

Chapter 4

The door opened, and Satre appeared. He blocked the entrance completely. The Last Man Standing looked more like a vault door than a human. The page, who had been rocking against the wall while staring at the ceiling, snapped upright. The Baron-Consort regarded us with flared nostrils and a grimace.

He scowled at me. "Astrologamage Elegy."

Was there a response to that? I waited.

"Never get married," he said and strode away.

Was there a response to that either? Should I say something? I didn't want the Baroness to think I was going after her man, but her man was angrily walking away, each booted step coming down heavily on the wooden floor. He rattled. I glanced inside the Baroness's office.

Alyssa wore a smile so warm and friendly she was downright frightening.

"Come in, please," she said. "And shut the door."

Ah, biscuits.

#

Baroness Alyssa said, "I would like you to go to the Silver City and rescue my sister, Kyria. In return, I will pay you two hundred and fifty marks, Celephian, almost four times the strike value that elves paid you to go to Bloodharvest."

I wished I had listened at the door. I'm a spy. It would be expected. But should I have door-listened because I'm a spy or not for the same reason? I wasn't sure. I hadn't listened, but I wished I had.

I wanted to know if Alyssa-and-Satre's ostensible argument was real or not. If they were running a blind, Satre leaving meant he had argued the side they didn't want me to take. Which would be fitting, since I didn't feel like Satre could hold a deception too well, but maybe that was part of their plan. Alyssa could. I could barely read her at all.

Was I being more clever than wise again? How far should I push the idea an argument that boiled over in front of me had to be fake?

"Why?" I asked the baroness.

"She's my sister."

"Didn't she try to kill you?" Satre had been emphatic on this point.

Alyssa sighed. "Things were muddled. The Disagreement about inheriting the throne nearly split Kageran apart, but we're done now. I rule. I won't call myself a savant of history, but I do know rulers who start their reign by settling old scores rarely rule long. Once people believe crossing me is an irreconcilable offense, when they do, they'll take it to death. I won't be here long if I make every enemy an enemy for life.

"For the last few years, things have been tense. While we haven't returned to knife-fighting in the halls, Van has a small army, and if I disband it, we will return to fighting in the halls. But I don't think they're on the cusp of attacking. I think they're being paranoid.

"If settling scores isn't wise, letting people have standing armies isn't wise either. I need to do something to show that they're not in danger, and Kyria is one such a person.

"Neither of the older twins like Kyria, but she is our sister. What's more, she raised arms against me, as Satre mentioned, which is worse than what they did. The twins undertook a sort of soft coup, while Kyria started throwing meteors.

"Kyria has a gift of rubbing people the wrong way." Alyssa rolled her eyes at Satre's empty chair. "And the older twins are a little too sensitive to work with her. But, if she returns, they'll have no excuse to think I'm going to move against them, and perhaps we can do some measure of healing for the city."

"You're betting a lot on personal biases," I said.

"All politics are somewhat personal. Family politics are entirely personal."

She would know, I thought. But I wasn't going to argue with her either way.

I asked, "How do you know she's still alive?"

"I saw her from a lightning bolt."

We smiled at each other. We waited. And I realized something: If they were willing to go through this elaborate scheme, good and bad sides having a fake argument, to get me to agree to this deal, they had to be invested. They had to want me to go. Which meant I had some leverage.

And if they had just had an argument in front of me, she might be willing to share something to get me on her side.

"Please go on, your Highness," I said.

Baroness Alyssa's smile lost none of her warmth, but I was struck by the notion she was judging me. Maybe she held that practiced smile too long. Maybe she watched me too carefully through warm eyes. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I didn't think so.

She said, "For a long time, I thought she was dead. The climax of the Disagreement involved a certain amount of conflict and people being set on fire. She disappeared for years."

Alyssa rose, went to the sideboard, and sorted quickly through small crystal decanters. One she sniffed, considered, and declined. She found another one with a pale red liquid in it and poured several fingers worth of rosé into her glass. She mixed it one-to-one.

"Another?" she asked, pausing in the act of stoppering the bottle. "Satre prefers strong over smooth. This is a little finer."

I actually did want another, but I was hesitant. "Perhaps in a bit, thank you."

She nodded, replaced the bottle, and sat down. She must have wanted a pause for thought.

"Years ago I finally made contact with Amon Tim, Whitefire's new Hierophant, and gave him assurances I didn't want him burned at the stake. When we met, I thanked him for a calming resolution to previous hostilities. The way he replied seemed...off. He said Whitefire's participation in the Disagreement had been Kyria's doing, but 'we won't need to worry about her again.'

"So I started worrying about Kyria again.

"I heard Amon Tim talking in private, and Kyria had promised the Eparchs that when she took this throne, she'd end the Maurite Prohibition. They were-" Alyssa stared at nothing and stroked invisible space, like she was learning the shape of something. "- they are hunted. In Ashirak Whitefire initiates are considered witches, and my father accepted that when he knelt to the emperor. I do not enforce the Prohibition, but it is enforced."

Alyssa sighed. "Kyria promised to end the hatred. If she took the throne, she'd renounce loyalty to Ashirak. She and the four Eparchs had risen together, and they stood with her.

"However when I took the throne, and her sisters in Whitefire had lost patience. Amon Tim lead a new faction, tired of doing the dying, and they replaced Kyria and the Eparchs. Politics in the Silver City have been turbulent. Are you familiar with it?"

"The Silver City?"

"Karash Ni. It hangs from the Moon's reflection. Mal Set hung it there after the Ashirai Emperors exiled Whitefire."

I blinked a few times.

"No, but that's incredible. How do you..." I trailed off, thinking about it.

"Get there? You wait until the wind is calm and row out to the middle of the Hyades. When the moon rises on a clear, still night, a stairway appears in the lake surface, descending into the reflection. You could do it tonight, if the wind were calm."

She smiled. "And I have some skill over weather." She opened her hand as if presenting something.

"You're a sorceress?" I asked. She'd said something about seeing Kyria through a lightning bolt.

She nodded. "I work weather."

"And you saw Kyria through a lightning bolt?"

She inhaled, held it, and said, "Yes. She's on the dark side of the Moon where weather does not go. I can send no storm, wind, or rain up there. However Kyria is a sorceress herself. Two weeks ago she spoke the word of Thunder's Lovesong, and I happened to be paying attention. I know she's up there."

"What is Thunder's Lovesong?"

"A crude and simple form of power. I am a poet. Kyria writes bad words on bathroom wall." Alyssa seemed somewhat less fond of her sister when she wasn't arguing about her.

However, I'd noticed something else. "Two weeks before I arrive. That is the darndest timing."

Alyssa nodded but said nothing.

I thought of Elvenhome. Two weeks ago Esmerelda cut my deal with Hyrmai Trui. She'd asked him because I'd suggested him, and Trui had been suggested to me by the stranger in yellow. That day, Kyria had used a crude power at just the right time to be spotted.

Forget, for a moment, sorcerer's prison on the dark side of the Moon. I mean, don't forget that because it sounds horrible. But think about something worse. Alyssa had seen her sister through a lightning bolt within a day of the yellow stranger setting this whole thing in motion.

This was clearly, absolutely, and utterly a bad idea.

"My dear Highness, I must respectfully decline. I am going to someplace warm where I will sit on a beach and drink something with a little umbrella." I stood up to bow.

Alyssa put her own hands together over her nose like she was praying. She looked over steepled fingers.

"What if I told you where Prince Aehr's wolves are?"

I stumbled through two breaths like I'd forgotten how to breathe, finishing with, "What?"

"Prince Aehr's wolves." She enunciated every word. "I can tell you where they are, and when you return, successful and rich, I can tell you where they will be to within a thunderstorm."

Um...

I skipped my turn to speak, because she'd shoved a stick through the bicycle wheels of my head.

Baroness Alyssa had hard, gray eyes that looked like stormclouds themselves. She spoke with excessive clarity. "Won't Aehr be grateful? He risked goblins looking for them. He would love someone to find his wolves. Just love them," she said, staring at me.

I was quiet for a very long time before sitting back down.