



The Rising Wave

Author: *Michelle Diener*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: A princess intent on escape . . . Ava has everything ready for her last chance at escape from her years' long imprisonment. She knows if she doesn't succeed this time, she will die. When an injured warlord is thrown into her cell with her, upsetting her plans, she faces a dilemma . . . leave him to die or try to take him with her.

A warlord intent on rebellion . . . Luc may lead a rebel army, but now he's at the mercy of his enemies, and they have no mercy to give. All except the woman imprisoned with him. She not only has mercy, she has a plan to escape. He just has to convince her to let him come along . . .

A partnership forged in adversity . . . Unable to leave him behind, Ava includes Luc in her plans, but escaping the castle where her cousin has imprisoned her is only the first step. Hunted by their enemies, she and Luc will have to trust each other, no matter how many secrets they're keeping.

Total Pages (Source): 40

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

Chapter 1

Carila would be proud of her.

Ava put the last touches on her escape plan and then stood in the center of her stone-walled cell, hands on hips, taking a moment to enjoy the accomplishment of it.

True, she had yet to pull it off, and this wasn't her first try, but she'd learned from her mistakes.

This time she would succeed.

She would have to.

Time was running out.

They'd moved her to the dungeons three weeks ago.

It was supposedly temporary punishment for her last escape attempt from the tower, but she saw it clearly for what it was—the first step to her murder.

Out of sight, out of mind, in a way.

She wasn't already dead only because Herron had to be careful not to appear involved in her demise.

Especially if Ava's aunt was still alive—something Ava hadn't been able to find out

from anyone.

Herron must be paying well for the guards' silence, even in the matter of whether the queen was still on the throne.

But she was well aware Herron intended her to die here.

It would be a terrible misunderstanding, of course.

She would sicken, and they would try to save her, but all for nought.

She had already been through one bout of vomiting through the night.

She knew she couldn't trust her food now, and she looked at the untouched stew in the bowl with regret.

Her stomach still felt tender from hanging over the bucket, even though it had been two days since she'd rid her system of whatever poison had been given to her.

She slid a finger under the edge of her tunic and rubbed the tiny stitches she'd put there after the first round of poisoning with regret. Theoretically, they would protect her, but she just wasn't sure enough of her workings. Not enough to gamble her life on them, anyway.

Which meant she had to move fast. The longer it took to escape, the weaker from hunger she would become.

The sound of voices, raised and angry, filtered through from beyond her cell and panic gripped her and squeezed.

She glanced up at her escape plan, heart thundering.

She had devised it to lure in and best Banyon, but it sounded as if there were at least three people coming, and the ring of hard leather boot soles on stone steps reverberated along with the threats and grunts that were clearer with every passing second.

She fought the throat-closing fear, forcing herself to step up to the bars of her cell door and stare at the arch out to the stairwell. Waiting for what was coming down toward her.

Juni staggered in, with Garmand beside him. Between them they were dragging a man at least head and shoulders taller than they were.

He hung between them, head bowed, feet dragging behind. He was shirtless and barefoot, and covered in bruises and bloody slashes.

Both Juni and Garmand were sweating, despite the chill in the dungeon, and Ava could see Juni looking at the ground as if he wanted to toss the prisoner onto the floor.

“No.” Garmand must have tightened his hold, because Ava saw the prisoner twitch a little. “Don't drop him. We'll dump him in the cell, or we'll only have to haul him up again.”

“Then open up, old man. Quickly!” Juni glanced back over his shoulder, his lips twisted in a snarl, and Ava saw Banyon nodding and simpering behind him, shoulders hunched as he darted around the two guards, keys rattling, and then came to a jerky stop at the sight of Ava, watching him from behind the bars.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

He hesitated. “What about her? You taking her back up top now?”

Juni's gaze flicked over her with a sly, knowing look. “No. She'll have to share for a bit. Won't you, princess?”

Ava backed away as Banyon used both hands to insert the key in the lock and then twist it.

Juni and Garmand shouldered the door aside and tossed the giant onto the ground, face first.

The door wouldn't close because his body blocked the way and Garmand grunted with effort as he rolled the prisoner over onto his back.

Eventually they got the door shut and Ava stared down at the battered face of the man who had ruined her escape plans.

She realized the guards were talking together, so she hopped over her new companion and crouched just below the small window formed by the bars set in the door to listen.

“Isn't he dangerous? What if she comes to harm?” Banyon asked, his voice a low hiss.

Juni's answer was low, and Ava had to strain to hear him. “That's on him.”

“But he could hurt her.” Banyon's voice was querulous. He didn't like looking after

her down here. He wanted to go back up to the tower.

“Sure.” Garmand scoffed at the thought. “Like you aren't trying to do the same. I hear she was very sick after dinner a couple of days ago.”

“Very sick,” Juni said with a laugh.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Ava wished she could lift up a little and see what was happening.

It was possible Banyon hadn't known the food was poisoned. But he knew now, and she bet he'd still give it to her, although maybe he was finally working out who would take the blame if she did actually die.

“She'll be fine. He's injured isn't he?” Juni's voice was full of patently false bonhomie. Banyon must look really spooked for him to even try to reassure, however insincere his tone.

“And the . . .” Banyon lowered his voice even more, and while she couldn't see him, Ava guessed he gave a quick glance toward the door of her cell.

“What are you miming, old man?” Garmand asked, impatient.

There was another silence, and Ava wondered if Banyon was asking them what he should do about her food. Now that he knew it was not just a bug she'd caught.

She glanced at the prisoner lying at her feet, and was suddenly ensnared in his bright blue gaze.

She froze, gaze locked with his, and then lifted a finger to her lips to keep him quiet.

He narrowed his eyes at her, but he stayed silent.

A clatter of boots told her Juni and Garmand at least were leaving, and annoyed she'd missed their last whispered sentences, she turned back to the door.

The shuffle of footsteps gave her just enough warning to slide down to the ground and scoot to the side, so she sat with her back against the wall as Banyon peered through the bars.

He gave a grunt at the sight of the prisoner, who had closed his eyes again and lay as if unconscious.

“You should give me a bucket of water,” Ava said.

Banyon gripped the bars and turned to try and catch a glimpse of her on the floor. “Why?”

“To tend his wounds. Water and some clean rags.”

Her warden seemed to think about it for a moment. “Maybe.”

He shuffled away, and she closed her eyes, thinking through her options.

Maybe it would be easier to escape with the new prisoner here. He drew the eye with his big body. She could even do it right now, when Banyon came back.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

If he was carrying a heavy bucket of water, that would be even better than the meal she assumed he would be holding when she'd set up her plan.

She opened her eyes and looked over at the prisoner, and found him watching her again.

She pursed her lips, and tried to harden her heart against him.

She didn't know him, and she had planned this for a long time.

It wasn't fair.

Her life was on the line. If she hadn't been completely certain before, hearing Juni and Garmand talk to Banyon had confirmed it.

She had pegged them as Herron's men on the inside, and from the knowing way they'd spoken, she'd been right.

“What are you deciding?” The prisoner's voice was a croak, and he started to cough.

She said nothing, pushing herself to her feet and walking over to the jug with the small amount of water she had left for the day.

She poured it into the chipped wooden cup, wincing when it barely reached the halfway mark, and crouched beside him.

His arms were bruised and scraped, and there was one deep cut in his forearm which

went down to the bone.

She averted her eyes, too cowardly to look carefully, and dropped to her knees, easing an arm around his bare shoulders so she could put the cup to his lips.

He glanced up at her, a quick look of surprise, before he lifted his less injured arm and grasped the cup himself, tipping it down his throat with a groan.

Even though the water had gone, he tipped it again, as if trying to find any drop of water left.

She watched his throat work, and felt despair drag her down.

She had to be hard. To think of herself.

And yet, wouldn't that mean they had won?

She sighed.

“What are you deciding?” he asked again in his raspy voice, and she glanced at him, found his eyes on her once again. He was watching her with the patience of a predator.

She eased back, heart beating a little faster, and was careful to guide his shoulders back to the ground gently.

She had been around predators her whole life.

She dusted her knees as she stood.

“Nothing,” she answered at last, refusing to articulate her quandary.

She glanced from him in his half-naked state to the bed, and felt a surge of anger at Herron and his lackeys.

The temperature down here bordered on icy, and they had stripped their prisoner almost naked.

But feeling angry about it wasn't going to solve anything, and the prisoner was as much their victim as she was. More, by the look of his injuries.

“Who are you?” His voice was still rough and scratchy.

“Ava.” She had her back to him, standing next to her bed. She pulled off the thicker of the two blankets and lay it on the ground beside him. “You?”

“Luc.” There was an edge of amusement in his voice. “What . . . are you doing?”

“Making you a bed on the floor. I can't pick you up, but maybe you can pull yourself over?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

He must have been freezing on the cold stone floor, because he used his arms to pull himself onto the blanket with what looked like a massive effort.

She felt the quick, hard knock of her heart when his face turned a strange gray color, and he collapsed.

She crouched next to him, touching his shoulder, but he was no longer conscious. His skin was hot to the touch, and smooth under her fingers.

His hair was dark—a true black—and cut in the same short style as the Kassian soldiers. His chest was heavy with muscle, and she stared at the dark hair that arched down a flat, ridged stomach and disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants.

He was magnificent, but now was not an appropriate time to admire him.

“Are you all right?” She rocked his shoulder, trying to rouse him, but she barely moved him.

And of course he wasn't all right.

She heard Banyon's shuffling step approach and curled around her knees, eyes closed tight shut.

She needed more time to decide!

She turned toward the door, and her knee knocked Luc's bruised shoulder. He gave a

quiet groan in his sleep.

Stricken, she opened her eyes and rose up, standing with feet apart. Her escape plan hung over the door, waiting.

She stayed where she was as Banyon peered through the bars to check he could see her, and then rattled the keys as he opened up.

He only opened the door a little way, and swung the bucket of water in with a thump.

Then he left it open a crack as he shuffled away and then back.

He extended a jug and a plate and Ava hopped over Luc to take them, standing in the opening he'd created and looking him directly in the face.

“Thank you, warden.”

His rheumy eyes were leaking at the corners, and he had a light sheen of sweat on his face from carrying the bucket. “Share with the prisoner. They want him alive. Maybe they'll reward you if you fix 'im up.”

They both knew that would never happen, but she bowed her head in acquiescence.

He peered at her carefully, then pulled the old sheet he had slung over his shoulder off, holding it in front of him like a shield. “This was all I could find.”

Banyon tossed it through the doorway onto Luc, as if by not directly handing it to her, he somehow absolved himself of his kindness. “For bandages,” he said, and then shut the door in her face.

She leaned against the door for a moment, looking up at the stone poised and ready to

come down on his head, and felt a tear leak down her cheek.

She straightened, using the back of her hand to brush the moisture away, and pushed down every raging emotion. It would do her no good right now.

She put the plate and jug on the table before she hefted the bucket closer to Luc. The water was cold, but there was a lot of it.

She lifted the sheet to her nose and sniffed. It smelled a little musty, as if it had been in a damp cupboard, but was otherwise clean.

She began ripping long strips off it for bandages and used a few of them to clean the scrapes and slices in his arms and shoulders.

When she got to the very deep cut on his forearm, she sat for a long minute, staring at it.

She had only sewn flesh once before—her own—and though she couldn't see the scar above her eyebrow, her finger traced the spot. Her skin felt smooth there, as if the deep cut had never happened.

She had no mirror, so she didn't know how well it had healed.

She lifted her hands to her head, and then hesitated, looking toward the door.

Too paranoid to continue where she could be observed, she moved to the side of the door, lowering to her haunches. It would be impossible for anyone outside looking in to see her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

She burrowed her fingers in her short, dark hair.

Banyon had been slack lately, and her hair actually had a little length to it, now, rather than the shorn look she was used to. Long enough that she'd been able to weave her hidden needle into the strands, in case they checked her clothes again.

She got hold of the needle and pulled it out, tugging a little when it wouldn't come until a few strands came away at the roots.

Eyes smarting from the pain, her fingers shook a little as she unwound the single thread she'd hidden with the needle. The black silk was already threaded through the fine, silver needle's eye, ready to be used at a moment's notice.

She stared at it.

It was the only thread she had left.

She had thought all of it was gone, until one day she'd found a short strand of it caught between the mattress and the sheet on her bed.

She'd kept it safe ever since, and had only used a little for the tiny stitches she'd put in her neckline to protect her from poison.

She made her decision and then committed herself fully, hunching over as she crawled to Luc, back to the door. Even if Banyon was pressed right up against it, looking in, he wouldn't be able to see what she was doing.

She clamped Luc's arm between her knees and began sewing.

As the needle pierced his skin, he came to with a cry and a jerk.

His gaze went to her face, eyes wild, and then down to his arm wedged in her lap.

At the sight of the needle sticking out of his skin, his gaze snapped to hers again.

“You're sewing me up.” His voice was a dirty rasp.

She nodded.

He gave a slow blink, a lowering and raising of his eyelids, and then he relaxed.

“I thought you were going to run,” he said, lying back against the blanket.

“Is that so?” she murmured as she worked the needle.

“Yes.” He closed his eyes, but his body remained tense.

“You were wrong.”

“You were going to, though.” His murmur was as low as her own. “What changed your mind?”

She shot him a look of incredulity, but his eyes were still shut.

“Maybe I still will.”

He gave a grunt at that. “You could do worse than wait for me to recover my strength. I've a good sword arm.” He winced as she pulled on the thread.

“You must have, to be down here.” Herron and his generals wouldn't bother singling out just anyone. There was something special about this one.

“It's more than my fighting skills they don't like.” His speech was choppy as he held and released his breath with the in and out of her needle.

“Who are you then? Some warlord threat?”

He was silent, and she looked up to check he hadn't passed out again, to find his bright eyes on her.

She blew out a breath. “You are?”

“I fought in the warlord's army, that's true.” He kept his gaze steady, but something in his eyes, some shadow, told her he was lying.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

She lowered her gaze, going back to her careful movement of the needle. “Oh?”

“They think I have a higher rank than I do.” He kept his voice level.

She relaxed a little. She could understand lying about his rank. He wanted them to think he was lower down than he was, and she respected that.

Respected that he wouldn't tell her. She was a stranger, after all. For all he knew she could use the information against him to help herself.

“What rank do they think you are?” she asked, keeping her gaze down, on her work.

She hummed softly as she did. Humming always made a difference, her grandmother had told her. And it seemed . . . right.

“They think I'm the Turncoat King.” He said it in a way that he thought she would understand what he meant.

She looked up, frowning. “Who is the Turncoat King?”

He looked at her in shock, and she almost laughed out loud.

Oh, you are the Turncoat King, all right. And you can't believe I haven't heard of you.

“A warlord,” he said at last.

“I'm assuming the Herald or his lackeys came up with such an unflattering name as

the Turncoat King.” She was on the last stitch, and she caught her lip between her teeth as she tightened the thread and began to tie it off.

“You would be right.”

“What do his own people call this warlord?” she asked. She looked up at him, holding his gaze to distract him.

He hesitated, and that told her he was uncomfortable with his people's name for him, more so than the one Herron was using against him.

“They . . . we . . . call him the Commander.” He suddenly looked down at his arm, and she did, too.

She had done a neat job. Almost impossibly neat.

He frowned, and then relaxed back again, closing his eyes. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” She tilted her head, staring critically at her work. She just wished she had scissors, so she could snip off and save the leftover thread hanging from the end knot. There wasn't much of it, but it was something.

Silk was difficult to snap off, and it would hurt him to try.

She let the idea go. The thread was lost to her now.

She had rubbed it against a sharp edge of stone on the wall when she'd embroidered the poison protection into her neckline, but short of dragging Luc across the room to it, that wasn't an option.

“Where is your Commander from?” She dipped a torn strip of sheet into the water

and dabbed away the blood her needle had made, then began to bandage the cut up, more to hide the stitches than because it needed to be wrapped.

“You really haven't heard of him?” Luc asked.

She shook her head. “I've been here a long time.”

“Why?” He lifted his arm to help her as she wound the bandage around it.

“I heard something someone didn't want me to hear.” That was the truth, in a way.

But she didn't feel compelled to be more honest with him, when he was lying to her.

“You're Kassian?”

“My father was. My mother's people are from Grimwalt.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

He was silent and she wondered if it was because of the reputation of the Grimwaldians.

They were fey.

Some of them, anyway.

Some of them, like her.

But she had managed to hide it for a long time, and she could hide it again.

She rose up, backing away from him, and turned to the table with its plate of bread, cheese and a wrinkled apple from the summer crop.

First, she poured him some more water, remembering the way he tried to get every last drop earlier.

He took the cup from her, his gaze never leaving her face. "Grimwalt has shut its border."

She raised her brows. "I hadn't heard that."

"They cannot think their fate isn't tied up with the rest of the region. Who will they trade with, how will they prosper?" He drank the water, slower this time.

Ava gave a low chuckle. "You know who they will trade with, and as for prosper? We do not care for riches in Grimwalt. Prosperity is measured in peace and

tranquility, not gold.” She took the cup back, filled it again.

“You first,” he said.

She hesitated, then nodded. She would have to be strong and able to run when she escaped, with or without him.

Although she knew it would be with him.

She'd made her choice, even though she wished she had enough hardness in her to leave him behind.

He watched her drink, and then took the cup from her when she filled it again. “What is the plan?”

“The plan?” She kept her voice light as she turned away and began to tear the bread in half.

“To escape.” His voice was less raspy now that he'd drunk more water, and he had turned on his side, propping himself up on an elbow.

He looked better than he had when they'd dragged him in. She'd cleaned off most of the blood and his eyes were brighter now he'd drunk the water.

“The guards think you'll harm me. They're hoping for it.” She said it calmly, but the reaction in him was instant.

He looked at the door, face and body still. “Why are they hoping for it?”

“Because they want to claim my death as an accident. They've tried to poison me, but I don't think the food Banyon brought us now is dangerous. He says they want you

alive, so we're safe to eat this.” She walked over to him and lowered herself in a smooth motion, sitting beside him, legs crossed. She set the plate between them and took up her half of the bread. “I was going to have to escape today, you see, because I haven't been able to eat for a few days already.”

He hesitated, but she motioned to him with her hand and he took the bread, broke off a piece of cheese and bit into it with strong white teeth.

“They captured you two or three days ago?” she asked.

He stopped chewing, gave her a suspicious look.

“Your stubble,” she explained, waving at his face.

He fingered the dark hair on his chin and nodded. “There was a battle near Zeneca.”

“They took you prisoner?”

“We won. After the battle, they sent in a traitor who pretended to have an urgent message for . . . the Commander, that a nearby tribe were interested in an alliance and wanted to meet, and when we rode out to negotiate, we were ambushed.”

That sounded like Herron's style.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

“I hope your Commander got away.” She couldn't help it. She wanted to poke at him a little in revenge for forcing her to change her plans.

He gave her a sharp look, as if he was suspicious of her question, and she lowered her gaze, folded some bread over a piece of cheese, and put it in her mouth.

She had never tasted anything so good.

“Why do they call your leader the Turncoat King?”

He was silent, and she risked a quick glance at him.

He was chewing thoughtfully as he stared at her face. “He was part of the Chosen.”

She hadn't expected that. She met his gaze. “He turned against the Kassian army?”

“He turned against them,” Luc said. “And he took every Chosen on the battlefield with him.”

“When was this?” She couldn't believe she hadn't heard of it. It was breathtaking in its implications.

“Just under two years ago.” He was still watching her, looking for any sign of deception in her expression, but he would find none. She would have taken such heart from the idea of the Chosen rebelling.

Herron would have known that.

He would have made certain she didn't hear of it.

The whole sick and twisted Chosen program was the worst thing her aunt had ever done. Even her aunt had known it.

Ava didn't think the queen had ever been the same after it.

“How long were you a Chosen?”

“Who says I was?” He had finished his share of the bread and cheese, and lifted the apple to his lips to take a bite.

“You said the Commander is your leader. I assumed you were in the Chosen with him.”

He bit down, then held the apple out to her.

She took it without breaking eye contact.

Eventually, just as she bit in, he inclined his head.

“I was. From the age of fourteen.”

He seemed to be in his mid to late twenties, so she guessed he'd been in the indentured servitude program for almost ten years before he had managed to break free.

“And the Herald calls your Commander the Turncoat King because he turned on the Kassians during a battle the Chosen were fighting for Kassia?”

“He did more than that. He got word to the Kassian's enemies the night before the

battle that the Chosen would turn on their keepers, to avoid more of his people dying for Kassia than necessary.”

“Oh.” She thought of it with wonder. A field of warriors the Kassian generals thought were fighting for them turning to strike a blow against them, and the enemy hanging back, their participation unnecessary. “I wish I had seen it.” She truly did.

Luc's expression was surprised, as if he hadn't expected her enthusiasm.

“Who were the Chosen supposed to fight?”

“The Venyatu.”

“Oh,” she said again, unable to hold back her smile. Carila, her weapons and fight master from a young age, had been Venyatux. She could speak the language fluently, and loved the fighting style. “They must have loved everything about your plan.”

“Not my plan,” Luc said. “The Commander's plan.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

Ava gave a solemn nod. "Sorry. The Commander's plan." She handed the apple back.

Luc took another bite, and then yawned.

"What time are we escaping?"

"Not tonight," she said. She hadn't missed the stiff way he held himself, or the way some of his cuts had begun to seep through his bandages.

He tilted his head. "If the opportunity arises, take it. I will find the strength to keep up."

She stared at him, then gave a nod. "There will be an opportunity tomorrow at mealtime. If you aren't ready by then, you must tell me. Better to try the day after than try and fail tomorrow."

"Better to go as soon as possible than wait for them to come for me or you."

She conceded his point with a nod. It was always on her mind, that any delay left her at risk of something worse than another day in the cell.

"I could have gone today," she reminded him.

"I thank you for your generous heart." He spoke formally, bowing his head.

Flustered, she stood and set the plate back on the small desk.

The window high on the wall above her bed was guarded by bars and it faced out of the castle, onto the forest side.

They had only a few minutes of light left.

She could only hope it was the last sunset she would ever see from this cell.

Chapter 2

She should have gone yesterday when she had the chance.

Ava stared with dread at the small entourage that filled the annex in front of her cell door.

They had come mid morning, around the time Banyon usually brought some bread and water for her.

They were here for Luc.

He had risen to a crouch from his blanket on the floor at the sound of footsteps approaching, and she slid down the door, out of sight of prying eyes, and gestured for him to lie down.

He stared at her for a long beat, and then lowered himself, curling in, as if he was in pain, eyes closed.

Ava slid to the side, then stood, walking to the far corner of her cell and wedging herself into it, as if trying to get as far from Luc as she could.

There was the rattle of a key at the door and then it banged open.

Luc didn't flinch, as she did, even though she'd known it was coming.

His control was spectacular, and then she remembered he'd been a Chosen for maybe as much as ten years, and she knew how hard he had come by that control.

“Princess.” Juni sneered at her, huddled in her corner. “What are you doing all the way over there?”

She said nothing.

“He been like this all night?” Garmand asked Banyon, who was standing behind them again.

Ava could see two other guards as well, lower in rank than Juni and Garmand, and obviously here to help control Luc.

“He hasn't moved.” Banyon leaned into the cell to look. “I got Ava to bandage him, seeing as you said he had to live.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

“He needs a fresh round of them, by the look of things.” Garmand stepped into the cell and looked down at the blood-soak strips of sheet.

It looked bad, but Ava had checked a few times in the night, and they had almost all closed up.

Luc was still hot to the touch though.

If they did check his wounds under the bandages, they would see the stitching.

That would be bad.

Very, very bad.

She fought the cold chill of panic as Garmand gestured to the other guards, and they crowded into the small space, bent down and hauled Luc up.

He muttered something unintelligible and lifted his head slightly, then dropped it down again.

He didn't look at her. That was wise, but she was sorry for it. Their plans were in ruins.

“We won't get anything out of him in this state,” Garmand said, staring at Luc's limp body hanging between the guards.

“We can try.” Juni gave a grin. “Let's go, boys.”

The guards dragged Luc out, struggling with the weight and size of him.

Ava watched with a growing sense of sickness in the pit of her stomach as he disappeared out of her cell.

They had come for him far sooner than she'd thought.

She was still in the corner, holding herself tightly with arms around her waist.

Juni and Garmand paused in the doorway as they made their way out, and she saw the leer in Juni's expression before he stepped out.

Alarm flared up in her. He was growing bolder.

She stayed where she was when the door closed, waiting until the only sounds beyond the door was the soft shuffle of Banyon's feet, and eventually, even that faded.

She walked carefully across the cell and leaned against the door, looking out and listening, because surely Banyon would be back with food for her.

She had to go now.

Before they found the stitches. She wanted to help Luc, and she would try. But if she couldn't, she still had to go.

There would be no fourth chance for her.

She had been told that and she believed it.

They would throw her off the tower, or hold her under the water of the moat.

Whatever left no weapon's mark.

So she would go the very first chance she got.

* * *

A long time passed.

She was unable to tell anymore how many hours, but it was midday or even later when she was roused from her position sitting against the door by the sound of Banyon's limping gait.

She shook herself out of her half-doze, adrenalin suddenly spiking now the moment had arrived.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

She lifted into a crouch and moved away from the door before standing, then backed up a little to the middle of the cell so she could get the momentum she needed.

Then she ran toward the wall beside the door. She propelled herself upward, using the protruding stone at knee height to lift her, and grabbed the thin strip of sheet that was hidden just behind the lintel.

She couldn't help the thump as she landed back on the ground, but Banyon was slightly deaf now, and she had been counting on him not hearing it.

She heard her warden sniff and then cough as he approached the door, heard the rattle of the tray on the small table just outside the door and then the clang of the keys.

She looked up at the stone perched above. She had the ripped and scraped fingers to prove she had eased it out of the wall behind her bed by hand over a period of two weeks.

If it landed on his head, as she planned, it could kill him.

She had to put that aside, because he was killing her. Feeding her poison. And any moment now, Juni and Garmand would find the stitches.

She stepped to the left a little as he opened the door, so she would be in his line of sight. The end of the sheet strip was in her hand, hopefully out of his view.

“Where did they take the prisoner?” she asked as he peered at her, keys still jingling.

“Question room.” He said it as if she should know what he was talking about.

“The question room?” She shook her head. “Where's that?”

“You don't know?” He paused.

“Never heard of it before now. Never been there.”

Banyon stared at her through rheumy eyes. “Hope you never do. You don't need anyone to tell you the way. You can hear the screams easy enough. And you wouldn't want to clean up in there when they're done, believe me.” He shivered. “Sometimes, even when no one was down there, you could hear screams and cries for help.”

He said it grimly, as if he didn't approve, but he worked here, and he kept her prisoner, and he gave her poisoned food. He didn't disapprove enough.

When he pulled the door open wider, she waited a beat for him to turn and lift the tray and then stepped back as if to give him room to enter.

He shuffled closer, directly below the lintel, and she took a small step toward him, willing him to edge that little bit closer to her, tray extended.

She yanked the cotton strip the way she'd practiced many times, with her bedding on the ground below the door to protect the stone and keep its fall silent.

It struck Banyon at an angle on the side of his head, above his ear, with a sickening thud. He crumpled to the ground in silence, although the tray he was carrying landed with a clatter.

Ava turned, her gorge rising, her breath coming in fast pants.

She forced herself to turn back and look.

Her gaoler lay sprawled across the doorway. She steeled herself. She had her needle worked back into her hair. She also had a few short strands of thread she'd worked out of Luc's bandages in her pocket, along with a few leftover pieces of fabric. There was nothing else for her here.

She stepped over him into the annex, avoiding the pool of water from the fallen jug, and then froze, turned back, and crouched beside him.

He was still breathing, but in shallow, quick inhales and exhales. His keys were clipped to his belt and after a moment of trying to work them loose, she undid the belt itself and pulled them off.

She also forced herself to check his pockets for anything useful, and found a small knife with a blade that folded on a hinge into a handle made of bone.

She slipped it into her pocket with the threads and fabric.

She had thought through her plan over many weeks, and she looked around and then found the bucket and mop that Banyon kept in the corner.

Her tunic and trousers were already dirty and creased—they hadn't allowed her to bring anything but the clothes on her back with her when they'd put her down here—and now she snatched up the thin cloth she'd seen Banyon use to wipe the table outside her door and pulled it over her short hair like a scarf.

With mop and bucket in hand, she stepped out into the stairwell she'd only come down once before, and tried to get her bearings.

The stairs were built in long, oblong stretches, the treads shallow.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

The dungeon was at the very bottom of them—the only way out was up.

She started to climb, trying to keep her steps light and silent, as much to hear someone coming as to disguise her own presence.

When she reached the first turn in the stairs, she found they continued up, but there was also a passage that stretched out in front of her.

There was no screaming that she could hear, to her relief, but she remembered what Banyon had said about the noise. She knew Herron would not have a room where there was a possibility of screaming being heard in the main part of the castle. That would be a little too revealing. Questions might be asked.

And Herron was seldom ever questioning someone he had permission to.

If she had been put on the lowest level, then the question room could well be just one floor above.

She hesitated for a moment, the keys she had taken from Banyon a heavy weight in her pocket. Her fingers tightened on the mop.

She smiled suddenly to herself. Who was she fooling?

She was going to look for him.

She would take the warlord with her, if she could.

Chapter 3

He hurt.

Luc cracked his eyes open a little, keeping his head down, and tested the strength of the ropes tying him to the chair.

They rubbed against his already raw skin and he felt a trickle of blood run down his wrist.

The room was empty.

Well, he thought it was empty, but he couldn't see behind him. He'd been raised in the hell that was a Chosen camp, where they would play games like making you think you were alone all the time. Then let you know—painfully—that you were not.

It meant you could never lower your guard.

He had exceptional hearing, and exceptional eyesight, gifts from his mother and her people, and he heard the light, quick steps coming down the passage toward him long before they slowed to a stop at his door.

He tensed, still unsure there wasn't someone sitting absolutely still behind him. There were people like that. People who even those with almost magically-heightened senses like himself couldn't detect.

People from Lustre and even Kassia. And Grimwalt.

The footsteps were those of a woman or a young boy, and he was surprised when he heard the faint chime of keys and the scratch of iron turning in a lock.

He dropped the pretence of unconsciousness and looked up as the door opened. He actually gaped as Ava stepped in, awkwardly holding the keys and a bucket and mop.

She looked around the room as she closed the door behind her, and he relaxed when she focused back on him without any cry of alarm at someone being in the room with him.

“You have the strength to run?” she whispered, her gaze going to the bruises on his face and then lingering on the black mottling on his chest and sides.

He nodded as she shoved the keys into a pocket, carefully put the bucket and mop down so they didn't clatter, and then brought out a small knife.

“Don't know how sharp it is.” She crouched beside him and he was left staring at the dirty rag she'd tied over her head.

He felt her slide the small blade between his wrist and the rope, pulling it toward her.

The fibers give easily.

“Very sharp.” His voice cracked as he spoke. He wondered where she'd got it. She hadn't had it before, he was sure of that.

She gave a final tug and the rope dropped to the ground. He flexed his hand as the blood rushed back and Ava shuffled around him to work on his other wrist.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

Then she was crouched at his feet, sawing at the rope around his ankles.

He stumbled up when they went slack, putting a hand on Ava's shoulder for balance.

“How badly did they hurt you?” She was looking up at him from the ground, face tipped up as she spoke, and he saw the calm, the competence in her expression.

This was a formidable person he was dealing with.

“Ribs and face,” he said, giving her the respect he would to his seconds in the army he'd created. The truth just was. It was how you used the information that counted.

“They didn't take off your bandages?” Her gaze was on the strips she had tied around him yesterday. “Check how you were healing?”

He shook his head. “Why would they?”

She shrugged as she stood, pocketing the knife and then gathering up the bucket and mop. The rag on her head had slipped a little and her golden brown hair stuck out, hair he'd been fascinated by since he'd met her—the soft look of it, the short spikes, had mesmerised him.

If her guards had cut it to humiliate her, they had failed. She looked as beautiful and fey as a Grimwalter could. The short hair only offset her sharp chin and her big brown eyes.

She held the bucket and mop like armor, and leaned against the door to listen.

There was no one coming.

She glanced at him, and he nodded before they both stepped out.

Ava turned and locked the door.

He approved. It was better to leave it as it had been. It would confuse whoever came for him next. Make them wonder if someone else in authority had taken him.

Before they could choose a direction, the sound of laughter drifted down from the stairwell.

They both froze, pivoted, and looked down the gloomy passage that ran past the question room into darkness.

“What's down that way?” Luc whispered.

“I don't know. I've never been here before.”

The laughter became louder, and Luc could hear Juni's voice. They were looking forward to whatever they had planned for him.

“They're here for me.”

She gave a snort. “Really?”

Despite the situation, he grinned at her, then started moving into the gloom to find a hiding place.

He noticed the deep recess in the wall straight away.

“In here.”

She hesitated, then moved, and he crowded her into the space, so they were both pressed up against the cold stone wall.

They were only just in time.

He heard the jangle of keys and then the scrape of a key in the lock and the slam of the door against the wall.

“Shit.” Luc didn't recognize the voice that swore so meaningfully. “How do we explain that?”

“Relax. Maybe Garmand took him up to the general.” That was Juni.

“What do you mean? Why would he send us down here to interrogate the prisoner if he'd already taken him somewhere else?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

“Garmand didn't send us down here. This was my idea. I thought a little more questioning might shake something loose.”

There was a moment of silence. “This wasn't sanctioned and now we get here and the prisoner is gone? Who's going to believe we didn't kill him and hid his body to cover for ourselves?”

“We walk away. No one knows we're down here. We just go back up.” Juni sounded nervous for the first time since Luc had met him.

“And if he's escaped?”

“The door was locked, remember? Chances are the general demanded to see him.” Juni sounded like he was trying to convince himself, but his words had the desired effect.

“That's true, it was locked.” The soldier with him gave a nervous laugh. “Still, let's get out of here.”

They moved away, with none of the laughter and joking they'd shared coming down, their boots ringing a quick staccato.

When they were gone, Luc eased a little away from Ava and looked down at her. “All right?” He was pressed up close to her, and he could see the sweep of her eyelashes in the flickering torchlight.

He moved aside and she stepped around him.

He must be cold, he realized. He felt a physical ache as she moved away. His shirt had long been ripped off him, and as they'd pressed together in the small crevice, her body heat had helped to warm him.

Ava looked in the direction of the stairs. "Let's try the other way first."

He nodded, turning to lead the way. The stone floor was icy on his bare feet, and he shivered.

"I should have brought a blanket for you. I'm sorry." Her words were soft behind him, and he gave a grunt in response.

A bit of cold was nothing.

Freedom was worth any price.

* * *

They neither heard nor saw anyone as they walked the unlit corridor.

Ava worried they would find themselves at a dead end and be caught, unable to evade whoever came to look for them.

Luc must have worried about that, too, because she ran in to him a few times in the darkness, standing with his head tilted back the way they had come, listening for signs of pursuit.

His torso looked terrible, black and red, swollen where he'd been hit.

"They didn't just use their fists, did they?" She reached out to touch him, but withdrew her hand before her fingertips made contact.

He glanced back, his eyes widening at the sight of her outstretched hand. Shook his head. “Sticks.”

She had been beaten only once, when she'd escaped the first time, and that had been because Herron had been in residence and he had been so angry, he had grabbed a sword from one of his guards and hit her with the pommel.

That was when she'd had to stitch herself above her eye.

She'd been told her legs would be broken if she escaped again, but Herron hadn't been around the second time, and no one had had the nerve to do it, in case Herron had changed his mind.

He'd told the general in charge of the fortress she was being kept as an alliance-maker-in-waiting. To be married off to someone useful to the kingdom.

Herron even had a list of husbands under consideration.

The guards had decided some of them might object to a crippled bride and wouldn't take the risk of being blamed later.

Of course, that wasn't why she was locked up. Herron would never risk letting her free.

If she wouldn't help him—and she wouldn't—he couldn't allow her to go free to help anyone else.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

Which meant she had to die.

She had no worries about being given in marriage in some grubby exchange for military support or trade routes.

Herron was sure she'd turn whoever her husband was against him and her aunt within weeks.

And he wasn't wrong.

In front of her, Luc slowed, and she noticed he was limping. She worried that he was flagging.

His feet were bare, and he stooped slightly in the chill air.

When she'd rescued him from the question room, she'd noticed his back was mottled with bruises and cuts, on skin that was latticed with long-healed scars.

It was impossible to see his injuries in the darkness now, but he was moving carefully, and his breath came in shallow inhalations.

He made a sudden sound, a shocked grunt, and she tensed as she came alongside him.

They had reached an archway.

It had no doors—it opened into another space that was bigger than the passageway they stood in.

There was a small amount of gloomy light filtering into the space, coming from a tiny window set high in the wall and overgrown, it looked like, by vines.

It took Ava a moment to find what Luc had obviously seen straight away.

A body.

Or rather, skeletal remains.

They lay on a stone bench which had a pallet on top, wrapped in clothing that was rotting in the damp, musty air. A long, thick chain attached to the wall beside the bench spilled onto the floor, and then back up to end in a bracelet around the skeleton's ankle.

Luc approached carefully, his gaze taking in the whole room.

He had exceptional eyesight she realized as he avoided a small table she hadn't seen herself. He moved as if he were aware of the location of everything in his environment.

“A woman,” he said, looking back at her.

She followed him slowly, careful not to touch anything as she made her way to his side and looked down at the almost clean bones.

She didn't realize she'd stopped breathing until he shook her, his voice soft but clear in her ear as he held her waist, forcing her head down toward her knees.

“You know her.” He crooned the words to her, as if she were a crying baby, and the way he did it told her he had done so a thousand times before.

Comforted babies.

Most likely, there were a lot of crying babies and children in Chosen camps.

She gasped in some air at last, and coughed, turning away from the sight.

“I think that is my mother.”

There was a long silence, and at last she turned back, saw his eyes had never left her. Shock was in his expression.

“You think, but you're not sure?”

She nodded, and finally steeled herself to approach the body again. “While I was imprisoned here, I was told both my parents had been killed crossing the mountains. But the cloak is familiar. Although . . .” It had originally been covered in black silk embroidery. She bent closer in the dim green light and saw where the thread had been unpicked from the complex design. There didn't appear to be a single stitch left.

“It is just the cloak that's familiar?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

She forced herself to look more carefully. The shoes . . . the shoes were her mother's favorite. Warm slippers for inside. She remembered those shoes, and the light blue stone ring on her mother's finger was where it had always been.

The skull still had hair attached, and it was the same golden brown hue as her own, though streaked through with white.

She thought . . . She thought they had died coming to save her. Herron would taunt her with that. Say they had tried but failed. That all hope was lost.

And all that time, had her mother been here?

The rage that rose up in her was so hot, so very white hot, that she had to close her eyes and swallow before she could speak again.

“Can you see how she died?” She looked over at Luc, but he was still watching her, not looking at her mother's remains.

She wondered what he had seen on her face.

He turned slowly from her at last to look, shook his head. “If she was murdered, the evidence is long gone. She may have died of illness, she wasn't necessarily killed.”

“If she died down here without help, I would still consider it murder.” She could not say more. Her throat closed up.

Ava had been here for nearly two years, and her mother had been down here from

perhaps a few months after that. She had been told her parents had been captured and killed by bandits while crossing the mountains into Kassia, but perhaps her father had been killed, and Herron had her mother brought here.

The single biggest fear her mother had had her whole life, for Ava and herself, had come true. They had both been captured and imprisoned for their talents.

Her mother had been dead for a while. Ava didn't know how long it would take a body to look like her mother's did, but the fact remained she had been alive and right here while Ava was imprisoned above.

And then, she suddenly knew . . .

She felt Luc's hands grab her as her legs gave way beneath her.

This was why Herron stopped trying to get her to embroider for him. She had thought she had managed to outwit him. Instead, her mother had been down here, picking the threads from her cloak to embroider items for Herron in her place.

Perhaps with a threat to Ava's life as the incentive.

And when her mother had died, that's when the orders for Ava to sew for him had come again. And when it became clear she would never bend, the harsher treatment, the edging to murder, had begun.

"I'm all right." She was still held up by Luc, his strength seemingly endless, and she struggled to get her feet back under her. "We need to go."

They really did need to go, and yet he looked back at her calmly. "Is there something of your mother's that you want to take with you?"

She felt a sudden rush of tears at his thoughtful question. “This cloak was a gift from my grandmother to my mother.” She stared down at the clasp resting on her mother's breastbone. “But I will not disturb her body.”

Instead, she crouched beside the bench and carefully removed the ring from her mother's finger. It was the only piece of jewelry she could see.

“Now we need to go.” Luc's attention was focused down the passage.

“You can hear something?”

He nodded, and she followed him out of the room, glancing back one last time to imprint the horror of it on her memory. The chain on the wall, the unpicked cloak.

The body, lying discarded and forgotten.

But not by her. She would not forget.

Chapter 4

They were at a dead end.

It had always been a possibility, but Luc knew they had nothing to lose trying their luck.

There was only one more chamber down from where Ava's mother's body lay, a storeroom with boxes and barrels rotting in the shadows, and a dust-covered table where it looked like someone had once sat pouring over ledgers and papers, a plate and cup visible amongst the clutter.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

The window in here was the same as the one in the other chamber, high and small, with bars across it.

The voices Luc had heard as merely a rumble of sound earlier were more distinct now.

Galvanized, he lifted the lid of a worm-ridden wooden crate, and it crumbled to pieces in his hands.

Inside was a collection of knives, and with a smile that bloomed all the way through him, warming him like a fire on a cold night, he pulled out one, handed it to Ava, and then stuck two in his belt.

Ava moved to another box of a similar size, but he ignored the square ones, looking for something longer. Narrower.

When he found one, he had to pry the lid with stiff fingers, and couldn't help the snap of sound the wood made as it gave.

Ava froze, and they both turned to look beyond the door.

The voices went silent.

Ah, well. They would have come this way, noise or no noise.

They had lost the element of surprise, but he didn't know how much that counted for, as the guards would have been expecting him to be down here anyway.

He looked into the box, caught the gleam of gold and metal, and lifted the sword out without even looking at it properly. He strode to the wall beside the chamber's entrance, and flicked his fingers at Ava to take the other side.

She complied, her face serious, the knife held in her hand in a way that told him she knew what she was doing with it.

Interesting.

She moved well. He'd noticed that from the first.

It was possible she had been trained, and if she had, that would only help them.

He lifted the sword up and to the left, liking the balance and weight of it, his focus on the sound of footsteps.

The voices had started up again.

“ . . . sounded like bones snapping.”

“You think something down here is eating our savage?” The answering voice was jeering. “Some monster? Or maybe it’s the ghost Banyon goes on about?”

“Shut up and get moving,” a third voice said, and Luc recognized it as Garmand's. “As it is, the general is disobeying the Herald, sending us down here.”

There was sudden silence.

They had just found the chamber with Ava's mother, Luc guessed. And it was interesting that they were surprised by it.

“Rudig,” someone whispered. “The Herald had him coming down here every day. When he died . . .”

“Fuck me.” Garmand's voice was just as low. “She starved to death because no one knew she was here.”

Luc's gaze flicked to Ava, but her full attention was on the conversation happening just one chamber down. Her face was agony to look at.

Her hands were clasped together, and then she slowly lifted a piece of fabric out of her pocket that looked like the sheeting she'd used to bandage his wounds. Her fingers burrowed under the rag over her hair and she yanked, pulling out a needle already threaded with a strand of cotton and began to sew in quick, sure movements.

He frowned, because she had slipped the knife he'd given her into a pocket to free up her hands.

Sewing was not going to help them.

He didn't understand what she was doing, but then he shrugged. He hadn't expected her to know how to fight anyway.

He'd told her she would do well to bring him with her on her escape because he had a good sword arm.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

She had upheld her part of the bargain. He would be happy to do the same.

“Where does this lead?” one of the guards asked, and Luc guessed they were talking about the arch into the storage room.

“I don't know.” Garmand's answer was tight and sharp. “This whole place is out of bounds. By order of the Herald.”

“You're saying the general has never come down here himself? Or sent someone else?” The third person scoffed.

“As far as I'm aware.” There was something considering in Garmand's voice.

Footsteps approached, then came to a stop just under the archway.

He waited, hoping they would walk inside a little way and give him their backs. Before they could do that, though, Ava suddenly stepped out, eliciting a gasp of surprise from one of the guards.

It wasn't what he would have chosen, but a distraction wasn't a bad thing.

“That is my mother,” she said, pointing, and one of the guards shuffled back a step. “She was here almost the whole time I was imprisoned upstairs. Can you believe that?” Her voice was high and thin, the most discomposed Luc had heard her.

He could not blame her for it.

“What is that in your hand?” Garmand sounded nervous, and Luc frowned in confusion. Because clearly what was in her hand was a strip of sheet.

He couldn't see what she'd stitched into it. The thread was the same color as the fabric itself.

She looked down at it, and then, just briefly—a mere flick of her gaze—at Luc, before she raised her head again. “Your death.”

Her voice was no longer so thin, and there was a calm to it, but at face value, she had lost her mind.

It was nothing but a piece of cotton.

“We had nothing to do with your mother's death. We didn't even know she was here.” Garmand sounded afraid. As if she might actually be holding his death in her hand.

“You support the Herald. You kept me prisoner. You are here, and the Herald is not.” She said it simply, and then stepped forward.

Luc moved then, because he assumed the guards would take the opportunity to grab her, but as he stepped beside her, sword raised high, the guards were not where he thought they would be.

They were retreating.

The guard closest to Ava paused at the sight of him, gaze flickering up to meet his, and in that tick of the clock, Ava darted forward and shoved her little scrap of fabric down the front of his jacket.

He looked at her in horror, and began scrabbling at his clothes, eyes wide in panic,

and then he went still, turning his head toward his fellow guards, as if Ava and Luc weren't standing right in front of him.

“What have you done to him?” Garmand hissed, his gaze fixed on Ava.

“Now you believe the stories the Herald tells about me?” Ava laughed at him, and Luc wondered if she understood their situation. If any of them did.

He was standing right here, sword raised, and they were having a conversation. Ignoring him.

The most dangerous person in the room.

He shook his head and swung at the nearest guard, catching him in the shoulder. Beside him, he thought he heard Ava gasp.

The guard cried out in pain, sword clattering to the ground, and Luc shoved one of the knives into his heart as he pushed him out of the way. He cut the neck of the guard beyond, and then brought it up again to engage Garmand.

At last the guard was focused on him. Almost shocked to see him.

Garmand was much better at swordwork than the other two, and Luc was not at his best. His ribs were on fire, but his arm was strong enough, and there seemed to be a warmth emanating from the cut on his forearm which Ava had sewn for him.

In a sudden flight of fancy, he imagined the warmth as extra strength and accuracy, helping guide his arm as he fought, and once it was in his head, he couldn't shake it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:49 am

He gasped with pain as he ducked down to avoid Garmand's swing, his ribs lighting up in agony, but it was worth it to set up the counter swing, coming up from below. He felt the sword bite through the thick fabric of Garmand's tunic, into the flesh and muscle of his side, and then he was standing over Garmand's body, breath sawing in and out of his lungs.

Garmand stared up at him from the ground, eyes dulling.

Ava came to stand beside him.

“They thought they were clever. That he would . . .” Garmand coughed. “Kill. You.”

Ava said nothing.

“Why would I kill her?” Luc had wondered at this logic from the start.

“They think everyone is like them,” Ava said.

“Dangerous . . .” Garmand's eyelids flickered and then he stopped talking.

“Let's take their cloaks, use them to slip out of the castle.” Ava turned to the first guard Luc had killed. She crouched beside him, unpinning his cloak, and delving into his tunic to retrieve her scrap of fabric.

Instead of pocketing it, as he thought she would, she moved to the burning torch one of the guards had slid into a bracket on the wall.

She hesitated a moment, looking back at the guard. "I'm so tempted to leave it, but my grandmother always said we should be careful to never leave deliberate traps, lest they come to haunt our dreams." She dropped the fabric into the flame and then pulled the cloak around herself.

Luc stared at the sudden flare of light as the fabric caught in the fire and then rolled Garmand to the side to get his cloak off him.

"What was that all about?" he asked as he pinned it at his throat and then chose the middle guard for his boots, as they looked like the most likely to fit him. "Why are they scared of you?"

She was straightening her disguise and her lips twisted in a wry smile. "The Herald told them stories about me. To keep them from befriending me." She lifted the hood of the cloak and looked down at the three bodies on the ground. "That didn't go as I thought it would, but the result is the same. We are alive, and they are dead."

When her gaze lifted and rested on him, he felt the weight of it. He was being evaluated afresh.

"You didn't behave as I thought." Her voice was a low murmur. "But that is neither of our faults. We don't know each other well, and have never fought together before." She inclined her head as if absolving him of something. "And you don't know my training or my skills." She shrugged. "We will do better next time."

Better?

Luc stared around the room. As she said, they were alive, the enemy was dead.

That's as good as it got.

She turned and started walking back down the passage, and he noticed a slight hitch in her step as she passed her mother's chamber.

“The general ordered them down here, so there will be others coming to check on them when they don't report back.”

She was right, and he set after her at a fast clip, leaving the dead behind him.

Chapter 5

It was the perfect time to escape.

Dusk had settled over the fortress in all its dark blue-and-gray shadowed glory, with the bright pink and orange of the sunset high in the sky an extra distraction.

Ava led the way, although it had been some time since she had been allowed through the halls and passageways of the building. Those occasions had been early on in her incarceration, when Herron had wanted her brought to him while he sat in pomp and circumstance, to show all around him, but especially her, that he was the one in charge.

Being dragged down the stairs into Herron's presence had stopped abruptly after six months, and she had always wondered if word had gotten out about her presence here—rumors or gossip—because of the many eyes on her in those audiences with the Herald.

Now she wondered if it was because her mother was being held below, and he didn't need to intimidate her anymore.

Whatever the reason, she remembered most of the twists and turns.

The time of day meant most people were either preparing for the evening meal or ending their work, and she and Luc were able to slip through the jostle of people moving in and out of the many entrances.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

She had lifted the hood of the cloak and kept her head down. If anyone looked closer, she hoped the short, cropped style of her hair would look similar to some of the younger recruits who were shaved completely when they were inducted, to prevent the spread of lice.

Luc was a silent shadow at her heels.

She didn't know how someone so big could be so silent, and she thought of her careful plans, ruined by him earlier, and almost shook her head.

She hoped the guard she'd spelled was about to turn on his own friends. If it had worked, Luc could have easily mopped up the leftovers, but instead he'd struck the weapon she'd created down first, rendering him useless.

Her mother had always insisted that only black silk could be used, but she had used her own hair when Herron had taken her thread away, and it had worked fine. So well, he kept her hair shaved ever since.

If Luc had waited just another moment, she would have known if the plain cotton she'd used on the guard had worked, too.

She forced herself to relax and unclench her jaw.

It had ended well, and unless she planned to tell him what she had done, she should be grateful they'd escaped without her having to explain anything away.

She might still have to explain the wound she had stitched. But maybe not.

He might not notice the improvements.

She didn't have enough experience to know if the results of her needlework faded over time. She had always assumed they did, but everything she'd ever created had been taken from her or destroyed, so she had no way of knowing.

Her grandmother's things had lasted a very long time, but as she'd seen with the unpicked cloak wrapped around her mother's body, even that could be undone.

And her mother . . . her mother had had a fear of her own power and strength and had tried to chain Ava's as well. She had never worked anything unless there was no other choice.

It had taken Ava years to work out her mother had been kidnapped when she was young. Ava's grandfather had rescued her before her captors had reached their destination, but it had made her mother cautious beyond normal bounds. Whatever had happened to her on the road had had a profound effect on her.

Even as a child, Ava had understood her mother balanced on the knife-edge of fear, lifting and setting down needlework over and over, without making a single stitch.

Her father's response had been to soothe his wife, and order the servants to pack her sewing away.

To Ava, he told her to learn what she could without her mother, and out of her mother's sight. There would always be those who would try to use her, and the more she understood about herself, the less they could.

Her grandmother had begged Ava's mother to allow her to show Ava what she could do, but her mother had been too afraid for Ava to accept.

Ava had heard many arguments about it, but in the end, her grandmother had loved her daughter too much to go against her wishes and risk alienating her.

Ava recalled the happy times spent on her grandparents' estate were marred only by the look of agony in her grandmother's eyes when she had taken up her sewing in the evening and sent Ava to bed.

“Stables.” Luc's voice, low and rumbling, lifted her out of her musings with a jerk.

The stables must be ahead of them, she could smell them.

“You want to steal a horse?” she asked.

“Two horses, unless you can't ride?” His breath was warm against her cheek.

“It has been a long time since I sat on a horse, but I can ride.”

“Good.”

“How are we going to leave with two of their horses?” Now they were in the open air, she most definitely didn't want to go back. And they were very far from home free.

“I'll think of something, and if it's not going to work, we'll leave the horses and walk out,” he promised, and took the lead for the first time.

She relinquished control to him for now, as she was no more familiar than he was about this part of the fortress.

The weather was cool enough outside that it didn't look strange that the hoods of their cloaks were lifted. It made her feel less exposed.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

She followed him to a long, low building that was well maintained and busy. Guards rode up in groups of two or three and swung down from steaming mounts, giving them to grooms to lead away.

A group of soldiers stood together, laughing and calling to the guards coming in, exchanging information and details of their patrols.

Luc was probably fighting a smile of satisfaction at the wealth of information swirling around them, light and easy as the evening breeze.

He was too big to miss, and she had worried he would stand out, but he moved with such confidence, even with his cloak wrapped close around him to hide the fact that he had no shirt. His stride was sure, even though she knew his stolen boots were too small. No one gave him more than a glance as he disappeared into the gloom of the stables.

She was just behind him, but as she reached the wide double doors she saw Juni, blocking their way.

His gaze was fixed on Luc, his mouth open to form his first shout.

Her heart gave a hard, painful thump in her chest, but she didn't hesitate. She pushed in front of Luc, felt the warmth of him as he crowded right up against her.

She held Juni's gaze, lifted her hand, and mimed turning a key.

Juni stared at her hand, and his mouth shut with a snap. He wanted to sound the

alarm, but he lived in a brutal system that punished people harshly for no logical reason at all, let alone when punishment was actually warranted. He needed a reminder that he'd been where he wasn't supposed to be.

That he would be safer—personally safer—if he hadn't seen them escape after being down in the dungeons without permission.

He skirted around them, stepping out into the courtyard, and she heard him hail someone, his voice only a little infirm.

Behind her, Luc turned, keeping Juni in view, and then his hands came up onto her shoulders.

“Good job.” Luc's head dipped so his mouth was almost touching her ear. “I thought he was going to start screaming.”

“He may still,” she murmured. “If he has time to think about it.”

“Stand against the wall, keep to the shadows,” Luc told her, and then disappeared amongst the confusion of the horses being led in and out, the shouts of the stable hands.

When he returned, he was leading a horse that was saddled and rolling its eyes as it pranced sideways.

She fell into step with him as the last call of the day went up, the final warning for those not staying in the fortress overnight to leave.

Luc didn't mount up—even he must know his size on top of a horse would draw the eye—so Ava kept close to his side as they joined the flow of people streaming out of the gates.

It was easy enough to let the crowd sweep them under the arch of the drawbridge and onto the muddy road to freedom.

As soon as they were far enough from the gate that the torchlight no longer touched them, Luc led them off the road and into the shielding wall of trees.

Ava drew in her first full breath in a while, realizing she hadn't taken one until now. She tucked her cloak closer around her, her nose wrinkling at the smell of it. "They'll find we're missing any moment now."

"Agreed." Luc swung up onto the horse, held his hand out for her.

She looked at the saddle dubiously, but took his hand, let him pull her up so she was behind him.

The horse shifted uncomfortably beneath them, and she felt sorry for it.

It was in for a hard run with two riders.

Without another word, Luc urged it on.

She had to bite her lip to stop from shouting as they surged forward, as the trees flashed past them.

She was free at last.

Chapter 6

The chase began far sooner than Luc had hoped.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

Perhaps Juni hadn't been able to help himself. He'd struck Luc as a man who had to be at the center of things, so he may have made an excuse to check on the prisoners so that he could sound the alarm.

Whatever the reason, the dogs baying in the distance gave Luc fair warning.

At his back, Ava stirred, straightening up and lifting away from him, making him suddenly aware of how close she had been pressed against him before.

“Hounds?” she asked, her voice fuzzy with sleep.

“Hounds and men.” They would be hunted like deer.

She gave a groan, so exasperated, he couldn't keep his lips from twitching.

Then she swore. “My head rag is gone. It must have fallen out of my pocket. Can I have one of your bindings?” She rested her chin on his shoulder. “Just a small scrap would be fine.” Her hands were loosely clasped about his waist, and she lifted them to smooth down one of his arms.

Her touch was gentle, trying not to hurt him, and it sent a wave of goosebumps over his skin. He had to suppress a shiver of reaction, holding still as she unwound one of the blood-stained bandages.

“You think dropping it will slow the hounds?” It wasn't a bad idea.

“Yes, but I need to do something to it first.” Her hands left him altogether, and she

seemed to lean back, working on something.

“Should I stop the horse?”

“No. We don't have time. I'm nearly done.” The last word was said as if she spoke with something held between her lips, and then she tossed the bandage down on the ground.

“It might delay the dogs for a few minutes while they stop to sniff it. But not long enough.” After all, it would just confirm to the hunters they were on the right track.

“A short while is better than nothing.”

He couldn't argue with that, and he urged the horse faster, aware it was beginning to lag, and, he was afraid, to limp.

Less than half an hour later, it began to walk, and then stopped altogether.

He wanted to rage, but instead he sighed and slid off.

Ava stared down at him—her expression hard to read.

“I don't know if I can get down,” she said at last.

He caught her as she toppled off.

She felt light in his arms, warm and delicate, and an urge to bury his head in her hair and hold her close swept over him, so strong he almost gasped before he released her, flexing his hands in shock.

Unaware of his struggle, she turned and leaned against the horse, sliding a hand down

its flanks. “Sorry, sorry,” she murmured to it. “You got a raw deal with us.”

She tried to straighten, staggered a little, and he moved her aside to unclip the horse's reins and let it move as it wished.

They would have to leave it here, and hope it found its way back to the fortress.

When he turned, he found Ava was still standing where he'd left her, swaying slightly.

“They're coming.” Her voice was a little raw.

“Yes, but the horse can't go any more.”

She nodded, then sank to the ground, head bowed. “Just need a moment,” she whispered.

The dogs bayed in the distance, and he scooped her up as he tried to work out the lay of the land.

The ground was undulating, gentle rises and falls, covered in a thick forest. There was plenty of cover, but the dogs would find them.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

Feeling helpless, he walked to the largest tree he could find, leaning against the trunk.

They could hide, but it would do no good.

And they couldn't outrun dogs and horses. Not in their current condition.

Ava rubbed her cheek against his shoulder as he sat down and settled her across his lap, and then crinkled her nose.

“They smell, don't they?” she muttered as he pulled her close and tucked his cloak around them both.

“What?” His voice cracked. He would fight when they came, but he needed a moment to rest. Just to sit quietly with Ava in his arms for a little while.

“The cloaks. They stink. I wish we didn't need them.”

He hadn't noticed. He had lived in places where it was a benefit not to notice these things.

Ava's breathing changed, deepened, and he realized she had fallen asleep, a hand resting limp against his bare chest under his cloak.

He didn't move, not wanting to disturb her until he had to.

He leaned back and listened to the barking dogs and then, as they came closer, the thudding hooves of the horses, the shouts of the men.

He knew the moment they'd found the horse.

“Fuck.”

“I told you.” The voice sounded aggrieved. “My dogs never steer me wrong.”

“The hoof marks clearly led in this direction.” Someone sounded defensive now.

“But they weren't on the horse, were they? The dogs said they went east thirty minutes back.”

There was silence.

“It seems your dogs may have been right, but it was necessary to check, anyway.” The voice speaking now had to be the general, Luc thought.

No one had anything else to say once he'd spoken.

“Well, let's give the dogs the lead.” It was an order, not a suggestion, and the whole stampede of them moved away, the sound fading into the distance.

The dogs must have tried to go east when they found the bandage.

Luc couldn't understand why, couldn't understand how, but they were safe.

Ava had slept through the whole thing, turned into him, as if she couldn't get close enough.

He was a warrior raised in a Chosen camp—he could sleep anywhere, anytime. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth and weight of her against him.

The absolute silence that had fallen at the arrival of the dogs and men slowly faded, and the rustles and noise of the forest resumed.

For the moment, they were safe.

* * *

Her working had. . . well, worked.

Ava smiled against Luc's chest as she remembered her grandmother telling her once the point of a working was for it to work, so to be sure her intention was carefully and thoughtfully done. It was not in the spirit of her agreement with Ava's mother, but no actual sewing had been done.

She hadn't had the time or the conditions for something elegant, but the few stitches she'd embroidered into the blood-soaked bandage must have been enough.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

She wondered if the blood had helped. Strengthened the suggestion to the hounds that the way they needed to go was to the east.

Or perhaps the strength of the blood was merely its effect on her. It had made her determined no more of that blood should be spilled.

She would have to experiment and see which it was.

And now she was free, she could do so.

She wanted to be as powerful as she could be when she found Herron and finished him.

He had left her mother to starve to death, had taken her father's life. Kept Ava herself a prisoner for years.

There was a reckoning to be had.

Luc woke with a start, almost tipping her from his lap, and then tightening his arms around her in reaction.

“They passed us by.” Ava looked up at him, and he gave a slow nod.

“The hounds were pulling them east, and when they found the horse, they thought we'd tried to trick them by sending it ahead without us.”

She smiled up at him, and he smiled back, and something in the way he did it made

her think he smiled often.

She hoped there would come a time when she could do the same.

“So what's next?” She didn't try to move out of his arms. She was warm and comfortable.

He had to be less so, he was up against a tree, with the weight of her across his legs, but as he hadn't indicated he wanted her off him, she was happy to stay where she was.

“The Rising Wave will be on the eastern plains, and that's the general direction the general and his men have gone, so we need to head northeast for now, until we can turn south and join them.”

“What is the Rising Wave?” she asked.

He frowned down at her.

“I was a prisoner in the fortress for nearly two years,” she reminded him. “And no one told me anything. The queen herself could be dead, for all I know.”

“The queen isn't dead.” Luc's forehead smoothed. “The Rising Wave is the rebel army.”

“Do you think they'll have given up hope you're alive?” She worried her lip. “They might have fallen into disarray and gone their separate ways.”

He stared at her. “Why would they fall into disarray without me?”

She tried a small smile on him. “Because you are the person the Herald calls the

Turncoat King?”

He sucked in a breath. “I told you I was not.”

She pressed her lips together. Settled in to get a bit more comfortable. “I know, but I didn't believe you.”

He closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the bark of the trunk. “They won't have fallen into disarray. There are strong leaders in command of the battalions, and they'll keep things together.” He looked down at her, and she felt ensnared in his gaze.

Her lips parted, and she felt a fizzing in her blood.

She lay against the bare skin of his chest, the heat of him warming her hands, her cheek.

Something hard pressed against her thigh, and she sucked in a breath as she realized what it was.

The heat in her blood pooled between her legs, and she ran her hand up his chest to his neck, curved her hand around his nape and pulled him closer.

He hesitated a moment, then cradled the back of her head with a hand and kissed her, his other hand sliding up to cup her breast.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

It was as if he had lit a fire inside her.

She couldn't get enough of him, and thank the heavens, he acted as if he couldn't get enough of her, lifting her tunic so they were skin to skin.

He devoured her mouth and slid a finger into the band of her pants, and she gasped in shock and delight as he rubbed her just where her body was insisting it needed attention.

“I have never been . . .” She shuddered, pressed closer to increase the sensation. “Don't stop.”

He bent his head, latched on to the tip of her breast and she made a sound at the back of her throat as she arched to give him better access.

She fumbled with her hand, wrapped it around the hard length of him, and it was his turn to groan.

Suddenly a feeling washed over her, shaking her to her core as she shuddered, blind and deaf for a moment, before she collapsed, panting against his shoulder.

“More,” she said, and then bit down on the tendon between his shoulder and neck.

He lifted her, stripping her trousers, and fumbling with his own.

“You said you have never—” He groaned as she aligned her center against the tip of his cock, and rubbed.

“Never felt so much.” She was ablaze for him, desperate, and overjoyed when his hands shook as he gripped her hips and lifted her up and then down on him.

It was a tight fit, and she wriggled and rocked herself down his length, delighting in the effect it had on him, until suddenly she was firmly seated, flush against him, and she shuddered at the feel of it.

She leaned forward, lips against his ear. “More.”

The muscles in his arms bunched. And he gave her more.

She didn't know how much later it was that he finally lifted her off his lap.

She drew on her trousers, sated and energized. She gave him a wide smile as she flopped back down beside him.

He lifted a hand and touched the short ends of her hair. “Why did they do this?”

“To punish me.” That was the truth, but she knew she was holding back enough that it was almost a lie.

That didn't sit well, now that she had felt him inside her.

“You said you heard something you weren't meant to. What was it that you were sent there for so long?”

She let her lips twist. “I heard the Herald conspiring against the queen.”

His shock at her answer was immediate. “How were you in a position to do that?”

She hunched over her knees, looking down as she plucked at blades of grass. “My

parents were trade envoys from Grimwalt, visiting the queen at Fernwell. I was with them.” Except they were more than trade envoys. So much more. But perhaps it wasn't wise to tell the Turncoat King you were niece to the queen.

“Surely Grimwalt has protested—” Understanding lit his eyes. “That is why they've closed their border. In protest.”

She nodded. “I didn't know they had until you told me. And most likely it was more to do with the death of my parents than my disappearance. No one knew what became of me. I smuggled out a message, but I thought it had never made it to my parents. Now I know it did, and coming to rescue me is why they died.”

She looked up, caught his gaze.

“Whoever killed them—the Herald or his people—is why they died. What parent wouldn't try to rescue their child?” The words were spoken with a deep layer of empathy.

She wondered who had tried to rescue him and died trying.

Remembered he'd been in a Chosen camp.

What parent wouldn't have tried to rescue their child from one of those?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

She shivered and looked up at the early morning sunlight. “We need to go.”

He nodded, rose up and held out a hand to her.

When he pulled her to her feet, he tugged her into his arms and bent his head, burying his face in her hair and inhaling her scent.

She tightened her grip on him, and then remembered his ribs.

“Your injuries.” She fought to get out from his embrace, her gaze darting to the bruising on his torso.

“My ribs were bruised, not cracked. There was only pleasure, no pain.” He held her gaze, and while she didn't believe him, he seemed no worse for it.

She sighed. “And your wounds from before? We should change the dressings and wash them, but we don't have bandages or clean water.”

In fact, they would have to find water soon. She was so thirsty, her lips were dry and she could feel the dull throb of a headache.

“We'll find a stream. We can look at the cuts, rinse the bandages.” He started walking. “But they feel fine. Better than I would have thought.”

It pleased her to think that perhaps the working she had done on the deep cut she had sewn had spread to the others, but she doubted it had.

He was healthy and strong. And there was something other about him. A speed and coordination she thought was a kind of magic in itself.

She had been starved of companionship and human touch for two years, and now she had both, in the form of an extraordinary man.

It would be very hard to leave him.

But leave him she must.

Chapter 7

“What do you mean you can't go with me?” Luc was crouched in the stream, naked in water that came up to his neck.

Ava was equally naked, using the fine sand on the river bottom to scrub at her skin and get rid of weeks of grime, while Luc was simply waiting for the water to soften his bandages so they could peel them away.

The sky above was a deep blue, the water cool, the grass that edged the stream a vibrant green, and Luc's dark hair and light blue eyes were vivid against the warm gold of his skin.

A feel of being bombarded by sensations swept over her. She had had nothing but four stone walls for so long, and the colors, the sounds, the scents in the air, suddenly overwhelmed her.

She held out a hand to stop him saying anymore, closed her eyes and breathed.

“You're all right.” He was suddenly beside her, his arms around her and she pressed into him, letting the pull of the current, the feel of his water-beaded skin, calm her.

“I couldn't take the colors anymore,” she whispered.

“I know.”

She understood that he did know. Had probably struggled with this himself.

“I want to come with you,” she told him, eyes still closed, letting his strength hold her suspended in the water. “But I have to find my grandmother.” And then kill the Herald.

He was still, and when she opened her eyes, his gaze was on her face, serious and thoughtful. “You could send her a message.”

She shook her head. “I don't trust a message. And I want to see her with my own eyes.”

“As soon as I join with the Wave, we are going to have to start moving toward Fernwell. My capture would have already delayed us two weeks by the time I get back, and all the tribes and groups I've managed to collect together since we first turned on Kassia will lose some conviction if we don't progress. I won't be able to wait for you.”

She'd guessed that. And in a way, it was better. She was not simply going to find her grandmother. She planned to hunt the Herald down and kill him, and that could take months. Luc and his army would not have that kind of time. Not with the season already changing, the leaves beginning to turn.

“I will come find you, as soon as I can.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

He frowned. Opened his mouth to speak, and before he could say something that would force her to lie, she noticed a bandage had lifted off his arm, and she caught it as it floated past.

“Look.” She lifted his arm and felt a well of pride at how beautifully the stitching had held. “We need to cut the stitches out before the skin grows over them.”

“That's . . . incredible.” He lifted his arm up, flexed his hand. “It felt healed to me, but the stitches are almost the only way to tell where the cut was.”

He unwrapped the other bandages, and she caught them as they began to float away.

When she looked up, he was staring at her, suspicion lurking in his expression.

“How is this possible?” He showed her his arms, then rose up out of the water, bringing her with him by hooking his hands under her armpits. Then he stepped back to look at the cuts in his side.

She turned and lunged for another bandage as the river caught it, and then briefly fought him when he held her back from going after it.

“Answer the question, Ava.”

She couldn't keep from watching the strip of fabric ripple in the water and then disappear below the surface. She had had so much taken away, she needed every scrap she could find, even if it was bloody bandages made from old sheets.

Realizing how mad that made her sound, she finally straightened and looked up at Luc. It was drummed into her, over and over. Never confess what you can do, or you'll never be safe. It hadn't mattered. Herron had known—somehow, he'd known. He'd hinted her father had told him, but she would never believe that.

Perhaps Herron had set spies to eavesdrop on her parents. That made sense to her.

But now she had to refuse to answer, or reveal herself, and she didn't know what to do.

With a cry of exasperation, she spun away from him, jumping onto the bank to pull on her clothes.

When she turned back, he stood in the same place, waist deep in water, so beautiful, each muscle was defined.

She stared at him for a long moment, noting the long-faded scars on his chest and arms.

“I—”

The baying of dogs cut her off, and with a gasp, she angled south, shielding her eyes against the sun to try and see what was coming.

Luc gave a vicious curse, hauling himself up onto the bank to pull on his pants and wrap his cloak around him. He had gotten rid of the too-small boots long ago.

“You go east,” Ava said to him. “I can confuse the dogs.”

“I'm not leaving you.” He flicked an astonished look at her as he buckled the scabbard he'd taken from Garmand around his waist, slid out the sword. “They're

close.” He sounded calm.

He turned slowly, taking in the wood behind them, the open field in front. “You hide there.” He pointed to a thicket of bushes a little way down the stream.

Ava could hear the thunder of hooves already. Any moment now, the horses and riders would appear from the valley below.

“Now, Ava. Go. Before they see you.”

She let out a small scream of frustration. “If they capture you again—”

“It's the best plan we have, but that's if you listen to me.” He shoved her into the river and she fell with a splash, spluttered, and then dived under, swimming to the small stand of brush where he wanted her to hide.

When she surfaced and pulled herself, dripping, amongst the gnarled, entwined trunks, he was gone.

She set to work immediately. She still had all the bandages but one, and there was a long strand of thread she'd seen on one of the raw edges. She tugged it loose, threaded her needle, and then centered herself.

Thought of the dogs.

They would be punished if they steered the general wrong again, so while she wanted them to run away, she didn't want them running home.

They would be hunted if they formed a roaming pack, and that wasn't fair to them, anyway. They were used to people.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

So she thought of them running through the forest, past Luc, to wait for her on the other side.

She could take them with her to Grimwalt, find a home for them there.

She made the few stitches, a stylized tree, a dog. She used three of the bandages, her hands shaking in her effort to be quick and still have a usable working. Then she slid back into the water, threw the bandages onto the far bank, and then swam back to her hiding place.

The dogs didn't sound as vicious, as loud, this time, and she guessed they still wanted to go east, had been forced to change route.

She heard the sound of them running and panting, and then the call as they found the bandages.

“There he is!”

The voice that called out made her hunch down a little more.

Juni.

How had he spotted Luc?

Unless . . . she had to fight the fear that washed over her.

He had shown himself. To draw them into the forest. Away from her.

She closed her eyes, listening to the dogs as they milled around the bandages.

“What the—?”

The dogs started running, this time without a sound.

She heard them splash through the river, into the forest.

“They've caught his scent, looks like.” The man who spoke sounded pleased.

“So it appears.”

If Juni's voice had sent a shiver through her, the sound of the general himself was enough to make her hold her breath, so she didn't make a single sound.

The only way to win this was not to get caught.

Chapter 8

Luc pressed back against the rough bark and waited, sword raised, for the hounds to find him.

They had stopped barking, but he could hear their panting breath and the sound of their feet running through dried leaves, coming toward him. Then suddenly, they were running past, more like a coordinated pack than the usual haphazard mix of dogs from a hunting kennel.

They were focused and silent, and none of them—not one—so much as looked his way as they loped into the dark green gloom of the forest and disappeared.

“He can't have run so far already.” The man who spoke was close, close enough that

Luc shrugged off the dogs' strange behavior, and prepared for combat.

“He must have. Did you see them go? They had the scent.”

“They haven't steered us right yet. Why would they start now?” the soldier muttered under his breath, and walked past Luc, eyes on the ground, looking for tracks.

He must have caught sight of Luc from the corner of his eye because he stumbled to a stop, turned, mouth agape, and then gave a shout.

With a roar, Luc swung at him, cutting him down, then turned, blood arcing from his blade as he brought it round to take on the next one, and then stopped dead.

Staggered back.

He looked down, found the arrow sticking out of his bare chest.

And collapsed.

“Don't kill him.” The general's call came from behind the men that were suddenly crowded around him. “We need to find out where Ava's gone first.”

Luc closed his eyes and pretended to slip into unconsciousness.

It was a trick they all learned in the Chosen camps.

Sometimes, there was no winning. The best you could do was pretend to be at the end of your endurance, and sometimes you got a reprieve.

Nothing good would come of being questioned about Ava's whereabouts.

He wasn't going to tell them, and they weren't going to stop.

Better to buy a little time.

Hands grabbed him, lifted him, and he kept limp and silent. He thought he'd feel worse, but it wasn't that bad.

The arrow had pierced his skin and hit bone—he guessed his sternum. A lucky escape.

“Do we pull it out?”

“Leave it. If he's dying, he'll go quicker if you pull it out. I need him to hold on a bit

until he can tell us where our little princess is.”

“Do you think she was with him? Maybe that's why the dogs have run off.”

“Maybe.” The general paused. “Who's gone after them?”

“The hunt master,” Juni said.

“You go help him. If Ava is that way, she might be a bit much for him on his own.”

A few of the men chuckled, and Luc heard the sound of boots running after the dogs.

“Let's set up camp here in the meadow. The horses need a break and there's water.”
The general said nothing else, but Luc could hear the soldiers spring into action.

He was carried over the river, laid down on grass, and he heard a stake being driven into the ground, and felt a rope being tied to his right ankle.

He could feel the blood trickle from his wound, down the center of his chest to drip over the side of his ribcage. It felt like a lot, but he knew these things often felt worse than they were.

A fire began to crackle near him, and the smell of food cooking affected him more than anything else.

He and Ava had had nothing to eat since the day before, although at least they'd been able to drink their fill at the stream before the general caught up with them.

He hoped she would stay where he'd told her to stay. If they started torturing him, he worried she'd give herself up, and that would be unbearable.

He also worried that he was too invested in her. He had only met her two days ago and some of his reactions surprised him—almost frightened him in their intensity—and yet, he didn't want to go back to being the way he'd been before.

Voices murmured in quiet conversation around him.

The sun was warm on his face and chest, and he realized he was comfortable and warm, more so than he'd been in a while. He didn't even need to run and hide. The worst had already happened.

He wished he could sleep. Catch up on all the hours he'd missed over the last week. Except that would be a terrible idea.

He didn't trust his reaction if they tried to wake him.

So he lay in a half-doze, as the soldiers checked on him now and then, and spoke amongst themselves.

“Here's the hunt master and Juni back,” someone called.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

There were exclamations of concern, and Luc guessed they'd been injured.

He snapped out of the doze he'd been in, ready to give his full attention to what was going on.

“What happened?” The general didn't sound worried, he sounded annoyed.

“The dogs, sir. Something's spelled them.” The hunt master sounded beside himself.

“They wouldn't come to me when I called, even ones I raised from pups. They stopped to drink and we caught up with them, and they wouldn't mind me, and when I tried to force one back, they attacked us. Attacked me.”

“Juni?”

“Something's wrong with them, sir. I don't know what. But the hunt master's right. They ignored him, and I've never seen them do that. When they'd drunk from the stream, they ran off again. Spooky quiet, sir, and fast. They just disappeared into the bush. We couldn't catch them.”

“And Ava?”

“No sign of her. And to be frank, I don't see how she could have been faster than us. We'd have caught her if she went that way.”

The general was silent.

“Do you think they were spelled, sir?” A soldier asked. “The dogs, I mean.”

“No.” The general moved toward Luc.

Luc could hear his steps, and then sensed him crouch near his side. “No, something's spooked them, or they've got the scent of something more interesting.”

“Sir—” The hunt master started to speak, then thought better of it.

No dog pack behaved the way Juni and the hunt master were describing. And the general was lying. Even Luc, with his eyes closed, could hear it.

“Wake up.” The general shook him, then hit him across the face, but Luc had expected something like this when the general settled in beside him, and he didn't react at all.

But there would be worse. A shake and a slap were child's play.

When he felt the tip of the knife jabbing into his side, he made himself go even looser.

Never react, never show pain.

He'd learned the lessons of the Chosen camps well.

“Is he dead?” someone asked.

“No. He's bleeding where I stabbed him.” The general made a sound of disgust as he moved back and stood. “I'll have to question him in the morning, no matter what, and then we start picking this countryside apart, looking for the woman.” He paused. “Because if we go back without her, I can assure you, not even I will walk away from the Herald's wrath.”

“But I thought—” Juni's voice trailed off.

“Thought what, soldier?”

There was a hesitation. “Thought the Herald wanted her . . . gone.”

“No. He wanted her dead. Not running around the countryside, alive.”

“But you said . . .” The soldier who spoke's voice trailed off.

“I said we had to go back with her. I didn't say she had to be alive when we did.”

Chapter 9

The afternoon seemed to drag on.

Ava was too afraid to move, so she was stuck in an uncomfortable position deep in the brush beside the river.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

The soldiers had obviously been pushing themselves as hard as she and Luc, because there was almost a festival atmosphere in their camp as they hunted, dressed game and then cooked it, chatting over the fire.

The only person who seemed unable to get into the spirit of things was the hunt master.

Being bitten by his own dogs had crushed him. Losing them probably had, too.

Ava didn't feel guilty about it.

Those dogs were ill-treated, and she had more than a suspicion they would have been put down for their part in her and Luc's escape.

They would be better off with a good home in Grimwalt.

When the sun eventually set, the men ate a meal around the fire, and when the general turned in, the volume went up a little, and then cut off, as everyone made their way to their tents.

The tents were just two sets of poles which formed a triangle on each end, and a cross-pole, over which they'd thrown stained canvas covers. There were six of them, with two guards on watch.

Ava heard one of the guards talking quietly to the horses as he checked on them. She waited for him to move on before she worked her way out of the bush, carefully crossed the stream, and made her way to the horses herself.

The soldiers had only taken what they needed from their saddle bags, and Ava moved quietly and slowly as she looked through them.

She found two sewing kits, and almost wept at the bounty that represented.

She could see Luc, lying in the open near the fire, close enough that the glow of it washed over him, so the guards could keep an eye on him.

At least it would give him some warmth.

He hadn't moved all day, and she knew the general had stabbed him to try to wake him earlier.

It had enraged her.

He was obviously senseless, and she would have to get the arrow out and stitch him before they escaped. She would not be able to lift him onto a horse herself, and she didn't think she trusted her working enough to see if she could compel one of the guards to do it for her.

It was too risky.

It was also risky to simply take him, injuries, arrow and all, and go.

Here she had the fire for warmth and light; clean, running water; and supplies.

This was the best place to help him before they ran. So she would have to make it safe to do that.

She rested a cheek against one of the horses' flanks, stroked it, and thought what she needed to do.

She would have to render all the soldiers harmless to give her time to help Luc.

But she needed Luc quiet and asleep while she did it, and so deeply asleep he wouldn't feel the pain while she removed the arrow and stitched him up.

But first, the guards on watch had to go.

She worked her way through the bags again, brought out a white undershirt. It had to be easy to see, so this would be perfect.

She worked sleep into it at the hem, but also the need to hand the shirt to the other guard, so the working transferred to him. If this worked, they would both go down one after the other, while her only risk would be placing it somewhere they could find it without being seen herself.

She waited for a chance, watching them as they made a lack-luster patrol, but they were never far enough away from the fire for her to creep closer without being seen.

Eventually, afraid time was wasting, she went back to one of the saddlebags that had contained something smooth and heavy, and brought out a piece of wood someone was carving. They had almost finished, and she ran her hand over the design with interest, before she threw it toward the river.

It landed with a splash, and both guards turned. One took a burning stick from the fire and they walked over to look.

She slipped from behind the horses, threw the shirt on the ground, and then ran silently back amongst them.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

“Must have been a fish,” one of the guards said, and turned.

“Didn't sound like a fish,” the other answered.

“Hey. Was this here a minute ago?” The guard walked to the shirt, bent and picked it up. He held it in his hand and rubbed the fabric between his fingers.

“What is it?”

The second soldier came up beside him, and the guard held the shirt out. “Look at this.”

Ava held her breath, and then the second soldier took it. Sniffed it.

“Maybe there's a breeze and it blew from someone's tent.” He didn't sound certain, because the night was absolutely still.

The first soldier yawned, and then walked to the fire, curled up facing it, and closed his eyes.

“I . . .” The second guard stared at him, then walked over himself, settled in beside his friend, and went to sleep.

Ava felt a fizz of elation.

But there were still plenty of others to go. And Luc to help.

She found a soft scarf in a saddlebag that was nicer than the others. She guessed it belonged to the general.

She thought through what she needed with Luc, and worked deep, healing sleep into the soft fabric.

She gave the horses a final pat and then walked over to him, keeping her gaze on the sleeping soldiers, but neither of them stirred as she walked past them and crouched beside her lover.

He was lying on his back, and the arrow was sticking out of his chest. It was difficult to look at.

His side was also bloody where the general had stabbed him.

As she dropped the scarf on his stomach, his eyes suddenly opened, his hand coming out to grab her wrist.

She almost screamed in reaction, swallowing it down as he went limp the instant the scarf landed on his naked torso.

He had been awake.

She knelt beside him, shaken, then looked over at the tents, her heart pounding at the possibility that one of the soldiers might have heard her, but no one stirred.

Did she take the scarf away?

She decided no.

This was good news, she realized. Luc wasn't as hurt as he'd seemed, and once she'd

stitched him, they could get away faster than she'd thought they'd be able to.

She walked to the tents and one by one began to stitch a working into the canvas. To sleep a long time. To not let any sounds disturb that sleep. To be afraid to come out until getting water became a matter of life and death.

When she was finished, she went back to the soldiers sleeping by the fire, and stitched a version of the same working into each of their cloaks.

At last, with everyone dealt with, she walked over to Luc and took out Banyon's knife. The rope they'd used was thick and it took time to cut through.

When he was free, she took out one of the sewing kits, her own needle, and went to get a bowl of water from the river.

There were a few medical kits in the saddlebags. Just bandages, cloths and some salves, but all useful.

She used the cloths to wipe him clean of blood, then examined the arrow.

The need to hurry was a constant thump in her chest, but she resisted the urge. She had bought them time. She would use it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

She carefully took hold of the arrow and worked it out as gently as she could.

It hadn't gone in deep and it came out suddenly in her hand.

Blood, sluggish and dark, welled up from the wound and she wiped it away over and over, until it slowed.

Then she stitched it closed, thinking the same thoughts of strength and health she had when she'd stitched his arm.

His side was not as bad, and the bleeding had stopped some time ago, so she cleaned it, and stitched it closed, too.

Then she stood and chose two of the horses.

One had had nothing unpacked from its saddlebags at all, and she guessed this belonged to the man Luc had killed in the wood.

The other horse she took was big. Big enough to take Luc's size and weight.

She guessed it belonged to the general, although he wasn't a particularly large man, and she transferred the medical kits, food and some clothes she thought might fit Luc into its saddlebags.

They had taken his sword from him, but it was lying near the fire, and she had a feeling he had become attached to it. She added it to one of the saddlebags, then went to fill one of the soldiers' cups with water.

When she was ready, she led the horses closer to Luc and pulled the scarf off him, throwing it into the fire.

He lay still for a long time, until the horses began to get restless and nickered softly. She bit her lip, wondering whether to wake him, when he turned, still deeply asleep, onto his injured side, and woke with a hiss of pain.

“Ava.” His whisper was harsh, croaking.

She held out the water to him, and he took the cup, emptying it in a few swallows.

“Let's go.” She held out the horse's reins.

His gaze went to the soldiers asleep by the fire, and his eyes narrowed. Found hers.

He said nothing as they stared at each other while he rose stiffly to his feet, took the reins from her and lifted himself gingerly into the saddle.

Suddenly, as if he'd just remembered he'd had an arrow in him, he looked down at his chest, bending his head to look at her stitch work.

He caught her gaze again, and she knew she would not get away with not answering this time.

He led the way, riding the horse upstream and crossing at a narrow, shallow point.

She kept close to him, watching him carefully to make sure he was not in too much pain to continue.

She needed to meet with the dogs. Needed to go her own way, and she suddenly had a feeling he wouldn't be as sad about that now as he had been before.

It was a hard road to happiness, her grandmother had warned her.

The best life partner was one who understood. Who supported.

But years of keeping secrets had made trusting anyone difficult. Perhaps he would have embraced her talent. Perhaps not.

There still might be a chance to find out, but it wasn't now.

She had revenge to wreak.

And a grandmother to comfort.

* * *

She had put the guards to sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

Luc knew that had to be true, because they had not so much as stirred, even as he and Ava had ridden away.

No one in the tents had stirred either, but he didn't know how she could have spelled everyone, so he assumed they'd just been lucky, there.

It was what she had done to him, though, that disturbed him the most.

He had a faint memory of waking to find her bending over him, and then nothing until he'd woken again, arrow out his chest, two wounds stitched.

He touched the arrow wound with hesitant fingers, something he'd done at least five or six times already. There was pain, but not what he'd expected. His side hurt worse, but he knew that the riding motion was contributing to that.

She followed behind him, saying nothing, but he sensed her slow and then stop behind him when they neared the northern edge of the forest, and he stopped himself, turning the beautiful Gaspatian horse she'd chosen for him around.

“I have to continue north. You need to go east. I think it's best we part ways here.” She spoke earnestly, her gaze flicking from his face to his chest, and then she urged her mount closer to him to check it.

He pulled his cloak around him, covering it up, because he had a sense she was using his injury as an excuse, a way to deflect from other things.

“Ava.”

She raised her gaze to his. “I . . . I hope I can find your Wave and join you later, if that would be acceptable to you?”

Acceptable to him?

He nudged his horse closer to hers, and pulled her close for a deep kiss.

“I want you to come with me now.”

“Even with . . . ?” She waved her arm back the way they'd come, presumably to indicate the general's camp.

“Even then.” She had spelled them. Had spelled him to heal him, he was now certain. So far, she had never done him harm. Had only helped him. He wasn't such a coward that he was afraid of strength he didn't understand.

He had seen the fear of his own strength in the eyes of the guards at the Chosen camps, and he would not be like them.

Never would he be like them.

“I want to come with you.” She leaned closer to him, kissed the side of his neck before she drew back. “But my grandmother deserves to see me, hear what happened to her daughter. And I have another task I must complete before I find you again.”

“Does this task have something to do with the Herald?” He knew it did. Had seen the look on her face when she'd left her mother's body lying in the dungeon chamber.

And could he blame her?

The Rising Wave was more than just an instrument of revenge for his own mother's

death, but wasn't that how it started?

He would not be a hypocrite.

She studied his face, and must have found no disapproval there, because she gave a slow nod.

He was afraid for her, afraid of the danger she would put herself in, but he could see the determination in her expression. "All I would say is that revenge often twists in our hands, and becomes something else. Joining me, helping me, would be fighting against the Herald just as much."

She lifted her shoulders. "I have a more personal revenge in store for him, but I'll keep your advice in mind." She trailed fingers down his cloak. "And I will come and find you as fast as I can."

"I will look for you every day."

She hesitated, and he could see the gleam of tears in her eyes as the sun rose behind him.

"I will think of you every day. And hope you are safe." She bent, fiddling with the flap of his saddlebag, and pulled out a handkerchief.

Her hand went to her neckline, and she pulled out a needle she must have woven into it. It was already threaded, and she looked down at the scrap of fabric, bit her lip, and then sewed a few, quick strokes.

It was his name, he realized.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

“Will you keep that against your skin?” she asked. “Think of me, and keep it against your skin?”

“You should put your own name on it, too,” he said.

She looked at him, and then shook her head. “Just in case someone finds it, I'd better not.”

She held it out, and he took it. It was made of fine cotton, smooth to the touch.

“Against your skin,” she reminded him. Then she leaned closer and kissed him, her arm coming around to hold him close. “Goodbye. Be safe.”

She let her horse dance back, then turned it north, and rode, and he watched her until he could no longer see her through the trees.

He looked down at the handkerchief and smiled at the sentimentality of her request. He tucked the fabric into the waistband of his pants, so it was against his skin as requested, and then turned his horse east.

With every step he took away from her, he fought the instinct to turn and follow. To help her reach Grimwalt before he joined his own people.

But he didn't have that luxury.

With every passing day, they would worry about whether to send someone after him, or attempt a rescue.

And with the weather changing, they needed to start moving toward Fernwell, to the warmer climes.

And still, his hands itched to pull the reins north.

Chapter 10

Her grandmother's house lay below as she crested the hill.

The dogs, exuberant and sensing the journey's end, ran down to the gate and milled about in front of it as they waited for her.

A man came from around the side of the house, and Ava recognized him as Tomas, her grandmother's estate manager.

He started at the sight of the dogs, then looked up the hill and saw her riding down, and relaxed a little.

“Tomas.” She called his name as she got closer, and he started again.

“Is that . . . Ava?” He took a step back.

She swung down from her horse and signaled the dogs, so they stopped jumping and behaving badly, and sat calmly as she opened the gate.

“Your grandmother would have loved to be here for this moment.”

The way he said it, in the past tense, she knew.

She bowed her head. “When did she find the way to death's embrace?”

“Six months ago.” He cleared his throat and she looked up to see the sudden hardness in his expression. “When she died, it was her deathbed wish that the borders be closed and all supplies to Kassia cut off in protest of your abduction.”

“I heard the borders were closed.” Although she hadn't thought through what that might mean for her trying to get home.

She had seen the guards, men and women in full Grimwalt colors, watching the way in, and preferred to keep her movements out of the official eye.

In the end, she had been forced to work her way up through the mountains and take one of the passes her grandmother had shown her on the maps that covered her study.

It had taken an extra four days.

“The court decided to honor your grandmother’s last wish, but some are making noises about opening the border up again. It is good you’re back, you can tell them your story.” Tomas looked down at the dogs, and then crouched, rubbing a few heads. “Where did you come across these, then?”

Ava bent and rubbed under a few chins, and the dogs crowded around closer, all wanting some of her attention. “These were the hounds sent to chase me down, Tomas.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

The estate manager went still, and then smiled. “Now that sounds like a story your grandmother would have wanted to hear.” He gestured to the house. “It's all yours, now, unless your parents . . .?”

“I saw my mother's body myself.” Ava couldn't keep the grief out her voice. “I heard my father died, too, and I have no reason to disbelieve it.”

“Then this is yours, and you need to visit the Grimwalt court and let them know what happened to you.”

She didn't contradict him, letting him take the dogs to give them food and water, and make a place for them in the stables.

But as she stepped into the house, she considered the suggestion and rejected it.

She had never had official dealings with the court. That had been her grandmother's role and while she had met many of the sons and daughters of the elected leaders of Grimwalt, she had never spent time with their parents.

Grimwalt, unlike Kassia, did not have a noble class. So those in control of the court now would not be the same as those she had mixed with before.

They had closed the borders in deference to her grandmother, though.

That probably meant they deserved at least a letter of explanation.

But actually going to court, getting caught up in meetings, and perhaps even coming

face-to-face with some of Kassia's diplomats, if any were still left there, now the borders were closed, would be nothing but a huge waste of time.

She had a Herald to track down and administer justice to.

And she didn't want to wait.

Not when she had someone waiting for her on the eastern plains.

* * *

The camp spreadout before him, the lights from fires and a few torches illuminating members of his army as they talked quietly, or moved between the tents.

Luc swung down from the saddle and stood in the dark, looking at it.

He had never expected it to grow this big.

When he'd turned against the Kassians, slipped away the night before the battle and sought out the Venyatux camp with a proposal for their generals, he had never considered it would grow into something this huge.

That he would be responsible for so many.

And yet, this was the way to victory, and so he accepted it.

Accepted the weight of responsibility that came with it.

In the name of his mother, who had literally thrown herself in front of an army to protect him.

That sacrifice would not be for nothing.

He had made that promise when he'd seen her body, and then every day of his life in the Chosen camp he'd been sent to. Looking at the tent city lying before him, he made it again.

A sound, something he barely registered, came from his left, and he pivoted, sword raised, to block the strike that came down on him.

Metal met metal with a high-pitched ring, eager and sharp. But this had to be a watch guard from his own camp, and Luc did not want to kill whoever they were.

He jumped back, sword raised. “Who is there?”

His attacker paused, then stepped forward, so a little of the light from below lit his face.

“Commander?” He gaped at Luc, and then dropped his sword. “I . . .”

“What's this?” A voice called from the dark behind the guard, and Reven appeared, the stocky warrior holding a sword in one hand, an axe in the other.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

“The Commander.” The guard gave Reven a stricken look, but Reven didn't even glance at him. He threw both weapons to the ground with a roar and grabbed Luc up in a hug.

“I knew they couldn't keep you for long. I knew it!”

More calls came out of the darkness, and Luc was soon surrounded by men and women, exclaiming and whooping.

He had to grab his spooked horse before it bolted, and they walked down the hill together.

Much later, he sat in the big meeting tent with Reven, Massi and Dak, wine cup in hand, and thought of Ava.

Of whether she had had as warm a welcome as he had.

“So, now we're alone, let's hear the details.” Massi leaned forward and poured more wine into her cup, then leaned back to watch him with eyes that gleamed in the firelight.

“First, who was it that told the watch guards to strike first, ask questions later?”

There was a beat of silence.

“What do you mean?” Dak frowned.

“I mean I was almost killed by one of my own army while walking into camp. I expected to have to announce myself, but if I hadn't heard the snick as they drew their sword, you'd be weeping over my body, not drinking to my health.”

Reven cleared his throat. “I heard a horse. Sent the watch guard ahead to stop whoever was coming our way. I never thought—”

Massi turned to stare at him, and so did Dak. “You told him to kill?”

“I didn't think I did, but he must have thought that's what I meant.”

“Someone is coming to join me when she's completed her own business. I don't want her cut down as she walks in. If someone even touches her, the consequences won't be pretty.”

“No one should be cut down. It's better to have someone to question than a body, anyway.” Massi was still looking at Reven.

“What?” He glared at her. “I made a mistake.”

“There are no room for mistakes any more, Rev.” Dak crossed his arms. “What would have happened to us if your guard had killed Luc?”

“I'll speak to the watch tomorrow.” Reven ducked his head.

“I'll speak to everyone tomorrow,” Luc corrected. “There is going to be no doubt in anyone's mind how things stand.”

Rev looked up, a flash of fury in his eyes, before he shook his head and gripped his cup. “That's a good idea, anyway. They'll want to hear how you got away.”

“The friend who'll be joining me is how. She helped me escape, not once, but twice.”

“A Kassian?” Massi asked, her eyes narrowed.

“A Grimwaldian. A fellow prisoner in the dungeon. I very conveniently arrived just as she was about to escape herself. Fortunately, she consented to including me in her plan.”

“Where is she now?” Dak leaned forward, elbows on knees.

“She had business in Grimwalt.”

“But she's coming to join you later?” Massi raised a brow.

“Yes.”

“Because . . .?” Reven slowly took a sip of wine.

Luc threw back the last dregs from his cup. “Because—”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

A small woman burst through the tent flaps. She was fast, running a few steps and then jumping onto a chest, using it to launch herself into the air, a curved blade in her hand. She brought it down at an angle to slice at Luc's neck, and Luc reached for his sword and arced his arm upward, cutting her hand as she brought it down.

The woman screamed as she fell, and Massi was on her as soon as she landed, a knee in her back and a knife to her throat.

With a gasp, the woman twisted up, pressing her neck against Massi's blade, impaling herself on it, and then fell down, blood gushing from her wound.

Massi turned to stare at him, shock on her face. "Did you—?"

Luc knelt beside the woman, but she was already unconscious and after a few moments, dead.

"How did you do that?" Dak asked, voice low.

"Do what?" Luc got to his feet, his gaze on the assassin, but at Dak's silence, he lifted his head, found all three were staring at him.

"I didn't even realize she was in the tent until you were cutting her hand." Dak shook his head.

"The way you grabbed your sword . . ." Rev swallowed. "I've never seen you move like that."

Luc frowned. "What are you talking about?"

But long after they'd taken the body away and he'd made a bed for himself in Dak's tent, he wondered.

He undressed, took Ava's handkerchief from his waistband and laid it on his pillow, as he'd done every night since he'd left her. When he lay down, he rubbed at the arrow wound on his chest.

A wound that was no longer there.

Chapter 11

Ava reached for the missive Velda held out to her, the document impressively beribboned, with beautiful beaded tassels.

"Another demand, I expect." Velda folded her arms and stood over her as Ava delicately loosened the knot and then unfurled the parchment.

Ava read it, then looked up. "It is."

Velda didn't say I told you so, although she had indeed told Ava so.

Her polite letter to the Grimwalt court, letting them know the circumstances of her parents' deaths, including who was responsible, and her own escape, had not been the end of the matter.

Increasingly demanding letters for her to appear began arriving, some now no more than a few days apart.

Ava set the letter down and took up her sewing.

“It's looking good,” Velda said, eyeing it with a professional's attention.

“It will have to be.” Ava tied off the last stitch and laid the man's shirt out.

It was, even if she said so herself, magnificent.

She had hand stitched it from the softest cotton, and then used blues and greens to embroider feathers over it.

Because Herron reminded her of a strutting, vain bird.

There was not a single black stitch in the work. She wanted to give him no reason to hesitate to put it on.

“Why did my mother tell me only black silk worked?” She tilted her head as she looked up at Velda.

“Your grandmother never understood why she clung to that. Yes, your grandmother preferred to work black silk, it was her signature, and perhaps your mother confused preferred with had to.” Velda shrugged. “Your grandmother never worked pieces like this, though. Secret pieces for the unsuspecting. When she worked an item, it was deliberately. Made to order, or as a gift. Whoever wore what she had made did so as a statement. And unless they said what working your grandmother had used, no one knew what protection they had. But people knew there was some magic involved.”

“Would she have approved of this?” Ava asked. She didn't just mean the shirt. She meant the deceit of it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

“I don't know. I think she would have.” Velda leaned against the table. “She loved your mother and you, and she would have wanted justice. But also, these are such complex workings, nothing your grandmother ever considered. She would be proud of your skill.”

“They are complex. Let's hope not so complex they don't work at all.” Ava folded the feather shirt, wrapped it in its own paper and then boxed it up.

“How many is that, then?” Velda waved at the parcels.

“Ten in all. Not much, but they take a long time.” Ava hoped ten was enough. There was a flower one, a wave one, an arrow one . . . all different. All unique. Rare enough Herron would covet one of his own.

“Tomas's friend should be here tomorrow to smuggle them over the border.” Velda straightened.

“Good. I have written instructions for him.” Ava showed Velda the rolled parchment. “The feather one can only be sold to the Herald. It has to be held back until a request comes from the palace.”

“I'll make sure he knows.”

“And your friends at the border are sure Herron is on his way to Fernwell?”

Velda nodded. “Word is the Jatan have retreated for the winter and Herron is going to Fernwell to report on the skirmish to the queen himself.” She shifted suddenly, a hand

going to her mouth. “I forgot. The court messenger is waiting for a reply.”

Ava grabbed the parchment from the Grimwalt court, picked up an ink pen and scrawled her answer across the bottom. She rolled it back up, wound the ribbon around it, and held it out to Velda. Her grandmother's housekeeper had been a second grandmother to her even when her real grandmother had been alive. It had been a balm to her soul to have her company these last three weeks.

Just before Velda took it, though, she changed her mind.

“No. I'll hand it over. Explain how things are. This aggravation has to stop.” Ava walked out into the hall and saw the messenger standing by the fire.

Summer had only just ended, but the weather was cooler than usual.

“Sir.” She came to stand beside him, and passed him the missive.

“Finished with your reply already?” He flicked a glance at her, and a bell began a warning toll in her head.

It wasn't that he was being rude. There were no social barriers in Grimwalt and she didn't care for the pomp and ceremony of her father's Kassia—she rather preferred the refreshing equality of her mother's country. There was something else here, though. Some nervous energy.

“It was a short reply.” Ava smiled at him, hoping none of her concern showed. “Please tell the speaker of the court that I cannot come all the way to Taunen. It would take too long, and I have pressing business.”

“It would take two weeks, at most,” the messenger said.

The bell toll became louder.

This was not the court messenger she was speaking to, she was sure of that.

Perhaps it was the son of one of the court leaders. Or even of the speaker himself.

“Two weeks is time I do not have.” She inclined her head and backed away. “Please send my regards to the court.”

“Lady . . .” The messenger's call was sharp, and Ava turned, face composed, to stare at him.

“My apologies. It is just not the news the speaker had hoped to hear.”

“I understand. I have been dealt a number of disappointments myself over the last few years. I'm sorry to have been the cause of one for him, but that is out of my control.” She inclined her head again and walked away.

He was on her by her second step, hand over her mouth to stop her screaming.

She fought him, using every trick Carila had taught her, but suddenly, he was not alone. He held her arms at her side while another man tightened a gag over her mouth, all while they dragged her from the hall.

By the time they had reached the door, her arms were pinned to her sides and only her feet were free.

“Ava!” Velda screamed her name from the door to her sewing room, and then ran at both men, grabbing a candlestick from a mantel as she sprinted across the hall.

She hit the messenger hard with it. He had no chance against her because his hands

were full, trying to stop Ava getting free from his grasp.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:50 am

The second man, the stranger, tried to grab Velda's arms, but she screamed again, the sound loud enough that even Ava wished she could cover her ears.

It did the trick, though.

The dogs began to bay, and Tomas gave a shout.

Suddenly, they were surrounded by the pack, streaming into the hall, snarling and biting, and Ava remembered the time when they had been after her, and was very grateful they were now on her side.

The men dropped her, and the dogs swarmed her, some even standing on her, as they growled and bared their teeth at the interlopers.

“All right, all right.” The messenger backed away, arms raised.

Ava was pleased to see more than a few bites and tears on those arms.

The other man joined him, bleeding from his face and arms.

Tomas stood behind them, a shovel in his hand, and both men started when they realized he was there and edged around him.

Velda bent beside her and undid the gag, and Ava gave her a look of gratitude before rolling to her feet, her arms still tied to her side. “You can tell the speaker that he has now ensured I will never come to his court. And he has made an enemy of me.”

“Why?” Velda asked. “She is an Yngstra. She is the lifeblood of this country. Why would you do this?”

Neither men replied. They turned and ran, and Ava ran after them, the dogs jostling for place beside her. She stopped when she reached the bottom of the stairs, watching as they swung up onto horses and galloped away.

Tomas stood beside her, and then tugged the knots on the ropes around her arms loose.

Her legs gave way, so she landed on the stone steps, and the dogs were suddenly licking her and yipping, and she cried and laughed as she rubbed them and kissed them back.

Then she stood and gave Velda a hug. “You are formidable. Thank you.”

Velda wiped away tears. “I don't understand why.”

“Perhaps the same reason I was taken by Herron. The same reason my mother was taken before I was born. The same reason the Yngstras live quietly in the country.”

Velda opened her mouth to object, to say that would never be done by one of her own countrymen, and then snapped it closed. Nodded.

“Whatever the reason,” Ava said, “the time has come for me to leave. Because those men will be back. Probably with others to help them.” She looked at Tomas and Velda. “Is there somewhere you can go for a while? Where you'll be safe?”

Tomas nodded. “I know a place.” He bent down to rub the dogs’ heads. “Can take the dogs, too.”

“Thank you. If I go now, as soon as I've packed, can you still give the shirts to your

friend tomorrow?”

Tomas nodded.

Velda didn't say anything more. She came to help Ava pack, but she said nothing, not until Ava tightened the strap on her saddlebags and turned for a final farewell.

Velda grabbed her in a tight hug. “Where are you going to go?”

“Somewhere safe, I promise.” Ava thought of Luc, drawing the soldiers into the woods to save her. “To someone who puts my life before his own.”

Velda gasped and drew back. “A lover?”

“A lover,” Ava agreed. “I'll be back when I can.”

“You better be, girl. The dogs'll miss you. We'll miss you.” Tomas wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

Ava swung into the saddle and rode up the hill, the way she'd come only three weeks before.

The hounds bayed behind her, but it was in sorrow this time, not excitement.

She felt excitement, though.

She was heading for the Rising Wave.

She was headed for Luc.