather-beaten face. She made for her sword but he grasped her arm in pretence of a friendly embrace and pressed the blade more firmly to her skin. Someone was following: she heard the clip of boots on the cobbles behind. Turning her head, she caught sight of the man from the fountain. This time, he doffed his hat in irony.

"Move." She was pushed to her left. They were forcing her into a backstreet. She reached for her sword once again, this time with her left hand, but the dandy grabbed her arm, deftly pulling the weapon from her belt and flinging it away. Helpless now, she struggled as they forced her further down a winding little passage which ran between high-

roofed shops and houses, the light pushed out, darkness encroaching. The place seemed deserted. If only she had taken the main street. She yelled out in fear, but the scream was stifled by a dirty, garlic-scented hand pressed over her lips.

Then they stopped. She kicked out with her legs and was met with a blow to her stomach, causing her to double over in agony. They pulled her to her feet. In the half-light she could make out two more figures up ahead. The first – stocky and well-built – stood, impassive, arms folded. The other was shorter, wirier, with a long beard and wild gingerish hair. Her heart sank. Four men, no weapon. She was finished.

“Got a message for you.” The wiry man brought his face close to her own. His breath was hot and foul.

“Really? From who?”

“You’ll understand who the message is from once you’ve received it.”

She reeled from the first blow as he struck her across the cheek. And as the fists flew down into her face, her back, her stomach and chest, the light faded and her last thoughts were of Meracad.

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Meracad gnawed on her nails, pushing away another



nauseous wave of fear. Her father had returned several days earlier than she had expected. Not only that, but he had requested her presence at dinner: a rare occurrence. They only ate together if Léac was receiving guests and needed her to play the role of hostess. It could mean but one thing: he wished to tell her about his dealings in the North, and the marriage contract which would have sealed them. She must get a message to Hal — to warn her to stay away for a few days. And for the time being, it would be best to humour her father, to make him believe that she was delighted at the news. Her only hope now was that Hal would not lose her nerve. Everything had seemed so much easier with Léac out of the city.

Trembling, she made her way downstairs to the dining room. In spite of the summer twilight, he had drawn the curtains. The room was dark, the air close. Léac sat in his shirtsleeves at the far end of the table, drinking wine and staring morosely into his glass.

“Daughter,” he acknowledged her as she entered. “Sit!”

She noted with unease that no place had been prepared for her, and took a chair at the opposite end, as far from him as she could.

“And how was your trip to Dal Reniac, father?”

Léac snorted. “We might better ask how you

spent your time in Colvé, daughter.”

She understood his meaning instantly but knew better than to show her fear, lowering her shaking hands beneath the table. If she were to save herself and Hal from harm, time meant everything, she realised.

“What do you mean, Sir?” The words came out strained, forced. She bit her lip and clasped her hands together, digging her nails into the soft skin so hard it hurt.

“You know very well what I mean.” His voice was a low growl. “Let us not play games, Meracad. I have no patience for them, as you well know. You have been seen in the company of that freakish boy-girl. And you, it seems, made no attempt to consider what that might do to your reputation. Or above all, to mine, while I was out of this city, negotiating the most important deal of my life, and the security of your future happiness — your marriage.”

His temper rising, Léac hurled his glass at the wall before pulling himself to his feet. Horrified now, she began to panic.

“I would like to know who has fed you these stories, father.” She caught the edge of hysteria in her own voice. “Surely someone who hates us both — who wants to ruin me.”

“Do not make me suspect you a liar now as well as an ingrate.” He moved round the table, and before

she could do anything, he had seized her hair.

“You’re hurting me, Sir!” She could no longer disguise her alarm.

“You asked about my dealings in the North,” he continued, unconcerned, pressing his lips to her ear. “I succeeded. I made a deal with Nérac, and its final clause was you.”

It was true, then. She was to be handed over to this aristocrat, this lord, to be treated as a bargaining chip – insurance against the breaking of the contract.

He pulled her roughly from the chair and glared into her face. “And I will honour that deal. You are to leave. Now. The carriage is waiting. It’s packed. In three days’ time you will reach Dal Reniac and there you will marry. You will not return to Colvé. And I pray to the souls of my ancestors, I will never set eyes on you again once you are married.”

Now desperate, Meracad twisted from his grasp, attempting to run for the door but Léac caught her and forced her against the wall, his hand around her neck. “Just before you leave, you might like to know that the bitch will share in your suffering.”

“What have you done?” She shook uncontrollably, faced with the helplessness of her situation, as if peering into a chasm or mine shaft with no hope but to jump.

“I sent her a message,” Léac sneered. “I don’t

expect her to come looking for you once she's received it."

With a howl of misery, Meracad sank to the ground. Snorting once more in contempt, Léac hauled her from the room, placing her in the hands of guards he had hired to escort her to Dal Reniac. And as they led her away, she heard him turn over the dining room table in his fury, caught the splintering crash of his chair as he hurled it against a wall, and then came the sound of a door slamming shut.

They pulled her out into the fetid, steamy summer evening, pushed her into the carriage and got in beside her. And as they sped out through the gates she screamed until they seized hold of her and forced sleeping spirit down her throat. The world swirled, the air seemed to close in and she sank against the carriage seats, clinging to her last shreds of consciousness until they too were shed.

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It was the early hours. A few straggling guests made their unsteady exit down the steps of Marc's grand residence and out across the garden as he bid them goodnight. Then, overcome by bitterness and exhaustion, he headed wearily back into the hall.

So, she had decided not to come. After their many

years of friendship — his support, the money, the protection — she had thrown that all back in his face.

It would not have taken much, he told himself, for Hal to have come to that party: to have torn herself away from her new object of devotion. Especially after the promise she had made. He had long accepted that she was stubborn, difficult: in some ways, he feared, a lost cause. But such a blatant display of disregard? It cut him to the quick.

Taking up a candle, he trudged downstairs. Marc often chose to sit before the glowing embers of the kitchen hearth following the exertions of his parties. After all the wildness, the excitement, the drunkenness, it was the unpretentious, quiet company of his servants that he craved.

But they had all gone to bed. Only Lira the maid was still at work, clearing up after the evening's excesses, her dark eyes haggard with tiredness, a few stray wisps of brown hair hanging loose from beneath her head scarf. She drew a chair up by the fire, gesturing for him to sit down. "Tired are we, Sir?"

He sank down, stifling a yawn. "Something like that." Marc pulled off his boots, stretching stockinged feet out towards the glowing embers in the grate. For some reason he found the heat soothing.

"I'll make you a cup of hot wine. That'll warm

your spirits.”

“Thank you. That’s kind of you.”

He leant back, eyes half closed. The party was already a stale memory, but his anger over Hal’s absence refused to abate. Lira bustled about the kitchen, hanging a copper pan above the hearth and rattling through cupboards for glasses.

He must have drifted off, for a sudden noise caused him to jerk upright, almost tipping from the chair as he did so. A faint, muffled knocking came from behind the door. Had he dreamed that? No. There it was again. Raising one eyebrow, Marc threw the maid a sly glance. “Expecting someone, Lira? Some night-time visitor, perhaps?”

She looked appalled. “I don’t know what you mean, Sir. I don’t take visitors at this time of the night.”

Marc laughed. “Alright, alright, I know. I’m only teasing. Anyway, get the door, girl. Might be some poor beggar after the scraps.”

Still ruffled, her worn features creased into a scowl, Lira wiped her hands on her apron and opened the door. The chill evening air caused him to shiver, and he twisted around just in time to see someone stumble into the kitchen, to catch their groan as they slumped face forward onto the floor, to hear Lira’s sharp shriek.

Springing upwards in horror, Marc clung onto the

backrest of the chair as if for support. Lira had backed away, putting the kitchen table between herself and the body which lay, crumpled and still, arms splayed, one leg still resting out in the street. Summoning all his courage, he edged across the kitchen, taking in the ripped, blood-stained shirt, the dark hair matted and wet. And then, in one appalling, sickening instant, he knew.

Marc knelt and gently turned over the body, peering down into Hal's beaten, disfigured face, her left eye sealed in a mass of bruises, dried blood congealed and crusted around her mouth and nose. Her street-soiled shirt, torn to the waist, revealed fresh gashes still bleeding, her chest mottled with bruises. Pressing his fingers to her neck he sighed with relief. The pulse was faint, irregular, but it was there. He felt Lira pressing against his back, peering over his shoulder.

A cold, hard sense of urgency replaced his initial shock. "Fetch the doctor," he told her gravely. "Tell her it's urgent."

She grabbed her coat from its peg, jumping over Hal's outstretched legs as she fled from the kitchen. His mood now grim, Marc hauled his friend inside, closing the door against the city and its dangers. Then, ignoring the girl's quiet moans, he picked her up and carried her upstairs to safety.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Broken

The carriage hurtled through the night, clattering over cobbles as the horses were driven on with maddening speed, halting only to secure passage through the city gates. Then it continued over paved surfaces which gradually gave way to dirt track as it joined the road north. A full moon lit the way, the din of hooves and wheels driving mice and hare from their hiding places; deer leapt across the path, causing the horses to whinny in surprise. The coachman yelled at them furiously, urging them forward onto open plains.

Inside, the carriage's occupants were violently rocked about as the vehicle swerved from one side of the track to another. Meracad clung to the



upholstery, desperately attempting to gather her shattered thoughts. Two of her father's men sat on either side of her and she was squeezed in tightly between them, unable to act on her impulse of leaping for the door and hurling herself out into the night. Two other burly guards stared at her impassively from the opposite seat. Léac had taken no risks in ensuring that his daughter reached her destination.

She fought back an urge to sob, knowing that it would not help. Guile and cunning had always served in the past, enabling her to navigate her way around life and its harsh laws. But all hope of evasion, of escape and freedom had now vanished. She stifled a groan and the guards shot her a curious look. If they knew the reason for her hasty removal to Dal Reniac, they did not seem to care. Their orders had simply been to deposit Meracad at Bruno Nérac's fortress within the space of three days, and never to lose sight of the girl. The carriage was not to stop at any point other than for a change of horses at a tavern in Caraden and then once more on the northern shores of Lake Brennac.

She leaned forward, doing her best to steal a glance through the window. Her father's men bristled immediately. One of them put his hand on her shoulder, jerking her back into her seat.

"I just wished to see where we are," she protested,

her voice choking with a frustration which verged on despair.

“We’re heading north,” the man next to her said, the hilt of his dagger pressing painfully into her ribs. “That’s all you need to know. We’re to hand you to Lord Nérac personally and you’re to remain in Dal Reniac. What’s out there — it doesn’t concern you.”

She had to get back; she could not leave Hal to her fate. Whatever Léac had in store for the duellist, it was sure to involve violence. She had seen, over the years, how he had dealt with business rivals, destroying them financially and, in more desperate circumstances, physically. She was aware of the thugs he hired to threaten his competitors, and the thought that Hal had just become their latest victim was more than she could bear. Her resistance gave way. She let her head fall into her hands, her body racked by sobs as the guards looked on, now in embarrassment.

“Don’t cry, Miss, for the Emperor’s own sake. Lord Nérac won’t want to see you with red eyes now, will he?”

The man placed a large, clumsy paw upon her shoulder, this time in sympathy. She did not care. The tears continued to fall, and part of her knew that the shedding of such a burden was necessary. If there were any chance of escape she must first release all such emotion, in order to leave herself

wide eyed, clear headed and focussed.

The men stared awkwardly at their feet, and she felt herself drift away again into fitful sleep, succumbing to exhaustion, her head resting on the shoulder of one of the guards.

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Hal drifted in and out of consciousness, only vaguely aware of figures moving around her, of lights flickering, low voices and a sea of pain which seemed to overcome her entire body, encompassing even the air she breathed.

It was mid-afternoon the following day when she finally succeeded in opening her right eye, the left remaining resolutely sealed in bruises. She perceived no more than a hazy light, heard little other than dull sounds echoing around the room. Hesitating, she lifted her arm, steeling herself against the waves of agony which ensued and raised her hand to her face. A voice broke through into the realms of her consciousness.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Your nose is broken.”

Groaning, she lay her hand back at her side, twisting her head in the direction of the voice.

“I’d avoid moving at all if you can. At least, that’s what the doctor advised.”

“Marc?” she gasped weakly.

“The very same,” his voice filtered back. “Well at least you have a decent excuse for not attending my party. Otherwise, I might very well have finished you off myself.”

“That’s not funny.” Now she could just make him out as he sat beside the bed, dark shadows beneath his eyes and his hair mussed.

“How did I get here?”

“You know, I really wanted to ask you the same question. All I can tell you is that I was down in the kitchens enjoying a post-party drink with Lira, when you made something of a grand entrance by falling through the door. The doctor is of the opinion that you must have crawled here, although judging by the state you were in, even she finds that incredible. Do you not recall anything at all?”

Hal’s thoughts drifted unwillingly back to the previous evening. “I was stopped in the streets. I know you won’t believe me, but I was on my way here.”

“Well, I suppose that’s irrelevant now, isn’t it?” the Senator mused.

“I can’t have been so far away I suppose,” she continued. “Maybe a few streets. Some men stopped me. I couldn’t see them clearly. They dragged me into an alleyway. Said they had a message for me.”

“And this, I suppose, was the message?”

“Apparently so.”

“And who do you believe the message was from?”

“I think we both know that. From Salius Léac.”

She gasped, racked by sudden fear. “Meracad!”

“Hal, you can’t do anything for her right now. For the Emperor’s own sake, lie down girl!”

“But if Léac knew about us...” She attempted to sit only to collapse back down on the bed as a fresh wave of pain laid claim to her entire body.

“Here, drink this.” Marc held a glass of water to her lips. “Now, Hal, I can’t believe the man’s such a fiend he would beat his own daughter.”

“You said he killed his wife.”

“Yes, well...” his voice trailed away. “Listen, I know you must be terribly worried, but you simply can’t help her at the moment. I’ll see what I can find out, but you must promise to lie here and behave yourself for a while. Besides, Léac may well be under the impression you’re dead, and we should keep things that way. If he finds out you’re still alive, he might decide to finish the job.”

“If Léac knew,” she said eventually, regaining her breath, “I can guess who helped him find out.”

“Cara?”

“Who else?”

He peered down at her, his eyes troubled. “If you’re harbouring thoughts of vengeance, Hal, I suggest you forget them. You need to rest, not to

worry. The doctor will be here again soon to check on you. You've broken more than just your nose, as I'm sure you're aware, and she gave strict instructions: you're not to move an inch. I'm serious about that. Understand?"

"I suppose so."

She understood, but such promises were so hard to keep when all she could think of was Meracad. Surely Marc was right: Léac could not have had her beaten? Or, she thought with a pang of horror, could he, in his anger, have killed her? No. Surely not! Even if he now despised his daughter for what she had done, she was still his most valuable asset. Yet, she knew that Meracad's betrothal had been central to Léac's plans for a long time. And their love — well, they may as well have taunted the merchant to his face. She began to feel worse than useless, lying in bed bandaged up to the neck. If only there were some way of getting a message to Meracad, at least to find out if she was safe. The night was long, feverish and full of disturbing shadows. In spite of her weakness she found it impossible to sleep and gradually, from out of her tormented, troubled thoughts, a plan began to form.

The next morning, Lira appeared with a bowl of soup and watched over Hal until she had drunk it to the dregs. With a satisfied nod and a grunt, the maid headed back downstairs, closing the door behind her

as she left. Hal waited for the click of the key turning in the lock, but silence followed.

She edged her way off the bed, wincing as every movement provoked a stab of pain, stirring memories she would rather have suppressed: of how the world had plunged into darkness as she lay on the rough cobbles of the street. Curling up on the ground, she had buried her face and head in the crook of her elbows in a futile attempt to stave off the blows as Léac's goons had kicked her into unconsciousness. When she came round in the street, she had no idea where she was or what time it could be. Crawling, as the doctor had surmised, on hands and knees, she had willed herself to move, aware that stopping could mean death. Somehow the thought of Marc, of warmth and safety nagged at her memory. Then she recalled that she had been heading for his party before the assault and that his house could not be so far away. Dragging herself back onto the main street, she had approached a group of early morning revellers, but they had turned from her with expressions of disgust and horror upon witnessing her bloodied face. This, she now realised, was a reaction common to all city-dwellers; had she not herself stepped over drunks and the victims of fights as they lay bleeding in the streets? After what seemed like hours, she had pulled herself to the rear of Marc's house and,

witnessing the candle light in the kitchen windows, used her last remaining strength to bang on the door. She could remember nothing more; everything had simply gone black.

She scanned the bedroom. Her jacket, now ripped and stained, lay on a chair. When she tried to pull it on the pain was so great that she all but cried out and so she left it discarded on the floor. Then, supporting herself against the wall, she made her way out of the room, fearful that Marc, Lira or the doctor might reappear at any moment.

A long, curving flight of stairs led down towards the main reception rooms. If she crossed the largest salon without being noticed, she could take the side door at its far end which led out into a corridor. Beyond that was the rear courtyard: hopefully a less conspicuous exit than the main doors to the front of the building. From there it might be possible to reach *The Emperor*. If she could persuade the thieves to make inquiries as to Meracad's fate, it would be a start. At least, she felt, she would be doing something. Clutching the wall, she fought against her own weakness and made her way down the stairs.

She had reached the ground floor now and rested for a few moments against the banister, her breathing, she noticed, shallow and painful, her bruises pulsing, a tightening around her lungs which



she took to be the result of cracked ribs. Silence itself seemed to throb inside her head. Dizzy, nauseous, she forced herself upright, preparing to take those few steps towards the salon, its double doors left open to reveal the grand chandeliers and wide expanse of parquet floor beyond. Taking a deep, agonising breath, she placed one hesitant foot forward...

A latch clicked somewhere in the building. She caught the drift of conversation, two people headed along the corridor in her direction. Panicking now, Hal grabbed the banister again. Perhaps she could pull herself upstairs again, if she was quick enough. She stepped backwards but her legs gave way beneath her and she collapsed back down upon the stairs. By the time she had regained control, she found that she was staring up into Marc's face, his normally placid features creased with fury. The doctor was standing beside him peering down at her, a kindly woman of middle years, her eyes now inked with concern.

"What in the Emperor's name do you think you're doing?" Unable to contain his anger Marc yelled, his words echoing around the cavernous spaces of his own house. "You turn up here, half dead, spend a night in bed, and then what? Suddenly you're well enough just to take off and leave?"

"I've got to find her," Hal muttered, half to

herself. She dragged herself to her feet once more, clinging to the rail for support, assailed by another bout of nausea.

“I told you, I’ll look for her. Do you think you can just turn up at Léac’s house now, knock on his door and ask for his daughter? Beric’s right: you really are a fool.”

The doctor laid a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “Let her go, Senator.”

Hal found herself staring, open mouthed at the doctor. Marc turned to the older woman, trembling with rage. “What?”

“I suggest we let her go. If she thinks she’s well enough to leave, maybe she should be the one to decide.”

“No.” Marc shook his head, paling with anger. “You said yourself: she needs to rest. She shouldn’t even get out of bed. I don’t make a habit of rescuing people for them to throw themselves back out into the streets the next day!”

“The doctor’s right,” Hal cut in feebly. “I need to go.”

As the doctor held Marc back, Hal limped in the direction of the main salon. Her vision clouding, she stretched her hands outwards as if in a trance. She was dimly aware of whispering, of the doctor’s calming voice and Marc’s tightly spat words issuing behind her. And as she reached the doors to the

salon, it all seemed to come crashing down upon her — the high plaster work ceiling, the chandeliers, the floor rose up to meet her and once again everything went black.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Dal Reniac

Dawn was breaking when Meracad woke, the pale morning sunlight filtering through the blinds of the carriage. She sat up, sore and stiff, her head pulsing with pain, and rubbed her eyes which still ached from crying. Any hopes that the previous night had been no more than a nightmare now evaporated.

One of the guards handed her a flask of water and she received it gratefully. She took in her captors, their own clothes dishevelled, grey shadows hovering beneath their eyes. Good. That was good. If they grew tired, they might become careless.

“I must relieve myself,” she said at last.

The men looked at each other and then eyed Meracad with suspicion.

“Gentlemen, we have been travelling all night. Please, let me outside for a moment.”

With a long sigh of resignation the man to her right banged on the ceiling of the carriage twice with his fist. The vehicle lurched to a halt.

“What is it?” The coachman yelled from his perch above.

“Lady needs a brief moment to herself.”

Now her tired mind conjured up visions of escape. She felt brittle, empty, but no longer burdened with tears, and her thoughts ran with a fluency and coherence that they had lacked the previous night. If there were dwellings nearby, some kind of village or hamlet, she could beg for shelter. Or better still, woodland would provide cover. As yet she could see nothing, for the guards blocked her view.

“Come on then.” One of the men rose, his eyes wild with sleeplessness, his doublet crumpled and unfastened to reveal a tuft of grey curls sprouting above his shirt front. “Make it quick.”

He opened the door and she was blinded briefly by sunlight. A light breeze ruffled her hair and she drew in scents which seemed raw and fresh after the heat and stench of the city. But as her eyes focussed upon the landscape, the prospect of freedom quickly faded and her heart sank in disappointment.

“I said make it quick.” The guard shoved her

between the shoulder blades and she dropped to the ground, her feet sinking into wet peat. Beyond, as far as the eye could see, was open moorland with no more than a stray gorse bush or rowan tree to break up the emptiness.

“Round the back of the carriage,” the man urged.

Hitching up her dress, she drew her feet out of the watery earth which sucked at her shoes, threatening to pull them off. Then she crouched down by the cart wheel. The raised dirt track upon which the carriage had been travelling seemed to provide the only dry land. If she tried to run across this, they would catch up with her in minutes. She would be visible from the road and it would be near impossible to make it across the heather and scrub without twisting her ankle.

“Don’t give up hope,” she told herself. They had not yet reached Caraden. She could still seize her chance.

She rearranged her skirts and clambered back into the carriage, assuming as cold and dispassionate an expression as she could muster. The door slammed shut and a guard hammered once more on the ceiling. With a grinding of axles and the crunch of wheels over dirt track, the carriage trundled on.

The guard who had pushed her from the carriage door surveyed her coolly, rubbing stained fingers

over a matted beard. “I told you there was nothing to see,” he observed.

She chose not to respond. And if he suspected her, he did not pursue the matter further. The man beside him was younger, perhaps in his thirties, with a tousled mop of blonde hair and pale blue eyes. Meracad had seen him about her father’s house from time to time, employed by the merchant as a personal body guard. He was well-built: stocky and muscular. He turned to her now, those pale eyes pasted with distaste. “What I don’t understand is why you’re so upset about this marriage, lady. I mean, my own daughter would give anything for such a chance. A rich, powerful aristocrat like Lord Nérac — what woman in her right mind would turn her nose up at such an opportunity?”

“Spoiled, that’s what she is,” added the first. They all mumbled in agreement.

“If you don’t mind, gentlemen, it really is none of your business. Your task, as I understand it, is to escort me to Dal Reniac. If you could accomplish that in silence, I would be indebted.”

“See you’re back to your haughty old self, anyway Miss,” the blonde man sneered. “Don’t think that Lord Nérac has got the patience for such behaviour.”

“I neither know nor care what Lord Nérac has patience for,” she returned frostily.

“Oh but you will do. That will be your sole care

before the week is at an end.”

She bit her lip and looked down at her feet, her shoes stained with the mud of the bog. Something dug uncomfortably into her thigh. She reached inside the pocket of her coat and realised that the material of the lining had been punctured. The shark’s tooth! She fingered its abrasive edges and then pressed it into the palm of her hand.

They passed through the gates of Caraden at about mid-morning and the carriage drew up outside a coaching-inn on the town’s main market square. The place was alive and busy at such an hour with customers flitting between shops and stalls, many of which offered fish caught that very morning from Lake Brennac.

Two of the guards jumped out of the carriage to help exchange the harness. Peering through the window to her left, Meracad studied the town which seemed calm enough and orderly with its clean, sandstone facades and wide central square. She observed a small group of women gathered around a stall admiring the wooden combs and jewellery that were on display. Their gowns and veils seemed as rich and ornamented as any courtier’s. One of them caught her eye and smiled: a woman of middle years with a willowy frame and flaming red hair stretching to her waist.

Meracad forced herself to smile back and then



turned her attention to the guards who had been left in the carriage. One dozed, his head lolling on his shoulders, a thin line of spittle oozing from his slack lips. The other was ogling the girls at the stall. This would be her only chance: before she had given it any further thought, she threw her entire body against the door, forcing it open and leapt out onto the street.

“Hey!” the guards had come round and were already on her heels. She ran for the red-headed woman, who stretched out her arms in surprise.

“Help me, please!”

The other girls closed in around her, blocking the men’s path.

“What is it?” The woman’s green eyes rounded in horror.

“Hide me!”

“I can’t!”

The remaining guards had joined in the fray and one by one, the girls were roughly flung from their path.

“Then one thing, please!” They were almost upon her now. “Find Halanya Thæc. Tell her they’ve taken me, Meracad Léac, to Dal Reniac — to marry Nérac.”

She gasped, winded, as gloved hands grabbed at her waist, pinioning her arms and dragging her back towards the carriage.

“I’m sure your father would be fascinated to hear

that you keep company with whores!” The blonde guard hissed into her ear.

As they pulled her inside, the red-headed woman raced forward excitedly. “Did you say Halanya Thæc – the friend of Marc Remigius?”

“Yes!” She could say no more. A hand was pressed over her mouth.

“I know the Senator. I’ll get word to him!”

One of the guards slammed the palm of his hand into the woman’s back and she dropped to her knees, her friends helping her up again, firing angry glares at the carriage. Then there was a swift crack as the coachman whipped the flanks of the fresh horses and they drove madly out of Caraden towards the northern road once more.

For the first time since she had left Colvé, Meracad’s heart gave a kick of hope. She knew now, that they would not let her out of their sight: that there would be no more breaks until they reached Dal Reniac. But she also knew that if Hal were still alive, she would find her. And so for the remainder of the journey at least, her despair seemed to abate and she surrendered herself to dreams of a future with Halanya Thæc.

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They had halted outside the main gates of Dal

Reniac. Meracad listened to her father's men as they delivered documents and money into the hands of the gatekeepers. Two of them remained in the carriage with her, now mindful of her plans for escape. They had not even risked an exchange of horses on the northern shore of Brennac, racing on instead through the night. The rough north road had climbed gently at first before twisting its way through a series of canyons and around rugged, wind battered escarpments. She had vaguely recalled that the fortresses looming above them were known as the Eagles' Nests. One of these was Hannac — Hal had spoken of its owner, Franc Hannac, with gratitude and affection. Supposing she were to find a way out of Nérac's fortress — perhaps he might offer her sanctuary?

In spite of her determination to keep awake, to study the landscape, to plot and to plan, tiredness had claimed hold upon her weary, anxious mind once more and she drifted into a dark, feverish sleep. In her dreams she lay beside Hal who stretched out her arms to embrace her. Meracad reached forward, sensing the warmth of her lover's body, feeling her breath upon her face. But then Hal disappeared, and she found herself staring up into her father's furious face. She opened her eyes, panicked, to discover that dawn was rising, a thin red half-light to the east. And as the sun's light gained intensity, she saw that she

was travelling once more across open moorland, the peak of Dal Reniac rising before her like the crest of a wave above an ocean of heather.

A face pressed against the carriage window and peered inside with undisguised curiosity. She looked away, ashamed, and the guards sat poised on the edge of their seats, ready to catch her if she showed signs of flight. But by now Meracad had resigned herself to the fact that she must enter Bruno Nérac's fortress as his future bride. Whether she would stay there long enough to marry him was another matter.

The other men climbed back in and the carriage rolled at a leisurely pace through the city. Dal Reniac clung to a hillside, its squat, low-roofed buildings huddling together as if in retreat from some unseen enemy. She caught sight of a few people moving with brisk purpose along its dense, narrow streets — so unlike the chaotic revellers of Colvé. She could hardly imagine a wild, drunken place like *The Emperor Inn* here. It seemed so stark, so ill at ease with itself, if that could be said of a city. And as the carriage pulled up towards the very apex of the slope, she peered out at the severe, pale walls of Dal Reniac fortress and shuddered. They passed beneath a high, defensive barbican before rumbling on into the courtyard. She caught a brief glimpse of grass and cobbles and of an old-fashioned keep towering above them, its walls punctuated with narrow arrow

slits. Meracad caught her breath and held it.

“Make yourself respectable,” hissed one of the guards, passing her a cloth and flask. She moistened the material and wiped her face.

The carriage door swung open and she forced herself to step outside, shielding her eyes against the sun’s glare. Soldiers lined the fortress walls above her, peering down from the battlements. Clearly the entire fortress had turned out to witness the arrival of their lord’s new bride. Sweating now, her stomach tightening, a bilious taste at the back of her throat, she scanned the courtyard’s grey expanse. All was quiet, save for a faint hammering of iron on anvil ringing from a distant smithy. A few workshops and stables nestled beneath the walls, the curious faces of artisans and stable hands peering at her around their frames. Almost mad with panic now, Meracad edged back towards the relative safety of the carriage when a small group of guards emerged through the main, arched doorway of the keep. All bore the bright red livery of the Nérac family except for one man who was dressed without show or refinement in leather trousers and a bleached white shirt open at the throat. Dark, unruly curls clung to a lightly tanned face. He was tall and well-built — of about thirty years of age, she guessed. And he seemed to read her with his deep set eyes as if she were a book.

Bruno Nérac stretched out his arm towards her.

“Meracad Léac. You must be tired after your long journey.”

She was not sure if he expected her to hook her own arm in his. And so she took his hand and shook it. He smiled then, a slight upward stroke of his lips which had disappeared in seconds.

“Yes, I am a little, my Lord. But I have been treated well enough by my father’s men.” If he detected the ironic tone to her words, he did not show it. Instead he threw her a curious look before gesturing towards the keep. “You must come in and make yourself comfortable. I will show you personally to your rooms. And then, I hope, you will dine with me?”

“You are very kind.”

“I think it wise that we get to know each other before...” his voice trailed away. His lips flickered into that brief, thin smile again. Was that a genuine display of embarrassment, she wondered, or a pretence at tact?

Sliding his arm around her waist as if already claiming his possession, he guided her towards the keep, his eyes trained on her face. She began to realise that her appearance left much to be desired: unwashed for three days and her hair a tangled mess, her shoes still stained with the peat of the moors. But what did it matter whether he found her unfavourable or not?

“You are here sooner than I expected.” He ushered her through into the dark coolness of the great hall.

“Yes. I believe my father was set upon demonstrating his commitment to your deal.”

Was that disappointment she detected in his eyes?

“So it was not at your own instigation?”

“No, Sir. It was not. My father is...” she hesitated, “a man of his word.”

She felt those coal black eyes upon her once more — probing, prying — and turned away.

“You are something of a diplomat,” he said at last. “A quality I prize greatly amongst my friends. But I had hoped that my future wife would be more interested in making my acquaintance.”

“As you just observed, Sir, I am not your wife as yet.” He bristled at that, she noticed. “But I do believe that we will have ample time to come to terms in the future.”

He scrutinised her once again and she gazed about the hall, embarrassed. Trestles had been pushed against the walls, laying bare the stone-slabbed floor, its surface dusted with rushes. The raised dais below which they now stood was furnished with a single high table. Above her a lofty roof sloped and arched, a series of balconies running beneath its length. And as the evening light faded,

the place descended into gloom. A few liveried pages emerged, lighting the candles which hung in lanterns on the walls.

“Yes,” he said at last. “We will have ample time. Please, follow me.”

He led her across the hall to a door behind the dais and they continued up a narrow flight of stairs. She followed him, noting the thickness of the stone walls, the simple, impregnable design of the keep. Could such a place have a weak spot?

Standing just ahead of her now, he pushed his hand against a wooden door embedded in one end of a slim corridor. “Your apartments, Madam. I trust you will find them to your liking. I will have your belongings delivered to you as you bathe. And afterwards, I hope, you will join me for supper in my own suite. The maids will direct you.”

“Thank you.”

He offered her a low, brief bow, and left. She sank down upon the enormous, canopied bed and stared blankly at the room. Tapestries displaying scenes of hunting and war stretched across its walls, timber beams supported a low, whitewashed ceiling. A thin slit of window to her right let in what remained of the evening light. She rose and put an eye to it, making out torches glowing below her in the courtyard, the dark mass of Dal Reniac itself, and beyond that the raw, wet moors. She drew back and



flattened herself against one of the tapestries, hugging her arms around her waist, biting down on her lips to stifle a moan. No more tears, she told herself. Here they would not serve.

Pushing a hand into her pocket, Meracad pulled out the shark's tooth. Then she lay back down on the bed, dangling it above her face, swinging it through the air like a pendulum. She caught it in mid-swing, lowered it to her lips and kissed it before fastening it around her neck. Where was Hal now?

## Chapter Twenty

### A Game of Chess

The doctor had proved Hal wrong. After a few miserable steps towards the salon, her body had rebelled against her. Now she lay once more in bed studying the lumps and cracks in the ceiling, trussed up in bandages and the door locked against further attempts at escape. Not that she would even try now. She had no desire to humiliate herself again. And Marc had promised he would seek word of Meracad. There was nothing more she could do.

The key now twisted in its lock. She attempted to raise herself on the pillows, expecting Lira with another tasteless bowl of gruel. Instead, she found herself staring up at Beric, his face flushed with anger, sweat dripping from his forehead as if he had

run all the way from the academy.

“Well, you wouldn’t listen to us, would you? We tried to warn you, the Senator and I, but you had to ignore us. And now look at you. Do you think you’ll be fighting anytime again soon? I’d be surprised if you could even pick up a sword, let alone use one.”

Bereft of words she lay there, unable to summon the strength to speak. Marc must have sent word to the old training master. She could have killed him herself for that.

“And I’ll tell you another thing,” the old man appeared to be warming to his theme. “No fighting means no money. And just how are you planning to survive without any money?”

She shifted her head sulkily on the pillow and looked away. He was right, of course. Even those sorry quarters in Riverside would be beyond her means now.

“If you feel well enough one day, I suppose I may let you come back to train. But you’ll be practising with the novices until you can prove you’re good enough to fight on the circle again.”

He stormed from the room, shoving open the door and almost colliding with Marc who had been eavesdropping.

“Well, Senator, I hope she’s pleased with herself,” he snarled on his way down the stairs. “No one can say we didn’t try to warn her.”

“Quite.” One eyebrow raised, Marc entered the room, putting the door to behind him. Hal groaned, feeling as if she had just endured a tempest.

“What now? More criticism, scolding, lecturing? Anyone would think I welcomed the chance to be beaten half to death by a bunch of thugs.”

“He’s angry because he’s lost you – for the time being, anyway. And, deep down, I do believe the old bear worries about you. He’s simply not very good at expressing it.”

“You can say that again.”

Marc peered down at his friend, his eyes flecked with concern.

“I can sympathise with him. You really do some stupid things on occasions.”

“Thanks,” she returned drily.

“You’re welcome. I know that what happened isn’t entirely your fault, but as far as Meracad is concerned, you won’t do her any good as you are.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Marc.” She raised herself up in bed, wincing as she moved. “But I’m worried about her. The spirits alone know what Léac might have done. I have to find her.”

Marc scrutinised her face and then sighed. “Listen, I probably shouldn’t tell you this but I had a visitor yesterday. An old friend. She lives in Caraden and, well, a carriage passed through the town recently with Meracad inside. She was being taken

north to marry Bruno Nérac, Lord of Dal Reniac.”

Hal stammered a reply but coherent words escaped her. What came out was more a strangled moan.

“I’m sorry, Hal, but you really need to try to forget her. Nérac is the most powerful of all the northern lords. Hal? Are you alright?”

A cold, clammy fear had gripped her so hard that she now shook uncontrollably. She clawed at the sheets and bedding, pushing herself upright. “No. No, I’m not alright. This can’t be!”

“What in the Emperor’s name are you talking about?”

“We love each other, Marc. Don’t you understand? Her life can’t be decided for her in such a way. She wants me, not him!”

“Hal Thæc, listen to me.” Marc’s tone was grave. “If you really do love her, you’ll leave her alone. We all have to make sacrifices, Hal. *All* of us. That’s something that both you and she will have to understand.”

“A sacrifice? This is not a sacrifice, Marc. It’s a punishment,” her voice rose, quavering, high and edgy. She felt her mind contract as if someone were squeezing it and then wringing it out. “It’s her father’s revenge, just because she chose to love me.”

“By all the ancestors, you’re so selfish at times!” Marc’s face seemed to contract in fury, grow white

with anger, veins pulsing at his temples. “You? You think this is all down to you? He’ll have been planning such a match for years. And you very nearly destroyed everything — no wonder he sent her north so quickly. Look at you, Hal — was one beating not enough of a warning? Can you not get it through your thick skull that if you try to reach her, you’ll risk her life as much as your own?”

A howl escaped her lips and she sank down, her head buried in her arms, her body racked with sobs.

“Here, take this.” He put a handkerchief on the blankets before her, but she ignored it. She felt the clumsy, warm weight of his hand upon her shoulder, but nothing seemed to offer comfort

“The world does not revolve around you, Hal Thæc,” he said at last. “If you continue to behave so recklessly, I will have no choice but to recommend that the court takes you back as its ward.”

It were as if he had thrown a glass of cold water at her. She stared up at him, her bruised face now twisted further in agonised grief. “You cannot do such a thing!”

“Don’t forget that I was Master of Records when you arrived at the court as a baby. I know more about you than you do yourself, Halanya. I will do what I think is best.”

“No, Marc. You couldn’t — you wouldn’t! I’m a grown woman not a child. The court no longer has

such control over me.”

“The imperial court controls all of our lives, in case you had forgotten. So, unless you wish to end your days as Cara’s maid of honour, I suggest you think very carefully, Hal. Promise me that you will return to your life as a duellist and forget Meracad.”

She crumpled into tears once again and Marc’s face softened. “You’ll find someone else, Hal, believe me. It’s time for you to grow up; I had hoped you would be stronger than this.” He offered his handkerchief again and she took it, chastened at his words.

“I had never known love before,” she said at last. “It seems as if life were taunting me — to take it away again so soon.”

“You’re not the only one to have such feelings, child.” He put his arm around her shoulders, but the gesture was an awkward one. She knew that Marc resented open displays of emotion. Drawing her sleeve across her eyes, she pulled herself up straight again.

“You were always the one to worry,” she sniffed.

“And you were always the one to give me cause. Get some rest. And just to give *me* some rest, I’ll be locking the door.”

She lay back, listening to his footsteps echo down the marble stairs to the salons below. Her thoughts swirled about her in a racing, tumbled, chaotic mess.

What did he know of her birth? He wouldn't tell her, she realised. Marc would sooner risk his own head than betray a secret. Still, let him believe that his threat had worked. She would be gone before he could even think of sending her back to court.

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“Your move, Sir.” Meracad manoeuvred her chess piece into position, deftly taking some of Nérac pawns in the process. He shook his head in exasperation.

“Where did you learn to play so well?”

“I told you. The game is new to me.”

Nérac eyed her with suspicion. “In that case, I account you one of the finest strategists I have ever had the pleasure to meet.”

He sipped his wine and then, pressing his hands together, rested his chin above them and fixed his gaze on the board. At last, with a thin, cryptic smile, he pushed forward a rook.

“I am of the opinion,” he said at last “that you hold back on certain things, lady. But I will have your secrets out, one by one.”

“And what secrets might those be?”

“Well, for example I find it hard to believe that a wealthy woman of your talents and appearance would never have attracted the attention of suitors.”



She turned her attention to the chessboard and moved one of her knights, taking his rook. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“I can assure you that if any man ever did harbour such feelings they were never returned.”

One eyebrow raised sceptically, he studied her

“Well,” he said at last, “perhaps the good men of Colvé do not appreciate their womenfolk as they should.”

Meracad gnawed at her upper lip. In spite of Bruno Nérac’s reputation in Colvé as a ruthless barbarian, she had found him to be witty, erudite and sophisticated. His compliments, however, left her at best embarrassed and at worst frustrated. She hesitated for a moment, collecting her thoughts before she spoke again. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why me? You are, after all, an aristocrat. There are many courtiers you could have chosen: someone of much greater social standing and with more experience of the world and its ways. So why did you agree to my father’s clause of marriage?”

He rose in silence, refilled their wine glasses and handed her one.

“Aristocrats,” he said at last with a degree of contempt. “A dying breed.”

“But you are of noble birth!”

“I am. But I see things differently. You must

understand, Meracad, that it is men like your father who are the future of the empire, not such parasites hanging on to the Emperor's coattails. With the imperial frontiers extended to their furthest, we can expect peace. And peace requires administrators, bankers and burghers like Salius Léac. Not such relics of a system which has never served anyone but a few court cliques. And that is why I believe in an alliance with new money rather than old. Besides, I need an ally as much as I need a wife. You have been brought up in this world of trade and commerce: of contracts and deals. You understand its ways."

"My father never discussed business with me."

"Maybe not. But I can be certain you know more about it than some hyena of a courtier."

Meracad thought about this for a moment. His words carried logic. But it was a cold, calculating logic. She shivered.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Tell me one more thing. If what you say is true, did you not consider that in marrying a merchant's daughter, you would infuriate the entire court?"

He offered her the same wan smile. "Perhaps. But, as I'm sure you understand, I am not a man to make decisions that are determined by emotion."

"I'm sure," she murmured.

How different to Hal, whose entire life seemed

directed by her instincts. Meracad experienced a sudden powerful wave of loss and bit her lip to hide it. Without thinking, she pushed her queen away, taking one of Nérac's senators. He stared at the board, his eyes rounding in surprise, and a mocking little laugh escaped his lips as he took her empress. "As I just said, emotional decisions never pay."

## Chapter Twenty-One

### A Contract

It had been an impressive marriage feast. Both Léac and Nérac had invited many guests: men and women from all corners of the empire. Courtiers rubbed shoulders with men of trade, soldiers with senators. They sat at trestles drooping beneath the weight of roast pheasants and geese, cauldrons of broth and wine, plates piled high with fruit or plastered with slices of cheese and meat. Above them, minstrels performed from the balconies: fast paced jigs or slow, measured courtly pavaues.

Meracad sat at the high table dressed in a long, white muslin gown, its details stitched in gold leaf and pearl, a garland of ivy leaves winding about her head. To her right Nérac, proudly surveyed the

room, leaning across her to engage his new father-in-law in conversation. Léac had said barely a word to her since arriving, other than a private warning that if word slipped out of her misdeeds, she would have only herself to blame. She kept her rage and disappointment in check, refusing to let them bubble to the surface, feigning a mask of placid, calm compliance. Everyone, it seemed was enjoying the spectacle. Everyone apart from her.

The evening drew on and guests gradually paid their respects before departing. Nérac insisted on the tradition that the newly-weds be the last to leave. The wait was torturous. She could eat little, her stomach threatening to reject the fine food spread before her on the table.

It was the early hours of the morning before they were left alone. Only Léac remained, now well into his cups, still holding forth on his latest business venture into debt collection. Pages wilted tiredly against the walls, waiting for their own chance to return home for the evening.

“Well, Master Léac, with all due respect to tradition, I believe that Meracad is exhausted.”

“Aye.” Léac nodded, casting a glance of contempt in his daughter’s direction. “I expect you’ll both be wanting your bed.”

She gripped the arms of the chair, digging her nails into the wood and clenched her teeth. His tone

had been inflected with a malice which only she could detect: a slight lecherousness even. She felt sick to her stomach.

Léac stood and presented an unsteady bow.

“I trust you will find your accommodation satisfactory,” Nérac offered politely.

“Oh yes, my Lord. It suits me well. Goodnight.”

He left and the pages began to hurry about the great hall, clearing away platters and glasses, carrying leftover food back down to the kitchens. Meracad breathed out a long sigh and rested her head against the back rest of the chair. Her husband observed her for a moment.

“It was a trying evening for you, I see.”

“No,” she lied. “Just rather long. I am tired.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he put a hand upon her shoulder. She flinched, before recovering her poise.

“Come,” he said at last. “There’s something I would like to show you.”

She stood, weary, and he led her from the hall and down a winding flight of stairs until they reached an iron-studded oak door. Lighting two torches, he passed one to her. She held it up as they stepped across the threshold, and as her eyes adjusted to the light she gasped in astonishment, making out a vast, wood-panelled corridor with leather-bound volumes lining its walls, stretching

away into the darkness.

“All of this is entirely at your disposal. Your father tells me that you are something of an avid reader.”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” she murmured in surprise.

She moved further along the stacks, bringing her torch as close as she dared to the books, her fingers tracing the inlaid titles upon their spines: tomes on hunting, war, history and philosophy, volumes of stories, of poetry and of illustrations.

“All of them?” she asked once again, dumbfounded.

“Every single one.”

She felt him move behind her, holding his torch above her head. His free arm curled around her waist. Meracad froze, her rapture now replaced by an icy fear: a nausea unfurling in the very pit of her stomach as his lips pressed against the nape of her neck.

She squirmed from his grasp and he released her.

“What is the matter?” he asked, his tone now colder.

“It’s nothing. It’s just, well, I am rather tired and...”

“It is our wedding night.”

“Yes, I realise that, but...”

“A contract is a contract.”

She stared at him in horror, but his eyes remained impassive. He took her torch from her and

placed it beside his own in a metal ring which hung from the ceiling. Meracad saw her chance and ran for the door, halting when his laughter rang out behind her.

“There’s no point. I locked it.”

Her heart beat wildly as she grabbed the handle and pulled. It would not move.

“Let me out.” She failed to suppress the rising note of panic in her voice.

“Come now, I thought we had an agreement, you and I.”

“You have one with my father, *not* with me.”

“It’s the same thing. Of course, I could decide to break the contract, to tell him that my own clauses have not been met. I wonder what he would have to say about that.”

“I am not to be bought with money, titles, possessions, or for a whole world of books!” She grasped the handle again, and shook it in desperation. The door did not budge.

“Everything has its price, Meracad. And if you do not know that by now, by the Emperor’s own soul you will do soon.”

He took a step towards her and she jerked away, her dress snagging on the corner of a shelf. Stumbling, she sought to regain her balance, but he seized her shoulders and forced her to the ground. Screaming, she struck out, her fist making contact



with his jaw. He winced and slapped her hard across the face.

Her head reeled. It was as if her strength were leaking away, but she continued to struggle, forcing her fingers into his eyes. He roared in pain and struck her once again. Blood ran from her nose and mouth, gradually transforming the white of her dress to crimson. He forced her onto her stomach, pushing the gown above her legs, his hands tearing at her undergarments. And then she experienced a pain that she had never known before, as it was the fabric of her body that he now tore at.

She had no idea how long it lasted. When he had finished, he left without a word. She lay in the darkness, covered in blood and surrounded by books.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### The Autumn

Rain hammered on the windows of Léac's office. The autumn was a miserable time in the city, as the dust of its streets changed to sludge. Wind plucked at the shutters, slamming them against the stone work. The revelry of the summer had been replaced by a stoicism in the face of the cold, chill gusts which blew in from the North: harbingers of the winter with its snowfalls which could sometimes cut the starving populace off from the surrounding countryside. But that didn't worry Léac. His new deal with Nérac ensured him full control over wheat and cereals passing into Colvé. And if food were scarce, he would be certain to raise prices.

He had heard nothing from his daughter since he

had used her as security for the contract. Not that she was his concern anymore. Nérac could throw her in his dungeons for all he cared now. Providing, of course, no one informed the northern lord of his new wife's little tryst with Cara Thæc's daughter. But who was there to know of such disloyalty, up there amongst those barbarians?

So it was with a degree of alarm that he now witnessed the arrival of Cara's carriage in his own courtyard and the speed with which she hurried in the direction of his office.

"Lady Cara Thæc," the boy announced.

"I know, fool," he muttered as she burst into the room.

"In what way can I help you, Madam?" A note of unease crept, unbidden, into his voice.

Cara eyed him coldly for a moment and then began. "First, Sir, I would like to know why I received no thanks for my role in saving your daughter from her own foolishness."

Léac smiled to himself. The greed of the woman. No doubt the tales of her financial insecurity were true if she were so desperate as to think of blackmailing him.

"I don't believe, madam, there was any talk of my recompensing you for having merely performed the duty of any self-respecting courtier."

Her long, arrogant face paled with anger. "If that

is the case and you really had any concern for your daughter's reputation, could you please explain to me why the duellist is still alive?"

Léac's smile became hard, fixed, and finally resolved itself into a frown. "I believe my men taught her a lesson she will not forget in a hurry. Bodies can prove awkward for business, Lady Cara. Particularly bodies of well-known duellists. If you want the girl dead, you must kill her yourself."

"Clearly, Sir, you know nothing of the woman's rapacity. As long as she is alive, there is every possibility that she will attempt to recover your daughter. I have had the misfortune of knowing her all her wretched life, and I can assure you that such is the truth."

"Well, I suppose a mother knows her child better than anyone else can."

Offended, Cara turned on her heel. "I took you for a serious man, Sir. I have only had your interests at stake. I shall be forced, as you suggested, to take matters into my own hands."

"Wait!" Léac barked, more desperately than he had intended. "I did not mean to be flippant. Please, take a seat. Share with me, if you would, a glass of wine."

She turned once again and gazed at him coolly, but to his relief she sat down.

"From whence, Lady Cara, do you have such

information – about the duellist’s condition, I mean?”

“My sources are perfectly reliable, Master Léac, as I am certain you are aware by now. What I would like to know is what you intend to do about this? It was my understanding that you would not tolerate the slur on your family’s honour.”

“And nor will I,” he murmured, half to himself. “Do you know of Halanya’s whereabouts?”

“She is being cared for in the home of her friend – the Senator, Marc Remigius.”

He chewed this information over. Remigius was powerful: a statesman. If action were to be taken, it must be without his knowledge. They would need to lure the duellist from her hiding place.

“Well, lady, I believe that I may make amends for my failure – as you see it – to recompense your labours on my behalf. However, I may need a little further information in order to do so. As I just explained, corpses are a great inconvenience in my line of work. If, that is, it is assassination that you were thinking of. Such inconveniences have a way of creating obstacles when they are least expected.”

Cara shuddered theatrically. “The word assassination, Sir, is not one I admit into my vocabulary. No, I had in mind something more subtle.”

“You interest me, Lady Cara. Do please continue.”

“Would it not be agreeable to know, once and for all, that the duellist is dead: incapable of ever driving another wedge between yourself and your own dear child?”

“I suppose it would be reassuring. And how do you propose such an outcome could be arranged?”

Cara’s features softened. “Sir, the woman’s life is devoted to duelling. And, knowing so much of her character as I have the misfortune to do, I can tell you that she is also a vengeful creature.”

Léac shrugged. “And so, what of it? Do you expect me to fight a duel with her, Lady Cara? I am a man of business, not a soldier.”

“Of course not, Sir,” she snapped. “I rather imagined that we could tempt her into fighting a duel that she can’t possibly win. A duel to the death, that is. A duel which we would personally witness. She is, by all accounts, weakened and we could pit her against an opponent who would be equally determined to succeed.”

“I see you have given this subject much thought. Do you know of such a person?”

Cara smiled as, Léac thought, a snake would smile, were it to have lips. “I believe I do, Sir. Furthermore, an illegal duel is, as I am sure you are aware, punishable by a long prison sentence. Which would mean that, even if Halanya were to win, we would have enough evidence to put her out of sight

for a considerable period of time.”

“She would be dishonoured in such a case. That is, rather, what you are thinking of, is it not, Lady Cara?”

“Possibly.” Cara sniffed. “What difference does it make to you Sir, so long as she can make no further contact with your daughter?”

“To me none. To you, I would say, a great deal. Her dishonour would after all redeem your own status at court, would it not? Come, now, Lady, I seldom venture into deals when I am uncertain as to the motives of the other party. You are her mother, she is your bastard child. Her disappearance removes the stain on your own name, particularly as her behaviour is so, how can I put it delicately, irregular?”

Cara’s hands shook and he thought he detected the faint hint of a blush darkening her neck and cheeks.

“It is true,” she hissed through gritted teeth.

“In which case, her removal would be a service rendered to you as much as to myself, would it not?”

“I suppose so,” she conceded.

“Be that as it may,” Léac leaned towards her in a conspiratorial manner, “I believe that we can both reach an agreement which will be mutually satisfactory. So, Madam,” he smiled a cold, chill smile. “Please, tell me everything you know.”

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“You shouldn’t have gone to such trouble!” Hal grinned broadly on entering Marc’s private dining room. Trays of sweetmeats, fruit and cakes fanned out across the candle-lit table, a tall flagon of wine and glasses forming the centrepiece. After two months of staring up at a white ceiling, her eyes feasted on the rich warm tapestries and glowing hearth of the cosy chamber.

“Well, I imagine that after a diet of soup and gruel you won’t refuse it,” he smiled.

“Of course not. I have to admit that I believe I may have even worked up something of an appetite.” She rubbed her hands in expectation and lowered herself into an armchair beside the crackling warmth of the fire.

Marc’s invitation to dine was, in essence, symbolic. The doctor had finally pronounced Hal suitably recovered. Her cuts and bruises had faded and her cracked ribs no longer caused her discomfort.

“The doctor tells me that your wounds appear to be healing well.” Marc poured two large glasses of wine and handed her one of them. Outside the window, the chill autumnal wind whistled across the garden, sending scurries of leaves whirling into the



air. “So,” he sat down at the other end of the table. “What will you do now that you are recovered?”

“I hadn’t given it much thought.”

He raised an eyebrow, took a swig of his wine and then shook his head. “Oh come on, Hal, please don’t take me for an idiot. You’ve been lying on your back for weeks with plenty of time to come up with any number of hare-brained schemes.”

“Schemes for what?”

“If I know you at all, I’d say for revenge and rescue. Neither of which is a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve already told you what I think of going after Meracad. It won’t work. You’ll put both her and yourself in grave danger if you even try.”

“And if I don’t? What kind of life do you think she’ll have – married to a man she doesn’t even know?”

Sighing, Marc swirled the wine around his glass. “Maybe you’re right, but surely it’s better than no life at all?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Look,” he set the glass back on the table and peered at her intently. “Maybe I don’t understand you well enough, I admit it. But I’m a realist, Hal, and at least realists generally live to see old age which is more than you can expect for all your honourable intentions.”

“It’s not merely an honourable intention,” she returned, riled.

Marc slapped his hand down on the table and cursed. “I don’t make a habit of saving people’s lives so they can give them up again at the next opportunity.”

She clenched her jaw, fixing her gaze on the fire. “Nor does it mean that you can then dictate their lives to them.”

With a low, furious hiss, Marc knocked his chair back and moved over to the fire which he proceeded to stir viciously with the poker. Hal picked up an apple and gnawed at it, attempting to curb her temper. She knew better than to provoke him. After all, he was right — he had saved her life. But over the days and weeks of convalescence, she’d had plenty of time to think. And she was certainly not prepared to let him steer her from her course.

He returned to the table and drained his wine in one gulp, immediately pouring out another glass. “At least promise me one thing,” he said, his tone less heated.

“What?”

“Get out of the city for a while. If Léac discovers that you’re still alive, he may decide to finish you off for good.”

“I have every intention of doing so.”

“Well, at least we can agree on something.” He

seemed more relaxed. “Eat for the Emperor’s own sake.” He wafted a hand towards the table. “Lira will string us both up after all the trouble she’s gone to.”

As they attacked the feast laid out before them, Marc seemed to recover his good humour, gossiping about the lives of courtiers and citizens: the intrigues and scandals of the previous month. She feigned interest but found it difficult to concentrate, her mind gripped by an intense unease.

The evening wore on. They had eaten and drunk their fill, and Marc was now even more talkative than usual. For her part, the alcohol had done little to improve her spirits and she found herself unable to match his banter. Slumping back in the chair, her patience dwindled as the indiscretions of the aristocracy were laid before her in detail. It was only when she heard her mother’s name that she grew more alert.

“I believe she may feel a little guilty, you know, Hal.”

“What?” she sat up with a jerk, as if waking from a deep sleep. “Cara? Guilt? She hasn’t a heart to feel guilty with, Marc. You know that as well as I do.”

“Well if that’s the case, why would she write to you?”

Disoriented now, Hal shook her head, struggling to gather her thoughts. “She wrote to me?”

“Yes, a letter arrived today with her seal on it. I

would have given it to you sooner, but you didn't exactly seem in the best frame of mind."

"Give it me, Marc," she growled.

"Alright." He fished in his pocket and handed her a crumpled envelope.

"You had it all along?"

"I was hoping for a suitable moment. You know, I wanted to wait until you were..."

"drunk." She finished his sentence for him.

"Well, not exactly. Listen, just read it would you? You know I've been practically sick with impatience all day to find out what it is."

"Congratulations on not reading it," she threw back with spite.

"Just look at it," he continued, ignoring the insult.

She tore open the envelope and a small card slid out into her lap. Hal recognised her mother's flowing hand at once. Swearing volubly, she threw the message back onto the table. "Feeling guilty, you say?"

"What is it?"

"Read it yourself."

Marc picked up the card, held it to the candle light, and read aloud:

Lady Cara Thæc and Master Salius Léac hereby send challenge to the duellist Halanya. May she answer for her insults to our families. An opponent

has been chosen and is prepared to fight to the very death. The fight, to be held in The Grove a week from hence, will remove the stain upon our honour.

His hands shaking, he lay the card back on the table, horror-stricken.

“I’m sorry, Hal,” he whispered hoarsely. “It would appear that she feels no remorse.”

“I told you so. The only remorse she could feel is over the fact that I’m not actually dead.”

Silence descended upon the room. Both stared into the red-glowing embers of the fire. Despite its warmth, Hal experienced a chill shudder which seemed to emanate from her own heart.

“All the more reason for you to leave Colvé,” she heard Marc say. “Maybe you should take Franc up on his offer after all – head up to Hannac for a while. I mean, if Léac and your mother are together on this...” his words trailed away.

She looked at him sharply. “You think I’ll leave now?”

“Well you can’t possibly accept this challenge. I mean, it’s clearly a trap. Besides, you know the punishment for illegal duelling, Hal. Even if you win, they’ll sling you into the palace dungeons to rot.”

“So you’re saying that in the face of the entire city, I should dispense with my reputation as a duellist altogether – my reputation which Beric

would tell you is all I have?” Her words gathered pace as she spoke, clipped with fury. The warmth which now flooded her veins did not come from the wine — of that much she was certain.

When Marc spoke again, a coldness had entered his eyes, his face now tight and drawn and grave against the candlelight. “Hal Thæc, I have saved your life once. I won’t do it again if you insist on putting yourself at risk.”

“You won’t have to.”

“Oh, really? So this will be just another duel like any other, will it? Oh apart from the fact that you’re already weak, and that you have not trained for two entire months. And let’s not forget that you’ll be taking on an opponent chosen by Cara and Léac, who we now know both want you dead, and that the duel will be not for cash but to the death? If, that is, there is a duel at all and it’s not simply an attempt to lure you into an ambush.”

“That’s not the point.”

“So what is the point then?” He rose now, still clutching his wine glass, the contents spilling over its edges as his hands trembled.

“Léac had me beaten like a dog in the street. The very person I love the most was taken from me. Now, just consider for a moment that they would take from me my reputation: probably the only thing of value I have left. If I run now, I lose it. Or does

your concept of honour differ so much from my own that you can't understand that?"

She had said too much. She realised that. He deserved better from her. Marc winced, as if she had dealt him a blow. The coldness left his eyes, replaced by something far worse: disappointment. When he spoke it was with the formality he would have reserved for a stranger: "I would like you to leave." He could not even look at her. "If you're well enough to contemplate revenge, you're well enough to leave my house."

He pushed his way from the room, the door slamming in his wake, the resulting gust of air extinguishing the candles.

Hal sank down, her head upon her arms, now experiencing the full weight of shame. The fire popped in the grate and outside, the wind continued its relentless howling across the courtyard. Part of her realised that she had just uttered the cruellest words in her life to the one person she had most reason to love. No one had given her more than Marc, not even Beric. The senator had supported her in every way he could since she was a child. Not just with money – it had been far more than that. It was the moral support he had offered, when it had seemed that the entire city was against her. And what had she given in return, she asked herself, guilt clawing at her, easing its way beneath her very skin.

Nothing. She had given nothing back. The relationship had been an entirely selfish one.

Furious with herself, she picked up a wineglass and hurled it into the ebbing hearth. The glass splintered into shards, the embers hissing around them. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes and she wiped them away. It was her fault. She was on her own now, truly on her own. Léac and Cara would get their revenge, no doubt. She deserved nothing better.

Dragging herself to her feet she made her way upstairs, took out a bag, and filled it with the few clothes she possessed. She pulled her jacket on, slung the bag over her shoulder and slipped out onto the corridor, closing the door behind her. Outside Marc's room she paused, contemplating an apology, a farewell befitting their friendship. But after what had been said, nothing would heal such a wound. And so, swiftly descending the stairs, she headed out into the streets of Colvé for the first time in weeks.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Orla

The battalion had returned to Colvé for the remaining months of the year. Orla regarded the city as a giant cess-pit, and she was not thrilled to be back. In the wastes of the South she had chance to be alone: to think, to fight. Back here, nothing was real. The city's residents had no idea what crimes were being committed in their name in such distant territories. They had one aim, it seemed, which was to indulge their appetite for pleasure: to dance, drink, eat and share each other's beds. Like animals, she thought, with scorn.

Everything was different back there in Yegdan. At first, heartbroken at the sight of starving children, failing crops and dying animals, she had given away

her rations. But after some time she learned that it was pointless to do so. She was left hungry, and such acts of kindness did nothing to alleviate the suffering she saw around her. And so her heart hardened like the stony, infertile earth, and she kept her food, eating it out of sight for fear that she might turn around to find reproachful eyes watching her.

The battalions came and went, each time with the same brief: to destroy the warlords who, controlling parts of this vast, dry territory, threatened the stability of the empire. Yet what, she asked herself, could the Emperor possibly want with such a place? Taking its toll upon the imperial army, the land soaked up soldiers' blood, yielding nothing in return. To the North, the fertile plains and highlands provided the capital with its crops. The great stretch of ocean which determined the empire's natural frontiers in the East brought fish, while the mountainous West was a treasure chest of minerals, its woods hacked down for carpenters, its stones mined for builders. Yet this arid land, almost a desert, dried out by famine and war: what could it possibly contribute to the imperial coffers? Better to seal off the borders and leave these people to their fate.

Like his father before him, the Emperor now dreamed of expansion, and there was nowhere left to go. What did it matter that the land was of no use, its

people shattered by violence and horror? It was simply territory, and there was nothing more that the inhabitants of Colvé cared for than to hear that their empire had increased by an inch. That its power had somehow been exerted over a strange land and people of whom they were ignorant. That was all that really counted.

So while the hardships of Yegdan – the hungry faces and dry, weathered landscape – had taken its toll, she found Colvé, with its rich appetites and lack of heart even more difficult to accept. It didn't concern her whether they were courtiers, senators, businessmen, or she reflected bitterly, duellists. They were all the same. They all shared responsibility for crimes committed in their name, and they were all too indolent and selfish to ever want to hear of those crimes.

Orla wandered into the training yard. Here, soldiers – men and women – smashed at each other with broadswords, shot arrows into targets, flung spears high in the air. She picked a sword from a rack, swinging it around a few times, testing its weight. Maybe she could find someone to train with. At least fighting prevented her from dwelling too much upon what she had seen and heard: upon the sights and sounds of villages burned to the ground, the vile taste of the dry desert. Yet fighting here in the city barracks was merely training. Back there it

meant killing. No relief could be found in the drawing of another's blood: the final gasp they gave as they sank to the ground and their eyes slowly closed. Such a result meant merely the conclusion of the task to which she had been assigned.

A hand tapped her on the shoulder and she briefly left the dark place her mind had taken her to. She turned round to notice a young lad, one of the barracks' servants.

“Someone to see you.”

Orla followed him into the interior of the building along a labyrinthine series of corridors, dimly-lit by burning brands. He led her to a small ante-chamber used by officers for private meetings. A tall woman of middle years stood behind a table, looking as if she were about to give orders in a military campaign. Arms crossed, green eyes piercing and arrogant, she peered through the gloom at Orla, her hair swept tightly back from her face: Cara Thæc.

“I make it a point of honour not to talk to courtiers.” Orla turned to leave.

“That's rather hypocritical of you, given that you choose to spend so much of your time in the company of a certain duellist.”

“That duellist was no courtier. I have nothing to say to you.”

“It's strange,” Cara continued, undeterred, “that you refer to her in the past tense.”

“That is because, as I’m sure your spies have informed you, our relationship is over.”

She felt herself sucked into the conversation against her own will. Cara stood for everything she most detested about the city: its intrigues, gossip and self-obsession. As far as Orla was concerned, courtiers were unable to see beyond the end of their powdered, urbane noses. Yet she rarely came face to face with the object of her contempt, and now she found it difficult to turn away.

“She disappointed you, I believe, as she has disappointed others.” Cara barely opened her mouth when she spoke, the words running out in a low, cool drawl.

“We went our different ways. It happens.

“You seem reconciled to your fate. And yet my informants led me to believe that you were so furious at the time you parted with her that the two of you fought. That, in full view of the misfits and human carrion who frequent *The Emperor* you both rolled around in the sawdust, punching and kicking each other. I suppose, on the basis of that episode, it could be said with a degree of confidence that Halanya is no courtier.”

The memory was too painful for Orla. She turned to leave without uttering another word.

“It is such a shame, is it not, that while you were languishing in the wastes of the South she remained

in Colvé, enjoying her fêted position with all the privileges it brings – money, fame, a certain young woman – the daughter of a rich merchant, I believe.”

Orla remained facing the door, half determined to grab Cara by the throat and throttle the life out of her. “Madam,” she hissed, her teeth gritted in rage, “you have succeeded in confirming why I hate the court and everything connected with it. Good day.”

Cara leapt around the table, positioning herself between Orla and the door with surprising speed.

“Don’t make me force my way out, Cara. I’ll hurt you if I do.”

“You have every reason to want Halanya dead and you do nothing about it. Are you a coward, woman? Are you really content to eke out your days on the empire’s southern frontiers, while she pays you no more than a second thought?”

“I hate her, is that enough for you? She brought that bitch to *The Emperor* and paraded her in front of me. That’s the kind of low behaviour I expected from courtiers, never from her. I’ve finished with her, and I hope I never see her again.”

“You wouldn’t have to, if you killed her.”

“What?” Orla shuddered, incandescent with rage. “*Me* kill *her*? You want me to do your dirty work? If you wanted her out of your way, you had limitless possibilities to do it and you never took them. Why should I help you now?”

“I’m asking you to fight her, not to assassinate her. Far more honourable, wouldn’t you say? And if you were to win, well...with Hal disposed of, you would have your revenge, wouldn’t you? Money, too. You would be richly recompensed. And I could even make sure that you’d never have to return to that hell hole in the South.”

Cara’s words prompted memories of a certain evening in the city square. Orla recalled the heat, the billowing fountain, the rich sensation of sitting beside Hal, of their bodies brushing. And then Meracad had arrived. The merchant’s daughter carried a fragile beauty, money fair chinked behind her when she walked. Why her? Why anyone? If she couldn’t have Hal, why should anyone else? A duel, Cara had just said. A duel... “How can you be so sure I’d win? She is, after all, renowned for her skill with a sword. I’m just a soldier.”

“My dear, you’ve been away from Colvé for too long. You know nothing of the past few months. Meracad’s father found out about their little tryst.”

“You mean you told him?”

“Possibly. It shouldn’t concern you how he was made aware of the fact. His daughter was sent to Dal Reniac to marry Lord Bruno Nérac.”

“A death sentence,” Orla remarked flatly.

“Meanwhile, Halanya was subjected to a severe beating. Which she survived.”

“Unfortunately for you.”

“For us. But what it does mean is that, in her now weakened state, I really don’t see how she could possibly beat you.”

“The odds would be in my favour, I suppose. But as I’m sure you are aware, illegal duelling carries a heavy punishment.”

“You would be under my protection”

Orla snorted in contempt. “As if that counted for something.”

“You’d be out of the city and enjoying a far more comfortable posting as a naval officer in the East immediately. As much as you might hate courtiers, you can’t deny us our powers of influence. Think about it, girl. As it is, you face certain death in the South. Such opportunities come but once in a lifetime: money, a career, a new woman at your side perhaps, and the satisfaction of Halanya lying dead at your feet.”

She would be a fool to trust Cara, she realised that. But there was one thing she knew for certain: the courtier’s hatred of Hal rivalled her own. And the thought of wiping that arrogance off the duellist’s face, of calling her to account for her selfishness...another memory arose, unbidden: that night at *The Emperor* when Hal had shown up with Meracad for the first time. Orla’s very heart had exploded in rage.



She pulled her thoughts together, backed away from Cara and sat down at the officer's table, recouping her self-control. "Listen, Cara, if I were to agree to such a thing, it would change nothing. I hate you all. This is between Hal and me."

"As you wish. The Grove in a week's time. Obviously I don't need to remind you to keep your mouth shut about this. I should think less of you if I believed you had informed a soul."

"It's not possible for me to think less of you than I already do. I will be there. That's all you need to know."

"Good girl." With the faintest flash of a smile Cara disappeared, leaving Orla alone in the ante-chamber. A duel to the death – it had a certain romantic edge to it. But Orla was not romantic. She was a realist. In a week's time, either Hal or herself would be dead. That, she reasoned, was justice.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### North and South

Someone's boot was pressing into her tender ribs. Wincing, Hal stared up at Beric's grizzled face, his thick-set features folded in amusement.

"Well, what have we here?" he asked, as if to an invisible audience.

Groaning, she dragged herself into a sitting position and shook off the blankets, struggling to remember where she was. Her eyes gradually focussed on the racks of rapiers, the high windows and white walls of the training hall. There had been nowhere left to go. She hadn't paid the rent on her chambers in Riverside for two months. Besides, a night spent on the hard boards of the academy had seemed some kind of penance for her argument with

Marc.

Crouching down beside her, Beric gave her hair a playful ruffle.

“Get off!” She brushed his hand aside.

“Marc’s place not good enough for you, eh?”

“Too good.” Still half dazed she narrowed her eyes, peering at the rows of weapons that lined the walls. “I want to duel again.”

“You want to duel again,” he mimicked, tugging at his beard. “And what makes you think that you’re ready for it?”

“I know it’s time.”

“Really? Well, maybe you are a little improved physically.” He surveyed her critically. “But up here?” He tapped her head with his little finger. “Are you improved up here?”

“What do you mean?”

With an explosive sigh, Beric sat down on the floor, facing her. The irony faded from his eyes. “I think it’s time you and me had a little chat, Hal Thæc.”

He crossed his legs, still tugging at his beard in contemplation. Hal grimaced, bracing herself inwardly for another tirade.

“I remember when you first came to this place, Hal. A young lass, ill at ease with the world, not sure of her place in it. When the palace guards asked me to give you a chance, I thought it was a joke. A girl of

sixteen, and a courtier to boot? An imperial ward playing with swords?” Smirking, he shook his head as if the memory itself were too incredible to contemplate even now, five years later.

“I thought they were joking too,” she murmured. “They told me you’d take me from the palace if I could prove my talent. But I never believed them. They set me up against that stable lad, do you remember?”

Beric laughed long and low, tears leaking from his eyes. “Remember? I thought he’d fairly wet himself by the time you’d finished with him. No, lass. When I saw what you could do, even then — your skill was raw, that’s true enough. But it was there. You had — you have — an ability I’ve rarely seen in men, and certainly never in a woman. And over the years, you’ve proved my instincts right every time. I saw something of myself in you — the same stubbornness, the same resolve. If you lost a duel, you never gave up. You came back here, picked up your sword and carried on.”

She felt her cheeks glow with embarrassment and cleared her throat.

“Now, Hal, I’m not saying that you lost that determination, but ...” he waved his arms expansively and smoothed down his beard. “I’m not saying Meracad was wrong, or that you were. I’m not saying you can’t lose your heart for a boy or a girl, or

whoever you please. But you should have the sense to see that some things, well, they just aren't going to work. It's not your fault, or hers. It's the world we live in, Hal. It's not of our making. You lost control, lass. This situation was eating away at you. I could see it, and I'll be honest, I was afraid. Now we know where it all led: you half dead in the streets, the girl — who knows where?"

Hal stared at the floor, biting her lip. She knew very well where Meracad was. That was the problem.

"I'm sorry, Hal, but that's the truth. Now what you need to ask yourself is this: are you strong enough to pick yourself up again and carry on fighting, or has this whole business," he spread his hands searching for a better word, "this problem — has it knocked the wind out of my best duellist for good? Am I going to have to look for a replacement for you, Hal? Because it will be hard to do."

Hal's lips opened and closed but the words failed to form. Beric had never spoken like this before. Now, she realised, was the time for honesty. Now was the time to tell him of the argument with Marc, to show him Cara's challenge. She ought to confess her desire to leave Colvé, to find Meracad. But she already knew what his reaction would be. "I'm here to duel," she said at last, the guilt flowing through her like a wave of sickness. The palms of her hands felt hot and clammy and she wiped them dry on her

shirt.

Beric's gaze was cool, his eyes firm and steady. Her heart thumped wildly against her chest. He couldn't possibly believe her. The old duelling master was far too wily to be duped by such a blatant lie.

His brow creased into a frown. With a slow sigh, he dry-washed his face with two coarse, calloused hands and then stared at her once more. "Train then, if that's your wish. Finn'll help you." He levelled one thick, dirt-stained finger at her face. "But if you break any rule that Finn or I set you, if for a moment you think of chasing off after that girl, or doing anything stupid, you'll be on your own."

Another thick wave of nausea assaulted her stomach. She would have retched, racing back down the stairs to haul her guts up in the street below. Clenching her teeth, swallowing down the hard knot of nerves and guilt that rose like gall in her throat, she took a deep breath. "Thank you Beric, I appreciate it."

"I hope so. Now you'd better get up before the lads arrive."

And without another word, he got to his feet, paced across the hall into his office and closed the door. Hal rose unsteadily and rolled up her sleeping mat. Splashing cold water from a bowl onto her face seemed to soothe her jarred nerves. She dug around

in her sack for a change of clothes, stripping behind a screen in a corner of the hall, pulling on a leather vest and coarse linen trousers. When she stepped back into the hall, Finn had arrived.

“What the hell are you doing here?” He folded his arms, staring at her as she pulled a blade from the rack as if she had never left.

“I’m here to train. Beric agreed.”

“Did he?” Finn didn’t sound convinced. “He told me what happened, Hal. Are you strong enough?”

“You’re the best duellist there is, Finn. Train me — give me a few days and I’ll be fine again, believe me.”

“Well you’re certainly not training until you’ve eaten. Wait here.” Grumbling to himself, he left the hall, returning after a few minutes with a hunk of bread and a jar of soup. “Eat it while it’s still warm.” He pressed the jar into her hands. “My wife made it for me but I’d say you’re in greater need.”

She balked, staring at the soup as if it were pond water.

“If you want to train, Hal, you’ll eat it. I’ll be waiting in Beric’s office. He and I need to talk — about you.”

Hal raised the rim of the jar to her lips and drank. The soup was salty and tepid, but when it hit her stomach she realised how hungry she was, and devoured it in minutes.

“Well I can’t argue with the old man I suppose.” Finn had emerged from Beric’s office, his expression grim. “But I won’t pretend to be happy about it. You’d be better served in bed.”

“I’ll be alright. Let’s get started.” She tossed a rapier towards him and he caught it, mid-air. “Best of three hits?”

Finn sighed. “If you can hold onto that sword, Hal, I’ll be impressed.” He whipped the blade through the air a few times before stretching his arm forward, the blade almost level with her chest. “Duellist, en garde.”

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Lying on her bed, Meracad swung the shark’s tooth over her face like a pendulum, considering it as if in a trance. *Hal isn’t coming*, she told herself. *This is all I have left.*

She was now a wife. A wife – what did that word mean? No matter how hard she tried, she could not forget the words they had made her repeat at the marriage ceremony: *To honour and obey the will of my husband...now his and his alone...*

They had come out in a half whisper, the temple priest begging her to speak louder for the benefit of her guests, that they might hear and rejoice in her commitment, her promise. As she turned to face



Nérac, she caught sight of her father, arms crossed, head thrown back in satisfaction, a leery grin stretched tight across his broad, square jaws. Out of the frying pan...

And the illusion of marriage as an alliance shattered after that wedding night. As far as she was aware, Nérac had already tired of her. Now he treated her with no more than cold contempt, greeting her with a sneer or a mere grunt of acknowledgement if they happened to pass in the corridors of his fortress. One thing, however, he made clear: he was not a man to be refused. A contract was a contract, he reminded her on those occasions that he chose to see her in her rooms. And despite her constant struggles, he insisted upon proving that point.

She dragged herself upright and sat cross-legged on the bed, stuffing the shark's tooth back into her pocket. What would Hal have done? Certainly not wait in doe-like acceptance of her fate. Even at a risk to her life, she would never allow anyone to dictate her own existence to her upon such terrible terms.

But Meracad had been testing the fortress for weak points over the past two months with no success. It was the perfect prison. Despite having access to the inner courtyard, the outer walls were so solidly constructed and heavily guarded that nowhere could she spot even a chink of light which

might indicate an opening. And attempts to look for such a place incurred its own dangers: soldiers and servants observing her, as if well aware of her intentions.

Finally, she believed she had found the only alternative route out of the keep: through the kitchens, rather than the heavily-guarded main gate house. Behind them ran the outer walls — perhaps there was an exit to the rear of the keep. Or maybe the cellars led out beneath the fortress, and they could be accessed from the kitchens. The prospect filled her with hope and she determined to investigate this new possibility.

Creeping down during the night, she gave the door a tentative push. In the darkness it was almost impossible to make out a thing, but she could hear the snores and heavy breathing of sleepers on the floor. For the servants, it appeared, the kitchens served both as workplace and bedroom. Her nostrils filled with the residual smells of cooking: of broth and roasted meat. She felt heartened. Surely there must be a way out that she had overlooked?

Skirting the edge of the room, she touched the wall for fear of bumping into the sleepers or furniture, obscured by the darkness. The remnants of a fire in the hearth offered scant light, but she could just about perceive a door beside it which must lead to the cellars. She pulled a candle stub

from her pocket and lit it in the glowing embers, taking care to avoid the sleepers clustered around the hearth. Then she reached for the handle.

The door lurched open. She jumped back, horrified, unwittingly stepping on the arm of one of the servants who sprang up in alarm. It was all over, she realised — her plans foiled, the man's shouts alerting others in the room to the presence of an intruder. And as they woke, a figure emerged from behind the cellar door bearing a burning brand. Blinded by the sudden light, she failed to make him out at first, but her vision eventually focussed upon the reeling silhouette of a large, drunk man.

"Lady!" He belched before offering her a mocking bow. In fear, she took another step backwards.

"We are graced with your presence, aren't we ladies and gentlemen?" The sleepers, rubbing eyes and yawning, turned their attention upon her. She shrank from the light cast by the brand.

"Yes, we wondered whether you might find your way down here. You see, the master told us to keep an eye out for you. Said you had a tendency to wander. Think those were his words."

"I was a little hungry, Sir." The lie sounded so feeble, so ridiculous she wished she could take it back immediately.

"Oh hungry are you, Madam? Well, sure we've food enough to keep a lady like yourself satisfied.

What'll it be? Some broth, a nice chicken perhaps, a bowl of rice?" He gestured expansively around the kitchen as if it were his own little empire, and she realised that this must be the kitchen master, Garth, a man — if rumour were to be believed — unparalleled in his ugliness, both of body and behaviour. In spite of her terror, she forced herself to face this monster who, she had heard, spent his nights in drunkenness, his days terrorising the servants under his command. What little hair he had appeared to have been plastered over a balding pate, his face peppered with warts. Fattened upon his nightly excesses in the cellars, he was clearly a man for whom hygiene was of secondary importance.

"I seem to have lost my appetite." Her voice dropped to a whisper.

Garth drew nearer. She recoiled from the stink of alcohol carried on his breath.

"If that's the case, Madam, I don't see any reason for you to stay here any longer. I don't welcome unexpected guests. I'm sure his lordship will be fascinated to hear of your night time visits."

She turned on her heel and walked as calmly as possible out of the room, ignoring the collective, mocking gaze of the servants. The door swung to behind her, plunging the corridor into darkness. She seemed able to breathe once more. It was that moment, that awful, hopeless, fear-racked moment,

that a curious sense of finality and acceptance washed over her. She had lost. There were no more ways out — other than death of course. Her fate was no longer beyond her control. Others would decide it for her.

Now sliding from the bed, biting back a fresh assault of tears, Meracad hurried to the window, almost inclined to jump without a second thought. Even if she ever escaped, there was nothing worth waiting for on the other side of the fortress walls. After all, Hal was dead. Her own father had seen to that.

The drop was dizzying. She almost vomited in fear and slumped down against the wall, disgusted at her own cowardice. Back in Colvé, she had scaled the walls of her father's house with ease. Here, the height made her physically sick. She remained on the floor for some time, her head buried in her arms, furious at herself for such passivity.

A coldness seemed to work its way into her heart. Detachment would be survival. Thoughts of the past, of Hal, of freedom would be more weight than she could bear. She must train herself not to think.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Seconds

It was early evening: already dark, the training hall creaked and groaned as wind lashed the window casements. Beric and the cadets had long since left, and now only Finn remained, dropping swords into the racks as he prepared to return home.

Hal rolled her sleeping mat out on the academy's wooden floor, weariness creeping its way along her limbs, taking her by surprise.

"Are you sure you don't want to come back with me?" Finn asked. "You're welcome, you know."

"I'm fine. You should be getting home. Your family will be wondering where you are."

"Suit yourself." With a shrug he pulled on a woollen cap and left for the cold and the dark

outside.

“I usually do,” the girl muttered to herself. It was time, she decided. She had spent long enough preparing and thinking. The doors slammed shut below and she peered through a window, observing Finn’s silhouette disappeared into the night. When she was certain the street below was deserted, she pulled on thick leather boots, wrapped herself in a winter great coat and headed out.

This was the first time she had been alone on the city streets for months. She shivered, hugging her arms around her body to keep out the cold, and set her head down against the wind. It had been a long time since she’d walked in this direction, and the last time, she realised ruefully, had been with Meracad. The memory struck her like a blow. It had been too long. Surely Meracad would have given up hope by now. Shame burrowed its way inside her conscience. She still had the chance to leave Colvé right now: there was no need to go through with this.

Yet the prospect of the duel tore at her, nagged her, bit her, refused to let her go. She could not go against her instincts: it would be an act of self-denial. After all, the first thing Beric had ever taught her since her arrival at the academy was that honour meant everything. And honour meant fighting, no matter what the odds. Once a duellist, always a duellist.

And if she was honest with herself, the perverse desire to face her enemies drove her on. Even if their plan was a trap — and she was quite capable of conceding that it was — she had to confront them. She had to ask Léac how he could possibly sacrifice his only daughter in such a cold blooded way. Above all else, she had to hear Cara acknowledge that she was her mother. For, deep in her heart, she harboured a desire to transform Cara: to make her see that, for whatever reasons her hatred existed, there was still a bond between them. The future could be different. Biting her lip, she trudged on, the wind whipping up the rain which stung her face and eyes.

*The Emperor* emitted a cheery glow. She caught the faint, casual strains of a fiddle working over the dull hum of conversation, and pushing open the door was greeted by the familiar fragrances of pipe smoke and stale beer. It was much quieter than the last time she had visited in the late summer. Now, the clientele clustered around tables, the floor stained and wet from the mud brought in on their boots.

When her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, she made out Jools sitting at a table near the fireside, both hands clasping a tankard of hot ale. The young thief seemed buried in thought, failing to recognise Hal until she had drawn up a seat opposite. Jools



glanced up, her confused, defensive expression quickly resolving itself into a broad smile.

They embraced warmly. “Hal! Didn’t think I’d ever see you back here, girl. How are you keeping?”

“I’ve felt better.”

“I’ll bet. We did the rounds, Kris and me, trying to find out what’d happened to you. We heard that Meracad had been sent north and we could only assume the worst. Then Kris comes back one day – she’d been spying around Marc’s place. Maids can be quite talkative if you ask them the right questions.”

Grinning, Hal shook her head. “The pair of you are incorrigible.”

“We were only taking an interest in your health, Hal. Kris’ll be back soon. Couldn’t resist pulling a few tricks – you know what she’s like.”

“And Orla?” Hal asked, unable to look at Jools.

The thief sucked in her breath and then shook her head. “No idea. Her battalion were off south for some time but word has it they are back in town. Haven’t seen her in ages. Listen, get yourself a beer. It’ll be like old times, even without Orla. Or Meracad,” she added as a hasty afterthought.

“Could you stand me one, Jools? I’m a bit hard up at the moment.”

“What, you ain’t even got enough for a beer? Things are looking bad. Alright, hold on a minute.” Jools left for the bar, returning with a hot frothy

pint, and had begun recounting her adventures from the past two months when someone brushed against Hal's back. She span round to find Kris rifling through her pockets.

"You won't find much in there, Kris. She's broke," Jools smirked.

"What are these then?" Kris waved two envelopes in the air.

"Give me those!" Hal snarled, snatching at the letters.

"Alright, alright." Kris handed them back to her. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself – you, a bleeding aristocrat with no money in your pockets."

"An illegitimate aristocrat," Hal corrected her. "Listen, ladies, I have to admit that I've a favour to ask the pair of you."

"Thought this wasn't just a social visit." Pulling up a stool, Kris slunk down at the table, shivered and held her hands out to the fire.

"I'll get straight to the point in that case," Hal began. "I would like you to deliver these messages: one to Salius Léac and the other to Cara Thæc."

Jools released an explosive blast of breath. "She's up to something, Kris. Listen, Hal, we might go back a long way, but I ain't taking no envelopes to anyone until I know what's in them."

Sighing, Hal surveyed her two friends with a growing sense of pessimism. She had hoped it would

not be necessary to give away too many details.  
“Alright. Read it.”

Unable to suppress her curiosity, Jools broke the seal on one of the envelopes, scanned the contents, and then dropped the parchment back on the table, shocked.

“What is it?” Kris asked, her voice tight.

“She’s mad. Read it.”

Kris picked up the message and read aloud:

The duellist Halanya Thæc hereby returns the challenge offered by the Merchant Salius Léac and Lady Cara Thæc to a death duel. May they choose their defendant and be prepared to meet at dawn in three days’ time at The Grove.

Her voice rising as she read the final sentence, she froze, staring at the letter in her hand. “Hal, you can’t do this,” Jools whispered, horrified. “They’ll finish you off.”

Unable to conceal her irritation, Hal stood up, knocking over her stool as she did so. “Thanks for your help, ladies. I’ll just have to deliver them myself.”

“No, wait!” Snapping out of her daze, Kris grabbed Hal’s arm.

“Sit down, girl, let’s talk about this.”

“What’s the point? I don’t need to talk, I need to

act. I thought you two at least would understand, even if Beric and Marc can't."

"We're just taken aback, Hal." Kris attempted to calm her friend down. "Calm down and tell us what you have in mind."

Reluctantly, she picked up the stool and sat down again, placing the challenge back in its envelope. "Listen, you take these letters to Léac and my mother. They choose their man. We meet, I win and I'm off to get Meracad back. Couldn't be simpler."

"Yes, you see, Hal, it all makes sense up to those two words *I win*," Jools objected. "You're absolutely certain that you're going to win?" She eyed her friend's weakened frame sceptically.

"Alright, I'm not. But if I don't, you won't have to worry about doing me any more favours, will you?"

The three of them stared into the fire, the background chatter and mutterings of the inn fading to a dull buzz, gloom descending like flakes of ash. After a while, Kris said, "What I don't understand, is this: if you're so prepared to risk your life, why don't you go straight after the girl?"

Hal shook her head. "Three very good reasons, my friend." She counted off on her fingers: "One: they sent me a challenge. You know very well I can't turn down a challenge."

Kris shook her head. "Not good enough. What else?"

“I have to convince myself that I can do this. That I can find her and save her. If I can’t even fight a decent duel, what hope do I have?”

The thieves looked at each other. “So it’s a question of confidence?” Jools asked.

“Something like that. Confidence, reputation.”

“And what’s your other reason? Would I be right in suspecting that it involves your mother? Because if it’s revenge you’re after, you’re going about it the wrong way.”

“Maybe revenge, maybe something else.”

“Such as?”

Hal sighed. “I owe you that much honesty, I suppose. Imagine that you’d spent your entire existence aware of the fact that your own mother despised you.”

“I never knew my mother,” Kris countered.

“That’s different, Kris. We can assume that, if you’d known her, she might at least have held some maternal feelings for you. But Cara hates me and she always has done. I just want to know why.”

“And you think she’ll tell you? We all know why, Hal. You’re her bastard. Your existence is a living stain on her reputation.”

Hal shifted uncomfortably. To hear Jools state the situation in such plain terms was hard.

“Yes, but Jools lots of people have children out of wedlock. It doesn’t mean they have to hate them,

does it? If Cara won't speak of the past now, she'll never do it."

"I suppose when you put it like that..."

"So, will you deliver the envelopes, or will I have to do it myself?"

Kris growled. "You're an idiot, do you know that? An utter fool. But I know you won't give us any peace until we agree. Just one thing."

"Anything."

"I believe it's usual, under such circumstances, for a duellist to require a second."

"Possibly."

"Well, here we are. Your seconds. Because, let's face it Hal, if you turn up there alone, you may well be getting more than you bargained for."

"I'll not have you two involved. It's too risky."

Jools shook her head, snatched the challenges from the table and swayed them close to the fire.

"I don't think you're in a position to dictate terms to us, are you, Hal?"

Cursing, Hal drained her beer. "I don't want you getting mixed up with Cara or Léac. They're dangerous people."

"All the more reason for us to come with you. So what's it to be? We deliver your challenges and act as seconds when you duel, or you do it all alone? At least, if things go really badly, you might want someone to inform your employer that you won't be

coming back to his academy. Ever.”

Hal mulled it over for a few moments. She had no desire to involve her friends in such a venture. Yet they were no strangers to risk themselves. And if it was a trap, she stood a better chance with them than alone.

“Have it your way,” she agreed at last, her tone sullen.

Jools favoured her with a broad, snaggle-toothed grin. “You see, girl. She always comes round to our way of thinking in the end. Doesn’t she, Kris?”

“I don’t see that she’s got any choice. Alright, I’ll take Léac, you take Cara. But just remember, Hal, I ain’t doing you any more favours.”

“I just told you: if I lose this fight, you won’t have to worry about that.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### The Grove

Fog hung over Riverside, encroaching upon the streets of the capital, winding its way around buildings and up alleyways: a fog through which it was almost impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Hal waited at the bottom of the academy steps outside the merchants' cloth hall. She blew on her hands in a vain attempt to keep the icy cold at bay. Her stomach was already lurching with the prospect of what she was about to do. A few days of training, after two entire months of convalescence. Was she strong enough? Her gut feeling told her that she was not.

Two shapes coalesced in the fog, gaining in clarity: she recognised Jools and Kris, grateful for



their company, even while she regretted their involvement. At the very least, if things went badly wrong, there would be someone to let Marc and Beric know what had happened.

The two thieves were both in sombre mood.

“Well, did you deliver the letters?” she asked nervously.

“We’re here, aren’t we? They got them.” Jools appraised Hal. “You don’t have to do this, you know. There’s still chance to turn back. We can get you out of the city for good, can’t we, Kris? No one need know – if you’re worried about your reputation as a duellist.”

Hal shook her head. No amount of dissuasion would work now. She had spent a sleepless night focusing upon the task in hand, and she was not about to change her mind.

“It’s not just about reputation, Jools. I told you before. If I can’t do this now, what chance do I have of getting Meracad back?”

“Well, I just hope you feel more confident than you look.”

Clapping her friend on the shoulder, Hal summoned a smile. “It’ll be alright.”

Kris cleared her throat. “Ladies, we’d better get moving. The streets will start to fill up soon, and we can’t afford for anyone to see what we’re up to.”

She was right. Questions would be raised if the

three of them were seen meeting at such an hour bearing weapons. The scandal of a private duel could get them all into trouble.

“Let’s start, then.” Hal turned down the road in the direction of the main city gates.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kris asked her, her voice rising in surprise.

“Well, I’m to duel in The Grove, am I not?” Impatience wore at Hal’s nerves. “That lies outside the city walls, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

Kris shook her head. “You can’t think of going through the main gates where the whole world will be watching, Hal. We’ll be questioned and turned back immediately.”

“Do you have any better solutions?” She asked testily.

“Obviously. We’re thieves, aren’t we? We know this city like we know our own house. There’s more than one way out.”

“I see.” So concentrated had she been upon the duel itself that such details had not even occurred to her.

“Follow us.” Jools pointed down the narrow alley which ran opposite. “But don’t,” she warned “breathe a word to anyone about this.”

They wound along the street, between houses packed so densely they appeared to be holding each other up. Hal was all but lost, relieved when they

stopped at a smithy nestling beneath the city walls. Kris rapped three times upon the door and a young boy stuck his head out, grinned and then let them into a dark, smoky interior.

“Kris!” exclaimed the lad. “Jools!” He turned to Hal, eyeing her with suspicion.

“Don’t worry,” Kris explained. “She’s with us. Let us out for a while, will you? A little business beyond the city walls. We’ll be back before noon.”

“It’ll cost you.”

“Here.” Jools handed him a shilling. “Don’t go spending that all at once. Open up, would you?”

The boy bit the coin and then, satisfied, smoothed it into his pocket. Crouching down, he scraped at the rushes on the floor, revealing, to Hal’s surprise, the vague outline of a trapdoor.

“Thieves’ exit,” Jools said. “A few of these around. Quite handy if you need to leave the place in a hurry.”

“So I see.”

Kris lit a brand and held it over the cavity. Below, a rickety set of stairs led down into the darkness.

“Leads into the catacombs and canals below the city.” She glanced up at Hal. “Well, are you coming or not?”

She nodded and followed the thieves downwards, the trapdoor closing above them, her breath forming small, icy clouds. As Kris held the brand above her

head, their shadows were cast grotesque and deformed upon the dripping, dank walls of the tunnel, the roof so low they had to duck as they moved. Hal hit her head on several occasions, cursing each time.

“You want to be careful.” Jools chuckled to herself. “You’ll be done in before we even get to The Grove at that rate.”

“What I wouldn’t give for the foggy streets of Colvé,” she complained.

“Don’t worry, Hal. Not long now.”

After some time she was thankful to make out a flight of wooden stairs leading up to another trapdoor in the roof. They climbed upwards and Kris pushed it open, light suddenly flooding the tunnel. She blinked, readjusting her eyes to the world above ground, inhaling the scent of damp, wet pines and grass. Clambering upwards, she made out the sodden shapes of trees and realised they were on out the edge of a small wood. On the surface now, Hal whirled around. The city walls lay within sight but not close enough to perceive the guards who stalked their ramparts. Here all was quiet, save for the chirping of birds and the rustling of the autumn leaves which fell to the ground leaving traces of red, gold and amber in the grass.

“That way.” Jools nodded towards a denser copse of trees and they trudged across the wet grass. The

light dimmed once again as they passed beneath dripping branches before entering a wide, open meadow at the centre of the woods: The Grove. The fog still hovered at ground level, creating a carpet of vapour over the grass, and the place felt eerily silent. Hal was aware of the sound of her own heart thumping against her rib cage.

Beric had told her of this place once: for duellists, it was legendary. Before the senate had built their complex in the city, men and women had met here to fight. Sometimes they had parried with swords, sometimes it had been hand to hand wrestling matches that had pulled the crowds: the masses gathering around The Grove to place bets. Now it was abandoned, the senate exacting a heavy penalty from those who dared to defy its edicts and fight without permission.

The Grove appeared to be deserted. They glanced around, Hal almost overwhelmed by nerves and guilt. An ideal setting for an ambush, she realised, doubting once more the wisdom of allowing her two friends to accompany her. As if confirming her fears, Léac and Cara both emerged from the forest, each flanked on either side by two men. She weighed up the odds. Jools and Kris were both experienced when it came to rough and ready street fighting and she had her swords. If pushed, they could take them on. Yet something unnerved her about the men. She

looked at one more closely. He smiled and doffed his hat. It was the same thugs that Léac had sent after her on that sweltering summer's night. Her stomach lurched.

“I see one beating wasn't enough for you, girl. Come back for another one have you? Don't worry. You won't walk away this time. You seem to believe that my daughter is anyone's for the taking. She's not. Right now, she's where she belongs, with her husband. If she's a better wife than her mother was, she might survive. Lady Thæc warned me that as long as you're alive, she's at risk.”

The greatcoat in which Léac was muffled appeared to add to his bulk. She attempted to trace some signs of Meracad in his bullish features but failed to do so. Perhaps she wasn't the only one to have doubts as to her own parentage.

“I came to duel. That was the challenge. You can dispense with the apprentices. Don't worry, I won't hurt you.”

Nerves and anger emboldened her. She turned to Jools and Kris. “Listen, girls, I think you should go. This looks as if it's going to get unpleasant.”

“All the more reason for us to stay,” Jools protested. “After all, we didn't come unarmed.” She pushed back her cloak to reveal a pair of daggers stuffed into her belt. “We didn't want to take any chances.”

Cara walked across the wet grass to stand before Hal. “Don’t worry. You’ll get your chance to duel. But if you *should* win, we deemed it necessary to throw in a few precautions.”

“You could have just killed me if you’d wanted to.”

“Unexplained corpses tend to attract attention. This way, it seems so much more logical, don’t you think? You, the duellist, unable to resist an illegal fight. You lose and your body is discovered a few days later, here in The Grove. Master Léac and I never touched you. Nor did anyone we know. So, if you don’t want your two friends to get hurt,” she nodded in the direction of the thieves, “you *will* duel. We really don’t want to deal with them as well. After all, three bodies are rather more difficult to explain than one.”

Hal shook her head sadly. “Why are you doing this, Cara? Where does this hatred come from? Do you want me to renounce the name of Thæc? I never took it anyway. Others gave me that. I never asked for a thing from you, and I never will.”

“Your behaviour leaves me no choice. It’s enough that others believe you to be my daughter for the good name of Thæc to be dragged through the mud.”

“You’re a bitch, Cara.” Jools’s face flushed red with fury. She pushed in front of Hal, rounding on the courtier. “And you’re a coward. If it weren’t for

Léac, you'd not have the courage to lay a finger on Hal. You're using him to get exactly what you always wanted. You make me sick."

Cara broke into peals of indignant laughter. "While she uses a pair of thieves for her own protection. How very appropriate."

"We've seen it all Cara, all of this," Kris broke in. "We'll let the whole of Colvé know what you and Léac have done."

"My dear!" Cara turned her back on them and moved to the tree line, smiling to herself. "Who are they going to believe? A courtier and a burgher, or a pair of lowlifes from Riverside?"

"The only lowlife around here is you, Cara."

Cara snorted. "Believe me, both of you, if we have to, there will be no hesitation in sending you to the same dark place as your friend. And so, if you wish to thieve another day, I suggest you keep your ugly mouths closed."

"Alright, let's do this." Hal realised the longer they waited, the greater the risk to her friends. "Where's your challenger?"

"I'm here." To her surprise, a woman's voice called through the trees. A figure stepped into The Grove, dressed in a long dark cloak. She threw back her hood. Hal heard Jools gasp in shock. It was Orla.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### Three Swords

Beric always arrived early at the academy, preferring the peace and quiet of the morning before novices and duellists began the noisy process of training. In this way, he could inspect swords or read letters from parents or relatives anxious that he train their sons. The reputation of the place was such that he was never in short supply of candidates, extracting a high fee from the wealthier to supplement his income from the public duels. Something to put by for his old age, he told himself.

“Hal!” there was silence. He called again, her name echoing around the still, empty hall. Surprised, he noticed that her sleeping mat had been neatly rolled away. Perhaps she had spent the night

carousing with her friends from *The Emperor*. Well, that would do the girl some good. Life had been hard for her of late — that ill advised love affair, the beating, and now to have fallen out with Remigius. He couldn't understand it. The two of them had always been so close.

He began pulling swords from racks, checking them for imperfections. Strange. Three swords missing. He counted along the racks, running his fingers across the hilts. She couldn't have taken them, could she? An uneasy feeling slowly unfurled in the pit of his stomach. Why would she take swords belonging to the academy? She had lost her own that night she'd been beaten, of that he was well aware. But she knew the rules concerning these weapons. They were not to leave the halls unless for a public duel.

Hal was up to something and whatever it was he didn't like it. She had been secretive since her return several days before, rather subdued. He had put it down to her argument with Marc, finding no reason to inquire any further. That was her business. Yet, Beric had always watched out for the girl in his own way. Granted she was now an adult, but he still saw her as the sullen sixteen year old who'd arrived at his academy. Fresh from court, she'd had to prove herself against a pack of boys, furious that a girl should train amongst them. He'd tutored her so well

that she could beat them all. He found her the lodgings in Riverside, and later infuriated the court by allowing her to fight in the arena. He'd taken care of her in those early years, and he wasn't about to let her ruin herself now.

Beric hurried out of the building and into the city, sensing that Marc must know where she was. After all, there must have been some good reason for the Senator to have thrown her out. The main square was deserted at such an hour. Beric skirted the fountain, setting a brisk pace along empty streets in the direction of Marc's residence. But if Hal was in some kind of danger, surely the senator would have wanted to help her? His pace slowed. No need to overreact. Sure, she'd be back with the swords soon enough, no doubt having spent the evening showing off amongst those dubious characters at the inn. By Diodiné's own eyes, he'd have words with her if that had been her game.

Nevertheless, better not leave too much to chance. Heading through the gates, his feet crunched on the elegant gravelled pathway which led to the main entrance of the town house. Marc was a man with taste, you couldn't deny him that. Even in the moist, cold air of this autumn morning, the garden seemed immaculate with its topiary hedges and manicured lawns. He ascended the semi-circular steps, rapping loudly on the door which was

opened in unhurried fashion by Lira, yawning.

“Sir,” she nodded courteously. “Master’s sleeping”

A pretty lass, Beric thought to himself. Marc’s good taste extended to the employment of his staff.

“I need to talk to him, girl. You’ll have to wake him.” He pushed past her, removing hat and coat, and threw himself with little ceremony into a chair in the main salon. “I’ll wait here.”

Sighing, Lira closed the door and then headed off up the stairs, her footsteps lost in the cavernous spaces of the house. Beric waited, his impatience growing by the minute. Drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair, he surveyed the place, taking in its paintings, the finely fretted plaster-work ceiling: ornaments and ostentation. It all made him uneasy. Maybe that was why Hal had left. She couldn’t stand the décor.

Marc finally emerged, rubbing his eyes, robed from shoulder to shin in a long, black silk dressing-gown. “By the Emperor himself, man, do you have any idea what time this is?” He slumped down in an armchair, yawning extravagantly.

“Well, Senator, I do know, and I apologise for waking you at such an hour but...” he spread his hands expansively “would you happen to know where Hal is?”

Marc’s face clouded. “Of course not. I assumed

she was with you. Anyway, I don't see why I should give a damn about someone who so disgracefully spurns good advice and generous hospitality when it's offered her."

"So that's what this is about. Pride."

"It's more than that, Beric. She turns up here, half dead. Lira and I go to great pains to revive her. And then..." he paused, his face paling, and then drew a hand across his face.

"What?"

"I know where she is. I thought even *she* couldn't be so stupid."

"Well, tell me! Stupidity can be cured, death is more of a permanent problem."

"She's at The Grove."

"What?" Beric thundered. "Don't tell me she's fighting an illegal duel, because if she is I'll kill her myself."

"It's worse than that. On the night she left, she received a challenge from Cara and Léac to fight a death-duel. It was obviously some kind of a trap, but she seemed to think she had to return the challenge. I was angry, very angry. I warned her against it, but she wouldn't listen. Finally, I was so furious I told her to leave. I believed that she would at least have the common sense to realise how dangerous it would be."

Beric stood, tugged his coat on and dropped his

hat upon his head. “Senator, if there is one thing you might have realised over all these years, it’s that the girl doesn’t possess an ounce of common sense. I need to get to The Grove. Will you come?”

“Of course. But it might be a good idea to take a couple of your duellists with us. I don’t fancy my chances against Léac’s thugs. And you’ll need some horses if we are to stand any chance of reaching her in time. I’ll have my men bring some round.”

“Thank you, Senator. We have no time to waste. If she left so early, it could already be too late, but we can at least try.”

“I wish I’d come to see you.”

“There’s no point in worrying now, Marc. I’ll be waiting for you outside the cloth hall.”

“Very well, Sir.”

Beric headed outside, this time running back across the garden. “I’m getting too old for this,” he muttered to himself. This was the last time he would help the girl. If they got there in time, of course. And if it was too late, he would get his revenge on Salius Léac. And that bitch Cara Thæc.

He had already lost one friend to Léac. The lad had been playing with fire, carrying on like that with the merchant’s wife. But Beric had seen the body which had been pulled out of the docks at Riverside and the memory had never left him. He still had dreams in which he extended a hand to rescue his

lost comrade, only to witness the bruised, broken body slowly sink back beneath the water's surface. Then he was left bereft upon the river bank, swamped by an overwhelming sense of impotence and grief. He would not, he swore, experience such feelings a second time. He'd rather swing from the gallows for killing Léac in revenge.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### Death

“What are you doing here?” Hal stared at Orla in disbelief.

“The same thing as you, I imagine. I’m here to fight.”

It could only be a terrible dream. The duellist closed her eyes, willing herself to awake, but when she opened them nothing had changed. A soft rain began to fall, and she shivered.

“I’ll not fight you,” she said at last.

Orla snorted indignantly. “That’s not a choice for you to make. You see, my friend, if you don’t fight me, these men are going to hack you down just the same.”

“Besides,” Léac cut in, “if you won’t fight the



soldier, my men will dispense with your friends too. So if you want to save them, I suggest you start now. I've not the patience to stand here in the rain and watch a lovers' spat."

"Girls, get out of here now." Hal turned anxiously to the thieves, but Jools shook her head. "We'll not leave without you. We've already told you that. Orla what are you doing? Come back with us, you can't fight Hal."

"I'll fight whoever I want. And as for you two..." Orla addressed them jeeringly. "Look at you. Just following her blindly, doing whatever she says. Have you not got minds of your own? Can you not see she's just one of them?" She gestured broadly in the direction of Cara and Léac. "She's simply another aristocrat. She'll trick you and deceive you like the rest of them, and then leave you with nothing. She's using you, and the pair of you are too blind to see it."

"Orla don't be stupid!" Jools grabbed the soldier's sleeve in desperation, but Orla pushed her backwards and she fell on the grass. Kris helped her up.

"You're mad! Hal in heaven's name get out of here now."

"Just tell me why, Orla." It was raining harder now. Hal wiped the water from her face and hair, turning wildly. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I hate you; don't you understand? Must

I tell you such an obvious truth?”

“But we agreed to part: it was your wish as much as mine. You said yourself, it would not work.”

“It never worked because you were too selfish to ever notice me. And then, after all that, you had the audacity to bring that bitch with you to *The Emperor*, as if I wouldn’t care. But I did. I do. You can charm these idiots, but it doesn’t work with me, Hal. Not anymore. The thought of you kept me going through those awful days in that stinking southern territory. So how should I feel when I come back here and see you with her? It’s time you learned what life is about Hal, and I’m about to teach you. It’s not about impressing a few punters for the sake of a pretty duel. It’s about survival, and the survival of one means the death of another. That’s how this world works. But you’ve never had the chance to see it.”

“Even if I had, I would never reach such a conclusion.”

“Oh you would, if you’d been to the places I’d been, instead of spending your time up here, drinking and whoring. You could have come with me – I asked you to. You refused, do you remember? If you’d come, my life might have been more bearable. But you were too content with your comforts up here, in Colvé to choose the life of a soldier.”

“I came to see a fight!” Léac yelled suddenly. “If

there's no duel, there'll be a massacre."

"Alright, Orla" Hal murmured, strangely calm as if her former lover's words had frozen her blood. "If it's to save the thieves, I'll fight you. But just remember this..." she brought her face very close to Orla's, almost whispering. "I loved you once – you're mistaken if you think otherwise. But now I love Meracad. More than I ever loved you. And nothing you do will change that."

Furious, Orla shoved her away and drew her sword. "I'll send you to hell," she snarled, slashing at the rain with her blade. The two women faced each other, and for a few, tremulous seconds the air was silent and hung like a barrier between them. And then Orla leapt and sprang at Hal, who deftly jumped to the side.

"Have to be quicker than that, Orla," she mocked, catching her opponent a blow on the leg. Orla winced and retreated.

"Don't worry, Hal. I've been in training, unlike you. I'll match you blow for blow, my friend."

The two circled each other warily. Then their blades crashed together in a lightning quick volley which ended with locked swords. Hal attempted to force Orla away, but she had forgotten how strong the soldier was. Their fight at *The Emperor* following their break up flashed across her memory. She gritted her teeth, and they pushed against each

other for what seemed like an age, until Hal risked sliding her sword across Orla's to its very tip, and then jumped backwards before the other girl could make a move.

"Retreating already, Hal?" she sneered. "That was a coward's move, if ever I saw one."

Infuriated by the taunts, Hal moved forwards once again, and the next volley of blows ended with Orla scratching a wound across her unguarded left arm. "I've caught you now, girl," she jeered, stepping back to recover. Hal span round in surprise, looking down at the blood which had begun to leak through the torn material of her shirt.

"Run, girl!" Jools screamed, her voice high-pitched and hysterical. "You can't kill each other. Think of the past!" Orla ran after Hal, seizing the opportunity to attack her from behind, but Kris jumped on her back. The soldier twisted and turned in anger, eventually throwing the thief upon the ground, kicking her in the stomach as she lay groaning. Hal tried to help Kris up, but Orla pulled her over, aiming to level her sword at her neck. She struggled free and sprang to her feet.

What Orla lacked in duelling expertise, she made up for in strength. The two women fought on, both tiring, both gashing wounds, their technique becoming more dogged for all that their determination never wavered. When Orla eventually

sank to her knees in apparent exhaustion, Hal dived in to take advantage, but was knocked to the ground by a blow which cut painfully across her thighs. Then Orla was upon her, and she was forced to kick her away.

The rain now poured down relentlessly. Cara, Léac and their men had retired beneath the relative shelter of the trees. Exhausted, the two women staggered towards each other, falling together as if in a lover's embrace.

“Don't do this, Orla,” Hal found herself whispering breathlessly in the soldier's ear. “Please, just stop.”

For a moment they stood there, foreheads pressed together as if about to kiss. Then, Orla kicked out at Hal, wounding her. The duellist dropped to the ground once again, rolled over and sprang to her feet before her opponent could take any advantage.

They circled each other warily, their breaths ragged and frayed. Hal's vision blurred, and she was forced to wipe the rain from her eyes with her free hand. As she did so, Orla leapt towards her, and caught the tip of her sword's handle, sending it flying through the air.

Now unarmed, Hal weighed up her options. She glanced to her left to observe the weapon lying in the grass. With a terrible smile, Orla drew back her arm

to wield the final death-blow. As she did, the duellist threw herself down, sliding on her stomach across the wet ground, grabbed hold of the sword and twisted around onto her back, raising it in a defensive position.

She felt weight on the blade which Orla, unprepared, had run onto. She experienced the terrible moment when it pierced tissue and muscle. Groaning, her opponent fell on top of her. Hal screamed in horror, and pushed her away. Orla lay on the ground, half of the sword buried in her chest just below her rib cage.

“Pull it out,” she growled.

“I can’t”

“You’ve killed me anyway. Congratulations. Your first death. After this it’ll all be much easier.”

Tears pricked at the edge of Hal’s eyes. “It’s not a fatal wound,” she whispered.

“Don’t be stupid.” Orla was rasping now. “It’s over. You could at least have the decency to pull it out and finish me quickly.”

Hal pulled herself onto her knees. “I’m sorry,” she whispered and slid the blade from her former lover’s body. Orla shrieked in agony, her breathing forced and erratic.

“I hate you!” She screamed. Her head slumped to one side, and she was gone.

A terrible stillness fell upon The Grove. The only

noise was of the rain as it pelted the ground. Jools cried out, distraught, and Hal sank down, burying her face in Orla's chest. Tears of fury and sorrow fell from her eyes, mingling with the rainwater. She raised her head, and howled to the air.

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She opened her eyes to find four blades levelled at her neck. Hal made no attempt to repel them. She no longer cared. Her death would be justice. She was a criminal after all. Closing her eyes once again, she lifted her face up to the rain, and waited for the end.

“We suggest you lower those weapons.” A familiar voice cut through the silence. She did not turn round, but remained kneeling on the saturated ground beside Orla's body. Gradually, one after another, the blades were taken from her neck.

A group of men had arrived on horseback. They were dismounting. Hal observed everything with a strange disinterest, her mind numbed by emotion, shock, physical pain and exhaustion. Yet somehow she realised that she knew these people.

Still kneeling as if rooted to the ground, she laid down the sword, blood mingling with rain, tiny rivulets of red burrowing away into the grass.

“Take your men and leave now.” A different man's voice, but also one she recognised.

“The woman has been duelling illegally. We witnessed it. She has killed. She’s a murderer.” Cara, incandescent with rage.

“And what would you be here for, with these men, if you hadn’t arranged the whole thing yourself?”

That was Marc’s voice. Her friend, once. But she had caused him offence. Why was he here?

“We were apprised of the situation and came to put a stop to it.” Léac was speaking now: stern, business-like. “The woman has already caused us much inconvenience. She was caught harassing my daughter. Now, it seems she is set upon disturbing the general peace as well.”

“And you decided to take the law into your own hands? How public spirited of you.” That sounded like Beric. She stared at him through the driving rain. How could he have known she was here?

“If the law, Sirs, will take no notice of such behaviour, we must take up the impetus ourselves. That is, after all, what our Emperor means when he speaks of civic responsibility, is it not?”

“Well, Sir, it would appear to be, were it not for the fact that you yourselves are responsible for the disturbance.”

“Us, Senator? I would take such an accusation to be slander were it to come from another’s lips. Upon what evidence do you base such a claim?”

“Upon the challenge which you sent Hal at my



own house. You do not believe such material could pass beneath my very nose without my notice?"

Silence. The two groups now appeared to have reached an impasse. She tried to stand but her legs gave way beneath her, and she sank once more to her knees, hoping her weakness had gone unnoticed.

"It seems that you are in fact the inciters of this public duel, not the girl. And you now have blood upon your hands too."

"She killed the soldier, not us."

"At your bidding!" Kris's voice now: high-pitched and edgy. "They told her that if she wouldn't fight, they would kill us all. She didn't want to kill Orla!"

Hal opened her mouth to speak, but words would not form. Grief-bound, she remained silent.

"I see." Marc's steady tones barely masked the anger he was attempting to repress. "You would have the soldier do your dirty work for you. And if things did not go to plan, you would take even more lives."

"And you believe these street-thieving scum, Senator? You surprise me."

"Having seen what court-dwelling whores are capable of, I can believe anything, Madam."

Silence again. A man stood before her. Léac.

"I'm watching you." His eyes rounded in fury. "I will be watching you. Always. Nérac's wife is *his* property, as she once was mine. If you steal from him, or me, you *will* pay."

She stared at him, glassy-eyed, no clever response formulating in her mind, no witty riposte with which to return his threat. He turned and left, Cara following in his wake. The hired thugs disappeared back into The Grove

And still she knelt, staring after him until arms lifted her to her feet, and Beric's face loomed into focus, inches from her own. "By the Emperor himself, girl, I'll..."

She didn't find out what he would do. Everything went black.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### Exile

“Hal! Hal wake up!” Beric was shaking her.

She opened her eyes. The canopy of tree tops whirled dizzily above her and she closed them again.

“There’s no time for that, girl. We’ve work to do. You’re going to have to get up.”

Hal dragged herself into a sitting position, resting her back against a tree. The rain continued to pour down but she no longer noticed it.

“Those wounds need stitching,” Finn observed in a worried tone.

“Too bad I left my sewing kit at home, Finn. She’s going to have to manage.”

“She’s lost blood already, Beric.” Marc removed his coat, hanging it on the branch of a tree. He

pulled off his shirt and tore some of the material away to produce a few makeshift bandages. Drained of emotion, empty, Hal watched. It were as if this were happening to another person — that she was a mere spectator.

“Best northern silk,” Marc muttered with a grimace, wrapping one piece around the wound on her left arm before securing the remaining strips around the gashes on her thighs.

Jools sat apart from the others, crouching beside Orla’s body in a kind of vigil, her face creased in an attitude of rage and misery, her dark eyes red with weeping. Kris stood behind her for a while, looking downwards at the prone body of their former friend. Then she lay her hands upon Jools’s shoulders to comfort her, but the girl shook her off angrily.

“We have to bury her,” she muttered.

“I know.”

“Why?” Jools sprang up and advanced towards Hal, her eyes gleaming with grief. “Why did you do it?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? You’re sorry that you just killed Orla, that you murdered the woman you once claimed you loved?”

“It wasn’t murder,” Hal protested weakly. “I had no choice.” She stared down at the wet grass, avoiding Jools’s gaze.

“You had *every* choice, Hal! You never had to answer that cursed challenge in the first place. We all told you it was a trap, but you didn’t listen. Now look what you’ve done!” She wheeled round and knelt down next to Orla’s body once again.

“She was our friend too. She wasn’t herself, Hal. The southern territory had driven her mad. You were all she had left.”

Hal could no longer keep her tears in check. Her body convulsed in sobs and she buried her face in her hands.

“Don’t be so hard on the lass.” They all stared at Beric in amazement.

“I never thought I’d hear *you* utter such words, Beric” Marc murmured.

“Well, she made a mistake; she shouldn’t have come. That much is clear. But she’s a duellist. Fighting’s in her blood. Not to answer a challenge would have been...”

“...inconceivable?” Finn finished the sentence for him.

“Aye. Inconceivable.”

“Even if the duel was illegal?” Marc queried sceptically.

“Even so. It would have been dishonourable in every way. And if you’d taken a beating like she had, you might not have been thinking too straight yourself, Jools. Revenge may not be a good motive,

but it's certainly a strong one. Besides, if she hadn't fought the soldier, it's possible that none of you'd be alive to tell the tale now. So just save your words and let's get on with the task of burying this poor girl before the city guards find her. And as for you, Hal, nothing becomes you less than tears or self-pity, so dry your eyes. We've work to do."

It took them several hours to bury Orla. They carried her body deep into the woods and then, using whatever they could lay their hands on — stones, daggers, eventually their bare hands — they dug a hole and lowered her gently down. Hal laid Orla's sword upon the dead woman's body and then the two thieves began to cover her with earth, Jools still scowling and refusing to talk to anyone. When it was over, Marc gathered them around the grave and spoke.

"We know little of what awaits us after death. The temple priests tell us that the former emperors will gather us into their grace. But in my heart I believe that the best we can hope for is to join those we loved and who have passed away before us. I hope, Orla, that this is your fate, and that you have finally found a place of peace instead of the world of torment you must have endured. I ask, too, if you can hear us, to forgive Hal, our friend, for what has happened. Of one thing we are certain. All things must return to the earth. You go before us to mark

the way.”

They remained there for some time, the only sound that of the rain which had now eased and the rustling of autumn leaves around them.

“Well,” Marc broke the silence at last. “We must once again face reality. Hal, you cannot return with us to the city. It is not safe.”

“I know.”

“I suggest you ride to Franc Hannac’s. You should lie low there for some time. I can think of no safer place.”

“I had already decided upon doing so.”

“And Hal,” Marc shot her with a warning glance. “If today’s experience has taught you anything, I hope it has been against the taking of unnecessary risks. I do not want to hear that you have gone within ten miles of Dal Reniac.”

She shifted uncomfortably.

“Do you promise?”

“Oh very well, Marc. I promise.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t look convinced.

“You may take my horse, Hal.” Finn offered. “I’ll accompany the girls back to the city.”

“We don’t need any assistance, thank you.” Jools broke her stony silence to protest.

“Take his offer, Jools,” Hal objected. “He’s the best swordsman you could hope to find in Colvé. You know well what my mother is capable of. And Léac.

If you won't return with Finn, you will have to come with me."

"Our lives are in the city, Hal," Kris objected. "You know we can't follow you. Will we see you again?"

"I hope so my friend."

"Me too." Kris embraced her.

"Can you forgive me, Jools?" The thief was silent for a time. The anger faded from her eyes and at last she wrapped her arms around Hal.

"I've already lost one friend today, Hal. I'm not ready to lose another. I will not forget, that much is true, but I'll do my best to forgive."

"Ladies, if you wish for further protection, you are welcome to stay with me for some time," Marc offered gallantly.

Kris smirked. "I'll wager you'd soon regret such an offer, Senator. We'd have your house stripped bare within a day."

"Well, I was thinking of redecorating, anyway."

Finn's laughter cut through the gloom. "Here, take the horse Hal." He passed her the reins. "Ever ridden before?"

"Once or twice. At the court as a child." She looked at the beast nervously. "Will it bite?"

"Not if you treat her well. She's a sweet enough mare. A little old, mind you. Can be a bit grouchy at times. She'll remind you of Beric," he whispered as



an afterthought.

Hal grinned in spite of herself. They shook hands, and Finn turned to go.

“One thing” he said, turning as he reached the tree line. “You were never the easiest of novices, Hal, but without any doubt you were the best.”

They watched the three figures leave The Grove and then mounted their horses, Hal with some difficulty, much to Marc’s amusement.

“Never have made a courtier, would she, Master Beric?”

“I’ll learn,” she protested.

“Well, you’ll have plenty of time,” Beric conceded. “Come, let’s ride. It’s not safe to wait here any longer.”

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They headed away from The Grove and took a path which wound its way through copses of trees and eventually across open farmland, bleak and bare in the grey autumn weather.

“Where are we heading?” Hal asked at last, already frustrated with her steed, which appeared to be more interested in munching at whatever greenery it could find amongst tree roots than moving in any particular direction.

“Nowhere if you carry on riding like that Hal,”

Marc observed.

“Well, she just seems to do what you wants.”

“You must show her some control. If she knows you are afraid, she’ll do whatever she pleases.”

“It’ll take forever to reach Hannac.”

“Would you rather walk?” Beric asked, his voice edged with amusement.

“I suppose not.”

“Then you’d better learn to ride, hadn’t you?”

The rain eased off as the day progressed and the clouds gradually broke apart, occasionally letting through a ray of sunshine. The farmland across which they moved was entirely flat, with nothing more than a few small hamlets peppering the landscape here and there. At last they reached a more substantial village, comprised of a few rundown farmhouses and an inn. Chickens roamed the road freely, and a dog ran out to bark at them.

“Best move on, Beric. We’ll attract attention here” Marc observed. The old duelling master nodded in agreement, and they headed in a westerly direction.

“The track to our right links up with the main road north,” Marc explained to Hal. “But you’re best staying off that for some time. This will take you a little further out of your way, but eventually it will lead to the Eagles’ Nests.”

“And how will I know which of them is Hannac?”

“Hannac lies atop the final plateau. It is

constructed of the same limestone upon which it rests. You can't miss it. Now listen carefully, Hal. Do not leave this road. It will wind around the great lake of Brennac, at the end of which lies a small fishing village." He looked at the bands of silk around her arms and legs which were already soaked in blood. "You won't get so far today. You need someone to take a look at your wounds. I suggest you stop for the night in Caraden. It is about three hours' ride. When you reach the town's centre, you will observe an elegant sandstone house to your right amongst the buildings which frame the main square. Here you can lodge. There are stables to the rear where you can leave your horse. Ask for Lavinia. Tell her that you are my friend."

Beric raised an eyebrow. "Is there something you've been keeping from us, Senator?"

"Perhaps. I'll explain another time. This is where we must part."

They had reached another small copse of trees some distance from the village which offered suitable cover. They dismounted, Hal in a rather unsteady fashion.

"Here," Marc passed her a pouch with a few coins inside. "This should suffice until you get to Hannac."

"Thank you. I'll repay you."

"Yes, I know you will. Listen, one more thing. When you reach Hannac, you are to give Franc a

message from me.”

“What message?”

“Give him this.” He pulled a signet ring from the little finger of his right hand and passed it to her. She turned it over in her palms and examined it. The seal had been formed in the shape of an eagle, its wings outstretched.

“I’ve seen this symbol somewhere before.”

“I’m sure you have. Just give it to him, please.”

“As you wish.”

Beric cleared his throat gruffly. “We must be returning, Senator. It isn’t safe for any of us to be seen on the road. Ride as swiftly as you can, girl. Léac may yet decide to send his thugs after you to finish the job. Be wary.”

Not for the first time that day, tears pricked at her eyes.

“Be brave, girl” Beric urged, noting her distress.

“I will. Listen, Beric, I want to thank you. Maybe it seemed as if I never appreciated what you’ve done for me, but I always did. You’ve looked after me for so many years. You’ve been like...”

“Like a father?”

She nodded, unable to say more.

“You and I lass, we’re very similar, but if I were really your father, I would have given you a proper hiding a long time ago.”

Grinning, Hal pressed her sleeve to her eyes,

wiping away the tears.

“Ah, come here, you young wretch.” He roughly pulled her towards him and held her for a few moments. “I’m proud of you. Don’t forget it, will you?”

She shook her head. “And you, Marc, I haven’t always been the friend I should have been. I’m sorry for that.”

“Let’s put that behind us, Hal. It makes no sense to dwell on the past. And before this all gets too maudlin, I’d like to remind you that we expect to see you back in Colvé before the spring.”

“I might get to enjoy that clean country air too much.” She smiled wryly.

“I know you too well, my dear” he retorted, embracing her.

“Let’s be off now Senator,” Beric warned. “The lass has a long journey to make.”

They climbed back onto their saddles, Hal wincing from the cuts to her limbs.

“Go, child!” Beric ordered and smacked the rump of her horse with his hand. This time the old mare set off at a brisk pace down the track. Hal did not look back for fear of crying.

# Chapter Thirty

## The Serpent

Hal had very little experience of horse-riding. Brought up in the city, there had been no need to learn the skills involved in controlling the steed on which she now found herself. While fairly placid, the beast appeared to have its own ideas as to the direction they should be taking or the places in which they should stop. She cursed at times, and was often compelled to dismount and tug at the reins when her new companion revealed an excessive degree of stubbornness.

She continued along the track that Marc had indicated, which wound its way through copses and fields. Turning her head to the west, she observed the hazy outline of mountains far on the horizon.

Purplish in shade, the line rose in height to the North, reaching the summit of a distant peak and then gradually dropping away again. The Eagles' Nests, she was aware, perched upon a long outcrop which span out eastwards from these same mountains, a natural border severing the North from the South.

She saw few people as she passed across open countryside. From time to time the road cut through land which had been cleared for farming, where a few villagers worked the fields, bringing in the last dregs of the harvest. They observed her with silent curiosity as she passed, and then returned to their work. Pangs of anxiety assailed her as the relative security of Colvé grew further from reach, and this more homely scenery of hamlets and farmland gradually morphed into the untamed wilderness of the moors. The pain of her wounds was becoming unbearable. The bandages about her legs were all but useless and blood had begun to soak through her jacket from the cut on her arm. She tried to ignore the queasiness in her stomach and the trance-like state into which her mind often wandered. If she fainted on the road, she would probably not get up again.

The light was fading and she knew that, with the cloudy autumnal sky above her, the darkness of the night would be absolute. It would be so much easier

to stop at the next village and seek lodgings there. But such a decision would attract far greater attention than a night spent in the town of Caraden. So she continued, deliberately suppressing the memory of the fight and above all of Orla's death. There would be time enough, she thought, to grieve for the girl, if she could only make it to safety now.

The howl of an animal reached her from distant forests — possibly a wolf. Sounds of scuttling and rustling broke through the wet foliage and bracken which lined the track. She dug her heels into the horse's flanks and as if sensing her concerns the animal sped up.

Eventually, to her relief, a tiny light appeared, hovering far away in the distance. Another sprang into view, and then more could be discerned. Hal urged the mare on, denying herself the luxury of relief. It could, after all be just another hamlet or village. She had really no idea how far she was from Caraden. Perhaps, she thought, panicking, she had veered off course and missed it altogether. But then she noticed the outlines of buildings. Straining her eyes to make out their shapes, Hal realised that they were far bigger and grander, far more solid than the shacks and shanties of the villages she had passed through. More lights twinkled and for the first time that day she experienced something like hope. Gathering her thoughts together, she moved on



towards the town.

She halted in front of a pair of insouciant guards who were controlling passage through the main gatehouse. Over their shoulders, she observed a few candles in windows, taunting her with the promise of comfort and warmth.

“Stopping here for the night, are we?”

“I hope so.”

“Papers of any description?”

She was entirely unprepared for such a request.

“What papers?”

“Well, young Sir, in order for you to enter this mighty metropolis of ours, we generally request some papers.”

Hal sighed and slunk forward, burying her face in the horse’s mane for a few moments. Then she looked up to observe the man examining the bandages on her legs critically.

“Been in the wars, have we, laddie?”

It would be safer if he assumed she was a boy, she realised. “Something like that.”

“Listen, we don’t just let anyone through here, you know. Especially not suspicious looking coves like you with no papers.”

She thought desperately, her mind swirling once more with fatigue. “Do you know the Senator, Marc Remigius?”

“Remigius? Of course we do. Old dog that one,

isn't he?" the man gave the other soldier a conspiratorial nudge.

"What?" she gasped in surprise and pain.

"Never mind that," the man snapped. "He's not here now, is he?"

"Yes but he could vouch for me."

"I said he's not here." His tone had become threatening.

She thought desperately, then plunged her hand into her pocket to pull out the bag of money Marc had given her earlier.

"Maybe you gentlemen would care to take a few drinks at my expense?"

"Well now," the soldiers' eyes rounded in greed. He snatched the bag from her hand and peered into it.

"Well, well, well. I say he's just a young lad. Can't do no harm, can he?"

"You can't take it all," she protested. "I'll need it."

A mock serious expression on his face, one of the guards stepped forward, placed his hand on her leg and squeezed. She gritted her teeth as the pain nearly caused her to fall from her horse. The man maintained the pressure.

"Listen, sonny. It's either a night out here in the cold, which frankly you don't appear to be in much of a state for, or you give us the cash and enter our fine town here. What's it to be?"

“Keep it,” she half-whispered.

“Very sensible. In you go.” He released his hand, and she managed to steer her way through the gates, the noise of the soldiers’ laughter echoing behind her.

Hal had no idea where to go and without any money, she realised that it may well have been better to continue north. Yet now there was no hope for it but to keep searching for the elegant building of which Marc had spoken.

She appeared to be on a main street and reasoned that it might lead to the market place. In contrast to Colvé, the buildings of this provincial town were not so grandiose, built to withstand the high winds which buffeted the place from the east. Few people were about at such a time, and none of those who were cast her a second glance. With heads down they went about their business, clearly eager to get home out of the cold evening air.

The street fanned out into a cobbled space which she took to be the town square, a motley assortment of architectural misfits arranged along its edges: some squat, timber-framed dwellings nestling between the more solid fronts of businesses and shops. To her right a tall, slim building constructed of dull yellow sandstone stood out amongst a cluster of ramshackle wooden constructions. This must be the place Marc had told her of.

She lowered herself down from the horse, which seemed to visibly appreciate being relieved of its burden, and clung to the saddle for a few moments for support. Then she steeled herself against the waves of exhaustion and nausea, and pulled at the bell rope to one side of the building's enormous, studded oak door. A latch clicked back and a girl's eyes peered furtively through a peephole.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Hal Thæc. I need lodgings. Senator Marc Remigius told me I would find them here. He said to ask for Lavinia.”

The shutter slammed back. Her heart sank. Perhaps this was the wrong place? She turned to go and then the door was yanked open. Hal almost sank down in relief, but summoning her final reserves of strength, she led the horse through a short tunnel and then into an open quadrant of courtyard. To her surprise, there was no sign of the girl.

The light had all but gone, but she could just make out the upper tiers of the building along which a series of balconies ran from wall to wall. Ivy wound its way around pillars and balustrades, giving the place a fresh, verdant appearance. In the centre of the courtyard, despite the chill autumn weather, a fountain bubbled away with candles around its base and leaves floating upon the surface of the water. From deep inside the building came the faint

strumming of a guitar, the hum of conversation, and occasional peals of women's laughter. What was this place? She clung onto the horse's saddle once again and waited.

Footsteps echoed across the courtyard and turning slowly, Hal realised she was being watched. The woman was tall, striking, not perhaps so young, maybe about forty years, but she was nevertheless perhaps the most beautiful person Hal had ever seen. Auburn hair lay in tresses to her waist, her eyes were almost emerald in shade, and her body indicated an exquisite grace of movement and gesture which could not be feigned. She was accompanied by a younger woman who, in spite of the cold, appeared to be wearing little more than a shift. Hal recognised the same brown eyes that had shone out at her through the peep-hole.

“Are you Lavinia?”

The tall woman nodded. The rich fabrics of her gown swished over the cobbles as she moved over to Hal and took the duellist's face in her hands, scrutinising her critically. Embarrassed, Hal looked away.

“My name is...”

“Don't tell me — I already know. Come, Halanya.” Lavinia extended her arm to the duellist. “Anka, take her horse.”

“Of course, Lavinia.” The girl took the mare's

reins and headed back through the tunnel.

“How do you know my name?”

“Marc has described you on many occasions.”

Grateful, Hal took hold of the woman’s arm and allowed herself to be led inside the building, aware of women peering down at her from the balconies.

She entered a luxurious looking salon and sank down amongst the silken cushions which were strewn across a chaise-longue. A fire crackled in the grate and the heavy red drapes around the curtains and vibrantly-patterned rugs exuded warmth.

“Your wounds are fresh.”

“This morning’s.”

“They need stitches. Here...drink this.” Lavinia poured a strongly-scented liqueur into a glass. Hal took it, her hand trembling.

She raised the fluid to her lips and drank without a second thought. It coursed through her veins, expelling the sensations of tiredness and pain with a drowsy warmth. “What is it?” she asked, unable to prevent a slur entering her voice.

“It will help you sleep.”

“But I don’t need help,” she protested weakly.

Anka had returned now with a bowl of warm water and clean cloths. Lavinia unrolled one to reveal a set of needles.

Hal watched Lavinia working with passive disinterest. It were as though she had been detached

from her own body and could observe everything from the side or above. “What are you doing?” she asked at last.

“You don’t expect me to stitch you up while you’re still conscious, do you? Go to sleep now, Hal.”

Her eyelids fluttered and then closed as she finally sank back upon the pillows.

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Daylight streamed in between parted drapes. She woke with difficulty, disoriented and tried to piece together the events which had led to her arrival in Caraden. The wounds upon her arm and legs throbbed and pulsed, yet it was a different kind of pain which caused her to groan out loud. Details of the duel came back to her in ever-increasing clarity: Léac’s bitter words, Jools’s despair, and above all Orla’s fury as she had lain dying. She bit down on her knuckles, stifling a sob.

“So you’ve woken up at last.”

Hal turned her head in the direction of the speaker, to observe Lavinia sitting in a high-backed armchair by the window.

“How long was I asleep?”

“It’s midday now. You slept restlessly, though. I was afraid you had a fever.”

“I’m alright,” she lied. She shifted uncomfortably

beneath heavy blankets.

“I’ll have the girls prepare a bath for you. We’ll put herbs into the water. That will cleanse the wounds. And bathing may cleanse more than just the body.”

“Look, I’m grateful to you but I must move on. I would like to reach the Eagles’ Nests by nightfall.”

Lavinia’s laughter sounded like a peal of bells. “Yes, you do rather live up to Marc’s description.”

“Why? What did he say? And how come you know him?”

“He said you were your own worst enemy.” She pointedly ignored Hal’s second question. “You need to rest, to bathe and eat. Besides, I don’t think you’ll be getting very far without your clothes!”

“What?” She lifted the blankets and gasped. “What have you done with them? Who are you people?”

“Don’t worry. I gave them to the girls to wash and mend. You can wear this for now.” She flung a length of faded blue material across the room. Hal caught it and held it critically to the light.

“A dress?” she asked, almost in horror.

“It looks about your size. You’re not a prisoner here, my dear. If you wish to ride to Hannac half-famished, exhausted and wearing a dress, be my guest. If, on the other hand, you take the more sensible option of spending one more night in



Caraden, the girls will give you back your clothes and you can ride tomorrow.”

She was left with little choice, it seemed. “Very well. But I can’t pay for my stay here. The soldiers, they...”

“Did they take your money?”

“Yes. All of it.”

“Typical. Incompetent thieves. Don’t worry, Hal. We’ll get it back from them.”

“What do you mean you’ll get it back from them? What kind of place is this?”

Anka stuck her head around the door. “We’ve prepared a bath for the guest as you requested, Lavinia.” She looked Hal up and down appraisingly and grinned. The duellist scowled as she pulled the dress over her head.

“Shall we?” Lavinia stretched out her hand.

They made their way along a corridor hung with rich tapestries and paintings to a smaller chamber at its end. A large, round bath stood in the centre, hot water steaming, spreading the air thick with the heady-scent of rose petals.

Lavinia and Anka then left her alone to bathe, closing the door quietly behind them. She pulled off the dress and climbed in, flinching as the hot water made contact with her wounds. And then she lay soaking, wrestling with herself as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her once more. Sinking

beneath the surface, she released a soundless scream, bubbles of air escaping from her nose and mouth. There was no point in giving way to rage and anguish this time. Nothing, she realised, would bring Orla back or change the look of despair that she had witnessed on Jools's face. She raised her head above the surface and raked her hands through wet hair. It was time to move on — and for the first time in her life, she experienced a genuine urge to make Cara pay for her crimes.

Lavinia re-entered the room, carrying fresh towels over her arm. Wordlessly, she laid them down next to the bath, observing her guest for a few moments, her eyes softening as she beheld Hal's grief.

“Come,” she said at last. “The water will get cold and you'll be ill.” She held Hal's arm, guiding her from the tub. “What happened?”

“I killed someone yesterday. No, I murdered someone.”

“Was it a duel?”

“Yes.”

“Well it was no murder then, was it? The dead person was a friend or an enemy?”

“Both, as it turns out.”

Lavinia was silent for a while. “I remember the first time Marc spoke of you,” she said at last. “Like a moth near a candle.’ I think those were his words.”

Hal hissed in sudden anger. “He talks too much,” she threw back. “And you haven’t answered my question. How do you know him?”

Lavinia’s emerald eyes betrayed a sudden bitterness.

“For all you’re a city girl, you really are naïve, aren’t you, Hal?”

“What do you mean?”

“Get dressed and join us for dinner below.” Lavinia handed her one of the towels. “Oh, and welcome to *The Serpent* — the empire’s most exclusive house of pleasure!”

## Chapter Thirty-One

### Asha

Hal's mouth opened and closed a few times in suspended shock before she finally managed to splutter: "Marc is a client?"

"My client to be precise." Lavinia shook her head, amused at the duellist's outrage. "Oh come now, Hal. The man's flesh and blood like anyone else."

"I know. It's just..."

"What?"

"It just seems so underhand. I mean does he love you? Why don't you live with him in Colvé?"

Lavinia's bell-like laugh now carried a shrill edge. "Do you seriously think a man of Senator Marc Remigius's standing would be seen around the city with a paid whore?"

“But it’s just so hypocritical. I had no idea he was a liar.”

“He’s a politician, Hal.”

She was silent for a moment, mulling this over. Perhaps it explained Marc’s exasperation with her own lack of diplomacy.

“You really are naïve, Hal. I expect you for dinner.”

Lavinia left the room, shaking her head and smiling. Reluctantly, Hal pulled the stretch of blue material over her head and caught sight of herself in a mirror, recalling as she did so Finn’s summary of her options beyond the duelling circle: *You’d be either mad, dead or wearing a dress, and I don’t think any of those things are your style.*

“He was right,” she told herself, observing the strange-looking figure in the glass before her. “By the spirits, he was right.”

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She headed along the tapestry-draped corridor and then down a flight of stairs to her left, following the sound of lively chatter and laughter which she realised must emanate from the dining room. Heavy purple drapes hung in place of a door and she pushed them aside to observe a group of about a dozen women sat around a long, food-laden table.

Most of them were dressed in shifts and dressing-gowns with their hair tumbling loose about their shoulders. One or two were, however, robed in dresses which would not have disgraced the richest of courtiers, expensive jewellery encircling their throats and wrists and threaded through intricately woven plaits and locks of hair.

The hum of conversation quietened as heads turned in her direction, some of the girls evidently suppressing the desire to giggle. She recognised Anka amongst them with her dark brown hair and innocent, warm eyes. Lavinia sat at one end of the table and indicated an empty seat to her right.

“Our guest, ladies. A duellist from Colvé: Hal Thæc.”

As she took the seat offered, one girl snorted indignantly. “Never thought I’d see you here, Thæc.”

Riled, Hal glanced across the table to observe a woman who seemed, for some reason, familiar. She wore her long, blonde hair in a labyrinthine mass of plaits and ribbons, her complexion was pale, her eyes of the iciest blue. She returned Hal’s look defiantly.

“Of course!” her tone was haughty. Aristocratic, even. “I imagine it’s something of an inconvenience to be reminded of one’s past, is it not?”

Hal peered more closely into the girl’s eyes, searching for a clue as to her identity. The defiance

transformed itself into something which might have been disappointment. That change in countenance triggered something in the duellist's mind.

“Asha?” she asked in amazement. “Asha Inæc?”

The blonde girl sat back in her chair, assuming a posture which hovered between nonchalance and arrogance. “Well done, Thæc. Perhaps there's some hope for you after all.”

“Asha,” Lavinia warned. “Hal's a guest. Treat her so.”

“How did you end up here, in this place?” Hal asked, horrified. The other girls fell silent their faces turned in expectation towards Asha Inæc.

“You're not the only ward to have escaped the court, Thæc, however much you might like to give yourself credit for it.”

“But why here, why this life in this place?”

“What's wrong with it?” Asha's tone betrayed her anger. “Don't come the hypocrite here, Hal, when it's widely-known that your own mother is the greatest whore in Colvé!”

“Asha!” Lavinia's face clouded and she rose from her chair. “I think we've heard enough. You will apologise and return to your quarters.”

Asha's face was cold, unreadable. She moved to leave but Hal caught her arm across the table.

“No! Don't go. She's right, Lavinia. My mother is probably the most infamous whore at court.”

“Finally, Thæc. You admit it.” Asha seemed satisfied with her small victory. “We could never understand why you did nothing about it. She made your life hell and you just took it.”

“Because she is my mother. I thought she would realise that eventually.” Hal picked up her glass and drained the contents. Asha’s expression softened and she shook her head.

“You fool,” she said at last. “She’ll never change.”

“Now I realise that. After...” her voice trailed away. *Steel ripping through flesh and bone. I hate you*, she had said.

“After what?”

“Nothing. You didn’t answer *my* question.” She changed the subject, unwilling to delve any further into her own past in front of a group of strangers. “You were heir to the Inæc estates — you could have had everything. You had only to wait until you came of age and they would have been passed down to you from your uncle.”

“From my uncle!” Asha shook her head in fury, her pale cheeks glowing feverishly red. “I assume, Thæc, that you are referring to the same uncle who sired my child when I was sixteen years old and then had me turned out of the court for depravity? What was I supposed to do? They all took me for a whore after that. So in the end I chose to prove them right.”

“By all the spirits!” Hal had avoided Asha Inæc as



a ward. They had lived in different worlds, it had seemed. Asha had sneered along with the rest when Cara had caught Hal red-handed, sneaking into the guards' room with her miniature sword. And yet here she was, her haughtiness apparently undiminished yet now fused with a bitterness, the depths of which Hal could not begin to fathom.

The bell rang and the girls all resumed gossiping amongst themselves. Lavinia frowned. "Clients at this time? A little early." She rose and pushed back the curtains, peering out through the windows which overlooked the market place. "Strange looking types," she murmured half to herself. She turned to Hal. "Do you know these two?"

Hal got up and peered over her shoulder, her heart picking up pace. The first — blonde, bulky in a broad-brimmed hat. The second — she shuddered — with curly red hair and a lean, wiry frame. "They've crossed my path once or twice." *Léac doesn't know when to leave well alone.* "Listen, Lavinia — could you do me a favour? Keep them talking."

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### Red

Red scowled at his companion. The man was an idiot. If Léac had left him to do the job alone, the girl would be dead by now. And he didn't trust this woman either. A brothel was a brothel as far as he was concerned, no matter who the clientele happened to be. And whores were whores — why trust this one just because she was robed like a courtier?

“I think we would have remembered someone of that description, gentlemen. She sounds quite — unique, wouldn't you say?”

Red hawked and spat. The pale, yellow string of phlegm slid between the cobbles at his feet. Lavinia eyed him with distaste.

“You’re certain?” he asked again.

“Your master, Sir, happens to be one of our best clients.”

Why doesn’t that surprise me?

“Why would we want to run the risk of losing such custom for the sake of some freakish outcast of Colvé?” She laughed, the sound like shards of glass crashing to the floor.

Red shifted uncomfortably. Perhaps she was right. They should have murdered the bitch when they had the chance. Now she could be anywhere between Colvé and Dal Reniac, possibly even sleeping out wild on the moors — she was mad enough to do that, it seemed. Lavinia assumed a more seductive pose.

“Your master has charged you with a difficult task, I can see. Why don’t you give yourselves a rest, gentlemen?”

Red’s companion appeared to prick his ears up.

“We boast some of the most accomplished girls in the empire, Sirs. And as I know your master well, I’m prepared to give you an hour to yourselves with two of them.”

The blonde began to fan his face furiously with his hat. “I’m sure the master wouldn’t object...” he began.

Red eyed him in disgust. “Can’t you keep it inside your trousers for more than a few hours, man? This

is a waste of time.” He turned to Lavinia. “A generous offer but we must be moving on.”

Lavinia shrugged. “As you wish. It’s certainly not every day a man receives such an offer — a free hour of pleasure in an exclusive bordello. But I can see you are men of business so, good day.”

She headed away across the courtyard. “Come on,” Red growled. “Let’s go.”

“No, wait!” A hint of desperation had entered the blonde man’s tone. “My friend is wrong — our master would not begrudge us such an opportunity, I’m sure. Especially given the fact that he is himself, as you just pointed out, such a regular customer.”

Smiling, Lavinia turned round. “Well, gentlemen, what’s it to be? I’m busy too, you know. And I won’t repeat the offer.”

Red’s accomplice turned to him, his eyes pleading. “How could Léac possibly know that we took an hour more or less to find the girl? Besides...” he bent down and whispered in the wiry man’s ear “If the whore is lying, and she’s really here, it may be our only way of getting into the place.”

Red mulled this over. It was the first sensible idea he’d heard from the man all day. He glanced across at Lavinia who was surveying the pair, her eyebrows arched in irony.

“Very well,” he agreed at last. “We’ll take you up on your offer. But if it should turn out that it fails to

match your description — our master will hear of it.”

“Sir, might I remind you that we have a reputation to maintain,” Lavinia threw back haughtily. “And besides that, your master may well own Colvé, but he doesn’t own *The Serpent*. This way, gentlemen.”

She led them through an alcove and up spirals of stairs to a plainly-plastered corridor at the very top of the building, along the sides of which ran a series of wooden doors. She indicated one at the far end. “One at a time, if you don’t mind, gentlemen. And if you mistreat my girls, I will hear of it.” With that, she turned and headed down stairs.

The blonde looked hungrily at the door, saliva flecking the corners of his mouth. Red’s stomach turned.

“For the Emperor’s own sake, man. Get in there and do what you have to. I’ll check these rooms.”

Head down, the big man thundered like a bull towards the door at the far end, grasped the handle and leapt across the threshold. Red observed him, shaking his head.

“There’s no one...” the blonde’s sentence was cut short. With a gasping sound he clutched at his throat, and sank to the floor. The door slammed shut again.

Shit! The bitch has been here all along.

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A dead weight, he crumpled to the floor in front of her, and before she could stop it, the door slammed shut. Hal had expected to take both of them as they entered the room. Now she had lost the advantage of surprise.

She looked down at the blonde man, his throat sliced open, blood gushing from his neck, coalescing in a puddle on the floor. Orla had been right about one thing, at least. The next kill was easier.

She heard Red breathing heavily behind the door and clenched her sword in readiness. His voice rasped between the hinges. She could smell his garlic-tainted breath.

“I know you’re in there, Thæc. I can wait all day, girl. I promised my master I’d be coming back with your head in a bag. And that is just what I’ll do.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. The odds are a little fairer this time, don’t you think? You haven’t got your friends to help you out.”

“Should have stuck you the first time, bitch. But I don’t repeat my mistakes. You’ll come out in time. And when you do, I’ll be ready for you.”

She grimaced. He was persistent if nothing else. There was a sudden motion behind the door, the sounds of scuffling and banging. Hal steeled herself for the onslaught but it didn’t come. Instead, a girl

screamed.

“So what’s it going to be, Thæc?” Red’s gravelly voice rasped through the keyhole again. “Are you going to stay in that room like a trapped rat while I butcher this girl here, or are you going to come out and get what’s coming to you?”

Her heart pounded. The stakes had just been raised. She heard movement again and risked peering through the wooden slats of the door. She could just make out Asha struggling in Red’s arms as he held a poniard to her throat.

“Be a good girl now and come out before I stick your friend here.”

“Don’t listen to the bastard, Hal!” Asha attempted to pull at the man’s arms but he forced the point of the knife dangerously close to her skin.

“Alright, I’ll come out. But let her go!” Easing open the door, she emerged on the threshold, her sword raised, the blue dress now bespattered in blood.

“Lay your blade on the ground,” Red ordered. “Do it!” he yelled when she hesitated.

Years of duelling had taught Hal to distinguish false confidence from real. She caught the tremulous ring to Red’s voice. There was fear there, she realised.

“Good girl. And now kick it away.” She slid it down the corridor with her right foot.

“You’ve got me. Let her go now.”

He flung Asha against the wall. She sank onto the floor, clutching at her neck and gasping for breath. “This is where it ends, girl.” Picking up her sword, still grasping the poniard in his right hand, he edged forward.

“It certainly does,” she whispered. Before he could come closer, she reached into the bodice of the dress, pulled out a dagger and flung it at his face. It hit him between the eyes. Red looked at her, his expression of confusion morphing into one of agony as the knife pierced deep inside his skull. Then, groaning, he fell backwards and was gone.

“Good thing your friend keeps his blades sharp.” Hal looked across at Asha who had stopped choking, although her breathing was still forced and ragged. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll live.”

“What the hell were you thinking of, coming up here? You knew what I was going to do.”

Asha coloured. “I thought I could help, that was all.”

Hal offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. “You could have got yourself killed.”

Still shaking, Asha made no reply. Wordlessly, she picked up Red’s legs as Hal hoisted him by the arms and they half-dragged, half-carried the assassin’s body back into the room and dumped him



unceremoniously on the rug next to his companion. Asha looked down at the blood-drained corpse on the floor in shock and disgust. “By all that’s holy, Hal, could you not have been more subtle? We just had this room painted!”

“I didn’t have time for subtlety.” She nudged Red’s corpse with her foot. “What are we going to do with these two?”

Asha surveyed the gruesome scene, her pale eyes now those of a calculating courtier. “Well I know they weren’t the first, and I suspect they won’t be the last.”

Hal stared at her aghast. “You kill off your clientele?”

“Of course not. That would hardly be good for business, would it?” Asha snapped. “I just mean that occasionally some of our customers get a little out of hand — perhaps they’ve had too much to drink or they think that just because they’ve paid for a girl they can do whatever they like with her. So on occasion, for our own protection we have been forced to, let’s say, take some fairly terminal measures.”

“And what do the town guards have to say about that?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Well it would be unwise, wouldn’t it? After all,

we do know all the dirty little secrets of every senator, courtier and merchant who visits this place. I don't think a couple of miscreants like these two are worth destroying reputations over, are they?"

Hal could appreciate the logic, but it made her uneasy all the same.

"Oh come, now Hal, would you rather swing for this pair of lowlifes?" Asha's lips twitched in amusement as the duellist struggled to reconcile morality with pragmatism.

"No of course not. I had to do it. They'd have followed me all the way to Hannac and beyond if I hadn't stopped them."

"You don't have to justify yourself." She caught Hal's gaze and her expression softened. "The same old Halanya Thæc." She smiled enigmatically. "Too honest for the court."

Hal looked away, embarrassed. "This dress is ruined," she said, examining the blood-soaked material.

Asha observed her for a moment before moving closer. Her lips almost pressed to Hal's ear, she whispered: "If you're staying tonight, I can help you out of it."

Hal froze and sensing it, Asha backed away, her expression unreadable. "You know, Hal" she said finally, "I think I was a little in love with you in the past. In fact, I believe a few of the wards were. You

were just so different, so determined to reject the cards that fate had dealt you.”

The duellist stared, her mind failing to absorb Asha’s confession. “But you all hated me!”

Asha smiled and shook her head. “We didn’t hate you, Hal. We were jealous. You were the only one who refused to be manipulated. And when you left, finally, we weren’t surprised. We were just sorry that none of us could defy them all in the way you had done. Then, of course, shortly afterwards, my uncle put paid to my aristocratic future.”

She bit her lip and Hal could see she was struggling to hold back tears. She suddenly experienced an enormous wave of regret for this girl whose potential had been devoured by the court. Perhaps, she conceded, she had been one of the lucky ones. Her life may not have been easy, but it had always been hers to control.

Reaching forward, Hal pushed a stray lock of blonde hair out of Asha’s eyes. “I see. Now I understand. And if you’d told me this in the past, our lives might have been different. But now I’m looking for someone — someone I’ve lost. And I won’t give up until I’ve found her again.”

Asha scanned Hal’s face gravely. “She must be very special, I imagine.”

“Oh, she is.”

The door swung open and they both jumped.

Lavinia entered the room and ran a trembling hand across her ashen face. “Two corpses in less than an hour, one of my best rooms all but destroyed and now I’ll have to come up with a convincing alibi for the town guards. Halanya Thæc, you’ll bring a house of ill-repute into ill-repute!”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### Brennac

Hal gorged on the generous breakfast of fruit, bread, cold meats and cheeses which awaited her the following morning. The girls had washed and mended her clothes, and Lavinia presented her with a fur-lined greatcoat and woollen hat. “You’ll need it if you’re going north. The cold can kill a person up there,” she explained.

Hal was beginning to feel more like her old self again: her wounds were healing and her stomach was satisfied. She re-entered the courtyard to find the horse saddled and waiting. Lavinia stood holding the reins, her golden tresses tumbling down her back — the same colour as the autumn leaves which spun about in the air and were blown across the ground

by the chill wind.

“Here,” she handed Hal a small bag.

“What’s this?”

“I told you we’d get it back for you,” she smiled.

Hal opened the pouch to find her coins returned.

“The town guards paid us a visit last night. At your expense, which now means at their expense! I took a little out of it for keeps. I’m sure you understand.” Lavinia leant forward and whispered in Hal’s ear. “Dead men don’t bury themselves.”

She nodded, about to speak, but Lavinia shook her head. “Don’t ask any questions, child. Just take it. You may need it. Along with this. It was in your trouser pockets. One of the girls took a liking to it, but I thought it may have more than just ornamental value.” She handed Hal the signet ring that Marc had given her when she left Colvé.

“Thank you. I almost forgot that.” Hal turned it over in the palm of her hand, and then placed it back in her pocket. “Marc would never have forgiven me,” she added. She embraced Lavinia warmly and mounted her horse.

“Stay safe now, Hal. And come back to us some time. I’m sure Asha would appreciate it,” she winked.

“How did you...?”

Lavinia grinned. “No more questions. You’ve a long ride ahead of you.”

Smiling for the first time in days, Hal directed her horse through the wide open doors of the courtyard. The town was busier than it had been upon her arrival of two nights' previous. She trotted slowly in the direction of the town gates towards a pair of guards who now seemed the worse for wear. "Need to check my papers, gentlemen?"

With a light groan, the first man waved her on. "Get out of here, laddie."

She favoured him with a low bow from the saddle and then, slamming her heels into the mare's flanks, she was gone.

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A vast expanse of water, the Lake of Brennac stretched between Caraden and the escarpments of The Eagles' Nests. A road skirted the water's edge, winding through isolated fishing villages in which men mended nets and traps, or sat with their backs to low-roofed crofts smoking pipes. Few paid her much attention, although some tried to sell her something from a recent catch. She held out until midday, when the hunger pangs grew so intense that she jumped down from her horse to purchase a plate of bread and smoked fish which an old woman offered her. The mare wandered over to the lake's bank to drink her fill, and as Hal chewed away on

the salty fish, she coaxed the villager into conversation.

The woman's face was as brown and wrinkled as a walnut. She contemplated Hal impassively as the girl attacked her plate. "You're headed for Hannac, you say? Well it'd be a good few hours before you get to the end of Brennac. And then the Eagles' Nests lie some few miles away from the shore — or so I've heard. Never been there myself. You won't get there before nightfall, lass."

Hal looked at her sharply. She was used to being taken for a boy by strangers. The old fisherwoman flashed her a toothy grin which lit up her entire face, making her appear much younger. "Oh we see things as they are round here, girl. And we accept them, too. Life's too short to do otherwise."

A sudden warmth flooded Hal's heart. Without knowing why, she felt the urge to give voice to a feeling which had been growing steadily within her as the day progressed. "You know, I've spent my entire life in Colvé. And yet the further I am from it, the closer I seem to home."

The old woman shrugged. "Life is real out here, lass. It's hard but it's real."

"Maybe that's it." She didn't feel convinced.

Hal paid handsomely for the fish. Her host shook her head but the duellist insisted. "I've never eaten better. And your words gave me hope."



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The old woman had been right. The light was fading even as she reached the northern shore of Brennac. The weather had also taken a turn for the worse, and she shivered as the wind carried with it drops of icy moisture, pulling on the woollen cap and wrapping the greatcoat around her as tightly as she could. Marc had mentioned a fishing village at the far end of the lake and she observed a few low-roofed cabins clustered together as if trying to stave off the chill. It must be truly bleak up here in the winter, she decided.

Should she spend another night here? She was impatient to move on. Her stay in Caraden had taken longer than she would have liked and with every passing day the distance from Meracad seemed to grow. *Fair hair in strands across her face as she lay naked on the floor of my room. The scent of her fragrant, warm skin next to mine.* She urged the horse onwards.

In contrast with the measured flatness of the plains, the ground now rose and fell in heather crusted mounds. A row of rangy, wooded plateaus loomed before her, a fort cresting the first, its limestone walls still visible against the greying light. After a few more hours of riding she found herself on

a track which led along the tree line at the base of the plateaux. Now it was dark, and the possibility that she would lose her way nagged and teased and ate away at her nerves. Occasionally, when the wind blew the clouds apart, she caught a glimpse of the high slopes above her. The mare whinnied from time to time, the sound muted by the wind. She urged the animal forwards, feeling guilty for having driven her so far. If she collapsed now, they were both dead. It was not just the darkness that disturbed her, but the sense of emptiness, of open space. After years of living in a city, it was a shock to find a world existing far from the hum of voices and the traffic of human existence.

The clouds parted once more and in the moonlight she perceived a shape which could not possibly be natural, balanced upon the very crest of the escarpment. A quadratic block of impenetrable stone, she recognised the fortress of Pæga from Franc's descriptions of the Nests. The battlements were too high and dark to make out any signs of life, but occasionally the wind brought with it the sound of a human voice, and she felt relieved for the first time since leaving the old woman at midday. The horse seemed to pick up on her optimism and began to move with greater confidence along the track.

A few miles further and another of the Eagles' Nests towered above her, its shape apparent against

the background of moonlight: strange turrets and roofed ramparts fluting off the walls at irregular heights. This was Berasé, and Franc had told her of Marta Ilenga, the woman who managed these estates with an eye for business and the finer things in life — good wine, delicious food and handsome lovers. It had once been rumoured that she had numbered the Master of Hannac himself among them, although Franc had always shrugged off such courtly gossip.

The track wound around tree stumps and rocks, growing narrower and more treacherous. Once again, she feared for her horse, which was slowing and trembling beneath her. “Just a little further, girl. Please? And then you can rest. We both can.”

She looked up to observe a few pinpricks of light above her. Could it be? Urging the mare on again, her hope increased by the minute as the lights grew in number. A gust of wind howled across the track, nearly causing the horse to lose its footing. As she steadied it, the full moon emerged from behind the clouds once again, and she rounded the base of the plateau to witness the formidable outline of Hannac for the first time.

The fortress had been carved from the same white rock on which it stood. It rose at one with the escarpment, its towers reaching up into the sky, lights beaming from its many windows. The

impression of might and splendour caused her to gasp. Franc was such a modest man that she would never have connected him with such a place. But the prospect of his company and her own exhaustion prompted her to turn onto a path which passed up through the woods.

The horse plodded up the hillside, the track zigzagging from left to right until it emerged above the tree line onto a precarious ledge below the walls of Hannac itself. As she prompted the mare on, she noticed a light jolting down the track towards her. Unnerved, her hand moved instinctively for the hilt of her sword.

A man emerged out of the darkness. Sat astride a horse, he clutched a burning brand, his body and face muffled against the cold. The rider approached, and bringing his horse to a halt, pulled back his hood. It was Franc.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

### The Ring

“Franc!” she gasped. “How did you know it was me?”

They both jumped from their horses, and he caught her in a rough hug. “I didn’t. My watch spotted you. We don’t get many guests at this time of an evening in the autumn, so I decided to come and see for myself. I could tell you weren’t from these parts.”

“How?”

“Northerners don’t ride so badly,” he teased. “Besides, I had a feeling you’d show up sooner or later.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Intuition,” he said vaguely. “So,

are you coming in? That horse looks like she'll barely make it to the castle gates, so you might as well stay the night."

Hal smiled. "I was hoping the offer was still open."

"Come on, then."

They headed up the last section of track to the fort, leading their horses by the reins. Unable to disguise his delight, Franc asked her so many questions about Colvé, the court and the academy that she did not have chance to answer them all. She tried to explain something of her reasons for leaving the city, but he stopped her.

"All in good time, Hal. Let's get inside to the warmth. You're hungry, I take it?"

She nodded, realising that she had eaten nothing since Brennac.

The gates were opened by a large, burly man-at-arms. Franc addressed him with no show of formality. "Take the horses to the stables, would you, Arec? Treat the mare well, she's come a long way."

Arec eyed Franc curiously, and then peered at Hal, his eyes rounding in surprise and then creasing in mirth.

"What is it, man?" Franc snapped, his voice edged with irritation.

"Nothing, Sir." The man took the horses as bidden and Franc shook his head.

“Reprobate!” he called after him, his jesting tone at odds with his grave expression.

“What’s the problem?”

“Nothing,” he replied quickly. “The man’s a half-wit, that’s all. And sometimes, lass, I wonder who’s in charge here: him or me.”

He led her across the courtyard. She could make out little in the shadows, although the torches of a guard crossing their path or walking the battlements revealed the doors to stables, magazines and workshops. As they passed through into the keep itself, she stared up at the wall above them to notice two lanterns hung precariously aside an enormous, carved stone shield bearing the emblem of an eagle, its wings outstretched. *Of course!*

“Franc I must pass on to you something Marc gave me,” she began.

“All in good time, girl. Let’s get some food inside you first.”

The warmth of the great hall was welcoming: a massive chamber framed by long trestles and benches, the darkness punctured by candles and torches which burned on the walls. Several men, women and children sat along the tables eating supper, sleeping or talking in low voices. Some turned and nodded to Franc as he headed across the room. Others barely looked up. Hal was faintly surprised at this lack of interest in the Master of

Hannac himself, but thought better of mentioning it. Franc beckoned to a girl who seemed to be waiting on a few of the others with a pitcher of beer. "Elis, bring some food up to my chambers, would you?"

They passed out of the hall and headed up a narrow, winding staircase.

"My chamber is one of the smallest rooms in the entire fort, but it's the only place I truly call my own. As you see, I share the fort with everyone else who treats it as their home."

"And what do they do, these people?" she asked breathlessly.

"Many of their families have been here for as long as the Hannacs. A lot of them are tenant farmers. When the weather is better, they farm down on the lowlands. Half of what they produce comes to the fort, and I sell it in Dal Reniac or Colvé. In return, they spend the winter here in safety from the cold. Here we are."

A heavily-bolted wooden door stood at the very top of the staircase. He took out a set of keys, and unlocked it. Franc's chamber was cramped but cosy, with wood panelling lining the walls, a shaft of moonlight creeping through its tiny mullioned window and a small fire spitting in the grate. He lit a pair of candles in the hearth and set them upon his desk before unlocking the cupboard beneath it and pulling from it two glasses and a corked bottle of



wine. Franc gestured for Hal to pull up a chair, and poured her a generous glass.

There was a knock at the door and the girl from the main hall entered bearing a platter of meat, bread and fruit which she set down between them. Ravenous, Hal attacked the food without another word and gulped down the wine, immediately feeling drowsy and light headed. His lips curling in amusement, Franc filled her glass once more, and they sat back comfortably in their chairs.

“Better?” he asked with a smile.

“Much better.” She patted her belly in satisfaction.

“Good. So, let’s talk. What brings you to Hannac at this time of year and in such weather?”

Hal paused and studied him intently. Eyes, sapphire blue, shone out of his tanned, coarsely-handsome face. His untamed shock of dark curly hair made him appear younger than he was. Only the wrinkles furrowing his forehead bore testament to a life which could not have been easy, up here in the North far from Colvé.

Franc gave little away, she knew that. Yet she had never had any reason to doubt his loyalty. Lying to her friends had only brought her more trouble than she had bargained for. “Well, Franc, the thing is, I’m er...”

“Yes?” He gazed at her down the aquiline length

of his nose.

“I’m in love.” She looked down at the floor, the heat of embarrassment spreading to her face, aware that she was now turning red.

Franc surveyed her for some time, a smile he could barely suppress twitching at the edge of his lips, before he could stand it no longer. Throwing back his head he laughed, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. Hal crossed her arms in irritation and glared at him. He caught her expression and forced himself to stop.

“Ah, I see...” he managed to gasp. “You’re serious?”

“Yes. I am. And if it’s such a matter of amusement for you I see I could have saved myself the journey.” She raised herself angrily from the chair.

“Oh, Hal sit down, for the Emperor’s own sake. You’re not going anywhere. You can hardly blame me for being surprised given your past record, can you? From what I recall of your romantic career, you were barely over one lass before you’d taken up with the next. And now you’ve ridden all this way to tell me that you’re in love? Of course, I can’t deny I’m honoured.” He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and sighed, choking back another laugh.

“It’s more than that, Franc. I’m in trouble.”

“Ah.” His expression resolved itself into one of concern. “What do you mean, trouble?”

She took a deep breath. Better tell him. He'll find out from Marc anyway.

"Her name is Meracad. Meracad Léac."

"Not as in Salius Léac's daughter, I hope?"

Biting her lip she studied the floor.

"Hal, what have you been up to?" His tone changed completely, his voice now strained and anxious. "Because if I'm not mistaken, my neighbour in Dal Reniac recently took as his bride the daughter of a Colvé merchant who..."

"Yes, alright. It's her," she interrupted, now impatient. "Look, Franc, I'm sick of people telling me that I've been a fool, or that I shouldn't have allowed it to happen, so please don't even try. You can say what you like, but you won't stop me. I'm not right without her, Franc. I have to get her back. Whatever it takes, but I *have* to get her back."

He stared at her in amazement. "I do believe you *are* in love. I never heard you say such things before."

"It's like being deprived of air, Franc. I need her."

Shocked at her own confession she lapsed back into silence, staring into the glowing embers of the grate. Franc shook his head, pouring more wine. He passed her a glass but she ignored him.

"I know you well enough to realise that if your mind is made up nothing will persuade you from your course. But let me ask you just one thing. Are

you sure you understand the risks of what I believe you're planning? Because one does not simply walk into Bruno Nérac's fort and carry off his wife. He has a certain reputation."

Hal's smile was bitter. "I've taken many risks over the past few months. I seem to be getting used to it."

He appraised her intently. "Well," he said at last, "you certainly won't get as far as the gates of Dal Reniac without my help."

"You want to help me?"

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, in general, it seems that people try to stop me from doing what I want."

"I know you too well to waste time trying to stop you. The way I see it, only an utter fool would think they could run off with Bruno Nérac's wife and get away with it. But then you've never been to Dal Reniac. And you've never seen his fortress. So I'll take you there. If you're still set on getting the lass out of there, at least you'll have somewhere to run to."

"Thank you. I wasn't counting on so much help and I have to tell you that I don't know if I can ever repay it."

Narrowing his eyes, his expression inscrutable, Franc peered into his wine glass, swirled the contents around and then drained it. "You don't have to pay me back, Hal." He set the cup down. "It's

getting late and you must be exhausted. I'll show you to a room."

As she rose, now unsteady with fatigue, she recalled the ring Marc had asked her to deliver. "Good grief! I almost forgot." Hal pulled it from her pocket and slid it across the table to him.

"What's this?"

"Marc asked me to give it to you. I hadn't realised what the emblem was until I arrived here...are you alright?"

Franc stared down at the ring, turning it over in the palm of his hand a few times, his face now pale and his hands trembling.

"Franc what's wrong?"

He made no answer. Clutching his fist around the ring he squeezed it tight, his gaze focussed inwards. She sat down again and waited.

"Hal," he said at last, his voice dry and gravelly. He avoided her gaze. "Could you give me a few minutes? Just wait outside the room for a moment, would you?"

"Of course." Nerves cancelling out her weariness, she went out onto the top of the staircase, closing the door behind her. What memories had that ring invoked?

## Chapter Thirty-Five

### Blackmail

It seemed like an eternity that she waited there in the dark. For some time there was silence. She could hear nothing but her own blood pumping loudly in her ears. Then came the sound of a chair scraping, a cupboard door opening and slamming shut again, papers being shuffled. At last, the door creaked open and he beckoned her back in, his eyes now wild. Not a trace was left of the genial host who'd greeted her at the gates to his fort.

Noticing some pieces of parchment spread out on the desk, she stared at him, desperate now for an explanation, but once again he avoided her gaze.

“For the Emperor’s own sake, Franc, what’s going on?” She sank back down into her chair.

“Who knows anything of your birth?” he asked at last.

She shrugged, disorientated and confused. “No one. Well, I suppose Cara is probably my mother. And Marc must know everything too. He was Master of Records at the Court. But he never told me anything.”

“He was right not to. He’d lose a great deal more than his position if he broke such a confidence.”

A terrible suspicion hovered on the fringes of her thoughts. For the first time in her life, she regarded Franc with suspicion.

“What are you trying to say?” Her voice quavered as she spoke. He rolled the ring between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

“This was placed in your swaddling when you were brought to the court...”

“What?”

“Let me finish! It was placed in your swaddling as proof of your parentage.”

“And how do you know that?” The fury quickened within her. She already knew what he was about to tell her.

“Because I put it there.”

He shoved a sheet of parchment across the desk, its red seal also impressed with an eagle. “Read it,” he instructed.

“No. I know what it says. I don’t have to.” Hal

clutched the arms of the chair, digging her nails into its wood

Cursing, he picked it up and read aloud. She seized the wine bottle and poured herself a glass, her hand shaking.

From the noble houses of Thæc and Hannac to the Great Emperor's court, greetings.

We hereby request that this child be adopted as a ward of court, being the daughter of two people of noble birth – Lady Cara Thæc, and Franc Hannac, Master of the Hannac estates. The evidence presented here should remove all doubt as to the girl's parentage. She will be provided for as long as she remains within the care of the court.

The families of Thæc and Hannac hereby request that no one, the child herself included, be informed as to the origins of her birth. We sign this declaration willingly, as

Cara Thæc and Franc Hannac.

The numbness came first, a strange refusal on the part of her body to acknowledge what she had just heard. But as the minutes passed, she felt the weight of Franc's gaze upon her as he waited for a reaction, and a strange kind of madness began to flood her veins – an anger which she realised she had carried her entire life and which now threatened to envelop



her completely.

“And just when were you planning to tell me?”

“I invited you here, didn’t I?”

“Afraid of what they’d say in Colvé?” she jeered.

“No – but I thought you’d need some time alone to come to terms with it.”

Shoving back her chair, she got to her feet, a fine skein of nausea curdling in the pit of her stomach. “I don’t *need* to come to terms with it!” Her voice rose against her will. “I don’t *intend* to come to terms with it. If you want to sit here in your great castle, with only your dishonourable memories for company, then do so. I want no part of it.” She turned to go.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice now betraying desperation.

“Leaving.”

“By the Emperor’s own eyes, Hal, that old horse will die beneath you if you ride it now. And you – where do you think you’re going anyway? I just told you that you won’t get to Dal Reniac without my help.”

She whirled around to face him. “And since when have I needed your help? Where were you, Franc, when Cara was making my childhood a misery?” She slapped the palm of her hand down on the desk in rage. “Where were you when I decided to leave the court? Or when my enemies had me beaten? Where?”

I'll tell you where: you were here, saving your own reputation instead."

"Your enemies did what?" He started suddenly.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter. It was obviously no concern of yours."

Franc's lips trembled and his eyes grew wider and wilder than before. "And what do you know of it?" He burst out at last. "You have no idea what happened – who I am, or who you are for that matter. I'm not going to beg you to stay, Hal. But just remember one thing – this could be your last chance to find out the truth and if you turn your back on me now, you'll be living in ignorance for the rest of your life."

From somewhere, buried in the deepest of her thoughts, a voice told her that he was right. If she left now, stumbling out into the autumn night, she would not return. Whatever happened – whether she succeeded in finding Meracad or not, if they both ended up on the run, evading Nérac, Léac or Cara, she would have no chance of recovering that knowledge. Her life would remain a mystery, both to herself and to those around her. Dragging the back of her sleeve across her eyes, she gasped, as if his words had knocked the wind out of her. "Will I feel better if you tell me?"

"Maybe not. But at least you'll know the truth."

Reluctantly, she lowered herself back into the

chair. "Tell me then," she said at last.

"I fell in love with Cara when we met at court. I was naive. I took our affection to be mutual. I should have known better. The Thæc family had squandered their fortunes over the years, and were penniless by the time she met me. They got by simply through blackmailing or toadying up to other aristocrats. Cara was no exception. What I took to be declarations of love were meaningless – she was in love with my money."

Hal shook her head in anger, but Franc continued: "I even hoped we would marry, and she led me to believe it, but a short time after I'd met her, I discovered that she already had another lover. I was furious, my illusions shattered. I told her that I would denounce her to the court as a whore."

He paused for a moment. Clearly, after so many years, he still found the memory of that betrayal painful. Clearing his throat, he continued: "I'll never forget what she said to me then, or the way in which she said it. 'Denounce me, and I'll kill the child I'm carrying. It's yours.'"

"How did you know I was your child?"

"I wasn't certain, but I didn't want to take the risk. And to be honest, with every year that's passed, I've realised that you *are* my daughter. Look at yourself, girl; you are Hannac through and through. Why, even that knave Arc noticed it on your arrival

here. And why do you think Cara has the power to continue to despise you? It's not just that you remind her of her fall from grace. She knows that you're my child. It's not just you she hates, Hal. It's me. She hates me through you."

Hal thought about this for a few minutes. He was right. Physically, they were similar; the same tall, sinuous physique, jet black hair and blue eyes. Even, she felt uncomfortably, the same mannerisms and habits – his semi-reclusive lifestyle, her inability to accept help when it was offered to her. How was it possible that she had never noticed it before?

"Anyway," Franc continued, "I knew she was perfectly capable of carrying out her threat. An illegitimate child would destroy her reputation at court entirely. I asked her to offer you to the court anonymously as a ward. In return, I appealed to the only thing I knew she would listen to: her avarice. I told her that I would provide not only for you at court, but for her too, as long as she agreed that you would stay alive, and..." his voice trailed off.

Hal instinctively realised that there was something more he didn't want to admit. "You promised to tell me the truth, Franc."

"You're right," he admitted. "But this is where my own shame causes me to hesitate. I arranged for her to give birth far away from Colvé in seclusion. Then I paid her money to keep her quiet. I didn't want

anyone to know who your parents were.”

Hal hissed in fury. “Why not?”

“I was young, Hal, an aristocrat, also with a future before me at court. And I couldn’t afford any scandal. My mind was in turmoil – I wasn’t thinking clearly. It was my moment of weakness.”

“And you never found the courage to tell me or anyone else, later?” She could not keep the scathing note from her voice.

“It became more difficult, with every passing year – I realised what your reaction would be and I decided that the role of friend was safer than that of father. As you know, the old woman who brought you to the court – she was the midwife who delivered you – she knew nothing about me. But she had a loose tongue, and well...when the court found out about Cara, she couldn’t do anything. If she denounced me, she would be admitting that you were our daughter. And so she preferred to persuade people that she had nothing to do with you.”

“And you let her.” A pulsing shot of madness coursed through her veins once more.

“I told you, the longer it went on, the harder it became to tell you – I knew you liked me, and I was terrified with the idea of losing what relationship we had.”

“But you bought the court’s silence – and Cara’s!”

“And in doing so, saved your life!” Tears now

streamed, unchecked, down his face. “Look, Hal, I made some mistakes. Don’t think that I haven’t suffered for them over the years. And I know that I can’t bring back the time I lost as your father. But if you give me a chance, I’ll be here for you now, and in the future.”

Hal shook her head. “I don’t know, Franc.”

“I ask only one thing. Stay here for the night. Stay here, and think about what I’ve told you. If, tomorrow, you still want to leave, I won’t try to stop you. But if you choose to stay, I’ll declare you to the court as my daughter. There’ll be no more lies, Hal, and you’ll be under the protection of the Hannac name for the rest of your life.”

“I have to think.”

“Very well. So you’ll stay the night at least?” His plea was almost pathetic. She fought back a slight wave of disgust.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. Rising, she picked up the parchment which lay on the table and tore it in two. Then she left the room, slamming the door behind her.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

### Heirs

Hal raced down the stairs, her mind filled with their argument, her feelings all at odds. Franc had lied to her all her life – or at least he had failed to admit the truth. How could she trust him now? Maybe he was really so selfish, so concerned for his own reputation, that he would change his mind again and try to treat her once more as a friend or a mere acquaintance – something she knew she could no longer accept. On the other hand, she found herself tempted by the prospect of having somewhere to call home: and the possibility of offering that freedom to Meracad.

She peered through a small window in the turret. The welcoming light of a brazier glimmered in the

courtyard and she made out a few soldiers sitting around it on log benches, warming their hands. The scene aroused memories of her childhood at court: the simple, unpretentious atmosphere of the guards' room. She continued down the stairs and through a door which brought her outside into the gloom of the autumn night. The air was freezing and carried on it the first wet flakes of sleet. The five men sitting around the brazier turned to look at her curiously as she headed towards them and sank down alone on an empty bench. Hal stared into the red, burning embers, groggy with exhaustion and emotion. They continued to observe her until eventually she was passed a frothy mug of hot beer. Grateful, she took it, recognising Arc, the guard she had first met upon entering the fortress. He favoured her with a snaggle-toothed grin, his broad face creasing once more in amusement.

“Bet you gave old Franc a surprise, turning up like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don't have to pretend. No foxing us. We're a group of old-timers, aren't we lads?”

His comrades nodded and laughed. Hal experienced a creeping sense of unease, uncertain as to where the conversation was headed. “What do you see?”

“Well,” Arc continued, apparently oblivious to



the fractious strain of her voice, “we always believed the master had a secret, didn’t we, lads? I mean, there he is, handsome fellow, rich, and he lives all by himself walled up in his fort. I always had my suspicions that he must have had his heart broken to behave in such a way.”

“And you think I broke his heart?”

“You?” Arec exploded in mirth, and the others followed suit.

“What is it?”

“Well,” he spluttered, “he might be a dark horse, but I don’t think you’re his type, lad.”

The soldiers collapsed in peals of laughter. Hal rose, her head now swimming as the hot beer mingled with her fractured thoughts, her temper rising once more. Wiping the tears from his eyes, Arec shook his head. “Don’t take it so badly, I didn’t mean any offence.”

“Well, you’ve quite a temper on you, boy,” another guard observed. “Just like the master. Doesn’t lose it often, but if he does – you know about it.”

Arec nodded in agreement. “Aye – same temper – got something of a likeness to Franc when he was young, too.” He looked her up and down. “We don’t think you’re his lover, lad. We know you’re his son.”

They chattered excitedly together, heads bobbing in agreement.

Her heart sank. Was it so obvious to everyone but herself? How could she have been so blind as to have missed it over the years? She felt that there had been enough deception, lies and half-truths. She shook her head. “You’re wrong. I’m not his son. I’m his daughter.”

The idea became real as soon as she gave it expression. Arec seemed to sober up instantly. “I’m sorry, Miss. I didn’t realise.”

“It’s alright.” She sank back down on the bench. “It often happens. My name’s Hal – once Thæc. I was named after my mother’s side. I’ve lived in Colvé all my life and I had no idea Franc was my father until he told me this evening.”

She was giving away more than she had intended but having begun, she was unable to stop. “He lied to me my entire life.”

She knocked back some beer and stared gloomily into the brazier. The guards looked at one another. Finally, Arec said: “If Franc is your father, then this is your home. Maybe he hasn’t done right by you till now, but he is a good man. He’ll see to it you want for nothing. And if you stay, it would solve a little problem of our own, wouldn’t it lads?”

They mumbled in agreement.

“What do you mean?”

“We were always worried that the master didn’t have an heir,” Arec explained. “Without an heir, who

knows what would happen to this place. The Emperor would have to take control of it. Maybe he'd let us live on here, maybe not. Some of us – our fortunes have been tied up with the Hannacs' for centuries. It would be a tragedy. But with a new master – or mistress – to take over when Franc dies, we could at least have some possibility of staying on here a few more decades. And if you're anything like your father, we'd have a good living too."

She tried to absorb this. Not only was she now the heir to Hannac, but potentially responsible for the livelihoods of its inhabitants. "Why me?" she whispered to herself.

"You look worn out girl," Arec said at last. "Did the master give you a room, or somewhere to sleep?"

She shook her head. "We had other things on our minds. I suppose he forgot."

"Well, if you're not too proud, I can offer you a space under a table in the great hall."

She had no energy left to protest. Rising, they bade goodnight to the other soldiers, and headed inside the fortress.

The candles had been put out, and she could just make out the prone shapes of sleepers everywhere: on tables, under tables, some even lying beneath benches.

"You should be warm enough here," Arec informed her. "We try to keep the fire burning all

night, and you might be lucky enough to find a spare blanket in that box over there.”

He gestured towards a wooden chest in a corner of the room. Gingerly stepping over the bodies of sleeping tenants, she pulled an old, worn rag from the bottom of the chest. Then she climbed under a table and lay squeezed beneath two strangers, both of whom were snoring violently. The noise did not disturb her. No sooner had her eyes closed, than she fell asleep.

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“Ah, doctor. You wanted to see me? Be brief, please. I’m rather busy.”

Bruno Nérac thumbed absentmindedly through some pages of a tome on politics. He was generally too caught up in matters of business to read these days. A shame, really.

A memory drifted, unbidden, somewhere on the edge of his conscious thoughts. A young child, seated on his mother’s knee as she had taught him his letters. The world of words that she had unlocked, a world in which anything was possible.

He slammed down the cover of the book. The noise reverberated around the library, echoing across its high-beamed ceiling. The doctor was sweating. Pulling off his cloth hat he wiped his bald

head and brow, dislodging the thin-rimmed spectacles on the end of his pointed nose. He bent down to pick them up, hurriedly replacing them. Nérac looked on in bored amusement.

“Well, Sir? You have news for me?”

“It concerns your wife, my Lord.”

“Oh, yes. My wife. How is she?”

He fixed the man with an interrogative stare. He had not seen the woman for over a week, now. Not since the last time she...it was all becoming so tiring.

He had waited for so long to make his choice, a match which would be profitable in every sense. A bright young woman from the city, untarnished by the corruptions of the court. Good-looking and intelligent, brought up in the ways of business. Robust enough to deliver the healthy sons and daughters he craved, and her dowry – the contract with Léac – which ensured him wealth for the years to come. In contrast to the other candidates he had considered, she had seemed perfect. And he had been more than prepared to grant her far more than any other aristocrat’s wife might expect: a library to call her own, security, protection, the freedom to pursue any harmless pastimes she might enjoy. All he expected in return was compliance. It was not much to ask.

At first her struggles had aroused him, to the extent that he had delighted in her resistance and his

own ability to overpower her. Gradually, however, the fight in her had faded, replaced by a cold, impassive acceptance which left him feeling disgusted, both with himself and with her. He had tried to catch her off-guard, to flatter or cajole her, to elicit some kind of reaction from her but nothing worked. She had become a stone figurine, a statue which might ornament the banqueting hall.

The doctor avoided his gaze, keenly studying the floor as he spoke. "She had a slight accident, Sir."

"An accident? Of what kind?" Nérac picked up the book on politics, reading its spine before carefully replacing it on the shelf.

"She fainted, Sir. While she was taking breakfast. Her maid observed it and fetched me. By the time I had arrived she had recovered."

Nérac froze and then quickly regained his composure. "Anything else, man?"

"She would not take her breakfast, Sir. She was sick."

"She was sick? And would you happen to know the cause of her sickness?"

The doctor shifted from foot to foot, his gaze fixed upon the floor.

"Well come on, doctor! I pay you a princely sum to keep my wife and myself in good health. What is the matter with her?"

"Sir, I examined her carefully and...I believe her

to be pregnant. By about a month.”

Nérac started. He had not expected to hear this news so soon. Well, he had been right on one score at least. His wife was healthy, strong, fertile. His heart beat faster. “This is good news, excellent news, doctor.” His voice was low, quiet, almost a whisper. “Take care that she wants for nothing. I will be with her soon.”

“As you wish, Sir.” The doctor turned to go.

“Oh, and doctor?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“My wife, as you know, is precious to me beyond belief. As is my future child.”

The doctor wagged his head up and down a few times, impatient to be gone. “I will do everything in my power to keep them safe, Sir.”

He left the room and Nérac lowered himself into a wide-armed wooden chair and rested his feet on the table. Suddenly, his composure breaking, he brought his fist down on the table with an exuberant crash and his mouth cracked open into a smile of pure joy.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

### Tinder

For once, his natural confidence deserted him. He hovered outside her door, internally debating whether to rush in and fling his arms around her, or to maintain that cold distance which now hung between them. His hand rose to knock and then he held back and put his clenched fist to his mouth, gnawing on his knuckles.

Turning his back to her room, Nérac paced the corridor. He could love her now, he told himself. In spite of her sullenness, that dumb insolence with which her eyes met his, he could love her because of what she would give him. And he would do, now. He would shower her with gifts, with attention. He would humour her every whim, they would become



the toast of the aristocracy. Dal Reniac would boast of a dynasty which would perhaps, one day, rival the Emperor's own, founded upon a perfect marriage of business and aristocratic lineage.

Turning back, he rapped on the door, then waited impatiently, his ear pressed to the wood. Not a sound. Grimacing, he raised his hand again. This time it swung open and she stood on the threshold, indignant fury inscribed on her face.

“What do you want Sir?”

Nérac was taken aback. He had expected her pale features to glow with radiance, a slim smile to play about her lips, the satisfaction of a wife who knew she had fulfilled her duty. Instead her eyes were enraged, her face streaked with tears.

“Meracad! You are overwrought. You should rest.” He put his hand to her fair hair and stroked it gently. That cold, hard look re-entered her eyes. Nérac peered down at her, surprised at her expression of disgust, of contempt.

“Overwrought, Sir?” There was no disguising the note of scorn which had entered her voice.

Ignoring it, he pushed past her into the chamber, casting a critical gaze over the plain, unadorned walls, the lack of ornamentation, her own few simple belongings. That strange thing she wore about her neck now lay upon the windowsill. He picked it up. In the light it was almost translucent.

“I would prefer it if you didn’t touch that.”

He clenched it tight and turned towards her.  
“What is it?”

“You have everything else that is mine, please don’t deny me the pleasure of one small token.”

“A token of what? The love of some poor young suitor back in Colvé?” He sneered in spite of himself, and flung the shark’s tooth down on the bed.

“I have already told you, I have known the love of no man.”

“I would remind you that you are my wife.” He allowed his expression to soften, and walking over to her again, placed his hands on her shoulders. She flinched. “And, if the doctor informs me rightly, you are also the mother of my child. Is it true?”

She slipped from his embrace and sat down on the bed, winding the skein of thread around her fingers tightly until the shark’s tooth bit into the palm of her hand.

“Meracad, I understand you must feel confused, nervous...” He knelt before her and took her hands in his own. “It is a burden as much as a blessing, I am not blind to that. What can I do to ease that burden?”

Her eyes were now filling fast with tears. “Let me go home,” she stammered.

“What?” Nérac looked up at her, askance. “Go home? This is your home.”

“I mean to Colvé. To my father. Just for a few days. That would bring me some relief. Please.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head. “That I cannot allow. You may take no journeys now. Nothing that might endanger the child — you must stay here, rest. You shall want for nothing, I can assure you.”

“Please!”

“No!”

She broke down, her body overwhelmed with sobs, the tooth now drawing blood as she pressed it hard into her skin. Unable to control his rage he reached for her hair, pulling her face up to the light. “I said you will want for nothing!” He let her go and she fell back on the bed, her body limp and trembling. “Why can you not be grateful? Do you not understand the privilege of being my wife? Of being mother to the dynasty of Nérac?”

“I know only pain, not privilege.”

He hissed through his teeth. “You’ll learn. I’ll teach you to respect what it means.” He left, slamming the door behind him.

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It was a long time before Meracad finally got to her feet again, padded over to the window and looked out. The air was flecked with damp sleet and she

watched the inhabitants of Dal Reniac fort trudging through the dirty puddles which were accumulating between the cobbles of the courtyard. The sky was as grey and brooding as her thoughts.

Hooves clattered across the wet stone. Her husband was riding his chestnut stallion through the slow-moving huddles of servants and guards, a hawk on his arm. She had observed that he often hunted to assuage his anger, leaving the boundaries of the city to try his luck on the surrounding moorlands.

For a brief moment she imagined herself in the place of that hawk. Tethered to his glove, yet if it chose it could fly and if it flew it might not return. Perhaps the situation was not so dire, after all. He had not taken the bait — he would not let her return to Colvé, perhaps sensing the motive behind her request. She would have jumped before the carriage had reached her father's, even at a risk of destroying the life which she now knew to be growing inside her. She would have jumped and run to find Hal, to ask the duellist — if she were still alive — why she had left her to endure this dismal black joke of an existence. But, she felt, there would be other opportunities. The trick now was to watch and wait.

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Hal awoke to the dull murmur of the stirring

tenants, and to a foggy grey light that radiated through the high windows of the great hall of Hannac. Disorientated and sluggish she rose, only to hit her head on the table above her. She cursed and lay back down again. Her two snoring companions of the previous night — both faintly reeking of alcohol — looked at her curiously, but said nothing. Rolling up their blankets they got up, leaving her lying alone on the stone floor. She turned her head to observe Arec's legs running frantically into the hall, and made a more successful attempt to get to her feet.

“Master's looking for you miss,” he began breathlessly. “He's in a bit of a state.”

The main doors to the room were flung open abruptly, any remaining sleepers moaning as they were jolted into consciousness. Franc charged in, clearly not having slept at all. Unshaven, he wore the same clothes from the previous evening, and his red-rimmed eyes were wild and shadowed. He scanned the great hall as people struggled to their feet, their faces fixed in attitudes of confusion or shock. At last his gaze fell on Hal, who was now perched on a table, pointedly studying the floor.

“Well?” he blurted out, his voice dry and hoarse. “What's it to be? Hal Thæc, or Hal Hannac?”

There were a few gasps of surprise followed by an expectant silence. Hal shifted uncomfortably, aware

that she had now become the focus of attention. She turned his question over in her mind, no longer able to evade the decision. “And what if I prefer just plain Hal?”

Franc’s eyes clouded with sadness. “I told you – it’s your choice. I can’t force you to stay. But if you choose that path, you choose loneliness. Believe me, girl, I can tell you a great deal about that. It’s no life.”

“I wouldn’t be alone. I’d have Meracad!”

“Ever the optimist, Hal. The two of you would be running for the rest of your lives – even if you got her out of Dal Reniac in the first place. Listen to me, all of you!” He addressed the tenants and guards of Hannac, his voice shaking. “I haven’t been honest with any of you. Not you – the people of this fortress. And not this girl either. She came here as a guest, expecting the hospitality of a friend. Instead, she discovered the lies of a father.”

As the truth unravelled, she could sense those around her holding their breaths.

“Halanya has lived in Colvé all her life, when she should have been here as the heir to the Hannac estates. Now she knows the truth, and she’s angry. Rightly so. Isn’t that the case, Hal?”

She nodded but remained silent, shocked at Franc’s release of emotions, the raw energy which seemed to drive them.

“All of you have a right to be angry. I’ve lied to everyone in this room. So now I’m asking you – if you will continue to accept me as your master, if you will accept Halanya as the future heir to Hannac and Hal, above all, if you will accept me as your father.”

The silence was painful. Arec broke the impasse. “If I might speak for us all, we’ve known you long enough to realise that you’re a good master. Your offence is to the girl, not to us. And as for her...” he glanced over at Hal “I’ve already seen in her the self-same qualities I’ve always admired in you, Sir. The same independence of mind and heart.” He turned to the others. “We all know what fate awaits us when the last Master of Hannac dies. Our future is uncertain – we could be driven off the lands that our families have farmed for centuries. I say we put our faith in this girl, the last surviving heir of the Hannacs. At least, if nothing else, we’ll guarantee security for ourselves and for our children in the years to come.”

There were a few murmurs of assent.

“Well, lass, you have our support. You have your father’s plea. What do you say?”

She jumped down from the table. Perhaps it would be possible to make it to the doors, to grab the horse and head for Dal Reniac. To leave Franc and his sorry lies and to continue to live as she had always done – alone, reliant on no one but herself.

Yet something rooted her to the ground. The same feeling that had led to her confession just a day before on the shores of Brennac. *The further I am from Colvé, the closer I am to home.* Now she understood.

“Maybe, Arec, you would not be so ready to accept me if you knew my own reasons for coming to Hannac. I am on my way to Dal Reniac. Someone I love is in that city.” They had to know the truth. She owed them that much. “Her name is Meracad Nérac.” A few low whispers indicated that Meracad’s marriage was now common knowledge. “If she returns to Hannac with me, we will almost certainly incur the anger of both her father and her husband. They will look for us and if they find us, they’ll kill us. If we return here, it will mean trouble for all of you.”

The voices rose heatedly now, rising to such a pitch that Franc was forced to shout above the noise: “Listen to me, all of you! Are we, have we ever been friends of Nérac and his family? While the Eagles Nests hung out against the empire until the last, the Nérac’s surrendered in exchange for the wealth they now possess. Bruno Nérac’s ancestors traded honour for money while the families of Pæga, Ilenga and Hannac were dubbed rebels, just because we upheld the rights and independence of the North. Some of our land was even given to the Nérac’s in reward!



And now our great estates are mere shadows of what they once were — Dal Reniac itself was in the hands of the Hannacs, centuries ago. There is no love lost between the houses of Nérac and Hannac, in case you had forgotten!”

Hal had thought such injustices had long been put aside in the interests of stability. She looked around the hall at the fervent expressions on the tenants’ faces. Politics, she realised, would never be a substitute for such passion. The North was tinder and her desire for Meracad was a flint that could set it all on fire. She should walk away, right now. She should leave and go back to the relative safety of Colvé, where her troubles with Léac and Cara would seem like a childish squabble in comparison with the ancestral rivalries she might now unleash.

She walked over to Franc and held out her hand. He took it warmly in his, and then blinking back tears, embraced her to the raucous approval of those gathered. Finally he let go, studying her face. “Welcome, Hal Hannac” he said at last. “Welcome to your new, old home. Welcome as my heir, and welcome as my daughter.”

The room grew quiet again. As news of the unfurling events had spread throughout the fortress, almost all of its inhabitants had rushed inside to witness them. Now they craned over each other’s heads, desperate to catch a glimpse of their

unexpected guest.

“Well, I think this calls for some kind of a celebration,” Franc called out, ignoring Hal who was frantically shaking her head. “A feast, some dancing – what do you all say?”

Despite the yells of agreement, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “It isn’t a good idea. I need to move on north.”

“Come on, Hal – you’re not going to disappoint them when they’ve only just met you, are you? Besides, I already told you, we’re not rushing into Dal Reniac.”

He shook his head in mock disapproval, grinning broadly. “Anyone would think you’d forgotten how to enjoy yourself. And we northerners make Marc look like an amateur when it comes to entertaining!”

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

### Native Talent

Hal woke to the sound of someone banging on the door. Opening it, she found Arc grinning unsteadily, already the worse for drink.

“Master told me to wake you. Says you’re expected in the hall. Here,” he threw a clean linen shirt and trousers at her. “Take this. Better hurry,” he slurred. “Don’t want to miss the fun.”

She changed into the fresh clothes and trudged down to the great hall, the strains of music, dancing and laughter drifting along the corridors of Hannac. Standing in the doorway, Hal stared, open mouthed at the scene before her. Long trestles sank beneath the weight of food – roasts of all descriptions, bowls filled with dried fruit brought up from the cellars,

huge loaves of bread and flagons filled to the brim with wine, beer and fruit compote. The fortress's inhabitants had already been driven to wild dancing by a group of musicians in a corner of the room. Franc sat behind a trestle on a raised platform at the opposite end, and she wound her way through the dancers and then climbed up onto the dais to greet him.

"You don't disappoint," she yelled above the noise. "I doubt even Marc could organise such festivities."

He smiled in response and gestured to an empty chair beside his own. "We've been waiting for you. Thought you would sleep away the entire day."

"I was exhausted. I've had more comfortable nights than on the stone floor of your great hall."

"I never knew you were so demanding, Hal. Besides, I found you a room, didn't I?"

Franc had allotted her a tiny chamber in a tower on the southern flank of the fortress, simply furnished but with a view over the woods and lowlands stretching far away to the shores of Brennac.

"It was palatial in comparison," she conceded.

He filled her wine glass to the brim. "So, it's been quite a while since you last did any training with your sword, I'll wager. Would you pay your father the honour of a duel?"

She choked on her drink, spraying the contents over the table. Ignoring her, Franc smiled, sipping at his glass. “Did you never wonder where you got those fancy fencing skills of yours?”

“I practised, hard. Every day since I was a child.”

“Undoubtedly. But don’t you suspect you have just one drop of native talent coursing through your veins?”

She shrugged. “Possible, I suppose. I hadn’t given it much thought. “

Franc had an unnerving ability to appear serious when he was joking, and to disguise his true emotions with irony. Unless, of course, disguise was no longer an option.

“So, if you entertain it as a possibility, maybe you’d put it to the test? I’d break my vow of modesty to declare that you got that drop of talent from myself.”

“What?”

“Well, you certainly didn’t get it from Cara.” As if to provoke her further, he leaned over the table to engage Arc in conversation. She drained her wine glass and reached for an apple moodily, worrying it rather than eating it.

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you, old man.” She threw the core onto her plate and sat back in her chair, stretching her legs out and folding her arms behind her head.

Arec grinned up at Franc, who rubbed his hands in glee. “Don’t do this to yourself, Halanya. If you have a weakness for anything, it’s a challenge.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

Standing, she poured herself another glass of wine and knocked it back.

“Alright. Just as long as you are aware of the risk.”

“I knew it!” he gloated and clapped, motioning for the musicians to cease playing. As the melody ground to a halt the dancers slowed and he rose, addressing the hall. “I believe that we rarely have a chance in this, our far flung corner of the country, to experience the delights of true city entertainment. And yet here we have amongst us my daughter – a renowned duellist.”

“Stop it, Franc,” she muttered, but he ignored her.

“You all know that the duellists of Beric Thælda’s academy have a certain reputation. And yet, if modesty will allow, I would vouch that we northerners can hold our own in a fight too.” He turned to Hal. “The first to reach three hits, girl. Let’s hope I’m not such an ‘old man’ that I can’t manage at least one.”

The crowd edged back around the hall to create space for them and Arec disappeared in search of

weapons, returning with a pair of sabres. These blades were heavier than the rapiers she was used to and she eyed them with suspicion.

“We don’t play with toys in these parts,” Arc joked drily. In response, Hal snatched a sword and slashed it through the air. Its curved shape gave it power. Franc handed her a mesh visor and a padded waistcoat.

“What’s this?” she asked, holding the waistcoat aloft in scorn.

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you, lass.” She read the irony in his eyes and without a further word pulled on the protective clothing and mask.

They circled each other before driving together. Hal recognised her own style in the fluid grace of Franc’s duelling, but it soon became clear that he had the upper hand in strength and ability, if not in speed. The crowd cheered for their master, although she heard a few yells of support on her own behalf. Franc took the first hit, catching her unguarded right shoulder, but as she grew accustomed to the new blade she answered with two of her own, lightly puncturing the padding on his vest. They broke apart again, weighing each other up.

“Where did you learn your technique?” she asked, breathless.

“I’ve practised hard, every day since I was a child,” he jibed. “We’re not complete barbarians up

here you know, Hal, whatever Marc might have you believe.”

They engaged, exchanging a few swift blows, and once again it was Franc’s turn to score a hit. “As even a match as any I’ve had,” he admitted, circling again, looking for an opening.

She shook her head, wiping the sweat from her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “You’re good. But it’s not as if your livelihood ever depended on fighting.”

“No. Not my livelihood. But occasionally my life.”

He attacked again, and with an intensity which surprised Hal. She lost her guard, and he scored a third, winning hit, lightly tapping the side of her visor. Angered at her own lack of care, Hal shook her head, and they removed their protection, Franc holding out his hand. For the second time that day she shook it in reconciliation, forced to concede his victory.

“Come on, child,” he gestured towards the table. “Next time you’ll win. You were simply out of practice.”

“No. You’re better, that’s all.”

She knocked back the mug of water that Arec passed her. The dancers regrouped and the musicians resumed their playing. Franc and Hal took their seats on the platform once again.

“As a boy, I had a talent for duelling,” he shouted



over the noise. “Very much like yourself. I even entertained the idea of trying my chances on the circle, but it wasn’t considered appropriate for an aristocrat. In the end I trained for my own pleasure. But it comes in useful, now and again.”

“Such as when you need to prove to your daughter that you’re her father?”

“Something like that.”

The party continued late into the night, but she succeeded in escaping back to her room, ignoring Franc’s entreaties to stay. The thought of the challenge ahead dampened her desire to party. She spent much of the night lying on her bed, soberly awake, as the strains of music and revelry drifted up from the great hall.

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When Franc failed to appear at breakfast the next morning, Hal took matters into her own hands and marched to his room, banging angrily on the door.

“Alright, I’m coming.” She heard him struggle out of bed, pull back the lock and finally he emerged, wrapped to his neck in a silk robe and looking queasy. “What is it? By the spirits themselves, girl, you’ve not been here two days and already you’re making uncivil demands.”

“I haven’t demanded anything.”

“Anyone who knocks on my bedroom door at this hour is making an uncivil demand.”

“Franc, it’s mid-morning. And anyway, you agreed last night.”

“I agreed to what?”

Sighing, she pushed her way into his room. “You agreed to help me find Meracad.” She hunted around, fishing out articles of clothing from beneath the bed and behind chairs. “Get dressed!” She threw the clothes at him. He shook his head, but clearly thought better of arguing, and pulled the trousers on underneath his robe.

“Let’s talk upstairs,” he suggested. “I’ll have someone bring us breakfast.”

They climbed the turret to his tiny chamber, and Elis soon appeared with a plate of leftovers from the previous night.

“So, what did you have in mind?” Franc poured himself a tankard of ale. Easing himself into his chair, he rubbed his head and peered at her through tired eyes.

“Didn’t you have enough of that last night?”

“An old northern custom.” He drained the tankard in a few gulps. “Helps delay the onset of the inevitable.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Anyway, you know exactly what I have in mind. I need to reach Dal Reniac, get into Nérac’s fort, find Meracad and get

us out again. Simple.”

“Oh aye, simple.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “Just let me point out a few facts, Hal. The gates to Dal Reniac are closely guarded. If you’re not a trader, they won’t let you in. Nérac’s fortress lies at the city’s very heart and is also, naturally, heavily guarded. Even if Nérac knows nothing of your existence — and that’s something we can’t take for granted — you’re hardly going to stroll in there without attracting attention. On top of that, we have to take into account the man’s reputation as a brutal, cold-hearted sadist.”

“You said you’d help me,” she protested.

“And so I shall. In fact, I don’t see how you’ll get anywhere without my help. But you have to know what you’re up against.”

“So how do we pass through the city gates?” she persisted.

“Oh, that’s the easy part. I often take crops for trade up there. You can pass yourself off as my servant. Even if the guards are suspicious, they part fairly easily with their scruples when money is involved. Besides, some of them know me personally. Not every man in Dal Reniac is a friend of Nérac’s.”

“Good. What then?” she asked, optimism creeping back into her voice once more.

“I have a safe house below the city walls. Once we

reach that, we'll be in a better position to find out more. Who knows – maybe Nérac is recruiting staff. He tends to get through them quickly. Or you may just take one look at his fortress and make the more sensible decision to leave Meracad well alone. We'll see."

"That's not going to happen," she hissed. But her stomach gave a wild lurch as if rebelling against her. What if she really did lose her nerve at the last moment? What if she took one look at those towering walls, the guards fringed along their battlements and gave Meracad up for good? What if her courage failed her? She grimaced inwardly. No. That could not be.

"I'll have Arc fix up a wagon and some bags of grain," Franc continued. "Meet me in the courtyard at midday."

"We're leaving today?"

"Why not? I know you won't give me any peace until we do. But one thing, Hal. You know the dangers. Listen to me. Take my advice if I offer it to you. If you don't, I may not be able to help you."

"Very well."

"You promise?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"You have a tendency to do the opposite of what people expect – you said as much yourself."

"Franc, I'll be as meek as a lamb at your side if it

means getting her back.”

Sitting back in his chair he appraised her, one eyebrow arched.

“I’ll get packed.” She hurried down the stairs, red-faced, as Franc’s laughter pealed along the corridors and courtyards of Hannac fortress.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

### Dal Reniac

A few hours later saw them waiting in the courtyard, where Arec and some guards loaded the last few sacks of grain onto an open wagon. The ground was now wet with thick dirty slush and there was a nip in the air which chilled to the bone.

“Will you be needing some help, Sir?” Arec was clearly a man who relished adventure.

Franc shook his head. “Sorry, Arec. I need you here for the time being. There’s a possibility things may not go to plan. If anything happens, I’m leaving you in charge. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” Arec’s face grew grave.

“If I change my mind, I’ll get word to you, so stay alert,” Franc added. He turned to Hal. “You’re my

serving lad. I have some business in the city and you're accompanying me."

"Right you are, Franc." Every step now seemed to take her closer to Meracad. She felt her face flush, her nerves singe with excitement

"Hal!" he warned, rounding on her. "Remember what I said. No madness. Understood?"

"As you wish."

She leapt onto the wagon and Franc climbed up beside her, taking the horses' reins. A few well-wishers had come into the courtyard to see them off as they rolled through the gates of Hannac, turning right to skirt beneath the fortress walls and then down through woodland on the northern side of the plateau.

The track wound through conifers, and their way was littered with pine cones and brown needles which stuck to the rims of the cart wheels. Water dripped from the trees onto the sacks of grain and their breath turned to vapour. She shivered, shrouding herself in the winter great coat that Lavinia had given her back in Caraden.

Franc explained that he often accompanied his tenants on their journeys to Dal Reniac, just as he made frequent visits to Colvé. "If the master doesn't understand the work his tenants do, they'll be sure to cheat him. Don't forget that, will you?" His eyes interrogated her from under the broad brim of his

leather hat.

She observed him in silence. Her thoughts pivoted around Meracad and Dal Reniac. She had no wish to complicate matters by imagining her role as Franc's future heir. The prospect of so much responsibility made her feel physically sick.

"Once we're back, Hal, I'll teach you everything. How to plough in the spring, the winnowing and harvesting of the autumn and how we cure meat and preserve food for the winter. You must know it all."

"It was never my intention to become a farmer, Franc."

"One day Hannac will be yours. It'll be a home for yourself and the lass you say you're so in love with."

She shivered and her stomach bounced as the cart jolted down the uneven track into the darkness of a steep-sided glen. "Let's find her first, eh? Then we can talk about my future at Hannac."

He nodded and focussed on steering the horses round a tree stump in the path. In spite of the gloom and the cold, the glen had a kind of aura to it, with the rushing noise of a swift-moving river at its base emanating up through the trees, and birds calling as they flew overhead. She experienced a surge of excitement as the wagon bolted down the steepening path and Franc had to work hard to rein in the horses. By the time they had reached the valley floor her heart was racing and the rushing wind had left



her dizzy and teary-eyed.

“So, tell me Franc, any great romances after Cara?” Hal had been itching to uncover a few more of Franc’s secrets and decided that they were now far enough from Hannac to do so. He pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes, but she could see that he was smiling.

“Well?” She was determined to extract a few confessions.

“You know what they say, Hal. Once bitten, twice shy.”

“I heard rumours about Marta Ilenga,” she coaxed.

His smile broadened even further and he let out a long, low whistle. “Ah, Marta,” he said at last. “What a woman.”

“So?” She asked, frustrated. “Is it true?”

He turned to her and pushed his hat back on his head. “No, it isn’t. Although I can’t say I didn’t try.” Franc fixed his gaze on the forest floor once more, and she noticed a hardness enter his eyes, his jaw clench and the release. “I’m a bit too rough and ready for a woman of her tastes. And she has very refined tastes, does Marta. A great connoisseur of the finer things in life – a real patron of young poets and artists – particularly handsome young poets and artists.”

“I see.” She decided not to pursue it any further.

The wagon bumped its way along the track, and she became lost in her own thoughts.

“And you, Hal. What is it about this young lass that you’re so enamoured of? Would it not be anything to do with the fact that she’s Bruno Nérac’s wife? I mean, forbidden love is always more enticing — or so I’ve heard.”

“She wasn’t Nérac’s wife when I first met her.”

“But she was Léac’s daughter. You must have known the risks.”

Hal sighed. “I suppose I did. Beric and Marc did their best to warn me, but...”

“But what?” He pulled on the horses’ reins as they approached a squat stone bridge which spanned the river. “Whoa, lads, slow down now!” The wagon ground to a halt.

“I don’t feel quite balanced without her, Franc. I can’t explain it in any other way. It’s as if she were a counterweight.”

He gazed at her intently for some time, the piercing blue of his eyes somehow boring deep inside her. She looked away.

“We’ll get her back, lass,” he said at last gently. “We’ll do whatever it takes to get her back.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He managed the horses as they trotted over the bridge and then they picked up pace on the other side of the glen’s leafy floor before the path crept

upwards towards the moors on the other side. The weight of grain sacks meant that they were now forced to dismount, and they led the straining animals upwards as the gloom of spruce and pine gave way to a lighter canopy of rowan interspersed with gorse. Heather formed a springy carpet amongst the shrubs and stunted trees, and suddenly they were following a sandy moorland track as it headed across the wild open plains between The Eagles' Nests and Dal Reniac.

"We'll not get there before nightfall," Hal observed with a shudder. The clouds were low and visibility was poor. The moors seemed so vast and lonely, and the only sounds were of unseen curlews, their piercing shrieks picked up and carried on the wind.

"It's better that way," Franc observed. "I'm known in Dal Reniac, of course – there's no help for it. But they won't be able to make out your face so easily in the dark."

The horses wound their laborious way over ground which had been churned to mush by the wet weather. Occasionally, Hal and Franc were forced to dismount and push or pull the wagon across boggy stretches. The journey took its toll and they fell silent as exhaustion set in. At last, however, the ground began to gently rise, becoming firmer and drier. Hal tried to coax Franc into conversation once

more.

“What were my grandparents like?”

“Well, I never knew my father,” Franc explained. “He died crossing these very same moors we are now on, one winter’s night. He was in Dal Reniac when he received a message that my mother was giving birth. They warned him not to cross the moors alone at such a time of year, but by all accounts he was so eager to reach her that he decided to risk it anyway. They found him the next morning. His horse had taken a fall and broken its neck. He’d died of the cold.”

She began to regret asking him anything, but Franc had now warmed to his theme. “So it was left to my mother to take care of the fort and to bring me up single-handedly. She missed him bitterly, but she did a sterling job, I can tell you. I’m sure she would never have allowed me to let you go. But she died before I even met Cara, more’s the pity.”

“What was she like?”

Franc’s eyes hazed with nostalgia. “Oh, she was a survivor. And a fighter — she’d argue with anyone, man, woman or child in order to get her own way. I remember I had a few flaming rows with her myself as a young man. But she brought me up to understand my duty to Hannac and its people, and for that I loved her.”

“What was her name?”

“Halanya. The spirits save me for my prescience. Look!”

Franc pointed ahead, and Hal strained her eyes to peer through the grainy light. A dim shape loomed through the mists and cloud. Far in the distance, the conical hill looked out of place against the backdrop of gently rolling moorland.

“Dal Reniac, Hal. Once the only rival to Colvé – when it was in the hands of our ancestors.”

As they continued further, she saw pale-coloured buildings of varying sizes and shapes clinging precariously to its side, and a formidable tower at the very peak. The light began to fade and low clouds enveloped the city once more. But now her heart seemed to pump with a different rhythm. Meracad was somewhere amongst that confusion of streets and buildings. She was going to find her.

## Chapter Forty

### A Dutiful Daughter

Dear Father

Lord Nérac has asked me to pass on the happy news that you will be a grandfather by late spring. He is pleased that I have passed this first test as his wife. In fact, Bruno never ceases to demonstrate his care and concern for my health and that of his future child. I asked, for example, if I might return to see you in Colvé for a brief visit, but he refused to let me out of his sight. I am, I must say, indebted to my husband for his protection of my interests. Were he not here, I am sure I would be a risk to myself.

I realise that you are so much engaged in your business ventures, father, that you will have little time for reading my letters, so I will be brief. I would

simply remind you that I have not forgotten your deep concern in ensuring that I reached Dal Reniac so swiftly and under such close supervision. I hope to find some way to repay you for this in the future.

In fact, father, as I write this, I feel inclined to let you in on a little secret. I had been saving it up for your old age, but we are family after all, and families should have no secrets. Besides, I would like to explain to you how, as a devoted daughter, I hope I have done my own part in saving you from potential shame or harm.

You will recall how, in the past, you occasionally thought you had misplaced certain letters of business. And you know what kind of letters those were, father, do you not? You are a merchant after all and merchants must take risks. But such risks, father? Had some of those letters come to light, I am sure you would be facing more than just expulsion from the guild. And so, to save you from dishonour or punishment, I took those letters. You thought that it was servants who were stealing them to blackmail you. You even had some of them interrogated – for which I am truly sorry. But I had to prevent them getting into the wrong hands. I did it all for your sake.

Of course, your decision to send me to Dal Reniac was so sudden that I did not have chance to retrieve them. But do not worry, father. I know where they

are. You can rest assured that nobody, yourself included, will find them. Only a devoted daughter could have kept them so secure.

And so, father, I must go now. But I will leave you with the thought that one day I will return to see you again. I cannot wait.

Meracad



## Chapter Forty-One

### Degaré

The dregs of grey evening light disappeared as they approached the gates of Dal Reniac. Hal was relieved, for as Franc had explained, the darkness offered cover.

“Good evening to you,” Franc addressed the guard who sat shivering at a desk in his customs booth.

“Oh, it’s not such a good one, Sir, now the cold’s setting in. Is this wheat you’re bringing to the city, Sir? Mind if I take a look?”

“Wheat and barley. Be my guest.” The guard unfastened one of the bags and dipped his hand inside, lifting it in the air and allowing the grains to slither through his fingers. “And where might this

wheat be coming from?”

“It’s mine. I’m the Master of Hannac and this here is one of my tenant’s lads. We have papers,” he added, pulling a bundle of documents from inside his coat.

The guard scanned the documents by candlelight. Hal noticed his expression harden, becoming more cunning, less compliant. He handed them back. “Sure it’s finest quality, if it’s from the Brennac plains. But I don’t need to remind you, Master Hannac, that Lord Nérac’s keen on knowing who supplies his city. And he tends to favour grain from the west to wheat from the Nests.”

“I’m aware of that. And I’m sure I don’t want to cause you any trouble. Not with the cold winter setting in as you say and you, no doubt, a large family to feed. Here, take this.” He reached under his seat and produced a pouch of coins. “Maybe the news won’t reach him so quickly. After all, I’m just here to trade some bags of grain and catch up with a few old friends.”

The soldier eyed the money bag with appreciation. “Well, I don’t see any harm in that.” His gaze fell on Hal. She returned the look with as much composure as she could muster, although her stomach performed cartwheels.

“Young Halac’s shown a bit of a head for business – thought I’d let him practise some trading.” Franc

followed the guard's gaze.

"One to watch out for, is he?"

"Could well be. Well, if that's all, gentlemen?"

"I believe so, Sir. Safe stay in the city."

To Hal's relief, he waved the cart through.

"We're in," Franc whispered. "Wasn't so difficult, was it?"

He directed the wagon along some narrow, half-deserted streets which ran parallel to the base of the main defensive walls. She strained to make out the city-scape with its practical, homely dwellings built of stone and slate. Occasional shafts of moonlight pierced the clouds as the wagon rattled its ponderous way past bolted doors and shuttered windows, until Franc pulled up outside what seemed little more than a shack.

"My safe house," he explained. "The more modest the better in this city."

Hal helped him to secure the horses in an adjoining building which served for both storage and stables. Then they unloaded the wagon, muscles weakening with every sack of grain as they swung them to the ground and lugged them across the floor. After nearly half an hour of back-breaking work, they returned to the house itself, and Franc rapped several times on the door.

It was opened by a dark-haired man who looked to be in his early twenties. He peered nervously into

the street, his fearful expression resolving into one of relief as soon as he saw Franc. "Thank the ancestors!" he whispered. "I had a feeling you might be some of Nérac's guards. They've been getting a little too enthusiastic recently. Come inside – both of you," he added, noticing Hal. His eyes darted, confused, from her to Franc. She slipped past him into the cramped, gloomy interior of the cottage.

Franc followed her inside and the young man checked to make sure that they had not been observed, before closing the door and locking it. The chamber they now entered was low-beamed and simply-furnished, with just a pair of chairs facing the dying embers of the hearth. On their right a wood-burning stove was set into the wall of a cramped, poky kitchen. A rickety ladder stood between the rooms, which she guessed led up to an attic as the roof of the building was so low.

"Will you not extend as warm a welcome to my daughter as you do to me, Degaré?"

The young man's jaw dropped and he grasped Hal's hand, shaking it with just a little too much vigour.

"You never told me," he gasped.

"Don't worry, he never told me either," she smirked. "I'm Hal."

"So you have an heir," Degaré murmured, half to himself. He glanced across at Franc who shrugged in

response.

“I’m sorry, lad. Everyone was in the dark, including the lass herself. But I’d rather you didn’t let the cat out of the bag just yet. I’ll explain why after we’ve eaten.”

Degaré studied her face once more. His eyes were deep set, shadowy and dark. She found it difficult to read his reactions. The smile he now flashed was unexpected. “Welcome to Dal Reniac,” he said, heading into the kitchen. “And congratulations upon coming into your inheritance.”

Was that bitterness she detected in his voice? She looked across at Franc but he seemed to have noticed nothing. They both sat down in relief by the hearth as Degaré briskly set to work, stoking the fire in the stove and placing a pan on the hob, onto which he laid strips of bacon. From a cupboard he pulled out a half-empty bottle of wine, unstopped the cork with his teeth, and poured three glasses.

“So, how’s business, Degaré?” Franc asked as the younger man returned to the main room and handed them the wine.

“Not bad, Franc – I’ve even managed to undercut your main competitor on a few deals. But I’ve been having a few problems with racketeers.”

“I always knew I employed the right man for the job. Take care of yourself, though. If things get too hot, we’ve always got space in Hannac for a lad of

your talents.”

Degaré smiled as he flipped the bacon, pushing it around the pan. “Thank you but, for now I have to take care of mother. She’s not getting any younger.”

“Ah, but you’re a good lad, Degaré.”

“That’s not what she says.” He loaded their plates with rashers of bacon. Hal realised she was almost dizzy with hunger and attacked the food without a second thought. After some time, the bacon all gone, the wine drunk, she began to feel drowsy.

“Hal, why don’t you make yourself comfortable upstairs? Tomorrow will be a long day,” Franc suggested. “You’ll find some blankets and pillows up there. I need to talk to the lad a minute.”

She struggled to her feet and bid them goodnight. The ladder creaked precariously as she hauled herself up through the cavity in the ceiling. There was no room to stand beneath the attic roof, and she groped around in the dark, dragging out what she hoped were blankets.

It was strange that Degaré and Franc were so quiet. She was sure that she ought to be able to hear their conversation at such close quarters. Kneeling on the floor, she put her head to the cracks in the boards. They were speaking softly, almost in whispers.

“I suppose you know something of our main competitor’s new bride.”

Degaré sniffed in contempt. “Heard a few things. She’s from Colvé. Sold off to the bastard as part of a business deal. Pretty much confined to the fortress. I’ve never seen her out in the city anyway. I heard he lost interest in her fairly quickly – likes his women to be compliant. Which, if you believe the rumours, she isn’t.”

Seething, Hal pressed her ear more firmly to the floor.

“Well, Degaré, we intend to rescue her from her pit of marital despondency.”

The young man laughed for a moment, genuinely amused. “Ah, you mean it?” he asked, incredulous.

“I do. I know it might sound like a fool of an idea, but...”

“It does, Franc. It really does.”

Franc hissed at him to keep his voice down.

“Why, might I ask?” Degaré’s tone was one of politely-suppressed rage. “Would I be right in thinking your daughter has something to do with this?”

Hal could keep her temper in check no longer. Rolling across the floor she leapt down the ladder. Both men sat back, startled as she fell into the room

“Yes it is because of me. But if, Franc, you were getting cold feet, now would be the time to say!”

Franc’s brow furrowed. He stood and faced her. “I promised I’d help you, didn’t I? And this boy will

too. Just give me chance to explain it to him.”

“How much explaining does it take, Franc? I’m in love with Meracad. And your ‘main competitor’ as you call him took her off me.”

“Now that is an exaggeration, Halanya. We hope that he knows nothing of your existence.”

Degaré stared at them in amazement before he finally spoke. “Franc, do you not realise what this means? Nérac would take it as a declaration of war – a member of the house of Hannac stealing his wife?”

“Not stealing! She’s not his property!” Hal yelled at him in fury.

Franc grasped her by the arm swinging her round to face him. “Your temper will get us killed before we even have a chance, lass! Keep your voice down.”

He let her go. Folding her arms she sank with sullen lack of grace onto one of the chairs. Franc turned to Degaré. “You did not hear, lad, that united voice in which the men and women of Hannac sang when they heard of our plan. We’ve lived too long in Nérac’s shadow. Someone has to teach him that he cannot have everything his own way.” He put his hand on Degaré’s shoulder, but the younger man flung it off and stepped out of reach, his eyes wild and haunted.

“And why must that someone be you, Franc? Why must you risk everything? This will bring ruin on the House of Hannac, on Nérac’s wife and on all of us.”



He walked over to the window and pressed his head against the pane. Hal gnawed at her finger nails, trying to suppress her own anger.

“You don’t know that for certain. If all goes to plan, he won’t know where she’s gone or who she’s run with.”

Degaré turned from the window, his laughter scornful. “Until she makes a magical reappearance at Hannac and Nérac sets the Nests ablaze in revenge!”

“He may choose to negotiate rather than risk such a confrontation.”

“Negotiate, Franc? This is madness. I’ve lived in this city all my life. I know how he thinks. It would be a humiliation for him, the like of which he would never, ever forgive.”

“Franc, there’s no point in arguing with him,” Hal muttered from her place by the fireside. “He’s clearly not going to help us.”

Franc sighed. When he spoke again his tone was grave. “Degaré, I know no one can claim to have performed greater service to Hannac than yourself. But you remember the contract I drew up with your father when I agreed to take you on as an apprentice.”

“Yes.”

“And what did it say?”

Degaré took a deep breath and then spoke, his

eyes fixed on Hal as he did so. “That if I should act against your orders I would no longer be welcome in your service.”

“And that contract still stands, does it not?” Franc was no longer playing the role of genial host. His manner had become stern, uncompromising. Hal gazed at him in surprise.

“It does,” Degaré said at last, his tone resigned.

“And so, will you help us? It will prove difficult without your assistance, and I will place you under my protection to the end of my days, if you do.”

“And mine too,” Hal whispered, her anger abating.

For a brief moment it seemed as if Degaré would break down into tears. “I will,” he said at last.

## Chapter Forty-Two

### Lion's Den

Hal spent a fitful night in the attic, failing miserably to get any sleep as her mind revisited the argument with Degaré. She had witnessed the strain in his eyes, his genuine concern for Franc and for Hannac, his fear of conflict. The possibility that he could be right played on her nerves, wrung her conscience dry.

She pretended to be asleep when her father wearily made his own way up the ladder, tightly closing her eyes as he held a candle near her face to peer down at her. Another pang of remorse hit her when she heard him sigh and extinguish the flame. Perhaps he really was risking all for her now, just because he had failed to do so in the past. *But it is*

*his choice, she told herself. I would have come here alone if I had to.*

Hal knew that he too had difficulty sleeping, for she could sense him wrestling with the blankets as he changed position. He rose at dawn and she remained, lying on her back and staring gloomily at the ceiling as pale streaks of morning light filtered through chinks in the ceiling, piercing the darkness.

There was no sign of Degaré downstairs. Franc was studying some documents, his face worn and haggard. He observed her without comment as she made her descent of the ladder.

“Where is he?” She yawned and slumped down in the chair opposite.

“Gone to the market. To get you a disguise.”

“A disguise? You didn’t tell me anything.”

“No, because I knew what kind of ideas you would have.” He dumped the papers on the floor and scrutinised her face. “You look tired.”

“You too. What do you mean ‘the kind of ideas I would have?’”

Stiffly he rose and padded into the kitchen. “We want to get you inside the fortress, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“And what kind of disguise is going to make that possible?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps I could get hired as a soldier or somebody like that.”

Chuckling, he poured out a glass of fruit compote, handing her a glass as he came back into the room.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s exactly what I mean by ‘the kind of ideas you would have.’ The problem, Hal, is that going in as a guard, you’ll be pretty much disguised as yourself. Besides, soldiers go where they’re told, and that’s either the guards’ room, the courtyard, or the fortress walls as you well know. You won’t have a chance of finding Meracad if you do that.”

“And so what ‘kind of idea’ did *you* have, Franc?”

“Well, there are other options, you know. Scullery maids, servants — that kind of thing.”

“What?” she yelped, horrified at the idea of entering service for the first time in her life.

“Think about it, Hal. Servants work inside the building itself. You’ll have the chance to see more of the place, maybe even explore a little. A dress, something to cover your hair, a hint of northern brogue — you’ll be transformed, my girl!”

Hal sat back in her chair, feeling as if she had just taken a blow to the stomach.

“Or do you think that, what with being an aristocrat and all, you could never sink so low?”

“I’m no snob.” She downed the compote, the sweet, summery taste of strawberries mingling with the sour aftertaste of currents. Setting down the glass she rose and stepped over to the window.

Outside, the street had begun to stir. Dour, head down against the cold, the inhabitants of Dal Reniac went about their business, trudging through the mud and slush of the city. No sign of Degaré, she realised, suddenly nervous.

“Look, Hal, Nérac certainly doesn’t make petty decisions about who works in his kitchens. He won’t pay you a second glance. And you’ll be able to move about with relative ease before you manage to get her out of there.”

“And would you happen to have given any thought as to how that might be achieved?”

His eyes took on a self-satisfied cast. Leaning back in his chair, he placed the palms of his hands together, resting his chin on top of them and beamed across at her. “Well as a matter of fact, I have. And that, my girl, is the best part!”

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Degaré returned from the market later that morning. His mood still apparently sour, he continued to eye Hal with suspicion. In turn, she kept her distance.

“Well,” Franc asked him, “have you got them?”

“Franc, this is a really bad idea.”

Franc’s face clouded. “We’ve already spoken enough of this, Degaré. Anyway, it’s Hal who’s taking on most of the risk. We just sit here and wait

until the girls are out. Then we'll be gone. No one need know of your involvement. But I need you to stay here and keep me informed of Nérac's reaction."

Degaré sighed, holding up a cloth bag. "Just don't ask where I got them from," he pleaded. "I'd not do this for another soul. You know that Franc, don't you?"

For a reason she couldn't quite understand, Degaré's words reverberated to the core of Hal's very being. He handed her the bag. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome." His voice was flat, inexpressive. And yet there was something about the way he looked at her then, as if he were trying to express something, something that she felt she should understand but couldn't quite grasp.

"I'm sorry for my surliness last night," she found herself saying. "I realise that you only want the best for Franc and for Hannac,"

This time he shook her hand with something like genuine regard. "Just get out of there alive."

"Let's get this over with." She emptied the contents of the bag onto the floor. At first she thought that Degaré had simply returned with a pile of rags, but poking through the heap of tattered material, she identified a grey, home spun dress and a faded white headscarf. "Oh, in the Emperor's own holy name!" She backed away as if she'd just stumbled across a wasps' nest.

“Just do it, Hal!” Franc snapped. “We’ve no time to be wasting on your fads, girl!”

“Fads?” she muttered, holding the headscarf at arms’ length. “It looks like it’s already been worn by half of Dal Reniac.”

“All the better. You’re supposed to be half-starved and desperate to find work. No one else would be mad enough to seek employment in Nérac’s fortress.”

Grimacing, Hal pulled the dress on over her trousers and shirt. Franc looked her up and down, failing to suppress a smile. “And the scarf, Hal!”

“Oh, come on Franc — is it really necessary?”

“How many serving wenches have you seen with cropped hair? Don’t ever take it off — just tell them you’ve got lice or something.”

“Well I probably will have after wearing that.” Screwing tight her eyes, she wound it about her head, convinced that she could feel her scalp already itching.

“Oh, put it on properly for the spirits’ sake!” Franc moaned in exasperation. “Anyone would think you’d been living wild on the moors looking at the state of you.” He adjusted it and took a step back. “There. That’s it. Degaré, what do you think?”

Degaré slunk his head round the kitchen door and stared at her in amusement. “She’ll pass,” he said. “At least they’re not too choosy up at Dal



Reniac Fort.”

“Thanks,” she returned drily.

Franc appraised her once more. “Ready, lass?” he asked at last.

“More than ready.” She hoped he did not hear the feigned strain of bravado.

“You remember what I told you? Observe the route I’m about to show you and memorise it. You’ll follow it back when you make your escape from the fort. We’ll be waiting for you here, the lad and I. And remember this above all else, Hal...you don’t have to do this. If you change your mind when we’re outside the walls of the fortress...if your courage fails you and you turn back, I’ll understand. What we’re planning here is...” he turned to Degaré “well, it’s madness.”

She noticed Degaré pale, his eyes lingered on Franc before he drew back into the kitchen. Hal bit her lip, aware of the strange weight of the dress hanging on her lanky frame, a nauseous excitement spreading through her entire body. “I love her, Franc,” she whispered. “I have to try.”

Franc nodded. “Very well. But be aware of this: If you’ve not made it back in three days, I’m going in there to get you out.”

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Franc and Hal set off at midday, picking their way through the slushy streets, the hem of her dress becoming soaked and heavy. Flurries of snow now danced on the wind, coating the rooftops and cobbles white.

“Make sure you remember the route we’re taking,” he warned her. “If you have to get out of the fort in a hurry, you’re better sticking to these smaller streets.”

They skirted beneath the western walls, passing a series of low-roofed shacks and cottages which resembled Franc’s own safe-house. In some of them she made out craftsmen at work, smiths ringing down blows onto anvils or the sound of saws screeching back and forth through planks of wood.

“Turn right now.” He indicated a street so narrow that there was barely passing room. “The Shambles,” he explained. “One of the poorest districts of the city. A good place to get lost in.”

Beggars squatted on doorsteps, their arms outstretched in positions of pathetic appeal. Some of them even grabbed at her dress as she walked past. She shuddered, noticing that many were missing limbs or had bandages wrapped across their eyes. A foul smell emanated from the gutters and they dodged just in time as a bucket was emptied from an upstairs window.

“Charming,” she muttered nervously.

“It’s how the other half lives, Hal. Look and learn. Alright, now this is where things start to get dangerous.”

They had reached an open lawn, its grass vanishing beneath the snow, a boundary between the poverty-stricken Shambles and the rest of the city. Long-robed figures huddled together in small groups, engaged in earnest conversation. Others meandered alone, their brows furrowed in concentration or, in a few bizarre cases, talking openly to themselves.

“Are they mad?” she whispered.

“No, they’re students,” he grinned back. “This is the university green. And you’ll notice that we’re almost at our destination.” A wide boulevard ran along the top end of the green, framed on its northern side by the outer walls of Nérac’s fortress. Behind those walls stood the keep which overshadowed everything: a massive, stone hewn monolith.

She cursed, gazing up at the fort as they approached, noting the rows of archers pacing their battlements, the angry, iron shape of the portcullis. “I might get in, but how are we going to get out?”

“I told you Hal, you don’t have to do this. You can...”

“Don’t, Franc. Please?” She turned to him, catching his sleeve, aware that her hands were

shaking. She put it down to the cold. "I've come this far. It's my only chance."

"You don't know that."

"I've waited...we've waited for so long. I'm not turning back."

He looked at her for a long time then, snowflakes settling amongst the black curls of his hair, his breath carried away as small clouds on the freezing air. At last he nodded. "I've no right to hold you back, Hal. And even if I tried, it wouldn't make any difference." He dragged frozen fingers through his wet locks. "But please, do what it takes to come out of there alive. Would you promise me that?"

"I promise."

"Well then," he breathed. "Let's get going." They followed a diagonal path which led straight across the green up to a postern gate in the fortress walls. Many of the students were so lost in their own thoughts that they almost ran into them. As they made their way up to the sentry post to the right of the postern, her heart thumped like a caged beast against her ribs and she found herself painfully conscious of the ridiculous headscarf and poor, snow-sodden dress.

The guard's bored expression tinged with contempt when he noticed Hal. "What do you want?" he asked, his lips hardening into a sneer.

"The lass's looking for work." Franc was a

confident liar. "I'm her only family here in the city but I can't offer her a penny. I have trouble enough putting food in my own mouth."

"Really? And what do you expect me to do about that?"

"I heard the master was taking on servants."

The guard stared at them both in silence for a while. "The master's always taking on servants," he said at last. "Although what he'd be wanting with a scarecrow like that I can't imagine."

Hal bit her tongue. At least the disguise was effective.

"Alright." The soldier's tone was grudging. "I'll take her through to see if Garth wants any help. But you," he turned to Hal, "you look like the light-fingered type to me. Don't even think about taking what isn't yours or I'll see to it both your hands are broken."

"I wouldn't dream of such a thing, Sir, after you'd shown so much consideration," she replied, in a poor imitation of northern brogue.

"Good luck, lass!" Franc called after her. She didn't look back.

## Chapter Forty-Three

### Broken Glass

Once they had passed beneath the walls, the sentry swung the gate shut behind them. She was in. After all this time, Hal was now closer to Meracad than she had been since the summer. She scanned the courtyard, but saw only groups of soldiers crisscrossing her path: servants, pages and stable hands rushing through the damp, icy air from workshops and outhouses to the keep and barracks. Once she had left the noisy bustle of the street, stillness seemed to fall within the fortress walls. The keep towered above her, an intimidating mass of stone punctured by thin slivers of windows.

The guard grabbed her arm and pulled her along roughly, leaving no more time for further

investigations. She found herself half-dragged beneath the northern walls of the fortress, which were shady, dank and smelt of mould. Eventually he rapped several times on an iron door: the only obvious entrance to the rear of the keep.

High above, a man-at-arms stopped in his tracks, observing them blankly. Then he turned away, spat over the rampart wall and continued his patrol. They waited a few more painful seconds before bolts were pulled back and hinges creaked open.

A sweating giant of a man stood in the doorway – lank, greasy hair flattened down over a huge swollen head. He appeared to expand out of what had once evidently been elegant and expensive clothing, but was now worn almost to shreds and pasted with stains.

“What?” he spoke through a mouthful of bread, and she found it difficult not to turn away in disgust.

“I’ll leave her with you. Says she’s looking for work, although what you’ll do with her the Emperor himself knows. If you don’t want her, throw her back out on the street again, but don’t let her out of your sight. Looks like the light-fingered sort to me.” With that the guard was off, and she was left hovering alone outside the kitchen door, waiting for this mutant of a man to decide her fate.

“Looking for work, eh?” he repeated. He chewed thoughtfully on the bread, swallowing it to Hal’s

relief, only to reach in his pocket for another slice and give it a vicious bite. “Can you cook?” A few soggy crumbs fell out of his mouth as he spoke.

“Yes, Sir, my mother taught me,” she began, but he interrupted her.

“Why do you want to work here?” he asked, his dull, blood-stained eyes taking on a suspicious cast.

Franc had prepared her for this question. “Well, Sir, I just arrived from my village yesterday evening, Sir. I didn’t know where to work but this seemed the biggest place, Sir, and...” she hoped her servile tone would convince him, but he snorted.

“This is Bruno Nérac’s fortress, girl. You heard of Lord Nérac?”

“Can’t say I have, Sir.”

He looked at her in disbelief. Maybe she had pushed the false innocence too far, but he shook his head and said, “well if you haven’t heard of him, it’s time you found out.” He opened the door and pulled her inside.

It took her eyes some time to adjust to the dim light. She stumbled into a long, narrow chamber, penetrated by just one tiny window. To her right a fire raged in an open pit. The smoke darkened the room and the air was barely breathable. She discerned the shapes of an old woman and a boy sat at the hearth, taking turns to stir a vast cauldron which was releasing acrid fumes. An enormous



trestle ran the length of the place, heaped with meat, vegetables, fruit and bottles of wine. A couple of girls were busy plucking chickens, while two more washed and peeled vegetables. None of them seemed interested in her arrival, merely raising their heads to observe her before resuming their work.

“This, girl, is where you’ll work, where you’ll sleep, and where you’ll live. You won’t leave the room without my orders,” the giant kitchen master hissed into her ear.

Hal’s heart sank. Franc had claimed her disguise would gain her access to the fort.

“You can sleep in that corner over there.” He pointed to a pile of rushes on the floor near the fire. “You’ll eat what comes back from my Lord’s tables. No pay for the first month – just food and board. After that, a shilling a month. Understood?”

She nodded dumbly.

“Good. So get yourself an apron, and help the girls peel those vegetables. I’m master Garth. This is my kitchen. If you answer to anyone, it’s me. Now let’s see you working.”

One of the girls raised her head and nodded in the direction of some hooks from which a few aprons hung. Without a word, Hal fastened one around her waist and found herself spending the next few hours standing in silence, scraping potatoes, her hands frozen by the murky, cold water. She wondered if

Nérac was in the habit of enjoying such feasts every day, or if this was a special occasion, but thought better of asking. Questions could well arouse suspicions.

Garth returned to the kitchen, having apparently spent much of the afternoon drinking, for his breath reeked of spirit, and his face had gained a glowing redness. “You,” he pointed unsteadily at Hal, “and you!” he indicated the girl next to her. “We need some more jugs of ale from the cellars. Bring them.”

The girl gestured to Hal to move quickly, as Garth reached towards the table, picked up a potato and hurled it at her. She ducked just in time, working hard to restrain herself from hurling one back.

“Quickly, or you’ll get it!” The girl hissed. They made their escape through a door at the hearth end of the kitchen. A flight of steps led straight down into the cellars.

The scullery-maid seemed young, barely an adult, although her eyes belied her age, shadowed with sleeplessness and worry. Dark waves of hair crept out from beneath the folds of her head scarf, and her tattered, stained dress clung to a willowy frame.

“Name’s Magda.” She offered her hand and Hal took it, shivering as she made contact with the girl’s chapped, dry skin.

“I’m Orla.” Hal hadn’t given much thought to her counterfeit name, and regretted her choice the

moment she'd opened her mouth.

"What are you doing here?" Magda whispered. "Are you a spy?"

Hal sucked in her breath and then laughed nervously. "Of course not. What makes you say that?"

"No one just turns up here asking for work. It's hell, so it is."

"So why are you here, then?"

"Don't have any choice, do I? Indentured here: to pay off my family's debts. If I work for another five years, my parents get to keep their farm."

Hal recoiled in shock. "That's like prison!"

"This is prison. That's what I mean. No one just asks to be let into prison, now, do they?"

"I didn't know. How could I? I needed work...It's my first time in Dal Reniac."

"You're not much of a liar, are you?"

Hal stared at her for a moment and then grinned for the first time that day. "And you're too smart for your own good. Let's find that beer, shall we?"

"Listen!" Magda grabbed her arm. "I don't want to know what you're doing here. It's better for me if I don't. But just remember what I'm telling you now. If you aren't playing their game, then sooner or later, they'll catch you out." She fell silent, as footsteps echoed down from the top of the stairs.

"Hurry up down there! Don't make me come

down myself!” Garth yelled, his voice hoarse and slurred.

They grabbed a few jugs of ale from the shelves and trudged back to the kitchen, to find him glaring at them.

“Took your time, the pair of you!” he fumed.

“Sorry, Sir.” Magda backed away and headed over to the table, where she immediately set about peeling more vegetables. Hal followed her, keeping her gaze fixed on the kitchen floor in what she hoped was a suitably humble pose.

“Well, seeing as how you seem to enjoy wasting my time, I’ll waste yours instead. You can both wait on table tonight,” he growled. Hal seethed inwardly, attacking a potato with a knife until there was little left of it. Something told her that if she didn’t make it out of the fortress alive, she would be taking Garth with her.

She grew hungrier as the day progressed, and the sight of so much food was a constant torment. Eventually they were permitted to take a little bread and meat, which they washed down with water from the keep’s well. The meal was eaten in silence, the girls remained standing before they continued their work after just a few minutes. Hal began to realise what a punishment it would be to wait on table all evening after a day spent in such labour: but at least, she told herself, it was a chance for her to escape

from the kitchen.

As evening descended, the kitchen was plunged into darkness and the other workers disappeared into various corners of the room to sleep. A few smartly dressed young pages came in and began to carry dishes up to the great hall. By now incoherent with drink, Garth handed Hal and Magda a pair of liveried tabards similar to those the pages were wearing, and they pulled them on over their dresses. Magda thrust a plate of meat into Hal's hands. They followed some pages out of the kitchen and along a corridor brightly lit with flaming torches.

Servants buzzed about the great hall like insects, filling glasses and laying down food as guests entered to take their seats. Musicians filed along the gallery above, tuning lutes, viols and flutes. Everything about the place oozed wealth. Hannac was immense in scale, but somehow a place where one could feel comfortable: it was warmed by the lives of the tenant farmers who slept in it throughout the winter, a communal shelter. For all its rich tapestries, wealthy guests and fine food, this was not a place of warmth. In fact, she felt with a shudder, it was as cold as a crypt.

Magda gestured for her to return to the kitchen just as the musicians struck up a solemn fanfare. Doors below the gallery were flung open, and Hal strained to peer over the shoulders of the guests who

had now all risen.

“Hey!” Magda looked irritated. “We’ll both catch it if you stand around gawping. Come on!” She grabbed Hal by the arm, pulling her back into the corridor. “Don’t you know how dangerous that is? We’re not here to look, we’re here to serve!” She dragged Hal back towards the kitchen. Garth was now sprawled in a chair, having succumbed to his drunken stupor. His head thrown back, he was snoring violently.

“Catch!” She picked up an apple and threw it to Hal. “He won’t notice now.”

“Thanks.” Its flavour exploded on her tongue, sour and juicy. Gnawing the fruit to its core, she looked up to find Magda gazing at her, one eyebrow raised.

“You have to be more careful round here,” the kitchen maid warned. “They’re suspicious – all of them. If they catch you spying, I don’t want to think what they’d do.”

“I have to look, Magda, I have to. You don’t have to come with me, but I need to see.”

“What?”

Hal balked at mentioning Meracad’s name. It almost seemed like tempting fate. “Oh, you know, the hall, Nérac, the guests. Everything.”

Magda snorted and shook her head. “So you admit you’re a spy?”

“No, I’m not.” Frustration was making her restless. Meracad may already have entered the hall. “Look,” she picked up a jug of wine. “They need this, I’m sure. I can pour a few glasses.”

With a long sigh of resignation, Magda folded her arms and rested against the trestle. “I don’t want to know anything, Orla – if that really is your name. Do what you have to. Just don’t get me into any trouble.”

Hal shook her head. “Don’t worry. I promise I’ll be careful.”

“I told you that you were a bad liar,” the girl muttered, as Hal made her way out the door once again.

The guests were still standing, the crowd too densely packed to glimpse anything over their shoulders. She squeezed between them, making a show of offering wine from the jug until she had gained a better view.

A couple strolled arm in arm, stopping to shake hands or exchange a few words with some of the assembled aristocrats or businessmen. She made out the husband clearly enough – tanned, olive skin, an arrogant, aristocratic presence. His wife was hidden from her view. They walked with their backs to her in the direction of the dais and her heart suddenly leapt into her throat. She fumbled, almost losing her grip on the wine jug. It was just the back of the wife’s

dress that she saw through a break in the crowds: the sweep of its long train across the floor, a glimpse of light, straw-coloured hair entwined in so many ribbons and plaits. She held her breath as they mounted the platform and sat down.

Meracad looked pale, gaunt, somehow much older. Was it possible that she could have aged so much in a matter of months? Her eyes were clouded, unreadable. She moved with the same grace and beauty. Yet there was, at the same time, a coldness to her that Hal had never witnessed before. It was as if a statue had been given life.

The musicians struck up a livelier melody, and the hall filled with the noises of people laughing, chatting and dining. At first it was relief that laid claim to Hal's confused feelings: relief that she had seen Meracad, that she could now seek her out, speak to her, that she might press her body to her once more. But Meracad seemed so changed, so forced, unfeeling, so unlike herself. How could Hal be sure that she was even the same person? She had to get closer. She had to find out.

Determined now not to return to the kitchens, Hal did her best to serve the guests with wine, sneaking sly glances in the direction of the high table. Meracad had wrapped her slim, pale fingers around a glass from which she took occasional sips. Displaying no apparent interest in his wife, Nérac



engaged the guests to his right in conversation. Suddenly he looked up, glanced around the room and his eyes fell on Hal. She flinched beneath his gaze. Did he know? Had Meracad betrayed her?

“You, girl!” he called. “Some wine here. Our guests have empty glasses.”

Meracad still appeared locked in her own thoughts, staring into the hall, her eyes clouded and unreadable. It was with a surge of fear that Hal mounted the steps to the dais. Fighting against her nerves, she poured wine for the guests, moving along the table. Still holding forth with his neighbour, Nérac did not even look at her as she filled his glass, his voice a deep, laconic drawl. She edged past him and found herself gazing down into Meracad’s pale face: into her haunted, hazel eyes. A thin leather cord hung about the girl’s neck, dark against the whiteness of her throat. Hal could have wept: the shark’s tooth.

“Wine, my lady?”

Meracad looked at her, and for the first time emotion flushed her face: a look of pure bewilderment, her lips quivering, her eyes darting with confusion. She raised her glass towards Hal and suddenly dropped it. It bounced off the table, shattering with the noise of a thousand fragments across the floor. The hall fell quiet. Meracad continued to sit, her arm extended into space,

almost as if in a trance. White with anger, Nérac turned towards her, and Hal noticed Meracad shudder.

“So clumsy, my wife.” He had regained his cold demeanour. He turned to his guests who laughed uneasily.

“You!” he addressed Hal. “Clear it up. And you, my dear? You are not well, I can see. Perhaps you should lie down.”

The words were spoken as an order, not a suggestion. Hal gathered some of the glass from the floor into her apron and descended from the dais, while Meracad stood, nodded towards the guests who rose as one, and then left through a door to the rear of the hall, without a further glance at Hal.

The duellist bit her lip, mentally trying to piece the evening together as she brushed away the fragments of glass. Had Meracad’s spirit been broken to such an extent that she could not even face her? Would she now expose Hal for who she really was rather than risk igniting Nérac’s cold fury? Or would she find the courage to run – to cross the moors to Hannac and to freedom? Hal experienced a sudden surge of elation, the possibility of their escape so close at hand. The next day would decide, of that she was sure.

## Chapter Forty-Four

### Emilia

These engagements at court had long since begun to bore Cara. She endured them for the sake of appearance, but yawned inwardly at the thought of yet another meeting with unrefined provincial aristocrats sporting last year's fashions. Of course, imperial courtiers had to maintain links with their country cousins. After all, they donated much to the Emperor's coffers, guaranteeing the lavish lifestyle that the Colvé elite now enjoyed. Yet somehow, these outlanders cheapened the place with their talk of tithes, of farming and worse of all, of trade.

There were, however, always a few gems scattered about the dunghill. And she believed she had just spotted two of them. An overly-protective mother

and her daughter — a charming study in youthful innocence — were now heading cautiously in her direction. Both bore the tanned complexions of the lower-ranking nobility, but the elegant simplicity of their gowns and their modish way of letting down their hair indicated a more refined taste and above all, money.

She smiled politely as the mother introduced her daughter — such a docile girl with her light brown wavy locks and soulful blue eyes.

“It is Emila’s first visit to the imperial court,” the mother explained proudly. “And we are expecting a great deal from her.”

Cara assumed an expression of polite condescension, inclining her head to one side as she gave the impression of listening intently. The girl was indeed endearing as she stood beside her mother, no doubt awe-struck at meeting such a famed personality of the court. Necessary to be careful, Cara told herself. She had learned, from bitter experience, which young men and women it was safe to take under her wing — and eventually into her bed. The threat of blackmail had sometimes dogged her steps after such affairs. But a quiet, pretty ingénue? A girl whose family would no doubt pull any number of strings if it meant arranging a profitable marriage in the future? That was a different matter.

The mother droned on. Cara latched on to snippets of information which sounded as if they might be exploited later. "Estates in the West," "money from timber and quarrying," "very distant relatives of the Emperor." And then, finally, the request. She knew that it would come eventually.

"It would really be an honour for her to be instructed by someone of such knowledge and influence as yourself. Emila is a bright young girl but untutored in the ways of the court." The mother's eyes were pleading ever so slightly. She couldn't be so old, Cara thought. Her greying hair belied a face still fresh, eyes which shone with vigour. Must be all that clean country living.

The flattery, the insinuation, the fawning: it was all so unnecessary, had but the mother known. Cara would have made the offer herself, she thought, her eyes tracing the outline of Emila's svelte young body.

"My dear woman," she patted the mother's arm, her body language intentionally patronising. "You need trouble yourself no further. I can see that Emila presents the most perfect specimen of a future courtier I have yet to meet. I would be delighted to advise her. We may begin tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you, Lady Cara. Do you hear, Emila? We'll make a lady of you yet."

Emila offered them both her doe-like, innocent smile. "My thanks, Lady Cara. I am impatient to

begin.”

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“You’d better get up.” Magda was shaking Hal roughly. “Garth’s awake, and he’s got a hangover.”

Hal groaned as she picked herself up from the cold floor of the kitchen. Her head felt foggy and unclear, her eyes sore with tiredness. The scullery maid handed her a piece of stale bread and a cup of water to wash it down. “Best get working,” she warned.

Under Magda’s direction, the duellist began the day’s chores: lighting the fire in the grate, fetching water from the well in the courtyard, unpacking trays of fruit and vegetables which had been brought down to the kitchen. This, she decided, must be the most hellish existence imaginable. She tried to imagine how Magda must feel, with the prospect of such a life stretching out over days, months, years. To wake, to work, eventually to snatch a few hours’ sleep or a crust of bread, and then to work again. If it were possible, she decided, she would persuade the girl to come with her when she left.

“Do you ever get a chance to leave this place?” Hal asked Magda, as she helped her carry a tray of fruit into the kitchen.

“Hardly ever. Normally Garth goes into town

himself for anything that might be needed. If he's very out of sorts, then he sends one of us. But never alone – always with a page. He wouldn't trust us to come back. Why do you want to know? Spying again are you?" They set down the tray and returned for another.

"Maybe," Hal winked at her.

"We're not allowed to leave the fort, if that's what you're thinking. We kitchen workers need Garth's approval before we can even leave the kitchen."

They had just set down the last tray of fruit and were about to unpack it when a figure appeared at the door. Everyone in the kitchen froze as if transformed to ice. Hal turned, her heart thumping against her ribcage. Meracad stood on the threshold.

Garth roused himself from his hangover, clawing at the wall for support as he stood, his yellow eyes blinking against the morning light. "Lady," his voice dripped venom. "This is an unexpected honour."

Meracad was once more wearing her mask of cold dispassion – if it were a facade. "Master Garth! I trust that the preparations for this evening's meal are going well. We expect it to excel even last night's culinary feat."

Garth nodded but his eyes betrayed his fury. "Of course, Lady. Everything, I'm sure, will be to your satisfaction."

"Excellent." She glanced round the room. "You

know, I'm a little hungry. I would appreciate it if you had one of your girls bring me up some breakfast." Her eyes fell on Hal, who swallowed hard, wrestling with her own body as it shook uncontrollably.

"You, girl, you were waiting on table last night, I recall."

"I was, Lady." Their first words since that day in her house on Riverside before their world had caved in around them.

"Well, bring me up some breakfast and be quick about it, if you would." With that, she swept from the room.

The kitchen workers maintained a tactful silence and then returned returning to their preparations, murmuring to each other, some casting sly looks at both Hal and Garth. The kitchen master stood, fists coiled, his round head flushed and glowing, snorting rather than breathing. Then he seized a large knife and drove it, point first, into the table, embedding the blade deeper in the wood as he streamed out a torrent of curses: "That snob, that over-bearing, city-bred bitch. 'Excel last night's culinary feat?'" he mimicked Meracad's Colvé accent. "I'll poison the cow if I get the chance. She wants breakfast brought up to her now, does she? Well, I'll give her breakfast."

He began to throw food on a tray: fruit, bread, whatever came to hand. Then, having filled a jug



with water, he spat in it and turned to Hal. “Well, you heard the lady!” The last word was stressed with irony. “Get up there, and if I find you spending too long about it, believe me, you’ll regret it.”

The menace in his growl should have been warning enough, but Hal was on edge now, her senses heightened, her heart racing with the prospect of seeing Meracad again. Drunk on her own emotions, she moved to pick up the tray. “I take it, Sir, that you dislike the lady?”

With startling speed, Garth leapt around the table, pulled the knife out of the wood, and before Hal could take stock of what was happening, had pressed it against her throat. His face was so close to her own that she smelt the sickening stench of rancid alcohol on his breath.

“I’ll finish you,” his voice was low, quiet now, and he stared at her through jaundiced, red-rimmed eyes. “If you ever speak to me like that again,” the blade dug into her skin. “I swear to the ancestors themselves, I’ll cut you into little pieces.”

The others looked on in silence, too horrified to move. Garth maintained the pressure on the knife, and for a few tense moments Hal believed that he would carry out his threat. He was clearly capable of doing so, and Nérac would hardly wail over the death of one obscure kitchen worker. But suddenly the blade was gone. She put her hand to her neck,

tracing the faintest of scratches just below her neck. Then, attempting to steady her hands, she reached down for the tray. "Which way, if I might ask?" So close and her quest would have finished on the rusty point of Garth's knife. She cursed herself for a fool.

"Along the corridor to the end, and then up the stairs to the right, before you reach the great hall. It's at the top." It was Magda who had spoken. Hal looked up and noticed with relief that Garth had gone.

"Well, you put him in a good mood," Magda said drily. "He'll be off to drink away his hangover now."

Hal said nothing in reply, but took the jug and poured its fouled contents out of the door. Then she refilled it with fresh water, took up the tray and headed from the kitchen.

A draft filtered along the corridor, chill air wafting from the great hall. Hal leant against the wall, her head resting against its cool stone-work, trying to gather her thoughts. The sooner this was all over, the better. Forcing herself upright, she followed the corridor until it reached a winding, narrow staircase which fed through to the floor above. At the top of the stairs was a cramped antechamber, tapestries clinging to its walls, the floor strewn with fresh rushes. She found herself staring at the door, now paralysed, as if standing on the shores of Brennac and willing herself to dive in.

Drawing in a deep breath, she raised her hand to knock, but the door suddenly swung open and light from an outer window shone into the darkness of the stair well. Meracad stood in the doorway, eclipsing the light, her face shrouded in darkness.

“Well, come on, girl, don’t hover around out there!” Her voice seemed to belong to someone else — to a courtier, to a stranger. Hal shuddered. Perhaps this had all been a mistake. One terrible mistake. Her eyes half-closed, she entered the room and Meracad closed the door quietly behind her. She bent down to set the food on the table and turned round. And as she did so, Meracad seized her arms, pushing her backwards and forcing her against the wall. Instinctively, with a flooding sense of relief, of joy, she sought out Meracad’s lips. The intensity of their kiss almost forced her to her knees.

They parted, staring at each other, Meracad’s eyes now round and wild, Hal gasping for breath as if she were suffocating.

“I thought you were dead!” Meracad whispered at last.

“Your father almost saw to that.”

“What?” Not even waiting for an answer, she kissed Hal again, leaving the duellist breathless. They broke apart.

“It doesn’t matter now.” Hal still felt as if her knees would give out beneath her. “There’s no time.

We're getting out of here. We're going home."

Meracad's face crumpled in despair and she sank down on the bed. "Oh, Hal, where is home, now? Do you not think that I would have run, if it had been possible?"

"I have somewhere for us to go. It's safe, trust me."

"And what are we going to do? Just walk out of here?"

"That's exactly what we'll do."

Meracad's laugh was high-pitched, bitter. "Every night I relived our time together in Colvé, again and again. Every day the same thoughts filled my mind. But I told myself that it was all over: that I would never see you again. I was convinced my father must have had you killed. There was no hope after that."

Hal hung her head, staring down at her feet. What could have possessed her to stay in Colvé a moment longer than was necessary? Why had she answered Cara's challenge? What had that duel delivered other than more pain, more tragedy, more time away from Meracad? "We're getting out of here and we're walking out," she said at last.

"You're unbelievable. But I'd sooner die beside you than remain here."

Leaning down, Hal covered Meracad's hands with her own. "Does he love you?"

Meracad shook her head. "How could he? I'm just

the clause in a contract. Of course, once that clause is removed, the contract is broken. And then we'll have both Nérac and my father to contend with."

Hal kissed her again. "We'll manage."

"You seem confident."

"I'm not – just desperate. Come down to the kitchen again tomorrow morning. Ask for me as you did today. We're getting out of here. Tomorrow."

She stood up straight and glanced about the room. It was plain, unadorned, as if Meracad had never really settled here: just a simple bed at its centre, a chair and dressing table, a few old musty tapestries covering the stone work. That was when she realised that Meracad had never meant to stay. She had always been waiting...waiting all this time, for Hal to return.

Meracad rose, and Hal flung her arms around her once more, pulling her close, revelling in the warm scent of her body. She ran her hands over the girl's hair, sensing its silken quality beneath her fingertips. Then, cupping Meracad's face in her hands once more, she kissed her.

"Go, now, Hal. I'll be waiting for you," Meracad whispered.

Reluctantly, she nodded and then opened the door.

"Thank you, girl. You may leave now." Meracad spoke with deliberate volume this time, her voice

chill, arrogant.

“My Lady,” Hal murmured as she descended the stairs, her incendiary heart on the verge of explosion.

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Hal was relieved to note Garth’s absence as she re-entered the kitchen. She had no wish to draw attention to herself, and so headed straight for the work bench and resumed her chores.

“It’s her, isn’t it? You know her, don’t you?” Magda was unable to disguise her curiosity.

Hal gritted her teeth and said nothing, her head now dizzy with their kisses, with the thought of Meracad waiting up there for her, with dreams of their escape.

“I knew it. You’re from Colvé, aren’t you? Were you her friend there?”

“Your questions will be the death of you. Better not know.”

Magda frowned, disappointed, but continued with her tasks and said no more. After a while, Hal was assailed by guilt. Magda had helped her since her arrival and she had even been punished with extra work on that account. She glanced at her from the corner of her eye.

“I don’t intend to be here much longer, Magda.”

She never raised her eyes from her work as she whispered. “And I can take you with me. It’s a risk, I don’t deny it. We might not make it out alive. But I can see you’re a brave girl.”

Magda sighed. “I told you, I can’t leave. If I do, my family will suffer.”

“I can offer them a place – shelter – to the end of their days if need be.”

The kitchen girl shook her head, hunched over her work in sadness. “Thanks, Orla. But – I can’t risk it. My place is here.”

“Well, just remember what I said. If you, or if your family are in need, come to Hannac fortress – the last in the chain of the Eagles’ Nests. Ask for Hal.”

“Is that your real name?”

She nodded but could say no more. The cellar door swung open and Garth reeled into the kitchen, his eyes already cast in an unsteady squint. It took him some time to focus before his gaze settled on Hal.

“You!” he growled.

“Me, Sir?” She peered up at him, round-eyed and innocent. Now she knew better than to goad him. But the prospect of escape had made her reckless.

“Yes, you. I thought I told you to be quick up there.”

“I gave the lady her breakfast as you ordered,

Sir.”

He leered at her. “Likes your company, does she?” A flicker of barbarous humour entered his eyes. “Maybe I ought to let the master know that his wife keeps company with kitchen workers?”

The false bravado deserted her. “I am sure, Sir, that it was just a whim of the lady’s.”

“We’ll see,” Garth scoffed.

The day continued in the same monotonous fashion as the previous one: the preparation of food, kneading of dough and boiling of water were all done in semi-silence. Exhaustion crept up on Hal. Her nervous energy seemed to desert her and it was all she could do to stay awake, as she sagged over the table, her hands frozen to the bone, her shoulders and back aching. When Garth left to quench his thirst she stole a little food, and allowed herself to rest. But when the kitchen door swung open, she pinched herself awake and continued.

As the evening drew to a close, and Garth finally drank himself into a stupor, she fought back the waves of tiredness and crept about the kitchen. The other servants were sleeping in their positions beneath tables or by the hearth. Hal eased open cupboard doors before she had found what she needed: the russet and gold of some pages’ tabards folded on a shelf. Pulling one out, she hid it under the workbench beneath some sacking. Then she lay



down by the fire, and drifted into sleep.

## Chapter Forty-Five

### Transformations

Meracad woke alone. Nérac had no longer found it necessary to pay her his little visits since he had found out she was pregnant. One had to be thankful for small mercies. The fact that her own body had, she felt, conspired against her was punishment enough, without having to endure those nightly struggles and defeats.

Should she tell Hal? Perhaps the duellist would change her mind if she did. How could they expect to run from Nérac once the pregnancy revealed itself? It was a ridiculous idea. But Meracad was now desperate enough to run, whatever the cost. In the past she would have taken time to consider the consequences of her actions – the possibility of being

captured and imprisoned, or worse. Nérac would almost certainly have Hal executed. But something had snapped inside her at that very moment when she had seen through her lover's disguise. She was not prepared to lose her again.

Judging the time to be right, she swung out of bed, bathed and dressed before heading downstairs. She hovered for a brief moment outside the kitchen door, listening to the clink of pans, the bubbling sound of boiling soup, its brothy scent wafting out towards her. She could also hear Garth's gruff orders to his staff. Why would Nérac, with all his sophistication and penchant for luxury, employ such a low-bred beast?

Gritting her teeth she turned the handle, entering the kitchen with as much dignity and self-control as she could assume. Garth looked up in surprise and then his eyes narrowed in hatred.

"We are blessed once more with your presence, my lady. We are honoured, are we not?" His workers nodded their heads obediently. "How can I be of service?"

"Not you, I'm afraid, master Garth." She made a pretence at looking around the room until her eyes alighted on Hal at the end of the work bench. "You, girl. You brought me my breakfast yesterday."

"I did, lady."

"I approved of your service. You have, master

Garth, hidden treasures amongst your workers. The girl is better suited to court than scullery.”

Garth shifted uneasily. “I hadn’t noticed, lady. That one’s an insubordinate wretch, if you ask me. She’ll come to no good.”

“Well, it’s fortunate in that case that I don’t rely on your recommendations. Let her bring me my breakfast once more. Make haste, girl. I am in a hurry today.”

Turning back into the corridor, she put her hand to her mouth. She had set something in motion, there was no going back now. This would end in freedom, or in death. Either way, it would end in release. Drawing herself up straight, she held her head high and made her way back to her chambers to wait.

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“Arrogant bitch,” Garth muttered to himself. “Still, taken a bit of a liking to you, it seems.” Walking around the table he peered over Hal’s shoulder as she gathered bread and fruit on a tray. “Remember what I said. Master doesn’t like her having friends.”

Hal focussed on the task in hand. However great the temptation, she could not risk antagonising Garth now. Too much was at stake. “I understand, Sir,” she replied.

“Well, quick about it!” He left the kitchen in search of wine, providing her with the opportunity to slide the page’s tabard from out beneath the table, keeping it wrapped beneath the breakfast tray.

Meracad had left the door to her room open, and Hal entered without ceremony. Kicking it shut behind her, she placed the tray on the bed and then turned to cup Meracad’s face in her hands. “Are you ready, Meracad?”

“I lay awake all night waiting.”

A sudden rush of heady joy gripped Hal’s entire body. “You brave woman.” They kissed with a greater sense of urgency this time. If someone were to discover them together, it would all be over before it had even begun.

“Take off your clothes,” Hal said.

“Hal, I don’t think there’s time for...”

Hal flashed her a grin. “There will be, later. Just put these on.” She unwound the headscarf, her dark, cropped hair now lank and mussed. Then she pulled off the dress, transforming herself in a stroke into the duellist that Meracad had known back in Colvé.

“You’re going out as me. Quick, put them on.” She thrust the dress and headscarf towards Meracad.

The girl’s face fell in disappointment. “That’s your plan? Oh, Hal it will never work. They’ll know it’s me.”

“It’s the only plan we’ve got and it has to work.

Garth is spending the morning doing what he does best. Those skivvies don't pay any attention to what's going on around them. Look!" She pulled the tabard over her head, fastening it at the sides. "I'm a page. Garth is too drunk to go into the city himself. He sent you on an errand and I am to accompany you. Franc Hannac is waiting for us on the other side of the city. We'll be gone before they've even noticed."

Impatience ate away at her as Meracad deliberated, pacing the floor of her chamber and groaning in desperation. "It's insane! We'll be caught, Nérac will have you put to death – it just can't work."

"Listen!" Hal caught Meracad's arms and held her, forcing the girl to look at her. "You said yourself, you don't know of any other way out of here. I'll be beside you the whole time. We won't get found out, you just have to play your part. Now put the dress on, for the spirits' sake before anyone comes up here to find out what I'm doing."

For a moment, Meracad seemed paralysed by fear. But then, to Hal's relief, she stripped off down to her shift and pulled the dirty grey rag of a dress on over her head. Hal grabbed the scarf, wrapping it around Meracad's hair, pushing stray, straw-coloured locks out of sight beneath the fabric. Then she stepped back to appraise her work. Nérac's wife had disappeared, and a low, slovenly servant stood

in her place. "You make a better me than me." The smile on her face froze suddenly. "Who's that?" She whispered.

Meracad's eyes rounded in terror. Footsteps echoed on the stairs.

"Get behind the door!" Hal whispered, as Meracad began to tremble. They clung together: Meracad's breathing was tight and shallow, Hal felt her shake in her arms. The handle pressed down, the hinges creaked and she swallowed back her fear, slid from Meracad's embrace and thrust her fist into the intruder's temple. As he sank to the ground, she reached down and drew his sword from his belt, lowering the weapon to the man's throat and then swore, kicking the door closed. It was Nérac.

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Cara sat poised on the edge of her chair, drumming her fingers impatiently on its ornately-carved wooden arms. Emila was expected at any moment. She glanced around her chambers, richly-furnished with tapestries, ornaments, fine art. Rooms to inspire respect rather than to offer comfort. And it gave her particular satisfaction to remember that most of this had been paid for by Franc Hannac. The hypocrite. Never once prepared to acknowledge the whelp as his own, he'd rather buy her silence. Well,

she couldn't entirely blame him. Who would want such a freak for a child?

Someone rapped lightly on the door. Her heart quickened. "Enter!" She hoped that her voice sounded commanding: imperious enough to leave no doubt as to who was to have the upper hand in this arrangement. Sure enough, mother and daughter both appeared meek and nervous as they entered.

"My dears!" Her tone was now magnanimous – the court veteran condescending to entertain a pair of ignorant country aristocrats. "Please make yourselves at home. Some wine?"

The mother looked askance, clearly overwhelmed by the sophistication and extravagance of Cara's apartments. "I really should be going. I have an appointment in the city."

Coward! Cara almost felt sorry for Emila being left to her fate by a mother who was as lacking in social graces as she was in guts. "Of course." Her voice dripped with contempt. "You will return, shall we say, in two hours? That ought to give me enough time to instruct Emila in her basic duties as a courtier."

"That sounds perfect. Thank you, once again, Lady Cara." She was already almost out of the door. "Listen to whatever Lady Cara has to tell you, Emila."



“I will, mother.”

Alone at last. Cara breathed a sigh of relief. “Please, sit down, my dear. You look so nervous, hopping from one foot to another.”

Emila obediently lowered herself onto a sedan.

“Some wine?”

“Oh, mother says that wine will redden my complexion,” the girl protested feebly.

“Nonsense, girl. A knowledge of fine wine is invaluable for any courtier. This, for example, is a rare vintage from our eastern sea-board.”

“Delicious.” Emila took a sip, her gaze darting from Cara to the chamber and back again.

“And so you seek instruction from me in the ways of courtly life?” Cara sat down beside the girl, sensing and savouring her insecurity.

“I believe that you have much to teach me, Lady Cara.”

“Indeed I do. Tell me, were there no doting young men in the highlands smitten by your fresh face and bright eyes?”

Emila’s embarrassment was evident in her blush. “No, Madam. No one.”

“They must be blind,” Cara sniffed. She brought her lips to Emila’s ear. “Or perhaps, doting young ladies?”

To her surprise, Emila did not flinch. In fact, Cara was convinced that she caught the briefest trace of a

smile, but it was gone before she could be certain.

“No, Madam.”

“You’re lying, girl.” She lifted Emila’s chin upwards and studied her face. “Exquisite. I expect there were a few, weren’t there? You were never tempted, Emila? No maids or lissom farmer’s daughters or whatever it is you have out there in the West?”

“No, Lady Cara. There was no one like that.” Her voice quavered.

“Liar,” Cara whispered in her ear. She placed a hand on Emila’s thigh. Her lips moved downwards, from the young woman’s ear to her neck. She kissed it lightly. To her delight, she felt Emila’s body succumb, her head turned towards her, their lips briefly met.

“I think, Lady Cara, if that is the kind of instruction you had in mind, we had perhaps better lock the door.”

“Clever girl.”

Emila rose and turned the key in the lock. “So, Lady Cara.” She faced the courtier and smiled. “What is it that you would like to teach me?”

## Chapter Forty-Six

### Two Birds

Nérac slowly opened his eyes. Why had she failed to knock him out cold? At first he simply groaned, rubbing at his temple where she had struck him. Hal put her foot on his chest and pricked the skin of his throat with the tip of the sword. He spluttered and coughed, twisting his head up to look at her, confusion giving way to outrage.

“Get up.” She stood back, allowing him to draw in a few deep gulps of air. As he pulled himself upright into a sitting position, she levelled the blade at his throat.

“Where’s my wife?” His voice was a low, heavy drawl.

Hal maintained the pressure on the blade. “I said

get up.”

Clutching the side of the bed, he dragged himself to his feet, still wheezing and evidently half-stunned by the blow to his head. Whatever wits he had recovered deserted him once more when Meracad emerged from her hiding place.

“Get his belt and tie his hands!” Hal urged.

“My wife!” His voice betrayed his confusion, horror, incredulity.

Meracad reached around his waist, whispering in his ear as she unfastened the buckle. “Your hands, Sir.”

Nérac struggled but Hal increased the pressure on the blade in response. “Not, I believe, your wife for much longer.” She could not resist the cheap jibe.

“You asked me once if I’d ever had any suitors in Colvé.” Meracad gave the belt an extra twist as she tightened the bonds, and he grunted in pain. “I told you what you wanted to hear. I have never known the love of any man.”

“You look overwrought, Lord Nérac. Meracad, why don’t you be a good wife and help your husband to sit down? He seems a little shocked.”

Meracad pulled out the chair from beneath the dressing table.

“If you please, Sir?” Hal gave him a push. He stumbled, plunging backwards, almost losing his balance. As he fell, Meracad grabbed a cord from the

gown she had discarded earlier, wrapping it around his chest and then securing it behind the back of the chair. He had ceased struggling, which disturbed Hal for some reason. Anxiety mounted in the pit of her stomach as he stared up, his dark eyes blazing, his face paling with anger.

“I’ll find you.” His voice was low, menacing now. “Whoever you are, I’ll find you. And then I’ll kill you. Slowly.”

“I think he’s serious.” Meracad gave the cord a final twist, a nervous smile twitching at the edges of her lips.

“I suppose he is,” Hal murmured. Summoning all her strength, she struck Nérac on the temple again. This time, the blow rendered him unconscious. “Let’s go.”

Meracad turned to seize a couple of items from the dressing table.

“Come on!” The full horror of what she had just done was beginning to dawn on Hal. Encountering Nérac had never been part of the plan. She plucked at Meracad’s sleeve, pulling her to the door.

“We may as well lock it. It’ll buy us a little time.” Meracad smiled, brandishing the key. Hal reached for the handle, yanking open the door and then pulled up sharp at the sight of a dirty, food-stained apron. The faint, acrid reek of stale sweat issued into the room. Garth stood on the threshold. Her guard

now down, she could do nothing but stare at the abhorrent kitchen master, who was armed with a carving knife and a meat cleaver.

“Well, two birds caught in flight!” He smiled, revealing a few black teeth piercing the red, raw meat of his gums. “We’re going to have some fun, aren’t we? I should have finished you off as soon as you walked in through the kitchen door, you insolent bitch!”

Hal knew that the minute she reached for her own weapon Garth would make quick use of the cleaver. The two women stood, rooted to the ground in terror. Was it all to be over so quickly, then? Hal stepped backwards.

He remained poised, his weapons raised above his head, aimed pointedly at her face. Then, his eyes rolled back. A strange gurgling noise issued from his throat and he sank to the floor, a dead weight, cleaver and knife tumbling from his hands and clattering across the stonework. She stared down at him, her mouth opening and closing in shock, and looked up to see Magda in the doorway, a bloody kitchen knife in her hand. A red spot blotted the back of Garth’s shirt, gradually fanning outwards to become a circular stain. He groaned again, and then was silent.

“Give that to me!” Hal snatched the knife from Magda. The kitchen maid had evidently shocked

herself with her own violence. She stared down, her eyes fixed on Garth as blood pulsed from the wound in his back, streaming down his flabby weight to form viscous pools on the floor of the antechamber.

They dragged Garth's greasy bulk into the bedroom and lay him at the feet of his master, who was still slumped unconscious on the chair. Then, retreating once more into the corridor, Meracad swiftly locked the door behind them.

"Thanks!" Hal whispered with heartfelt gratitude to Magda. "How did you know what he was going to do?"

"He came back to the kitchen quite soon after you'd gone. He never does that when he's drinking. And I had my suspicions he was up to something. I never thought to..." her voice trailed away, and she looked down in silent confusion at the spots of blood on her hands.

"Never mind. He deserved it. You'll have to come with us now."

"No, I can't. I'll take the risk and stay. I slipped out – I'm sure no one saw me come up here. And Garth's certainly not going to be speaking to anyone."

"You're mad!"

Magda shook her head. "Not as mad as the pair of you. If they catch you, you know what'll happen. Run, now!!"

Hal determined to wrestle with her conscience later. They fled down the stairs, halting just before they reached the corridor. “Alright, girls – this is what we’re going to do. Meracad, go back in with Magda. Just keep your head down, go straight to the table and start preparing food. I’ll wait here for a few minutes and then follow you.”

“You said you’d be with me all the time!”

“I will – but we’ll raise less suspicions this way, you’ll see. Please, Meracad. Nérac may come round at any minute.”

Taking a deep breath, Meracad stepped out into the corridor, Magda at her side. Hal flattened herself against the wall, watching, waiting until the pair had entered the kitchen and the door had closed behind them. Then, casting one last anxious glance up the stairs, she slipped her hands beneath the tabard and wiped Garth’s blood onto her shirt before stepping out into the corridor. She waited at the kitchen door, her ear pressed to its wood, but could hear nothing to indicate trouble. And so, pressing down the handle she strode inside, attempting to cut the swagger of one of the fortress pages.

“Mornin’ all!” There was no response. “Well, aren’t we the cheery ones today? Eh?”

Meracad stood beside Magda, making a poor show at kneading dough. She slouched further over the table when Hal spoke, biting her lips.



“So, word has it, your master’s a little under the weather,” Hal carried on, wondering how long she could keep the performance going.

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Magda shot her a grin.

“So I’ve heard. So I’ve heard.” The duellist’s brogue had now acquired the intonations of the Riverside underworld. Meracad shook her head in frustration.

“Anyway, owing to master Garth’s state of ill-health, I’ve been asked to accompany one of you into Dal Reniac to procure a few necessaries for the evening meal. So, who’s it to be?”

The workers all looked up, their eyes hopeful. Hal was immediately flooded with regret. Clearly a trip into the city was the closest they would ever get to a break from the punishing routine of their daily existence.

She made a show of reaching in front of Meracad, and grabbed a handful of raisins from a bowl, throwing one in the air and catching it in her mouth.

“Just get us out of here, Hal,” Meracad whispered between gritted teeth.

“Well now, a new girl!” Hal chomped on the raisins and rested one arm on the table, making a show of admiring Meracad. “Fancy a trip into town?”

“Oy!” The old woman yelled from the fire place. “She’s not been here long – she should wait her turn.

Just a minute!” She peered at Meracad, her eyes rounding with the shock of recognition. “That’s not...!”

“It’s not who? Eyesight must be giving her grief, the old dear!” Hal released a nervous laugh and grabbed Meracad by the arm. “Coming, darlin’?”

Before the old woman’s suspicions could be confirmed, they were running and out the door. “Your turn next, Magda!” Hal yelled over her shoulder as Meracad half-dragged her out the kitchen.

She caught Magda’s thin smile as the girl wiped her hands on a damp rag. “I’ll remember that!”

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The cold hit them as soon as they had left the stuffy humidity of the kitchen. Meracad could not prevent her teeth from chattering, the worn fabric of the dress offering little protection against the wet, snow-choked air.

“What on earth were you playing at, back there?” She tried to ignore the fact that her limbs were shaking violently.

“I was attempting to look convincing,”

“You almost got us caught. We don’t have time for games, Hal.” She fell silent as a pair of soldiers crossed their path, but they were too preoccupied

with their own duties to pay any heed to the petty squabbles of kitchen workers and pages. “The minute N rac wakes up, he’ll be after us.”

“And if we blow our cover now, we’ll have the entire fortress on top of us,” Hal hissed back. “Make for the postern gate and keep quiet!”

Men-at-arms, pages and servants packed the main courtyard, enabling them to blend in without too much difficulty, and they threaded their way with ease amongst the clusters of fortress dwellers. Meracad could not help overhearing brief snatches of conversation as they passed.

“Lord N rac must have gone hunting alone this morning.”

“Hunting, on a day like this?”

“Well he’s not been seen since breakfast.”

Hal touched Meracad’s arm. “Speed up,” she urged.

Two soldiers guarded the postern, both of whom bore swords and bows. More men-at-arms stalked the perimeter walls, rendering impossible the chance of a desperate dash through the gates. They stared at Meracad and Hal in the impudent, lazy way that only guardsmen could.

“What do you two want?”

Meracad kept her head down, hoping to appear coy rather than afraid, prepared to let Hal do the talking. Pages, she knew, held a higher social rank

than servants or soldiers.

“Master Garth sent the girl to buy goods in town. I was told to accompany her. Make sure she didn’t make off with the kitchen’s coffers.” Hal threw the man a knowing wink. The soldier shifted uneasily.

“I see. And why doesn’t Garth go himself, if he’s so worried about the money?”

Hal cleared her throat in a delicate fashion and feigned embarrassment. “He’s a bit incapacitated,”

The man smirked. “No changes there then. Alright the two of you. Be quick about it before he changes his mind.”

The soldiers stood aside to let them pass, just as footsteps echoed behind them. Someone was running in the direction of the postern. Meracad closed her eyes. *Not now. After all of this, not now.*

“STOP!” a voice yelled. Meracad edged towards the gate, but Hal grabbed her arm. They turned around slowly. It was Magda.

“Master Garth says to take this!” She thrust a piece of paper into Hal’s hand. “It’s the shopping list. You forgot it. He said to make haste, or it’ll be the worst for you. Both of you,” she stressed pointedly.

“Well, if Garth says make haste, you’d better make haste,” the soldier observed in dry amusement. This time they didn’t hesitate, but walked straight out through the gates.



## Chapter Forty-Seven

### A Thousand Arrows

For the first time in months, Meracad was beyond the fortress walls. She stopped to inhale the air, as if it were somehow composed of different elements.

“Keep moving,” Hal urged. “Walk as calmly as you can. Then when I give the word, we’re going to make up some time.”

“Where are we going?”

“I told you, Franc Hannac is waiting for us. He has a safe house below the southern walls.”

The boulevard was already behind them, and they were now winding their way across university green. Meracad whirled around, painfully aware of how exposed they now were. The archers posted atop the fortress walls behind them could easily pick them off

against the half-deserted backdrop of The Green, their dark figures a stark contrast against the snow underfoot. She turned to see that Hal was already several feet ahead, and ran to catch up with her.

“Master Hannac? From the Eagles’ Nests?” she gasped, drawing level with the duellist, attempting to catch her breath.

“Yes, that’s right.” They were now approaching the end of The Green and entering The Shambles. “Franc Hannac, my father.”

“What?”

Meracad almost stopped, but Hal pulled her into the alley. “Now, RUN!” she yelled.

She could ask no more, for Hal was already tearing in a chaotic flight of arms and legs towards the western walls. Picking up her skirts she followed, the slushy wet ground splashing around her legs. Street vendors screamed out in anger as Hal kicked over a basket of dried plums up ahead. Meracad’s lungs already felt as if they were being ripped from her body.

“Mind where you’re going!” someone yelled. “Bloody thieves, like as not!”

“Hal, slow down!” Hal had reached the end of The Shambles and was about to turn left down the western walls. Dizziness gripped Meracad, the world whirled around her. She bent over and retched.

Hal skidded to a halt and ran back to her. Creased

double, Meracad released the contents of her stomach into the gutter. She clung for support to the timber frame of the end cottage, her skin growing clammy and cold, sweat breaking across her brow.

“What’s wrong?” Hal was stroking her hair, glancing anxiously back up the street.

“It’s alright, I’ll be alright. Just slow down a bit. Your legs are longer than mine.” Meracad managed a wan smile.

“Are you able to carry on? We can’t stay here, it’s not safe.”

“I know, I know. Let’s move.”

Hal put her arm around Meracad’s shoulders, supporting her as they half-stumbled past work houses, smithies and carpenters. The Shambles had become a blur, its ramshackle wooden shelters merging into one. Her feet were now frozen, the snow soaking the soft leather of her boots. She felt her stomach heave once more, but repressed the urge to vomit. There was nothing left in her stomach anyway.

“Come on, almost there.” Hal was kissing her cheek. She forced herself onwards.

They had stopped before the low, squat door of a timber-framed shack. Meracad rested against its wall, her nausea finally subsiding, her breathing now less erratic. She closed her eyes, latching onto the drift of city sounds — the distant calls of vendors, the



crunch of cartwheels over dirty streets. Hal rapped three times on the door. For a few tense moments, it seemed as if no one would answer. The duellist looked up and down the street in desperation, and Meracad felt her stomach dip once more. Then bolts were flung back and a man's head peered out at them, his blue eyes bright with relief, his smile broad. Meracad almost sank down on the street, but he pulled her inside, Hal followed, and the door slammed shut behind them. She sat on the floor for a few moments, panting, her head buried in her hands. When she looked up, arms were reaching down, pulling her inside, into the warmth and safety of the hut. She felt Hal close, and gave in to the duellist's tight embrace. They were safe.

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“Well done!” Franc turned to Hal as she extricated herself from Meracad's arms. “I was almost on the verge of going in there to get you out. The lad here was desperate...”

From behind him, Degaré stepped out – Franc's dark shadow. “Congratulations, Hal.” He patted her shoulder. “I was beginning to have my doubts.”

“So this must be Meracad? Sit down, lass. You've been through a great deal today and we aren't out of the clear yet. Degaré, fetch the girl some wine. She

looks as if she could do with it. I'm Franc Hannac of the Eagles' Nests."

"Thank you, Sir." Meracad looked up at him, her face pale, the head scarf now loose, half unravelled, her eyes feverish and bright. "I'd heard people speak of your good will but I never expected so much."

"All Hal's friends are my friends too – apart from those two rogues she thinks I don't know about down at *The Emperor*." He winked.

Degaré handed her a glass of wine and she drank it, some of the colour returning to her cheeks. "The thieves have good hearts, Sir. Believe me."

"For your sake, I'll try to."

Franc turned to Hal, one eyebrow raised. "Another thing you've inherited from your father," he whispered. "Good taste. So," he continued aloud. "I take it the plan worked."

"Well, not entirely, Franc."

He looked at her sharply. "What do you mean, not entirely?"

"Well, I think we ought to get out of Dal Reniac right now."

Degaré's face clouded. "What have you done?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly our fault."

"Just tell us, Hal." Franc rounded on her. "If something has gone wrong, we need to know."

She took a deep breath and began to recall everything that had happened, from her arrival in

the fortress to their mad dash through The Shambles. Franc sat down opposite Meracad, working out his exasperation on the hearth with a poker. “Have you finished?” he asked at last, in a tone of suppressed anger.

“I suppose so.”

“So, the plan, Hal, if I remember well, was quite simple. You exchanged clothes and walked out of the fort. No one was to recognise you, least of all Nérac. Instead of which you actually knocked him out – but lest we forget, not before he’d seen your face.”

“How could I know he’d be there?”

“I haven’t finished. He saw you, you knocked him out, tied him to a chair and then to top it all succeeded in murdering his chef before doing a rather dubious impersonation of a page for the benefit of his kitchen staff?”

“Well, if you want to cast it in such a negative light.”

“In what other way can I cast it?”

“Look, there’s no point in arguing about it now.” Meracad was beginning to come round. “If we don’t move, he’ll be searching every house in Dal Reniac. We have to go.”

DeGARÉ shook his head. “You chose a bad moment. It’s the week’s market. All the farmers and traders from the mountains of Ceadda to the eastern sea-board will be leaving the city. There’ll be a queue

stretching back from the gates. You're better off waiting until tomorrow."

"We can't do that!" Hal yelled. "By this time, Nérac could have been discovered, and he'll almost certainly have given the guards orders to watch out for us. If we don't go now, we won't get out at all!"

Franc sighed in resignation. "She's right. If we stay here, we'll be trapped like rats. Degaré, we'll have to saddle up the horses from the wagon." The young man nodded and stepped outside without another word. Franc shook his head at Hal. "Couldn't you have been more subtle?"

"No," she retorted angrily, dragging the page's tunic over her shoulders. "Could you?"

"Master Hannac, is it true that you are Hal's father?" Meracad interrupted, attempting to stave off further arguments.

Franc and Hal looked at one another. Hal shook her head. "Not now, Franc."

"Well, she's right, Meracad. I am her father, but I don't suppose we have the time to go into that now."

"Well, if you don't mind me saying so, you're an improvement on her mother."

"That's not exactly difficult is it?" Hal muttered, keen to be gone.

Franc fought back a smile. "I suppose she's right. It's not much of a compliment, but thank you anyway."

They waited with growing impatience until Degaré had returned. He refused even to look at Hal, but addressed Franc with undisguised concern. "Please, be careful."

Franc embraced the boy warmly. "I'm always careful, lad. If the guards should come, you know what to say."

"The master was here for a few days on business, but we didn't see anything."

Franc nodded. "If there's any sign that things are going to get too hot around here, get to Hannac before it's too late. I don't want you risking your own life for our sakes. And you'll keep me informed as to what you hear of Nérac's reaction? Forewarned is forearmed."

"I will do, Sir."

"Very well, let's be gone."

Degaré had saddled the horses and filled their panniers with blankets and food. Hal was grateful to find her coat in one of the saddle-bags, while Meracad wrapped her freezing limbs in a blanket. Without hesitation, she made a confident leap into the saddle of one of the horses as Franc hauled himself astride the other.

"You can ride?" Hal asked Meracad in surprise.

"Of course. Can't you?"

She looked down at her feet. "I learned on the way here."

“In that case, you’d better get on in front of me,” Meracad smirked. Hal clambered up with less grace than Meracad had displayed and they set off for the southern gates.

Degaré had been right. It was the end of the weekly market, and the queue of farmers, tenant workers and tradesmen stretched a hundred-fold back along the streets of Dal Reniac. Beneath the walls, guards inspected each cart, interrogating the owners before eventually letting them through. Hal groaned in disbelief. “It’s impossible,” she whispered to Franc. “Nérac must have come round by now. He’ll send his guards at any minute.”

“Well, what did you expect, Hal?” Franc hissed back in anger. “That we would dance out the gates with his blessing?”

“No, but I thought you said you knew the city well enough to spirit us out of it.”

“And? So? Just because I know the place doesn’t mean I can compensate for your mistakes!”

“Ssshhh!” Meracad urged. “Stop arguing. I have an idea. Get back off the street before they see us.” She jumped down and rummaged inside a pannier, pulling out one of the blankets before disappearing down the nearest side street.

“What’s she doing? Is she out of her mind?” Franc stared after her, his brow creased into an incredulous frown.

They waited for several minutes, until she returned with a sizeable bump beneath her dress. Hal looked at her and then at Franc. "It's probably our only chance," she whispered. The fastest pregnancy in history."

Something nudged at the edge of her thoughts, a sudden connection with their mad dash through the streets. She brushed the anxiety away. There was no time now. Leaping from her horse, she joined Franc who had already found himself caught up in Meracad's little drama.

"Oh by the ancestors themselves!" the girl shrieked. "It's coming!"

A few heads turned in surprise as she collapsed theatrically on the floor.

"I'll not have my child delivered on the city streets!" Franc yelled for the benefit of those who were now gathering around them. "I'll get you home, my dear. Lad, help us get her on the horse."

They hoisted her back up with some help from a few concerned bystanders, and Franc climbed on behind her as she continued to let out exaggerated groans. There were a few shouts of disapproval as they rode past those who had already been waiting in the cold for several hours, but some murmurs of sympathy for Meracad.

The guards on the gate eyed them with deep suspicion. "What's wrong with her?"

“Is it not obvious, Sir? She’s having our baby.” Franc’s tone was as grovelling as he could muster. “We need to get her home.”

“Well, now, that’s not my fault, is it? You see this queue. Wait in line like the rest of them.”

Meracad let out a sudden shriek.

“Please, Sir, have pity on the girl. It’s her time. What if it were your wife, Sir, about to have a baby on the filthy streets of the city?”

The guard’s face softened. “Where are you from?”

“We’re moorlanders, Sir. Our village lies to the south.”

“Got papers, have you?”

Meracad shrieked again. “It’s coming, it’s coming!” she yelled. The guard looked worried. Other men at arms had now gathered around him, their conversation hushed but animated, peppered with gesticulations and occasional shouts of disagreement. Finally, he turned to Franc.

“Alright,” he said grudgingly. “You and the girl can go. But the boy will have to stay.” He looked at Hal. Franc shook his head. “No, Sir, I need him with us at such a time.”

The soldier would not budge. “Out of the question. If I let you all go now, with this crowd here, they’ll lynch me. The boy will stay. Unless, of course, you’d prefer it if the girl delivers her child right now in front of the entire city.”



Hal realised the futility of arguing. The guards would grow suspicious if Franc pushed this too far. She touched his shoulder. "It's alright, Sir. I'll stay behind. You can trust me."

Franc looked at her for a moment, his eyes registering her intention. "Well lad, I do trust you. Catch us up later".

"I will, Sir. I promise." She stressed the last word, willing Meracad to stifle her protests.

"Come on, lass. Let's get you out of here." Franc turned his horse towards the gates, saluted the guard and thanked him. Then they moved out, Meracad now in tears as she strained round to look at Hal.

"To the back of the queue, son!" the soldier barked. She bit her lip and turned her horse around, ignoring the jeers of those who were grateful that the guards had not been entirely persuaded by Franc.

The line seemed barely to move at all. Her horse made impatient strikes at the ground with its hooves as if sensing her fears. The minute Nérac's men appeared, her escape would be thwarted, she would be arrested. It would be the end of everything. She had every reason to believe that Nérac was a man of his word.

At least Franc and Meracad were away. If they caught her, it might distract Nérac's attention from Meracad for a while. It might give them enough time

to reach Hannac, and if necessary, for the girl to set out on the run alone. She growled in frustration. The thought of Meracad alone and on the run was unbearable.

The line edged forwards a few steps. Before her, the farmers muttered amongst themselves, heads bowed into their collars, hands buried deep in pockets. She had been waiting for what seemed like hours, although she knew that her mind was playing tricks on her. For it was not the hours that counted now, but the seconds. The second at which Nérac would come round, or would be discovered, bound and stunned in Meracad's bedroom, Garth lying in a pool of his own blood at his master's feet. The moment when shouts rang around the fortress, when every last corner of the place was searched for Meracad, and the guards at the postern gate realised they had been duped. She hoped that Magda's role in all of this had gone unnoticed: that no one had thought to comment on her absence from the kitchen, that they were not now interrogating her, or worse.

As if to give form to her fears, she raised her head to witness fortress guards running down the main street, waving their arms in the direction of the queue and yelling. Their colleagues on the gates looked up in surprise, and an order was given. Slowly, the massive iron-wrought portcullis began to

seal, lowered from its cavity high in the walls. Behind it, two huge wooden gates rolled forwards. Far away in the distance a bell tolled, raising the alarm. She knew that there was no choice. Slamming her heels into the horse's flanks, she rode out past the queue. Frantic, the guards called out as they saw her coming, and drew together in a defensive line. She charged at them, experiencing a sickening jolt as the horse kicked one of the men down with its hooves and carried on relentlessly, towards the diminishing space in the walls, now barely the width of a horse and rider, daylight vanishing out of her reach. Lowering herself down flat in the saddle, she refused to turn round to see the massive iron grid make contact with the ground as she shot out between the gates. Behind her, she heard a call for arrows, and then the air around her was torn apart by a thousand flying shafts.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

### Wild Horses

Meracad wept as Franc's horse carried them further from Dal Reniac. Despite her many pleas, he refused to turn back. The fact that for the first time in months she was free of Nérac, his fortress and city meant little to her now. All that she knew was that she'd lost Hal almost as soon as she had found her.

"The girl can look after herself," Franc repeated over and over again, as if trying to convince himself that it was true. "And if she's not here by night fall, I'm going back after her."

They journeyed on for over an hour. The purple-brown hue of the moors was now buried beneath the snow which drifted, moulded into bizarre shapes – almost like waves on the sea. Tears had frozen on

Meracad's cheeks, but she failed to brush them away, her skin numbing as the ice adhered to it. She could just make out the ruin of an abandoned shelter further down the track, its roof almost entirely collapsed, stone walls coated in moss and ivy. They grew closer and she realised that it was no longer uninhabited. A group of men stood around a slowly-ebbing fire, their horses tethered to rusty iron hooks buried in the walls of its dilapidated structure.

"I thought I told you not to make too much of a spectacle of yourselves."

Meracad sat upright, startled out of her grief. Franc knew these people! A tall, well-built man in the simple attire of a farmer stepped forward.

"Well, Sir, we didn't realise you'd be gone for such a while. Who'd this be, then, another family member you've mislaid?"

"This is no time for jokes, Arec." Franc helped Meracad down and she looked about her, confused and distraught.

"Who are these men?" She found herself blinking back tears once more.

"They're my men, Meracad. I sent for them a day ago. In case we were faced with any trouble."

Arec offered her his fur-lined coat. She took it with gratitude.

"Where's Hal?" he asked, turning to Franc.

"She's still in there, Arec."

“What? Still inside the fortress?”

“No, inside Dal Reniac. They let us out. The lass here pretended she was about to give birth.”

“Cunning.” Arec grinned in admiration, but Meracad did not return the smile.

“So,” Franc continued. “They wouldn’t let us all go. They don’t know who Hal is.”

“Yet.” There was a note of grim finality to Arec’s voice.

“Which is why I’m going back there now. To get her.” Franc climbed astride his horse once more.

“They won’t let you in, Sir. Not now. They’ll recognise you.”

He shook his head. “I’ve let her down all her life, Arec. I’ll not throw her to the wolves now. Wait here for me. If I’m not back by nightfall, go back to Hannac.”

Meracad turned to him. “I want to come back with you, Franc.”

He shook his head. “We’ve just risked our necks getting out, Meracad. I won’t have you chance it again.”

He had already turned the horse in the direction of the city and was preparing to set off, when Arec suddenly shouted: “Stop!”

“What now?” Franc growled, unable to disguise his irritation.

“Look, Sir. What’s that? On the horizon?”

Dal Reniac was almost entirely out of view, and they seemed to be surrounded by nothing but the snow-covered wastes of the moors. Meracad cupped her hands around her eyes and stared. A dark shape was travelling towards them, moving – she could tell – at some speed. As it grew closer she made out a horse and rider, snow kicked up and flung high into the air by the horse’s hooves. Meracad heard Franc catch his breath. Some distance behind the figure, far on the same horizon, well over a dozen dark shapes had also emerged, travelling at a furious pace. Franc breathed out a curse.

“It’s Hal, Sir!” Arec shouted in excitement. “It must be!”

Unable to hold back, Meracad released all the emotions of that fraught day in a howl of relief. Briefly stunned, Franc shook his head and gave a low whistle, clenching his hands around the hilt of his sword. “Do you think the lass could stay out of trouble for just a few minutes? Well, lads, I don’t suppose she’ll turn down an offer of help right now.”

Arec and his men had already begun to hunt around for weapons, and were busy untethering their horses.

“Stay inside the shelter!” Arec yelled to Meracad. “And keep hold of this.” He passed her a sword. “Alright, lads, let’s get to Hal before that horse gives out beneath her.”

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Armed and ready, the Hannac men galloped towards Hal and the line of men who were chasing her. She was now less than half a mile away, and identified their outlines against the barren backdrop of the moors. Kicking her heels into the horse's flanks, she urged it forwards. Behind her, Nérac's russet-liveried soldiers also quickened their pace, and the air was filled with the sound of thudding hooves as they hurled the wet snow upwards into the sky. As she approached them, Franc held out a sword. She grabbed it, hurtling past, moving too quickly to stop. Then she reined in her steed, turned round and followed behind the men as they drew in to engage Nérac's guards.

And then came the confusion. The clash of metal, blades falling against blades, the shrill whinnying of the guards' mounts mingling with the shouts of the men themselves as they plunged into the fray. Arc had brought with him ten of Hannac's finest men-at-arms who, like horses stabled after the winter were now half-wild, forcing Nérac's men onto the defensive and then cutting them down from their saddles with ease.

"To your right, lass!" She caught Franc's warning as a soldier bore down upon her, his sword drawn



high in one hand, ready to slice her across the waist. She yelled out, standing upright in the stirrups as she urged the horse forwards, before wheeling it around and charging straight back at her assailant. Before he was aware of it, she had brought her sword down across his neck. He put his hand up in a vain attempt to stem the flow, as blood spurted from his throat and he fell with a strangled gasp to the ground.

Franc nodded to her across the scene of mayhem and destruction. "We'll make a rider of you yet."

She panted, whirling about on her horse looking for the enemy, but there was no one left to fight. Suddenly, it was very quiet. Only three of the Dal Reniac guards were left astride their horses and they sounded a retreat, fleeing back in the direction of the city. The wounded lay in the snow, groaning. For others it was too late.

"It's over, Hal." Franc rested his hand on her shoulder. She breathed out a long sigh of relief and buried her head in the horse's mane.

"Well, well, well, we were almost certain you were finished, lass!" Arc grinned, wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand.

She lifted her head up and looked at him, dazed. "I had no choice," she said at last. "Nérac must have come round, or else he was found by someone. I was waiting to leave the city when some of those men

came down the main street and I knew that if I didn't risk running then, I'd never make it out." She leapt down from the horse as Meracad emerged the shelter, and choked back tears of relief as they embraced.

"I'm sorry we left you behind," Meracad whispered.

"I'm back now. For good." They clung together, ignoring the cold, blocking it out with the warmth of their own bodies. Hal felt tears threatening to spill and buried her face on Meracad's shoulder.

"I think we should move on, all the same Sir," Arec urged Franc. "Nérac may decide to finish the job. And if any of those men recognised you, he'll know where to come looking."

Franc shivered. "You're right. Let's move on. Ready lass?" He ruffled Hal's hair. She pulled her sleeve across her eyes and nodded.

"Ready, father."

His laughter echoed across the moors. "I'll say that word fair stuck in your throat. Come on now, lads. Let's go."

They rode towards Hannac and safety as the snow continued its relentless plummet to the earth.

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"Your move, Remigius."

Marc frowned and stroked his chin as he contemplated the chessboard that lay between himself and Anton Dræc. He delighted in these weekly contests of will. How else could he claim victory over a lawyer?

Cautiously, he reached out to push forward a pawn. His hand retreated. Far too insipid. Time to bring out the empress.

Dræc looked surprised. "That was bold, Marc."

"Yes, well, one needs to take a few risks now and again."

The lawyer was a dour, soberly-dressed man, slightly stunted in appearance with an earnest, inquisitive face.

"Heard your young friend the duellist has disappeared." His finger hovered over the board as he plotted out the course of a knight, changing his mind at the last moment and swinging out a senator to take one of Marc's pawns. Marc grimaced.

"I think she may be lying low for a while. Got herself into a spot of bother."

"So you *do* know where she is?" Dræc shot him a keen look across the chessboard.

"Not exactly," Marc replied, with a sense of unease. "Ah!" he exchanged the lawyer's senator with one of his own pawns.

"Yes, well. I would have had her drummed out of the city long ago." Dræc concealed his irritation at

losing the piece by changing the subject.

Relaxing back in his chair, Marc contemplated the little man. “And why would that be?” he asked quietly.

“Oh come on, Remigius! Her behaviour was a disgrace. She respected no rules but her own. All that duelling and, well, it would be beneath my own dignity to mention what else.”

Marc’s laughter seemed to engulf the entire room. “By Diodiné himself, Anton!” he choked. “You join that little clique – what do you call yourselves, *The Guardians of...* what was it?”

“The Guardians of Public Morality,” Dræc responded coolly.

“That’s right, the Guardians of Public Morality. And suddenly you become the saviour of Colvé – you, Anton, who if I recall correctly, once bragged that you’d exhausted three girls in one night!”

“I turned over a new leaf, Remigius. Perhaps you ought to consider doing the same thing.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Yes, what is it?” Marc wiped tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes.

“I hate to interrupt Sir, but I think I need your help.”

“Yes?”

The maid took a couple more tentative steps into the room. “It’s just that I wanted to clean Lady

Cara's chambers, Sir, and I heard something like a commotion coming from them. And the door's locked – I couldn't get in."

"What kind of a commotion?" Marc had suddenly become grave.

"I think I heard a woman shouting, Sir. Crying for help. But it wasn't Lady Cara's voice. It was someone else."

Marc turned to Dræc. "Coming, Anton? That woman's a dragon. I might be in need of a lawyer."

"Yes, well." Dræc sniffed, smoothing down his trousers. "If the daughter's anything to go by, I'd say it runs in the family."

They followed the maid in the direction of Cara's apartments on the floor above.

"I can't hear anything, woman." Marc sounded impatient now. "You've just interrupted my chess game for this?"

"But I told you, Sir. The door's locked." She pressed down the door handle. They jumped at the sound of a high-pitched shriek. Marc knelt down and put his mouth to the keyhole. "Can I help?" he called anxiously.

"What are you doing?" The growling lower tones of an older woman this time. Cara Thæc.

"Lady Cara, what on earth is going on in there?" Marc turned to Dræc. "We'll have to get that door open somehow, Anton. The ancestors alone know

what the woman's up to."

"Oh, help me! For pity's sake, help!" The girl's high-pitched wail pierced the air. She sounded as if she were being smothered.

"Sirs, you have to do something!" The maid was almost in tears.

Marc leaned with all his might against the door. The hinges creaked slightly, but it didn't budge.

"Move out of the way, Remigius." Dræc raised his foot and with a strength which seemed to contradict his slight appearance, kicked the door just above the keyhole.

As the door flung open, the lawyer almost fell into the room. Marc gazed after him, raising his hand to his mouth, words forming and then catching in his throat. Cara Thæc, clad in no more than a shift, appeared to be wrestling with a naked girl. It took Cara a few seconds before she realised she was being watched. The girl took advantage of the distraction to leap from the sedan. She grabbed a tapestry from the wall, wrapping herself in it.

Dræc was now shaking from head to foot in righteous indignation. "Lady Cara, what is this? I take it that if your intention has been to drag the good name of the imperial court down into the mud you have almost succeeded!"

Cara's expression ran the gamut, from horror, to fear, to abject fury. "You treacherous little whore!"

she screamed at the girl. To her surprise, Emila began to smile. She reached for her curly brown locks, pulling them away to reveal hair so blonde it was almost white.

“Well, credit where credit’s due, Cara.”

“Asha?” Marc gasped as he entered the room. “Asha Inæc?”

“Strange thing she never noticed, eh?” The sweet innocence of Emila had all disappeared. Asha’s icy blue eyes gazed at Cara in stony contempt. “You seem quite content to turn virgins into sluts, Cara. But not so keen to bed a real whore. I wonder why? Perhaps your memory is deliberately selective. Perhaps you don’t wish to remember me as I was, a young aristocrat like Emila, until you conspired with my uncle to get me pregnant and carve up my inheritance?”

Cara shook her head, still unprepared to admit defeat. “It’s not true. Dræc, Remigius, you don’t believe her, do you? She told me she was of a good family to the west. She wasn’t alone – her mother accompanied her. They set me up!” She peered out into the corridor, as if expecting to see Emilia’s mother standing there. It was empty. The maid had vanished.

“I have seen what I have seen. And I shall be making my report to The Guardians this very day.” Dræc turned on his heel. “Courtiers consorting with

prostitutes. This, Remigius is exactly what I've been talking about. We must cut out this canker before it spreads!"

"Quite." Marc barely managed to suppress a smile as the lawyer left the room. Cara continued to stand in her shift, her mouth opening and closing in dumb-founded horror.

"Well, Asha Inæc – I haven't seen you since you were a girl," Marc lied. "You appear to have taken your career in something of an interesting direction."

"I was left with no choice." The icy ring to her voice betrayed a disillusion which he knew would remain with her to the end of her days. She picked up her clothes, clutching the tapestry tightly round her naked body as she turned to go. "I did it for Hal as much as myself," she whispered in his ear.

"I know, Asha. She'll hear of it," he returned softly as she left the room.

He stood facing Cara, the living embodiment of wild-eyed rage and shock.

"If I find that you were behind this, Remigius," she hissed through gritted teeth, "I'll have you taken apart!"

"You surprise me, Cara. I would have thought that you of all people should know that the court survives on appearance and nothing more. A whisper, even one word is enough to bring the entire



house of cards crashing down. And I happen to know a lawyer with a wagging tongue and a highly developed moral conscience.” He almost put his hands to his ears at the noise she made as he left the room: a wild, feral cry of outrage that echoed down the corridors of the court.

Marc worked his way back downstairs, not quite knowing whether to laugh or cry. The trap had not been his of course, as much as he would have liked to take credit for it. But the opportunity had arisen and he had certainly not been one to stand in its way.

The light was fading quickly now. A slight gust of wind whistled down the corridor. He increased his pace, passing the various doors and ante-chambers which led off into the labyrinthine depths of the palace. An arm suddenly reached out and grabbed him, pulling him into an alcove. His heart skipped a beat before he had realised who it was. “You genius, ‘Vin!” He sought her out with his lips and found Lavinia’s mouth waiting to receive his own.

“You’re pleased with my performance, Sir?” Her accent was that of a low-born maid once again.

“Pleased? You didn’t see her face, ‘Vin. She’s ruined. And she knows it – that’s the best part.”

“I never knew you to be the malicious type, Senator.”

“I’m not, as a rule. But Dræc is.” He put his hand

over her mouth as she laughed and then slid his arms down to her waist, holding her tight.

“Oh, 'Vin, you should have been an actress.” He kissed her again. “Live with me,” he suddenly whispered in her ear.

“What?”

“You heard me. I want you to live with me. Here, in Colvé.”

“Marc, the scandal! Think about it. A senator living openly with a prostitute? The city would never live it down.”

“Oh 'Vin, I'm getting too old to worry. I don't want to grow aged and lonely. The city has its claws out for Cara – it would gladly drink her blood. But for us? We'd be old news before the spring had even arrived.”

She traced her hands across the profile of his face, before ruffling his hair. “Well, if you put it that way, there are those who'd risk far more than a scandal for the people they love.”

“Indeed there are.” He reached behind her back and pressed down a handle embedded in the alcove.

“You know, I do believe these were once Lord Ceadda's apartments.”

“Were they?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, I think they were. And do you know, I believe that since his death, they've been empty for some time. Shall we?”

She smiled as he guided her into the room,  
closing the door behind them.

## Chapter Forty Nine

### Red Velvet

Hal stretched back lazily, arms folded behind her head, and watched with undisguised amusement as Meracad enveloped herself in one of Franc's silk robes.

"We really must find you some clothes. You'll get lost in that."

"It will do for now. Franc said he'd find me something more suitable."

Meracad leant over the bed, kissing Hal with the same intensity that had defined their lovemaking earlier that day. Except that then they had been frantic, desperate. Awakening after hours of exhausted sleep, they had torn at each other's clothes, clinging together, overwhelmed by the

extremes of intimacy and joy that their passion had invoked.

“I missed you.” Hal closed her eyes, savouring the pleasure of physical contact after being deprived of it for so long.

“I got that impression.” Meracad ran her finger over the outline of Hal’s ribcage, trailing her hand across her stomach, hips and thighs. The duellist inhaled sharply, throwing her head back for a brief moment before seizing Meracad’s wrist.

“Enough!” she exclaimed. “Franc will be wondering where we’ve got to!”

The merchant’s daughter stuck out her lower lip in mock petulance. “I think he can guess.”

Hal frowned, pulling at a thin cord which was wrapped around Meracad’s wrist. “What’s that?”

“What do you think?” Meracad loosened it a little. A tiny translucent sliver fell down above Hal’s face, swinging like a pendulum.

“The shark’s tooth! You remembered it!”

“Of course. It was all that kept me going through these months — the memories it evoked.”

Unwinding the cord, Hal turned the strange token over in her hands.

“Such a stupid gift,” she said at last. “It should have been a sapphire or a diamond. But I never could save the money I made from duelling.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that now, do

you? Now you're Franc's heir."

"No, I suppose I don't."

Rising, Meracad slipped across the room to gaze out of the window. Hal observed her, taking in the folds and drapes of silk as they hung from the girl's slim frame, her fair hair now streaming loose down her back. Rising, the duellist pulled on her shirt and padded barefoot across the room to stand behind Meracad, wrapping her arms around her. The late afternoon sky was a crisp blue and the autumn sun still carried enough power to melt the snow, releasing for the time being its grip on the landscape. Water plunged in heavy erratic drops from the rooftops and gutters onto window sills and panes of glass. She bit her lip, resting her warm forehead against the chill lead of the lattice work.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sensing Meracad's mood change, her levity giving way to uncertainty.

"He'll come for us," Meracad said at last. "He won't rest until he's found us. I know him."

"We'll be ready." She rested her chin on the girl's shoulder, hoping that she sounded more confident than she felt.

"He has every right to come. Every right to take what's his."

Hal froze, her embrace tightening. "I know what it is you want to tell me," she whispered in Meracad's ear.

“You know? How?” She twisted around in Hal’s arms to face her with anxious eyes.

“You were sick. When we ran from the fortress. And then you pretended to be pregnant. The pretence seemed like too much of a coincidence. Does he know?”

“Yes.” True fear entered her eyes. “He never seemed to stop talking about the preservation of his dynasty, how important it was that I give him a child. I struggled, Hal. Believe me, I fought. He was just too strong. I couldn’t stop him.”

Her tears swelled, brimmed and spilled. She gave into them for a minute. Hal held her as her body shook with emotional release. “You won’t go back there.” Anger cut through her words of reassurance.

“But once he knows I’m here, he’ll take it as a declaration of war,” Meracad stammered.

“Let him. There is no love lost between the houses of Hannac and Nérac, believe me. We’re not running now. We’ll stand our ground. And your child will be better off out of that death trap of a place.”

“Is Franc really prepared to stake Hannac on our freedom?”

“Not just Franc. We all will.”

Meracad smiled through her tears, pulling Hal closer. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I got that impression.” Hal’s poor imitation of Meracad’s cut-glass Colvé accent elicited a peal of

laughter from them both.

A knock at the door made them jump. Elis, Franc's maid, stood in the corridor, clutching a ball of crimson material. "Master said this should be a decent fit for Lady Meracad." She thrust the dress at Hal and fled.

"Well?" Hal turned back into the room and looked across at Meracad. "Are you going to try it on?"

"Of course." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and tugged it from Hal's arms. "Don't look."

Hal screwed her eyes closed, opening them slyly when she heard the silk gown drop softly to the floor.

"I said don't look, Hal! Alright. Now you can turn round."

Hal released a low sigh and sank down on the bed. The deep red velvet clung tightly to Meracad's waist and hips before spilling down in waves onto the floor. The dress was without sleeves, just two delicate thin straps holding up a deep neckline.

"You know," she said at last, "I don't believe Franc would miss us for a few more minutes."

Meracad smiled. Reaching down, she lifted the duellist's face upwards between the palms of her hands. "No," she whispered. "I don't believe he would."



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Hal woke with a start. The autumn afternoon had disappeared, a clear, starlit night winking in its place. The hum of conversation, accompanied by distant strains of music wafted upwards from the great hall.

She shook Meracad, who was lying next to her, still soundly asleep.

“What is it?” The pillow muffled Meracad’s voice.

“Franc will be furious! Get dressed!” Hal jumped out of bed and pulled on her shirt and trousers. “I’m going downstairs.” She pushed a few strands of hair from the girl’s face and kissed her cheek.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Meracad stretched luxuriantly and then turned over and went back to sleep.

As Hal hurried in the direction of the great hall, the melodies and laughter grew in intensity, building to an uproar. Franc caught sight of her across the room and jumped down from the dais on which the high table was raised, squeezing through the crowds to greet her.

“Where have you been?” He was forced to shout to make himself heard.

“We had a lot to catch up on.”

He raised an eyebrow. “The festivities started

some time ago! Come on!”

He grabbed Hal by the arm, dragging her through the throngs of tenants who had given sway to the rhythms of the music or sat, huddled together in groups discussing the triumphs and failures of the harvest. Others raised their glasses to the Hannacs, father and daughter, as they pushed their way to the high table, while some listened, enthralled, as Arc relived the confrontation with Nérac’s guards.

“We have a guest.” Hal looked up to see Marc seated in Franc’s chair, apparently the only person not enjoying himself. Still wrapped in his travelling coat, he scowled as he surveyed the chaotic scene before him, drawing deep draughts from his wine glass.

“He’s not happy is he?” Hal yelled into Franc’s ear.

“No, he isn’t. Try and explain it all to him. He won’t listen to me.”

Hal clambered onto the platform with an air of resignation. “Marc!” She held out her hand to him.

“Hannacs!” he muttered, ignoring her. She sat down beside him and filled her glass, waiting for the tirade to begin. Franc pulled back the seat next to her, observing Marc warily.

The Senator finally spoke. “Well, I hope you’re happy, the pair of you.”

“We’re ecstatic, Marc. Can’t you tell?” Hal

gestured to the crowds of dancing farmhands.

“Typical.” Marc looked as if he had just swallowed something distasteful. “You kick open a wasp’s nest and then celebrate with a party.”

“Oh come on, Marc!” Hal began to rile. “Don’t pretend you didn’t think I would at least try.”

“Hal, I really wanted to believe that your common sense would prevail for once. Of course I should have realised that the two of you share the same rebel blood.”

“What can I say, Marc? She’s her father’s daughter.” Franc’s proud response irritated Marc even further.

“Nérac’s wife!” He drained his glass, cast them both a morose look, and then immediately poured himself another.

“Meracad Léac,” Hal corrected.

“Well of course that makes it perfectly alright!” Marc snapped back. “You know, I had hoped to find you settling into your new role as provincial aristocrat, Hal. Instead of which you’ve succeeded in stirring up an internecine feud which could destabilise the whole of the North. I did have some good news to pass on but I don’t really feel like it anymore.”

Before either Franc or Hal could reply, the heady pace of dancing slowed and the great hall gradually fell quiet. Meracad hovered at the entrance,

uncertain, nervous – a little lost. Her hair fell in loose flowing waves about her shoulders and her face now turned the colour of her dress as she realised all eyes were upon her. The crowds parted respectfully to form a corridor along which she might pass as she summoned enough courage to thread her way amongst them towards the high table. Even Marc seemed briefly stunned, his face softening, the bitterness draining from his eyes.

Hal leapt down from the platform and extended her hand to Meracad. They ascended together, Franc gathering her in a warm embrace.

“Welcome, lass. You’re a sight for sore eyes. Take a seat next to Marc there, would you?”

She inclined her head in politeness. “Good evening, Senator.”

Marc nodded coolly. “Lady Nérac.”

She winced. “Please, Marc. Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.” She took her seat beside him.

“Believe me, Meracad, life is about to get very difficult for the two of you. You’ve made your decision and you will have to be strong if you are to live with the consequences.”

“Oh, Marc!” Hal sighed. “For once, let’s just imagine that there is no world beyond these four walls. Let’s fool ourselves enough to believe that every night is as joyous as this one. Of course we’ve

staked everything on a few poor cards. Perhaps we'll pay for it tomorrow. But for now, give us the opportunity to enjoy ourselves."

Franc smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. "Spoken like a true Hannac, lass. Anyway, Marc, you said you had good news for us. For the Emperor's sake tell us what it is, instead of sitting there brooding like the agent of death itself."

Marc shook his head in disbelief. "You are all beginning to confirm my suspicions that the further north a person travels the madder they become. I can see you're all hell-bent on inviting ruin, and I can assure you that I'll be leaving in the morning before the insanity can spread. I just wanted to pass on a piece of interesting news about Cara."

Hal sat bolt upright in her chair. "What has she done?"

For the first time that evening the trace of a smile flickered about Marc's mouth. "Well actually Hal, it's more a question of what *I* have done, along with the help of a couple of rather obliging acquaintances."

Once he had begun telling the tale of the baiting of Cara Thæc, he seemed to regain some of his old humour, describing with particular relish the moment at which Anton Dræc had stumbled into Cara's chambers to find her wrestling with Asha. Meracad choked back her amusement at Marc's tragi-comic narration, while Franc clapped him on

the back, wiping away tears of laughter. "I am indebted to you, old friend. Indebted I tell you!"

"And that's not all, Franc. Diodiné made a personal decision to have her ejected from the court."

"One of the few wise decisions that man has made," Franc observed. "Oh, come on now Marc!" He caught the Senator's warning look. "The Emperor's ears are not so sensitive!"

"You'd be surprised." Marc had grown serious again. "It turned out that Cara was in arrears on her court apartments. Even when she'd sold off the tapestries, the artwork, the jewellery, everything she had, there was still money to be paid."

"And so?" Franc asked, loading his plate with slices of meat, bread and fruit.

"Well, what do you think happens to those who can't pay their debts to the imperial court?"

"No!" Meracad suddenly appeared shocked. "They couldn't have!"

"Why not? That's what debtor's prisons are for, isn't it? You or I would face the same fate, Meracad, if we reneged on our duties to the court."

Hal had remained silent and stony-faced, waiting for the conclusion of Marc's performance. "That was harsh, Marc," she said at last.

They all looked at her in surprise. "Oh come on now, lass. Someone was bound to prove Cara's

match eventually. I'm only surprised it wasn't you."

"She's my mother, Franc. That's hard to swallow, I know, but it's the truth. And somehow, I always thought..."

"That she'd acknowledge you?" Franc grew grave, his brow wrinkling in concern. "Don't ever fool yourself about that, Hal. I have more reason than anyone to know that she'll never change. You're Hal Hannac now, not Hal Thæc. Don't ever forget it."

Meracad squeezed Hal's hand. "Franc's right, Hal. We can't delude ourselves. Life is too short. We must live with the truth, however painful."

Hal looked out across the dancing crowds, her imagination soaring north to Dal Reniac, south to Colvé, the two cities which had dominated her life and still seemed to hold her in their sway. "You're right," she said at last. "Only the truth matters now. And the truth is that I love you." She stood up, and held out her hand to Meracad. "Will you dance?"

Meracad smiled. "Of course. I thought you'd never ask."

She rose, and they were soon lost amongst the swirling throngs of dancers, giving themselves up to the music's wild beat, as the swirling stars of the autumn night loomed over Hannac.

## Epilogue

In spite of the cold, Léac was sweating. No sooner had he arrived in Dal Reniac than he had caught wind of rumours concerning his daughter's flight from her husband. That was when the urgency of Nérac's summons began to dawn upon him. He had assumed that there was to be a re-negotiation of their contract: not that the contract would be torn up altogether.

He fumed inwardly, pacing the corridor outside Nérac's private chambers. To be made to wait in such a way was demeaning. He was not the man's servant. Whatever Meracad had done, she would pay for it, he would assure Nérac of that. But their arrangement had proved so lucrative for both men.



Why throw everything away now?

Cursing, Léac wiped his handkerchief across his face. He should have listened to Cara Thæc from the beginning. That girl of hers seemed to believe she was answerable to no one, that she could roam the empire as she pleased, stealing the wives of powerful aristocrats from beneath their very noses. Deep down, he harboured a desire to catch her before Nérac did: to teach the bitch her place before putting her out of their way for good.

“Lord Nérac will see you.”

Léac gave his forehead a hurried wipe and followed the page through into Nérac’s rooms. There was little light and he strained to make out the figure of his business partner who was sitting behind a writing table with his shirt unbuttoned, a few days’ worth of unshaven stubble on his cheeks. A large bruise encircled his left eye and his hand appeared to be shaking as he wrote. Léac stared down at him. This he hadn’t expected.

“I gather you understand the reason for our meeting.” Nérac continued to write, not looking up once.

“I had heard rumours as I came through the city.”

“Ha! Rumours!” Nérac spat the words out and threw down his pen. “Yes. You see, Master Léac, that is what you and your daughter have subjected me to. Rumours. I am now the butt of a thousand jokes.”

He looked up at Léac, an intense fire raging in eyes.

“Nérac, I had no idea that...”

Nérac held up a warning finger. “Today I am *Lord* Nérac, and if you want me to believe that you had no idea about your daughter’s affair with this woman, you insult me further.”

Léac shifted from foot to foot. Lying would not help his cause now.

“I attempted to deal with the matter, Sir. Twice.”

“Twice! Were you deliberately incompetent or is this woman some kind of spirit that she slipped from your grasp on both occasions?”

“She is neither, Sir. But she has powerful friends.”

“So I’ve heard. Not far from Dal Reniac, it seems.”

“I don’t think I understand you, Lord Nérac.” Léac scrutinised Nérac’s face, attempting to gauge his meaning.

“No, I believe you don’t,” Nérac said at last. “What a pity. That is the best part of the entire story it seems. If you are in the mood for gossiping. Which I most certainly am not. Those men who returned from the moors that day saw both your daughter and the duellist leaving in the company of the Master of Hannac fortress. It is therefore interesting, is it not, that Franc Hannac has just acknowledged the duellist to be his own daughter and heir?”

“Halanya Thæc is Franc Hannac’s daughter?” Léac gasped in astonishment.

“Yes, she is. Which is going to make your task all the more difficult.”

“My task? I am not your errand boy, Lord Nérac. I will not answer for my daughter’s behaviour.”

Nérac rose suddenly, hurling the table to the floor. He stepped over the scattered books and pens to stand face to face with his business associate. “You will find your daughter and bring her back here.” He jammed his finger into Léac’s ribcage as he spoke. “And if she begs on her knees for her life, I may determine to spare it, on the condition that the child she delivers me is a healthy one.”

Shocked at the snap change in Nérac’s behaviour, Léac remained silent. The northern lord turned away, reassembling his composure. When he finally faced Léac again, his face had become cold, impassive, almost a mask. “And you, personally, Salius Léac, will bring me the heads of the duellist and her father. And until you do, you may consider our contract annulled.”

“But Lord Nérac, this is impossible – I am no agent of the law. We can seek redress through the Emperor himself if need be, but to murder Franc Hannac – you ask too much.”

Nérac’s voice was now low, soft, dangerous. “I don’t think we understand each other, Léac. I will set the North ablaze if need be. I will put to the sword every last inhabitant of the Eagles’ Nests. And I will

do so with pleasure. So if you do not wish to have an unprofitable war on your hands, I suggest that you do as I ask. If not, I will make widely known your inability to keep your own affairs – and those of your daughter – in order. If the Emperor wishes to know why the North has suddenly caught fire, I will lead him to your door.”

For the first time in his life, Léac felt that control had slipped from his grasp. He also knew that it was his daughter and her lover who had brought him to this impasse. His blood seethed. “Very well. I will deliver what you want before the month is out.”

Nérac’s tension appeared to dissipate. To Léac’s frustration he said nothing, moving about the room, setting upright the overturned table, picking up scattered papers and pens. He turned round as if just noticing the merchant standing, watching him, wrestling with his own self-composure.

“Still here, Léac? You may leave. Please do not return without bringing me what I have asked for.”

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Furious, Léac slammed the door behind him. Nérac slumped, suddenly weary, in the chair. A duellist? He pulled his own sword from his belt, eyes narrowing as he examined the blade’s glint in the candle-light. He had always been, it was said, a

skilful swordsman.

He stood once more, pointing the weapon at the throat of an imaginary adversary. Then he drove it forwards with slow deliberation, twisting the blade as it cut through the air. And in his mind's eye, Hal lay dead at his feet.

Coming Soon

# *Hannac*

Storm clouds gather over Hannac. Bruno Nérac will stop at nothing to get Meracad back, and has vowed to set the North ablaze in revenge. Will Hal and Meracad's love overcome such fearsome odds? Find out in *Hannac*, the sequel to *Hal*.

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