



Princes of the Outlands (The Castles of the Eyrie)

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Category: Historical

Description: Can a kiss change your fortune forever?

The three princes of the Baersladen seem to have it all: courage, strength, and good looks. But they each have one thing missing—true love.

TREI, the handsome eldest brother, is so shackled by his duty as the crown heir that he nearly loses his chance for love with the beautiful falconer whose bird seems determined to keep him away from her.

VALENDEN, the disreputable middle brother, is known throughout the kingdom for his vices: wine, women, and shirking his responsibility. But when a clever tavern wench rescues him from a drunken fight, he wonders if he's going about romance all wrong.

RANGAR, the brooding youngest brother, cannot stop thinking about the fair-haired princess from a rival kingdom whose life he saved when they were children. Now, he must decide if he should pursue the headstrong village girl who has eyes only for him, or keep his heart fires burning for the girl he can't seem to forget.

PRINCES OF THE OUTLANDS is a prequel novella to the Castles of the Eyrie series

Total Pages (Source): 9

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 1

Trei

Trei Barendur, eldest prince of the Baer kingdom, should have been at his swordsmanship lesson on the afternoon of the Anniversary of Sovereignty but was instead sticking his tongue down a beautiful falconer's throat.

It wasn't as though he'd intended to shirk his princely duties—as the crown heir, he took his role with all its due seriousness—but he had a weak spot for Saraj Swiftjoy. Judging by the looks he got from villagers whenever she was around, he suspected his infatuation with her was the kingdom's most poorly kept secret. When he'd spotted her ducking out of the snow into the falconry mews while on his way to the training grounds, his feet had somehow led him inside the stone structure instead of where he was supposed to go.

And now here they were, hiding out in one of the narrow stalls used for housing the kingdom's falcons, with her back against the stone and his mouth drinking her in.

“By the gods,” Trei moaned, gripping her jaw as he pulled back to gaze into her bright green eyes. “What have you done to me, Saraj? I'm supposed to be helping my father rule this land, but all I can think about is touching you in all the places I shouldn't.”

Saraj smiled coyly. “You work too hard. The whole kingdom says so. Even the heir needs to have some fun every now and then.”

Trei pressed his forehead to hers, returning her devilish look. “I think you have me under a spell. Was it one my aunt taught you? A love hex?”

Saraj snorted. “I need no hex to charm you, Trei Barendur.”

His hand fell to her dress’s collar, running along the wool neckline. “And if I demand you prove it by showing me your hexmarks?”

In the outland kingdoms of the Eyrie, magic was primarily performed through hexmarks. Each spell required its caster to recite a phrase and carve a symbol into their flesh: usually on a person’s chest or arms or back, and always cut by a knowledgeable mage. Though receiving hexmarks was often painful, Trei was working on mastering his thirty-ninth—one that controlled wind.

He had no idea how many hexmarks Saraj had earned; despite their few romantic tussles in the hay, he hadn’t glimpsed her bare chest or back. Yet .

Saraj toyed with the laces on her dress’s bodice, teasing him. “That’s why you want to get a glimpse at my chest? That’s the only reason?”

Trei nodded in mock seriousness. “Purely for informative purposes.”

She slowly tugged one lace free, biting her lower lip. The rigid panels of her bodice loosened, and Trei felt his heartbeat stampede in his chest. His eyes locked on the soft curves peeking out. His hand itched with the overpowering desire to tug her bodice down.

But Saraj paused before baring herself fully, running a finger lightly over her lowered neckline. She paused at a small scar now visible on her upper left breast.

“The spark hex,” she whispered.

Trei cupped the curve of her breast outside her dress, sweeping his thumb over the raised skin in an “x” scar. Unable to resist, he dipped his head to skim his lips over the hexmark scar. Her skin was even silkier than he could have imagined. He was used to her hands’ rouge callouses from years of hard work, and he was thrilled to discover softer pieces of her.

“That’s one.” His voice was gruff as he counted off the hex.

She tugged the laces even looser and stroked her finger to the hollow between her breasts, where a small spiral scar rested. “The eyesight hex.”

Trei’s pulse was thundering in his ears. Feeling bold, he dipped his head between her breasts to lick his tongue over the eyesight hex. He felt her breath pull in sharply, then give a shuddering exhale. She gripped the back of his head, silently urging his mouth to continue to explore.

“That’s two,” he muttered against her skin.

Moving faster now, Saraj dragged her loosened dress collar down over one shoulder, freeing her left breast. Trei spotted two more hexmarks: one carved on her shoulder and the other at the top of her ribs.

By the gods, she’s covered in them , he thought briefly. It was no surprise that Saraj was well-versed in magic—he had expected nothing less.

As he captured her nipple between his teeth, Saraj arched her back, pressing against the mews’ stone walls. The smell of straw rose around them, and the other familiar barnyard scents: her falcon, Zephyr’s, leather binds; the acrid scent of iron tools; her damp wool cloak hanging on the door hook. Saraj herself smelled like the snowfall outside, yet her body was anything but cold.

“I thought you wanted to know all my hexmarks,” she whispered as Trei devoured her breast. “We only made it to two.”

He gripped her hard around her narrow waist, locking her hips back against the wall as he licked and sucked and nibbled. “I’ve found something far more interesting.”

He broke his attention to return to her mouth. The kiss was burning in intensity, only surmounted by the force of their hands tangled in each other’s hair.

He gripped the back of her neck, tilting her skull to look at him. Her lips were parted and swollen from their kisses. Her eyes were sharp, ringed by long lashes.

By the gods, she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

He slid his knee between her legs. “I’m missing a swordsmanship lesson for you.”

“So you think you’ll sheath your sword here and now, is that it?”

“If you’ll have me.”

They’d made love twice before. The first time was on the beach after the Autumn Equinox bonfire, on a moonless night when they’d both drunk too much mead. The second was a few weeks later when Trei had come to her cottage under the pretense of delivering a message from the head falconer and had ended up with her skirts bunched around her waist, thrusting into her against her dresser.

Their lovemaking might be new, but the truth was, he’d loved her for years.

She’d been an orphan when they’d first met and a scrappy one at that. She had been ten to his twelve years of age. He’d caught her in the castle kitchen stealing raspberries. He’d let it happen because he’d assumed she was hungry—but then she

had smiled wolfishly at him and taken a whole ham hock and wheel of cheese, too, green eyes daring him to tattle on her.

Over the years, he'd caught her pilfering everything from his mother's satin ribbons to herbs from the mage quarters. He'd never told anyone about her minor crimes. And then, as they'd grown older, he would find her waiting for him in the room he shared with his two brothers. She would pointedly steal some trinket of his—a button or a coin or a handkerchief—defying him to stop her. And when he didn't, she would reward him with a featherlight kiss on his cheek.

For years, her bad habit had been a game between them—until Trei had decided they were too old for games.

“I'll have you,” Saraj whispered into his ear.

Trei needed no more encouragement. He tugged on the remaining bodice laces, freeing her from the dress. Both of their other lovemaking times had been performed in the dark or mostly clothed, and he was eager to see her bare curves. He pulled on the dress until it pooled around her feet in the straw. She wore only a thin cotton chemise beneath.

He took the time to step back and let his gaze rake down her body. She was even more perfect than he had imagined—and he'd spent plenty of nights fantasizing about the lithe falconer. Her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders. At least a dozen hexmarks graced her chest and shoulders. Her hipbones curved out like handles that he very much wanted to grip.

Fingers coiling in her chemise's hem, he pushed it up around her waist. Saraj gave a soft moan.

“Moan like that again,” he rasped as he fumbled with his belt. “I want to hear it again

and again.”

Just as he was freeing his cock from his pants, something cawed sharply outside the stall. Before Trei realized what was happening, a storm of fluttering wings and a sharp beak descended on him through the open doorway.

He barely had time to shield his face with his arm before a falcon attacked him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 2

Valenden

“You’re drunk, my lord,” one of the wenches across the tavern’s table pointed out. “Again.”

Valenden Barendur gave the girl a wicked grin. Maira . She worked in Barendur Hold’s goose pens and always had at least one delicate down feather caught in her amber hair. Unlike the girl sitting next to her, Shusana was always impeccably coifed.

Valenden—Val, as everyone from peasant to lord called him—might have been the second son of King Aleth and the late Queen Anathalda of the Baersladen, but he was unsurpassed when it came to royal gossip. If it got back to his father that he’d been drinking again in The Whale tavern with a gaggle of village girls, King Aleth would roll his eyes and order a bucket of cold water thrown on him when he returned.

But ale was the only thing that drowned out the pain he’d felt since his mother’s death. His two brothers had loved their mother, but Valenden and Queen Anathalda had always had a unique bond: they both had felt the darkness calling. He’d been stronger when she was alive. Now, he felt utterly lost—except when blinded by pleasure.

“And what of it?” Valenden countered Maira, sloppily propping up his chin with his hand. “It isn’t as though anyone needs me sharp-witted for anything. I’m the spare prince, lovely Maira. My family has Trei to be the steadfast heir.”

“If anything were to happen to Prince Trei, you’d be next in line,” Shusana reminded him.

Valenden balked as he searched the tankards on the table for a full one. Then, not having any luck, he waved to the bartender.

“Winter. More ale.”

Winter was a pretty girl, though you wouldn’t know it from her unbrushed locks or bare cheeks without a spec of rust powder on them. She flicked Valenden an annoyed look as she headed back to the bar.

Well, that was nothing new. He’d disgraced himself in her tavern plenty of times to have earned her ire.

Turning his attention back to the girls at his table, Valenden explained, “If something were to happen to Trei, my father would deem me unfit to be heir and pass that honor down to my little brother. And don’t think I’d be torn up about it, either. Rangar has the right temperament for ruling, always brooding around, thinking of everything that could go wrong. No, crowns aren’t for me. I haven’t a kingly bone in my body.”

Maira leaned across the table so that Valenden got a good look at her plunging neckline. “I don’t know about that, my prince. I’d say you’re well known among the ladies of this kingdom—and a few men—for at least one impressive bone.”

While the other girls tittered and snorted, Valenden leaned back in the wooden chair, spreading his legs as he reclined. “It would be inelegant of me to either deny or confirm rumors—though if any of you want a peek at my kingly bone later tonight, I might happily oblige.”

Maira gave a flirtatious hair twirl, which loosened a white goose down feather that

floated onto the table. Valenden scooped it up, massaging the soft filaments between his fingers. He suspected that he and Maira had locked lips a time or two, though he was usually too drunk to remember details of his many dalliances. The curly-haired seamstress apprentice sitting across from Shusana, however—he'd definitely felt under her skirts.

Maira stood and moved to his chair, perching in his lap as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her slight weight settled warmly over his thigh.

"You know, Val, you'll be expected to take a bride one day."

"Pffft," he dismissed. "There isn't a woman in the Outlands who would marry a cad like me."

Shusana scooted her wooden stool closer to him, biting her lip as she gazed up at him through her lashes. She teased, "That isn't true. There must be some desperate spinsters."

"The bog hag," Maira said in mock seriousness. "She's one hundred and two years old, but I'm sure she still has a few good years left."

Valenden was very much enjoying the girls' attention when Winter sauntered over with his fresh tankard of ale. She plonked it down in front of him carelessly enough to spill drips on his pants and Maira's dress.

"Apologies, Maira," Winter said. "I was aiming only for the prince."

"Oh?" Valenden said, raising an eyebrow. "Trying to chase me out of your establishment already? It isn't even midnight yet."

"Last time you were in, your little brother had to come to drag you out."

While Maira squirmed deliciously in his lap, Valenden lifted his chin, studying the bartender. He frequented The Whale tavern enough to have interacted with her often, yet he knew little about her other than her name and the fact that she'd recently inherited the tavern from her late father. It couldn't be easy for a girl of eighteen to run the establishment on her own, especially with the likes of him stirring up trouble more often than not.

"See?" Valenden said to the girls around the table. "I told you Rangar was better suited for responsibility than me. If you have your eyes on the throne, girls, it's him you should seduce. Don't let the scars on his face deter you."

As Winter gathered up the empty glasses, she smirked. "The rumor is that Prince Rangar is still besotted with that Mir princess whose life he saved."

"Lady Bryn." Valenden rolled his eyes. "In this case, I can confirm the rumors are true. My little brother is even learning the Mir language, hoping to one day talk to her. He's a hopeless case, I'm afraid, if you're after his heart. His cock, on the other hand—well, Lady Bryn is a kingdom away, and his bed grows cold while he plots how to make her his."

Valenden loved nothing more than to tease his little brother about his obsession with the Mir princess. It had been nearly ten years since Rangar, then just a boy, had saved the six-year-old princess from wolves in an attack that had left them both scarred. Her father, King Deothanial of the Mirien, had denied the Baer tradition that declared "a life saved is a soul owned" and forbade Rangar from ever coming close to Bryn again. Of course, that hadn't stopped Rangar. Two years before, Rangar had convinced Valenden and Trei to travel to Castle Mir to spy on Bryn on the night of the Harvest Moon Gathering. Grown to sixteen years old, Bryn had become a stunningly beautiful woman. Poor Rangar had only fallen even more hopelessly in love.

“Why are we talking about my brothers?” Valenden said, bouncing Maira on his lap. “Aren’t I the most handsome one, anyway?”

“You might be if you ever bathed,” Maira teased, raking her fingers through his tangled curls.

“I think Trei is very dashing,” the seamstress apprentice said with a dreamy sigh.

“Better take your mind off him,” Shusana warned. “He’s smitten with Saraj, and Trei isn’t promiscuous like this one.” She patted Valenden’s arm affectionately.

“Well, I, for one,” Winter added as she cleared the mugs. “Think Rangar is the most handsome—or at least he would be if he weren’t always so brooding. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen him smile.”

“You don’t mind his scars?” Maira asked.

Winter scoffed. “What man in the Outlands doesn’t have a few scars?”

Maira leaned forward and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “My mother says that your mother used to read fortunes before she died. She could tell which couples were fated to be together. Can you read fortunes, too?”

“Not when I have a tavern to run. Ask me again another day.” Winter gave Maira a wink and grabbed the last mug and sashayed through the maze of tables toward the bar.

Valenden watched her go with a nagging feeling he couldn’t quite put a name to. He hadn’t liked the fact that she preferred Rangar to him. Usually, he was no stranger to jabs and barbs at his expense—in fact, he was known for his self-deprecating sense of humor. But hearing Winter say Rangar was the more handsome brother lodged in him

like a thorn, souring his mood.

He eyed the pretty bartender closer as she interacted with an elderly farmer at the bar. Winter had always caught his eye if he was being honest. That was hardly remarkable—every attractive woman, and even a few men, in the Baersladen caught his eye. He currently had three gorgeous girls practically spilling their breasts out onto the table like a buffet offering for him, and one even wiggling provocatively in his lap.

And yet he had to admit the bartender was the one who truly fascinated him. Was it true she could read fortunes?

Her mother had died long ago, and ever since her father's more recent illness and death, she had worked hard to make the tavern successful. As a result, it had been cleaner over the last few weeks than it had ever been before. Winter baked the pastries for sale herself each day. He'd even once spied her repairing a broken door hinge, and now he kicked himself for not having stopped to help her.

His older brother would have stopped to help her. So would his younger one.

He growled to himself to think of his own uselessness. Winter disappeared into the back room, and Valenden snapped back to the present and realized Maira was trailing kisses along his neck.

Flashing a sloppy grin, he returned his attention to the three girls at his table, trying to forget about the bartender.

Trying—but failing.

“Now,” he purred, “Weren't we talking about my kingly bone?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 3

Rangar

Princess .

Princess.

Prin-cess.

Rangar Barendur practiced pronouncing the foreign word under his breath as he raised his iron sword. He lunged forward and slammed the blade into the side of a pine tree, sending out slivers of wood into the falling snow. The edge had lodged deep in the trunk, so he caught his breath before freeing it. His chest was rising and falling hard from the exertion of combat training. Despite the cold, sweat beaded on his bare chest.

“ Princess ,” he muttered aloud, testing out the word’s sound as he gripped the hilt, tugging his sword free of the tree.

He’d spent the last three years trying to master the Mir language. It was frustratingly dissimilar from his tongue, Baer. If he’d been more skilled with magic, he could have gotten a translation hexmark carved into his chest, as his aunt had. But despite the dozens of hexmarks scarring his muscles, the translation hex was so advanced as to be inaccessible to anyone other than mages. And so he’d persuaded his eldest brother, Trei, to obtain a book written in Mir. For the last year, he’d been painstakingly teaching himself the language one word at a time.

“ Well met, princess ,” he tested out. Briefly, his thoughts returned to the last time he had seen Bryn Lindane. She was the youngest daughter of the Mir royal family, the most powerful rulers in all the Eyrie, and thus far out of his league. If it hadn’t been for what happened when they were children, he probably never would have even been allowed in the same room as her. But fate had led her into the woods, following a white fawn. He’d been watching from her castle’s tower and had surmised what grave danger she was in. Luckily, he’d made it to her before the wolves did.

Now, he raked his sweaty hair off his face, fingers lingering briefly on the four claw mark scars that marred his face from temple to chin.

Bryn hadn’t escaped the wolf encounter unscathed, either, though her scars were hidden beneath her clothes. Not for the first time, Rangar wondered what it would be like to press his hands against the scars over her ribs that matched his own, forever binding them together.

“ Do you know who I am ?” he spoke in Mir, stumbling over the unwieldy pronunciation.

Two years before, he’d convinced his brothers to sneak into the Mirien on the eve of Harvest Moon Gathering. He’d seen Bryn dancing in a wheat field from a distance and had even managed to collect a button that had fallen from her gown. He kept it hidden in the rafters of the room he shared with his brothers, knowing they’d tease him ceaselessly about it if they knew.

He hadn’t been able to speak to Bryn at the Harvest Moon Gathering. With her father and brother so close, he would have been immediately run through with a sword. But the Low Sun Gathering was coming up in a few months. With tensions high among the kingdoms of the Eyrie, all the outland realms, including the Baersladen, had been invited to convene to discuss politics.

He would finally see Bryn again.

He might even talk to her.

Hefting his sword, he aimed at the last mark he'd made on the pine, intending to strike it again. He swung with all his strength, burying the blade deep into the wood.

Satisfied, he braced one boot against the trunk to pull the blade free, but before he could, a falcon cawed and landed on a branch overhead.

She was a small, light tan bird, and the leather tag on her talon was threaded with green glass beads.

It was Hurricane, Aya's falcon.

"You're speaking gibberish again," a voice came behind him. "So I assume you've either gone mad or are trying to impress your Mir princess."

Rangar turned to find Aya crossing the snow in her green wool cloak. He'd been friends with the junior falconer since she'd come from the village of Casim to train under Saraj's guidance. Headstrong and confident, Aya was never put off by his brooding nature. Now, with her silky tresses loose and dotted with snowflakes, she looked almost like one of the woods sprites from the ancient ballads. She stopped in front of him, scrutinizing his bare chest marked with hexmarks.

"Or perhaps you intend to freeze out here, training shirtless?"

He gave a half grin as he heaved against his boot, freeing his sword. "I grow hot when I train."

"Yes," she said with a gleam in her eye. "You do."

He laughed slightly as he started to sheath his sword, but Aya held out a hand. “Wait. Keep your sword drawn.”

He did as she requested, though his raised eyebrow said he was unsure of her reasons.

“Your grip is off,” she instructed. “You forget that my father was the finest swords maker in all the Outlands. He even made a sword for that Mir royal family you’re so taken with. Now, loosen your grip. Yes, like that.”

Rangar was one of the finest swordsmen in the Baersladen, rivaled only by his brother, Valenden. But, for all that Valenden played the part of a useless rogue, he was actually highly skilled in combat. And though Rangar’s swordsmanship instructor had given him the opposite advice about his grip, he didn’t question Aya’s suggestion.

She stood behind him, extending her arm alongside his, folding her small fingers around his larger ones. “There. Do you feel the difference? If you squeeze too hard, the sword won’t have enough give to take the impact.”

Though Aya stood half a head shorter than him, Rangar could feel her breath clouding against his bare shoulder. Her wool cloak tickled his skin. He tested out loosen his grip and found his sword felt much better in his hand.

“Yes, I see,” he noted, and then before he thought better of it added, “You smell good. Like honey bread.”

She paused, cheeks warming. “I’ve been helping bake rolls this morning in the kitchen,” she said, her hand still cupped over his on the sword hilt. “ You smell like, well, a sweaty soldier who’s been training too hard.”

He grunted a laugh.

As he sheathed his sword, Aya came to face him and touched a hexmark on his bare bicep. “The finding hex. It was the first one I ever got. I use it all the time—I’m forever misplacing things.”

Rangar combed back his messy hair. Now that he wasn’t exerting himself, he was starting to feel the cold as the snow continued to fall around them. It was invigorating—he had always loved snow.

Aya moved her hand over the hexmarks on his shoulder to his pectoral muscle. She tapped another hexmark. “What is this one? I don’t know it.”

“Protection from nefarious spells.”

“Do you have many mages trying to curse you, Rangar?”

“Everyone has enemies, Aya.”

“Please. You and your brothers are beloved by everyone in the Baersladen. They even have a soft spot in their hearts for Val.” She cocked her head. “Or were you thinking of enemies beyond our borders?”

Rangar couldn’t help but think of King Deothanial forbidding him and his family from setting foot in the Mirien, all for the apparent crime of saving his daughter’s life. Of course, it hadn’t been the rescue they’d taken issue with—it had been the Baer belief that a life saved is a soul owned. Rangar’s father claimed Bryn belonged to Rangar and wanted to take the young girl back to the Baersladen with them. The Mir King had refused with harsh threats, saying Bryn would never belong to savages.

But she’s mine, Rangar thought. Not his to own, not his to command—but his to protect. The belief ran deep within his culture that he was responsible for her safety now, and for nearly ten years, it had been torturing him not to be able to fulfill that

duty.

Aya slid her soft fingers along the hills of his chest muscles, watching goosebumps rise from the heat of her touch on such a cold day. His pulse picked up. He swallowed, unsure suddenly about how he was feeling. He'd never quite noticed until now how Aya was the perfect height for him to hold close and rest his chin on the crown of her head.

"I enjoyed yesterday evening." Her voice had softened. "The dance, I mean."

It had been part of the Anniversary of Sovereignty celebration when Barendur Hold's great hall was filled with music and festivities. Saraj had teased and prodded Rangar until he'd joined in on the dancing, and he'd found himself taking a spin with most of the girls in the castle, Aya included.

He'd enjoyed dancing with her. They'd laughed together. For a second, he'd even thought what a good pair they made...

"I'm not much for dancing," he said, looking away, flushed with guilt that he was having improper thoughts about any girl other than Bryn.

"You're not as bad as you believe yourself to be. You just need to loosen up. Like your sword grip. You're too stiff, Rangar Barendur."

Aya placed her hands on his taut shoulder muscles, kneading them in jest in a way that made his breathing tremble, but then her face turned serious. "I mean it, Rangar. Dancing with you was the best part of my day."

He gazed down at the pretty falconer apprentice in indecision. He and Aya had never been anything more than friends, and yet there had been that moment at the dance last night when he'd wondered if there could be something more. While he wasn't like his

brother Trei, who only devoted attention to one woman at a time, nor was he as promiscuous as his other brother, Valenden.

He'd never considered Aya in a romantic way. His heart had always belonged elsewhere...but maybe he'd been a fool. Maybe his brothers were right to tease him about loving a girl a kingdom away that he barely knew.

What if there had been someone else in front of him all along?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 4

Trei

“Zephyr!” Trei shouted as the falcon assailed him. “What in the gods’ name?”

Saraj’s falcon was one of the largest birds in the mews. Its stall was next door to the one Trei and Saraj occupied, and he had assumed the bird was sleeping as it did most afternoons.

Saraj pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter. “He’s defending my honor.”

Trei ducked away from Zephyr’s sharp claws. “I’d appreciate it if you conveyed to him that I’m hardly deflowering you for the first time.”

Saraj whistled to the falcon, who gave Trei one final sharp caw of warning and then flew onto a wooden perch that rested a few feet above Saraj’s shoulder. She reached up to stroke the bird’s chest feathers tenderly. “There now. Good bird.”

“Good bird?” Trei balked. “He attacked me!”

Saraj crossed her arms over her bare chest. “He barely scratched you. He was just being protective. That’s what he’s trained to do.”

As Trei smoothed back his hair, throwing the bird on its perch a frosty look, he muttered, “I’m starting to regret recommending you for this position.”

Five years ago, Trei had caught Saraj stealing his favorite quill pen from the castle library. Are you finally going to do something about it? she had challenged him, dragging the quill down the length of her neck. And he finally had: He became a thief himself and stole a kiss.

Since that first kiss, Trei had made it his mission to find the orphan girl a place in the castle where her cleverness would be rewarded. He'd recommended her as an apprentice to the former falconry master and wasn't surprised when Saraj had taken to the art instantly. After all, she was just as clever as the birds, and it gave her the freedom she longed for. Six months ago, when the falconry master had taken ill, Saraj had been appointed the lead falconer in his place.

Saraj slid her arms around Trei's neck to mollify him. That was all it took for Trei to forget about Zephyr's attack. Her bare, lithe body pressed to his soldier's uniform immediately reawakened his passions.

He stole her lips in a soft kiss. She slackened beneath him, melding her curves into the planes of his muscles. His hand fell to her hips and pulled her closer, firmly. She responded by wrapping a leg around his hips.

He captured her thigh in his grip and took her mouth in a heated kiss. As her fingers clutched around his shoulders, she whispered, "Deflower me again, Trei Barendur."

It didn't take him long to free his cock, and then he had both her thighs in his grip with her long legs wrapped around his back.

Their bodies pressed together to become one. Saraj let out a moan as she wiggled to deepen their lovemaking. Trei, honed from long days of training with the Baer army, easily supported her weight around his hips. He thrust into her again and again with a groan. Her body welcomed him, growing warm and wet.

His nerves burned with pleasure as he let out a release, matched a brief moment later by her own.

Breathing hard, Trei tossed his head back as his fingers dug into her thighs. “Sacred hell, Saraj.”

“I didn’t think a future king cursed,” she whispered a tease in his ear. “Then again, I didn’t think a king could screw like that.”

He lowered her down as his heartbeat still throbbed. She slid back into her dress and combed her fingers through her hair.

As he refastened his pants, he paused, then said, “My aunt can give you the special tea, like last time.”

Saraj’s smile was lazy with pleasure as she leaned back against the stone wall. “Don’t worry, Trei Barendur, I don’t intend to be a mother yet.”

He swallowed, unable to take his eyes off the beautiful falconer. For years, his heart had belonged only to her. And now that they were of marrying age, it increasingly weighed on him that he wanted more than a few tumbles in the straw.

“Would it be the worst thing?” he said softly.

Her green eyes flashed in a warning. “I like my freedom, Trei. You know that.”

“You like me, too, do you not?”

She gave him a sympathetic smile as she squeezed his hand. “You’ll be king of the Baersladen one day. My mother was a vagabond, and my father was a woodcutter.”

“Royals are forbidden from marrying commoners in the southern kingdoms like the Mirien, but not here. The Baersladen has no rules against it.”

An uncertain look flickered over her features. “I like where I am. Working with the falcons, living on my own. Do you really think I would make a good queen?”

She said it as though she was joking, but Trei nodded gravely. “I do.”

She took a deep breath. Then she reached up to where Zephyr rested on the wooden perch and stroked his chest feathers again before saying, “Your father is in good health. It will be years before there’s even a chance you’ll take the throne. Until then, let me have my falcons and my freedom.”

She stood on tiptoe to press a kiss to his lips again. He squeezed her waist, wishing he didn’t have to let go.

When she sank back down, she asked, “If the Mirien requires a princess to marry a prince, does that mean your brother is free to marry his Mir princess?”

“Rangar?” Trei snorted. “Not likely. There might be no law against it, but Lady Bryn’s parents are determined to keep them apart. They don’t believe in the fralen bond. They think Rangar wants to steal their daughter away.”

Trei knew that Saraj had strong feelings about the fralen bond, the belief that a life saved is a soul owned. She had once saved her friend from drowning in the ocean; now, they were as close as sisters. To the outside world, the fralen bond felt harsh and domineering, but everyone in the Baersladen knew it was more about a lifelong connection between two equals, taking a soul from death’s claim and guarding it as one’s own obligation.

“Won’t he?” Saraj asked.

Trei had to admit that he wasn't entirely certain what lengths Rangar would go to in order to see his Mir princess again. They would be attending the Low Sun Gathering in a month's time, and Rangar had been busy practicing the Mir language so he could speak with Lady Bryn. Trei knew his brother wasn't capable of violence, but he also knew how fiercely dedicated Rangar was to the girl whose life he'd saved.

"Rangar is a man of honor. He might be obsessed with the idea of Lady Bryn, but he hardly knows her. She could be mean as an ogre. Or perhaps she'll find him utterly distasteful, and Rangar isn't one to force a woman to marry him. If he has marriage on his mind, he's getting far ahead of himself."

She finished tying her dress's laces. "What about Valenden? Do you think he'll ever marry?"

Trei rolled his eyes. "He'd sooner take an arrow to the heart."

"He has plenty of paramours."

"Yes, just how he likes it. Willing bodies to warm his bed who he can kick out in the morning."

Saraj made a teasing sound deep in her throat. "That doesn't sound too bad to me."

Trei's face fell. Every time Saraj talked about wanting nothing more than sex with him, he felt like he'd taken an arrow to his own heart. He wanted so much more with her than a quick, secretive screw. She was by his side when he thought of his future as king. If she didn't desire to be queen, he could accept that. Baer traditions were not rigid, and he didn't think anyone would blink an eye if they were a couple yet unmarried.

Still, married or not, he wanted her commitment.

“Right.” His tone was clipped. “I should get to the swordsmanship training before the master comes looking for me.”

Saraj’s eyes softened. “Trei, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all right, Saraj.”

He gave Zephyr a pat, hoping the bird wasn’t planning on plucking out his eyes in the middle of the night, and left.

All that evening, Trei trained hard, trying to forget that Saraj favored freedom over him. He would take whatever crumbs she offered him and keep the hope alive that one day she might see him as she saw her bird: a companion in freedom, not a trap.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 5

Valenden

Valenden stumbled out of The Whale tavern sometime after midnight, squinting at the hazy clouds. Were the trees swaying, or was he? By the gods, just how much ale had he drank that night?

“Hey. Prince.”

The sharp voice came from a trio of burly men stalking down the alley toward Valenden. He tried to stop his vision from spinning long enough to pin down their faces. The one in front, who had spoken, had a jaw like a bull’s and fists like a bear’s.

Sacred hell.

It was Maira’s three older brothers, whose long days farming had turned them into nothing but walking muscles.

Valenden held up his hands. “Your sister isn’t here. Maira left with Shusana and that seamstress girl...I always forget her name...a few minutes ago.”

In truth, he wasn’t sure how long it had been since the girls had left. He’d gotten so drunk that one minute they’d been there, their sweet little backsides pressed in his lap, their lips on his mouth and neck and cheeks, and then suddenly he’d been alone, asleep with his face pressed into a sticky spot on the table in the nearly empty tavern.

“Maira isn’t one of your playthings,” the eldest brother threatened.

“I think it’s more the other way around,” Valenden pointed out, hiccupping. “If anyone is a plaything, it’s me.”

His legs suddenly gave out in the slippery mud, but the man shot out an arm and caught him before he fell.

“Thank—”

Maira’s brother jerked Valenden close enough that the man’s spittle landed on his cheek. “You think you can do whatever you like because you’re a prince? Fuck whoever you like?”

“Not because I’m a prince.” Valenden dangled limply from the man’s fist. “Look at my brothers. They’re both honorable to a fault. I fuck who I want because I’m a dog —”

The burly man wrenched Valenden even closer to his face. “Keep your hands off our sister.”

The brother behind the first one rolled his shirtsleeves as though readying for a fight. Hexmarks for strength and speed showed on his forearms.

Valenden’s stomach turned. He had definitely had too much ale.

Before he could stop himself, his stomach lurched, and all that ale rushed back up his throat and splashed right onto Maira’s brother’s face.

The man’s face went slack with shock, terror, and rage. His hand opened, releasing Valenden, who immediately collapsed in the mud.

“Ow,” Valenden said, rubbing his backside.

Vomit dripped off the man’s face and chest. For a moment, neither he nor his brother said anything through their shock. Then, the man’s face hardened.

Shit , Valenden thought.

“I’m going to kill you, prince.”

The man grabbed Valenden by the arm, wrenching him to his feet, and slammed a fist into his jaw. Pain bloomed throughout Valenden’s skull. Doubled over, he took a moment to catch his breath.

And then he swung his fist at Maira’s brother.

Valenden’s aim was off in his drunken haze, and the strike glanced off the man’s jaw of getting a direct hit. All three brothers fell on Valenden like they were wrestling a bull into submission. It was a storm of flying fists and raised knees. Valenden could hold his own in a fight even three sheets to the wind, but not when it was three-against-one.

In the end, he collapsed on his back in the mud, blood pouring from his nose, and he decided to stay down.

Maira’s brothers took turns spitting on him, then stomped away down the alley.

“Not a very befitting way to treat a prince,” he muttered to himself. “Or even a dog.”

Every bone in his body ached. He tested his arms and legs tentatively, relieved to find nothing was broken except, perhaps, his nose. Ah, well, it wasn’t the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last time.

Light snow began to fall again, and he closed his eyes.

Maybe I'll just die right here , he thought to himself. Freezing to death isn't the worst way to go.

He was drifting off in his drunken delirium when footsteps splashed through the mud. A shadow fell over him.

He cracked one eye open, frowning.

Winter crouched over him, looking at his wounds with a mix of pity and disappointment. She poked at his ribcage. "Are you dying, prince?"

He groaned as a wave of pain bloomed on his side. "Unfortunately not."

"Well, I suppose I should rescue you from the cold or face the king's wrath. Come on." She lifted his arm around her shoulder, then heaved to help him scramble to his feet. He winced as blood dripped down his forehead. Supporting his weight with one arm around his back, they hobbled together into The Whale. Inside, the fire roared in the hearth, leaving the room blessedly warm and dry. Winter helped him into the backroom, where she motioned to a bedroll.

"Rest here. I'll get you a blanket." She thrust a bar rag at him for his nose.

Valenden sank onto the bedroll, wincing at his aches and bruises, as he staunches his bleeding nose. He'd never seen the backroom of a tavern before. This one was filled with wooden kegs, a bucket of soapy dishwater and dirty mugs, and a collection of brooms. Everything was tidy and well-ordered, though cramped.

As Winter returned, he caught sight of a wicker basket holding some women's clothes.

“You sleep here, in the tavern?” he asked as she tossed him a wool blanket.

She gave a defensive shrug. “When my father died, I had to sell our cottage to pay off the tavern’s debts.”

Valenden took the time to wonder what life was like for a girl even younger than him who ran a business entirely on her own, handling the alcohol orders, baking the pastries, managing finances, and even dealing with drunken, disreputable customers— like him .

“Are you going to say running a tavern is no job for a girl?” she challenged.

He barked a laugh. “On the contrary, I was thinking how I couldn’t do it myself.”

Winter disappeared briefly and returned with a kettle of steaming water. She poured it into a bowl and dipped a fresh rag into it. Carefully, she dabbed the mud and crusted blood off his face. “I heard you’re to be in charge of the docks when you’re older.”

Her eyelids were heavy, he noticed. What time was it again? She must be exhausted on a regular night after closing the tavern, let alone having to take care of him .

“Pfft,” he said. “I’d be lucky to be deemed responsible enough to oversee a chicken coop.”

A smile tugged briefly at her mouth, and Valenden found his heart kick up a little. Though she wore a simple work dress and apron, with her curly hair pulled back like a soldier, her natural beauty was undeniable. Her features weren’t fine like Maira’s or Shusana’s, and he found he liked her heavier nose and big eyes.

“You know,” she said quietly as she continued to wash his face, “I remember the night of the fire at Rollins’ store.”

Valenden grew quiet. She was referring to an incident about two years ago. He'd been drunk, as usual, in a different tavern on the other side of Barendur Village. Some lantern oil at Rollins' supply store had caught fire and ignited the entire structure. As it was late at night, most of the town was fast asleep, including old Rollins himself. Valenden had been one of the first ones the scene. He'd dashed into the building and gotten Rollins out, then had grabbed a chamber pot, ran back outside, and used muddy water from the street's gutter put out the fire.

"You were there?" Valenden asked.

She nodded. "I came when I heard the commotion. I saw you put the fire out."

He groaned. "With a chamber pot. Not my finest moment."

"On the contrary, I'd wager it was one of your finer moments. And I suspect there are more fine moments you don't like to talk about. There were witnesses at the Rollins' fire—you couldn't escape being known as a hero then."

He lifted a defensive shoulder. This bartender was getting under his skin, and he wasn't sure he liked it—or maybe he liked it too much.

She wrung out the rag in the bowl. "Why do you want the world to assume you're useless, Val? Is it because you don't want the responsibilities of a prince?"

Valenden shifted uncomfortably on the bedroll. "I enjoy life's pleasures. It isn't my fate to rule."

"A prince can't be carefree?"

"Have you met my brothers?"

This got another rare smile from Winter, and Valenden's heart gave a little soar of triumph. He raked his hair back off his face as he studied her closer.

It was the middle of the night, and she must be exhausted after a long day working, yet here she was tending to him. Maybe it was the ale or his bruised body, but he felt a different kind of falling sensation than when he was merely attracted to someone new. There was something about Winter that almost made him want to be a better person.

She was close enough to kiss. All he'd need to do was lean forward and capture her lips. His heart started thumping at the prospect. And yet he felt the overwhelming certainty that even though he was a prince and she a tavern maid, he didn't even begin to deserve her...

While he was still thinking about a kiss, she picked up a bottle of mead and raised an eyebrow with a curious smile.

"You want to talk about fate, prince? Sit up. I'll read your fortune."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 6

Rangar

Aya pressed onto her tiptoes and kissed Rangar while he was still deciding what to do about the beautiful girl's confession. Her lips were warm and soft, and his arms instinctively went around her waist. The snow was falling heavier, catching in their eyelashes and skimming over his bare shoulders and her wool cloak.

She tilted her head back to deepen the kiss. Rangar felt his senses go on alert—his skin was extra sensitive, his nose detected her floral smell mixed with bread dough from the kitchen. He found his hand weaving through her silky hair, fighting the urge to clutch her possessively into a deeper kiss.

She broke the kiss, looking up at him through her long lashes. "I've wanted this for a long time, Rangar."

He couldn't help himself. Her body was such a pleasing, warm presence beneath his hands. Her lips were full and ready. When she brushed a finger over the hexmark on his pectoral muscle, he growled low and took her in another kiss.

She parted her lips in a sigh. Her muscles trembled slightly beneath his hands, from the cold or the kiss; he wasn't sure. She pressed those lips against his jaw, kissing her way down his neck and shoulder.

As his hands dropped lower on her hips, Rangar was having difficulty concentrating. It had been a long time since he'd felt a woman's touch. The few women he'd made

love to had been meaningless exchanges of release on both sides—he'd been careful to pick women who knew where his heart lay and didn't expect to win it. But Aya was different. Their friendship was a bright spot in his days. He cared about her too much to break her heart.

His mind turned to the Mir princess with hair so fair it was nearly white. The fralen bond connected him and Bryn forever, but the fralen bond could take many different forms. Some individuals who saved another's life became friends with them—for others, it was more of a sibling-like relationship. It wasn't uncommon for the bond to turn romantic, but nor was it a given. When Rangar convinced Trei and Valenden to sneak into the Harvest Moon Gathering to spy on Bryn two years ago, he'd wondered how he'd feel about her as they were no longer children.

All it had taken was one look to fall instantly for her.

Now, he remembered:

Hiding behind trees on the outskirts of the festivities, Trei had slapped Rangar. "Look. Your girl. There."

A young lady, not quite a woman, dressed in a dusty rose-colored gown and a crown of wheat berries and dried flowers, had clasped hands and spun in circles, laughing, with two other young royals.

Rangar had felt his breath still.

"Well, go on, then," Valenden had prodded. "Go confess that you're hopelessly enthralled by her. And nab a few bottles of mead while you're at it."

"I cannot approach her," Rangar had growled. "Or her father will have our necks."

“Well then, why the hell did we travel half a day to come?” Valenden had asked.

Trei had rested a hand on Val’s shoulder. “Rangar is right. The risk is too great. He wanted to see her again, and now he has. We’ve got what we came for.”

Valenden again protested about sampling the mead while Rangar couldn’t take his eyes off Bryn. Laughing and dizzy, she’d broken away from the other girls and stumbled a ways away from the bonfire to catch her breath.

Bryn , Rangar now thought to himself. It’s Bryn. It will always be Bryn.

Though his body objected to his mind, he forced his hands to ease Aya away from him gently.

She looked at him with big eyes. “But I thought...”

“Aya, this isn’t a good idea. You know where my heart is.”

Her throat constricted as she swallowed. The snow was coming heavier now, filling the forest with gentle patters. Her falcon, Hurricane, roosted on a branch above their heads, keeping watch among the trees.

“Your Mir princess,” Aya said evenly.

For a moment, Rangar let his eyes fall closed. How many nights had he fallen asleep dreaming of Bryn? The fralen bond would bind them forever. They were meant to be together. He was meant to watch over her, to protect her from any other danger that might once more threaten her life.

After all, he hadn’t gotten the four scars across his face for nothing.

“When we danced together last night,” Aya pressed, “Didn’t you feel something?”

Rangar smoothed an errant strand of her hair down. “You’re beautiful, Aya. Any man would feel fortunate to dance with you.”

She shook her head. “You know what I mean.”

He clenched his jaw, looking away, thinking guiltily of Bryn.

The snow continued to fall steadily. Rangar realized it was coming up on supper time, and people would wonder where the two of them were. For her sake, he didn’t want rumors spreading throughout the Baersladen that there was something between them when there wasn’t.

Aya placed her palm on his cheek, letting her thumb brush over one of his scars. “Close your eyes and pretend I’m her,” she whispered.

He had to admit that it felt good to have someone touch his scars. The other women he’d been with hadn’t wanted to, disgusted by them.

But he captured Aya’s wrist, stopping her. “I might not be as honorable as Trei, but I wouldn’t do that to any woman.”

Aya’s eyes sizzled in the fading light. “I know where your heart lies, Rangar Barendur. Fortunately, I never said I needed your heart.” She brushed her hips against his suggestively. “Only your cock.”

A bolt of lightning shot through him. His body instantly responded to her words, but his head held him back.

“Aya,” he said slowly, “I care about you. Our friendship—”

She silenced him with a finger on his lips. “Spare me the pity, Rangar. I’m not some lovesick girl who fell for the first man she danced with. You know me—I’ve never been overly emotional. The reality is your Mir princess is a kingdom away. It will be a long time before you see her again, assuming her father even lets you get within a hundred paces of her. You aren’t going to be a saint your entire life. Nor do I wish to be. You can’t deny that there was something between us at the dance.”

Before Rangar could object again, she replaced her finger over his lips with her mouth, wrapping her arms around his neck, and kissed him again.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 7

Trei

The heavy snowfall had kept Trei up late, helping the castle's woodcutter haul in extra logs for the two monstrous fireplaces at either end of Barendur Hold's great hall. For most of the cold winter months, the castle's servants and many townspeople from Barendur Village slept on the great hall's floor for warmth. They even brought their livestock into the heated space so that now, cattle, sheep, and sleeping bodies covered the floor.

Though Trei shared an upper chamber with his brothers where they had cots and wooden chests for their clothes, they, too, tended to sleep in the great hall during this time of year, in part for the fireplaces' heat and in part to show solidarity with their people.

When he finally finished with the wood and splashed icy water over his face and hands, most of the castle was asleep. He stepped carefully over the slumbering bodies until he reached the dais near the northern fireplace where his family laid their bedrolls. His father was asleep, but his two brothers' bedrolls were empty.

Valenden was at the tavern, no doubt, keeping warm with a belly full of ale. But it wasn't like Rangar to stay out all night.

Trei grabbed his wool bedroll and dragged it into the alcove near the courtyard with the yew tree. He looked back toward the great hall, where a few villagers were still awake chatting, a single musician toyed with his lute, and a few couples had

absconded to the room's shadowy corners and grunted and moaned under blankets.

"There you are."

He twisted to find Saraj, yawning and wrapped in a blanket, shuffling up to him. She plunked down next to him, leaning her back against the wall. "Do you mean to freeze, sleeping out here practically in the courtyard?"

Her rejection from earlier in the day still stung, but he tried not to show his wounds. "Why are you awake so late?"

"I was waiting for you." Mischief glittered in her eyes as she pulled a basket of raspberries from under her blanket. "I borrowed these for you from the kitchen. Figured you'd be hungry."

All Trei could think about was the first time he'd caught her stealing when he'd been barely a teenage prince and she a scrappy orphan girl, and he'd spied her pilfering raspberries. Was this why she'd chosen raspberries now? To remind him of their history?

"When I got you the position at the falconry mews," he said, popping a raspberry in his mouth, "I thought your little habit would come to an end."

"Stealing?" She gave him a small smile. "Come on, you know that I never take anything valuable."

"You do it for the thrill."

She reached up to brush a spot of berry juice off his lip. "I do like thrills."

Trei looked off toward the snow falling gently in the uncovered portion of the

courtyard. Quietly, he said, “Is that why you don’t wish to marry me? Life with me wouldn’t be enough of a thrill?”

She took her time swallowing down another raspberry and then met his eyes directly. “Maybe. Yes, maybe that is it.”

His chest tightened at yet another rejection, but she rested her hand on his arm. “You’re a good man, Trei. You care about your people. You’ve been up all night hauling in extra wood to keep the villagers and livestock warm—do you think arrogant Prince Mars of the Mirien does that for his subjects?” Her eyelids lowered slightly. “Besides, every girl in his kingdom has a crush on you. They call you the Saint of Stolen Hearts behind your back. I can’t tell you how many jealous looks I get each day.”

By the saints, could she be any more beautiful like this, with the distant firelight warming her face?

“And yet I haven’t stolen your heart,” he said.

She sorted through the basket of berries but didn’t eat more. Finally, she whispered, “Are you so sure about that?”

A flutter of hope moved in his chest, but he quickly squashed it, unwilling to get his hopes up again.

“Saraj—”

“I love you, Trei.”

He froze. They had never spoken those words aloud, though he felt confident that she knew he’d been in love with her for years. After all, the entire kingdom knew.

He dared to raise his gaze to her face. Her lips were stained with red berry juice. Her green eyes were on fire.

“I love you, Trei,” she repeated. “Despite my best efforts not to fall in love with you, I have. I don’t think there’s any point in denying it to myself anymore, and the gods know how much I’ve tortured you by never saying it.” Her voice broke. “However, I don’t want to be queen. I’m scared by all that I’ll lose should I take that role.”

His throat was dry. “What of all you’ll gain?”

She threw up her hands. “I’m not suited to be queen, Trei! You know my past. Sacred hell, I’m an orphan...”

He dragged his thumb over her cheekbone. “You’re also the youngest head falconer the kingdom has ever seen.”

“I’m a thief...”

He dropped his thumb to the corner of her lips. “I don’t think they throw people in the dungeon for stealing raspberries.”

“I’m not a virgin.”

“Ha,” he barked. “And aren’t I glad for that.”

“Stop it, Trei. You know it will never work between us. I want you and only you—not what comes with you. The crown. The kingdom.”

Saraj rarely cried—she rarely showed any emotion at all. So the tears wetting her eyes made Trei spring into protective mode. He pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her back.

He whispered, “You don’t have to be queen for us to be together.”

She sniffled as she leaned her head against his broad chest. “So you’ll take me as your whore while you marry someone else?” There was no barb in her words, only an honest question. “My mother, god rest her, would have wanted more for her daughter than to follow in her footsteps.”

What little they knew of Saraj’s mother had hinted at a disreputable lifestyle, but Trei had never actually heard Saraj admit that her mother was anything more than a vagabond.

“Of course not.” He gripped her face in his palm, forcing her to read the sincerity in her eyes. “If I’m with you, there will be no one else.”

She scoffed, “The crown heir of the Baersladen will never marry, then?”

“That’s right,” he said gravely. “If it isn’t with you, then I’ll remain unmarried.”

She stared at him, too shocked to wipe away her tears. She sputtered, “You have to marry.”

He smoothed a hand over her silky hair, letting his gaze fall to those berry-red lips. “I told you, Saraj, this isn’t like the Mirien. The same archaic rules don’t bind Baer royals. I can marry a commoner; I can also choose never to marry if I wish. Frankly, I can do whatever the hell I want once I’m king.”

Her eyes were drying. She shifted in his lap, tugging the blanket up further around the both of them. Trei silenced a groan—her sweet little ass was impossible to ignore against his hips.

“So we dine together and travel together and fuck together and never marry?”

He tilted his head up. “That hardly sounds like torture.”

She blinked slowly. “And...children?”

He adjusted her on his lap, finding the more she shifted her hips, the harder it was to focus. “Children are only bastards if their father never acknowledges them. If you bore me an heir, married or not, I would proudly proclaim that child as mine to every ruler in the Eyrie.”

She bit her lip, and he fought the urge to capture her berry-stained mouth and ravish her right there in the great hall alcove—they’d hardly be the first couple to make love under the cover of a blanket.

Cupping her jaw instead, he said sincerely, “I shall lay my heart bare: I want to marry you, Saraj. I want you to rule the Baersladen by my side as queen, and I do not doubt you’d make as strong a ruler as you do a head falconer. But if that is not your wish, then I’ll take whatever life I can get with you.”

The lingering tears in her eyes made her pupils look even bigger, and Trei found it harder and harder not to grab her around the waist and kiss her.

“Do you mean it?” she whispered.

“By the gods, what more do I have to say?”

She gave a small chuckle that made her cheeks turn pink. Under the wool blanket, her hand found his shirt collar, toying with the laces.

“Then you be the thief now, Trei Barendur, and steal a kiss.”

A wave of desire rushed through him. He grabbed the corners of her jaw with both

hands, leaning in until their lips were a breath away.

“You’ll be mine, Saraj?”

“If you’ll be mine.”

She tasted like everything he knew she would—the raspberries, the woodsmoke from the fires, the hiss of snowfall. His hands pet down her body beneath the blanket until he found her hot center, and after a little more shifting, they were moaning together like the other couples throughout the shadowy perimeter of the great hall.

Trei meant what he had said: He fully believed she would be the kind of queen the Baersladen needed. Saraj was strong but not domineering, kind but decisive. He didn’t know if Saraj would ever be his queen, but he felt certain that now that their souls were intertwined, she would be the only woman to ever be his heart’s true love.

Chapter 8

Valenden

“My fortune?” Valenden raised an eyebrow at the pretty bartender.

While there were hexmarks for fortunetelling, they were among the most advanced of all spells and notoriously tricky. His aunt, Mage Marna—the Baersladen’s most skilled mage—had only once successfully predicted the future. Years ago, she had warned her brother, King Aleth, of a coming drought. The kingdom had time to make preparations, yet when the drought hit, Mage Marna began to shrivel and dry out. The spell had doubled back on her, creating a shortage in her own body despite how much water she’d imbibed. She’d very nearly died, and she’d been left prematurely gray-haired.

“Not hex magic,” Winter clarified, popping the mead bottle’s cork. “This is a skill my mother taught me when I was a girl.”

“Ah, so it’s only superstition.” Valenden reclined back, smirking. “Play your games, then.”

Winter leveled him a stern look but didn’t say anything. Instead, she hunted up a tankard and poured a draught of mead into it.

“Drink this.”

He accepted it gladly. “Ah, now, this is my kind of superstition.”

She rolled her eyes. “Are you never serious, prince? Drink it. In one swallow, no more.”

He tipped the tankard back, downed the liquid in one go, and then passed it back to her. Winter dragged a lantern closer and spent some minutes examining the dregs in the bottom of his glass.

Valenden adjusted his position, trying to peer into the tankard over her shoulder. Sediment from the alcohol glazed the tankard’s bottom in a haphazard pattern that looked a little like stars in a night sky. How many mugs had he drained to the sediment, never imagining the dregs might be worth studying?

But ultimately, wet sediment didn’t hold his interest long, and he peered sidelong instead at the girl reading it. Why hadn’t he noticed Winter more for all the many nights he’d spent in The Whale? He’d been so consumed with flirtatious wenches who’d willingly perch in his lap and let him slide his hand up their skirts. And gods knew there was no shortage of girls like that, so his mind had never wandered to other types of women.

The salt-of-the-earth kind of woman.

The surprise-fortune-telling kind of woman.

The gorgeous-in-lantern-light kind with hair pulled back like a soldier’s...

When Winter glanced up and caught Valenden staring, he quickly cleared his throat. “I’ll take the rest of that bottle since it’s already been opened.”

She rolled her eyes again as she passed him the mead. “I would have thought you’d had your fill after blacking out and being assaulted.”

“There are some lessons I can learn: sword fighting, dancing. Abstinence, not so much.” He tipped back the bottle.

She continued to squint deep into his tankard as she moved it back and forth in a circle.

“Well, what does that blob at the bottom tell you?” he asked, trying to mask his curiosity with playfulness.

“The location of the dregs doesn’t matter,” Winter muttered, deep into her examination. “It’s a common misconception. Only the shapes do. I’m looking for shapes that mirror hexmarks. If a hexmark shape appears here for a spell you already possess, it will be a particular strength in your future. If the shape mimics a hexmark you don’t possess, it shall be a weakness for you going forward. A warning, perhaps.”

Valenden turned quiet. Winter’s detailed explanation of the process implied this was true magic her family believed in, not the game he was pretending it to be.

At his silence, Winter looked up questioningly. “You’ve gone pale. Don’t you want to know your future?”

“I’m not entirely certain I do.”

She gave him a softly admonishing look. “You yourself said fortune telling isn’t real magic, just a superstition.”

He grumbled as he tipped up the mead bottle again, then wiped his mouth. “Has anyone ever told you that you have a way of turning people’s words back on them?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s infuriating.”

A smile flickered at the corners of her mouth. “Don’t the pretty ladies who sit on your lap challenge you?”

“They don’t,” he muttered. “Their brothers, however...”

Winter adjusted her skirt so she could move closer to him to show him the tankard’s insides. Her soft ponytail brushed his neck, sending a flush throughout him. Her body radiated good health—her pink cheeks and strong hands. He felt suddenly repulsive in his bloody, mud-stained clothes.

But Winter didn’t seem to mind his haggard appearance.

“Look,” she said, tipping the tankard his way. “The dregs along that bottom portion, do you see? They have the same horseshoe shape as the persuasion hex.”

The persuasion hex—commonly known as The Charmer—gave its bearer the ability to intuitively read others and thus respond to their needs and desires.

Valenden set down the mead bottle and rolled up his shirt sleeve to his bicep. On the inner portion of his arm was a horseshoe scar.

Winter ran her fingers over the hexmark, eyes lighting up. “You already possess The Charmer. So, that means that you’re destined for a lifetime filled with merriment and often surrounded by many people.”

Valenden heard her words but was far more interested in her hand on his bicep. Her fingers were calloused from scrubbing tankards, not soft like Maira’s. And yet he found he liked the extra bit of friction.

He cleared his throat. “I’m not sure I needed magic to tell me that.”

Winter ignored him as she frowned back into the tankard. “There are more shapes. This one here. It mimics the hexmark for knowing people’s names before they tell you.”

Valenden peered at a murky shape like an apple blossom at the bottom of the glass. “I don’t have that hexmark. So, what, I’m destined to have to ask people’s names? How dire.”

Winter didn’t respond to his joking tone as she clutched the tankard between her hands. “That isn’t what it means, Val. That hex symbol discerns if someone will be close with others.”

He frowned. “That last prediction said many people would surround me.”

“Having people around you isn’t the same as being close with anyone.”

His heart thumped uncomfortably in his chest. “So what are you saying?”

Her lips flattened into a line. “That ultimately, you will be alone your entire life.”

Valenden’s mind pulled between various courses of action. His instinct was to laugh off her words with another joke. But Winter looked serious, and the truth was, her words had stung him somewhere deep. It felt like she’d confirmed something he’d already long known in his soul.

That look in her eyes wasn’t pity. It was understanding.

Gods, this girl...

Still feeling the tinges of panic, he cupped her jaw without thinking and pulled her into a kiss. Winter's hand clamped onto his wrist, surprised, but she didn't pull away. Her lips yielded under his. A surge of panicked desire made Valenden deepen the kiss feverishly. He fisted his hand in the back of her hair. Thrust his tongue along her teeth. Placed his other hand scandalously high on her waist, almost grazing her breast. His heart was stampeding. For some wild reason, he felt Winter was his last chance at a connection.

At not being alone.

The kiss went on for some time before they finally broke apart. Valenden was breathing heavily, eyes searching hers. He needed something from her, he realized.

Approval? Love? Something .

She cleared her throat, keeping her eyes aimed down at her lap, but her pink cheeks revealed she hadn't exactly hated the kiss.

Valenden felt another surge of triumph. See? He wasn't a hopeless case. He'd won over someone as even-keeled as Winter. Gods, he could see it all now. They'd keep their affair secret for a few weeks before revealing it to the public. He—the disreputable, silly, promiscuous middle son—would have a girlfriend . He'd help Winter run the tavern in the evenings. Of course, he'd have to drink less to be functional, but so be it. Maybe some of her good sense would even rub off on him...

“Winter—” he started, breathless.

She silenced him with a finger against his lips. For a moment, his hope lingered, but then he saw the serious look in her eyes. His heart sank.

“Val, the dregs don't lie. You'll have fun your entire life, but you'll always be alone.”

He sputtered, “Fine, fine; I’ll get the damn name-knowing hex...”

“That won’t change anything.”

He realized, then, like feeling the wind shift directions, that there would be no secret affair. No girlfriend for him, no nights helping Winter in the tavern.

His face must have fallen because she rested a gentle hand on his cheek.

“You can sleep here tonight, prince. Give your body a chance to rest and heal.”

He scowled and turned away from her offer but then thought better of it and moved his head back to fit within her gentle palm. “Sleep with me?”

“Well, you’re on my bed, so yes.” A tiny smile flickered over her face.

Valenden laid down on her bedroll. Winter extinguished the lantern and laid down next to him, tucking one hand under her head.

Facing one another, she stroked his tangled hair until he felt himself nodding off.

The last thing he remembered—or maybe it was a dream—was Winter pressing a soft kiss to his lips again before muttering, “You aren’t the only one destined to be alone, prince.”

They spent the night lying next to one another—together and yet alone—and all Valenden could think about as sleep overcame him was calloused hands, the sweet smell of mead, and hair pulled back like a soldier’s.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:03 am

Chapter 9

Rangar

Rangar knew the girl in his arms wanted him. Aya had made it clear that she would accept a physical relationship without an emotional one—and gods, it was tempting. Her body was so lush and tight as her curves melded into his chest. He'd heard what the soldiers in the Baer army said about Aya—she was the one they all longed for, and now she was his.

If he wanted her.

Maybe he was being a fool over the Mir princess, as his brothers constantly teased him. He'd only seen Bryn twice in his life: the first when he saved her from wolves, the second when he snuck into the Harvest Moon Gathering. And yet he'd thought about her every night since he was nine years old. She was his Saved; he was her Savior. The fralen bond wasn't a duty that he took lightly. And, of course, when he'd seen her grown up with those luscious lips and perfect curves...

He dropped a hand into his pants pocket, where his fingers found the button he'd kept with him for a year. Bryn's button, which she'd dropped at the Harvest Moon bonfire, and he'd picked up as a token to remember her by.

Rubbing the wooden button between his fingers, he gently broke the kiss with Aya.

“Aya.”

There was enough regret in that one word that she instantly turned away, stung. She was smart enough to know when she'd been rejected.

"So that's it, then?" she asked quietly. "It's her or no one else?"

"I saved her life. She and I are forever bound." He dragged a hand down his scarred face. "She has these same scars on her body."

Aya folded her arms defensively, or maybe it was just the cold. She glanced through the bare trees toward the horizon where the sun was sinking.

In an effort to change the subject, she asked tightly, "Are you coming to the Hold for supper?"

A part of Rangar still wanted to reach out and give Aya all the reassurances she wanted. He'd never intended to hurt her—but the simple truth was that his heart wasn't free. Still, he'd never been taught to put such feelings into words, so he only barked gruffly, "No. I'll get something from the kitchen later. I need to return this sword to the armory."

She dipped her head in a nod and turned away but then paused and looked back at him. The snow caught in her long, dark hair like stars against the blanket of night.

"I hope she's everything you want her to be," Aya said.

Rangar swallowed hard. "She is."

He didn't know how to explain that he just knew Bryn even though they'd spent so little time together. Aya had never been a part of a fralen bond, so there was no way she could understand how two souls, even far apart, could be intertwined so fatefully.

Aya pulled her cloak's hood over her head and whistled for Hurricane, who flew

down from his branch onto her arm. Rangar watched as the girl and bird disappeared down the hill toward Barendur Village.

The sun sank fast. A chill spread over the woods. One by one, lanterns were lit in the windows of Barendur Hold and the surrounding village. It beckoned him home, and yet he didn't quite feel at ease.

His heart told him that he'd made the right decision—and yet it wasn't easy to have blind faith that he belonged with a girl he barely knew.

He dressed quickly in his linen shirt and bearskin cloak. Sheathing his sword, he sauntered down the hill toward the village.

He spotted The Whale tavern and wondered if Valenden was there, as he often was this time of night, warming his belly with ale instead of bread from the castle's kitchen and warming his lap with yet another girl. Rangar shook his head, briefly wondering if Valenden would ever find a girl and settle down. Perhaps...what if Valenden and Aya were to pair off...but no. Aya was too grounded for his brother. Valenden would forever have his head in the clouds—or a wine barrel—and Aya needed someone who matched her ambition.

As Rangar neared the village, he began to spot townspeople preparing for nightfall: the soldiers on patrol, the shepherd leading the last of his flock into the Hold's great hall.

He was surprised to catch sight of Trei outside the draw bridge, helping to unload a cartload of split wood. It was nothing out of the ordinary for Trei to pitch in with the villagers wherever he was needed, but Rangar knew that Trei had been planning on speaking with Saraj that night about their future—he should be screwing her senseless right now.

Ah, well, the night wasn't over.

As Rangar entered the village, he nodded to the soldiers who wished him a good evening and then crossed the draw bridge into Barendur Hold and made his way up the winding stone stairs to the mage quarters.

The smell of herbs and potions enveloped him. He'd always felt at home here, where the mage apprentices were quietly hard at work, and nature's gifts filled baskets along every shelf.

Calista and Ren, two of his aunt's apprentices, were busy grinding dried mushrooms with mortars and pestles at the worktable. When Rangar filled the doorway, Calista glanced up from her work.

"If you're looking for your aunt, she's in the back room."

Rangar gruffly thanked Calista, then made his way through the dark, narrow passages to the rear chamber used for experimentation. His aunt, Mage Marna, had her back to him as she stood before a stone altar draped in velvet. The rhythmic sound of metal on metal reverberated through the air. Thick white streaks ran through her otherwise reddish hair—she'd seemed ancient to him for as long as he could remember.

"What brings you here at this late hour, nephew?" she asked, not looking up.

Rangar stepped closer to the altar, where she was sharpening her many knives with a stone. The rhythmic sound continued as she finished sharpening a knife with a long, thin blade, then picked up a finer blade.

"The same reason I came last time," he said.

"Ah. I see." She finished polishing the fine-bladed knife, then set down the sharpening stone. "What hex shall it be tonight?"

Rangar shifted his weight from one foot to another. He was glad for his bearskin

cloak—it was always frigid in the mage quarters. He wasn't sure why he was reluctant to confess to his aunt that he had come about Bryn. It was hardly the first time he'd sought magic to cure his interest in her.

She met his gaze with a flicker of understanding as though reading his mind. “Ah. The fair-haired princess. I told you already that the translation hex requires more skill than you possess.”

“I haven't come for that. I'm learning Mir on my own.”

Mage Marna gave an approving nod. Though she was the kingdom's chief mage, she advocated for the sparse use of hexes, preferring that tasks be completed the old-fashioned way instead, with two hands and no whispered spells.

One never knows when magic will turn on its caster, she always warned. Use hard work if one can and save magic for special occasions.

“But it is about the girl, isn't it?” she pressed.

Rangar lifted his chin. “I want a hex for scrying.”

His aunt's eyes narrowed briefly at the request. “There are many scrying hexes.”

“One that will let me see her,” he clarified. “From afar. I have no wish to trouble her, but I want to see her. To know that she's safe.”

Mage Marna's eyebrows lifted, but she didn't scold her nephew for wanting to spy on his Saved. As one of the kingdom's top advisors, she knew how strong the pull of the fralen bond could be as much as anyone.

“Scrying spells are secondary; they require a caster to first have a hex for improved vision.”

Rangar tugged his shirt collar down, showing the eye symbol scar on his collarbone. "I've had that one since I was eight."

She grunted deep in her throat as her eyes moved toward her row of sharpened knives. "There is one hex that might pair well with your skill level. A water-srying hex. Fill a clay vessel with salt water that has sat out beneath a full moon. Wait for the sediment to settle, cast the hex, and end the spell with the location you wish to observe. Sometimes the images are stronger than others. Sometimes, the images don't want to come at all. Are you sure you want it?"

"I'm sure."

"Shed your cloak and shirt."

While Rangar stripped to his waist, Mage Marna selected among her knives, settling on the fine-bladed one. She gathered herbs from the storeroom and returned with a tonic for him to drink.

"You know the requirements," she said. "Hold still."

Bracing himself against the stone altar, he gritted his teeth as she cut into his skin beneath his right lowest rib. With over three dozen hexmarks, Rangar was practiced at handling the pain. The army commander who trained him and his brothers had taught them to focus their vision on one spot on the wall and let their minds go blank until the pain felt as if it was happening to someone else.

But this time, Rangar's mind refused to empty. Fantasies of Bryn dancing at the Harvest Moon Gathering filled his head. Her fair hair catching the moonlight. The laughter on her pert lips. The gown she'd worn with its lace and flouncy skirt that had made her seem like she was flying as she spun.

"It's done." Mage Marna straightened, wiping the blade with a rag.

Rangar snapped back to the present and tentatively touched around the fresh wound that vaguely mimicked the shape of a curving wave. Like all of his aunt's carved hexes, this one was tight and precise.

She handed him the rag, and he pressed it against the blood.

"You have moon water and a vessel in your storm rooms, I assume?" he asked.

"So eager to see your princess, are you? Your wound still bleeds."

When he didn't answer, she gave a small snort as though reflecting on the folly of youthful love. "Calista can give you what you need."

It didn't take long for Calista to hunt up the supplies. Rangar took the jar of seawater and clay bowl to the roof of Barendur Hold, one of the few places where one was nearly guaranteed privacy. Only two sentries watched guard over the Hold far on the other side.

Snow fell steadily. Though clouds obscured the moon and stars, the reflection of the snow brightened the night. Kneeling on the stone roof, he emptied the water into the vessel. While he waited for the sediment to settle, he shrugged back into his bearskin cloak, leaving his shirt off so he could keep the rag pressed to the wound.

The familiar sound of waves lapping at the shore near Barendur Hold's eastern wall floated on the breeze. Snowflakes swirled around him as he gazed into the vessel.

"Ka visten aus aquim," he muttered as he traced the wave symbol of his latest hex in the air. "Bryn Lindane's bedroom in Castle Mir."

The murky image that surfaced showed a four-poster bed and elegant furniture but no princess. It took Rangar several tries, scouring his memory for locations within Castle Mir where she might be so late at night. Finally, he gave a wild guess and whispered,

“Saint Serrel’s shrine.”

It was the site of the wolf attack nine years before—where their fralen bond had been forged.

And there she was.

Far south, the Mirien kingdom’s warm climate meant little snow fell, though the image in the water showed Bryn wrapped in a cloak against the cold. She dipped a glass bottle into a stream’s sacred waters but paused and looked at the rocks where the wolf attack had taken place. Then, her eyes shot straight at Rangar, almost as though she could see him. His breath hitched—but it only lasted a second before she looked away, corking the bottle, and called something to her sister, who was waiting for her on the trail.

Rangar watched until Bryn disappeared out of sight and then poured out the seawater on the rooftop’s tiles.

“ Princess ,” he practiced under his breath, the Mir words still unwieldy on his tongue. “ Princess. Prin-cess .”

Would she be afraid of him when he saw her again at the upcoming Low Sun Gathering? Be alarmed by his scars and dark bearskin cloak? Or would she, too, feel the rush of seeing a kindred soul?

He practiced Mir until late into the night, when he finally descended into the warmth of the great hall and fell onto his bedroll among the slumbering villagers and sheep. His two brothers’ bedrolls were empty.

Rangar hoped that Valenden and Trei had each found their hearts’ desires that night—or at least someone warm to take away the night’s chill—but he didn’t mind sleeping alone.

One day, he imagined, Bryn might be here at his side.

Until that day, he'd run her button between his fingers and wait for his princess.

THE END