

Forsworn

Powder Mage, prequel

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Published: 2014

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The forest filled with the dry bone sound of fallen leaves swirling in the wind as Erika drew back on her bow. She pulled until the feather tickled her cheek, sighting down the shaft, then let out a breath as she released, accomplishing the entire act in one swift motion.

The arrow glanced off a tree root forty feet away and careened into the underbrush. The squirrel she'd been aiming at raced up the tree, chattering angrily at her. She pulled an arrow from her quiver, set it to the string, drew back and fired again.

The second shot thumped into the branch just below the squirrel's bushy tail. Erika reached for another arrow, but the rodent had already retreated to the safety of its nest.

"Your form is fantastic," a stern voice commented. "Your speed is admirable and your movements precise. Only one thing lacking; you missed."

Erika glared over her shoulder at the Leora family mistress-at-arms. Santiole was a sharp-eyed woman in her late forties with weather-worn skin and more than a few gray strands in her brown hair. She was roughly the same height as Erika, but her stiff posture made her seem far taller. She had a way of looking down her pinched nose that might seem genuinely imposing to anyone else. Erika just found it annoying. Fifteen years as Erika's tutor had done little to sweeten Santiole's sour humor and she always knew exactly what to say to get under Erika's skin.

"I might have hit it," Erika said, "if you weren't sitting back there creaking in your saddle, scaring off my targets."

Santiole's horse tossed its head impatiently and the mistress-at-arms shifted her weight on the roan's back, eliciting yet another loud creak. "You need to learn to shoot with distractions."

Erika's eyes rested first on the flintlock musket laid across Santiole's saddle horn and then on the pistol tucked into the mistress-at-arms' belt. Her fingers itched to go hunting with one of those. In all her nineteen years she'd never been allowed to do so. Handling a black powder weapon, even an unloaded one, was forbidden to her.

After all, that would be illegal.

"Go fetch your arrows," Santiole said. "We should head back soon."

They were an hour's ride from the Leora manor and would be back in time to wash up for dinner if they hurried. Erika slung her bow over one shoulder and set off into the trees.

She rooted around in the brambles to find the first arrow, tearing a hole in her hunting doublet that would doubtlessly be noticed by grandmother, before returning to the offending tree and working her way fifteen feet in the air to dislodge the second arrow from its home in a thick branch.

Mother would have a fit if she saw me here, Erika reflected as she shimmied her way out to the arrow. Mother would lecture Santiole, and Santiole would weather the tirade only to tell her a Kez duchess needs to learn to fend for herself. And then father would interfere, telling mother to leave the poor old mistress-at-arms alone and...

Erika's train of thought was interrupted as her eyes focused on something further in the forest: a subtle movement amongst the reds and browns of fallen autumn leaves.

She retrieved her arrow and returned to the ground, where Santiole waited with a look of impatience. She opened her mouth to say something, but Erika interrupted.

"Tie the horses and come with me."

The mistress-at-arms hesitated for a moment, but she dismounted and quickly tied up both their horses. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure," Erika said. "I saw something. Someone."

"Let me go first." Musket at the ready, Santiole crept into the underbrush, barely stirring the leaves as she advanced. Erika followed her forward, an arrow nocked. They worked their way across a dry stream bed and came into a clearing some forty yards from the road. Santiole shouldered her musket.

"It's a child."

The girl couldn't have been more than twelve, with hair a shade lighter than Erika's dark blonde. She huddled next to a hollow tree, knees clutched to her chest, wearing a woolen summer dress soiled with mud. Strips from the hem of her dress had been tied around her bare feet and the makeshift bandages were soaked through with blood.

"Mistress," Santiole started, but Erika was already crossing the clearing toward the girl.

"Don't come a step closer." The child's voice was barely more than a hoarse whisper, but the words—and her expression—were deadly serious. The girl wiped her small, round nose with the back of her hand, blinking tears from brown eyes. There were cuts on her left cheek, no more than a day old, and bramble scratches covering both arms. She brandished a penknife in one hand.

"What are you doing out here?" Erika asked.

"Go away," the girl answered.

"Do you need help?"

"I said to go away."

"Look at her feet," Erika whispered to Santiole.

The mistress-at-arms regarded the girl warily. "She's come a long way. There isn't a town for thirty miles except for Bedland. She's not local. We would recognize her."

"Visiting a relative?" Erika asked Santiole. "Perhaps got lost?" These were Erika's grandparents' lands and she knew them well, but Santiole knew them better than anyone.

"No," Santiole said. "Couldn't be."

"Don't talk about me like I can't hear you," the girl said. The point of her penknife didn't waver. "I'm right here."

"Where are you from?" Erika asked.

"Go away."

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. None of your business."

Erika drew herself up, her patience already wearing thin. These were her family's lands and so it was her damned business and she would get answers.

Santiole touched her on the arm and leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "Look above her right shoulder."

Partially concealed by the girl's hair and a thick smear of mud, Erika could make out a dark, angry scar. It was about the length of a man's finger and in the shape of a flintlock musket.

"By Kresimir," Erika swore.

Not a natural scar. A brand. The brand of a powder mage who had been sentenced to hang by royal decree.

"We have to turn her in," Santiole said mildly.

Erika whirled on her tutor and *stared*, feeling a bitter mixture of anger and resentment.

"No," Santiole said, "I didn't think you'd allow that." The mistress-at-arms cursed under her breath. "They'll be hunting her."

Erika knew that. She also knew that the royal mage hunters—or the king's Longdogs, as they were known unofficially—wouldn't care that this was just a child. A powder mage was a powder mage, after all. They would pursue this girl from one end of Kez to the other and no one would help her. In fact, most people would turn the girl over, expecting a fat reward.

"I'm not leaving her out here," Erika said. She'd gotten lost in these woods once, when she was just a little younger than this girl. She still woke sometimes in the middle of the night sometimes, covered with a cold sweat, haunted by the memory of a labyrinth of trees and the terrifying approach of darkness.

Santiole's voice held a note of pity. "We don't have a choice. If we're caught..."

"She escaped the Longdogs once. She's traveled Kresimir knows how many miles to get here and she's obviously heading north. If this girl has the courage to try the northern mountains on her own in hopes of escaping to Adro, I will damn well help her."

Santiole sighed. "This is bloody stupid."

"What are you talking about?" the girl demanded, edging away slowly. "Leave me be. I'm armed!"

Erika looked the girl up and down once, and then advanced a few feet to drop down on her haunches just out of the girl's reach. "You'll never make it across the mountains on your own," she said.

"I'm going south," the girl said.

"No. You're not. You're going north to Adro, where they don't kill powder mages. I can help you get there alive. Or," she added lazily, as if she didn't care, "You can stay here and see which kills you first—winter or the Longdogs."

The girl sneered at Erika. "What do you care?"

Erika smiled at her. "What's your name?"

"You tell me yours first."

"My name is Erika ja Leora." Erika pulled the collar of her shirt down to reveal a brand—identical to the one that the girl wore, but smaller and more easily concealed—just above her left breast. "And I'm a powder mage too."

The girl followed them back to the road. She kept her distance, as if unsure as to whether she'd have to run at any moment. When they reached the road she remained in the shadow of the trees and clutched her penknife. The girl hid it well, but she walked with a slight limp. Every step must have been painful for her.

"I've heard of you," the girl said.

Erika would have been surprised if the girl hadn't. Powder mages amongst the nobility were rare enough. "Good things, I hope."

"Just that you're Forsworn," the girl sniffed. "You can hide your brand."

"Yes. Because I'm the heir to a duchy," Erika said. She realized after the words had left her mouth how incredibly unfair that must sound—that a noble could live

unmolested as a powder mage, while the commoners were hunted and executed for it. "That's why I have this," she hefted her bow. "I'm not allowed to touch a musket, by law." Or black powder, for that matter.

Powder mages could manipulate the energy of black powder with their minds or ingest it to enhance their senses and increase their strength and speed. They were considered incredibly dangerous, and no one hated them more than the king's Privileged cabal of elemental sorcerers and his personal cadre of Longdogs.

Erika realized that her statement about the powder couldn't have been very consoling. This girl was running for her life, for a crime she had no choice in committing.

"Come with us," Erika said. "You can ride with me."

The girl shook her head. "I...no. I can't go on the roads."

"I'll protect you."

"That's what my brother said. And they killed him."

Erika couldn't put words to a response.

"Riders on the road," Santiole said, taking her musket off her shoulder.

Erika turned to the girl to tell her to hide, but she had already disappeared into the trees. She swore quietly under her breath and turned to watch as a pair of horses rounded a bend further up the road to the south and came toward them.

As they drew closer, she made out that both men were armed with small swords but neither pistol nor musket. One was paunchy, broad across the shoulders, while the other was whip thin and slouched in his saddle. They wore the green on tan of the king's Grand Army but with white sashes across their chests that spoke of special commission. The sashes were emblazoned with images of thin, narrow-headed hounds from which the Longdogs got their nickname.

Erika felt her stomach turn.

"You, woman," the paunchy one said to Santiole. "What business have you on the king's highway?"

"We're hunting," Santiole said. Her thumb brushed the hammer of her musket, but she kept the weapon pointed at the ground.

"On whose permission?"

"The duke of Leora."

"Do you have papers?"

Santiole took papers from her jacket pocket and gave them over. The thin Longdog looked at the papers, speaking quietly to himself as he read, and then handed them back to Santiole. He nodded to his partner.

"Seems to be in order," the paunchy man said regretfully. "Have you seen any strangers in the area?"

"No," Erika said. "Why?"

"I wasn't talking to you, girl," the paunchy man said. "Let your betters speak." The thin Longdog leaned over and smacked his partner on the shoulder, to which the man swore loudly.

Santiole said, "You shouldn't talk that way to the duchess-heir of Leora. I'd be within my right to knock your teeth in."

"Ah," the fat man said, muttering his apology. He scowled at his partner.

"Who are you looking for?" Erika asked.

"A dangerous fugitive, my lady. A powder mage."

“Sweet Kresimir, I hope you find him,” Erika said.

The thin man cleared his throat. “My lady, would you excuse us for a moment?”

The two drew away to confer between themselves some distance off. Santiole scowled at them, her musket still lazily cradled beneath one arm, thumb resting gently on the hammer.

Erika turned herself away from the two men and reached in her pocket. She surreptitiously drew out a snuff box and flicked open the lid with her thumb.

“What are you doing?” Santiole whispered. “If they see you...”

Erika took a pinch of the black powder and held it up to her nose, sniffing. She shuddered as a warm feeling flooded her body, an equal mix of euphoria and nausea. The world became a torrent of noises, scents, and sights as the black powder took effect, sharpening her senses, and the voices of the two Longdogs reached her ears.

“...that is?”

“No idea.”

“The heir of the Leora duchy? It’s that powder mage brat that the duke is always going on about.”

“You think she’s hiding the girl?”

“Pit, we don’t even know if the girl is within twenty miles of here. She could have gone northwest, for all we know.”

“So what?”

“So what? We put down this girl and the duke will throw us a bloody parade, you twit. He hates it when nobles get off just because they’re nobles.”

“Now that’s damned risky. Her chaperone looks like a handful.”

Erika’s eavesdropping was interrupted by Santiole. The mistress-at-arms had stepped closer and said quietly, “Let’s just mount up and go. With them searching we can’t risk helping the girl.”

“And if they find her and she tells them we offered to help?”

“We deny everything. There’s no evidence.”

“They’re talking about killing me, by the way.”

Santiole blinked back at her.

“The thin one just suggested they make it look like an accident. The fat one thinks they could plant some black powder on me and make it look like they were defending themselves.”

Santiole let out a sigh. “Pit and damnation. You better take the fat one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shoot him in the chest.”

Erika hadn’t actually thought of killing anyone. “But I...”

“But nothing. You’re going to be a Kez duchess. It won’t be the first time you get your hands bloody.” Santiole brushed a strand of hair behind one ear and stepped into the middle of the road. She pointed into the forest. “A squirrel up in the tree. There!”

Erika slipped the bow from her shoulder and drew an arrow.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the thin Longdog asked.

“Teaching my mistress to kill vermin,” Santiole said.

Erika sighted at an imaginary squirrel in the forest, then turned toward the paunchy man and let her shaft fly.

The arrow sunk into the man's chest just below his heart. He stared at it in shock. The crack of a musket shot broke the air and smoke rose above Santiole. The thin man slumped forward in his saddle, his sword half-drawn, and Santiole dashed forward to snatch the reins before the horses could bolt.

She pulled both bodies from their saddles, setting the horses free to gallop back down the road. She yanked the arrow from the fat man's chest and handed it to Erika. "Clean this off."

While the thin man was most definitely dead, the paunchy one was not. Erika watched in fascination as his round stomach rose and fell and blood gurgled from his mouth and nose. Santiole drew her pistol and checked to see that it was primed, then aimed it at the arrow wound and pulled the trigger. The fat man jerked once and let out a moan of anguish, his arms flailing. She bent over to finish the job with her knife.

Santiole wiped the blade off on the dead man's pants. "And that's how you put down a dog."

"Why'd you shoot him?"

"To destroy the wound. So no one knows he was shot with an arrow. Would look awfully suspicious."

"Ah. Thank you." Erika drew a shaky breath. What the pit had she been thinking? Two of the king's Longdogs, dead at her feet. She struggled to keep down a rising panic, breathing deeply and counting to one hundred in her head. This was self defense, she reassured herself. These two had been chasing down a mere girl and had plotted to kill Erika, the granddaughter of a Kez duke! They had deserved what they got.

The girl emerged from the woods, dry leaves rustling at her approach, her hair full of burs and twigs. She stared at the two bodies, her eyes never leaving them as she inched toward Erika.

"You protected me."

I protected myself.

None of this would have happened if Erika hadn't stopped to help this girl. She would be on her way back to her grandfather's manor, blissfully ignorant of Longdogs or fugitive powder mages, and with no blood on her hands. She'd probably be wondering what the cook had made for dinner.

She was in it now. And she couldn't turn back.

Norrine couldn't tear her eyes off the two bodies. The men lay side-by-side in the road, rivulets of dark crimson soaking into the dirt. The older woman, Santiole, reloaded her musket, one foot resting on the paunchy man's stomach like he was some kind of trophy. She hummed softly. It reminded Norrine of how Da used to hum as he skinned the small game animals he'd bring home from his hunts.

She recognized the paunchy Longdog. The one who killed Phille. Put a sword right through Phille's chest and left him laying there in the street outside the prison.

That was less than two weeks ago. She could still remember Phille laying there, his life-blood leaking out, one hand stretched toward Norrine as if begging her to come back for him. He had told her to run after he tricked the Longdogs and helped her escape. Said he would distract them.

She watched him die from the safety of the tall grass a hundred yards away.

He probably thought they would put him in prison for a few years. Maybe cut off his hand. Stupid Phille. He'd always been more heart than brains. He'd helped a powder mage escape. A quick death was mercy for him.

The sound of Erika sniffing brought Norrine back to the present. She watched the noblewoman—the Forsworn—for a moment, puzzled. Were all nobles so squeamish? Norrine was used to blood and bodies. Da was a woodsman. The blood on his pants and jacket belonged to animals, but the blood of a fox or a beaver was no different than that of a human. Erika seemed slightly shocked by it all.

She thought about taking Erika's hand. That's what Da would do for her when she was scared. But Ma had said nobles didn't like to be touched by commoners. "I'm Norrine," she said.

"Erika," the noblewoman responded faintly, though she had already introduced herself. She turned her attention away from the dead Longdogs and knelt next to Norrine. "You don't have to be scared."

"I'm not," Norrine said, though she was. Of course she was scared. She had done everything she could to throw off their scent. She had blown up a powder barrel not far from the compound, using only her mind—the thrill still coursed through her—and then doubled back past the compound itself to throw them off. She'd lost the dogs by taking the river upstream, heading south, before doubling back once more. She had avoided roads, towns, and even isolated farms. Somehow the Longdogs were still on her trail.

Think like a critter, Da had always told her, teaching her how to be a woodsman. How to track game, trap beavers, trick foxes. Even how to avoid the cave lions that would sometimes come down from the mountains.

It wasn't enough. Now this noble had killed two mage hunters and offered to help her go north, to Adro, where Phille had promised her it wasn't illegal to be a powder mage.

Santiole took the men's pocketbooks from their jackets and then tossed them in the mud and stepped away from the bodies. "It'll look like a robbery," she said. "And the villains ran when they realized who they'd attacked. Good shot, by the way. It could have been an inch higher, but good nonetheless."

"I hesitated," Erika responded.

"Everyone does on their first," Santiole said. "If you hadn't, there'd something wrong with you."

Santiole barely seemed to acknowledge Norrine, which made her uncomfortable. The older woman didn't seem to like the idea of helping a powder mage. Then again, who did? Norrine had been taught since she was little of the evil within powder mages. Only the memory of Phille's murder kept Norrine from giving herself up.

Norrine studied Erika. The noblewoman might have been twenty or twenty-five, but Norrine was no good at judging age. She had a pretty face, clear of blemishes and with a slightly-upturned nose and blue eyes, and dirty-blonde hair. Could Norrine trust her? She had the brand, and Norrine had heard her name before. The Forsworn heir of the Leora duchy.

It could be a trick. Da always said that people were far more cunning than animals, because their cunning could be cruel whereas an animal, even when playing a trick, was always honest.

Norrine reached out with her senses. She could feel the powder that Santiole carried. A full powder horn, along with several prepared powder charges for her musket and pistol. Norrine could ignite it with her mind, killing both Santiole and Erika, and run for the mountains. If this was some kind of trap, it would be safer than going with them.

Norrine's senses touched upon something else. More powder. But Santiole wasn't carrying it.

Erika was.

Not much. Certainly not more than a couple charges worth. But she had it on her person. It gave Norrine a little thrill. Erika was already breaking her oath, it seemed, which would put her at odds with any more Longdogs they happened across. Maybe Norrine *could* trust her.

Erika's voice cut into Norrine's thoughts. "Let's see about getting you to Adro."

Erika left Santiole and Norrine in the forest about an hour from the Leora family manor and went on ahead, knowing that the servants would already be clearing the dining room table by the time she arrived.

That was the least of her concerns. The whole lawn was in shadow, the sun almost gone behind the trees, as she rode down the gravel drive to the great manor house and she worried that someone might have already spotted them with the girl.

It would only take one errant word, a peasant mentioning that he'd seen Erika and Santiole with a child, or a visiting relative noticing Santiole's absence, and this whole endeavor would fall apart. Erika couldn't let anyone know that the child was here—a difficult task in a manor full of gossiping servants—and she couldn't afford to make a single mistake.

She left her gelding with one of the grooms and headed in through the front door, returning the servants' greetings and taking a small scolding from the head butler with a smile.

Sweat trickled down the back of her neck as she slipped past her grandfather's study and started up the staircase in the grand hall. Santiole would bring the girl onto the manor grounds by one of the riding trails and stash her with some food and bedding in one of the lesser-used stables. She could stay there until morning, by which time Erika would have thought of a reason to go visit her parents in Adro.

"Erika, is that you?"

Erika froze half way up the staircase and cursed under her breath. "Yes, grandfather." She returned to the door of his study.

The old man sat in his favorite wingback chair with his feet up on a hassock and a fire burning in the hearth. He set his book facedown on his stomach and gazed at her from over his reading spectacles. "You missed dinner."

"Sorry, grandfather."

"Your grandmother will give you an earful."

"I know. I'm sorry."

“Fine, fine.” He made a dismissive gesture. “She’s too protective anyway. Where do you think your mother got it from? Where’s Santiole?”

“Just tending to the horses.”

“Isn’t that what we have grooms for?”

“You know how she is,” Erika said.

“Oh? How is she?”

“Just, um, fretting over everything,” Erika muttered.

He watched her for a few moments. “Is something wrong?”

Erika forced a smile. “Not at all, grandfather.”

“You bag anything?”

She shook her head. “Santiole had me shooting squirrels.”

“Hard buggers to hit. Oh well. You’ll get them next time. You can shoot at them from the window for all I care. The damned things keep getting into my garden.” He lifted his book and scanned the page for his place. “Get cleaned up and look in the kitchen for your dinner. Daphnie has kept something warm for you.”

Erika bounded up the stairs, happy to be away without any more questions and eager to avoid grandmother for at least an hour or two. She bathed and changed her clothes, then went back down to get her dinner from the cook. The quail was tender, the potatoes smothered in butter, and the beans roasted in garlic. Daphnie explained that the raspberry tart would be the last of grandfather’s berries for the season.

“Daphnie, have you seen Santiole?” she asked the cook as she finished off her dinner at the servants’ table.

Daphnie was a sturdy woman of about thirty-five, wearing an apron that always seemed covered in flour. She cracked a pair of walnuts in one hand and picked the flesh out of the shell, leaning against the kitchen counter. “Came in a little while after you did,” the cook said. “I think she’s with the master.”

“Thank you.” Erika left the last few bites and snuck out into the back hallway, stepping gently, avoiding the creaky floorboards, until she was within hearing distance of the servants’ entrance to grandfather’s study.

She could hear grandfather’s voice, but not what he was saying. Was he talking to Santiole, or one of the servants? Or grandmother? If it was grandmother, Erika needed to stay clear but if it was Santiole... well, Erika had to know if everything went smoothly with Norrine.

She took one more step and cringed as the floorboard creaked loudly under her slipped foot.

“Erika,” grandfather’s voice said. “Come here.”

How the pit did he know it was her? She let out a soft sigh and stepped around the corner, plastering a smile to her face. “Yes, grandfather?”

The smile slid off just as quickly as she’d put it there. Grandfather stood beside the fire, his book abandoned, Santiole beside him. The mistress-at-arms looked serious while grandfather’s forehead furrowed and he drummed his fingers on the mantelpiece thoughtfully.

“Close the door, child.”

The door to the main hallway was already closed. Erika shut the one behind her and felt a sheen of sweat in the small of her back.

“I understand you had your first real kill today,” grandfather said.

“I don’t...”

The lord of the Leora duchy snorted. “Don’t lie to me, girl. Santiole may be your tutor, but she’s my mistress-at-arms. Do you think she’d keep this from me? I know about the mage hunters and I know about the girl.”

Despite his gruff tone, grandfather kept his voice low. He always said that in a nobleman’s house the walls had ears and that even loyal servants might be spying for another noble family.

“Come here.”

Erika crossed the room to stand before her grandfather, trying to look as ashamed as possible. What would he do now? Turn the girl over to the mage hunters? Maybe even turn Erika over? The idea that her own grandfather would betray her had never crossed her mind, but Erika found her nerves suddenly frayed at the thought.

“Chin up. Look me in the eyes,” grandfather said.

She looked up at his face in time to feel the sudden sharp blow of the back of his hand across her cheek. It wasn’t hard enough to make her stumble, but sharp enough to smart. The shock of it was worse than the pain—her grandfather had never been a violent man, even to the boys in the family.

“There’s a consequence for every action, my dear,” grandfather said. He took her chin in her hand and gently rubbed her cheek.

She forced herself to not flinch away. “Yes, sir.”

“No ‘sir,’ my girl. I’m still grandfather.” He gave her a fond smile, but his eyes seemed tired. He turned away to look into the fire. “You did the right thing killing those Longdogs. This won’t be the last time you bloody your hands and Santiole tells me that you barely hesitated. I’m proud of you. Life is cheap in Kez. You have to earn the right for yours to be costly.”

“You’re... proud of me?”

“You came home alive. I know the king’s mage hunters, girl. They’re an unscrupulous lot of murderers and thieves. They would have killed you without hesitation if they thought they could get away with it.”

He still hasn’t brought up the girl. Oh pit. What has he done? Has he ordered Santiole to kill her? Grandfather was not heartless, but he had a reputation for ruthlessness when the safety of his family was concerned. He was a pragmatist first and foremost.

“This never goes beyond this room,” grandfather said.

Erika nodded. A Kez noble is taught many things as a child. Among them, the value of silence.

“What do you have on tap for Erika tomorrow?” Grandfather asked Santiole.

The mistress-at-arms cleared her throat. “Fencing in the morning. Riding in the afternoon, and mathematics in the evening.”

Erika groaned inwardly. She hated mathematics.

“Cancel the arithmetic tutor. I have business in Norport and Erika has decided she would like to return to see her parents in Adro a little earlier than she’d initially planned. We’ll travel light with just a few men and leave tomorrow after my meeting with Lord Sibil in the afternoon.” He pointed at Erika. “When we get to Norport I’ll put you on a schooner across the Adsea to Adopest.”

Erika swallowed. “And the girl?”

“She’ll be going with you. There are people in Adopest who will take her in, and once she’s there you’re to wash your hands of this whole business. Do you understand?”

Erika let out a soft sigh and said a silent prayer of thanks to Kresimir. “Yes, grandfather.”

“Get some sleep. We’re going to ride hard tomorrow. I don’t intend to stop anywhere long enough to get caught with a powder mage runaway.”

Erika arrived at the practice yard behind the main stables at dawn to spar with Santiole. The morning air was brisk, her breath visible in the early light. Her arms felt heavy and her head throbbed from a restless night. Couldn’t they just skip all of this and head to Norport immediately? The sooner she took the girl to Adro, the sooner this would all be over.

Yet despite her nervousness, she felt a thrill at the idea of outsmarting the Longdogs. This was so far beyond her small rebellion of taking hits of black powder from time to time.

“Norrine?” Erika asked quietly when Santiole joined her in the practice yard.

The mistress-at-arms held her small sword out to one side and bounced lightly on her toes, limbering her body. Her long brown hair was tied back behind her head in a bun, reminding Erika that she had forgotten to do the same.

“Checked this morning. Fresh as a fiddle. A little food did her well.”

“You gave her my old shoes?”

“Yes,” Santiole said, her tone cross. “Every little kindness you show like that will come back to bite you. If they catch the girl, they will find out who gave her those shoes. Longdogs are relentless.”

Erika tightened her jaw. “Then I’ll have to be sure they don’t catch her.”

Santiole hung her jacket on the barn door. “Kindness will get you killed in Kez.”

“Or maybe it will make me powerful friends.”

“You speak like an Adran. On guard!” Santiole leapt forward without any warning, the tip of her small sword flashing in the morning light.

Erika couldn’t help the squeak that escaped her mouth as she backpedaled, trying to bring her own sword to bear. She parried once, twice, and then the point of Santiole’s small sword leapt forward to whisper past Erika’s ear.

A minor shift of her fingers and Santiole could have put the blade through Erika’s eye.

Santiole lowered her sword. “Not every fight is a duel. Not every enemy will let you prepare yourself before going on the attack.” She returned to her jacket and removed a wooden blossom from the pocket, fixing the bit of round wood to the end of her sword to act as a foil.

Erika did the same with her own sword, scowling at the mistress-at-arms’ back. She rolled her shoulders and stretched her arms, and then attacked as soon as Santiole had turned around.

They battled back and forth across the practice yard, coating their pants and boots with dust and soaking their shirts with sweat. Santiole scored the first two touches, and then Erika scored the third and fourth.

And then the fifth. And sixth.

She had scored eight in a row when she saw Santiole's stance change. The mistress-at-arms loosened the collar of her shirt and dabbed at her forehead with a handkerchief. "By Kresimir, you're getting good at this. I suppose I should stop going easy on you one of these days."

"I've been practicing with father," Erika said, catching a thrust and turning it to one side. Santiole followed it up with another, quicker and more forcible.

"He's been teaching you Adran fencing, eh?"

"A little. Their form is sloppy, but he says that Adrans fight with less technique and more heart," Erika said. She skipped back, but not quick enough, and Santiole scored a touch against her inner thigh.

"Far be it from me to correct your father," Santiole said, "but Adran duelists are shit." She attacked again, and Erika adjusted for the greater speed and strength that Santiole was putting behind her advances.

It wasn't enough. Santiole scored three more touches before she fell back and gestured for a stop.

Erika gratefully bent over with her hands on her knees, panting hard from the fight. She knew Santiole was considered a fine duelist even by Kez standards, but she'd not seen the mistress-at-arms fight like this before.

"You're progressing well," Santiole said.

It was meant to be a compliment, but she couldn't help feeling bitter at those last four losses. Erika spat into the dust.

"I'm serious," Santiole said. "You're already better than most Adrans I've faced. A few more years and you'll hold your own with most fighters throughout the Nine, I wager."

"Flattery."

"Well," Santiole sheathed her sword and gave Erika a thin smile. "Don't let it go to your head."

Their conversation was interrupted by a shout from across the manor yard. Erika crossed to the edge of the stables to look toward the manor and saw a trio of figures heading their way.

"Who is that?" she asked.

Santiole squinted. "Looks like your grandfather and... I'm not sure."

Erika recognized the man on grandfather's right a moment later. "Pit," she swore. "It's Nikslaus."

Duke Nikslaus was a short man a couple of years older than Erika, with a slight frame and an over-large head that looked too big for his delicate neck. His hair was so blonde it was almost white and he wore it curled just above his ears beneath a fine felt bicorn. He wore white gloves covered in crimson archaic runes that would allow him to summon elemental sorcery into this world. At twenty-two, he had the distinction of being one of the youngest Privileged sorcerers to complete their training in full. And he was certainly the youngest Privileged to join the ranks of the mage hunters.

Erika fought down a rising panic. "If he's here, he'll have his men with him."

"Stay calm," Santiole said, squeezing Erika's arm.

The trio arrived at the edge of the barn and grandfather looked Erika up and down. "You two look like you're working hard this morning."

"She's getting very good, my lord," Santiole said.

“Wonderful! Erika and Santiole, you know Duke Nikslaus?”

“We’ve met. One of the king’s balls last spring.” Erika forced a smile and extended her hand, which Nikslaus took in his own. He bent at the waist and kissed her hand, returning her smile with a curl to his lip that made her skin crawl.

“My lady, it has been too long. You’ve grown into a very beautiful woman.”

“Charmed,” Erika said, hearing the flatness in her voice and grimacing. Grandfather would take her to task later for being so transparent. She knew better than that.

“Santiole is the Leora mistress-at-arms,” Duke Leora said. “And forgive me duke, but I’m ashamed to say I’ve forgotten your companion’s name.”

“Duglas,” the third member of their trio said with a bow. He was a tall man with long, gray hair and a waxed mustache. His limbs were long and sinewy. He stood at least a foot taller than Nikslaus and he did not extend his hand. A small sword hung at his belt. His jacket was unbuttoned despite the morning cold. He stood with a thumb hooked in his belt and regarded Erika with some interest.

“Duglas is a master mage hunter,” Nikslaus supplied. “Thirty years experience hunting down the vile creatures. An expert duelist as well. He’s helping me on my current mission.”

“And what is that?” Erika asked, her voice coming out too high for her liking.

“We’re hunting down a dangerous fugitive. A powder mage, of course. She escaped one of our prisons down in Loreland.”

Erika feigned shock. “That’s nearly eighty miles from here. Surely she hasn’t gotten this far?”

“A surprise, certainly. This mage has proven to be resourceful.”

“Where could she possibly be going?”

“We suspect Adro, but how she plans on surviving the high mountain passes with winter just around the corner, I have no idea.”

“I hope you apprehend her before someone gets hurt,” Erika said.

“As do I. Not every powder mage has the decency to forswear against that abominable magic.”

And there it was. Erika swallowed hard. Nikslaus knew she was a powder mage, of course. Everyone did. But did he suspect that she might help a fellow mage in flight?

Nikslaus droned on for several minutes about the particulars of their search, Duglas looming behind him silently. Both Nikslaus and Duglas seemed to watch Erika closely, as if looking for some kind of tell. Perhaps it was her imagination playing tricks on her. Regardless, she hoped that they attributed her trembling hands to nothing more than the exertion of her fencing practice.

“My men are already searching the premises,” Nikslaus concluded. “We must be sure that such a beast hasn’t put your family in danger.”

Erika resisted the urge to glance west, toward the abandoned stables where Santiole had stashed Norrine. It was nearly three quarters of a mile from the main house, hidden away in the forest. Even the slightest hint might give her away. She couldn’t help but wonder if the girl was properly hidden. What if she had been found already?

“My utmost thanks,” Duke Leora said, shaking Nikslaus’ hand firmly. “We appreciate everything you hunters do for us. And you, as well, Duglas.”

The tall master hunter gave a short nod.

How could grandfather play this so coolly? Was he that used to lying to government officials? Had he moved Norrine’s hiding spot in the night? Erika’s grip tightened on the hilt of her small sword. If she had to stand here passively for one more minute while Longdogs ransacked the family property, she would scream.

“My good duke,” Erika found herself saying suddenly, “do you fence?”

“A little,” Nikslaus said, taken a little off guard.

“Would you care to join me for a round?”

Duglas crossed his arms skeptically and grandfather said that sounded like a wonderful idea. Santiole gave a soft, exasperated sigh.

The corner of Nikslaus’ mouth lifted slightly. “Certainly. Do you have a blossom I could borrow?”

Santiole somewhat reluctantly supplied him with a blossom for the tip of his sword and Nikslaus handed his jacket and gloves to Duglas. Santiole took up a position behind Erika.

The mistress-at-arms leaned in close to Erika as she brushed by and whispered, “Let him win.”

Erika took a deep breath. Of course. That’s what she intended. A good way to distract the duke for a few minutes, nothing more.

Her heart pounded as she took up a dueling stance. Any minute the Longdogs might come running across the field, shouting that they’d found the girl. Everything would be ruined. Erika would go to the headsman and the Leora house would be disgraced. She wondered how many men Nikslaus had brought with him and whether Santiole and the house guard might be able to fight them off.

She dismissed that outright. Nikslaus was a Privileged. He’d probably kill them all before they had a chance to draw their swords.

Deep in her thoughts, she responded to Nikslaus’ salute by instinct and only barely parried his first thrust. He was inside her guard within two moves and scored a touch against her left breast, not far from where she had been branded as a powder mage.

Hardly a coincidence, she suspected.

Nikslaus returned to the post. “You seem distracted, my lady,” he said, gesturing for them to begin again.

She tried to regain her focus, forcing herself to relax as he came forward. Their swords crossed several times before he scored a touch on her arm. “Just tired, is all.”

“You do look like you could use some rest,” Nikslaus said. “That should be enough for now.” He returned to take his jacket from Duglas, and Erika heard him say quietly, “I thought her tutor said she was good?”

“Once more,” Erika said before she could stop herself. Behind her, Santiole swore quietly.

Nikslaus turned toward her, brow furrowed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The duke raised his sword and advanced. Erika parried his first thrust and immediately returned with a riposte that touched the wooden blossom on the tip of her sword against Nikslaus' chest.

"Well," Nikslaus said in surprise. "Again."

Erika scored three more touches against his chest and one just inches from his groin before Nikslaus retired for good. His cordial manner seemed strained and he nodded graciously in defeat. "Very good, my lady. You're a far better swordsman than I."

"I've had an excellent teacher," Erika said, looking to Santiole. The mistress-at-arms grimaced. Erika could practically hear her thinking, *you should have let him win.*

"Of course, my own studies have been toward sorcery." Nikslaus tugged his Privileged gloves on over his fingers. "I don't have much time to practice fencing. Douglas here is much, much better."

Without a word, the tall master mage hunter stepped toward Erika. He drew his sword and took the blossom from Nikslaus, fixing it to the end of his own. Erika swallowed hard. Douglas was far taller with a much greater reach, and his sword was several inches longer than her own.

"Now, I don't think..." Santiole began.

Nikslaus cut her off with a raised hand. "Let us see how you do, my lady. He'll be gentle."

Douglas seemed to unwind his tall frame. He slid forward like a snake moving to strike, sword lashing out while not one bit of his body remained within reach of Erika's blade. He batted aside her parry and slapped the blossom against her throat hard enough to leave a welt.

Stunned, Erika put a hand to her throat. He dared strike her like that? That wasn't right. It wasn't fair! She advanced on him as quickly as she could, sword flashing. He caught her thrust once, twice, and the third time batted it away with startling ease, stabbing the blossom against her ribs.

Erika could feel her face growing red. He had the range on her, but he also had startling speed. His form was more disciplined. Santiole would tell her to acknowledge defeat graciously when she was so clearly outmatched. She raised her sword.

"That's enough of that," Duke Leora cut in. "Erika, I think you and Santiole should prepare for our journey. Remember, we're leaving in just a few hours for Norport."

Erika lowered her sword. "Yes, grandfather." She snatched her jacket and stalked toward the manor. She could hear Santiole's footsteps behind her.

"Don't you ever do something like that again," Santiole hissed. "That man would have torn you apart."

Damn Douglas for humiliating her like that! Damn Nikslaus for encouraging it. "I will kill him," Erika vowed.

"Don't be stupid. As good as you might be some day, you're not going to be that good," Santiole said. "He's a Longdog's kennelmaster for a reason."

Erika stopped and looked back at the two men as they spoke with grandfather. Nikslaus was watching her. She wanted to carve that miserable smile off his face.

“Maybe so,” she said. “But I’m going to make sure that Norrine makes it to Adro. It’ll humiliate them both. And they’ll never know it was me.”

The sound of hushed voices immediately sent Norrine scrambling out of her makeshift bed for some kind of cover. She was fully awake in a matter of moments, snatching for her blanket, the left-over crust of bread from her dinner, and anything else that might betray her presence.

Da had always told her to sleep light, ready to sit up from her bedroll and shoot an unlucky deer that might have strayed across their blind. She’d put the advice to good use for the last couple of weeks on the run, avoiding a close encounter with a hunter and another with a farmer out searching truffles with his pigs.

But now she would be caught like a rabbit in a snare. She snatched up her penknife, all her supplies clutched in one arm. Last night, Santiole had told her of a place to hide. Could the old woman be trusted? She ran to the far wall of the stable, where Santiole told her a trick would open an old false wall. Norrine tugged at a broken beam, trying to find the latch. Nothing happened.

Norrine tugged again without any result. How had the mistress-at-arms done it last night? This was the right beam, wasn’t it? Norrine’s tugs became more frantic. She couldn’t remember how to open the hidden compartment.

Norrine kicked at the straw she’d been sleeping on, destroying evidence of her bed, and scrambled up the ladder to the second floor. The loft was suffused with the sweet smell of dry hay. She hoped it was enough to cover the stench of her unwashed clothes.

She scrambled between two hay bales, worming her way into the stack just as the stable door below was pushed open with the rasp of sliding wood.

“You hear something?” an unfamiliar male voice asked.

A female voice answered, “Yeah, the rattle of rocks in your stupid head.”

“I’m serious,” the man said.

“So am I. Help me push this door open the rest of the way. We’ll need some light to search this place.”

There was a wooden thud, and another, then boots thumped on the hard-packed floor of the stables. “By Kresimir, I hate the cold,” the woman said.

“Picked the wrong place to winter, then,” the man responded with a chuckle.

“Don’t be an ass. You think I chose this assignment? If I had, it would have been with someone better lookin’ than you. The duke has us chasing ghosts. We’re only here because he wants to pin something on that Forsworn Leora girl. You see the look on his face when he got out of his carriage? The way he talks about her, I can’t tell whether he wants to kill her or bugger her. Now open that window so we can see something.”

One of the barn windows thumped open, and Norrine heard the sound of the two moving about below her. Rusted metal creaked as something heavy was lifted to one side, and the woman cursed loudly.

“What?”

“Smashed my toe under that plow, you bloody ingrate.”

“Quit your whining. Does that look like someone slept there?”

The woman took a sharp breath. "Oh my pit, it does." Boots scrambled across the floor. "Someone small. Look at here, the straw is all crushed. And feel this. Still warm!"

There was silence for a few moments, and then the man answered. "You're making fun of me."

"Of course I am, you idiot. There's deer droppings all over the place down here. A blind man could see they sleep here all the time. The butler said no one's been in this stable for months."

"The door was closed, though. Explain how the deer got in, if you're so damned smart."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe that hole in the wall there. Kresimir, you're dumb. Go check upstairs and let's get back with the others. There's no one here."

Norrine forced herself to take shallow breaths as the ladder creaked under the weight of someone large. Footsteps sounded on the floor of the loft as he stepped off the ladder, and she could hear him muttering softly to himself.

"Stupid. I'll show you stupid. I'll drop a bloody axe on your head."

"What are you saying?" the woman called up.

"Nothing!"

"Anyone up there?"

Norrine smothered a squeal as the pile of hay bales suddenly shifted. The hay rustled, and she could see a hand grasping into the space she had tunneled out for herself. The hand patted around for a moment and then withdrew. The bales were kicked several times, and Norrine waited for the whole stack to fall over on her. Mercifully, it stayed together. More muttering, and then, "Nothing up here."

"All right, let's go get some breakfast. I'm bloody starving."

The man descended the ladder and the two made their way out of the stables. Norrine waited for nearly a minute, when the pair's voices could barely be heard, before she allowed herself to exhale a ragged breath. She slumped down in her hiding spot, trying to forget about the groping hand and the fear that had kept her frozen in place.

She'd dropped her penknife somewhere in the straw. What would Da have said about that? There was no powder here, nothing she could use to defend herself. If the man had grabbed her she would have been helpless.

Norrine dared not leave her hiding spot. The two searchers had left, but surely more would come? Only their loud bickering had saved her before. She might not be so lucky next time.

Hay poked through her clothes, causing her skin to itch. Her hiding spot was warm, but not comfortable, and fear kept her in place.

She heard voices once more some time later, but they were further off and she could not make out what they said. The stables remained silent but for the sound of crows on the roof and the scratch of rats down below her. She remained curled up like a fox cub in its burrow, counting her own heartbeats, trying not to be afraid.

A sound in one of the stalls below brought her out of her daydream. Her body stiffened, and she prayed that it had only been the building settling. Surely she would have heard the door open if someone was downstairs? Had the two Longdogs closed the door behind them? She couldn't remember.

A throat cleared.

Norrine's hands began to shake.

The ladder creaked, and then a voice said, "It's me, girl. You can come out now."

Norrine crawled out from beneath the hay bales and brushed the straw from her hair and clothes. Santiole stood on the ladder, her head and shoulders sticking up into the loft. "You were supposed to hide behind the false wall on the first floor."

Norrine paused to search through the hay until she found her penknife. "I forgot how to open it," she said, following Santiole down to the floor of the stable.

The old woman went to the wall and pushed *up* on the beam that Norrine had pushed down on. Norrine heard a soft click, and Santiole shoved. The beam pushed several inches into the wall. The boards creaked open on a hinge, revealing a space that would have been just big enough for her to hide, completely concealed. "You're damn lucky that they were too bloody lazy to search the hay."

"They did."

"Not well enough." Santiole seemed unimpressed. "You should have paid better attention last night. If you cause trouble for my mistress, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Norrine clutched her fists at her sides. "They're going to kill me if they find me. I'm not stupid. You can't do any worse than that."

Santiole fingered her knife for a moment. Norrine wondered what kind of threats were working their way through her mind, but the woman just said in a soft tone, "No, I suppose I can't. Be more careful next time."

Duke Nikslaus met Erika and Lord Leora in the manor drive that afternoon as they prepared to leave for Norport.

Erika needed a distraction, an excuse. Anything to keep them behind while Nikslaus left so that they could be sure he was gone before they started their own journey.

Grandfather would have none of it. He was right, of course. They couldn't alter their plans lest they attract Nikslaus' suspicion. It was miracle enough that Norrine hadn't been found by the duke's Longdogs. Unless she had, and the duke was on his way to arrest them.

Erika was conscious of her own fidgeting as Nikslaus approached the carriage window.

"I do hope you're none the worse for Douglas' little game," Nikslaus said. Erika's hand went to her throat involuntarily. The welt would be there for a week or more. Nikslaus continued, "He's a fantastic swordsman but he does come from lesser stock. A peasant, you see. He has no sense of propriety."

"It's all right," Erika said, praying Nikslaus would turn around and leave.

"I thought you were rather fetching with a sword," Nikslaus said.

"Thank you, my lord." *Fetching*. Not skillful or quick or anything else. Just fetching. What an ass.

Nikslaus rapped on the door as if to say goodbye, and gave her and grandfather each a nod. He stepped away.

Erika let herself sink against the upholstered seats of grandfather's carriage and sigh in relief. Grandfather rolled his eyes at her, and she stuck out her tongue at him, suddenly giddy that they would finally be away.

“My lord,” Nikslaus said, stepping back to the window and addressing grandfather.

Erika leapt half way out of her seat, but Nikslaus didn't seem to notice.

“Yes?”

“Two of my men were killed on the road not more than six miles from here,” Nikslaus said. “We found the bodies just this morning.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Lord Leora said. “Very unfortunate.”

“Indeed.” Nikslaus looked toward Erika. “I can't imagine what could have happened.”

“Do you think it was the powder mage?” Erika asked.

“Perhaps.”

She could feel the blood thumping in her ears. “Where did it happen?”

“To the southeast.”

Erika put her hand to her chest. “That's the king's highway! Santiolo and I were just hunting down there yesterday. Could it have been bandits?” She dabbed at her forehead. “Pit, we were just there. We could have been attacked!”

Nikslaus seemed taken aback. “Well. I'm glad it was my men, and not you and your bodyguard.”

“That's... that's just horrible. Grandfather, I demand you send someone down there to root them out.”

Grandfather pursed his lips. “I'll talk with Santiolo. We can't have bandits operating in my forest. I'll see that the culprits are brought to justice.”

“Very well,” Nikslaus said slowly. “Thank you for that.” He eyed Erika, then said, “I do hope you have a safe journey.”

Nikslaus left, and they were soon heading north into the mountain roads that would take them through the lowest passes to Norport.

Erika watched the forest roll by, the trees naked but for the last stubborn leaves clinging to bare branches, the only sound the creak of the carriage wheels and the clop of their small escort.

“You played a dangerous game there,” grandfather said when they were some ways from the manor. “Admitting that you had been hunting in the area.”

Erika nodded. If grandfather had disapproved, he would have spoken up earlier.

“But well done,” he said. “You threw him off balance. Be careful with Nikslaus. He's young, and as Privileged go he's not actually very powerful, but he makes up for it with cunning. Don't provoke him into doing something stupid.”

“Isn't that what I should be doing?”

“Not if that stupid thing is trying to kill you. Because mark my words: he will succeed. You can look into his eyes and see a man who doesn't balk at murder.” Grandfather shrugged. “After all. This is Kez. And he's a duke.”

“So are you.”

“Have I balked at murder?”

Erika tilted her head, taken aback. “I... don't know.”

“I may be grandfather to you, my dear, but... well, men have learned to fear me. And they will learn to fear you, by the time you inherit my title and lands.”

Erika watched her grandfather—the wizened old man who used to bring her flowers and berries from his gardens—and wondered just of what he was capable. Was he as ruthless as Nikslaus? Had he learned to hide it better? Would she be

that ruthless some day? The question bothered her all through the afternoon and into the evening to when they stopped to change horses before continuing on through the night.

They were joined the next morning by Santiole and Norrine. Erika couldn't help but give a sigh of relief at the sight of the girl. Norrine wore an old pair of Erika's riding boots and a white chemise with green trim under a long fox fur jacket. She also wore a scarf to cover the brand on her neck.

Their new additions brought the company up to seven. Lord Leora made it clear he did not like the idea of so many people with knowledge of the girl they were smuggling out of the country, but also that he trusted his two men-at-arms and the driver implicitly. Each had been with him longer than Erika had been alive.

They were in Norport just four days later. Santiole once again disappeared with Norrine, taking her to an inn where they could stay inconspicuously, and Erika proceeded to the hotel with her grandfather. Erika was able to get her first good night's sleep in almost a week, and she woke up in the morning with a lightness to her step and the smell of fish and the damp odor of the Adsea in her nostrils.

She was almost there. Grandfather's driver had booked her passage on a schooner heading to Adopest. Santiole would book herself and Norrine passage on the same schooner and in just two days they would be far beyond the reach of the Kez Longdogs. Norrine would be gone when Erika returned to Kez in a few months, and there would be no evidence to tie her to the fugitive powder mage. She couldn't believe they had done it.

Grandfather asked her to join him for breakfast in the hotel dining room. Only one other pair dined in the large room, which suited Erika fine. They were seated and their breakfast of partridge eggs, toast, and calf liver was brought out to them just a few minutes later. Erika set into the meal, feeling like she hadn't eaten in months. Grandfather lifted his fork and pointed it to the doorway behind Erika. "Your friend is here," he said, his voice flat.

"My friend? Who?"

Erika turned in her seat. Several men stood speaking with the hotel owner in the grand hall. They wore the tan uniforms with green trim of Kez soldiers, with white sashes across their chests. Another member of the group wore a black suit and a pair of runed Privileged gloves.

Duke Nikslaus.

Erika felt the blood drain from her face and turned to face her breakfast. She stared at her plate for several moments, trying to control her breathing. He was here. And if he was here, it meant he was here for them. Within moments he and his Longdogs would come through the door and arrest her and grandfather.

She had brought grandfather in on this. It was all her fault. Maybe she could convince them he had nothing to do with it?

"Eat up," grandfather said. "You'll need your strength." He was already sipping at his morning tea.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat," he urged again.

“My lady! My Lord Leora! How good to see you both again!” Nikslaus entered the room and came around the side of the table. Grandfather stood to shake the duke’s hand, and Erika allowed him to kiss the back of hers.

Surely he could hear her heart pounding away. Surely the trap would spring any moment.

“What brings you to Norport?” Erika asked, her voice sounding faint even to her.

“Still hunting, still hunting,” Nikslaus made a motion like a wheel going around and fell into one of the chairs. “We have to range all over when we’re hunting like this. You know how it is. A fugitive could be anywhere.”

“Surely not here,” Erika said.

“We don’t know. I’ve sent men in every direction, of course.”

“Of course,” she echoed, waiting for the other shoe to fall. Was he toying with her?

“When I discovered you were here, I thought I’d come and give you the courtesy of telling you myself.”

“Oh?” Erika asked. She looked toward grandfather, but the old man sipped his tea and took a bite of his toast as if this conversation were perfectly ordinary.

Nikslaus went on. “I’ve had to close the port. I’m so sorry. I know you were returning to Adro today. But with the powder mage still loose I have to take every precaution.”

Erika set her fork beside her plate so that he wouldn’t see how it trembled. “Oh. I see. How long will the port be closed?”

“A week. Maybe two? A month at the longest, I’m sure. I’ve asked for reinforcements and we’re going to make a thorough search of the city before I can allow the port to open again.”

“That’ll be very poor for trade on the Adsea,” grandfather said after a bite of poached eggs. “The Adrans won’t be happy.”

“The king is worried not a whit as to the happiness of Adro when it concerns these damned powder mages. No offense, my lady,” Nikslaus lay a hand gently on Erika’s arm. “I know you’re half Adran yourself, but you must understand.”

And a powder mage. She swallowed hard. “Certainly, my lord.”

“I do have good news,” Nikslaus said. “I’ve just been sent something wonderful by the men at the royal armory. Duglas!”

The tall master mage hunter entered the room a moment later, wearing one of the green on tan uniforms with his long gray hair tied back and his mustache gleaming with wax. He had a long package slung over one shoulder, wrapped in oil cloth. At a gesture from Nikslaus, he thumped it on the table. Erika jumped as a plate shattered beneath it. Duglas didn’t seem to notice.

“It’s called an air musket,” Nikslaus said, unwrapping the oil cloth and lifting the item from the table. It looked much like a regular musket with a long barrel, but the wooden stock was wider than a musket’s and the firing mechanism quite unlike a flintlock. He pointed to the flared stock and said, “It fires bullets using compressed air from this cylinder. Good for several shots. The range is a little less than a flintlock, but it’s a magnificent weapon.”

“Fascinating,” grandfather muttered, taking his glasses from his breast pocket and leaning toward Nikslaus.

“We’ll be using these exclusively to hunt powder mages from now on,” Nikslaus said, locking eyes with Erika as he spoke. “No more risking a powder mage getting the better of us with their abominable sorcery.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Erika wanted to spit in the man’s face.

“Perhaps I could have one made for you, my lady. Then you’ll know the joy of shooting.”

Erika covered her face as if she were blushing. “You’re too kind.”

“It’s the least I could do. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go deal with the mayor. He’s most upset about me closing the port.”

Nikslaus was gone a moment later and Erika was left staring at her plate. He had ordered reinforcements. How many was that? A hundred? A thousand? Once they had reinforcements they would search the entire city. They would find Norrine in Santiole’s care, and then they would come for Erika.

“I have to leave,” she said.

Grandfather tapped his fork gently on his plate. “Oh?”

“I’ll take the high pass back over the mountains and make for Budwiel.” It was the closest Adran city by land. It would take over a week to get there, but she had no choice. “Nikslaus doesn’t have many men. He can’t be watching all the city gates. If I leave now, I can get ahead of him before he thinks to close the passes.”

“I suppose you’ll want my carriage for that?” grandfather asked.

“Please,” she leaned close to him, offering her broadest smile.

“You’re going to be a terror for whatever man you marry. All right. I’ll send you with Dominik and Tirel. And Santiole, of course. I’ll keep one of the men for myself and hire a carriage when I’ve concluded my business here.”

Erika leaned back in her seat and watched her grandfather for a moment. How could he not see it? This was most certainly a trap. Nikslaus was trying to get her to do exactly this, and when she did, he would come after her in force. Not that he’d given her a choice. She could wait for him to tighten the noose or she could leap from the gallows and hope the rope broke.

“Be very careful,” grandfather added. “I need you coming back alive. You wouldn’t want one of your younger brothers to inherit the duchy now, would you?”

“Of course not. They’re much too headstrong.” Erika winked at her grandfather. “Thank you so much. I’ll see you in a few months when I return.”

Norrine sat alone in a small room tucked into the corner of an inn just a stone’s throw from the Norport docks.

The dirty, fishy smell of the city made her ill. Whatever the innkeeper had burned in the room to rid it of the smell hadn’t done enough, and Norrine thought she might throw up any minute. Riding in Da’s rowboat had always made her queasy. The smell of fish doubly so. How was she supposed to survive for two days on the Adsea?

Santiole had gone to get provisions for the short trip across the Adsea. Back at the Leora manor, hiding in the abandoned stables, being alone hadn’t bothered Norrine. Here in the city it made her nervous. She had never been in a town bigger than a few hundred people. Santiole said that Norport had fifteen thousand.

Fifteen thousand! Most of the children Norrine knew couldn’t even fathom such a number. Norrine only knew it because Ma had taught her numbers and even still...

She got off the bed and stood on her tiptoes to look out the window. Her view was dirty alleyway and just a sliver of the main street. Wagons rolled by, gentlemen strolled, and laborers moved cargo from the ships in the harbor.

The door thumped open, making Norrine jump. Santiole stepped inside quickly, closing the door behind her, and gave Norrine a disapproving glance. "You shouldn't hang about near the window. And keep that scarf up around your neck, even when you're alone."

"Sorry," Norrine muttered.

"The ship leaves in two hours. We'll go get settled so that Erika isn't seen with us."

"She'll be on the same boat, though?"

"Ship. And yes, she will. But you can't talk to her on this journey. In fact, if you see her you're to pretend you don't know her at all. As will I. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All right. Pull up your scarf and let's go."

Norrine adjusted her jacket and scarf to conceal her brand and followed Santiole down the hallway and to the common room downstairs.

"Don't walk so close. You'll tread on my heels," Santiole said.

Norrine fell back a few feet behind the mistress-at-arms and tried not to focus on all the people around them. Alone, in the forest, you knew who you were. You knew who your enemy was. But here, with so many people around...

She put her hand to her scarf. One slip, and someone would shout. Anyone here would turn her in for the reward.

Santiole walked with a particular swagger. No one gave her a second glance. She looked so natural and unconcerned. She walked with confidence, Norrine realized, like someone who could fight any two people in the room and come out on top. Norrine tried to emulate the walk and imagined it would be easier with decades of training and a small sword and pistol at her hip.

Out on the street, Norrine reached out with her senses, looking for powder, and nearly gasped at the sudden overwhelming sensation. She could feel it all around her! That man walking past them had a loaded pistol at his hip. That woman driving the carriage had a powder horn and a blunderbuss. Two buildings over was a small armory, with dozens of barrels of powder.

Norrine's mouth watered at it all. Was this what it was like for every powder mage? How could anyone stand to stay in a city with such overwhelming sensations? Such... temptations! She felt like she could just reach out with her mind and ignite it all.

The dock planks were soon underfoot, and Norrine's heart beat faster as they approached their ship. Which one would it be? Santiole said it was called a schooner.

Santiole raised her hand in greeting toward a man coming toward them. He wasn't wearing a shirt despite the chill of the wind blowing off the Adsea. He had a lean, muscular build. His chest was criss-crossed with old scars and his head was shaved bald. He returned Santiole's greeting.

"Not going out today, I'm afraid," he called before he reached them.

"What do you mean?"

"Just got word that they've closed the port. Don't know why yet. I think..."

“All right,” Santiole cut him off. “Thanks. We’ll take another route.” She took Norrine by the hand and was already turning her back on the docks.

“Well, it might be open tomorrow. You’ll just have to wait.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Santiole called over her shoulder.

Norrine could sense Santiole’s sudden alertness. She walked on the balls of her feet, as if ready to run or fight at a moment’s notice. They left the dock quickly, taking a seemingly random series of turns on the city streets for nearly fifteen minutes, during which Norrine decided it best to stay silent.

They finally stopped on a street corner beside a small cafe. Santiole dropped into one of the chairs outside the cafe and pushed Norrine into one beside her. The mistress-at-arms instantly seemed to relax, her body language becoming careless as she sprawled back and called for a waiter.

Norrine tried to copy her relaxed manner. She could see Santiole’s eyes working quickly, searching the crowds.

“What’s wrong?” Norrine asked quietly.

“No one just closes the port,” Santiole responded, her voice low. She paused as the waiter approached, and paid for coffee for both of them. When the waiter was gone, she went on, “Only the mayor can close the port, and his fortunes are all tied up in trade with Adro. He would sooner cut off his own thumb than close the port even for a day. It had to be Nikslaus.”

Norrine didn’t follow. “But you just said that only...”

“A Privileged can do just about anything, child,” Santiole said, “And a Privileged Longdog has the authority of the king. He must have followed us here.” Her lips moved silently, as if she were considering something. “If Nikslaus is here, Duke Leora will be watched. As will Erika. I can’t risk making contact with either of them and leading the Longdogs back to you.” She fell silent for another few moments and then said, “Stay here.” She got to her feet and disappeared into the crowds before Norrine could respond.

Norrine remained frozen in her chair. She waited for Santiole to return. And she waited some more. The waiter returned with a new cup of coffee for Santiole, smiling congenially at Norrine. Norrine made herself smile back.

She waited even longer.

It soon became apparent that Santiole would not be right back. Norrine lifted her coffee to her lips, taking a sip and nearly spitting it back out. It was so bitter!

How long was she supposed to wait? What if Santiole had been captured or questioned? Perhaps Erika and her grandfather had already been arrested. If Santiole decided to abandon Norrine, she would have to go on without her. With the docks closed, that meant she would have to brave the mountain passes.

Norrine waited at the table for another five minutes. She leaned back in her chair, swinging her feet, and smiled at the waiter when he returned.

“She’ll be right back,” she said.

When he had turned his back, she let the smile drop and turned to watching the street.

A flash of color caught her eyes. Green on tan uniforms moved through the street, the crowd parting before them. Norrine leapt to her feet and hurried inside the cafe. She paused by the door, wringing her hands together, and pressed

herself into the corner where she could see out the window but—hopefully—remain unseen herself.

The Kez soldiers seemed to be coming straight for her. There were three of them, swords at their sides with no muskets in sight. A fourth man was leading them. He had light blonde hair, a slight build, and wore a black suit with runed gloves on his hands. Norrine tried not to tremble at the sight. A Privileged sorcerer.

The group passed the cafe and continued on down the street. Norrine watched them go.

“Have you seen a Privileged before?”

The voice made her jump, but it was just the waiter standing behind her. Norrine shook her head. “I haven’t.”

“We get a few through here, being a port town and all,” the waiter said. “You know how it is. They’re not as special when you see ‘em in person.” He paused, then added, “Not that I’d want to make one mad or anything.”

Norrine let out a soft sigh when she saw Santiole coming down the street a few minutes later. Santiole was alone, and she approached the cafe hesitantly. She came inside with one hand on her pistol.

“Nikslaus is here,” she said, taking Norrine back outside.

“A Privileged walked by with some soldiers not long ago,” Norrine said. “It must have been him.”

“Good that you kept out of sight.” Santiole gave a curt, approving nod. “It took me longer than expected to speak to Lady Erika without being spotted. They’ve closed the port and they have men watching all the city gates. My lady wants us to take the high pass over to Budwiel to smuggle you into Adro by land.”

“How will we escape the city?” Norrine asked.

“We’ll go during the night. I’ve arranged to have horses waiting just outside the walls.” Santiole moved the hem of her jacket to reveal a coil of rope hanging from her belt. “How do you feel about heights?”

Erika and her entourage ascended back into the mountains the next day, their team of four horses pulling them higher and higher into the pass between Norport and the wheat fields of Kez known as the Amber Expanse. They were forced to travel southwest in order to head back across the mountains and reach Budwiel, an Adran city that sat on the southernmost border between Kez and Adro.

She was accompanied by Dominik, her grandfather’s elderly carriage driver, and Tirel, a man-at-arms who had been with the family for decades.

Santiole and Norrine met them two days outside of Norport as they crossed the first of several high passes on their journey. Erika was relieved to see them safe and glad for the company in the cold carriage.

On the third day it began to snow, and by the fourth they were forced to slow their pace lest the carriage slide off the mountainside. On the fifth day, Erika sat brooding, watching the snow fall lightly outside the carriage window. Dominik claimed he could keep driving as long as the road didn’t freeze but that the snow would slow them a little. If Nikslaus had set a trap, surely they would have sprung it by now. If he was chasing her, his men on horseback could travel faster than a

carriage on slick roads. Or her guess had been wrong. Perhaps Nikslaus hadn't suspected her in the least and had simply let her go.

Erika didn't dare to hope.

She would drive herself mad trying to anticipate Nikslaus. Best not to think about it. "Are you warm enough?" she asked Norrine.

The girl nodded. They were both smothered soundly in furs and blankets. Erika felt the worst for poor Dominik out with the horses, though the old man protested that he was plenty warm in his seal-skin cloak. Dominik was a cripple, his left leg injured from a fall from horseback in his youth, but if anyone could get the carriage through the passes in the snow it would be him.

Erika looked at the healing scrapes on Norrine's cheeks and wondered how she'd gotten them. Perhaps one of the guards had attacked her. Or maybe during her escape from the Longdogs. Erika imagined Norrine frightened, hungry, and cold as she pressed herself amongst the roots of an old tree beneath the road, scraping against rocks and hard soil as she hid from her pursuers. It must have been terrifying in a way Erika couldn't conceive, yet the girl stayed strong and silent, ready to brave the mountain passes on foot to earn her freedom.

By Kresimir, if Erika could find in herself even a fraction of that bravery she would be a duchess to be reckoned with.

"How did you find out you were a powder mage?" Erika asked.

Norrine watched her for several moments, her eyes melancholy, before she answered. "Da was showing me how to shoot a musket." She paused and shivered, but not, it seemed, from the cold. "It was over a year ago now. Last summer. He saw that I fired the musket without pulling the trigger. I tried to tell him it was an accident."

"And he turned you in?"

"He wasn't going to. He kept it a secret through last winter and spring. Summer came, and then Phille got sick and Da didn't have any money for the doctor. Phille's my older brother. And Da said if Phille died, Ma would go mad with grief."

So they turned in their daughter for a handsome reward. Erika had heard similar stories. Peasants had little choice, after all. If they turned in their children or friends or relatives they were given land, money, cattle. If the Longdogs found out you were hiding a mage, however, your whole family could go to the headsman.

She tried to imagine the pain of having to turn in her own daughter, but felt only disgust for Norrine's father.

"Do you hate him?"

Norrine seemed surprised. "No. Why would I?"

"Because he..." she trailed off. The girl knew she would be turned over the minute she realized she was a powder mage. Of course. That's how the peasants were raised.

"Phille's dead now anyway," Norrine said.

"He didn't get better?"

The girl sniffed. "He did. As soon as he was well he helped me escape. One of the Longdogs—the fat one you killed on the road—ran him through with his sword. I guess Ma will go mad with grief after all."

"I'm sorry."

Norrine shrugged in response and rubbed the sleeve of her coat across her eyes. “How did *you* find out?”

Erika glanced out the window. The snow seemed to have let up a little. “It was my twelfth birthday—just about your age—and the dowers came around to see if I had the talent to be a Privileged. They gave me their tests and I failed. But then they brought out a powder mage.” She remembered seeing the mage, branded at the neck like Norrine and bound with iron manacles. He had been reduced to nothing more than a beast, barely clothed and smelling worse than a dog.

“Privileged can’t sniff out a powder mage,” Erika went on. “Only other powder mages can. He took one look at me and he told his masters I was a powder mage.” They’d given him a dinner of slop as a reward, and Erika remembered hating that man more than anyone in the world. She had cried for weeks, though her mother assured her she wouldn’t be taken off to be executed. “I had to go before the king and swear to him and Kresimir that I would never touch black powder. And then they branded me.”

It had hurt worse than anything else in her life. She still remembered the pain of hot iron against her skin.

She fingered the snuff box in her pocket, trying to remember when she had first broken that promise. A few years ago, now. No one had ever checked, really. After all, what self-respecting Kez noblewoman would sacrifice her future for forbidden powers?

“You’ve never touched powder?” Norrine asked skeptically.

Erika smiled at the girl but didn’t answer. It was possible to be kind without being overly trustful.

The carriage suddenly slowed and there was a sharp rap at the door. Santiole ducked inside without waiting for an answer. She shut the door behind her and rubbed her hands together. Her hair and shoulders were dusted with snow. “Pit, it’s cold out there.”

“Are we making good time?”

“Better than I expected. Not as well as I’d hoped,” Santiole answered. “We’ll change horses at a wayhouse in about three hours, and then ride through the night.”

“You can’t ride for so long,” Erika said. “Not in this weather.”

“I think it’s best we not stop. Dominik will rest in here with you and I’ll drive for the first half of the night.” She seemed about to say more but fell silent. “We’ll make good time.”

Erika snatched Santiole by the jacket as she made to leave the carriage. “What is it?”

“Nothing, my lady.”

“Santiole.” Erika tried to inject the same authority into her voice that grandfather used when the servants weren’t being forthright.

Santiole pursed her lips. “I think we’re being followed.”

“Do you know for sure?”

“No. Just a feeling.” Santiole spread her hands. “It could just be other travelers on the road. It could be nothing. You shouldn’t worry.”

Erika chewed on the inside of her cheek. She had long ago learned to trust Santiole’s instincts. “All right. We go through the night.”

The snow stopped the next afternoon and they were able to return to a steady pace though the roads were slick with wet snow. Dominik, Tirel, and Santiole traded places driving and sleeping in the carriage with Erika.

The next day Santiole returned to scouting. She was gone for only a few hours, early in the afternoon, when the carriage suddenly slid to a jarring stop.

Erika opened the door and stepped out onto the snow-covered road. "Everything all right?" she asked.

Dominik sat atop the driver's seat with the reins in his hands. He huddled with his sealskin cloak pulled tight around his shoulders. He turned to look at her with a puzzled scowl.

"Dominik?" she asked.

Tirel caught up to the carriage on his own horse and frowned. "What's going on?" he asked. "Dominik. What's going on?"

Dominik suddenly toppled from the driver's seat. Erika rushed forward to catch him, nearly losing her balance on the snow, and Tirel leapt from his horse to help. They both lowered the driver gently to the ground.

"Is he having some kind of attack?" Tirel asked.

The old man opened his mouth several times before he managed to say, "I think I've been shot."

"I didn't hear a shot," Tirel said.

Erika heard the sound of splintering wood and looked up to see a bullet lodged in the frame of the carriage not far from her head. She dove into the carriage and snatched her small sword. "Stay here," she said to Norrine. She was back outside a moment later and Tirel had already fetched his musket. He clutched it in both hands, peering into the mountains for an unseen attacker.

"Has anyone passed us?" Erika drew her sword and tossed the sheath back into the carriage.

"No," Tirel said.

"Then they're behind us." She faced the mountain road and eyed a spot fifty yards back where a boulder jutted out into the road. "You going to shoot from the shadows like a coward, or will you come out and fight?" she shouted.

She waited for another shot to hit her dead in the chest, her breath coming shallow, the cold numbing her hands. The mountain pass remained silent and snowflakes began to fall gently. It seemed like an eternity before a figure suddenly emerged from behind the boulder.

Erika recognized the master mage hunter from his height alone. Douglas wore a brown felt jacket beneath a canvas overcoat and a side-to-side bicorn hat. A woolen scarf concealed his features, but there was no mistaking the peculiar musket he held in his hands. It was the very weapon that Nikslaus had displayed so proudly on the hotel dining room table.

Two more figures joined Douglas in the road, their small swords drawn. Erika didn't recognize them. It seemed Nikslaus had sent others to do his dirty work. Only one of them held an air musket—some small relief, at least.

Douglas advanced cautiously, flanked by his companions. "Lower your weapon," he shouted at Tirel.

"By whose authority?" Tirel asked.

“Master of the king’s mage hunters.”

Tirel began to tremble, the tip of his musket wavering. “Don’t listen to him,” Erika said. “He’s just a common bandit.”

Tirel scowled at the man. “Do you have proof of who you are?”

Duglas took his air musket in one hand long enough to pull a white sash from his jacket and hold it fluttering in the air.

Tirel’s scowl deepened. “He’s a Longdog. That one from the hotel.”

“If we surrender, he’ll kill both of us,” Erika said.

“Do you guarantee our safety if we surrender?” Tirel asked.

“Of course. Lower your weapons.”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Tirel said.

“Tirel!”

Tirel lowered his musket and then let it drop into the snow. Erika let out a soft hiss as he did.

Duglas raised the air musket and pulled the trigger. There was a low popping sound and Tirel inhaled sharply as he jerked backward. There was another pop, and Tirel went down in a spray of crimson, crying out in pain.

Duglas turned the weapon toward Erika. She willed herself to leap away, to snatch up Tirel’s musket...to do something! Her muscles wouldn’t listen to her. The Longdog pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He frowned, slapped the side of the musket, and tried again. Still nothing.

“Not very reliable, are they,” she called. The words seemed to free Erika’s muscles and she jumped to the side, grasping for Tirel’s musket. She brought it to her shoulder and sighted along the barrel as she’d seen Santiole do so many times. The three men were already running toward her, their swords drawn. She pulled the trigger.

The blast jerked the stock back into her shoulder harder than she’d expected. Smoke briefly obscured her vision, but she could tell that none of the men had fallen from the shot. She had missed. She dropped the useless weapon and leapt backward, scooping up her sword with one hand. The acrid smoke stung her eyes and she felt a surge of energy as she breathed in the sulfuric smell.

The cowards. They would not find her so easy to kill at close range. She could not—would not—allow them to take Norrine. She whirled to face the charging Longdogs when the escarpment on her right suddenly exploded in a flurry of snow.

Santiole emerged from the snow to hit the three Longdogs from the side. The first of them whirled to defend himself, parrying desperately. Erika didn’t have time to watch the fight progress. The second mage hunter was already upon her, his sword darting forward. Behind him, Duglas seemed to waver between Erika and Santiole.

Erika found herself instantly on the defense against the Longdog. He was about her height, but he had the longer sword and was clearly stronger. He pressed forward confidently as she shrank back, trying to be mindful of her footing on the slick road.

She countered the man’s disengage, and then caught a quick slash from the side. Her back was almost to the carriage and she would soon run out of room.

The man saw her hesitation and lunged. She parried as she stepped to one side and recognized the opening in his attack, countering with her own solid thrust.

Her blade entered above his heart, just beneath his clavicle. She drew back, parried a weak attack, and put her blade through his heart.

The fight must have lasted less than a dozen seconds. Her mind buzzed from the smell of the black powder smoke and the adrenaline coursing through her body. She turned to Santiole.

The first of the Longdogs lay face-down in the road, the snow beneath him stained with crimson. Santiole and Douglas appeared to have already engaged and separated, their swords up, their breath coming in bursts of steam. It wasn't until they engaged once more that Erika noticed the dark stain on the front of Santiole's jacket and the off way that she held her sword.

Douglas attacked in a straightforward, almost lazy manner, using his height and reach to bear down on Santiole like a warhorse trampling an infantryman.

Santiole was forced backwards, parrying his attacks a little slower each time, her body sagging from loss of blood, her face pale. Douglas pressed forward relentlessly, forcing Santiole toward the edge of the road and a drop of at least twenty feet.

Erika approached Douglas from the side, ready to take him unawares, but she was waved off by Santiole as the mistress-at-arms made her stand a yard from the precipice. Erika took another step forward. She wasn't about to allow Santiole to die because of damned stubbornness. This was a battle for their lives, not a duel for honor.

Santiole's sword blurred as she parried two quick thrusts and put on a burst of speed, counter-attacking with her own strikes that Douglas only barely parried. One more thrust and she was inside Douglas' guard, her sword flashing forward.

She struck nothing but air. Douglas slid around the thrust with stunning swiftness and rammed his sword through Santiole's heart in one quick, brutal thrust. The mistress-at-arms stiffened, letting out a single cry.

In the time it took Douglas to force Santiole off the end of his blade with one boot, Erika was upon him.

He parried with the same casual technique he'd used on Santiole. Erika beat it aside and stuck the very tip of her sword into his left shoulder.

She had to scramble backward to avoid his counter. She paused several yards away, giving herself a chance to glance at Santiole. She fought down a sob and felt her steadiness falter at the sight of the lifeless body.

Douglas touched the shoulder wound with one thumb and made a face. "Sloppy," he said. "You should have killed me there."

It *had* been sloppy. She had let emotion get the better of her and it had caused her attack to go incredibly wide. With more discipline, the fight would have already been over.

Douglas attacked without warning, dashing forward and making a series of thrusts and cuts that very nearly left Erika impaled on the end of his small sword. She fought off the attack, and then a second attack. A third attack drove her all the way back to the carriage and she almost stumbled over the body of the Longdog she'd killed.

Douglas paused and backed away. Erika watched him carefully, waiting for the next attack. He didn't seem wary, and barely winded. Frost coated his mustache, and he brushed a strand of long hair out of his eyes.

“By all means,” he said, “Catch your breath.”

Was the bloody pillock toying with her? Or was he really unable to beat her as easily as he liked?

She raised her hilt to her face in a mock salute and took several more steps back. The man would play with her until he got bored, and then he would kill her and leave her body for the wolves. Behind her, Dominik had sat up and was watching the fight silently. Norrine sat in the snow beside him, her small hand pressed against his wound. If Erika failed, Duglas would kill them both.

She stuck the blade of her sword under one arm and removed the snuff box from her pocket, fingers fumbling from the cold. The lid off, she raised a pinch of black powder to her nose and sniffed.

A flash of warmth spread through her body as quick as lightning, and she felt the numbness fade from her fingers and toes. Her vision sharpened to the point of being almost painful and she could *hear* Duglas taking slow, measured breaths.

The master mage hunter was inspecting the wound she'd given him. He looked up and their eyes met briefly, before his darted down to the snuff box in her hand. Duglas tilted his head to one side as she took another sniff of black powder and returned the snuff box to her pocket. She could see the understanding in his eyes as he realized she was not, in fact, taking snuff.

“You bitch,” he snarled, leaping toward her.

The speed she had so feared seemed suddenly trivial as the powder coursed through her system. She brought her sword up and parried his first thrust easily. It took two more thrusts for her to take his measure, and then she went on the offensive.

Even to Erika's powder-sharpened eyes her attacks seemed blindingly fast. She pressed forward, plowing through his counter-attacks, not letting him get the chance for a proper thrust. She could feel nothing, not even her fury, as the powder sang in her blood. Her sword rang against one of his buttons and she pulled back for a parry and then slammed the blade between his ribs.

Even with her sword sticking out of his chest, Duglas drew back to strike. Erika pushed forward, sliding the slim blade deeper, and closed the gap to snatch his sword arm by the wrist.

“Bloody powder mage,” he spat in her face.

She twisted her sword, letting his cry of pain be her reply. His body sagged and she pulled back and aimed the tip at his heart. He dropped to his knees, the fight gone from him, and he sneered up at her. She let him die with the sneer on his lips.

Santiole's body was warm when she reached it. Her chest was still, her heart silent. Erika knelt beside her and let the sobs come.

She couldn't have been crying long when Norrine joined her. The girl stared down at Santiole's body, unshed tears in her eyes, and clutched at Erika. Erika took the girl in her arms.

“Dominik is hurt,” Norrine said, “but he says he can still drive.”

Erika cleaned and bound Dominik's wound herself. The old driver had taken a bullet in the arm, but it had missed the bone and she managed to dig it out with her knife. Treating bullet wounds wasn't common to a noblewoman's tutoring, but Santiole had taught her enough.

Erika was forced to push Santiole and Tirel in a ditch and cover them with snow, with the hope of recovering the bodies come spring. For Douglas and his companions, she dragged their bodies over two hundred yards and dumped them into a deep crevasse, along with Douglas' infernal air musket.

They camped there that night and Dominik seemed much recovered in the morning. She sat beside the ditch for nearly an hour, staring down at Santiole's grave, haunted by memories of the fight. Douglas had been the better duelist. Without the black powder, they'd all be dead now. Had this powder mage girl been worth Santiole's life? She clutched Santiole's sword—a prized weapon made from the finest Starlish steel—unable to leave it in a ditch for some highwayman to find.

She finally decided that Santiole would wish to see this finished, and roused herself from her stupor. She had to be strong. She was heir to a duchy, after all. She couldn't afford to mourn, not with Adro still several days away and so much at stake.

The road soon left the high mountain passes from Norport and descended onto the Amber Expanse. Known as the breadbasket of the Nine Nations, the fields and pastures of the Expanse seemed to roll on indefinitely towards the horizon. Erika was glad to leave the snow behind even if the fall air was still cold. Norrine rode in silence, avoiding Erika's gaze.

The northern highway wound along the foothills of the mountains, looking out over the expanse, turning northward toward the city of Budwiel.

Budwiel sat between two great monoliths of stone where the mountain range split into a mighty valley. The Addown River, runoff from the Adsea, flowed through the city to water the Amber Expanse. The carriage crossed the river at nightfall and began a mile-long gentle ascent that ended at Budwiel's gate. The wind picked up and seemed to blow right through the carriage walls. Erika put her head out the window and looked toward the dots of light that marked the city walls.

Soon they'd be in Adro and beyond the influence of Nikslaus and his Longdogs. They would finally be safe.

She looked toward Norrine. The girl slept soundly in the corner of the carriage, wrapped in furs. She stirred and let out a whimper. Erika adjusted the fur around her shoulders. Yes. It had been worth it. This girl was a powder mage, kin in sorcery in a land where being a powder mage meant death unless you had the name of a great family to protect you. The thought of Santiole's death sickened Erika. She hoped the mistress-at-arms would be pleased to see them reach safety at last.

"My lady!" Dominik called. "Riders on the road behind us! Coming fast!"

Erika put her head out the window and looked back down the road. There they were, at least a dozen of them on horseback, carrying torches and gaining ground fast.

Was it more Longdogs? Bandits? It could be anyone.

The pressure in Erika's chest threatened to turn into full-blown panic. She was only a few hundred yards from the gates of Budwiel. She had come too far to fail now.

"Faster!"

Dominik whipped the horses into a gallop and the carriage jolted hard on the dirt roads.

“What’s the matter?” Norrine asked, wakened by the sudden jostling. Erika ignored her and stared at the gates of Budwiel, silently urging the carriage faster. A glance behind her said the riders were coming up too quickly. They would be on them just outside the city gates, which would find her still on Kez lands.

“Norrine,” she said. “When I tell you, you have to leap from the carriage.”

The girl’s eyes grew wide.

Erika went on, “Get into the ditch as fast as you can. It’s deep, it’ll conceal you from the torches. You mustn’t make a sound.”

Norrine nodded bravely.

“Dominik,” Erika called. “Stop the carriage.”

“Are you sure?”

“Now!”

Dominik reined the horses in quickly and Erika took Norrine by the hand. “Out to the left, go quickly.”

The girl opened the door and scrambled into the ditch without hesitation. Erika composed herself, wrapping the furs around her and easing back into her seat as if unconcerned. Within moments the sound of galloping hooves closed in and surrounded the carriage, and men’s voices shouted at Dominik.

The carriage door was yanked open and Erika stared into the eyes of Duke Nikslaus. Sorcerous fire danced upon the tips of his gloved fingers, casting half his face in shadows and causing Erika to shy back.

“My lord Nikslaus,” she asked, “is that you?”

The fire disappeared from his hands and the duke jerked the blanket away from Erika, then moved the pile of furs from the other corner. “Why did you run when you saw us?”

“My lord? You gave me a pit of a scare,” Erika said. “We thought we’d been set upon by bandits again.”

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

Nikslaus’ jaw flexed angrily, all hints of his cordial, graceful attitude gone. “You know bloody well who.”

“I don’t!” Erika’s heart pounded and she wrung her hands to keep them from trembling. “If you’re looking for Santiole, she was killed by bandits on the high pass, along with my grandfather’s man Tirel.” The panic came through in her voice and she urged herself toward tears, as a woman who might break into hysterics at any moment.

Blind obliviousness was her only weapon now.

The tightness in Nikslaus’ jaw disappeared slowly and he stepped out of the carriage, conferring with one of his men.

“You were set upon by bandits?” he asked when he returned.

“Yes! Five of the filthy bastards. They killed Tirel and wounded Dominik. Santiole killed two and I, one, before they retreated. Santiole died from her wounds.”

“You fought them?”

"I had to!" Erika said, forcing indignity into her voice. "We were fighting for our lives."

Nikslaus seemed to consider this for a moment. "Three of my men are missing. They were on the same road as you."

"Most likely ambushed by the same band of highwaymen that attacked us." Erika took deep breaths, her hysterics only partially faked, and tried to gather herself.

"Bandits," Nikslaus said flatly. "Like the bandits in your grandfather's forest." His tone indicated just how convenient he thought her story was.

Erika leaned forward, jutting out her chin. "The king needs to clean up his bloody roads," she exclaimed. "You've lost, what is that, five of your men now? And both Santiole and Tirel have been with my family for decades. They'll be impossible to replace."

Nikslaus sniffed and retreated from the carriage once more. "Search the fields and ditches along the road," she heard him say. "Question the driver."

A voice answered him in a whisper, likely thinking Erika too frazzled to hear. "Shall we kill them both, my lord?"

"We're a stone's throw from Budwiel's walls, you bloody idiot," Nikslaus hissed back. "There will be a dozen witnesses."

Questions were directed at Dominik but the old man played his part perfectly. Erika watched with no small amount of trepidation as Nikslaus' men swept through the nearby fields with torches held high and leapt down into the ditches to search them by hand. She kept the pommel of her sword in a vice-like grip and wondered if she'd be quick enough to draw, killing Nikslaus before he could react with Privileged sorcery.

Nikslaus returned to her carriage about ten minutes later. He crawled inside and sat across from her, exactly where Norrine had been a quarter of an hour ago. His face was lit eerily by the light of a torch outside the window.

"You've not yet asked why we're holding you here." Nikslaus said calmly.

Erika felt a cold sweat break out on her brow. "I assumed you had a good reason. You are the king's servant, after all." Her voice trembled.

"Indeed. I am going to let you go now, but be warned, my lady. I will be watching you. And if you decide to play this game with me again, I will present your head to the king." Blue fire sprouted from the fingers of Nikslaus' runed gloves, dancing like candles in the wind. He drummed his fingers on the side of the carriage, leaving black burns.

"I don't know what you are accusing me of."

"I think you do." Nikslaus climbed out of the carriage, leaving Erika alone with the sound of her own pounding heart.

The sound of hooves retreated, but Erika could see from her window that Nikslaus' men were still searching the surrounding fields and up and down the road. Dominik, holding his wounded arm stiffly, appeared at the window. "My lady, are you all right?"

"You did well," she answered with a nod. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. We can't risk..."

Erika said a silent prayer for Norrine. "I know. Take us inside the city."

Norrine tumbled to the bottom of the deep ditch that ran alongside the road into Budwiel.

She was less than a dozen paces from where she'd left the carriage and was already coated in mud. The walls of the ditch blocked her vision of the road and the carriage and everything but the sky above and, further on, the torches of Budwiel's main gate. But there was nowhere to hide. Water came up to her ankles and the walls were too steep for her to climb back out. The Longdogs wouldn't be sloppy this time. Norrine remembered Santiole's warning not to trust to luck after the Longdogs had failed to find her back at the Leora manor. Now Santiole was dead and Norrine wondered if she would soon join her.

She could hear hoofbeats and angry voices shouting.

They would find her, and they would kill her. Like they'd killed Phille. Like they'd killed Santiole.

Nothing to do but run, a hunted animal near the end of the chase.

She slipped and stumbled as she went, trying not to catch herself on the slick ditch walls so as not to leave any sign of her passage. By now they would have caught up to Erika's carriage. They would be searching Erika, and they would then search along the road.

They were going to find her. It wasn't a matter of 'if,' but 'when.' Budwiel's gates seemed impossibly far away, looking up into the night, the flickering torches atop the wall taunting her. Norrine felt tears running down her face. Mud and water squelched in her boots and covered her from head to toe. The clothes Erika had given her.

If Norrine didn't escape, Erika wouldn't either. Norrine had to escape. Not just for herself or for Phille and Santiole's sacrifices, but for Erika.

How much further? Mud stung her eyes. She stumbled forward, blindly, trying not to make a sound.

Rough hands snatched her under the shoulders and lifted her from the ditch. She flailed about in her panic, trying to reach into her pocket for her penknife. She had to get away. She couldn't do this to herself, or to Erika.

She had gotten them both killed.

Erika's carriage arrived at the gates a few moments after Duke Nikslaus had left. Dominik pulled up just inside the gate and Erika took the stone steps to the top of the wall, ignoring a curious look from a blue-coated Adran soldier.

Nikslaus' men were still out there. They searched in a circular pattern, working their way out, and the ditches were being examined once again. If they found Norrine now... Erika didn't want to think about it. She was safe enough in Adro, but her grandfather would suffer for it.

Erika was joined a moment later by the captain of the wall guard. She turned toward him, noting that he was alone. Perhaps she wasn't as safe as she thought.

"Something wrong with my papers, captain?" she asked in Adran.

"Not at all, Lady Erika." He settled with his elbows on the wall and watched Nikslaus' searchers. "You have any trouble out there? We were about to send a company to investigate."

"That wouldn't have ended well," Erika answered. "They were mage hunters. Best not to start an international incident on Kez lands."

“Ah,” the captain said, eyeing her for a moment. “For the best, then. I’m glad you made it here safely. Could you have your man pull around to the side of the gate house, please? I have a package for you.”

“Excuse me?” What was this? Something else? Another trap?

“You best be on your way, I think. And someone has left you a gift at the gate. Pick it up on your way out.”

Something about her presence—or more likely the presence of the Longdogs just outside the gate—had the captain nervous.

“I will, thank you.” Erika glanced once more at the searchers and climbed back down the wall. She gave instructions for Dominik to pull around to the side of the gate house. They sat waiting for several minutes before the captain appeared at her carriage window.

“There you are,” the captain said, opening the door. It took a moment for Erika to realize the captain wasn’t talking to her. Norrine stepped into the carriage and settled into the seat across from Erika. Her jacket was gone, replaced by an old Adran military coat. The scarf that had covered her powder mage brand was also gone.

“She was a bit muddy when she came in,” the captain said. “We cleaned up her boots the best we could, but her jacket was a total loss.”

Erika struggled with words. “Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t thank me,” the captain replied. “Thank Captain Tamas. He comes around every few months with new boots and a bottle of port for each of us here on Budwiell’s wall. In return, we keep a lookout for... special... kinds of runaways. We’re glad to be of some service, my lady.” He tipped his hat and stepped away, closing the door.

“Are you all right?” Erika immediately asked Norrine. “Did they hurt you?”

Norrine shook her head. “They were very kind,” she said.

“How did you make it to the gates?”

“I did jump in the ditch, but I thought I should get away. I started along the bottom. There was a lot of water, so I shouldn’t have left any tracks. The soldiers on the wall saw me approach and came out and got me.”

Erika nodded. Very kind of them indeed. Powder mages might be legal in Adro, but they weren’t exactly welcomed either. Who was this Captain Tamas? And why did he care about Kez powder mages?

It was a mystery that would have to wait until another day. She felt her exhaustion overwhelming the adrenaline that had kept her going since she left grandfather’s manor. She sank against the wall of the carriage and nodded off, dreaming of a warm bed.

Voices brought Erika awake again. Voices and light. A panic set into her instantly, and she sat bolt upright, one hand searching for her sword.

The sword was gone, fueling her desperation. Her eyelids seemed impossibly heavy and her body sluggish as she sought desperately for a weapon. Strong hands took her by the shoulder and a voice called to her. She shook her head, trying to make sense of it all, before realization set in.

“Father?” she asked.

She shook violently, and the hands kept their grip until she was able to calm down. Lord Pensbrook, her father, eventually stepped away from her and she took

the chance to look around. She was in the sitting room of the family's Budwiel townhouse. Father stood beside her, wearing only his pajamas. He was a tall man with a broad chest and a neatly trimmed, black goatee.

"It's me, my dear," father said, taking her by the hand. "You're safe." The corners of his eyes wrinkled in concern.

"Your father carried you inside. You've been asleep there for two hours. You haven't been out like that since you were a child." Erika craned her head to find mother sitting behind her, leaning forward on the edge of the chaise. She was still wearing a crimson evening dress, her hair done up for a night of playing cards with her friends. She was a tall woman herself, but she looked small beside Lord Pensbrook.

Erika vaguely remembered noise and the sensation of movement, but she thought it a dream as the carriage drove on. "How did I... wait," Erika said, trying to find her thoughts. "I thought you were in Adopest?"

"We were," mother said, "We came down for one of Baron Ildal's masquerades."

"I was on my way to Adopest," Erika explained. "Grandfather was going to put me on a ship in Norport, but then the harbor was closed and..." she stopped when she saw the odd look on her mother's face.

"We know, dear," mother said. "Dominik told us. He told us everything."

"Everything?" Of course he had. Dominik wouldn't lie to them.

She waited for a response from either of them and tried to come up with some kind of explanation. They exchanged a glance and then father went over to the door. He opened it, checked the hallway, and came back in and nodded to mother.

"The girl is safe," mother said.

"Norrine."

"Yes. Norrine is safe. I know of homes for children like that in Adopest. She'll be safe from Kez mage hunters."

Father looked at Erika with the face he usually reserved for scolding Jakola or Camenir. He remained silent, however, and gestured for mother to continue.

"We've made a decision," mother said.

Erika shifted nervously, still trying to clear her muddled mind. "About what?" Were they going to keep her in Adopest? Or send her abroad? They might think of anything, and clearly father was not happy about what she'd done.

"With Santiole's death, you need a new tutor."

"So soon?"

"Yes," father said, rather too gruffly.

Mother glanced at him, and then went on. "We've decided that for your own safety, you need to be trained as a powder mage."

"That's absurd!" Erika said, regretting it once the words had left her mouth. "I swore to the king!" An oath she'd broken many times by experimenting with powder.

"It'll be done in the utmost secrecy," father said.

"You're only half Kez, you know," mother said, glancing at father. "And you would keep your word while you are on Kez soil. But here in Adro, you will learn how to control your powers, and how to wield them. Dominik told us how you bested a master mage hunter. With the right training, there won't be a man in Kez

who's a threat to you. And you'll need that when you inherit your grandfather's land and titles."

"Who would train me?" Erika asked. "No one of repute, I'm sure. Even here in Adro, powder mages aren't exactly forthcoming with who they are."

"There is one man. He's a captain in the Adran army. Low-born, but you know how the army is. To rise even to captain, he'd have to be quite exceptional."

"And who is he?"

"His name is Tamas."

Tamas. Wasn't that the name of the man the guard captain had spoken of? "And he's agreed to teach me?" How could he have agreed so quickly? Unless they were already considering this before Erika's arrival.

"We haven't asked him yet," father said. "And we don't know if he's going to say yes. He has a rather unsavory reputation for hating the nobility."

Mother didn't seem particularly concerned. "You'll ask him yourself," she said.

The more Erika thought about the idea, the more she warmed to it. She remembered the power that coursed through her when she had taken powder to fight Douglas. She knew how powder sharpened her senses and made her quick, and from what she understood a powder mage could do so much more.

"I'll go to Adopest and meet with him myself," she said.

"As a matter of fact," mother responded, "He's in Budwiel. He'll be at the masquerade tomorrow night."

Epilogue

Norrine liked her new family well enough.

She had been given as ward to a farmer southwest of Adopest. The old man insisted she call him 'Papa,' and his wife immediately began to teach Norrine to speak Adran. They had three other children, but they were all grown and gone from the farm, and they seemed to enjoy the company.

Norrine tried to ask about Erika, but neither Papa nor his wife, Madia, seemed to know anything about her and her questions were always answered with the shake of a head.

Winter passed in Adro, and spring came early the next year. Papa and Madia celebrated Norrine's thirteenth birthday with a new doll and sweet sugarcakes. She was given chores around the farm and grew closer to her new family. She even made friends with the two boys from the next farm over. As time went by she found herself wondering about her old home less and less, though she often wished that Phille was still alive and could come live with her here.

One morning Madia woke Norrine with a solemn scowl and told her to dress for a day out in the woods.

Papa took her several miles from the farm to the edge of the great western forest. His ox cart trundled onward, into the darkness of the deep wood, and Norrine noticed that Papa wasn't whistling like he normally did when he drove the wagon.

The air grew cold and Norrine recalled running through the forests of northern Kez, before Erika had rescued her. She resisted the urge to rub at her feet—she still had scars from that ordeal—and pulled her jacket closer around her shoulders.

“Papa,” she said, trying to work through her broken Adran. Madia could speak Kez, but Papa didn’t know a word of it. “Where are we going?”

“Just a little further,” Papa answered, his voice quiet.

The wagon drove around a bend in the road, and Norrine caught sight of a grassy clearing. She got a whiff of smoke from a campfire and saw a horse tied up to a tree with a feed bag fastened around its neck.

Papa reigned in the oxen and looked at Norrine. He gave her a kindly smile. “Don’t be scared.”

About what, she wanted to ask. But Papa was already climbing down from the cart. He crossed the road, gesturing for Norrine to follow. She hesitated for a moment, feeling the same urgency and fear that had plagued her in the scramble to escape the mage hunters. What was going on?

A young officer knelt next to the fire. He arose as Papa approached. They shook hands, and a few words were exchanged. The man wore an Adran army uniform—dark blue with silver trim and a crimson collar. He was taller than Papa, taller than Santiole had been, and lean like a young willow tree. His face was clean-shaven, and his black hair perfectly parted.

“Come on, girl,” the man said in Adran. His words were clipped and precise.

Norrine crossed the road and approached, ready to run at any moment. Who was this man? What did he want with her? She reached out with her senses and felt the black powder on him. He had many powder charges, and a full powder horn. There was another hanging from his horse’s saddle. The pistol at his belt was loaded, as was the carbine strapped to the saddle.

The corner of the man’s mouth lifted slightly. “She won’t be very strong,” he said in Adran. “But I’m told she has spirit.” He suddenly switched to Kez. “Girl, do you speak my language, or do you prefer we speak in Kez?”

“Kez,” Norrine said. Was he a Kez spy? A Longdog in disguise? Her muscles tensed as she prepared to run for the forest. She could ignite his powder, killing him, and flee. It would be her only chance.

“Kez it is, then,” the man said. He flipped his hand dismissively to Papa, who turned back toward the ox cart.

Norrine felt her breath coming quicker. “Papa? Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right here until you’ve finished,” Papa said gently.

“Until I finish what?”

“With me.”

Norrine turned to find the man in front of her, within arm’s reach. He didn’t look very old—thirty at the most—but she could see the lines on his face and the way his skin was already weathered.

“What do you want?” her voice came out a whisper.

His face serious, the man reached into his breast pocket. He removed a powder charge and held it out toward her on his palm. “I want you to show me what you can do.” The powder charge suddenly split, the white paper curling as the black

powder within began to glow and spark, burning away slowly until nothing was left but ash and the sulfur smell of burnt powder.

Norrine felt her eyes widen. He was a powder mage.

“My name is Captain Tamas. A friend of mine has asked me to teach you how to use your powers and as I am currently stationed nearby...” The corner of his mouth lifted once more. “You begin your training today.”

