



# The Last of the Dark Lords

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Skye

My whole life, I've heard stories of the Dark Lord of Ashfuror, horrifying tales of torture and death that gave me nightmares as a child. When I turned eighteen, I committed myself to defending my home city of Greatfalls against the threat, and in six short years I rose to the rank of Commander of the Archers. All I want to do is keep my city safe.

But when war finally comes, I find myself not on the front lines, but engaged to be married to the Dark Lord as part of a fragile treaty. I arrive for the wedding intent on destroying the source of the Dark Lord's power and preserving my home's security and autonomy forever.

But soon I find that all is not as it seems. The Dark Lord is not a monster, but a handsome, infuriating man. And my home city of Greatfalls is not the innocent sanctuary I always thought it was.

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# Page 1

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“Are you ready?”

Jelenna gave me a fierce look, her eyes flashing and her dark brown hair pulled back tight, emphasizing the severity of her face. Lean and muscular, my second-in-command could be intimidating when her warrior personality revealed itself.

From the top of the dam, I had a good view of the sea of people, hundreds of the citizens of the city of Greatfalls, bows strapped to their backs. They were the most accomplished archers in all of Fyr, gathered in the morning sun. The first rays of dawn burst over the top of the wall behind them, painting bright stripes over the tops of their heads.

Many had their arms crossed, some worrying at a weapon or a leather tie. I could see the doubt on their faces. They’d heard the rumors. I was here to alleviate their worry.

“Skye?”

I turned back to Jelenna. She smirked at me.

“Want to get started anytime soon?” she asked.

“Shut up.” Jelenna was an old friend and one of the few people I could be unguarded around. I was thankful for it, especially today.

“It will be fine.” Jelenna’s voice took on a comforting tone. “They trust you.”

“Do they? How many of them see me as nothing more than the spoiled grandson of

the Prime? A kid who was selected to replace a veteran of five decades at the age of twenty-four because of his family connection. That's why they're questioning themselves now."

Jelenna rolled her eyes at me. "None of them think of you like that. You've been Commander for four years. You've trained the Archers well."

I shook my head. That didn't matter, if I lost their support. Making sure they could fight wasn't my only job. Their morale was my responsibility.

"None of them have seen combat. Until now, war was only an idea. Hell, how many of them have traveled even fifty leagues away from the city? I haven't. Our isolation is a strength, but it makes the unknown that much more terrifying."

"So you'll show them how confident you are in their abilities. Give them some fire! Convince them of the righteousness of your cause, and they'll follow you anywhere." She winked. "Even if I know you're shaking in your boots."

I chuckled. She loved to take me down a peg, but she'd always had my back. Jelenna wasn't just an excellent leader and tactician, she was also my best friend. It didn't matter that I was the youngest son of the Prime Family of Greatfalls, I would have never become Commander of the Archers without her support.

I had been a short, scrawny, tawny-haired kid when I'd joined the Archers, determined but untested. She had helped me grow into the solid commander I was today. Strong in body and spirit. Even if I was still fairly short.

I nodded. "It's time."

She turned out to the crowd and gave a high-pitched yell. The conversation among the troops died down to a low murmur.

“Archers of Greatfalls!” I let my voice ring out. It was a half a league from the dam to the outer boundary, and the soldiers filled the space in between.

“You have come to me. You’ve told me of your worry over our uneasy dealings with the capital at Ashfuror. You’ve heard the stories of your great-grandparents, of the lives lost defending Greatfalls from the assault of the Dark Lords. You’ve heard rumors of an army on the move, making its way toward us.”

They stared up at me, some shifting their weight back and forth uneasily. I could see the distrust in so many of their eyes.

“I am here to tell you that those rumors are true.”

The whispering burst into full on conversations as the Archers reacted to my words. There was a tone of arrogant bluster in some of the voices, but most had an undercurrent of fear.

“Commander Skye!”

My eyes went to the source of the yell. It was an older Archer, a scruffy middle-aged man with the weathered skin of someone who’d spent their life in the sun. I wasn’t surprised he was the first to speak. He was never shy about making his opinions known.

“Gyles.” I locked eyes with him.

“Commander, my great-grandfather spoke of the last war.” Gyles’ voice shook with barely-concealed panic. “He lived through it. Greatfalls almost didn’t survive, and we had many allies then. There’s no one to come to help us now. If they breach the walls, we will fall.”

“We will not!” The blood rushed to my face. I took a breath. It wouldn’t serve me to lose control.

“We will not fall,” I continued, keeping my voice even. “The Archers of Greatfalls are legendary. Your skill and your fervor keep us safe. No one will breach the walls, because you won’t allow it. You’ll cut down any that dare to come against us.”

“But Commander—”

“No.” Although Gyles had voiced their fears, my words had broken through the cloud of dread that dampened the spirits of many of the Archers.

“Greatfalls is different from the rest of Fyr.” I scanned the faces of the soldiers as I spoke. “It is our great strength, and why we must keep ourselves separate. Our commitment is to Family, and theirs is to their shadowy figurehead. It is why we do not suffer from the drought, and why our walls will always hold. The ties of family hold us together, each of you with your own unbreakable bonds forming the foundation of our lives.”

Resolve crept into the faces of many of my Archers. I continued. “They do not have the same commitment to family, to each other, to human life. That is why they will always fall.”

My eyes found Gyles once again. His face had softened, although the worry still lurked underneath. That was fine. This was only a beginning. The other Archers would rally the most fearful among them.

“Shall I continue?” Seeing the nods and raised fists, pride burst in my chest. They may have been untested in combat, but they were still the legendary Archers.

“We do not know the intentions of the Dark Lord of Ashfuror, but his troops are

traveling in our direction. Our scouts are out there now, infiltrating the battalions. Soon we will know more.”

Some flickers of fear returned at the mention of the Dark Lord, but I had laid the foundation. They might have arrived as individuals, but they would leave as a single unit.

“But I will tell you this.” I unstrapped my bow from across my back and hoisted it above my head. The sun glinted off the polished silver embellishments.

“For hundreds of years, the Archers have protected Greatfalls from the assault of the Dark Lords. We have kept our families safe. We will continue to do so.”

Jelenna’s hand squeezed my shoulder. The strength of her certainty energized me.

“But if the Last of the Dark Lords thinks that he can take us, he will discover the knowledge his forebears gained with their lives. The Archers of Greatfalls will hold the line.”

“Hold the line!” Jelenna’s voice pierced through the cold morning air. Some of the soldiers started at the sound.

“The Archers of Greatfalls will push them back!”

“Push them back!” Now Jelenna’s voice was not alone. The oldest veteran Archers had added their voice to hers. The growing energy thrummed through the crowd.

“The Archers of Greatfalls will show our strength!”

“Show our strength!” It was more than half of them now. These were my people. We would always protect our home.

“The Archers of Greatfalls will keep us whole!”

“Keep us whole! Keep Greatfalls whole!” To a person, my Archers held their bows aloft. I saw the tears running down the faces of a couple of the old timers who were nearing retirement. They had twenty years on Gyles even, and it wasn’t a story to them. They were children during the last conflict, and could remember the fear and desperation, and the triumph.

“And so we will. Stay vigilant, Archers. If we are needed, we will be ready. Now to your posts.”

Determination shone on the faces of the Archers. And then Erik, the youngest of them, just eighteen and newly joined, cried out with youthful exuberance.

“For Greatfalls!”

The cries echoed as I turned to leave. Jelenna followed behind me.

“I hope that was enough,” I said, not looking back as we walked.

“It was more than enough. They trust you.”

“I hope so.” Doubt still flickered inside me, the very thing that I’d been trying to eradicate in my Archers. “I sometimes feel a strange distance from them.”

“They respect you.” Jelenna said, then paused before continuing. “But they don’t love you. Yet. You could fix that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Spend time with them. Drink with them. They’ve been asking you for years.”

My jaw clenched. People kept hounding me about socializing. “That’s not what a military commander does. I have to keep a clear head.”

“Who says you can’t take a night off?” Jelenna’s tone stayed teasing, but I could tell she was frustrated with me. “A little carousing and they’ll see that you’re an actual person.”

“Absolutely not.” My voice was getting louder. I tried to calm myself. Jelenna had to be honest about what she thought. It was essential to our relationship, as friends and officers.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t lose control around them. They need a steady-eyed leader, not a sloppy drunk.”

She shook her head. “If you let them see that you’re human, not one of them would think it made you less of the commander that you are.”

“A commanding officer doesn’t fraternize. It’s as simple as that.”

“Skye—”

“Any word from the scouts?”

Jelenna let out a grunt of exasperation at my attempt to change the subject, but I knew she would let it go. I had made up my mind. She might call it stubborn, but I was certain about some things. More arguing wouldn’t do her any good.

“I haven’t heard anything from them,” she said, “but your brother would know for sure.”



I stopped and let out a sigh. I didn't say anything, but my face must have read volumes.

Jelenna gave me a pitying look. "Yes, he's an ass, you can say it."

"That may be," I replied half-heartedly. "But he is my brother. Family is the most important bond. And he will be Prime of Greatfalls one day, when Grandmother moves on."

It was hard to prize that familial bond when Athard was everything Jelenna was not: arrogant, pretentious, and utterly lacking a sense of humor. Which I supposed I'd been accused of occasionally, but he was worse.

Jelenna pressed her lips together, and then spoke. "May that not be for decades to come."

"Hopefully by then we'll have come to some sort of peace," I said. "It won't do to have the Prime of Greatfalls and the Commander of the Archers at each other's throats."

My stomach tightened with anxiety as the words left my mouth. Once he was in charge, Athard wouldn't hesitate to pull rank. I was sure of it. I was glad that he would be Prime and not me, because I sure as hell didn't want to rule. Managing the Archers was more than enough. But I also didn't want to kowtow to his ego and poor decisions.

Jelenna winked at me. "I'll say a prayer to Vazzart tonight for your grandmother's long life."

We reached the end of the dam and the flat plain of the outer fortifications, the path curving around the edges of Safehold reservoir. The trees grew more dense as we

made our way to Prime Hall. Grandmother would be there as would Athard, but I could put up with him to find out if the scouts had returned.

The way was smoothed with years of footfall, curving through the groves of oak and cedar until it reached the top of a mound where the hall stood. A sturdy building of intricate carved wood, Prime Hall had been there for generations, housing the leading family of Greatfalls. For the last seven generations that had been the Adfelds. My family.

As I entered the building, I felt the weight of those generations on my shoulders. As commander of the Archers, it was my duty to keepsafe the history and lineage of Greatfalls. Prime Hall was a symbol of that history.

Jelenna fell back as I entered the main meeting area, where my grandmother leaned over a rectangular table, poring over maps and documents, her long silver hair pulled back into a braid. Although quite short, she exuded a sense of calm power that set everyone at ease.

Off to her side stood my brother Athard, leaning against a wall with a bored expression on his face. His blonde hair fell over his eyes like a petulant teenager's, and he wore a cape that was embroidered in gold. It was ostentatious and ridiculous, but he had it made for himself several years ago, and he was never without it. His hand rested on the rapier strapped to his side.

The weapon was an unusual choice in Greatfalls, where most were trained in archery and defensive hand-to-hand combat with daggers. Athard had always been a terrible shot, and my own facility with the bow enraged him. That didn't explain his choice of a weapon mostly associated with the long-dead aristocracy of Fyr, but I'd given up trying to make sense of my brother.

"Grandmother." I bowed my head. Out of the corner of my eye, Jelenna sank to her

knees. “Athard.” I did my best to hide my disdain as I spoke my brother’s name.

“I see you’re back from calming your unruly troops.” His words dripped with sullen sarcasm. “I hope we won’t have any more trouble from them.”

My shoulders tensed at his words. “The Archers are the backbone of Greatfalls. They deserve to know they are valued, especially when so much is uncertain.”

“ We are the backbone of Greatfalls.” He gestured to Grandmother and himself. “Your loyalty is to the family. We shouldn't have to coddle the Archers like toddlers with toy bows and arrows.”

Harsh words sprang to the tip of my tongue when Grandmother raised her hand to silence us.

“Enough, Athard.”

He glared at me, and then bowed his head. “Yes, Grandmother.”

“Please rise,” Grandmother said, gesturing to Jelenna, who got off her knees. “You mustn't let Athard get to you, Skye. When he is Prime, the two of you must work together. You will be all that’s left of the Adfelds, at least until one of you has children. ”

“Yes, Grandmother.” Athard had deliberately provoked me, and I was annoyed that I’d let his words get to me. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He wore a spoiled pout. “When he speaks of the Archers like that—”

“I know, my love.” Grandmother smiled. “When your parents died, you found your purpose in the Archers and the defense of Greatfalls. Athard had other pursuits.”

I nodded. It took a small effort not to say out loud what I thought, that his pursuits were foolish and selfish. More fighting would be pointless.

“Would you rather you were heir?” she asked.

Athard sputtered at Grandmother’s words. He opened his mouth to speak, but Grandmother silenced him with a sharp look.

“Commander of the Archers is all the title that I want.” Jelenna placed a hand on my back. I was lucky she was so often there to calm me. “I’m not interested in politics.”

“Then as his family, his most important support system, we must help him grow into his role as Prime.”

Athard mumbled something under his breath, but I ignored it. Grandmother was right. Our strength was as the Prime family. I wouldn’t do anything to undermine that.

Grandmother stepped back from the table, sitting down slowly in a large wooden chair. “Now tell me why you are here in the middle of the day. Shouldn’t you be with your company?”

“I come from them. And although I wouldn’t call them unruly,” I said, glaring at Athard, “they were unsettled. Any word from the scouts?”

“No.” Her face was inscrutable. “The last report said the Dark Lord’s troops were thirty leagues to the southeast. They have stopped advancing on us.”

“We aren’t his target, then.” Athard had shrugged off his petulant mood to participate in the conversation. At least he could take things seriously when it was required.

“Who do you think the target is, if not us?” Grandmother asked. “Between Ashfuror

and here there's only wasteland for a hundred leagues in either direction, and behind us are the mountains. No Dark Lord has crossed the mountains since long before I was born. Who knows what lies on the other side."

"He's coming here," I said.

"Yes."

I was suddenly aware of the sweat sticking to my palms. I was not particularly prone to fear, but the last of the Dark Lords was something else. He was a figure of terror, and he was responsible for the great tragedy of my life.

Athard reacted to the alarm on my face. "Don't be such a coward."

I didn't respond. He wasn't wrong. I was a military commander, not a milkmaid. But I was overwhelmed with flashes of memories from when I was young.

"Skye," Grandmother said. "Do not let your emotions be ruled by grim rumors of the Lord of Ashfuror."

"The death of our mother and father is not a rumor, Grandmother. He killed your son and took our parents from us. To murder diplomats on a peace mission..." I wrestled my voice under control as it threatened to crack with childhood grief. "I can't even remember their faces. He took away my chance to know them."

"I know, my love." Grandmother stood, coming to me and enveloping me in her arms, the top of her head brushing my chin. It was always astonishing to me how this tiny woman could exude such strength. "I miss them both, every day."

Athard grunted and stomped out of the room. He was impossible.

Grandmother broke from me and stepped back, her hands on both of my arms as she continued. “Pay him no mind. You know he cannot stand thinking about your mother and father. Someday he will learn that there is strength in confronting the past head on. But listen. We have always stood against the Dark Lords, and we will against Cyrus as well.”

“Cyrus? That’s his name?” Jelenna’s voice cut through my anxiety with her curiosity.

“Yes, dear,” Grandmother answered. “His father is the one who killed my son and his wife.”

I blinked in confusion. I had always assumed that the current Dark Lord and the killer of my mother and father were one and the same.

“How did he die?” My voice wavered as I spoke. As an adolescent I had imagined leaving Greatfalls, riding beyond the wall and into the wasteland to Ashfuror to track down my parents’ murderer and mete out justice. I had let that fantasy go years ago, but a small part of me held onto the idea that one day I might get revenge.

“You were so young at the time.” Grandmother closed her eyes, as if conjuring a memory. “After your parents were murdered, we were able to get an assassin through to Ashfuror. He managed to take out the Dark Lord, although he lost his life in the process. It’s not something I’ve spoken about much. The people of Greatfall can get...upset about the realities of political rule.”

It made sense that she wouldn’t have told me at the time. I was only six, after all. Still, it brought up questions. Would the current Dark Lord have a vendetta against us for the murder of his father?

“Do you think...”

“Do I think that the Dark Lord is coming back for revenge? It’s always possible, but I doubt it. By all accounts Cyrus did not mourn his father particularly, and that was twenty-two years ago.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure how I felt. Maybe this Dark Lord was not my parents' murderer, but he was still responsible for so much suffering in Fyr. Greatfalls was one of the last holdouts from his rule. The skill of the Archers was legendary, and the tales of their endless bravery kept away most would-be conquerors.

The Dark Lord, though, did have the strength for a siege if he decided the time had come. It would cost him dearly, but throw enough men at us, and who could say how long we'd hold out? Five years? Ten?

“Don’t worry about Cyrus, love. I’ll let you know when we have more news from the scouts. For now, we stay ready. The outer wall must hold. We have to protect the dam and Safehold reservoir. They are all that stand between us and the drought that ravages the rest of Fyr.”

“The Archers will be ready.” Pride bloomed in my chest as I spoke. “They are strong, Grandmother.”

“As are you, my child. As are you.”

She opened her arms once again, and I wrapped her in a hug. There was a sense of home and safety there that I had never found elsewhere. My memories of my parents were only fond flashes of kindness and love, of smiles and soft words. They died too young for anything more. Grandmother had been the foundation of my life.

She was the Prime of Greatfalls, and I was her grandson. I would always keep our home safe.

## Page 2

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Jelenna and I walked along the top of the dam, checking on the archers at their posts. The dam was the cornerstone of Greatfalls' existence. The water that ran down from the mountains behind us collected there, enabling our agriculture and ensuring that we would survive even when the rest of Fyr was dry.

Which it was. As long as anyone could remember, Fyr had struggled with lack of rainfall, and the latest drought had lasted five years. I gave thanks to Vazzart that we'd been prepared for it, and prayed that the suffering in the rest of Fyr might be eased. Of course, I knew that was unlikely. Outside of our city, the people of Fyr worshiped Stahkla, the God of Fire and Metal, and followed the Dark Lord of Ashfuror. In Greatfalls, we knew both to be bringers of chaos and destruction. I had sympathy for their ignorance, but unless they rejected their ruler and their god, their lives wouldn't improve.

As the afternoon sun beat down on our heads, Jelenna gazed out onto the water of Safehold reservoir. The water sparkled, the gentle wind creating ripples across the expanse. On the far end, the mountains rose, looming over the evergreens and wooden houses of the small city.

I found myself entranced by the thatched roofs and chimneys peeking through the greenery, brown and green, all bathed in the bright white of midday. Inside, the people of my city went about their day, untouched by drought or violence. The lives of these families were what I sought to preserve. My own troubles were less important.

"You're pensive."



Jelenna's voice startled me, bringing me out of my reverie into the present.

"The man who killed my parents is dead."

"He is," Jelenna replied. "But his son is still alive. You could track him down and beat the shit out of him."

I barked out a laugh. "Sure. I'm going to go all the way to Ashfuror, hunt down Cyrus, and what? Spank him?"

"Sounds fun to me." Jelenna winked.

"It doesn't matter. I haven't thought about avenging my parents in a long time." I watched as gentle ripples traverse the expanse of the reservoir. "It's just strange that I didn't know. I understand. It was a long time ago, there's no reason Grandmother would have brought it up."

"Isn't it recorded somewhere for posterity?" Jelenna frowned. "It seems important enough that it should be in the Archive."

"I'm not the heir. I don't have access to the Archive."

Jelenna grunted. We stood there for a moment, the cool breeze lapping at our faces. Then Jelenna broke the silence.

"What if you were the heir?"

My shoulders tensed at her words. Why couldn't she let this go? "I told you not to bring that up again."

"Athard's an asshole," Jelenna kept on.

“No, Jelenna—”

“Your Grandmother has to see that. You would be a hundred times better than him as Prime.”

“I don’t want that!” My voice came out louder than I’d intended, but I was angry. “A military life is one of rules. Soldiers thrive on clarity. It’s my job to make sure nothing is vague or uncertain for them.”

“You’re good at that.”

“Being a politician leader, ruling a city, it’s all subterfuge and manipulation. I don’t have the stomach for it.”

Jelenna squinted at me, then spoke. “Athard certainly has an appetite for that side of things.”

“He gets it from Grandmother. If only he inherited her love for the people.”

I looked out once more on the water. The gentle waves had a calming effect on me, evening my breathing out.

“I worry about being in the dark, once she’s gone,” I continued. “I don’t want to be his tool. But he will be ruler. He will have access to the Archive, to the knowledge of our family and to the artifacts gathered there. Only the Prime can claim that.”

“What do you think is in there, anyway?” Jelenna’s eyes sparkled with curiosity. She loved a good mystery, and I couldn’t say that I hadn’t wondered myself on occasion.

“Hard to say. I know that Vazzart has gifted Greatfalls with several powerful artifacts over the generations, but I’ve never seen one used. Grandmother’s staff is an artifact

of Vazzart, supposedly, but I don't know what it does."

"My cousin Omer, you know, the assistant librarian?" Jelenna's voice bounced with enthusiasm. Talk of magic brought out her obsessive side. "He loves history, he's always researching this or that. He found an old volume that talked about the people from beyond the mountains. Evidently, they could use magic without an artifact."

I laughed, shaking my head. What a disaster that would be. "The fact that the gods choose the bearer and limit the magic of an artifact is the only thing keeping it from being abused. If anyone could have that kind of power, people would do horrible things!"

Jelenna shrugged. "I'm just telling you what Omer said. It would be amazing to have that kind of magic. Don't you think?"

"I have enough to worry about as it is."

She started to reply, but was interrupted by a long, clear tone, like a bell, pealing out over the reservoir. Across Safehold, a shimmer of gold and silver ran through the water and burst into the air with a joyful splash. Somehow both solid and insubstantial, the manifestation hung above the lake a few feet in front of us. It twisted and turned, forming exquisitely curved shapes, intersecting and merging. If it was trying to communicate something, I didn't know what, but it was beautiful.

The manifestation slowly left us, quivering as it faded to nothing. After a moment, I realized I was holding my breath. I released the muscles of my core, forcing my lungs back to work.

Jelenna let out a laugh, deep and joyous.

"Vazzart must approve of what we're doing, to send us a sign like that!"

“I hope so.” I stared out at the empty space where the phenomenon had appeared. “The God of the Water and the Forest doesn’t come to us very often these days.”

Jelenna clapped me on my back, her touch strong and stinging. “Trust it, Skye. Let’s make sure that we’re ready for whatever comes. What do we need to do?”

I thought for a moment. The Archers were ready. I believed that. They’d grown into an even more formidable fighting force over the years. I trusted them to take on anything.

Still, we couldn’t be too prepared.

“Let’s ride out and survey the outer wall. We can find and repair any weaknesses before the Lord of Ashfuror gets within spitting distance.”

“Come on, then. Let’s mount up.”

A few minutes later, Jelenna and I sat on our steeds as the stewards raised the gate skyward. Blaze had been my mount for a few years now. He was a tall, black stallion, and with me he was sweet and mischievous. But he had a strong kick and a sharp bite waiting for an enemy, or anyone who treated him poorly.

Jelenna sat atop Cherry, a brown-red horse a little shorter in stature than Blaze. Cherry wasn’t sweet to anyone. Her relationship with Jelenna was more like two rivals than rider and mount, and at any given moment I wasn’t sure exactly who was winning.

Jelenna and I rode out onto the plains of Fyr. I loved the feeling of riding, the wind whipping through my hair, feeling Blaze’s muscles stretch and flex beneath me. There was a sensation of power, but also of partnership. Although I’d never been on a truly long journey, even a few leagues with Blaze put me in a good mood.

As we passed through the gate, the shift in setting was instantaneous. The lush greenery of Greatfalls stopped abruptly past the walls. The years of drought had turned the soil dry and clay-like, and there was no vegetation outside of a few scraggly shrubs. What had been a pleasant afternoon sun inside the city was a tormenting burn on the arid, cracked plain.

I scanned the horizon in every direction, but there was no trace of humanity. The nearest farming village was leagues away, if anyone even still lived there. There was no life in the area surrounding my home city. The sight of it left a desolate emptiness in the pit of my stomach.

We rode north along the outside of the wall, stopping at the dry riverbed to inspect the great outlet pipes where the waters of the dam could be emptied when necessary. It was part of the duty of the Prime to monitor the use of water in Greatfall. Any excess would flow out to be used by the rest of the people of Fyr.

It had been four years since the last time Grandmother allowed any water to be released.

The stonework and metalwork around the outlets had been crafted in Ashfuror long ago, during the ancient times of peace. The system was intricate and, when fully functioning, unassailable.

Jelenna dismounted, walking up to inspect the metal grates and seals that protected this place of weakness in the wall. It was enough to give me nightmares, the thought that somehow the armies of the Dark Lord would pry their way into the city through the water system, but thankfully none had been able to do so in our long history.

Giving a quick thumbs up, Jelenna hopped back onto Cherry's back and we continued our northward ride.

Pride stirred in me at the sight of the well-maintained walls. The stonemasons of Greatfalls took great care to repair any flaws as soon as they were discovered. Every citizen of our city was committed to our security.

We approached the northernmost end of the outer wall, where it met the sharply rising mountain. The sheer cliffs made it impossible for approaching armies to flank the city. Perhaps half a league away from the wall's end, Jelenna stopped and pointed.

“Do you see that?”

I squinted in the direction of her finger, but didn't see anything unusual, except...yes. There was a slight movement at the foot of the wall.

“What is it?”

Not saying anything, Jelenna rode toward the spot, and I followed a few strides behind. Alarm twitched in my chest. Something about this was off. As we got closer the problem came into focus — writhing, furry bodies about the size of dogs, maybe forty? Fifty? More than I could easily count. We slowed, keeping our distance.

Jelenna identified them first. “Rock gories. There must have been a chink in the wall. They're clawing at it, trying to open it up more.”

“This isn't normal.” Rock gories were friendly creatures and stayed in family groups of three or four. They weren't pack animals.

“It's the drought. They're desperate for water. They can hear the reservoir behind the wall.”

Stepping Blaze forward, I called out to them.

“Hya! Get out of here!”

There was a tiny hesitation as the mass of limbs and fur paused at the sound of my voice, and then resumed its work.

“Rock gories are usually afraid of people,” I called out to Jelenna. “They must be desperate. We can’t let them keep digging into the wall.”

Jelenna grabbed her bow from her back, stringing an arrow and letting it fly. It struck one of the animals with a thud, and it collapsed onto the dry dirt.

Once again the mass of furry bodies stopped, but this time the group turned toward us. Their small, beady eyes shone out of their square faces, as their long snouts sniffed at the air. As one, the gories growled and bared their teeth.

“What the hell!?” Instinctively, my hand went to my bow. “Rock gories are supposed to be easy to scare off!”

“Enough hunger and thirst will make anything violent.”

With a leap, the animals came for us, a turbulent river of fur and teeth and claws.

Jelenna and I began shooting, splitting apart and guiding our steeds to get on either side of the pack of crazed mammals. Another gory went down, then another, but it didn’t slow their advance. Soon they had managed to flank us both.

My arrows flew, one after the other, finding their target over and over again. A minute later, there were ten rock gories lying dead, but the others took no note of it. I was holding them off, but barely, and I didn’t have an unlimited supply of arrows. I’d run out sooner rather than later.

I couldn't shoot fast enough to prevent them from getting to me. When the first clawed at Blaze, he sent it flying with a kick that crushed the rock gory's skull. That didn't stop the assault, though, as they nipped and clawed at us from all sides.

I jumped down, grabbing for the long dagger in my belt, slashing one gory's throat and gutting another. Their bodies pressed against me, and I felt the sting of their teeth tearing into my leathers, but I jabbed back at them. Every Archer was schooled in knife fighting, in the event that an enemy got too close to shoot. My training kicked in, and my movement became unconscious. Thrust, slice, stab, again and again.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Blaze kicked and trampled, his hooves crushing the soft bodies of the rock gories underneath them. Between the two of us we managed to put down many of the animals, and I could sense the assault getting thinner.

Until a roar echoed on the empty plain. Piercing the air, raspy and feline, it could only be one thing.

"A zakar!" Jelenna yelled, although I couldn't see her through the crowd of rock gories around me. "A zakar come down from the mountain!"

That was not good. A predator cat the size of a small horse, zakar were solitary and elusive animals. I'd caught a glimpse of one once, hiking the nearby slopes. It had disappeared seconds after I'd even registered it was there. They didn't attack people. At least, that's what I'd always been told, but today I'd learned I couldn't trust the conventional wisdom.

As I was sliding my dagger up the torso of one gory, the zakar roared again. It was louder, much nearer to me this time, and the shock pushed me out of my fighting rhythm. My feet slipped on the blood pooling beneath and slid out from under me. The rocky ground met the back of my head with a sharp pang, and the world flashed



bright in front of me. I clenched my gut, fighting to hold on to my consciousness.

A rock gory was on me then. Its hot, wet breath warmed my face as I struggled to hold it at arm's length. It was straining to get at my throat, and we were locked in opposition. I needed leverage to push it back and attack with my dagger, but I couldn't get it.

The jaws of the rock gory inched closer and closer to my neck as my arms grew weaker. Driven to rage by its thirst, it growled low and lunged.

I closed my eyes, wanting my final sight to be something other than the feral face of the beast. Its sharp teeth grazed my neck.

“Need a little help?” It was a man's voice, deep and smooth. I didn't recognize it, but in my desperation I didn't question it.

“Yes!” I grunted out.

There was a sick sound, like a butcher knife slicing through wet meat, and a whimper. The weight of the animal came down heavy as it collapsed on top of me.

“Shit.” I rolled the gory off me and struggled to catch my breath. When I'd recovered, my savior was already moving away. He was tall and toned, dressed in black leathers, swinging a sword in fluid arcs as he took out the rock gories that mobbed him. His face was pale, sporting a few days worth of stubble, and his eyes were green and piercing. Atop his head sat a circlet of onyx.

I pushed myself to my feet and looked in the direction the man was headed. There it was. The zakar. A tall, thick cat with rippling muscles, it was covered in orange and white fur. It was huge, but the swordsman didn't slow his approach.

What was he doing? There was no way to fight this thing on foot.

An arrow whistled as it passed by me, embedding itself in the zakar's side with a thud. I turned my head and Jelenna stood there, surrounded by mounds of dead rock gories.

I grabbed for my own arrows, and my hand only found one remaining in my quiver. Damn.

Jelenna sent another arrow toward the creature, but it went wide as the cat moved to avoid the swordsman's jabs. I made eye contact with Jelenna and she shook her head. She was out of arrows.

The swordsman danced around the zakar, his movements graceful and deadly. He was getting hits in, but they weren't deep enough. The cat was agile. Eventually the man would tire, and the zakar would overwhelm him.

I couldn't help fight the thing with only a dagger. I knocked my last arrow. This was my one chance. If I didn't hit my target, I'd be left totally useless.

The swordsman's eyes flitted to me and then back to the hulking feline. I could only hope he understood what I was trying to do. He sliced the cat across its shoulder, a superficial injury at most, but it had the desired effect. The cat turned its head in response, and I could see the slits of its eyes.

I squinted, took a breath, and let my arrow fly.

It found its mark, piercing the zakar's left eyeball. With a yowl of pain and frustration, the cat rolled onto its side, the end of the arrow sticking out and agitating even more as the animal hit the ground.

With the finesse of a dancer, the swordsman moved to slice the cat's throat. With a roll, the big cat barely avoided the attack, and then it was off. Its muscles flexed and pulled as it ran away at top speed.

"Ah well. Nice shot," he said after watching the cat run for a minute. He walked toward his horse, a large white mare. I hadn't noticed her in the chaos of the fight.

"Wait," I yelled after him. "Who are you?"

"You'll find out." He hopped up on his steed and winked at me. He winked at me. What the hell was happening here? I was uncharacteristically flustered all of a sudden. Who was this strange man? He had incredible sword fighting skills, and was dressed in expensive leathers.

As he rode off, Jelenna made eye contact with me. "He's very handsome," she said, smirking.

"Are you serious?" We had a swordsman in the vicinity of Greatfalls, an elite fighter of unknown origin. We had no idea what his motives and plans were, and she was commenting on how handsome he was? What did it matter that he was good-looking?

"I just noticed." She shrugged, then her eyes widened as she noticed all of the blood and viscera down the front of me. "Are you hurt?"

I made a quick inventory of myself. I was covered in scratches and bites, but my armor had managed to turn the worst of it. None of the blood was mine.

"I'm fine." My eyes went to the swordsman, who was galloping away at a clip. "We need to go after him. We have to find out who he is. "

She nodded and we both started for our mounts. I sprang up on Blaze's back and

turned him to follow the enigmatic fighter. Jelenna rode up beside me and I spurred us onwards.

“Commander Adfeld!” A voice rang from behind us. I pulled Blaze up short and we turned. Doren, one of the more promising of the younger Archers, was heading toward us on horseback. “Commander, stop!”

“What brings you out here?” I asked as he approached. “We have to go—”

“No, please stop! I was sent to find you.” The slight young man paused, taking several labored breaths. He must have been riding hard.

As he paused, I peered back out in the direction the swordsman had ridden to find that he was...gone! How was that possible? The land was flat, and there were few trees. How could he have disappeared?

“Dammit.” The curse was out of my mouth before I could stop it. The man might have saved my life, but he’d also rattled me.

“Commander, First Lieutenant...” Doren’s voice wrenched my attention back.

“What is so urgent that you needed to rush out here to get us?” Jelenna asked.

“The Prime ordered me to find you as she found out.” Doren straightened, regaining his composure and locking his gaze to mine. “The scouts have returned.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

The air was thick with tension when I entered Prime Hall. The two scouts, Renna and Burl, passed me as they exited. When I made eye contact, both of them looked at the floor and quickened their pace. Something was up.

I found Grandmother sitting in the Primal Chair, an imposing piece of furniture intricately carved out of deep mahogany, and a seat she rarely inhabited. The crests of the families that had ruled Greatfalls through the generations surrounded her, sculpted vividly in the dark wood.

Grandmother's eyes snapped to mine as I entered, and her face was grave. Athard stood off her shoulder, an arrogant smirk turning up his lips. The sight of his face made my stomach churn with unspoken frustration.

Grandmother made a sweeping gesture with one hand, and the room emptied of the various other ministers and servants. Jelenna reached out and squeezed my arm. The concern showed on her face.

"Come find me later."

The steward pulled the great wooden doors shut with an ominous bang. I swallowed, my tongue thick in my mouth. I couldn't recall a time when we'd had a truly private conversation here. Grandmother was always surrounded with advisors.

"Are we going to war?" I worked to keep my voice even as I asked the question.

"That's up to you, baby brother," Athard said in a taunting tone. What the hell did that mean?

Grandmother glared at him and he frowned, but at least he stopped talking. She turned back to me. Her face was pale and still. When she spoke, her voice was clear, not betraying any emotion or turmoil.

“The scouts have returned. The Dark Lord Cyrus engaged with them directly and sent along a missive.” She gestured at an envelope sitting on the nearby table. It bore the flaming emblem of Ashfuror, glowing with an otherworldly orange light. “He’s offered a proposition.”

I felt a flutter of anxiety in my chest. Her words unsettled me.

“What could he possibly want from us?”

“He has offered a peace treaty, to end the feints and skirmishes of the past and to forge a true alliance.”

“How can we trust him?” I had trouble getting the question out.

“I don’t know that we can.” Grandmother sighed, brushing a strand of gray hair from her face. “But I also don’t know that it matters.”

My brows furrowed at her words. What was she getting at? Some deep part of me hummed with alarm.

“According to the scouts,” she continued, “he has come with an overwhelming force. We could hold Greatfalls for a long time, years maybe, but if he was determined, he could outlast us. He has the force of a nation behind him. We are but one city.”

“We can hold him off,” I rebutted. “My people are ready. The Archers are better coordinated and deadlier than they have been in years.”

“How many of them are you willing to lose, Skye?” Grandmother asked, her voice a whisper.

“They would all give their lives willingly for Greatfalls.”

“Would you want that on your conscience?” Grandmother stood and walked to the large bay window to her right. She gazed out onto the lush greenery of Greatfalls, and beyond that, the sparkling waters of the reservoir.

“He has pledged that Ashfuror will not attack our city as long as his reign lasts.” She turned toward me, and for the first time I saw uncertainty flash across her face. “In return for your hand in marriage.”

The room got uncomfortably bright, and I felt my lungs seize. I gasped for air, but it was getting caught in my closed throat.

“What...why? Why would he want me?”

“There is...some precedent. Marriage has been used to cement relations between Greatfalls and Ashfuror in the past, although not for two hundred years.”

Athard tittered from the corner. “Maybe he heard about your famously uncorrupted virtue.” His words dripped with sarcasm.

I was too overwhelmed to retaliate. I fought for control of my body, taking several deep breaths.

“But the marriage bond.” I clenched my fists as I clawed my way back to equilibrium. “I know that they don’t revere family as we do. Do they bind their souls together as they wed?”

“By all reports, they do.” Grandmother’s eyes softened. “I do not know if the tie is as strong. They worship a different god than we do. But it is part of the nuptial ritual, yes.”

My mind worked hard to organize the information I was receiving. My words were fully disconnected from any conscious thought. “I will bind myself. To the Dark Lord. For a peace treaty.”

“It’s not about the treaty, not fully.”

“What do you mean?” I kept blinking my eyes, trying to cut through my confusion and clear my head so that I could understand.

“It’s about the opportunity.”

“What opportunity?!?” I had never raised my voice to my grandmother, but I couldn’t control myself. My words burst out of me. “He can’t be trusted!”

Grandmother didn’t get angry. Instead, she flashed me a small, sad smile. “No, love. But with you there, you can take away his greatest power.”

I shook my head. That didn’t make any sense. Once I was in Ashfuror, I would be under his thumb, and bound to him through marriage. Any injury to him would be an injury to me.

“Don’t you know anything?” Athard crossed his arms as he spoke. “It’s his crown. It’s an artifact of Stahkla.”

“I’m supposed to destroy it?”

Athard barked out a laugh. The sound was harsh and cold. “You can’t destroy an



artifact of the gods.”

“How would I know that? I don’t have access to the Archive like you do.” I glared at him.

Grandmother held up her hand to stop us. She was right. There were far more important things to do than arguing with my brother.

“The crown of Ashfuror gives the Dark Lord the advantage of sight and knowledge of all of Fyr, including Greatfalls. Without it, his ability to govern and to attack is crippled.”

“So, if I can’t destroy it, what am I being sent to do?” My voice sounded distant to me even as I spoke the words.

“We have an artifact here in Greatfalls, a gift from Vazzart. A dagger with a sapphire handle. With it you can sever the Dark Lord’s link to the crown. But it cannot be done while it is on his head. He must take it off, willingly, which Cyrus has never been seen to do.”

My eyes went wide as it dawned on me what she was suggesting.

“You want me to marry him. You want me to wait until he takes the crown off in his bedchambers, where I will be in my place as his husband, and cut the link to his power.”

“Yes.”

My knees went weak. I walked to the large table nearby, pressing my hands down on the sturdy wood as I lowered myself into a small chair.

“You wish me to bind myself to the Dark Lord. To take vows I never planned to take with anyone, and then break them.”

“I don’t take it lightly, the breaking of a marriage oath,” she said, her tone solid and sure. “I would only ever ask such a thing to keep our home safe.”

I gripped the wood of the table with my fingertips. I’d made the defense of Greatfalls my life’s work, but wasn’t this too much? The soul bond would make me vulnerable in a way I’d never allowed myself to be. I would be bound to the son of the man who murdered my parents.

Grandmother must have seen the turmoil on my face. She walked to me, resting her hand gently on the back of my neck. Her touch was soothing.

“It is too much to ask. But I must ask it anyway. Take time. Speak to your friends. Pray to Vazzart. You have some days before the Dark Lord's ambassador arrives. Consider the price of what I am asking you, and the benefit to our people and to our city.”

I nodded silently, unable to speak. This was an impossible choice. My duty to Greatfalls or my own integrity. I was too overwhelmed to decide if the price was too high.

Grandmother kissed me gently on the forehead. “Think on it. I know you’ll make the right decision.”

I didn’t have a response. I stood up straight and kissed her on the cheek. I looked into her eyes, wondering if I would see regret or sadness, but there was only love and determination. Turning, I walked out the door of Prime Hall.

The sound of footsteps followed me, and when I reached the antechamber I turned to

find my brother. He leaned against the doorframe, a cocky sneer on his face.

“I’ll have to think long and hard about who should succeed you as Commander of the Archers.”

He was already planning my exile, of course. What an ass.

“I haven’t decided if I’m going,” I replied.

“Dont be an idiot, Skye. You’re going. You always do the dutiful thing. You might torture yourself for a few days, but you love to be the martyr.”

I felt rage churn in my gut. Why was he like this? Ever since we were teenagers, he’d made every interaction some kind of obnoxious sibling competition. I remembered those first few years after our parents’ deaths, when he’d been the perfect older brother, the only one who understood what I’d been through. The one person I trusted above all else. What had happened to him?

“What is wrong with you?” I spit back the question at him. “Why do you have to make everything so hard?”

Athard strode forward and bent his face down to mine. I couldn’t stop myself from flinching.

“Because you always have it easy. Little Skye, Grandmother’s favorite child. So good at archery, so fast and agile, and so handsome! Pretty, even, with your pale brown hair and your perfect skin. The perfect leader.”

“You are the heir ! What more could you possibly want?”

“So virtuous. Well, now you’ll sell your virtue for our peace. Do you think the Dark

Lord will be gentle when he takes you for the first time on your wedding night? Or do you think he'll use you for his pleasure and throw you away?"

I'd never lost control before, never let my rage supersede my rational thought. But before I could stop it, my fist flew, and Athard hit the ground with a thump.

I stepped back in shock at my own actions. My brother sprang back up, rubbing his chin and glaring at me.

"When I am Prime, Greatfalls will not welcome you." His voice had a malevolent finality to it. "All you will have left of home will be a fading memory. When Grandmother is gone, there will be no one left to coddle you."

His words stung, but the true pain was at my own violence. Why had I allowed him to get to me?

Seeing that he was unharmed other than his bruised pride, I turned and charged out of the building.

By now dusk had fallen, turning the forest of Greatfalls into a web of shadows. I didn't want to see Jelenna. I didn't want to speak to anyone. I wanted to forget, but I couldn't do that in my small, barely furnished cottage. Instead I took off toward the denser part of the wood, where the trees were close enough together that there were no buildings or people.

I reached the foot of the giant oak and jumped up to grab hold of a limb for leverage, pulling myself up and shimmying up the trunk. I pulled myself up to the higher branches, where I found my treasure.

It was still there, if a little worse for wear. A hammock, a ragged remnant of my childhood. It had been my refuge during the years after my parents death. When I

fought with Athard, or I was simply overcome with anger and sadness, I escaped to this perch, hidden among the boughs.

I lay on my back and watched as the gray of dusk gave way to the deep navy of night. One by one, the stars peeked through the thick darkness, until the sky was a field of white sparks.

As I drifted off to sleep, I thought not of dark lords and arranged marriages, but of my mother's smile. My memory of her had faded as the years went by, a tapestry worn away by time and the elements, but her smile stayed clear and bright. I imagined how she might have been dressed on my wedding day, in maroon or turquoise maybe, her brow adorned with flowers.

Her kind face blessing my future.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

I woke up wet. The morning dew had soaked my undergarments. The first light of morning brightened the sky and flickered through the filter of the canopy above. Everything was less ominous than the night before.

Despite my damp clothes, I didn't go back to my cottage. I could tough it out. I slid down the trunk of the old oak slowly, taking more care than the night before not to scrape my skin or put holes in my shirt.

I arrived at the training range as the archers were starting their morning routines. Most of the soldiers were in the mess tent, grabbing a meal and getting ready for the day. Alone on the field, I chose the farthest target of the bunch.

I let my arrows fly, one after another, until the repetition became hypnotic. Draw the arrow from my quiver. Notch it in the bow. Release it. Draw. Notch. Release.

I was about to step out to shoot through my quiver for the ninth time when a hand rested on my shoulder.

“Why didn't you come find me, Skye?”

I lowered my bow. I hadn't considered talking to Jelenna, or to anyone really. I'd felt an overwhelming need to escape. Even now, I wasn't sure I could put my thoughts into a coherent order.

“I...couldn't.” I fought through my reluctance. If I didn't speak to anyone about it, it wouldn't feel real. “Do you know about...”

“The rumor is the Prime asked you to marry the Dark Lord of Ashfuror.” She squeezed my arm. “Is it true?”

“Yes.” I let out a ragged breath. I checked to make sure no one was in earshot. “Grandmother wants me to sever Cyrus’ connection to his crown. It’s an artifact, a powerful one.”

“Sounds fun!” Jelenna flashed me a crooked smile. “What’s the problem?”

“We’ll take wedding vows. We’ll be bound together. That’s the strongest tie you can have with another human being. It wouldn’t weigh on you to betray that?”

“Skye, they aren’t people , not like us. They’re manipulative and conniving. They don’t feel guilt when they do something bad. His father killed your parents!”

I squeezed my forehead with my right hand. A throbbing pain was threatening to take over. “It’s not about them. My vows mean something to me. They aren’t just empty words. The soul bond makes that doubly true. What will it cost me to betray that?”

“Maybe a lot.” Jelenna answered. “But isn’t the future of our home worth it?”

From her face it was clear that she thought the answer was simple, but it wasn’t to me. I’d understood the need for agents among the enemy’s people, I even assumed we had some active. But this was an act of deceit and aggression that could put the core of who I was at risk.

I didn’t have an answer.

“Listen.” Jelenna’s tone was more casual. “I think I’ll come along.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll need support. I can be a lady-in-waiting.” She curtsied mischievously.

I chuckled at the thought of Jelenna dressed in the elaborate lace outfits of the old aristocracy.

“You’ve never been a lady.”

“Your attendant, then.” Her face set itself into a mask of determination. “The point is, you won’t be alone.”

Her wish to stay with me was comforting. She was intelligent and deadly. It would be good to have a friend like her at my side.

“All right. If I decide to do this, you can come.”

“Nice!” She slapped me on the back. “Now let’s talk about your virginity.”

“No.” My face surged with embarrassing warmth. “No, we will not be talking about that.”

“You need to lose it before the wedding.”

“I do not!”

“You really want your first time to be with the Dark Lord? Who knows what kind of ugly troll he is! I’ve heard that the old families of Ashfuror have been inbred for centuries.”

“I don’t think—”

“Why haven’t you taken care of this already, anyway?”



I rubbed my face with my hands. I hated this, hated talking about it and hated thinking about it.

“There was never anybody that I was that close to.”

“Oh, you mean you kept any potential love interests at arms length, because you’re scared to be vulnerable.”

I rolled my eyes. She was annoying, but she wasn’t wrong. As a teenager, I’d been too wrapped up in the drama of my parents’ deaths to have interest in any of it. After I came of age, I moved quickly up the ranks of the Archers. I hadn’t wanted to compromise my ability to be a good military leader by getting involved with any of them, but they were the only people I ever saw. There hadn’t been time to hunt for a partner.

All of that added up to, yes, I’d held people at a distance. It wasn’t worth the trouble.

“I’m not going to go and screw some stranger,” I said, “just to have done it.”

“Why not? In my experience, that can be a lot of fun.”

I shook my head. Jelenna viewed sex differently than I did. I didn’t begrudge her that. She should have all the fun times she could want. But if I had sex, my heart would be involved automatically. I understood that about myself, from even the few fleeting moments of kissing a classmate in my youth.

“It’s not for me.”

Jelenna shrugged. A sweet sadness shone in her eyes. “I thought it would make things easier.”

“I haven’t decided yet if I’m going to agree to the marriage. It’s a lot to ask.”

Jelenna stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. The compassion radiated from her embrace. I leaned into her. After a long moment, she broke the hug, keeping her hands on my shoulders and peering into my eyes.

“You should go up the mountain. To the shrine.”

“Vazzart hasn’t allowed anyone to find his altar in decades,” I said, confused. “No one has had direct contact since before we were born. All we have are those light shows over the reservoir. Has the god ever even spoken to anyone beside the Prime? It’s probably an old wives tale.”

“My grandfather found the shrine, back in the old days, and spoke directly to Vazzart.” Jelenna’s eyes were sharp with certainty. “He wouldn’t lie about something like that.”

“Even so, no one has managed it in our lifetime.”

Jelenna grabbed my hand and squeezed.

“Please try. If Vazzart could guide you, maybe the decision wouldn’t be so hard.”

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It took me two days. Two days of sleepwalking through my duties as Commander. Two days of my thoughts going in circles. I kept sleeping in the hammock. Being enveloped in the canopy of trees calmed the unease that coiled like a snake in my chest.

When I woke on the third morning, it was time. I gathered what I needed for the

ritual. It was simple: a flask of water from the reservoir, a gold coin, and my knife. The ceremony should be an easy one.

Finding the shrine, on the other hand, would be harder, if Vazzart even allowed it. It had been years since anyone had traveled that far up the mountain. The holy place wasn't all the way to the summit. That was unreachable, surrounded on all sides by sheer cliffs. But it would still be a hard hike, almost up to the treeline.

People said it had always been on the banks of the stream that ran down the mountain, feeding the reservoir, but they could never agree on the exact location. If the route of the stream had shifted significantly over the years, it would make finding it even more difficult.

I headed up a few hours after sunrise, keeping the swift stream in my sight as the path grew steeper and more difficult. The forest thinned with the elevation as I made my way. The mountainside was alive with movement, with chipmunks flitting from tree to tree, hummingbirds drinking from the bluebells, and starlings circling overhead. There was an electricity to it all, as if the mountain was welcoming me into its arms.

Eventually, though, it all grew quiet. The soft murmur of the water and the gentle movement of small animals through the undergrowth faded to an almost unconscious hum. The trees were sparser, but still the shade from the swaying leaves above my head kept my skin cool.

I didn't see it at first. I felt it, a tremor deep in my gut and spreading out to the rest of my being. At first there was nothing but the stream and the trees. Then a glint of blue and white, a flash of reflection through the brush. I left the bank and walked toward it.

The altar waited in a small clearing, a single block of carved blue quartz with veins of white running through it. Atop the altar sat a simple pewter bowl. I moved in closer.

The bowl was filled with water, gently bubbling, although there was no physical reason for it to be doing so.

With nervous reverence, I kneeled before the altar. I took out the gold coin and dropped it into the bowl. Upon contact, the water stilled, and the coin tumbled to the bottom, a glinting golden sun on a field of silver. Raising my left hand above the basin, I sliced across the top of it, letting blood drip down and float in tiny pools on the surface of the water.

After a few moments, the red liquid began to wind and turn, swirling into increasingly intricate patterns. I lost myself in the shapes, feeling a strange disconnection from my body and the world, like I was floating through empty space.

I was startled back into reality by the sound of rustling in the nearby brush. An enormous buck entered the clearing. I got up off my knee. Even standing, its head was far above mine, and its thick, muscular neck held up a massive set of antlers.

It approached me with powerful, even steps. It could have easily overpowered me, but I didn't have an impulse to step back from it. I couldn't tear myself away from its huge brown eyes. They contained some strange intelligence, some deep understanding.

It closed the distance and bent down, touching its nose to my forehead. There was a flash of cold and then everything changed.

I was underwater. Disoriented, I was carried along by a mighty current, passing by ancient, coral-covered ramparts. I struggled to swim, but the pull was too strong. Nothing I tried would slow me down.

Look .

The voice resounded loudly in my head, alien and strange, not like any human sound. It echoed with the power of the ocean's depths.

Before me, the moss- and coral-covered stones of the ancient monuments shifted and blurred, forming images that sprang to life in front of my eyes.

The unfathomably tall spires of Ashfuror, black and sooty, set against an orange-red sky. I recognized them from the illustrations in the history books I read as a child.

The inside of a cathedral of Stahkla, with an iron icon of the god himself. I stood in front of the altar, standing and grasping the hands of a tall, thin man in red robes, decorated with intricate gold embroidery.

Blaze, riding at great speed across a desolate plain, with me on his back, bearing the glowing orange banner of the Dark Lord. A flock of ravens circled overhead.

What was this? Some prediction or conjuration of what might be?

My grandmother, standing at the shrine of Vazzart, blood dripping from her hands, seeping through her fingers, falling to the earth below.

“No!”

Water flowed into my open mouth, silencing my cry, and I was choking, I was drowning. I squeezed my eyes closed, willing myself out of whatever this was, this vision or manifestation or terrible dream.

A bright light shone behind my closed eyelids, turning them from black to orange. I opened my eyes and I was once again back at the altar. The buck still stood in front of me, its intense brown eyes staring into my very soul.

You must go to him .

“How do I stop it? How do I save her?” I couldn’t keep myself from uttering a desperate plea. My grandmother was all I had, the only thing left that connected me to my parents. “Please...”

Go to him.

From behind me at the foot of the mountain, the clarion call of a horn rang out, echoing off the slopes. I turned toward it, but from where I stood I had no view of Greatfalls, or of the outer walls.

I turned back. The animal was gone.

Was this the visitation of Vazzart? The buck hadn’t spoken but a few words to me, but what it had shown me was terrifying. Were these visions of a set future, or could I change the outcome?

There were no answers to be had, only the gentle gurgle of water from atop the shrine. I shook with anger. I had been given no answers, only some disturbing images and a vague directive to “go to him.”

I assumed the “him” was the Dark Lord, but why? Why did I have to go to him? Would it circumvent the visions or would it cause them to come into being?

Another horn blast broke me from my reverie, and I took off down the mountain at a clip. Regardless of whatever had just happened, if that horn meant what I thought it did, then I needed to be there for it.

The arrival of the army of the Dark Lord.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

When I arrived, Grandmother and my brother were at the front gate, surrounded by her personal guard and a regiment of Archers.

For once in his life, my brother was serious. He stared at me as I walked toward them, an undercurrent of anxiety tempering his typical arrogant expression.

There was no fear on Grandmother's face. She exuded a business-like severity. Her hand rested steady and strong atop her staff of carved hickory. She faced the closed gate. I fell in at her side. The soldiers around us were tense and restless.

I smiled confidently at the Archers. It would put them at ease if I could project a sense of confidence. Several of the younger recruits loosened their stances slightly. Good. It would be a disaster if someone's panic caused them to shoot without provocation.

My grandmother took a deep breath. "Are you ready, Skye?" she asked.

I nodded. "I am."

"Raise the gate!" Grandmother's voice pierced the air, echoing first off the wood of the outer wall and once more off the stone of the dam behind us.

The stewards of the gate reached up and pulled down on thick ropes, and the metal lattice rose to reveal three figures on horses. There was a man in black robes adorned with the orange sigils of Stahkla. The symbols glowed with an unearthly orange light. Two armored guards flanked him, cloaked and hooded.

“Where the hell is their army?” Athard grunted.

“Sshh!” Grandmother didn’t turn as she silenced him, keeping her eyes on the slow and steady gait of the steeds of the Dark Lord.

Fifty feet from us, the procession came to a stop, and the berobed man sprang down from his mount. He was surprisingly agile for an elderly man, balding and sporting a silver beard. The two guards stayed mounted, but kept close as he stepped forward to speak.

“Greetings! I am Manod, priest of Stahkla and ambassador of the Lord of Ashfuror. We have come to fulfill the ancient treaty.”

An ancient treaty? Was there an agreement already in place? Grandmother had said there was precedent, but the priest had implied a settled negotiation. I glanced over at her, but Grandmother’s face betrayed no emotion as she answered him.

“As required, the youngest child of the Family Prime is presented to you. And as the accords also state, the union cannot be forced upon him. The choice is his.”

With that, she turned to face me. “Skye. What is your decision?”

For a moment, my mind froze. I knew the time had come, but I couldn’t find the words.

The old priest cleared his throat, pulling my attention from my grandmother. “If I may?”

She nodded, the smallest flash of guilt crossing her face.

“Seven generations ago this treaty was blessed by both Vazzart and Stahkla.”



Manod's voice was low and soothing, the smooth tones of a practiced speaker, and he exuded a kindness that made me suspicious.

“In the event that either Greatfalls or Ashfuror broke the truce, it could be reinstated with the marriage of the Lord of Ashfuror, or one of his children, to an eligible younger child of the Prime of Greatfalls. Cyrus is the last of the line of the ruling family of Ashfuror and unmarried. In the spring of this year—”

“Can we get on with this?” Athard's voice dripped with petulant boredom. “We all understand what's going on here.”

Grandmother cut him off with a gesture, and his face flushed with the indignity of being reprimanded in front of a foreign dignitary.

“What will you choose, my love?” There was compassion in Grandmother's eyes, and a deep sadness. I had never been away from her. The thought of separation struck a chord of melancholy in me.

But I was also confused. I was somehow a party to a treaty from hundreds of years ago? Why hadn't I been told?

The Archers of Greatfalls watched from behind me. They had joined my force and put themselves in my care. I had promised myself that I would do my best to protect them. To protect all the people of our city. No matter the circumstance, if this was something I could do, well...I would do it.

“I will wed the Dark Lord of Ashfuror.” The words rushed out of me before I could let my fear stop them.

Behind me, whispers ran through the battalion of Archers. Grandmother wore a look of pride. I had done what my duty required.

“I really prefer simply ‘Lord of Ashfuror.’ The ‘dark’ is something you people added.”

I started at the vaguely familiar voice. The guard off Manod’s right shoulder was the one who had spoken. He swung down, landing softly on his feet, and pulled back the hood on his cloak.

The face that was revealed was pale with piercing green eyes. He radiated a confidence as well as a deep exhaustion that was contradicted by his casual tone.

Atop his head was a circlet of intricately-shaped onyx.

“You!” I felt my eyes go wide at my realization. “You’re the swordsman! The one who fought the zakar!”

“I am. Nice shot, again.” He flashed me a crooked smile. “That cat was quite the giant.”

Something stirred within me at the compliment, an anxious thrill that I immediately tamped down.

“You...you know him?” Grandmother sounded truly surprised for the first time in my memory.

“He showed up when Jelenna and I were swarmed by a pack of rock gories.” I wasn’t sure if I should say the next thing, but it was the truth. “He saved my life.”

“You did the same for me. I’d say we’re even. For the moment.”

The Dark Lord of Ashfuror strode toward me, locking his eyes to mine. His eyes pierced me as if he could read my thoughts. He moved with the same easy grace as he

had wielded his sword. He was taller than me, forcing me to crane my neck up as he approached.

“You’re even better looking when you’re not covered in blood.” He regarded me with some intensity, and I suddenly felt shy. “Maybe this won’t be so bad.”

“What?” This was too much. My mind seized as I scrambled to put together what was happening.

“Sorry. I should have introduced myself. I’m the ‘Dark’ Lord of Ashfuror. But since you are to be my husband, you should probably call me Cyrus.”

He extended his hand to me. I stared at it, then at him. He was slender, but there were hints of muscle under the black leather armor.

“Not what you were expecting, hmmm?” the Dark Lord — no, Cyrus — asked, a smirk sneaking onto his face.

I shook my head. The fog finally cleared enough for me to understand.

“You are my betrothed?” I couldn’t keep the tremor out of my voice.

He chuckled, a sound that made my stomach flip. “I’m similarly surprised. I thought I was getting some spoiled nineteen-year-old child of the aristocracy. Instead, you are...”

“I am Skye.” I vibrated with annoyance at his condescending arrogance. “I’m twenty-eight, and Commander of the Archers of Greatfalls.

“That explains the muscles. And the lack of wit.”

Did this snotty lord just insult me? He might be an accomplished swordsman, but that didn't mean he had decent manners.

"Just because you aren't the gouty weakling I thought you'd be, doesn't mean I can't best you in a fight." My growing anger cleared out any lingering confusion.

"Oh, he's got some fire!" Cyrus smirked at me. My right hand curled into a fist in response. "How uncharacteristic of a follower of Vazzart."

"What do you know of that?" I replied. "I can't imagine you get much exposure to civilized society."

There was a clang from behind him. We both turned to where Manod had his hand across the chest of the other guard, who had a white knuckle grip on his drawn sword.

"Elber, stand down." Cyrus' voice was deep and commanding. I hated how appealing it was.

"My lord, he insulted you!"

"Stand. Down." Cyrus turned back to me, clearly amused. "This is my somewhat befuddled betrothed. He is going to be so much fun. If you are still committed..."

I glared at him. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of backing down, despite his pretty insults.

"It will be your greatest honor to be married to me."

Cyrus let out a low laugh. I ignored the desire it stirred up inside me. Even if he was my intended, I wasn't going to fawn at his feet. Especially if he was going to be such a twit.

“Come. Let’s get you to your new home.”

The Dark Lord of Ashfuror turned and walked out the gate of Greatfalls, and I followed.

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The first day was spent riding in silence. I was piqued by meeting the Dark Lord, and the only thing I could think to do was brood. Jelenna rode by my side. I was grateful to her for packing a bag for me in advance, although a little annoyed that she assumed I would be going. She thought she knew me.

Maybe she was right.

At the very least, she knew better than to try and break through my current bad mood. I hoped I was projecting an air of danger and grit, but I couldn’t escape the feeling that the Dark Lord’s people were laughing at me.

We joined with a platoon of soldiers a league or two outside of Greatfalls. I assumed the rest of the army had already headed back to Ashfuror, but I didn’t ask. I didn’t speak to anyone as I rode, Jelenna to my left and Cyrus and Manod to my right. The two were having whole conversations with only their eyes, but I didn’t care about their opinion of me. I kept my gaze trained on the road ahead of us.

The lands were cracked and dry with drought. We moved at a steady, even pace for many hours, but we never saw another person. All the vegetation was stunted and choked. We passed the ruins of several old farms. None of them had live crops or animals.

I had never been this far away from Greatfalls. My home city had always valued self-sufficiency, and we preferred isolation. My Archers were at their most effective

shooting down from the ramparts. We avoided situations where they'd have to go on the offensive.

As we made our way through the dead plains, I was struck with how dire the state of the rest of Fyr must be. My righteous anger drained away, replaced with a feeling of concern for the people of Fyr, and for myself.

Was this the Dark Lord's fault? Had he mismanaged the response to the drought so severely that the land itself was dying?

The stories passed around the old families of Greatfalls painted the dark lords as power-hungry and willing to sacrifice their people for their own conquest. But those were stories about Cyrus' father and grandfather. I had no sense of the man himself, outside of how infuriating could be.

We slowed to a standstill, and Cyrus hopped down from his horse.

"Time to set up camp, pretty."

I bristled at his mocking words, but I kept my face still. I wouldn't let him see the effect he had on me. I refused to give him the satisfaction.

Sliding off of Blaze, I reached into my bags, pulling out a stake and anchoring him to the earth. No trees grew here, and the dirt was still warm from the rays of the now-setting sun.

I glanced around me. Elber, the Dark Lord's personal guard, was helping him to set up a small wedge-shaped tent. I was struck by the easy rapport Cyrus had with the hulking brute. Elber made some remark as he pushed a stake into the ground, and Cyrus laughed. Wait. Did these two already have a relationship? Was I going to be a husband in name only, while Cyrus was off screwing his guard? Or worse, in love

with him? I felt a pang of jealousy, which was absolutely absurd. I was on my way to Ashfuror to take his power from him. What did it matter who he slept with?

That thought was followed by a wave of confusion. Would I be expected to sleep next to Cyrus this evening? What would he want of me? Although I had entered into this arrangement willingly, the farther we got from home, the more of a prisoner I became. Within the next day, we would pass the point where I had any knowledge of the land around us. I hated how little power I had. Cyrus held all the cards.

I didn't trust him. The Dark Lords had always brought death and destruction to Greatfalls, and to all the people of Fyr. The history we learned in school was clear, although my education had stopped with the death of his grandfather. I knew almost nothing about his father, other than the fact that he had conquered the other remaining Lords of Fyr. Cyrus had inherited his position as the last of them.

And I was there to betray him. A spark of guilt sprang up in my chest, which I quickly pushed away. It was ridiculous to feel remorseful. I was protecting my family and my home. I was doing what was right.

Still, he was my betrothed. Did he expect me to submit?

Manod, the old priest, must have seen the confusion on my face. He left the small cooking fire he was building and approached me.

"He doesn't expect anything from you, young Skye."

Hearing his words, Jelenna broke from putting up her own tent and took a step toward us. I held up my hand to stop her. She was right to be suspicious, and I didn't trust Manod's apparent kindness, but it didn't make sense for any of them to cause me harm. If something happened to me, all of this would have been for nothing.

“He understands that you don’t know each other.” The priest’s voice was soft but clear. “Although all of us would wish nothing more for Cyrus than to find love in this betrothal, you are strangers.”

I nodded, not saying anything, stifling my incredulity. A love match with the Dark Lord of Ashfuror? It was an impossibility. To me, he’d always been a boogeyman, a story to scare children with. At least some of the more fantastical stories had to be false, but the title was a terrifying one. I’d spent my whole life building up the defense of Greatfalls in the eventuality of his attack.

The old man chuckled. “You have many voices warring in your mind. When you’re ready, speak to Cyrus. He may be arrogant and sarcastic, but his heart is in the right place. You should get to know your intended.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know what I would even say to Cyrus.

Manod smiled and walked away. I watched him go. After a minute, Jelenna cleared her throat.

“A little help?”

I rolled my eyes and went over, helping her stake the corners of the tent despite the fact that it was an obvious cover so that we could speak.

“What did he want?” she said under her breath.

“He told me to talk to, you know, him . Cyrus. The Dark Lord.”

“You’re going to have to eventually.”

I must have made a disbelieving face, because she shook her head. ‘No, no, if you



don't connect with him, then we'll never accomplish what we came here to do."

With one motion, she pulled and the tent popped erect and into place. Grabbing the travel bags from the horses, she tossed them into our new shelter. She indicated that I should crawl inside.

After I did, she followed and knelt down, whispering as she searched through her bag. "I have a package from your grandmother."

"Is it...?"

Her lips pressed together in a thin line. It was the artifact. It had to be.

After a moment, she found it and handed it over - a small burlap bundle tied with twine. I took one end of the rough string in my hand and tugged on it, unraveling the knot and allowing the burlap to fold open.

Inside were two items: a small silver dagger with a sapphire in its pommel and a note. I eyed the dagger for a moment. If this was the artifact, I would be carrying an instrument of Vazzart with me, one of the few people alive to do so. Maybe the only one who wasn't the current Prime.

Instead of touching the dagger, I picked up the note and unfolded it. It was covered in Grandmother's flowing script. I was flooded with feelings of warmth and a deep sadness. She was the person that loved me most in all the world, and I didn't know when I might see her again.

My Skye,

I send with you the instrument of Vazzart's vengeance, and of our liberation. When the time comes, circle the blade of the dagger three times around the crown. The

strands of connection between the crown and the Dark Lord will then become visible. You must cut them.

I never thought a time would come when Ashfuror would ask that the old treaties be fulfilled. If I had, I would have prepared you better for this. I hope you will forgive me.

I pray to Vazzart that we will be together again.

You have all of my love,

Your grandmother

I sat on the floor of the tent, reading the note again and then again once more. After a few minutes, Jelenna rested her hand on my arm in a gesture of comfort.

“What will happen when all of this is over?” I couldn’t keep the tremor from my voice as I spoke.

“What do you mean?”

“To us. And to Greatfalls. Will we be killed in retribution? Will we escape? Will Cyrus use whatever power remains in him to attack our home?”

“I don’t know.” I winced at Jelenna’s words. I craved certainty, but there was none to be had. “I don’t, but I know this. We have a duty to perform. We’ll worry about what comes after when we arrive there.”

She winked at me. “Besides, you and I always come out the other side.”

I wasn’t certain of that. Everything had changed. Rather than reply, I picked up the

dagger, weighing it in my palm. Strange that something so small could topple a Lord of Fyr. I wrapped the knife back up and placed it gingerly back in my bag.

Jelenna watched me for a long moment. “Come on. Let’s get some sleep.”

I lay on the hard, dry ground, listening to the sounds of night as Jelenna’s breath slowed beside me. In the solitude of the twilight, I was left alone with my uncertainty. The sensation was alien to me and uncomfortable. I understood my role. I was to serve my people. But doing so would require me to feign a relationship with the Dark Lord of Ashfuror, on a deep enough level that he wouldn’t feel my deception through our bond. I’d never done anything like that before. I had no romantic experience to speak of, and I’d never been a skillful liar.

But if I had the chance to weaken the Dark Lord’s hold on Fyr and keep Greatfalls safe, I had to take it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

After an uneasy sleep, the morning came, and I woke with a sense of resolve. I couldn't let my anger and frustration at Cyrus keep me from my task. I would have to, as Manod had said, "get to know him."

We rode out as the rising sun crested the horizon, painting the plains with bright orange-yellow streaks. Once again I sat atop Blaze, with Cyrus and Manod to my right, and Jelenna to my left.

After I mounted my horse, I stole a glance at Cyrus. He appeared far too tired for a man who had slept through the night. Maybe he'd been as restless as I had. When he saw me, he called out "good morning, sunshine" in a sleepy voice. I think he'd intended it to be sarcastic, but in his exhaustion it came out sincere.

I laughed, disarmed for a moment, and then immediately stifled my response. This man was dangerous, and I needed to stay on my guard.

"It's a two week ride to Ashfuror," Cyrus said. "Come on, wouldn't want you to be late to your own wedding."

With that it was gone. His wry tone and forced nonchalance snapped back into place like the door of a cage. I couldn't blame him. I didn't trust him either. He took off, not looking back to see if I followed.

Little by little, as we rode, signs of life began to appear. First we came across wheel tracks in the dirt. Someone had been by with a crude wagon, probably a farmer. Then pieces of wooden fencing that had clearly been repaired, if not recently, at least within the last year. Then there was the simple farmhouse and a barn that had been

freshly whitewashed.

On the front porch, an elderly woman in a blue checked dress sat in a crude rocking chair. Cyrus whistled, and the company of soldiers came to a stop. He guided his mount up the path to the house, and Manod gestured for us to follow.

“How goes it, mother?” Cyrus swung down off his horse and stepped up onto the ancient boards of the porch. Wary, I dismounted but kept some distance from the Dark Lord and his subject.

“Oh, you know how it is, young man. The drought has taken the wheat and the corn. There are still a few acres of greens and rhubarb hanging on. My son is out tending to them now. Who knows how long they’ll last? The livestock’s all gone, other than a cranky rooster and about a dozen hens.”

“What about water?” Cyrus’ question seemed sincere.

“Well’s been dry off and on for months. We get a shipment of beer once every few weeks.”

Anger flashed across Cyrus’ face. He reached into his purse, pulling out a handful of gold coins.

“Here, mother, perhaps this will get you some extra meat and beer. Need to keep you healthy.”

“Bless you, and bless Lord Cyrus. We are thankful for all he does for us.”

I’m not sure why that was the thing that broke me, but I couldn’t hold my tongue any longer. I guided my horse closer so that I could face the old woman directly.

“Why should you give him your blessing?” I struggled to keep from yelling. “Your crops are gone. Soon you’ll be starving to death! All under his watch.”

I saw Cyrus’ gaze snap to me, but I kept my eyes trained on the silver-haired woman. Her spine straightened in indignation.

“Lord Cyrus cannot stop the drought, child. Nor can he provide water when there is none to give. He has always sent aid when things got bad. Ashfuror has been good to us, and Cyrus is a better man than his father ever was. If anything, you should blame those isolationist devils over in Greatfalls.”

A retort sprang to my tongue. I was about to reply when there was a loud cough behind me. It was Jelenna, who sent me a subtle head shake. She was right. It wouldn’t do me any good to pick a fight with Cyrus or his citizens. I tamped down my righteous anger as the old woman kept going.

“If Greatfalls didn’t hoard all that water, this drought would have been a minor heat wave. Instead, we suffer because of their selfishness.”

I gained nothing from a confrontation here, no matter how badly I wanted to correct her. I stifled the urge to throttle the old priest. It was reprehensible that they would spread lies about us.

Cyrus rolled his eyes at me before turning back to the woman. “We’ll take your leave, mother. Be well. I’ll speak to Lord Cyrus about sending more supplies out this way.”

“Thank you, young man.” She shot me a reprimanding look. “Perhaps by the time you reach the capital, you’ll have had a chance to teach this one his history. And his manners.”

Cyrus barked out a laugh as he hopped back on his tall steed, guiding us back down to the road. Once we were out of earshot, I lost the battle to keep my anger under control.

“How can you lie to them?”

“What are you talking about?” Cyrus’ voice was laced with irritation, but I didn’t care. The people he governed should know the truth.

“Telling them that Greatfalls is hoarding water, blaming the drought on us. We only keep the water we need for our day to day life.”

“What?!?” Cyrus shouted. I’d struck a nerve, which wasn’t surprising, seeing as I was calling him out on his deception.

Manod reached out and put his hand on Cyrus’ shoulder, who shook his head. The elderly priest leaned over from his mount and whispered in Cyrus’ ear. Grumbling, Cyrus urged his horse forward, pulling away in front of us until we were alone with Manod.

We rode in silence. The only sound was that of the horses’ footfalls against the dry clay underneath. Finally, the priest spoke, his voice projecting compassion but also certainty. “It is not a lie, Skye. Greatfalls has been keeping more than their share of water for a long time now.”

“That’s not—”

“How long has it been since they allowed any water through the dam?”

“Four years. We’re in a drought. We have to be careful.”

“The reservoir is deep. Your city is small. Do you really think you need all of that water?”

“Grandmother makes those decisions. It’s her job to keep Greatfalls safe.”

Manod shook his head in frustration. “Every spring and summer, the snow melts, running down the mountains and filling the reservoir. Safehold is deeper than you could imagine. There’s enough water for the city to last for decades.”

What was he saying? Grandmother wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t withhold help when people needed it. I glanced at Jelenna, silently asking for help.

“We have no reason to believe you.” Her voice was low and tense. “You’re lying.”

“You may think so, if it makes you feel better.” Manod’s earnest tone belied his condescending words. “But I am a priest of Stahkla. I do not traffic in untruths.”

“In Greatfalls we don’t put our trust in the God of Fire and Metal,” Jelenna said, more forcefully this time.

“Put your trust where you like, but I know what my god has shown me. I know what my common sense tells me. And I know what Cyrus has seen.”

Manod’s words were confusing. “What does that mean?” I asked.

“The first Lord of Ashfuror was given the Crown of Seeing by the god himself. It grants the one who bears it the ability to observe what is happening anywhere in Fyr. Cyrus has seen the flow of water and resources. It all stops at Greatfalls.”

“Bull.” Jelenna’s voice cut through the air, but Manod was unfazed.



“I can only tell you what I know.” Manod shrugged. He urged his horse forward to catch up to Cyrus.

“You can’t trust them.” There was a simmering rage in Jelenna’s voice. “That’s why what we’re doing is so important.”

I scratched at the back of my neck, which was irritated from days of hot sun. She stared at me, expecting some kind of response. I nodded in agreement, but I wasn’t sure. Manod had sounded like he believed the words he spoke.

Jelenna caught the doubt in my eyes. “He is in the wrong. They both are.”

“Of course.”

“Remember why we’re here, Skye.” Jelenna’s eyes were fierce. “We will break their hold on Greatfalls. Whether it’s a lie or self-deception, what they believe doesn’t matter.”

I breathed in, trying to steal some of the certainty that shone in Jelenna’s eyes.

“Yes,” I said. “They can’t be trusted.”

Jelenna opened her mouth to reply, but she was interrupted by a series of rough croaks and the sound of flapping wings. Above us, the sky filled with black birds, circling and weaving, like some demented mirror of the starlings on the slopes at Greatfalls.

I urged Blaze forward, making up the distance between the rest of the company and ourselves.

“What is this?” I called, pitching my voice loud enough to be heard over the cries of

the birds.

“Hmmm? These are my ravens.”

“ Your ravens?!”

“They are one way I keep track of what goes on in the plains when I am home in Ashfuror. They can travel faster than a man, and they’re more trustworthy.”

“They’re harbingers of devilry!” Jelenna’s voice cracked as took in the flock of circling birds.

“Nonsense! They are my friends.” At his words, an enormous raven swept down and landed on his shoulder. He reached into his pocket, fishing out some seeds, and held out his hand. The bird pecked and ate the morsels, then nuzzled its head into Cyrus’ open palm.

“This is Bertio,” Cyrus said. “He is the leader of this flock. We’ve known each other since I was a teenager.”

“His name is Bertio ?” Cyrus scowled at my incredulous tone.

“He doesn’t speak the language of Fyr, of course, but that’s what I named him. He’s always responded to it.”

With that, Bertio straightened, cawing at me, his black dot eyes tinged in red.

“I don’t think he likes me.”

“Well he wouldn’t, if you keep talking poorly about his brethren. But if he sees you are my friend, you will win him over.” Cyrus blinked, taking me in for a moment.

“Are you my friend?”

His question cut me to the quick. I’d been at war with myself since leaving Greatfalls. Cyrus was not the monster I had expected. Instead, he was a man. An infuriating, complex, and unfortunately handsome man.

I squashed that last thought as quickly as it came. I had to keep my wits about me. It would be no good to develop a crush on the boor, even if we were betrothed. I was riding into enemy territory.

Cyrus stared at me, his head cocked, waiting for my response.

“Yes.” My mouth was dry as a desert. “We might be friends.”

“Good.” He gestured to me. “Come, meet Bertio.”

I nudged Blaze forward until I was even with Cyrus and his steed. The huge raven stared at me with an evaluating gaze. He was a strange, alien presence. Bertio squawked at me, hopping up and down on Cyrus’ shoulder. Cyrus smirked.

“Go on.”

I reached out my hand slowly, ready to snatch it away if the thing attacked, but after a moment of consideration, it hopped over to my arm. It hopped its way up to my shoulder and nuzzled at my neck. I froze. Was this some kind of trick?

“God of the fires, relax!” Cyrus’ words were frustrated, but I could tell he was mostly amused. That’s what convinced me. I willed my tense shoulders to release, and Bertio nuzzled in farther. His feathers were soft, and he made soft little cooing sounds. It was adorable, except for the pinch of his claws digging into my skin.

“That’s enough, Bertio. Scout ahead and report back on the state of the next few towns and villages. I need to know what we’re walking into.”

Bertio took off with a single, strong flapping of his wings. We watched him go, and I realized that Cyrus and I were alone. The other members of the party had fallen back. They were giving us time together. It made me uneasy.

“Is that what you use the ravens for? To spy on your enemies?”

“The people of Fyr aren’t my enemies, Skye, they’re my subjects. I want to know if they’re starving, and if I can help.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “But yes, less often, I spy on criminals or those plotting to overthrow my government. You’d do the same.”

I shrugged. I hated that side of things. The hiding and the spying.

“How do they report back?”

Cyrus tapped his crown, winking. “This artifact allows me to see through their eyes. It’s not the only way in which the Crowing of Seeing gives me insight, but it’s one of the more effective ones.”

“Huh.” It made me uneasy, the idea of ravens spying on us, invisible in the night sky. “Your people don’t mind being spied on?”

“Your family is in charge of a single city. I rule an empire. All of Fyr is mine, outside of Greatfalls. If she wants to know what’s happening under her reign, your grandmother can simply take a walk around town. I don’t have that luxury.”

I peered out at the horizon. In front of us, leagues away but still visible, were clusters of villages. Through the dust to the left, I could barely pick out the spires of a city. To

the right, there were no signs of settlements, but there was a tributary road that branched off in that direction, clearly well-traveled. There were more people that way as well.

Fyr was enormous. I hadn't understood that, growing up in the shade of the quiet forest of Greatfalls. For Cyrus to rule over all this, he would need some kind of tool, some way to find out what was happening.

"Your empire is large."

"It is, but throughout it there are people that I trust. Stewards, friends, some of whom have been working to keep order since the demise of the other Lords of Fyr during my father's reign."

I felt a pang of old grief in my chest. Did he know his father had been responsible for the deaths of my parents? Hell, did he approve? I certainly wasn't going to bring it up, but the knowledge of it stood like thick stone between us.

"Your father. Was he...responsible for the deaths of the other Lords?"

Cyrus' eyes hardened. "Yes. I wish that he hadn't been. I wish that I could have ruled over Ashfuror only, instead of all of Fyr." He sighed. "But he wanted more. He always wanted more."

I searched for any sign of falsehood in Cyrus' face, but he was sincere. He didn't notice me staring. He was lost in his own thoughts.

"There are stories."

Cyrus' eyes snapped back to mine. "I'm sure there are."

“They aren’t kind to him.”

“My father was a hard, ambitious man. Not cruel, but...he wouldn’t allow anything to stand in his way when he wanted something. Whether that was the crowns of the other Lords of Fyr, or for his son to be a master swordsman. He’d let nothing stop him.”

“I’m too young to recall his rule, but the tales are dark. Assassination, torture...”

“Exaggerations, mostly.”

His words felt like a hot poker to my gut. Whether he knew it or not, he had just dismissed the murder of my parents as an exaggeration.

“Not all.” My voice was like ice leaving my lips.

Cyrus rolled his eyes. I was growing to hate that. “I’m sure your grandmother didn’t mind spreading the rumors. After all, she was doing her own share of espionage and assassination.”

“Grandmother wouldn’t do that.” My throat tightened. “She is a good person and a good ruler.”

Cyrus squinted with irritation. “You can’t be both.”

“I don’t believe—”

Cyrus held up his hand to stop me. “I promise you. I hit my head against that wall every day. More often than not, I’m making a choice between two evils. It’s why there will always be some segment of the population that hates the person in charge.

“The people of Greatfalls love my grandmother.”

“In front of you, her beloved grandson, maybe. The truth is what they say behind your back.”

“No—”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she wanted you to assassinate me .”

My face was white hot, and all of a sudden I was uncomfortable in my body, jittery and unsettled. Without saying a word, I turned and spurred Blaze forward, getting ahead of Cyrus and the rest of the party. As I pulled away, I heard Cyrus say to Manod, “He’s a child.”

I spun my mount around. “How dare you suggest I would be so dishonorable? Any single citizen of Greatfalls is worth a hundred of you!”

“Skye—” I didn’t allow him to finish, pulling away and pushing ahead. I had to get at least some distance away from them all.

I needed a moment to think. It was ridiculous for him to suggest that I might try to murder him. The marriage bond alone would be enough to stop me. Causing that much hurt to my spouse would reverberate back onto me in a deeply painful way. Not that that even mattered. Maybe we’d only met a few days ago, but surely he could see I had more honor, more integrity than that?

But as I continued to ride, the anger was replaced by guilt. I would never try to kill him, I would never murder anyone in cold blood, but I had been instructed to weaken his power. The deception rankled me and made me feel unclean.

As did the question that lingered in my mind. What if I had been the older brother? If

it was Athard that had been promised in marriage, would Grandmother have asked him to murder Cyrus in his sleep? He would have done it gladly. I was sure of it.

I hoped that she wouldn't have, but I knew Cyrus wasn't totally in the wrong. I'd watched my Grandmother rule over Greatfalls for my whole life. She was deceptive and manipulative, she was harsh and just shy of cruel when the situation required it, but she did it for the good of our people and of our city. That's why I'd agreed to complete the task she had set me.

"Skye."

I startled, Jelenna's voice pulling out of my rumination. My chest flooded with a sense of gratitude. She hadn't wanted to leave me alone.

"Did you hear?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Do you think Cyrus is right? That Grandmother might have sent assassins to take out our enemies?"

She stilled, her face thoughtful.

"I don't know. But I know this: she wouldn't do it lightly. Only if she thought it was necessary for the health and safety of her people."

I sighed. This had all been simpler when I was Commander of the Archers.

"I wish I was back home."

"Me too." Jelenna smiled, kindness shining in her eyes. "We'll get there, when this is



over.”

“But for now I guess we have to—”

Searing white-hot pain exploded in my side. God of the Waters, it hurt so much. I grabbed onto Blaze as I weakened in response to what had to be an attack. An arrow, maybe? I reached back, my fingers finding crude bark fletching sticking out of my right half. Yes, an arrow.

I studied the area around us, hoping to see who had shot it. My focus had been on my conversation with Jelenna, and I hadn’t noticed that the terrain had changed. What had been plains had given way to rockier territory. It provided plenty of cover for a cowardly attack. There was no sign of movement.

Jelenna had her bow out and was scanning for enemies. I tried to reach for mine, but the pain from the movement made me feel like I was going to faint. I clenched my core, trying to hold on. If I lost consciousness, I’d be no good to anyone.

I heard the sound of galloping horses behind us. It must have been Cyrus rushing to catch up. Had he seen whoever it was that ambushed us?

“Manod, take care of Skye.” Cyrus’ voice was tense, like he was genuinely worried about losing me. Or the treaty. He didn’t want to lose the treaty.

He stepped out in front of us, and ran his finger along the obsidian circlet resting on his brow. What had been a lifeless, gray-black ornament sprang to life, with orange fire forming the shape of a full crown above the black stone.

There was a tugging on my right side, and I turned. Manod was inspecting the wound, which was too far back for me to see. But from his expression, it didn’t look good.

“We need to get you down from the horse. I have to get the arrow out before I can mend you.”

There was something about dying from an arrow wound that felt correct.

Manod tried again. “I need to help you down.”

My eyes drifted beyond Manod to where Cyrus stood. The crown on his head pulsed with the light of a thousand burning embers. When he spoke, it was with a deep authority that was almost supernatural, far from the tinny sarcasm I’d become accustomed to.

“I am Cyrus, Lord of Ashfuror. Come forth, citizens of Fyr.”

There was a long moment of absolute silence. Not even the birds and rodents made a sound. Finally, people began to appear from behind the rocky protrusions surrounding the road. They were dressed in tattered clothing, and they were uniformly gaunt. They moved toward us in tentative, skittish steps.

Jelenna took in a sharp breath. The wood creaked as it stretched when she drew her bow.

“Stay.” Cyrus held up his hand to her. There was a gasp, and what could only be the clacking of her bow and arrow falling to the packed ground. I knew if I turned to see what had happened, the pain would only worsen. I kept my eyes trained on my betrothed.

“Please, Skye...” The desperation sounded in Manod’s voice as he tugged on my arm, trying to get me to dismount, but I had to watch. Cyrus’ power and authority demanded that.

A scrawny young man stepped forward to speak. His clothes were dirty and ragged, and his face was covered in a patchy beard. He could not have been more than seventeen.

He fell to his knees in front of us. “My Lord Cyrus. We saw the bows of the two on horseback. They were of Greatfalls make. We couldn’t take any chances.”

The man glanced in my direction, then locked his eyes on the earth at his feet. I fought through the fog of pain, trying to understand what he meant. Yes, we came from Greatfalls. Why would that prompt them to attack?

“How long ago?” Cyrus’ voice rang with authority, but I didn’t understand. What was he asking?

“Three weeks, Lord. A company of raiders from Greatfalls rode through our town up ahead, killing our guards and stealing horses and provisions. Since then, we’ve been patrolling the road, worried they would come back.”

I felt Manod grow restless at my side, pulling on me once more, but I pushed him off. The wound hurt, but this was too important.

“Who led them?” Cyrus’ voice was cold.

“A tall, sneering man. Blonde, roughly thirty years of age. He wore a cape that was embroidered in gold. He killed the first guard with his rapier.”

I gasped at his words, and the inhale caused a stabbing pain to shoot through my side. I was unable to hold back a whimper. Cyrus turned to me, concern written on his face. The man continued to speak as he stared at the ground.

“Lord, the man killed our mayor in cold blood. We’ve already lost so many of the

elders to the drought. There's no one left to lead us. There's no one to tell us how to survive."

It couldn't be possible. Someone had taken Archers out in a raiding party without my knowledge? Vazzart help me, from the description I knew there was only one person it could be. My brother. Athard. And according to this man, he was a murderer.

I tried again to speak, to ask questions, to ease the dread in my heart, but still nothing would come. There was a tug and a sudden burst of pain, a thousand times worse than before, as if my whole body was on fire. I screamed as the world went white.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

“Will he make it?”

A familiar voice cut through the cozy fog of my sleep. I wasn't sure how long I'd been out, but my eyelids were heavy and weighed down. It would take too much effort to open them.

“He will, through no fault of his own.” That one was different: rough, older, annoyed. “If he hadn't pushed me away and he'd let me work on him, it wouldn't have been so touch and go.”

“He's a military commander.” That voice came from right next to me. I knew it well. Jelenna. “You can't drag him away from the battle.”

“He almost died.”

“But he didn't. That's good enough.” Jelenna's voice was close. A physical sensation cut through my grogginess. She was squeezing my hand. I forced my eyes open.

As my vision coalesced, it revealed a simple but clean wooden building. I was laying on a thin straw mattress, and Jelenna sat next to me. Cyrus and Manod stood at the foot of the bed.

“I don't intend to lose him.” Cyrus' was insistent and desperate.

“Then get him to be less stubborn and—”

“Hello?” My airway was on fire as my breath squeezed through, ground glass in my

throat. My side ached.

Cyrus turned to me. His face was haggard, and he was even paler than usual. His hand clenched the wooden footboard of the bed. His knuckles were white.

“Skye?” Jelenna asked in a casual tone that was definitely forced. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m sore. Woozy. What happened?”

“You took an arrow to the side, and you wouldn’t let me heal you, foolish boy.” He might have been trying to take me to task, but I liked this grumpy side of the normally kind priest.

“I...” In a flash, it all came flooding back. The pain. Cyrus and the crown. The words of the attackers. I tried to push myself into a sitting position, but my elbows wobbled underneath me.

“Don’t, Skye. I’ve got you.” Jelenna put an arm around my waist and pulled me up. She positioned the pillows against the headboard to support me.

“Thank you.” I made eye contact with Cyrus, who was staring down at me with wild eyes, like I was a live rattlesnake. “I heard what they said.”

“It was a lie, it had to be.” There was fire in Jelenna’s voice. “No one could take out a company of Archers without Skye or myself finding out.”

“Truly?” Exhaustion had taken whatever was left of Manod’s typical politeness. “You would actually accuse us of—”

“You concocted some kind of story with them—”

“Stop. The two of you need to go.” It still hurt to speak, but I forced the sound out. This felt important.

Jelenna made a face like she’d swallowed a fly. “I’m not going anywhere—”

“I want to speak to Cyrus alone.”

Cyrus’ expression clouded with confusion. He glanced at Jelenna, and then Manod. The uncertainty was in deep contrast to the wry persona he cultivated. I liked seeing him thrown off guard.

“Now.”

Manod rolled his eyes and stalked away. Jelenna squinted at me.

“I’ll be right outside.”

“I’m fine, Jel.” She walked toward the exit, eyeing Cyrus as she went.

When she closed the door behind her, Cyrus and I considered each other in silence. I gestured toward the chair next to me. He sat down, setting his face in a blank, still mask.

“They were attacked by my Archers.”

Cyrus nodded and touched the circlet on his head with his right hand. It was no longer a fiery crown, but once again a simple black band. The gesture seemed unconscious. Maybe it grounded him.

“Yes,” Cyrus replied. “The crown of Ashfuror is the Crown of Seeing. With it, I can observe places far away, and sometimes it will even show me the future, if the

outcome is certain enough.” Cyrus sighed. “I can also tell if someone is lying.”

I closed my eyes. “I knew it was true when I heard him say it.”

“Why were you so sure?” Cyrus asked.

“The man described my older brother Athard. The blonde hair, the gold cape, there was no mistaking him. And...”

I didn’t want to say it out loud.

“And you wouldn’t put it past him to raid a town for supplies.” Rage and compassion warred on Cyrus’ face.

“That’s what makes me so angry.” I grasped the sheets of the bed between my fingers. “It’s not a question of procuring supplies. Greatfalls has no need of them. It’s just an excuse for cruelty. And the outright killing...”

I didn’t know what else to say. Cyrus sat there with me in silence. I was grateful for his presence, although part of me worried that he might use this against me later. Or against my home city. If Jelenna was there, she would have warned me not to trust him, but I had sent her away for a reason, so that we could speak openly.

He brought me out of my rumination with a question. “What did your grandmother tell you of the treaty?”

I studied him. His face was kind, but I couldn’t hold back the suspicion that had sprung up. He had knowledge that I lacked. I wasn’t sure I wanted to reveal my own ignorance, but lying wouldn’t help me in this moment.

“Not...Only that there was precedent for the marriage,” I said after a moment. “That



it had been used before to repair the relationship between Greatfalls and the Lords of Fyr.”

“It’s more set and clear-cut than that.” Cyrus’ face tensed as if he was afraid of my reaction to what he was about to say. “When one of the parties attacked, or made some sort of incursion into the other’s territory, it was a way to avoid devolving into outright war. The aggressor would give a child of their ruling family to marry into the enemy’s sovereign household, and the two powers would consider the matter settled.”

My mind started to put together the pieces. It had been slowed by pain and exhaustion, but it was still working.

“It was something like this,” I said, “a raid or something. The thing that broke the treaty and triggered our betrothal.”

“Yes. Archers from Greatfalls raided a town forty leagues north of here. They didn’t kill anyone, but they might as well have. They took every last bit of food and water.”

I felt heat churning in my gut, angry and restless. I wanted to ride back, to confront Athard, to do something. Instead I was injured and far from my home. There was nothing I could do.

Cyrus put his hand on my forearm. My muscles twitched at the feel of him. I willed myself to relax. We had never touched before. His skin against mine was warm and comforting. It was unexpected. He spoke in a soft, clear voice.

“What will you do about your brother?”

I closed my eyes and kneaded my forehead with my fingers. That was the question, wasn’t it? If I was honest with myself, it had always been a question, simmering underneath every fight we’d had over the last decade.

“I don’t know.” I breathed out, forcing myself to let go of some of the weight of the problem. “He is the oldest, and will be Prime. I have no standing to challenge him. Grandmother could change the order of succession, but that’s never been done, at least not in our family’s history. I’ve never gotten the impression that she’d go so far as to disinherit him, even if he often displeases her.”

“And you will be leagues away in Ashfuror.”

“Yes. I don’t believe for a second that Grandmother knew in advance about the raids. She wouldn’t sanction something so foolish. But when she dies, Athard will become Prime. Who knows what will happen then.”

Cyrus squeezed my arm, and he stared at me, his eyes moving back and forth as if he was scanning me, trying to make a decision. When he spoke, his voice trembled slightly.

“I...I know that we have no reason to trust each other. But you are my betrothed, and I don’t take that lightly. I have no intention of marrying you and then breaking the treaty. I’ve always wondered if my marriage, whoever it was with, could be real, could be a true joining and not just an act of politics. It’s silly, maybe, but ever since I found out, as a child, that I wouldn’t get to choose my spouse, a part of me has always held out hope that, somehow, there’d be love there. Maybe not at first, but eventually...”

I stared deep into his eyes, trying to detect some lie, some sign of deception. I didn’t find any.

“I am scared.” The words left my lips before I could stop them. Perhaps it was whatever potion Manod had given me, or the effects of being so near death, but I needed to be honest with him. “I, too, had hoped that if I married, it would mean something. But I have never...never been with...”

As I struggled to find a way to tell him how inexperienced I was, Cyrus leaned closer to me. I could smell the mix of soap and leather on him. Something about it sent a shiver through me, unmoored me, but it wasn't unpleasant.

He whispered. "I know we don't know each other. Not really. But we could try."

My breath caught. I couldn't find words to reply. Cyrus stared at my lips with longing.

"May I?"

I nodded.

He brought his lips to mine. It was so soft and gentle at first, but that didn't stop my body from reacting. I felt a shock travel from my lips down to my torso and my pelvis, and instinctively I brought my hand up to the nape of his neck, pulling him in closer.

He took my touch as a signal, deepening the kiss. What had been chaste turned ravenous. I felt the blood rush to my face. Was this what I'd been missing out on? It was all-consuming, my brain lost in a sea of floating pleasure.

When he pulled away, his absence forced a moan from my lips. He smiled at the sound.

"You almost died, sweet Skye. I think you've had enough excitement for one day." He brought his hand to my cheek. "If we are to be married, you should be my partner and my equal. You won't be alone. Whatever comes, whether it's your brother or something else, you face it with me by your side."

I swallowed. No one had ever spoken to me with such care, such certainty. Maybe my

mother, but my memories of her were cloudy.

Because she'd been murdered by Cyrus' father.

A pang of grief shot through my chest. Nothing I'd felt since this whole thing began had been simple, and the specter of my parents' deaths had loomed over it all.

Concern crowded Cyrus' features. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes." It wasn't a lie. That's what I told myself, anyway. "It's fading now."

"Good. Get some rest."

He bent down to kiss me on the forehead, and before I could stop myself, I flinched. Thinking of my parents' deaths had stirred up my ever-present suspicion. Hurt flashed across his face, but it was quickly replaced by a cold, defensive mask.

"We won't continue on until I'm satisfied you can travel without pain," he said, his voice flat and emotionless.

Sadness surged inside me. I had wounded him. I hadn't intended to, I just couldn't escape the scars of my own history. They always lived there, right under the new skin.

"Cyrus, wait—"

The door slammed shut as he exited the cottage. I cursed my own inner struggle. I'd never convince him that I wanted to be by his side if I pulled away from his touch. I was frustrated, and more. Guilty, that I had ruined an unexpected tender moment between us, and deeply conflicted about how he'd made me feel.

When he kissed me, something inside me gave way. A wall that had been up since the moment of my parents' deaths finally started to crumble.

And I didn't know if it was real.

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Somehow I convinced everyone that I was well enough to ride the next day, although Cyrus kept a constant eye on me as we went. Jelenna was no better. Every time Blaze whinnied or snorted, she'd whip her head to check on me. Her eyes squinted in the morning sun, and her reflexes were on a hair trigger, as if I would fall off my horse the second she stopped paying attention. The only one who was nonplussed was Manod. Evidently the old priest was confident in his handiwork.

After about an hour, I couldn't take it anymore. I pulled Blaze up short and jumped off in one fluid motion, landing in a crouch. I won't lie, the move wasn't painless, but it was worth it.

Both Cyrus and Jelenna yelped. They were off their horses and on top of me in seconds.

"Enough!"

They took a step back, both of them stunned.

"I am fine," I said, adding some steel to my voice. "I am healed. Stop acting like I'm going to bleed my guts out at any moment."

Jelenna and Cyrus looked away, guilt flashing across their faces.

Jelenna spoke up first. "You took an arrow to your ribcage, Skye. You were bleeding

out. It could have pierced your lung.”

“Yes, and now I’m better. Right, Manod?”

Cyrus and Jelenna glared at the gray-bearded priest, who shrugged.

“I told you he was healed.”

“You almost died.” Cyrus' voice was soft. He was trying to hide his fear.

I walked over to him, taking his hands in mine, and kissed him on the cheek. His eyes widened at the gesture.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I feel good.” I glanced over at Jelenna, who had frozen at the display of affection. “I promise.”

She shook it off and jumped back on her steed. “If you say so.”

I turned back to Cyrus. “Can we please go?”

He nodded. I walked back to Blaze, patting him on the neck, and then pulled myself back up. Nobody else moved. They still were treating me like I was a ceramic vase balancing on the hump of a camel.

I urged Blaze forward, setting a quick pace. They could all catch up to me if they wanted to.

Over the next hours, the land on either side of us rose up, until soon enough we were riding through the bottom of a canyon. The rocky protrusions grew taller until they became full sandstone cliff walls, and there was a faint sound of rushing water, although we never reached the source.

“Where is the river that carved this canyon?” I asked Cyrus, who had been riding by my side for the last hour or so.

“In the days before the drought it was strong and wide, connecting Ashfuror with Inwic to the northwest. All that’s left of it now is a bubbling brook. It shrinks farther with each passing month of summer. Next spring, the melting snow will swell its waters, but unless the weather breaks, it won’t be nearly enough.”

Cyrus’ voice was scarred with deep exhaustion. He had been carrying the burden of drought and famine for years now, and it weighed heavily on his shoulders. I wished that I could alleviate it somehow. Maybe I could.

“What do you want from me?” Cyrus’ head snapped to me at my question. “As your husband.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Will there be something I can do? Can...can I help? I can’t sit alone in a castle looking pretty.”

“First of all, it’s not a castle. It’s a large building. Very simply appointed. There’s nothing to distinguish the palace from the offices and apartment buildings around it. Although there is an old family manse, on the shore of the Eastern Sea.” Cyrus pursed his lips. “I haven’t been there since my father died.”

“I would like to see it.” Cyrus frowned, but I kept going. “You can’t work all the time.”

“I’m an emperor, in everything but name. I constantly have decisions to make. Plus, this...” He gestured to the circlet that rested on his brow, gray and inert. If I hadn’t seen it for myself, shining with fiery magic, I would have thought it an ordinary, if

well-crafted, piece of stone. “It pulls on me, when I’m needed. I can’t exactly up and leave.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t exactly one to take time to rest myself, but Cyrus was more strung out and exhausted than I’d ever been.

“But to answer your question, you should do whatever you’d like. You could join the military command in some way, if that interests you. Or be an advisor. Or you could find something else.”

I didn’t say anything. It suddenly struck me how out of place I would be in my new home. I’d never been to a city other than Greatfalls. What would it be like?

“I had always thought, if I married, that my spouse would rule by my side.”

Cyrus’ words jolted me from my thoughts.

“But I’m not even from Ashfuror.”

“No.” He chuckled, deep and low, and the sound sent tingles running throughout my body. “I had imagined that you would be someone from my own city. Even for them, the path to acceptance might be too great.”

“What do you mean?”

“This crown gave me authority, even as a teenager. It allowed me to hold on to the rule of Ashfuror after my father died, despite my young age.” His tone grew more serious. “My father stored the crowns of the toppled Lords of Fyr in our vaults. If Stahkla accepted my spouse as a Lord of Fyr, if he allowed them to bond with one of his artifacts, then the people would embrace that person.”



Cyrus slowed his steed to a stop, turning to me.

“But bearing an artifact always comes with a cost, and no outsider has ever been accepted by the God of Fire and Metal. Still...it would be nice. To be equals.”

My brows furrowed at his words. I had never even considered that any romantic partnership of mine wouldn't be between two equals.

“Yes,” I said, unable to hide my anger even as I kept my voice monotone. “Nice.”

“Of course, this is only about fulfilling the treaty,” Cyrus said, rolling his eyes. “No need to think about such things. You can spend your days reading and working on your needlepoint. Perhaps you could throw a lavish dinner once in a while.”

With that, the sarcastic tone was back, and the glimpse of what I thought of as the real Cyrus was gone. He picked up his pace, moving away from me.

“Cyrus.”

He didn't acknowledge me. I had somehow hurt him again, impenetrable Dark Lord that he was. I leaned into Blaze, nudging him to keep pace so that I was parallel with Cyrus.

“Please.”

“It's fine.” He kept his gaze trained ahead of us. “I forgot myself for a moment. I forgot that we are strangers. That you hate us.”

“Cyrus!” My voice rang out in the canyon, and he pulled himself up short, turning to me, his eyebrows furrowed in irritation. “A week ago, I had no idea that an arranged marriage was even a possibility. A week ago, I thought you were a faceless monster.

We are strangers. I don't know if love is possible here. It's enough that our marriage will bring peace."

His face was inscrutable. I reached for the courage to continue.

"I don't hate you." My voice came out in a ragged whisper. This level of vulnerability was foreign to me, and my throat tightened at the attempt. "I hated the idea of you. But you...I don't know you. I...I want to find out more."

The corners of Cyrus' mouth turned up a tiny bit. "You are something else. Maybe you should be the heir of Greatfalls."

I laughed, but my chest tightened with anxiety at the thought. "I've never wanted to rule. I hate the expediency, the manipulation. It's not my way to hide ugly actions behind pretty words."

"That's why you would be a good ruler. You'd be straightforward, and people would trust you." Cyrus was smiling now, and I blushed at the compliment. "Leading is not fun. But I've always thought it might be easier with someone at my side."

The yearning in his voice made me want to comfort him, to give him everything he could want. At the same time, running from this was enticing, escaping the complicated feelings this man inspired in me.

"Trust me, I shouldn't be the Prime," I replied. "Besides, if I was the heir, you'd be marrying Athard right now."

"Don't even bring him up. Being Lord of Ashfuror is heavy enough without adding that dead weight. I've only met him once, and I already dislike him." He tapped the circlet resting on his brow. "Besides, I've already got this to worry about."

I regarded the circlet atop his head. Was it a metaphor or was he being literal?

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Stahkla requires much in exchange for his gifts, and—”

The harsh croak of a raven made both of us turn our heads to peer farther into the canyon. I rested my hand on my bow.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Bertio.” Cyrus closed his eyes, faint amber wisps leaking from the obsidian stone on his head and weaving together to form the Crown of Seeing.

“Is it danger?”

He opened his eyes. The royal symbol atop his head pulsed with energy. "Come."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

As we made our way farther into the canyon, my senses were flooded with the smell and texture of smoke. Manod coughed behind me as the air grew thicker. Cyrus pressed on, his eyes not leaving the trail in front of us.

"What would be on fire in this canyon?" I asked, scanning the path ahead. "Does anyone live here?"

"Wildfires," he said, pushing forward as quickly as the rocky ground would allow. "We've always had them, but they've grown so much worse during the drought. People do live out here. There's a cluster of cabins near the encroaching flames."

"How do you—"

Cyrus tapped on the corporeal part of the crown he wore. "It is the Crown of Seeing, after all."

The smoke in the air was becoming overwhelming, but I kept pace with Cyrus. If he had a plan, he revealed none of it to me. What could we do about an out of control fire? We had no way to douse it — we'd not seen a trace of water since we entered the canyon. If I hadn't heard the sound of it a few hours ago, I wouldn't have believed it existed at all.

The trees grew denser as we traveled. Normally, I would have welcomed the sight. These were sickly, though, the few left that hadn't succumbed to disease or lack of water. Fire would make quick work of the dry, dead wood if it got out of control.

We heard it before we saw it: the crackle of flame and the shouts of men. We

emerged from a copse of desiccated trees to find five cabins clustered around a dry river bed. The buildings were on fire. Two bearded men were gathered around a third, who was lying on the ground in front of the houses, seemingly unconscious.

One of the men sprang up as we approached. "Can you help? We've got people trapped in the cabins!" He dissolved into a fit of coughing.

Cyrus swung down from his horse, unaffected by the thick smoke. My eyes were stinging and watering. I pulled my tunic up over my mouth to filter out some of the ash in the air.

"Where are they?" Cyrus projected an air of calm authority.

"My wife and daughter are in the middle cabin. Raffin's grandmother is in the one on the end. She's eighty, and her lungs haven't been right since last winter. Raffin went in after her, but he passed out before he reached the door. We dragged him back."

From behind us came a harsh, sandpaper cough. I turned to find Manod with his hand around his own neck. It was radiating a white light that leached into his skin and flesh. The symbols on his vestments were shifting and glowing. It dawned on me then that the robes he wore were an artifact of Stahkla. They must be the source of his ability to heal.

After a moment, the old priest removed his hand from his throat. "That should do it. I'll take care of the people out here. See what you can do about the ones inside."

"How close is the water from here?" Cyrus asked the men. The question didn't sound hopeful.

"Almost half a league to the south," one of the men replied. "It used to run through here, but..."

"Yes. All right." Cyrus turned back to me and Jelenna, who had joined us. "Jelenna, ride with the soldiers and carry back what water you can. Leave me a couple strong men. We may have to drag people out. Skye—"

"I'm not going anywhere," I cut him off, surprised by my own vehemence.

"I wouldn't think of it. Stay by my side. I may need your help." His eyes flickered with a quick moment of apprehension. "This is going to cost me," he said under his breath.

My stomach tightened his words. What was he going to do? Jelenna rode back to the soldiers and barked out a quick command before heading out at a clip. They all followed her, except for two huge men that rode up to join us.

"We'll go into the middle one first. The two of you will lead the way once I've tamped down the flames. Skye, stay by me."

The two muscular giants dismounted and made their way to the front entrance of the middle cabin. There was a rude set of decaying wooden stairs that were beginning to char. The men pushed through the smoke, but they had to stop where the fire became too intense to traverse.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to put it out." With that, Cyrus grabbed my upper arm, squeezing tight as he closed his eyes. The crown's orange light pulsed and intensified. Tendrils of smoke drifted upwards from it.

I startled at a loud pop from the fire in front of us. The conflagration on the front stairs of the cabin flared and died down, shrinking to nothing. Cyrus opened his eyes, steadying himself against me.

"Come on." Cyrus gestured to the two soldiers. One of them kicked the door, which crumpled under the assault. We stepped through into the house. The smoke made it nearly impossible to see, and I couldn't help but cough.

"I can help with that." Cyrus' crown burst with energy once more, and this time it was as if the smoke in the air froze in place. He sighed, exhausted and drained. With that, the particles of ash and dust fell to the floor, clearing the field of vision and coating everything in a layer of soot.

The main room of the cabin was bare, and the walls were marked with stains of black charcoal. One of the soldiers headed up the stairwell in the back, and immediately turned back.

"There's a wall of flame at the top of the stairs," he called out.

Cyrus moved to go up the stairs himself when a shriek came from the second floor, followed by the weak cough of a child. Cyrus' face took on a grim cast. He climbed halfway up the stairs.

"Skye, please..."

I went to him, standing a step behind. I was confused as to why my presence was needed, but I would do what I had to to save these people. The heat poured down the stairwell. It was unbearable. Cyrus gripped my shoulder and squeezed his eyes shut. As he did, something shifted inside of me, and my bones ached with a sudden, deep weariness.

In the doorway, the flames shifted and morphed, forming shapes as they burst forth, grabbing at Cyrus. Then the fire died down to nothing.

Cyrus opened his eyes, and collapsed down into a seated position, breathing heavily. I

reached down to help him up, but he waved me off.

"Go up to the next floor. Help them."

His face was marked with soot and deeply lined with exhaustion. However he was doing this, it was taking a toll. I shoved my concern aside as I squeezed past him up the stairs.

I rushed into the upper room. A woman crouched in the far corner, a blanket pulled over her, shielding what must be her baby. My heart ached at the desperation in her face.

"It's safe," I said, walking toward them. "Let's get you out of here."

The blanket flopped to the side, and the woman stood up. Her face was stained with ash and tears. She held a tiny infant in her arms. It wasn't more than two months old.

"There's something wrong with her. She's breathing, but..." The woman held out her child to me. I took her into my arms. I held her awkwardly, not knowing how to help. The baby let out a faint cough, as if that was all she could muster.

"I'm going to take her to the priest," I said. "He'll help her."

She gave me a quick nod, and I took off down the stairs. Cyrus had gotten on his feet and was heading out the front door. He saw me and stepped aside.

"Take her to Manod and meet me at the other cabin."

I made my way out to the priest as fast as I could. Manod had managed to get the collapsed man up on his feet. Raffin, his name was. I held the infant out, and the old priest took her into his arms with a careful intensity.



"She'll be fine, Skye. Go to Cyrus." His eyes filled with worry, matching my own.

"What's happening to him?" I asked.

Manod cradled the infant, checking her for injuries as he spoke. "The powers of an artifact always come at a cost. The cost is greater if the bearer uses it for something outside its intended use. The Crown of Seeing was made for scrying and augury, but it was also a gift of the God of Fire and Metal. Through the connection to him, Cyrus can command the flames, but the price is great. He pulls vitality from you to help him weather it."

I shook my head in confusion. "How?"

"The artifact can sense your betrothal. The connection that formed because of it, new and faint though it is, is enough for Cyrus to channel a small amount of energy from you."

My eyes widened. "But we're not married. How is there any kind of bond between us?"

"I sensed it when you were injured, the thinnest of strands formed from fear and care and your promise." Manod glanced over at the far cabin, which still had smoke pouring from it. "Go to him, please. He's as stubborn as you. He'll force his way into the last cabin alone."

With that, I was off, sprinting over to the rough structure, where Cyrus and the two brawny men stood at the front door. The house itself was run down, probably in the worst shape of any of them. I slipped in next to him.

"What do you need?" I asked. He turned back to me. There was a vulnerability in his face that I'd not witnessed before in him. He was tired, yes, but more than that I could

sense an undercurrent of fear.

"Take my hand. The door is blocked with debris. I'll need to clear it. There's no time to dig the old woman out."

"Can you do that? Move the fallen beams?"

"I can. If they're burning, I should have some control over them. But I can't do it alone." The uncertainty in his eyes gave the lie to his confident words. I desperately wanted to take his doubt away.

I slipped my hand into his, trying not to think too hard about how right it felt. A watery smile appeared on his face. Then he squeezed.

The world went white. I held on to my consciousness through sheer force of will. This time, I could feel the energy drain from my body. He was taking more than he had before. Through the blurriness in my eyes, I could see him, tall and shaking, the crown's bright light eclipsing the blaze in front of us.

The door split open with a loud crack, parting down the middle and pushing through the debris on the other side. The two burly soldiers stepped forward, but Cyrus stopped them.

"Wait. The flames are too intense for you to go inside." Cyrus steadied himself against me, his breath fluttering against my neck. He straightened, squeezing my hand once more.

Through the debris, I saw her. A gray bundle that had to be the old woman, unmoving against the far wall.

The fire burst with blue-white intensity, and my stomach dropped. Cyrus shook, and I

trembled with him. My knees wobbled with the loss of vitality.

In a flash, the flames died, and the two soldiers moved around us and rushed into the damaged cabin. I couldn't move, I could barely stay on my feet. I was weak, but that wasn't the worst of it. An intense pain ran through my muscles as I attempted to keep upright. Cyrus pulled on my hand, and then crashed into me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders as he lost control.

It was too much. The pain, the weight of his body, my own fatigue. I couldn't hold on.

As I lost consciousness, Cyrus whispered in my ear, his voice ragged from inhaling smoke.

"I'm sorry, love."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

At first there were only shapes and patterns, complex and beautiful, filling my field of vision. Intricate red and gold embroidered fabric was all around me, covering me and enveloping me. It was a bedspread of some kind, but more luxurious than anything I'd ever had in Greatfalls. I slowly grew aware of my surroundings. The fabrics felt lovely against my skin: the pillows, the blanket, everything was incredibly soft.

The sweet, even breathing next to me was also soft.

I squinted, trying to re-engage my vision past the bedspread. That's when I saw him. Cyrus. He lay there, his chest exposed, his pale skin in contrast to the colorful bedspread. The obsidian circlet still sat on his head even in sleep, and his face was...peaceful. Maybe for the first time since I met him. The lines in his face had softened, the furrow in his brow had smoothed away.

And I felt at peace. The knots in my shoulders had loosened, and the ball of tension that had lived in my chest for days now had released. I breathed in the cool air of the bedroom.

It was a bedroom. Whose bedroom was it? I pulled myself to sitting. The room was lush, but not ostentatiously so. Cyrus and I lay in a four poster bed, painstakingly carved with complex and beautiful designs. The stone walls were covered in bright tapestries. There was a cushioned armchair in the same fabric as the bedspread, and against one wall was a simple wooden desk and chair. An enormous mahogany armoire loomed over everything, and a fire burned low in the fireplace.

"Do you like it?"

I turned to see Cyrus now awake, flipped on his side, his eyes open, questioning. His tone was quiet and tentative, as if he was worried I might reject him.

"I do. It's very foreign to me. We don't build from stone in Greatfalls."

"I hope it's foreign in an enticing way." He smiled, and it was as though someone had punched me in the chest. How did this man's smile have such an effect on me? So much had changed in the last week. He was no longer the symbol of evil and aggression to me. Now he was a man, and in the short time I'd been with him, he'd demonstrated a deep level of compassion for his people. Even if he could still be absolutely infuriating.

I lowered myself back down to be close to him, keeping a little distance between us. I didn't touch him. I wasn't sure if he wanted that. Hell, I wasn't sure I wanted that.

"It's very intriguing. Is this your room?"

"Yes. I don't sleep much, so most of my time here is spent working at the desk, or reading." Confusion flashed across his face. "I can't remember the last time I slept so well."

I nodded, not saying anything. I was uncharacteristically refreshed, revitalized in a way that was whole and complete.

"Should we...get someone?" I scanned the empty room.

Cyrus chuckled, a low warm sound. Warmth rushed to my face, and the tips of my ears grew hot as well. It was honestly annoying how easily he could make me react.

"I've already been awake once already," he answered. "Manod said that we should take it easy, but we are fully healed. All of the people at the cabins are fine."

Cyrus stretched and yawned, his hand coming to his head as he did so. It brushed against the black circlet, and he froze for the smallest of moments. Then, after making some internal decision, he pulled it off his head, and reached over to rest it on the nearby desk.

Shocks of nervousness ran down my body, bringing me back to my purpose here. He trusted me enough to take off the Crown of Seeing in my presence. I pushed down the guilt that sprang up as he continued speaking.

"The retinue is settled into the palace here at Ashfuror, including your friend Jelenna. In fact, she put away your luggage in the dresser and armoire."

My mind immediately flashed to the dagger, the artifact from Grandmother. Had Jelenna put that in there as well? Would she expect me to use it today? I forced myself to pull my gaze away from the carved patterns of the obsidian circlet.

With the two of us here together, a split opened in my understanding of Cyrus between the man I'd seen risk his life for his people, and the tyrant I'd been sent to sabotage. I owed Grandmother and the people of Greatfalls this, to remove the source of their oppressor's power. But a small part of me wanted to leave my promise behind. And all of me wanted Cyrus to touch me.

"Where did you go?" Cyrus reached out and put his hand to my face, and I was jolted back into my body at the feeling of it. His palm was soft and warm. I instinctively pushed my cheek against it.

"Nowhere," I said. "Just thinking about all that's happened in the last week."

"It was quite the journey."

"A week ago I was Commander of the Archers of Greatfalls. And now I'm...about to

marry the Dark Lord of Ashfuror."

Cyrus rolled his eyes. "I really don't love that title."

"It's what we always called you. Before I understood how you were."

He squinted at me. "And how am I?"

"I...I'm not sure. I don't know everything. But you are strong, and committed to your people. I didn't expect that." I swallowed. My mouth was dry, but I continued anyway. "And handsome."

Cyrus brushed my hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. It was astounding to me that the great enemy of Greatfalls could be so gentle. He was stubborn as hell, sure, but right now he was like a kitten. The same man who had stood next to me and saved his people from a raging wildfire.

"Can I kiss you, Skye?"

I froze. My inexperience threatened to take my words away, but I fought through it. I needed him to understand what I wanted.

"Yes. Please."

With that, his lips were on mine, soft and pillowy against my own. He slid closer and wrapped his arm around my waist as we kissed. I couldn't keep my own hands from exploring his skin. I ran my fingers down his back, stopping at the small of his back. I paused for a moment, uncertain, but the feel of him growing hard against my stomach gave me a jolt of courage. I slipped my hand under the band of his undergarments and grabbed his ass. It was firm and round, with the lightest covering of fur, and felt perfect under my touch.

He must have taken my boldness as a sign, and deepened the kiss. The tip of his tongue traced the outline of my lips, and I opened my mouth, allowing him in. I moaned as he entered me, and I sucked gently at his invading tongue. My whole body shook at the barrage of new sensations.

This was bad. There was no way I was ever going to be able to live without this, now that I'd had a taste.

He broke the kiss, and I whined at the absence of his lips.

"You are incredible." Cyrus' eyes were filled with wonder. "You've got the hardened body of a soldier, but you respond to me like you've never been touched."

I blushed. "I..." I hated this.. I was so confident in everything else, but here I was utterly lost. I couldn't finish my sentence, but he deserved to know.

"Are you a virgin, Skye?" I nodded, and he took in a quick breath. "We don't have to—"

"No. I want to." I pushed the words out before my doubt could stop them.

"Are you sure?" Cyrus looked deep into my eyes, care and concern on his face.

"Yes." I slid in closer and wrapped myself around him, my head resting on his toned chest. "We're going to be married. I want us to share this."

He kissed my forehead and brought his lips to my ear. "I'll make it so good for you."

My whole body trembled at his words. He rolled us over, putting me on my back, and kissed my neck. I squirmed underneath him. It was all so intense. His sweet mouth made its way kiss by kiss down my chest, stopping at my nipples. He sucked lightly



at one, tugging on the other with his fingers at the same time.

My body jerked in response, and I let out a guttural moan.

"So responsive, my sweet warrior." He sucked harder at my nipple, and a sob slipped out from my lips.

"Cyrus, please..."

"Oh, we've just started, my love."

He left my chest behind, trailing kisses through the furry patch below my belly button, and stopping when he reached my underpants. He mouthed at my erection through the fabric, which made me swell even more. He slipped off the shorts, and I sprang to attention, painfully hard.

"Your cock is so pretty, Skye." Cyrus ran his tongue up the underside of my shaft, flicking the tip of his tongue against the head. My breath hitched at his teasing, and my hands went to his upper arms, squeezing his muscles as the sensations rolled over me.

With one fluid motion, he took my dick into his mouth, and I was enveloped in wet heat. I shouted as the tip settled onto the back of his tongue. His nose rested against my pelvic bone, and he rocked the head of my dick in and out of his throat.

It was too much.

"Please, I'll never last."

He hummed, sending a shiver down my whole body, and my dick twitched in his mouth. Then he began to move, setting a pace that could only mean he was trying to

kill me.

"Fuck, Cyrus, you feel so good."

His tongue swirled around me, and my torso came up from the bed as I vainly tried to push farther into his mouth. Up and down he went. My balls tightened, and I knew I wouldn't last much longer. I shuddered.

He slid off of me with a pop, and the cool air of the room calmed my incipient orgasm. He gave my dick one more lick, his lips red and swollen, and then pushed himself up to a sitting position.

"I want you inside of me."

I didn't say anything. I wanted to give him pleasure so badly, but I was clueless. I didn't want to ruin our first time together.

"Cyrus, I don't..."

"Just watch, sweet Skye."

He jumped up, grabbing a bottle from the dresser, and straddled me, facing away. Pouring some oil on his fingers, he got on all fours over me. He was putting on a show.

"Go ahead. You can touch."

I reached out and spread his ass cheeks. It was like an undiscovered continent to me as I explored him for the first time. His pretty hole was puckered and tight. He slid his own index finger into himself and I gasped. It was so warm and inviting. He moaned as he moved his fingertip in and out.

I couldn't resist. I grabbed the oil that he'd rested on the bed, and slicked up my finger. I moved his hand away and pushed my own finger in. It was so warm inside, and he squeezed his muscles around me. The little whimpers and moans he let out were pure heaven.

"Your fingers are thicker than mine." Cyrus pushed his ass back against my hand, my finger slipping farther into the snug warmth. "That feels so fucking good."

I ran my finger around the ring of his hole, stretching it out. The thought of my dick being inside of him was almost too much to bear.

"I can take another one. Fuck...please." I added a finger, and his moans grew louder. He was so perfect, in control and yet at my mercy. I went faster, moving in and out, and he shook with the sensation.

"Enough, Skye." He flipped around to face me, and now his beautiful dick rested on my chest. It was long and a little narrower than mine. I wrapped my hand around it, giving it a tug, and he closed his eyes, letting out a grunt as I pulled gently on his cock.

His eyes snapped open. "Are you ready?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. He reached behind him and slicked my shaft with oil, his hand gripping and teasing. He locked his eyes to mine, and with a quick motion, moved down, taking me into himself.

He was so tight around me, I had to fight my orgasm back. He gasped as he bottomed out, and I felt his weight against my pelvis. Our connection was complete. He looked down at me, and I clutched at his lean, muscular thighs. This was amazing.

"I love how you stretch me." Cyrus bent down and kissed me, and I pushed up into

him as he did. I felt his breath catch through the kiss. I wanted to always have this effect on him.

He broke off the kiss and lifted up, putting a hand on my chest. "No, I told you I'd make you feel good."

With that he was off, pushing up and settling down on me, squeezing and milking me with his ass. My cock disappeared inside of him and then reappeared, over and over. It was hypnotic. Eventually my gaze drifted up to his face. Cyrus' eyes were closed, his face beatific as the pleasure rolled through him.

His pace was punishing. I knew I wouldn't last long. As he moved, I reached for the oil and slicked up my hand. I jerked him off, slow at first, and his whimpering made my cock jump and twitch.

"Please, Skye, faster please." I slid my hand up and down his cock, matching his quickening pace. My balls tightened, and I knew I wasn't far from my release. Cyrus wouldn't let up.

His breath quickened and his face turned red. He was close. I was too, I just needed a little more friction, a little more control. I put both hands on his hips, and ensuring that I was lodged deep inside of him, I flipped us over.

He yelped in surprise, but I didn't give him time to adjust. I drove into him, chasing my need, pulling all the way out and slamming back into him. I was right on the edge.

Cyrus began to wail, his eyes squeezed shut, and his release spurted against the muscles of my stomach. The sounds he made, and the thought of him coming without touching himself pushed me past the point of no return.

"Cyrus!" I yelled as I emptied myself into him, my whole body shuddering as I filled

him. He squeezed around me.

"Yes, I want all of you, Skye."

His words intensified my orgasm, and I bottomed out inside of him, wanting to feel him around me, fully engulfed. As my cock jerked inside of him, I kissed him like I was devouring him, like I couldn't live if I didn't have this connection.

I collapsed on top of him, breathing hard into his neck. My cock slipped out of him, and I heard him sigh at the loss.

"That was incredible." His voice tickled my ear as he spoke. "It's never been like that."

"Thank you."

Cyrus ran his fingers down my spine to the small of my back. "For what?"

"For being my first. For making it perfect."

He wrapped his arms around me, squeezing me tight to him. He held me there for a long time, but eventually I felt his grip loosen around me and his breathing slow. I let myself drift off, feeling him under me as sleep took us both.

"Skye."

Someone shook my shoulder. I grumbled, intent on drifting back to the blissful sleep I'd been enjoying.

"I'm sorry, my love, you have to get up."

A sharp pain jabbed into my side, and my eyes snapped open. The afternoon sun flooded the bedroom, and it took a moment for Cyrus' face to materialize out of the sleepy blur.

"You pinched me!" I rubbed where his fingers had grabbed my skin.

"We have to get up."

"But...you pinched me."

"I did. You were ignoring me."

Cyrus' mischievous smirk made me forgive him immediately. That was followed by a flood of emotions: exhilaration at what we'd done, a satisfying feeling of fatigue in my muscles, traces of remorse at having enjoyed my time with my supposed enemy, and embarrassment to be here together after having been so vulnerable. For some reason, seeing Cyrus' open, playful face swept any awkwardness away.

I reached out, wrapping my arm around his waist and using my strength to pull him close to me. I kissed him, squeezing him tightly as I did so. He moaned into me for a

moment, and then pushed himself off me.

"You're not distracting me. We have to get up." Cyrus jumped out of bed, and pulled the covers off. I grumbled as the cold air hit my skin.

"Why? I want to stay here."

"We have to get married."

I sat up straight, my eyes widening. "Today?"

Cyrus slipped a robe around his shoulders. "The big ceremony won't be for weeks. Every person that works here wants a chance to put their stamp on the Lord of Ashfuror's wedding."

I stretched my arms over my head, pushing my body to fully wake up. "Then what?"

"The nuptial ritual. The treaty requires that we be married upon your arrival in Ashfuror. It'll only be the two of us and Manod. Jelenna, if you wish."

"Oh." I swung my legs over the side of the bed. I sat there for a second, trying to take it all in. I thought I would have a day or two to adjust. To prepare for the marriage bond. Everyone said that it was intimate, startlingly so. More intimate than sex. Whatever connection was there now, I knew it would magnify a hundredfold when the soul bond was brought into being.

Cyrus sat down next to me, his voice low as he spoke. "I understand if you're not happy. This is quick."

I turned, staring into his rich emerald eyes. "It's not that I regret...what we did. It's just, we only met a week ago. I thought there'd be time."

I turned my face away, my eyes going to a nearby rug. He kissed me on the cheek, the lightest of brushes.

"It's the nature of politics, sometimes. Human feeling gets left behind." He wrapped his arms around me. "I wish we had longer to learn about each other. But I like what I've seen so far. I...I'm not afraid of being known. By you."

I hugged him back, feeling his lithe body against my own. His warmth was comforting. It made me feel like there might be a way through this, some path that didn't end in heartbreak.

I was avoiding thinking about what I'd been sent there to do. I knew that. But I could no longer think of Cyrus as my adversary, or even as a neutral obstacle. I had feelings for him that were new and strange to me. There was an ease between us that I couldn't dismiss.

"Let's get ready, love." Cyrus stood, grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet. "We don't want to keep Manod waiting."

In an hour we were clean and dressed. Servants had dropped off the ceremonial garments while we bathed. Mine was a navy blue robe, embroidered in intricate silver designs. It was open in the front, showing the simple black shirt and trousers I wore underneath. Cyrus' robe was red with gold embroidery, in the same style.

We stood side by side in his bedroom, observing ourselves in the large polished silver mirror. His reflection winked at me.

"You're very handsome."

My face warmed at his words. "You were made to wear clothes like these. I look...we don't have this kind of fancy clothing in Greatfalls."



Cyrus kissed me lightly on my temple. "You couldn't be more perfect."

I didn't answer. It didn't seem right to correct him on the way to our wedding.

"Let's go," Cyrus said. "We don't want to keep Manod. He gets impatient."

Jelenna waited for me in a small, bare room next to the entrance to the chapel. When I walked through the door, she smiled, but there was a palpable tension underneath it. She closed the door behind me after checking the hallway for people.

"You look nice." She locked the door.

"Thank you?"

She turned to me, straightening the collar on my robe.

"You're getting married." Her tone was inscrutable, her eyes boring into me.

"I am."

"Tonight, you must perform your appointed task."

I didn't say anything. I understood what I'd been assigned to do. But I also knew that in fifteen minutes, Cyrus would be my husband.

"Skye?"

"He's not a monster," I said, the words rushing out of me. "He makes me crazy sometimes, but he's trying to do what's right, to be a leader."

"It's a facade. It's not real." Jelenna maintained a flat, emotionless tone, but she

clenched her fists as she spoke.

"I stood beside him when he saved those villagers from the fire. It was real. It cost him. He wants to do what's best for his people."

"What about our people?" Jelenna stepped away from me, picking something up from a nearby table.

"I...I don't know. I need to understand things better. I can't do it tonight. I need to write Grandmother, to get some clarity."

Jelenna brought hands up to my throat, pulling my collar out. In her hand was a small brooch: a gold bow, the symbol of the Archers. She attached it to my robes, her fingers gentle but sure.

"You've known him for a week," she said. "Don't forget your home because you have a crush."

"It's not that simple."

She raised an eyebrow to me, but I continued.

"People say you can sense emotion through the marriage bond. What if we get married, and I find there's no trace of deception? What if he is exactly who he says he is?"

She stepped back, appraising me from head to toe, and sighed. She was my oldest friend. She knew when I wasn't going to change my mind.

She smiled again. It was bittersweet, but it was genuine this time. "You really do look very nice."

"Thank you," I said, trying to project the calm and certainty that I didn't feel. I held out my arm. She took it, and we walked out together.

The chapel of Stahkla was beautiful, if dark for my tastes. It was on the lowest level, and the walls were not constructed from stone blocks, but rather had been hewn out of a single enormous boulder of black chalcedony. It was an astonishing feat, and I could only imagine that they had needed the help of the God of Fire and Metal to complete it. The walls were covered in candles, and where an altar would be, there was a pit with a blazing bonfire contained within.

Manod stood in front of the fire, his arms outstretched in welcome. His robes were black, and emblazoned upon them were symbols of flame, similar to the banners Cyrus' soldiers had carried. They pulsed orange with magical energy.

Excitement shown on Manod's face, cutting through any of the weariness of old age. Jelenna let go of my arm and stepped to the side. I approached the bonfire.

"There's a complicated ritual that we do mostly to impress the masses. We'll save that for the public wedding. Today, we enact the part that actually matters." Manod gestured down the chapel aisle. "Your intended has arrived."

I turned to see Cyrus in the doorway of the chapel. His robes sparkled in the light of the bonfire, and the crown on his head swirled with yellow and amber and pink. In the previous times I'd seen it come to life, it had been a deep, fiery orange, but these were the colors of the setting sun.

He exuded a noble air that was undercut by a mischievous sparkle in his eye.

"Are we doing this or what?"

Manod shook his head, chuckling. "It's good that Stahkla is not a self-serious god, or

you'd never have survived so long as Lord of Ashfuror.”

Cyrus stepped forward and grabbed my hands in his.

"I know that you had no choice in this. Nor did I. But I have hope that this marriage can be more than a political convenience."

Over Cyrus' shoulder, I saw Jelenna's face set into a stone mask. I envied her in some ways. She could have done this, and it would have meant nothing to her. But that wasn't me. The ritual, the marriage bond, it mattered to me. I wasn't sure yet what it would grow into, but there was a tie between Cyrus and myself that was more than the requirements of a treaty we'd been forced to carry out.

“I want that, too,” I heard myself say. Cyrus smiled, and a warmth bloomed in my chest. Jelenna frowned.

"Let's begin." Manod gestured for us to stand together near the bonfire. "This ritual has two parts: the questioning and the joining. When we are done, you will be as one in the eyes of Stahkla."

I took a deep breath. Cyrus was right. We hadn't had a choice, and this was momentous in a way I didn't fully understand. But I would honor the treaty of my people. I hoped that with the bond solidified, our connection would blossom in the coming days.

"Answer the questions together. Do not look away from one another. The fire will burn away any falsity."

What did that mean? Cyrus saw the doubt in my eyes. He smiled at me, and the tension in my shoulders released. I understood that his smiles for me were different, were something he shared with no one else. They took my breath away.

"Go on, Manod." Cyrus spoke for both of us.

"The fire of the God is witness." Manod's voice took on a strange, deep resonance. It rattled in my chest. "Petitioners, do you pledge your devotion to one another, forsaking all others in this the strongest bond?"

"We do." The words came unbidden to my lips, as if my mind had been turned off, and only my soul answered. Cyrus looked surprised as well. Next to us, the bonfire blazed forth hotter and higher.

"Do you pledge to stand in the way of all harm to your betrothed, and to never purposefully cause them harm yourself?"

"We do." Once again, the fire blazed brighter, climbing up toward the roof of the chapel.

"Do you pledge to love each other, and in so doing, protect and love all of the people of Fyr?"

There was a pause. I didn't love Cyrus, I barely knew him, but within me, I felt there was something stirring. Were the seeds of love there? Could they be cultivated with time?

Yes.

"We do." The bonfire flashed, and heat poured off of it. It was almost too much, but I kept my eyes locked to Cyrus'. For some reason, withstanding the heat of the fire was an important part of the ceremony.

"Then join hands, petitioners." Cyrus reached out and I took his hand in mine. I felt him tremble as our fingers met. It was comforting to know that he was as nervous as I

was.

"Now we seal your answers with the flame of truth." Manod stepped forward and rested his hand on top of ours. "And may that seal last through adversity and through prosperity, even past the point of death."

With that, Manod pushed our joined hands into the fire.

Jelenna yelled from across the room. I held up my free hand to stop her, knowing she would attack if she believed me to be in danger.

The spike of burning pain subsided almost immediately. Ropes of fire wound around our hands, and although there was an odd pressure, I no longer sensed any heat. As the cables tightened, I felt them sink into our skin, the energy dissolving and spreading.

The fire went out.

The chapel was now dark, except for the glow of Cyrus' crown, and the glow of our two hands, now one. They shone bright with orange-red runes, shifting and turning as they surfaced on our skin and then disappeared. I held tight to Cyrus. We had to experience this fully. We could only let go when it was all over.

Then my mind was plunged into the deepest of dark waters. Around me swirled a maelstrom of emotions that I understood were not my own: fear, trepidation, a grasping for control, confusion, embarrassment, even pride. But there, at the center, was a spark, still small, but growing, pulsing and expanding little by little. It was hope.

Cyrus' eyes were wide, and I knew he hadn't had any warning of what would happen, that our connection would be so immediate and so deep. He stared at me with

trepidation, scared of my reaction.

I smiled. I had pledged myself to him. To the possibility of our love.

Relief flashed on his face, and his whole body relaxed. On our hands, the ember-bright runes faded away, leaving our skin unblemished. Cyrus pulled me into him, kissing me hard, and I met him with the same fierceness.

We were joined.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

After the ritual we changed, and then Cyrus brought me out into his city. Considering I'd entered Ashfuror in an unconscious state, this was my first time out of the palace. Cyrus exuded an air of giddiness as we burst through the ornate wooden doors and into the streets, taking my hand in his and dragging me along from place to place.

I had to admit, the city was beautiful, if drastically different from my own. Instead of small wooden houses, there were towering buildings of stone and metal. The only wood tended to be embellishment. I can imagine to many from Greatfalls it would have felt ominous and unforgiving, but as we made our way through the maze of streets, I was filled with a vibrancy, a current of speed and intention that was new to me.

We stopped first at Cyrus' favorite bakery. He insisted that a proper tour of Ashfuror had to include his favorite pastry, a flaky bun filled with cream and some kind of tart fruit. It was delicious, crunchy and smooth and a little sweet. From there we wandered from street to street, in and out of bookstores and florists and forges.

Of which there were many. Considering Stahkla's influence, it wasn't surprising that metal-working was a common profession. The large pieces were impressive, of course, but I was most interested in the most delicate of them. Intricate iron picture frames. Flowers with carefully shaped metal petals. Even iron jewelry.

We ended the tour at the Great Square of Ashfuror. As we stepped out into the open space, I gasped. Without the other buildings closing in, the great spires of the city towered over everything, glimmering in the sunlight.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Cyrus asked.



“It is...” My head swiveled back and forth on my neck as I tried to take everything in.

“Look.” Cyrus pointed up to a grand balcony. Made of iron and embellished in gold, it loomed over the square. “That’s the far end of the palace. When we have the public wedding, it will be there. The whole square will be filled with people.”

I took in the area around me. It was a great expanse of cobblestone, with patches of green here and there.

“How?” I asked. “It could fit thousands.”

“There will be that many and more.” Cyrus winked. “People from all over Fyr will be begging to attend.”

The enormity overwhelmed me, as did the city in many ways. The scale of it made me sheepish. I slipped my arm around Cyrus’ waist. It was a show of weakness, perhaps, but I needed something to hold on, some steady thing that I could anchor myself to in the sea of change, and his strength and confidence pulsed through the marriage bond.

He pulled me in closer, kissing the top of my head and whispering in my ear.

“All this is yours.”

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My mind was buzzing with a jumble of contradicting thoughts. I was married to the Dark Lord of Ashfuror. We shared the marriage bond, and that had only served to deepen my already confusing feelings for him. Of all the possible outcomes of my life, this hadn’t been on the list. Hell, it hadn’t even been in the same room as the list.

Jelenna was not happy with me. That was clear the minute the ceremony had concluded. The fact that our wedding had been so blatantly blessed by Stahkla had visibly disturbed her. I was sure she had concerns about my ability to perform my purpose, to sever Cyrus' connection with the Crown of Seeing.

She wasn't wrong to worry. My grandmother, the most important person in my life, had trusted me with the task. But I had so many questions. I couldn't go through with it, couldn't hurt the man who was now my husband. Not if I wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.

I was avoiding considering my brother and his transgressions.

It was so much to think about, and yet here I was, drifting off to sleep in a contented haze. Why?

Because of Cyrus and his very talented mouth.

Between the wildfire and our wedding, we'd been absolutely exhausted. But that hadn't stopped him from giving me, as he said, "the full treatment." I didn't think there was an inch of me that he hadn't explored with his tongue. In the process, I'd made some discoveries about new pleasurable areas on my body that I'd never even considered before.

After that, he settled down to suck the very life out of me. All of the contradictory thoughts in my head disintegrated with that mind-blowing orgasm. As sleep took me, I made a mental note to make sure that I returned the favor very soon.

The combination of exhaustion and having Cyrus by my side meant that I slept deeper than I ever had. For the second night in a row, I was dead to the world.

Sometime near the witching hour, my sleep was disturbed. Someone called my name,

cutting through the heavy velvet blanket of my slumber.

"Skye..."

I dismissed it at first as the remnants of a dream.

"Skye!"

I sat up straight in bed, scanning the bedroom for the source. But I wasn't in Cyrus' bedroom anymore. It retained some similarities, but the angles were all off, and strange sprays of blue and purple formed an ever-changing film over the floor and walls.

"What is this place?" I mumbled under my breath.

"We are sharing a dreamscape, love." I jumped out of bed at the voice, turning to see the one person that couldn't be here in Ashfuror.

"Grandmother!" I ran to her, wanting to wrap my arms around her small frame, but as I tried they passed right through her.

"I'm not really there, Skye." The kindness in her voice soothed my soul. "One of the artifacts that Vazzart has gifted us over the years allows me to communicate in this way."

"Oh." I stepped back. There was something about her that was unsubstantial, like she could fade away at any moment. "I've missed you so much."

"And I you, my love." She smiled, but her eyes were sad. "Do you know why I'm here?"

I nodded unhappily. I had hoped that I had more time. The contradictions between what I'd been told of Cyrus and what I'd experienced next to him loomed large in my mind, and my conflicting emotions complicated the matter.

"Will you do it then?" she asked. "Tonight?"

I glanced over at the desk, where Cyrus had casually set his crown down. He didn't suspect me of any betrayal. He had embraced me as a husband and an equal. Would I really hurt him in this way?

"I have questions."

She squinted at me, her face growing hard. I'd only seen this side of her once or twice before. It struck fear in me, but I brushed it off. I wouldn't be a clueless tool.

"We were ambushed on the road. The villagers attacked us because they recognized our weapons. They claimed their town had been raided by the Archers, with Athard at the vanguard. Did you know about this?"

"I sent him." My stomach clenched at her answer. There was no tone of guilt in her voice.

"Why?"

"He was supposed to build relationships with the surrounding towns and villages," she said, all business. "It is something that I've neglected over the years. He...did not do it in a compassionate way."

"He didn't do it at all! He assaulted the town and murdered their mayor." My face grew hot with anger.

She didn't answer.

"Will you allow him to become Prime?" I pressed. "He's obviously unfit to lead."

She sighed. "You are gone, Skye, and you never wanted to be Prime anyway. I have no other grandchildren. I must sharpen the tool in my hand, rather than build another from scratch."

"Make someone else the heir. It wouldn't be the first time the Prime was adopted into the family. Give it to Jelenna. She's as loyal as they come."

Grandmother stayed silent for a long moment, then replied. "I will consider it."

It wasn't the definitive answer I'd hoped for, but it was something. Not that that was the end of my questions.

"Cyrus said that Greatfalls is hoarding water, that the Crown of Seeing showed him that. That we have far more than we need, that we are responsible for much of the suffering from the drought."

"It's not true."

"Grandmother—"

"Child, I have never lied to you. We have only ever kept the water needed to allow the city to survive. I would not cause suffering needlessly."

"But he said—"

"The crown is a deceptive tool." She gripped her staff. I was trying her patience.

"What do you mean?"

"The crown is a gift from Stahkla, and the God of Fire and Metal has an agenda. He hates that Greatfalls stays independent from the rest of Fyr, from his hand-chosen Lord. The crown can't lie. It can't show what isn't there, but Stahkla can decide what the wearer sees to support his own schemings."

"Cyrus is trying to do what's right."

"Is he?"

"Yes! I've seen him put his own life at risk trying to save his subjects. Since I've met him, he's always thought of himself last."

She glared at me, but I didn't flinch as I continued on. "We share the marriage bond now. I don't sense any deceit from him, not toward me, and not toward his people."

"They were quick to get you married."

"It was part of the treaty that we should be married upon my arrival."

Grandmother cocked her head at me, her expression unreadable. After a moment, she said, "There was no such provision."

"What?"

"That was not a requirement of the treaty. The armistice didn't go into effect until the wedding occurred, yes, but it didn't enforce a timeline."

I stared at her. Had they lied to me? Had they purposefully rushed the marriage? What possible reason would they have to do that?

“I...I don’t know. All I know is what I can sense through the soul bond. Despite any faults, Cyrus is trying to lead the best he can.”

She frowned. "Very well, child. If you say it is so, I will take it as truth. But that means little when he is under the thumb of an evil god."

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. This was complicated, made more so by my oaths and my bond to my new husband. I was being pulled between my old life and my new one, and I didn’t know how much further I could stretch before I broke.

"Listen to me, Skye. Do you care for him?"

"I do. More than should be possible after such a short time."

"Have you seen what the crown takes from him?" She gestured to Cyrus' sleeping form on the bed. "The cost is a steep one, and eventually it will kill him. It will not be a pleasant death."

My heart burned at her words. "What do you mean?"

"Death is the price of worshiping the God of Fire and Metal. The more you use his gifts, the more he takes from you."

My throat tightened at the thought of losing Cyrus. We’d just been married. I needed time to be with him. He deserved more than an early death.

"If you separate him from it," she continued, "he will have the chance to live a normal life."

"But he'll hate me! I'll be breaking the oaths I swore to him."

"Oaths blessed by a dark god." Grandmother spit on the ground next to her. "But won't you be helping him? Saving him, even? And at the same time, you can help your people get out from under the thumb of Ashfuror."

"I-"

"In your oaths, you vowed to stand in the way of any harm to him. The crown will bring about his death. You can stop that."

I stood there, staring at her, and no words would come. There was no right answer. On the one hand, Cyrus had chosen to bear the crown, presumably with full understanding of what that meant. On the other hand, Grandmother had never lied to me, not that I knew of. She had omitted facts on occasion, but if she said the crown would kill him, I believed her. I had to. I'd stopped thinking of Athard as my brother years ago, and she was the only family I had left.

I shook my head.

"He'll forgive you, Skye." Grandmother spoke in a low, soothing tone. "He is your husband. You have the chance at a life with him, unburdened by the price of Stahkla's artifact."

"Fine." The words came out as barely a whisper. There was no way to win here. Either I betrayed my home or I betrayed my husband. But at least this way, Cyrus would live. "I'll do it."

She put her hand to her lips and gently blew me a kiss. "You will always be my family, love. You are my Skye. Your mother and father would be proud."

"I love you, Grandmother."



I jolted awake, breathing hard, in bed once more. The room had been returned to normal, no longer a morphed dreamscape. I was back in Ashfuror.

Cyrus lay next to me in the bed. He was so still, his chest barely rising and falling with the flow of his gentle breath. His face was peaceful and free of worry.

This was going to hurt.

I stood and went to the dresser, keeping my footfalls light. I opened the drawer and removed the dagger, the present from my Grandmother and the gift of Vazzart. It hummed in my hand, vibrating as though my touch had brought it to life.

I picked up the circlet. The volcanic glass was dark and lifeless. Without Cyrus bearing it, feeding it his energy, it was nothing but an empty symbol. I couldn't let it continue to steal Cyrus' vitality.

I held the ornament aloft in my left hand. It was lighter than I imagined it would be. As I raised the dagger, the sound of mumbling came from the nearby bed. I froze.

Cyrus was talking in his sleep, mumbling incoherently. I breathed in and out slowly, steadying the racing tempo of my heartbeat.

Taking the dagger in my right hand, I circled around the crown. Once.

The crown sprang to life, shining with a bright orange-yellow light and emitting a low tone. The dagger shook and hummed. Moving it through the air took an effort, as if the knife was being pulled down toward the center of the earth.

Twice.

The tone grew louder, and the crown shook sympathetically with the knife. It was

warming underneath my fingers, tolerable but heating up quickly.

Three times.

The whole room came alive with orange light, and flames burst from the surface of the circlet. I almost lost hold, but I gritted my teeth and gripped hard, even as my fingers blistered. I could see them then, the rope-like strands of amber energy running from the artifact to Cyrus, pulling energy from him, taking what belonged to him.

He deserved more than this, to have his life sacrificed to Stahkla's will. The people of Greatfall, my people, my home city, they deserved more as well. They deserved to govern themselves, to not constantly worry about some far away Dark Lord coming to bend them to his desires.

And I deserved more. I had given up my home and I had given up my hand in marriage. I deserved time. Time to find out if Cyrus and I could have something real, something like my mother and father had had.

The dagger was heavy now, so heavy, and the crown burned with a white-hot heat. I wanted to scream, I wanted to drop them both, but I didn't. I had a duty to perform. For Greatfalls. For Cyrus. And for myself.

With great effort, I held the dagger high. My arm strained against the weight. In a single quick motion, I cut through the threads of energy that connected the crown to my husband, sleeping peacefully in his bed. In our bed.

The cords of power snapped with a crack that echoed off the stone walls. I instinctively shielded my face. Then everything went dark.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

Cyrus' scream shook me to my core. It was the desperate cry of a creature in agony, and it made my heart break to think I'd been the cause of that pain, even momentarily. I set the now-dark circlet down and went to his side.

He lay there, eyes open, staring up at the empty air as if he could see something I couldn't.

"Cyrus? What's happening?"

"I didn't know it would hurt this much." He didn't look at me, his eyes still glued to the ceiling. I put my hand to his forehead. It was hot to the touch.

"Cyrus..."

"I had wondered if you would do it. You love your home city so much."

"It wasn't only for Greatfalls. Now you won't have that thing draining your life away."

"Sweet Skye." He grabbed my hand, squeezing, but never turned his head to me. Could he see anything at all? "I'm sorry. I should have warned you, but Stahkla stopped me. The god wanted this to be some kind of test or...I don't know..."

"Cyrus—"

He coughed, deep and raw, and tremors wracked his body. Despair filled me as I watched the consequences of what I'd done.

"No time, Skye. Go get Manod."

"But—"

"Please. I'm dying."

His words were a knife to the gut. Had Grandmother lied to me? There wasn't time to consider it. I took off at a sprint down the hall. Manod's quarters were two floors below us. My bare feet slapped against the cold stone as I ran.

When I reached the stairwell to go down to him, he emerged from the doorway. His eyes bored into me.

"I felt it. Come on."

He stalked down the hallway at a speed belying his old age.

"Is he really dying?" I asked.

"Yes." Manod sighed. "I told him this would happen. He had hoped you wouldn't make this choice. Or at least that you would talk to him first."

"How did he know?"

"The Crown of Seeing. The future isn't fixed, but the artifact can show the possible outcomes. This was the one it always came back to."

"But—"

Manod shook his head sharply as he reached for the doorknob. He went to Cyrus' side, while I stood back, helpless and guilty. And angry.

"Are you ready, my lord?" Manod raised his hands over Cyrus' head.

"Wait. Give me a moment with Skye."

Manod stepped back and turned to me. His eyes were dark, and his voice was tight with anger. "Hurry. You're out of time."

I stepped up to Cyrus, and he reached out for me, although his sight was still transfixed forward. I kneeled beside the bed.

"I'm so sorry. I..." The words stuck in my throat.

"Shh. I know." He grasped my upper arm, but his grip felt weak to me. "Kiss me."

I couldn't deny him. I leaned over and pressed my lips to his, and I couldn't hold back my tears. They fell from my eyes onto his cheeks, running down until we tasted salt in the kiss.

Cyrus broke it off. "That's enough. No more tears. I need you to do what Manod says."

"But I—"

Cyrus shook, moaning low. Manod pushed me out of the way. Placing both palms on Cyrus' forehead, he poured bright white light from his hands. Cyrus' face was bathed in it, and after a moment the tremors subsided. He went completely still.

I was scared to speak. I was stuck, unable to help and overwhelmed with the knowledge that this had been my fault. That I had misread the situation, that my judgment was fundamentally flawed. Still, I had to understand what was happening.

"Is he dead?" My voice cracked as I forced the words from my lips.

"No." Manod removed his hands. "I've bought him some time. Not a lot, not more than an hour. That will have to be enough."

"What do we do?"

"Not we. It's what you must do."

I shook my head. Guilt, confusion, and anger warred inside me. I didn't think I would ever feel settled again.

"We worried that your grandmother might push you into doing something like this. I had hoped that once the wedding ritual was complete, the soul bond might give you pause, might make you reconsider any plans of betrayal."

There was an undertone of raw anger in Manod's voice. I wanted to explain myself, to make him understand. "My grandmother—"

"Stop!" He breathed in, calming himself. "It doesn't matter, not now. The crown stays with the bearer until he dies. Then it lies dormant until it is given to the next. Once the connection has been secured between them, the bearer cannot live without the artifact."

The taste of acid hit my mouth as my stomach churned. "There's no way to save him?"

"You are his husband." Manod turned his back on me as if he couldn't bear to see my face. He paced around the room, lighting candles, illuminating the dark chamber. "Not only did you establish the marriage bond, you were recognized by the fire. There is a connection between you and Cyrus that is unique. Your grandmother's

artifact ensured that Cyrus cannot re-establish his connection with the crown again, that's part of its dangerous magic."

Manod turned, the light of the candles flickering yellow on his face. He glared at me as if daring me to contradict him. I said nothing.

"You can."

"What?"

"You can become the Crown of Seeing's next bearer. It will recognize the bond of marriage you share, and the connection can be preserved through that."

"So if I—"

"If you put on the crown, and it accepts you, then he will not die."

Why would it accept me, after what I had done? "And if it doesn't?"

"You'll both be dead."

I ran my hand through my hair. Exhaustion and guilt threatened to overtake me. This was too much. Knowledge of what was right and what was wrong was obscured from my sight. All that was left was confusion.

"It is your grandmother's fault," Manod accused. "If she had told you the truth—"

"Grandmother doesn't lie!" My reaction was automatic and instinctive. It was ingrained in me, but even as the words left my mouth, I was already doubting them. A growing grief gnawed at me. I had been so certain that she would not mislead her own grandson.

Manod sighed. "Sit down, Skye." He gestured to the nearby wooden chair.

I sat, and even that amount of physical relaxation made me aware of how my whole system was on a knife's edge. What Manod was about to say might make me or break me.

"I was advisor to the Lord of Ashfuror when your parents died."

My whole body tensed. "You knew them."

"I did."

"You were there when they were killed by Cyrus' father."

Manod barked out a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Is that what you were told? That they were murdered in cold blood?"

I nodded. It was a story I'd heard over and over again, from Grandmother, from everyone in Greatfalls. "They were ambassadors. They were slaughtered in the middle of the night."

"Of course that's what they told you." Manod's face softened. "Well, I was there, and I know the truth."

My vision blurred around the edges. This was the fundamental fact of my childhood from the age of six. My parents had been murdered by the Dark Lord of Ashfuror. It was foundational. Questioning it would jeopardize my whole sense of my own history.

But I had to know. I gestured for him to continue, steeling myself.



"They were here as diplomats. Although Ashfuror and Greatfalls have been at odds for centuries, there were moments here and there when the tensions eased. This was one of those times. There were some indications that perhaps we could forge a lasting peace. We hosted a banquet in their honor. They talked prettily about the possibility of alliance, of sharing resources and greater peace in Fyr."

He sank down on the edge of the bed.

"But the second night they were here, I was alone in my quarters when Stahkla sent me a flash of insight. He doesn't often communicate in that way. He prefers to use his artifacts, but this was important. It wasn't much, nothing visual or even words. Just an overwhelming sense that Cyrus was in danger."

His face showed his discomfort at calling up the memory. His voice shook, but he pushed through.

"I found your mother with a knife to Cyrus' throat. She was about to murder a ten-year-old child."

I stepped back unconsciously, my back slamming against the desk behind me. The desk hit the wall with a bang. It hurt, but the pain didn't break through the swirl of thoughts in my mind. The sense that Manod was telling the truth, that he was sharing a deeply painful event from his past, was at war with my belief that my parents would never have done such a thing. I may only have a few memories of them, flashes of comfort and love, but I couldn't believe that my mother would attack a young boy.

I didn't say anything. What was there to say? Manod continued.

"I managed to fight her off and get Cyrus behind me, although only because I caught her by surprise. She was a fierce fighter. I held her back until the guard arrived. She wouldn't surrender. They had to..."

Manod stopped. Even as upset as he was, he wouldn't describe my own mother's death to me.

"Cyrus was safe, but that was overshadowed by the arrival of horrible news. The Lord of Ashfuror was dead. Your father had attacked in the night. He'd fought back. The clash had ended in both of their deaths."

He flexed and unflexed his fingers, trying to purge the recollection from his mind.

"I could understand the attack on Oswyn. It seemed foolish to throw away the chance at peace, but he could be a harsh and ambitious Lord, and there have always been tensions between Ashfuror and Greatfalls. But I couldn't forgive them for going after a child."

This couldn't be possible. If this was true, then everything I knew about myself, my family, my home...it was all a lie.

"How can I believe you?" My voice came out in a ragged whisper.

"Ask yourself what is more likely to be true. That all of this is an elaborate staged hoax? That Cyrus' affection for you isn't real, that your marriage isn't real, that we've somehow staged all this. Isn't it more likely that your grandmother sent your parents here to topple the Lord of Ashfuror's reign? The same as she sent you."

I couldn't deny the old priest's words. After all, Grandmother had lied to my face, no matter how much I wanted to believe otherwise. She had made me believe that Cyrus would live, that being separated from the crown would prolong his life. She had kept the existence of the treaty from me.

But Cyrus and Manod had also lied, or at least omitted vital information. They misled me about the timing of the wedding. They'd left me in the dark about the nature of

the crown. They could have been truthful, no matter what the God of Fire and Metal wanted, so that Cyrus' life wouldn't be in danger.

Instead I was left weighing the piles of deception against one another. I was mired deep, and tired of being a tool of ancient ruling families and the gods themselves.

A pained moan came from Cyrus' still body. His face was even paler than before.

"I thought we had time," I said, turning to the priest for answers.

"I can only hold it off for so long." A maelstrom of conflicting emotions swirled on Manod's face. "You have to decide. There is danger, but...it's the only chance he has."

My new husband lay before me. His lips were speckled with blood, and his eyes were squeezed shut in pain. The gravity of it settled on me like a great weight on my shoulders. No matter what lies had been told to me, I had been the one to do this. If there was no one left for me to trust, I could trust in myself, in my own integrity, my own sense of responsibility. This was my fault, and it was my job to fix it. There was only one answer.

"I'll do it."

Wasting no time, Manod sprung up and took the obsidian circlet in his hands.

"Once this is set atop your head, you will come face to face with Stahkla. Only he can bind you to the Crown of Seeing. You must convince the god of your worthiness."

I nodded. There was a decent chance this would end in my death, but that was the risk I had to take to right my wrong. At least I'd die with my honor intact.

Manod lifted the artifact above my head and chanted in a low voice. "This one offers himself to your service, God of Fire and Metal. May you accept his sacrifice for the good of all Fyr."

Manod brought his hands down, and the Crown of Seeing settled on my brow, heavy and cold. For a moment all was quiet, as if time itself had been suspended.

Then the room was ablaze.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

Fire filled my field of vision, consuming everything around me. All of it burned, the furniture and Manod and Cyrus and the stone walls themselves. It disintegrated into flame and ash, until the only thing left was the inferno. I sat at the center, clenching my jaw as I endured the pain of the heat.

I didn't make a sound. I could not show weakness in this place, no matter what tortures were to come, I was certain of that. After what felt like an eternity, the conflagration died down. I floated alone in a black void.

Then it came. It did not appear. There was no moment of arrival. It was simply there, as if it had always been so, a titan, a creature of molten rock, the magma flowing and swirling on the surface of his body.

You have betrayed your oath.

What could I say to that? It was true. Not intentionally, perhaps, but through misplaced trust and naiveté, I had broken my vows to Cyrus.

"Yes. I didn't intend to, but I did."

A handlike appendage emerged from the thing, glowing and throwing off an unbearable heat. It touched my cheek, and a burning agony spread throughout my body, as if my very bones were on fire. I fought to stay on my feet.

If you wear the crown, all people who worship me will become yours to steward.

"What do you mean?"

Look .

With that we were flying high above the plains of Fyr at a dizzying speed. The dry cracked lands passed quickly underneath us as we went, hills becoming tiny bumps and valleys becoming divots as we observed from that great height.

We slowed as we floated over towns and villages. People toiled in the fields in vain, doing their best to coax sprouts out of dust and clay. Elsewhere, we passed ponds and rivers with the barest trace of water left in them. Desperate communities fighting each other over land and food. On the seashore to the east, fishermen returned to their starving families with their nets empty. Finally, we arrived at the foothills. The gates of Greatfalls.

All are your responsibility. If you bear the crown, you also bear that burden. Any that walk on the surface of Fyr must be safeguarded and under your care.

The enormity of it hit me. Is this what Cyrus carried with him? The responsibility to caretake an entire nation? Not only the weight of his birthright, but the weight of a god's expectations.

"I..."

I couldn't say no. The lives of both my new husband and myself depended on it. But I desperately wanted for there to be another way.

Why do you not want to lead?

The god's voice echoed in my mind. I breathed in the possibilities, imagining myself as Lord of Ashfuror. Having a nation that relied on me. Having to sacrifice my own integrity for the sake of my subjects.

"I will not play the game of lies. I will not taint my every human interaction with dishonesty. When leading a city, or a nation, there's always an angle or a deceit. It's one thing to withhold information. Effective rulers go beyond that. They manipulate every situation to the benefit of their people. Even now, the lies of the past reverberate and shape this meeting. The goal may be noble, but I will not lose my soul to it."

The god did not answer. I continued.

"Even you encouraged them to lie to me, to mislead me, to leave out important truths. If I had known it would kill Cyrus, I wouldn't have severed his link to the crown. But you wanted to observe me, like an alchemist putting the heat to his newest experiment, waiting to see the result. Even if the materials burned up in the process."

The creature of fire and ash shifted and transformed, a living inferno, its every movement giving off wisps of smoke. Was there a trace of regret there?

You are not one of mine. Your motivations were hidden from me, and perhaps I chose...unwisely. But the crown will not force a change in you. It gives you the power to act as you see fit, and complements your own abilities. You may forge a path of your own, if you wish, leaving behind deception.

I stared at the creature. Was that even possible? Grandmother worked hard to get people to do what she wanted them to do. She wore a mask, and when she removed it, another was revealed. I hated it.

But maybe Grandmother wasn't the person I should take as my model of leadership.

"I do not want to lie."

Then do not.

The words of the god reverberated in my mind as we hovered over the green forests of Greatfalls, then over the reservoir, then over the mountain itself.

You cannot place these over the others. All must flourish.

"I know." And I did. I would not abandon my people, but I would not privilege them.

Once again, everything changed. The earth below faded away. It was replaced with an intricate network of amber strands and nodes. At each node there was a faint movement, like a baby bird straining against its egg.

"What are these?"

This is the web of possibility. The future is not set, but some events are more likely to occur than others.

The god gestured to one of the larger nodes, and moving images flickered on its surface.

There was Cyrus, pale and still, unmoving in his bed. My stomach churned, and I gasped at the grief that sprang up in me. Was he dead? Was I unable to save him?

His body shifted and changed into a different person, a man with blonde hair instead of brown and a permanent sneer affixed to his face. My brother Athard. Also still, also unmoving.

Then, before I could take in what I was seeing, it changed once more, and the body became my grandmother's. She too did not stir. Was it slumber? Or death?

"All of them? Do all of them die?"



And what if they do? Will you still take the crown? Will you still pay the debt you owe to Cyrus and to me?

If they were all gone, what then? If my family and my husband were dead, what remained? I would be left with my duty to the people of Fyr, and the knowledge that I did everything I could to right the wrong I had perpetrated. That would have to be enough.

"If I bind myself to the crown, I will become a ruler? A Dark Lord?"

You will.

A fiery appendage gestured to another node. Inside was the image of a large chamber of dark stone with a huge round table at the center. A map of Fyr was on the table, with wooden figurines placed at various points throughout. A figure stood over it, cloaked in black, wearing a glowing orange crown.

It was me.

Manod was by my side, appearing even older and wearier, his beard unkempt and his eyes bloodshot. Other people were around us, but I did not know them. Advisors? Military commanders? But they all waited. They were waiting on my decision.

Then a flurry of images. Me standing with members of the aristocracy, dancing, talking, laughing. Me speaking with unhappy citizens. Me meeting with dangerous criminals.

Eventually, everything faded, the amber strands disintegrating around us, until it was just the god and I alone in the void. Although it said nothing, I could tell that it was waiting for my final agreement.

There was no question. I would rule over Ashfuror, over all of Fyr. I would save Cyrus and atone for my betrayal. If the lordship changed me, it would be no one's fault but myself. If I wanted to keep my integrity, I'd need to have the will to do so.

There was only one way forward.

"I accept the crown."

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Without a word, the God of Fire and Metal was gone, and I was back in Cyrus' bedroom. There was no fire, no charred furniture or smoke-filled rafters. It was as it had been before, except for the amber light that bathed the entire room. It took me a moment to realize that the illumination came from the crown on my head.

"Stahkla has accepted you."

Manod stared at me, his hands by his sides and his eyes wide.

"He did."

"My Lord." Manod went down on one knee, his movement unsteady from old age. I reached out to stop him.

"Get up, Manod. I am no more a Lord than I was a moment ago, no matter what the crown might signify. I've been in the city all of three days. Please stand."

Manod was uncertain for a moment, then pushed himself up to standing. "What is your command, Lord?"

"Cyrus. Is he alive? Is he hurt?"

Manod moved to Cyrus' bedside and I followed. My husband was still. Whatever tremors racked his body before had calmed.

"My healing put him into stasis, and his body has stopped fighting it. The artifact ceased draining him when you bonded with it. I can remove the magic keeping him

like this, but whether he has the energy he needs to recover, I do not know."

I let out a shaky breath. Had this all been for nothing? But I had sworn myself in service to the people of Fyr, and I would not break another oath. Even if Cyrus didn't...no, I didn't want to think of it. Fear and grief sprang up in me, but I pushed them away. This wasn't the time.

Manod pressed his hand to Cyrus' forehead, and his body released. It was subtle, but there was a ripple as the muscle and tissue relaxed. I willed his chest to move.

After a minute or more, it finally did. A strangled sound burst from Manod, but he quickly tamped down his display of emotion. He picked up Cyrus' wrist, feeling for a pulse.

"He is alive, but I do not know how long it will be before he wakes. He has to rebuild the vitality that he lost. He was on the edge of death."

Manod gazed down at Cyrus' face. It was so peaceful now, and his lips called to me. If Manod had not been there, I would have kissed him. I desperately wanted to feel the warmth in him, to let him know that I was there with him, to assure myself he was still alive.

"Will he survive?" I asked, hating the question.

"I don't know." Manod's face was a contradiction of hope and fear. "He is young and strong, but his connection with the artifact was powerful. He used it often. It's hard to say what the severing cost him."

"If he...when he wakes, will he still be Lord of Ashfuror?"

Manod's lips tightened. "As of this moment, he is not a Lord of Fyr. Your bond with

the crown means that Stahkla has chosen you to be Lord of Ashfuror."

I shook my head. "The people here don't even know who I am."

"If he wishes to rule by your side, there are...other possibilities."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"His father conquered the other Lords, and he kept their crowns. They are locked away in the vault. Cyrus could decide to bind with another, if Stahkla would have him. And if he chose to do so."

"You think he might not?"

"The cost of wearing the crown is high. It grows more so the more often you use it. And Cyrus may no longer wish to rule. He was made Lord of Ashfuror as a teenager. I don't know..."

I glanced down on my husband, conjuring an image of his body and his spirit knitting themselves back together, willing it into existence. "He deserves a rest."

"He does. I don't know what his choice will be. He cares deeply for his people." Manod stepped away from the bed. "It doesn't matter right now. He has a long recovery before him. You should come. You need food. I will prepare you for your role as Lord."

I shook my head. "Have them bring dinner here. I'm staying with him."

"Lord, you now sit in a seat of power. You have responsibilities—"

"They will hold for a day or two. You have my blessing to deal with any small crises

that arise.”

Manod opened his mouth to argue, then shut it. He closed his eyes, taking in a breath and letting it out. When he opened them, his face had softened. "Very well. I can buy you forty-eight hours before people start to question you and Cyrus' absence.”

Manod left the room, and I pulled up the desk chair. I took Cyrus' hand, visualizing my own life energy passing into him. If that had been the price, I would have paid it gladly. Instead, though, I was left with the crown and the rule of Fyr. I pushed the thought out of my head. Right now, my duty was to Cyrus. I needed to focus on him. If I embroiled myself in the day-to-day doings of the government, all of my time would be stolen away by that.

So I sat by him, holding his hand and hoping. I had hoped Cyrus might wake again in an hour, or a day, but I was quickly disabused of that notion. After twenty-four hours, there was no discernible change. Manod assured me that it was a good sign that hadn't gotten worse, and I clung to that hope tightly.

The hours ran into each other, and with nothing to focus on, my brain went to thoughts of Greatfalls and of Grandmother. Had she known Cyrus would die? Despite my wish to trust her, to think that this was all accidental, I couldn't be naïve. She had allowed my brother to raid and kill with impunity. Who knew what other crimes he had committed? I doubted she had even tried to guide him away from it.

If I was to believe Manod, she'd sent my parents to murder Cyrus in cold blood. To assassinate a child. It was unfathomable to me. No matter what she thought the benefits were, I couldn't wrap my head around it.

The more the hours passed, the more my mind focused on her. Was she truly so different from the person I thought I knew? In some ways, it was easier to accept that my parents were heartless assassins. I had almost no memories of them. But my

grandmother had raised me. She was kind and she cared about her people. She loved me.

Toward the end of day two, Manod stopped by once again. His pace was slow and his face, haggard. He once again put his palm on Cyrus' forehead.

"No sign of change?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "What's happened? You look as though you haven't slept."

"That's because I haven't." He lifted his hand from Cyrus and a tiny tremor ran through it. "The drought had already brought everything to a breaking point before now, and Cyrus had been working non-stop to hold it all together. With him incapacitated...I can only stand in for him for so long before people begin to question, and I don't have his stamina. Truth be told, his pace was unsustainable. We need a solution. There is talk of rebellion in some of the worst hit areas. For now, it's only talk, but..."

He fell silent, lost in his own thoughts. My own mind was racing. I was now Lord of Ashfuror, and I was a member of the Prime family of Greatfalls. The lies and deceit could be left in the past if we could forge a peace under our one family. And as a token of that peace, Grandmother could let the water flow. Not enough to endanger the city, but surely there was enough available to alleviate some of the suffering.

The solution was in Greatfalls, and I had to go there.

Cyrus moaned in his sleep. He didn't wake up or open his eyes, but he made a sound and squeezed my hand. Manod's eyebrows shot up at the sound.

"He is healing, I think." Some of the tension released in his forehead. "It may take some time, but he is on the path to recovery."

I nodded, staring at my husband. I wished he could speak, that he could tell me what to do at this moment. Who knew how long it would be before that would be possible? What if he never fully recovered?

“Where is Jelenna?” I asked. “She hasn’t come to see me.”

He hesitated for a moment, staring down at the floor. After a few seconds, he answered. “She’s gone.”

“What?”

“She’s been gone since the night...since Cyrus was injured. I thought you knew.”

I shook my head. Had she abandoned me? She was my best friend. Did she think I would be killed for my actions?

Manod put his hand on my shoulder, and I could feel the warmth and compassion radiating from it. I wasn't all that good at keeping my inner turmoil hidden.

"I have to go," I said.

Manod squeezed my shoulder and stepped back. "Yes, I think so."

"I want to wait for him to wake up. But the nation has to come first, and I need to see my grandmother. I think there’s a possibility we could build something...and also I need to see her.”

"She's your family."

"The only family I have left, other than my brother. She has always done right by me. I want to give her a chance...to explain herself, maybe? But if not, to show her good



faith. To cement the peace and share her resources.”

Manod stared off into the middle distance. "You know that that is unlikely."

"I don't know that." My voice hardened. "I'm her grandson, and she's no monster. I won't ask for more than she can give."

"And if she refuses?"

I pressed my lips together for a long moment before answering. "Then I will find another way."

"Very well." Manod moved toward the door, opening it and gesturing out into the hallway. "Come with me."

I followed as he strode into a wing of the building I had not been in yet. Manod opened a door with a heavy lock, and brought me into what had to be an armory of some kind. It was filled with plate armor and chainmail hanging off of wooden racks.

"I'm from Greatfalls. We don't wear metal armor."

"We're not here for the armor." He opened an armoire, and inside were a series of black, hooded cloaks. He glanced at me, sizing me up.

"You will need the crown for your journey back, and for whatever lies waiting for you in your old home. Don't take it off. It cannot be separated from you if you have it on your head." He pulled a cloak out and tossed it to me. "But most citizens of Fyr know what it means to wear the crown. It's better that you keep it hidden. Keep your hood up."

I folded the cloak over my arm. "I won't be staying in any towns. I don't think I can

make it in one go, but Blaze can manage it in two days. I'll stay off the road."

Manod moved on to another area. He tugged at a long wooden pole, pulling it off the wall. A black banner with no embellishment hung off the end. He held it out to me.

"What is this?"

"Take it."

I reached out, and as the metal of the pole touched my hand, a fiery symbol sprang to life, glowing orange against the black background.

"What—"

"It recognizes you." Manod smiled up at the striking emblem, a variation on the flame motifs I'd seen in the chapel and on the priest's robes during the wedding. "It is a symbol for anyone you meet. This banner shows you have the favor of Stahkla. People will stay out of your way. It will stop most bandits, and even wild animals will be put off by it."

There was something comforting about the banner. It was worn for the wear, tattered at the ends, but it shone brightly with the symbol of Cyrus' rule.

Of my rule, now.

"I'll leave first thing in the morning. Tell the stablehands to saddle up Blaze."

Manod said nothing in response, worry radiating from him. Finally, he spoke.

"I don't know what you will find in Greatfalls. If you fall, there will be no one left to lead in Ashfuror."

Would it really go that poorly? Would my own family attack me? I couldn't imagine.

"Can you communicate with me?" I asked softly. "Can you send a message if Cyrus wakes up? When he wakes up?"

"You can use the power of the crown, although you might not have the time on your journey. It will take some hours to get a handle on its magic." Manod closed his eyes as he thought for a moment. "If Cyrus wakes up, I will have him send his ravens to you. His connection with Bertio goes beyond the magic of the artifact."

"Thank you." Handing the banner back to Manod to have it sent to the stables, I started back to Cyrus' bedroom. Our bedroom. Even if he would not wake, I wanted to spend my last night in Ashfuror next to my husband.

I set out right before dawn.

I kissed Cyrus goodbye and pressed my cheek to his. If the memory of my presence could soothe his waking, it was the least I could do. Part of the urgency for the journey home was driven by my guilt. There was no way to ignore that. I needed to repair the harm I had caused.

In the twilight, the buildings were all gray stone drenched in shadow, but the impression was peaceful rather than dreary. As the sun rose, it cast sharp delineations of light and dark down onto the streets. I passed through the gate, and Blaze burst forward with eager speed. A few days in the stable was enough rest for him. The road rose before us, and after I'd gained some elevation, I turned back to take in the fullness of Ashfuror.

With the sunrise behind it, the city was a glory of light and a testament to the works of humanity. Buildings rose high, many with great windows of stained glass, and the outer wall was lined in turrets and towers. It was somehow both imposing and welcoming. For a moment, I wished that Cyrus and I had been able to ride in together, side by side. I would have liked to have him welcome me to the city of fire and stone.

I didn't have to push Blaze. He was excited to run, and set a pace just shy of his top speed. We flew through the canyon and out into the plains, the dust billowing behind us as we galloped. The hours passed in a blink. My need to see my home city again kept my mind from registering exhaustion or boredom.

I rode past sunset and many hours into the night, stopping once the moon had reached

high in the sky. There had been no sign of Bertio and the ravens. I was tired, but it wasn't yet time for sleep. Instead, I sat in front of the fire and touched the circlet resting on my brow, willing it to activate.

The area was filled with orange light from both the crown and the banner, which glowed brighter with the crown's awakening. Although I had never been allowed to use the artifacts of Vazzart that my grandmother kept, I'd been told it was mostly instinctual.

I closed my eyes. Flames burned bright in my mind's eye, flickering and waiting for me to direct their power. I breathed in, nudging it toward Cyrus' bedroom in Ashfuror.

The flames died down as I flew through the air in my mind's eye. I could see from above: first the canyon, then open road, then...nothing. The flames burst to life once more, filling my field of vision behind my shut eyelids.

It was a simple distraction, the feeling of an ant on my leg, but that had been enough to break my concentration. It would take time to hone my focus to a fine enough point. An hour passed, then two, as I pushed my vision farther afield, inch by inch and league by league.

The road, then the spires of Ashfuror, then the palace, then our bedroom. I peered down from the ceiling, and the scene unfolded beneath me: Cyrus still asleep, and Manod next to him, holding his hand. My heart ached at the sight.

I hadn't known them long, but it was obvious the two of them were incredibly close. According to him, Cyrus hadn't had any real relationship with his imperial-minded father. Manod had mentored and cared for him for all those years, essentially adopting him.

I had taken away his son.

As my emotions rose, my concentration broke, and the images flickered and died. I opened my eyes. I was tempted to go back, to try again, but sleep called to me. If Blaze and I kept up this punishing pace, I would reach Greatfalls by the next evening.

Greatfalls. It was worth staying up for a few more minutes to check on my home city, to see what awaited me.

Once again, flames and the sense of flying. Now the outer wall was before me, and beyond it the dam and Safehold Reservoir. It was the middle of the night, when the citizens would mostly be in bed. I didn't expect to see anything unusual.

But I also didn't expect the emptiness and silence. Greatfalls was a lively city, despite its rural setting on the mountain's slope. The Archers and other soldiers enjoyed the taverns, and their revelry often spilled out onto the streets. Parties and concerts went late into the night. It was a bastion of culture and nightlife.

Now there was nothing. No one walked the streets. The lights in the pubs and concert halls weren't lit. Even the outer walls were empty, barely manned, only a skeleton crew. Everything was quiet.

What had changed since I left?

I dismissed the image. I would find out soon enough. I bedded down, trying to get a few hours of sleep before it was time to push on once more.

The next morning was harsher and less forgiving than the previous one. Gone was the excitement of being out on the open road with Blaze. We were both tired, but if we were going to arrive before nightfall we would have to press hard.

The plains flew by in a dreary, dusty blur. Same as the last time, the signs of drought were everywhere, but I could go faster now, untethered by the need to keep a company of soldiers together. A few rough-looking farmers waved from their struggling fields as I passed.

As the hours stretched on, Blaze's gait became hypnotic, his even footfalls putting me into a trance. The land was the same, all the same, dry and cracked and dead. The few signs of life disappeared the closer we got to my home city, but still we went on.

Every part of me was sore and exhausted when the mountain appeared in the distance. I slowed Blaze's gait. We didn't have much time, but it wasn't wise to arrive completely exhausted. We both needed to catch our breath. I watched the tiny rectangle that was the gate to the city slowly grow larger and larger as we approached.

We were perhaps a league away when the sound hit my ears, the feline roar sending a chill down my spine. My head swiveled fast to see the source, but before I could move it hit me hard, toppling both my steed and myself onto the cracked dirt road. My ears rang with the impact.

The zakar was on me then, growling and lunging for my throat, hunger and death in its one slitted eye. The weight of it was unbearable, the orange and white fur filling my sight. This was the zakar that Cyrus and I had fought those weeks ago. Did it remember me? Did it blame me for the loss of its eye?

I managed to get a knife in my hand, stabbing into the big cat's underbelly, and although the thing flinched back, it didn't retreat, whimpering but then renewing its attack. Every time its jaws opened to rip out my throat or clamp down on my head, I sliced it with my knives. The zakar recoiled at the injury, but it wouldn't pull back. I knew that soon enough the pain would no longer register with it, and those enormous sharp teeth would spell my doom.

As the cat lunged again, the rough, raw call of a raven resounded across the plain. The zakar flung itself to the side, rolling and screaming, the piercing sound almost human-like in its pain. I scrambled to my feet, stepping back and getting my footing for another attack, but I had been given a reprieve.

The ravens dove and pecked at the zakar, even as it covered its face with its huge paws. As it rolled and turned, blood dripped down onto its face. Bertio had pierced its remaining eye! The huge bird's dive-bomb must have made the cat roll off of me.

The zakar managed to get back to its feet, fighting through the pain. It swatted at the ravens, and even without its sight, some of the birds weren't fast enough to evade the cat's killing instinct. One raven fell, and then another. The flock backed off, soaring aloft once more and circling above us.

The animal sniffed the air. I knew that big cats relied on their sense of smell as much as on their vision. It circled around me, zeroing in on my scent, and every muscle in my body tensed with alarm. The zakar had been chastised, perhaps, but also angered.

This was not a fight I could win alone, not under normal circumstances. But the cat's sight had been taken, and perhaps I could manage another advantage. I willed the Crown of Seeing to life.

There was a moment of disorientation as my vision split. In front of me was the zakar, slowly positioning itself for the next attack. But overlayed on top of that was Bertio's view from above. From there I could see the injuries that the ravens and I had managed to inflict. Where the cat's back left leg met its body, several of the birds had penetrated deep into its flesh.

Somehow, Bertio understood my need exactly. The zakar growled, its muscles tensing to lunge, and as it did, the sizable black bird dove, digging its claws into the already deep injury. The big cat yowled, rearing back in pain, and with one swift



motion I drew my bow, nocked an arrow, and let it fly.

The sharp point of the arrowhead pierced the zakar's throat, nicking an artery as blood spurted from the cat's neck, staining the orange and white fur a deep red. The animal thrashed for a few moments, but the blood loss was significant. Soon, its movements slowed as it sank to the ground. It didn't get up again.

My thoughts were swirling as I stood, breathing hard while the adrenaline drained out of me. I glanced over at Blaze, who had managed to get himself back to his feet. He was battered and bruised from the initial attack, but walked over to me with confidence, nuzzling against my hand. I ran my palm down his mane unconsciously, unable to stop the burst of hope that had blossomed in my mind. With the fight over, the meaning of the ravens' presence hit me, a flash of bright energy running through my body in spite of my exhaustion.

Cyrus was awake.

The sun was starting to set behind the mountain when we reached the city. I slowed Blaze to a walk as we approached. There was no sign of movement on the wall.

"Hello, Greatfalls!"

There was a long silence. Finally, a response came back, the call muffled.

"Hello, the gate. State your purpose."

I knew that voice.

"Doren, open up. It's me, Skye!"

A face popped over the top of the wall. The young Archer's eyes were wide as he

peered down at me.

"Commander Skye! It's good to see you, sir. One moment!" He made his way to the small enclosure that held the gate mechanism, but before he reached it, he peered over his shoulder into the city. He was listening for something.

Eventually, he turned back to me. "Commander, the Prime is waiting for you. The instructions are to go straight to Prime Hall."

Anxiety fluttered in my chest. It wasn't surprising that Grandmother would want to speak to me immediately, but the whole place felt like it was preparing for...something. I wasn't sure what.

As the gate rose, I dismounted, walking Blaze into the city and over to the stable. The stableboy came out to get him, but when I passed him the reins, he flinched. What was he afraid of? He said nothing as he led Blaze away.

I made my way through the quiet twilight of the city of my birth. The silence was disturbing. There wasn't a soul in the streets, and the houses were shrouded in darkness. Even the chipmunks and squirrels were in hiding.

What the hell had happened? I didn't understand what could have caused such a shift in the weeks since I'd left.

As I arrived at Prime Hall, there was a whole contingent on guard at the door, rather than the usual single soldier. Ten of them stood at attention on either side of the entrance. As I reached it, I turned to the nearest guard, who stood stockstill, staring out front.

It was the young Archer I had commanded only a few weeks earlier, although now he wore a helmet and armor of iron. I didn't understand. It was good quality armor, but

it would get in the way of using his primary weapon. He was an incredible shot on foot and on horseback.

"Erik," I said. He turned to me, his eyes wide in surprise.

"Commander! I mean, uh, Skye..."

"What is going on?"

Erik kept his face a frozen mask of neutrality. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Why is there no one on the streets? Where has everyone gone? Why are all of you here guarding Prime Hall? If someone got past the outer walls and made their way up here, the cause would already be lost."

"I do as I'm directed by the new commander."

"New commander? I've barely been gone for three weeks."

"I serve Commander Athard."

I was hit with a wave of confusion. Why would Grandmother make Athard the commander of the Archers? He hated the bow and arrow. He'd always said it was a cowardly weapon.

I did a quick inspection of the guard in front of me. Erik didn't even bear the bow that he'd trained so hard to master.

"Where's your weapon?"

"I bear a short sword." His hand rested on the pommel at his waist.

"You are an Archer!"

"The Archers numbers have been reduced by half. Commander Athard wanted more foot soldiers."

I shook my head. Taking hundreds of talented archers and making them grunts, forcing them to start their training from the beginning, that was insane.

"I am here to see my grandmother."

Erik nodded and gestured to the door. "They are expecting you."

"They?"

"The Prime is there with Commander Athard, as well as Second Commander Jelenna."

What was I walking into? It didn't really matter. I had a peace to preserve, and a nation to save.

"Be well, Erik." I stepped through the door, making my way through the antechamber and entering Prime Hall itself.

Grandmother was in the middle of the room, leaning against the large table. Jelenna stood by a nearby window, stiff as stone, looking as if she'd rather be anywhere else. Her eyes went to mine as I entered, then quickly darted away. Athard lounged off to the side in a large cushioned chair, the only one in the room. He'd obviously brought it in for himself.

"Skye, love." Grandmother smiled. "I'm glad to see you back home where you belong."

I stared at her. Those were her first words, after all that had happened? I was flabbergasted.

"What is happening here?" I asked, the questions bursting out of me. "Why is there no one on the streets? Why is there a whole company of guards outside of Prime Hall?"

"It's simple security, brother , something that was sorely neglected when you were Commander." Athard's voice dripped with contempt. He didn't even glance in my direction as he spoke.

"There's no good reason—"

"I appointed Athard to Commander in your absence." Grandmother didn't lose her smile, but there was metal in her tone. "It will be good training for his role as Prime of Greatfalls. He has made some changes, including adding the guards stationed here. And the curfew."

"A curfew? The citizens of Greatfalls don't need a curfew." The whole idea was ridiculous.

"The 'citizens of Greatfalls' need to understand that if they are to live here, they are to follow our rules." Athard swung his legs over the arm of the chair and hopped to his feet. "All the carousing was becoming a problem."

"We can discuss the military forces of Greatfalls later." Grandmother tapped her staff on the floor in frustration. "You've returned. Is it done?"

My stomach flipped with nervousness at her question. This was the crux of it. How thoroughly had she lied to me? And what was she willing to do about it?

"It is."

Her smile widened. "Good. His death is unfortunate, but it is better this way. Greatfalls could not continue having to contend with the threat of Ashfuror."

She had known everything. She had expected him to die.

"You lied to me!" My heart raced and my face grew hot with rage. "You told me the crown would kill him if he continued to use it."

"It would have." Concern flashed on Grandmother's face, but it was false, I was sure of it. Everything she said was threaded with lies. "Either way, the crown would eventually take his life. This just sped up the process. It's for the best. It will take them some time to find a new ruler, and we can use it to our advantage."

My blood burned, and there was a sudden weight on my brow. The crown had grown heavier, as if it anticipated what would come next.

"Not so much time." I pulled back my hood, and the amber light of the crown poured forth, illuminating the shadowy hall. Jelenna flinched at the sight, and Athard stepped back. Only Grandmother was nonplussed.

"That's quite a surprise." Grandmother took in the sight of me for a moment. "But also an opportunity. We can forge a new treaty. A stronger one, to ensure that Ashfuror will never threaten us again."

"I want that too," I said. No matter what she'd done, I had more important things to do than nurse my own hurt. "A treaty that will solidify the relationship between Greatfalls and the rest of Fyr. That will ensure the safety of the people of this land. But there is one question that must be answered before we can do that."

“Yes?” Grandmother asked, her voice laced with suspicion.

“How can we sign a peace treaty with a ruler that would send an assassin to murder a child?”

Grandmother stepped back and leaned onto the tabletop. For the first time, she was actually surprised. Her recovery was quick, though, and her expression sharpened.

"He was not a child, Skye. He was heir to the throne of Ashfuror, and a future aggressor."

"He was ten!"

"You will learn soon enough, Dark Lord of Ashfuror, that to be an effective ruler, you have to make difficult decisions."

I said nothing. This was a point I could not concede. I would never participate in the harming of a child, no matter what the political goal might be.

"Your grandmother's right, Skye. We do what we have to do." Jelenna spoke for the first time, her voice tense with fear.

"What did you have to do, hm?" I couldn't stop my reaction. "Where were you after I took the crown from Cyrus? You were gone!"

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Just as well. There was no answer she could give that would make it feel like she hadn't abandoned me.

"Those were my orders." Grandmother stepped toward Jelenna, putting a hand on her shoulder. "She was to leave once the deed was done."

"And what about me? Was I to be abandoned to torture or execution, when they found me with the dead Lord of Ashfuror?"

Grandmother did not answer. No one spoke, no one argued the point. That was it then. I was expected to marry a man, I was expected to kill him, and then I was expected to die.

I shook it all off. None of this mattered anymore, now that I knew the truth. This final confirmation of her deception hardened my heart. This was a political negotiation now, not a personal one. She was ruthless, and I would ensure that the people of my new nation would not suffer because of her. I didn't need more specifics of how my parents were child-killers, or how my own grandmother would leave me to my death. I was a Lord of Fyr, and I would act as one.

"Very well. Here are the terms of the treaty. Greatfalls shall remain autonomous, and neither I nor any Lord that comes after me will threaten the city. In return, you will give over control of the dam and the water supply to me."

An inhuman growl rumbled from my left. It was my brother.

"Like hell we will!" he shouted.

Grandmother held up her hand. "Athard—"

"We will never give up our water!"

"Enough." She locked eyes with me. "He is right. We will not give up control of the dam."

"People are dying," I argued. "That should matter to you whether they are your subjects or not. I won't stand by and let it continue."



"This is your home. These are your people. I raised you. You owe us."

I couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth. To invoke a familial connection now after betraying me was the height of arrogance.

"You lied to me and abandoned me to my death. I owe you nothing. I've given you the courtesy of entertaining your treaty. I—"

A sharp pain exploded on the back of my skull and a bright flash exploded in front of my eyes. The room began to darken, and I saw the sneering face of my brother, standing over me with the pommel of his sword in his fist.

As everything faded to black, I heard the call of a raven.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

I woke up in a room that should never have existed.

Greatfalls didn't have a prison system. Crime wasn't a major problem in the small, tight-knit community. Most transgressions were dealt with using a mixture of arbitration and community service. If someone did something truly awful, the punishment was exile.

But despite that, I was locked in a cell, and I had no idea where it might be located. I assumed I was still in my home city, but from the damp air I could tell I was underground. My people didn't build below the earth. There was no structure in Greatfalls that had space for holding cells in its basement, not that I knew of.

For three days, I spoke to no one. Meals were slid to me through a small opening at the bottom of the large iron door. Once I'd tried to call out when the slot was open, but had gotten back no response.

I'd been stripped of my bow and my daggers, as well as most of my outer clothing. For some reason, they'd left the crown on my head, which was a comfort, although not as much as it could have been. I tried to reach out with it, but using the artifact was like pushing against an immovable wall. It might as well have been an inert chunk of black stone.

By the fourth day, I had mapped every nook and cranny of the small, dark space with my hands. Other than the few moments when my food arrived and light spilled through the opening in the door, it was always pitch black. If it weren't for the regular meals, I'd have had no idea how much time had passed.

Not that the lack of light mattered to anything aside from my sanity. There was nothing there. No furniture, not even a bed. Only a dirt floor and hard stone walls, and the slow drip of water from a leak in the corner of the ceiling.

I was sitting, my back against the hard wall opposite the door, when a blast of light hit me. The door opened. There was only a single lantern hanging in the hall, but my eyes had adjusted such that even that slight illumination burned. I clenched my eyelids shut.

After a minute, my eyes had habituated enough to see my grandmother standing in the doorway. She was framed by lantern light, a creature of power and control. Behind her in the passageway, two guards watched and waited.

"How are you feeling?"

I cleared my throat. Having not spoken in days, it was scratchy and full of phlegm from the moisture in the air.

"I was attacked by my only brother and imprisoned by my grandmother so, all in all, I'm not having the best time."

"Now is no time for sarcasm." Grandmother stepped into the cell, but I didn't move. The cold stone against my back grounded me. "Now is the time for reflection. Have you changed your mind?"

"About the treaty?" I laughed, a guttural sound. Grandmother folded her arms in front of her chest.

"I wouldn't think there would be anything you'd find funny in this place."

"My whole life I was taught to fear the Dark Lord of Ashfuror. I was told he was a

threat to all the peoples of Fyr, that his attack against our city could come at any time. That he was the reason my parents died. Now I'm the Dark Lord, and I find my own grandmother is the true villain."

"The villain?" Grandmother's voice was flat and tight. "My responsibility is to Greatfalls."

"Your responsibility is to humanity ." I pressed my hands down against the cold floor as I spoke. "You hoard water, and the rest of the continent starves. There are people dying out there. There has to be some compromise you could make to help them, some amount of your vast resources that you could give."

"I don't care about them! They are not my subjects." The lantern-light behind Grandmother flared as if it was responding to her ire. "To think that you've made it this far into adulthood without understanding. The reason Greatfalls prospers is because I protect the people here at all costs. I will not compromise on that."

I shook my head. This argument wasn't accomplishing anything, but she might be worked up enough that she'd let something useful slip.

"What did you do to the Crown of Seeing?" I asked, touching my fingers to the circlet atop my head.

"That thing ?" Grandmother frowned. "It has no power here. Stahkla may have ensured that it cannot be removed by force, but here in the heart of Vazzart's power it is useless to you. Underneath the reservoir itself, no other god's artifact has any potency."

Interesting. She'd tried to take off the crown, and couldn't. And we were under the reservoir. I hadn't known that any tunnels dug that far down into the earth.

"The heart of Vazzart's power? What does he think of what you're doing?"

Grandmother scoffed, rolling her eyes. "He would tell us if he didn't approve." A flash of insecurity crossed her face. "Besides, Vazzart hasn't spoken to anyone in Greatfalls since the time of my own grandmother. He would appear to us if he wished us to stop."

I frowned at her words. They simply weren't true. Vazzart had responded to my request, and he'd told me to go with Cyrus. What did it mean that Vazzart had not appeared to Grandmother? Was it really the blanket approval she seemed to think?

"Have you ever thought that you aren't listening hard enough?" I asked. If someone had told me a month ago I'd be speaking to my grandmother in that tone, I'd have told them they were crazy, but she'd pushed me too far. This was the woman that raised me. I never thought the day would come that she would treat me as an enemy.

"Perhaps three more days in the dark will loosen your resolve." Grandmother stepped back into the hallway, calling out to me as the guards shut the door. "Think hard, Skye. You may be Lord of Ashfuror, but you will be the last."

The darkness returned.

In the artificial night of the prison cell, my thoughts rang out loud and harsh in my head. Did Grandmother really have the will to hold her grandson captive indefinitely? I had to consider the possibility. I'd misjudged her. Her willingness to discard morality for the sake of politics ran deeper than I could have imagined.

Cyrus was alive and awake. Part of me was certain that he would come for me, that he would never leave his husband to rot. But part of me worried that I had hurt him too deeply, that my betrayal was too much for him to overcome, even if he had known it might happen. That he would abandon me here.

Why didn't Vazzart stop my grandmother, or at least make his will known? The direct presence of a god could obliterate whole cities, that's what some folk said. That's why the gods worked through artifacts and through the minds of their followers. Although some argued that they couldn't reach us if our hearts were closed, regardless of how powerful they were.

Stahkla was terrifying but had been crystal clear. My interactions with Vazzart had confused me more than anything. Why send me with Cyrus just for me to get locked away?

As my thoughts wandered, the drip of the water in the corner grew louder and faster. It would hit stone and then trickle down to the dirt floor. The longer I sat, the louder it became, echoing off the walls of the cell. It took on a life and a rhythm of its own. I got lost in the hypnotic patterns filling the damp air.

The black field of my vision vibrated with color as the sound took on a visual form. It was small at first, but soon the whole cell was filled with aqua patterns, pulsing to the sound of that now-thundering drip.

If I hadn't been stuck in the dark for four days, I might have reacted with suspicion, but I was hit with a wave of relief. The shapes called to me, and I inhaled the sound into my lungs. Then I exhaled, my breath joining the dance of colors in the air.

With an overwhelming woosh, I was underwater once again. Like that day at the mountainside altar, I was being pulled by the current, faster and faster as I passed indistinct piles of rock and coral.

Then I felt it. His presence. Vazzart was here. Not as a person or the enormous buck, but all around me, like a school of jellyfish, wrapping me in hues of purple and pink.

Little one.

He was so much more intense than last time. Grandmother had said this was the heart of Vazzart's power, and the weight of his being permeated me down to the foundations of my soul.

"Lord."

You are a Lord of Fyr now.

The colors around me sprang to life, moving faster now, forming images of me in Ashfuror, marrying Cyrus, wearing the crown.

"Do you approve of what Grandmother's doing? Is this what you want?"

The colors became more subdued, the images fading to gray, ashy clouds.

No.

"Then why haven't you let your will be known?"

I cannot appear to those who shield themselves from me, even unintentionally. She fears my judgment, and that fear cuts her off from me. I cannot break through. My words are for those who welcome my guidance.

"But...what do I do?"

What do you wish?

Tears welled up in my eyes, meeting the water that surrounded me and floating away. They were like tiny bubbles of my spirit, carrying my hopes to the surface. The god's presence made me want to say everything, to speak all of the words that echoed in my mind.

"I wish to go back to when I had a grandmother who loved me, and parents who were not murderers."

You would live in ignorance? You would give up Cyrus?

The blues and greens were back, and now the colors were thick, like blankets wrapping around me, squeezing me, comforting me. It took me no time to come to the answer.

"No." The admission called forth more tears. They confirmed what I already knew. "It's better to have the truth. My marriage to Cyrus has the potential of real, true love between equals. I don't want to go back to the lies of my family."

Images appeared once more in the water around me, this time of Greatfalls, of a drier and more humble version, with Safehold filled to only half of what it was now. Of a leaner, rationed people.

Greatfalls may have to sacrifice. Your family may suffer. You will be called upon daily to make the hard decisions, and some may die because of those decisions. That is the nature of it. Are you willing?

I nodded. I'd made my choice.

Very well .

The water around me sprang to life with amber light, the orange and the aqua dancing and shifting together. It took me a moment to realize that it came from the crown on my head.

At this moment, your husband stands at the gates of Greatfalls with an army behind him.



An image of Cyrus appeared in front of me, atop his steed, on the plains beyond the outer wall. Manod was by his side, Bertio sat on his shoulder, and behind him were legions of soldiers. On top of his head, there was a crown, like mine but unlike, more angular and intimidating than the Crown of Seeing. It shone with a blue light.

Go.

With that word, the water around me swirled, and sucked down, farther and farther down, to the place where all light died, and I went with it. Soon enough, the water was gone, and I was back on solid ground. The dirt floor was cold underneath me. I'd been deposited back in my cell.

The lock on the cell made a sound like a bone snapping. The door swung open. Beyond was the passageway, the lantern flickering, but there was no sign of the guards. I peeked my head out. The hallway was empty.

I ran.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

I was almost flying through the tight tunnels of the underground prison. This was Vazzart's domain, and he pulled me through it with a crackling, chaotic energy.

Cyrus waited for me above. The thought of seeing him again sparked a pulse inside of me, of hope and nervousness and maybe something deeper. It drove me to go even faster. I followed the thread of Vazzart's directive, right, then left, then down a long tunnel ending in a fork. I stopped at the split. I could feel the pull in both directions, equally as strong either way.

Vazzart had granted me use of my crown, so I used it. I closed my eyes, willing it to show me the two paths. First it followed the left-hand way, a long stretch that ultimately ended in a short stairway up to my grandmother's anteroom in Prime Hall. The door there was hidden by a large tapestry.

Then the crown showed me the right path, a curving tunnel that went on and on, following the wall of the reservoir. The way ended in an imposing metal door that opened into the control house of the dam.

My Grandmother would be in Prime Hall, keeping tabs on any fighting, but I needed to get to the field of battle. It was time to test the loyalty of the people of Greatfalls.

I moved as quickly as I could down the long passage. I reached the door, brown and green with rust and patina. I opened the lock, turned the handle, and pushed .

I stumbled forward into the lower level of the control house. I'd never been in there before, and from the looks of things, few people had. The room was piled with old equipment and tools for the maintenance of the dam. Above me, I could hear shouting

and the sounds of battle.

I hurried to the top level, leaving the control house and finding myself on top of the wall, overlooking the field between the dam and the outer gates. Below, soldiers bearing the flaming insignia of Ashfuror fought with the clumsy swordsmen of Greatfalls.

My brother was a distance from the fighting, shouting commands from the edge of the fields, where the forest began. His face was red with fury and frustration. Things were not going well for Greatfalls, and it was his fault. To reassign half the Archers to hand to hand combat was beyond foolish. With a full complement of Archers, Cyrus could never have breached the outer wall in the first place.

The remaining Archers were stationed at the edges of the field as well as on the wall of the dam, to the right and left of me. They were not shooting. I stared at them for a long moment until it struck me. Athard had purposefully not given the command. He wanted victory to go to his infantry.

My mind boggled at his stupidity and ego.

Down by the gates, I caught glimpses of a figure, his crown alight with an intricate pattern of azure flame, weaving through the soldiers on horseback. Combatants threw themselves at him, attempting to unhorse him. As they did he held his hands out, and balls of blue energy sparked between his palms. He threw them at the soldiers, and when one hit them it pushed them back and off their feet. No one could even get close.

Cyrus was glorious. Now I had to do my part. As I'd done so many times, long before I knew the truth about my family and my city, back when it was only me and the good people under my command. I took in a breath and called to my Archers.

"Archers of Greatfalls, fall back!"

Everything stopped. The archers to my left and right who had been watching, who had been ordered not to fight, all turned to me and, after the smallest moment of indecision, kneeled as one. The infantry on the field that had once been Archers themselves turned and saw me on the wall. The soldiers of Ashfuror looked to me as well, because the Crown of Seeing sat shining atop my head.

"No! He is no longer your Commander!" Athard's voice came out as a strangled cry.

"Archers of Greatfalls, fall back!" It wasn't my voice this time. I turned to my left. Jelenna stood next to me, in defiance of Athard and of my grandmother. Her eyes met mine, and I saw guilt and sadness flash across her face. She reached out her arms, handing me my bow, my quiver, and my daggers. I'm sorry , she mouthed. I didn't reply.

I saw the pain in her eyes before she hid her reaction. It hurt my heart, but we didn't have time for me to learn why she'd done what she did. She understood that as well, yelling out to the Archers once more. "Fall back!"

"Soldiers of Ashfuror, fall back!" The echoing cry came from the other end of the battlefield. Cyrus was with me. We were bringing this battle to an end.

Like a wave hitting a causeway, the two forces separated. Cyrus' soldiers fell back to the gate, and the Archers retreated to the dam wall. They looked to me for guidance, ignoring my brother's yelling, which was growing more desperate.

I rushed down to the bottom of the dam wall as Cyrus rode to meet me on the field. We came together, two leaders of war who also happened to be Lords of Fyr. And husbands.

He swung off the back of his horse with a fluid grace that made my heart leap. He was recovered, fully fit and sporting a new accessory.

"Nice crown," I said. "Where'd you get it?"

Cyrus chuckled, deep and joyful, and hope sprung up in my chest. "Someone stole mine, so I had to get another one. Luckily, we had a few crowns kicking around in storage."

In my joy at seeing him, I'd forgotten that I'd been the cause of his trouble. "Sorry about that." It was flippant, maybe, but I meant it.

He stepped toward me, and my heartbeat sped up. How did the new crown make him even more handsome? The blue light reflected off his pale skin with an otherworldly glow.

"You're not going to try and kill me again, are you?" He had a smirk on his face, but I caught something in his eyes, a flash of hurt. I never wanted to be the cause of that ever again. I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around his waist. He didn't pull away.

"I didn't know. I...I thought I was doing what was best. I thought I was saving you."

"I know." His voice was low, now, only loud enough for the two of us to hear. The sweet odor of soap and leather made me desperate to be alone with him. "Manod told me what you did. How you bound yourself to the crown."

I didn't have a response. We needed more time, time to talk about all that had happened. I desperately hoped for that time.

"The one you wear is blue. Is it..."

"Yes, it belonged to one of the conquered Lords of Fyr. The Crown of Battle."

"You're a one man army!"

"It was made for war. It allows me to send out bursts of pure energy. I can shape them as I wish, blunt or sharp, wide or narrow. Stahkla decided that I should use it. I had really wanted the Crown of Diplomacy, but the god had other ideas."

I wondered for a moment what sacrifice the God of Fire and Metal had demanded of him, then pushed that aside. "Thank you for coming for me."

"Bertio was perched in the window of the hall when that ass knocked you out. I figured they must have you locked away somewhere." He breathed as he took me in, like he was trying to stamp the image of my face in his memory. "But I see you didn't need my help."

"I don't know if that's true."

A shock of warm liquid hit my left cheek. Reflexively, I touched my fingers to it. It was saliva.

"Betrayer!" My brother's voice rang out from a few feet away, full of petulant anger. "I should have known you couldn't finish the job. That you'd fall in love with our greatest enemy!"

Cyrus stepped forward, but put my hand on his arm to stop him. Athard was my responsibility, a problem that I had trusted in Grandmother to solve. Now that I saw the truth, it fell to me.

"I had always thought that you were the one that strayed from the love our parents taught us." I squared off my shoulders. "I was wrong. You followed in their

murderous footsteps. You have no regard for the lives of others. You are nothing but a self-serving twit."

In a fit of temper, Athard reached for the pommel of his rapier. He pulled it out and took a fighting stance.

"Prepare."

One of his men approached me, handing me a rapier of my own. I felt the weight of the weapon in my hand, unfamiliar to me. I glared at Athard. Once again, he was expecting me to play by the rules, to bend to him, even as he sought to kill me.

I'm certain that if we were to duel in the old way of the nobles, rapier to rapier, that he would win. He had trained obsessively at the art of swordcraft for many years. He was a master.

But I was no longer his noble little brother, the one who always followed the rules. And this would not be a noble duel.

I tossed the rapier away and pulled a knife from my right side. As he brought the rapier down for the first strike, I parried it off to my left with my dagger. He took a step backward, recovering from the strength of the deflection.

With that, the fight was over before it had begun. I grabbed my second knife from my left side and thrust. The knife punctured his stomach, and he went down.

"You bastard." He curled around the wound, holding his fist against it to staunch the bleeding. "You have no honor. You were never fit to be Prime of Greatfalls. You weren't even fit to be Commander."

I bent over, grabbing his jaw roughly in my hand and lifting him up by it. "No. But I

am more than fit to be the Dark Lord of Ashfuror."

I heard a deep tone, like an enormous bell, and the sound of fire crackling. Athard's face was illuminated in orange light. The Crown of Seeing had come to life of its own accord.

Athard's eyes grew wide, and he began to wail, the cry of a damned soul.

"No! Please, no, it's too much!" He started to shake, falling back to the ground as I released him from my grip. "No!"

With a great shudder and exhalation of air, he collapsed and went still.

"What...what happened?" I turned to Cyrus. Cyrus came to me, putting his hand on my back as I stared at the lifeless corpse of my brother.

"It is the Crown of Seeing. If Stahkla deems that someone has caused enough suffering, the god will use the crown to punish them. It has only happened twice since the crown has been in my possession. I do not know what they are shown. I only know that it is terrible."

We stood there in silence for what felt like an hour, but was probably only a few minutes. Athard had been my brother, and once, many years ago, we had been close, two orphans that leaned on each other for support.

But that person had been gone for many years, and the one in front of me didn't deserve any mercy.

"Skye!"

Jelenna burst out of the copse of trees at the edge of the field, running at a sprint.



"Skye! You have to come!"

As she reached us, Cyrus put himself between me and her. My heart warmed at his protective instinct.

"What is happening?" Cyrus' voice was cold.

"Please. Skye, your grandmother, she's going to do something. I don't understand, but it can't be good."

My whole body tensed at her words. "What happened?"

She bent over at the waist, catching her breath and then forcing the words out. "She took her staff and headed up the mountain. She said she was going to the altar of Vazzart, that she would defeat the enemies of Greatfalls once and for all."

Cyrus turned to me, his voice full of concern. "What do you think she's doing?"

I shook my head. I had no answers. "She's not the person I thought she was. There's no way to know what she might try."

Jelenna reached out and grabbed my arm. Cyrus responded instinctively to block her, but I put a hand on his chest to stop him. Her eyes were wild, and her face was a mask of desperation.

"I've never seen her like this before. The staff is an artifact of Vazzart, an ancient one. I don't know what it can do."

I locked eyes with Cyrus, and he nodded. I took off running toward the path up the mountain.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:31 am*

The journey up was drastically different from the last time. Before there had been rustling leaves and roaming chipmunks and the restful gurgle of the stream. Now there was only silence, as if nature itself held its breath.

The air was hot and stuffy against my face and in my lungs as I ran, growing thinner the higher up I went. The sound of footsteps followed behind me. I assumed it was Cyrus, but I couldn't slow to check. Who knew what Grandmother might do? Who knew what secrets she kept?

The clearing was no longer the lush pocket that it had been. It was desolate, and every plant in the ring around the altar had withered and died. The golden chalice still sat atop the shrine. Grandmother stood in front of it, her eyes cold and resigned.

"Do not come within the circle." She swung her gnarled wooden staff in a semicircle arc in front of her.

I stepped forward. Something pushed me back, an invisible barrier, challenging me. I strained against it.

"You never understood the responsibility of being the Prime family." Grandmother's voice was hoarse and ragged. "I tried to guide you, to show you the webs you must weave to rule in this city. But you always shied away from making the real sacrifice."

Tears sprang to my eyes. I blinked through them. I was mad at myself that she could still wound me, that she still had that much power over me.

"I would have sacrificed anything." I channeled as much confidence into my words as

I had available. "For you and for Greatfalls. I would have given my life."

"But you couldn't give up the myth of your own integrity." She squared her hips as if she were preparing an attack. "Your life is worth nothing. But your marriage, your friendships, even your connection with me, they should have all been fodder for the greatness of your city. You've always been obsessed with honesty. Honesty has no place in being a leader. Lies are your strongest weapons."

I shook my head, but didn't answer. She was wrong, but a tiny part of me still held her in esteem, still doubted myself, still told me I should listen.

"You're wrong."

Cyrus' voice hung in the still air next to me. I turned to him, and he smiled at me. It was sad and hard-won, but it was there. Between us, there was no doubt.

He turned back to Grandmother. "That is the way that you led, the way you taught your children. But that is not how it has to be. I am proof of that."

She laughed, and the sound was harsh and cold. "What kind of leader are you? Your people are starving."

"Because of you!" His jaw clenched, and I wanted to jump in, to fight for him. But he didn't need that. He needed me to stand beside him, as he would do for me.

"And you allowed it to continue," she countered. Bitterness soaked every word. "You are as weak as he is. Neither of you can do what needs to be done. But I can."

Grandmother moved to behind the altar, and thrust her staff into the ground. The gnarled knob of hickory at the top emitted a deep purple glow, casting an otherworldly light on the surrounding greenery. She held her wrist above the chalice.

"This is the Staff of Last Resort. It is the oldest and most powerful of Vazzart's artifacts, to be used only in the direst of circumstances. When triggered, every enemy within the city walls will die. All the artifact requires is the lifeblood of the Prime."

"Grandmother—"

"See what true sacrifice is, child." Grandmother pulled a dagger out of her robe and sliced across her left wrist. The blood flowed, dripping down her fingers into the golden chalice.

I pushed against the invisible barrier, but I couldn't break through.

"Skye, take my hand."

"I need to get to her—"

"Take my hand. I wear the Crown of Battle. You wear the Crown of Seeing. If you can reveal the barrier to me, I may be able to break through."

I grabbed Cyrus' hand, harder than I meant to, my desperation fueling me. At once, the two crowns ignited with orange and blue light, the colors mingling and producing a warm red-brown radiance. I peered into the clearing, willing the crown to show me what was invisible.

With a snap, the barrier solidified in front of our eyes. It was no longer transparent but a dull gray. Cracks ran across it in a web pattern. There were points where many cracks met, nodes where the structure was the weakest.

"There!"

Cyrus nodded. With his free hand, he gestured toward the spot. A ball of blue fire

flew out, striking the weak point, and the whole thing shattered. Shards, like cloudy dull glass, fell to the ground around us.

We ran forward together, but Grandmother's scream stopped us. She stood atop the altar, her eyes wild. She shook from the loss of blood.

"It is too late now! Soon you will all be dust."

As I went to grab her, do anything, anything that might prevent this, I heard the voice of the God of Fire and Metal in my head.

Stop.

I froze, as did Cyrus. He had heard the voice as well.

"What—"

This no longer matters. Call my brother.

Cyrus looked to me, but I shook my head. "I don't know how to call him."

Vazzart has spoken to you, the only one of your family in generations. Call him, and he will come.

Cyrus released my hand and stood behind me, resting his hands on his shoulders. I felt his sweet breath on my neck. I closed my eyes and I remembered .

The buck, here in this clearing. I called out to him. The majestic antlers. The deep blue eyes that I lost myself in. The drip of water in the prison cell.

He was there. He was the enormous buck. He was the gurgling stream. He was the

still pool.

"My lord." Grandmother was weak, but she understood what she was seeing, the presence she was feeling. "Please..."

The god did not answer her, but instead turned his presence to me.

Child, you have no need of concern.

But—

You have already made your choice. You pledged yourself to the people of Fyr. In my presence, you swore to take on their suffering. I granted you my favor. Did you think I'd allow my power to be used in this way?

"But..." I had no answer.

"No!" The scream ripped from my grandmother's throat. "God of the Water and the Forest, protect my legacy! I have given my life for this city. Do not let it fall."

The world shifted as the god turned his attention to the Prime.

You have lost your way. The only enemy of Greatfalls here is you.

She fell to her knees. Her blood pooled on the ground around her.

"Please...my people. They should not have to sacrifice. Just so that his people can continue to eke out their miserable existence?"

Prime of Greatfalls. Did you think I would allow you to misuse my artifact? It is blasphemous. Your city is safe under the rule of the Lords of Ashfuror.

One last tremor shook her tiny body, and she collapsed. She was gone. She had given her life for what she believed.

I felt nothing. Cyrus' arms gripped tightly around me, reminding of my foundation, of the support I now had. But there was no grief. I had already grieved for the family I wished I had, over and over again. There were no tears left to shed.

The god turned to us. The power of his presence overwhelmed us both, and we fell to our knees.

You have promised yourselves to both the water and the flame. Greatfalls is now yours. Treat all of Fyr better than those who came before you.

"We will," Cyrus and I said together.

Good. You have earned your respite. But do not rest too long. You have much to do.

### Epilogue (Two Months Later)

It was the day of the wedding. Which also happened to be the day of the coronation. The real rituals had already happened. These were ceremonial events for the citizens of Ashfuror and of Fyr, and I didn't begrudge them that. The people needed a public sign of stability after everything that had happened.

It had helped that there was a small but significant lessening of suffering with Safehold Reservoir providing water to Fyr once again. It hadn't been a complete solution - there hadn't been enough water to fully counteract the drought - but it had made the crisis go from desperate to simply difficult. There was a surprising amount of support for the action in Greatfalls at first, but that had been tempered by the water rationing that we'd instituted over the last months. Life was harder there, but it was a loss of comfort rather than a loss of life. For the moment, it was a burden the people were willing to bear, even if there was some grumbling.

They all deserved a celebration.

Which was why I was trying on the heaviest set of robes I'd ever had the pleasure to put on my body. Jelenna was having trouble holding them up even as she helped me into them. Iron and gold were threaded throughout the fabric. It was a work of art, but it was a burden to wear.

Jelenna had proved her loyalty by returning with me to Ashfuror. By the end of the Battle of Greatfalls, she had come to question everything she had previously believed. Could I blame her for abandoning me after what I myself had done to Cyrus? The power of misguided belief is strong.



"If you fall over, I'm pretty sure that's considered an insult." Jelenna's teasing pushed me out of my ruminations.

"Who's gonna punish me? I'm already Lord of Ashfuror."

"I don't think it will be good for the Dark Lord to take a header on the day of his coronation." Jelenna poked me. "Ow, this stuff is hard."

"It is. Now get it off me."

I had a few hours before the festivities began, and I wasn't going to spend it encased in metal.

"I'll go make sure everything else is set." Jelenna started toward the door of the chamber.

"Manod's got it under control. He's been obsessing about today for weeks. Maybe for years."

She shrugged, giving me a sly wink. Something was up.

I laid down on the long upholstered bench in the chamber. Hopefully, no one would disturb me. I needed the sleep. It had been a whirlwind two months, and the exhaustion had settled deep in my bones.

"Aren't you supposed to be meditating on the value of marriage to a community or some shit?"

Cyrus popped out from behind a changing screen that had been erected in the corner of the room. He was still in his underclothes.

"Aren't you supposed to be somewhere getting ready?" I asked with faux annoyance.

“Somewhere not here?”

He bounded across the room, sliding into my arms, and I wrapped myself around him. This would never get old, this feeling of totally belonging to someone. It had been so foreign to me, this kind of love.

"We have a few hours." He kissed me, hard, his hungry mouth trying to devour me. I savored it for a moment, then pushed him back.

"What do you think we're going to do with only a couple of hours?"

Cyrus reached over to a nearby end table, opening the drawer and pulling out a bottle of oil.

"I could fuck you."

I shivered at his words. I had only bottomed a few times. It had been a wonderful and intense experience, once I'd gotten used to it.

I grabbed hold of the neck of his shirt and pulled his face close, until our noses were almost touching.

"Then you'd better do it fast."

With that, he was on me, pulling at my shirt, tugging at the button of my trousers.

"Careful!" I yelled. "I'm wearing these to our wedding."

He pulled on the pant legs, and my hard cock sprang out, now unimpeded by fabric. "You have other pants." I felt the cold air on my exposed ass.

We had had many tender, romantic moments in the last months, but that's not what

this was. This moment was all about fast, hard, animal passion. He needed me and I needed him in me.

He shoved my knees back, and I heard myself let out a whimper. I loved when he took charge.

Without warning, he attacked my hole with his mouth, licking and sucking, and I began to shake. It was always so much, and I craved it.

"Ngh..." I writhed as he dug in farther, his teasing wet tongue moving in and out of me. "I need you. Please..."

"I love to hear you beg."

I heard the uncorking of the oil bottle, and then his finger was in me, slick and probing. He flicked at my prostate, and I moaned, unable to control myself. He was so damn good at this.

"More."

"Don't be impatient." It made me so hard when Cyrus teased me.

"I need you. To fuck me."

Suddenly, there were two fingers in me, and then three. When he pulled them out, I sighed at the emptiness. The anticipation was killing me.

He placed his hands on the inside of my thighs and, pushing my legs back against my chest, he entered me.

It was so much, his long cock filling me and stretching me. He stayed there, giving me time to adjust to the burn and the stretch, but that's not what I wanted at all.

"Move, Cyrus." I couldn't keep the desperation out of my voice. "I want to feel it."

The fire in his eyes was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. He set a punishing pace, sliding in and out of me in hard thrusts that made my balls tighten.

"You are so fucking pretty like this. At my mercy." Cyrus smirked and then slammed into me harder, and I yelled. One stroke, two stroke, three—

The orgasm took me without warning. I didn't even have a hand on my cock when it started to spasm, setting off tremors in my whole body, and my release spurted up, coating Cyrus' chest. The intensity was overwhelming. I squeezed my eyes shut trying to gain control, even as inhuman noises of pleasure burst out of me.

They spurred Cyrus on, and he lost control of his rhythm, chasing after his own need until he too cried out. He filled me, the most delicious feeling of warmth spreading deep inside me.

He collapsed down on top of me.

"How do you do this to me?" Cyrus whispered into my ear. "Every time is more intense"

I reached up, grabbing him by the nape of the neck and dragging him into a slow deep kiss.

"I don't know, but I hope it never goes away." I glanced down at myself. "Dammit, I really wanted to wear these clothes."

Cyrus chuckled. "Come on, let's get cleaned up. We've got to get married. And crowned."

He reached out a hand to me, helping me come to standing. He offered me his elbow.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

There was a fire in his eyes that set my stomach to tingling. I nodded. He bent down and whispered into my ear.

"I love you, my Lord of Ashfuror."

I slipped my arm through his, kissing him on the cheek.

"I love you , my Lord of Ashfuror."

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As the Crown of Battle and the Crown of Seeing settled on our heads, the crowd in the Great Square burst into cheers, waves of sound that washed over us. I grabbed Cyrus' hand, and he gave me a small smile. I smiled back. I had made mistakes along the way, but I couldn't be more thankful that we were here, together. We waved to the throngs of people, citizens who shared our joy, as well as the promise of a better Fyr, a thriving, flourishing nation.

It would not be easy. We ruled a land in crisis. We would work tirelessly to help those we could. It would be the work of our lives.

With Cyrus by my side, I was looking forward to it.