

Servant of the Crown

Powder Mage, #1

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It was a crisp fall day with a slight breeze and clouds overhead that rolled and boiled in the gray sky, threatening rain as Captain Tamas prepared for the duel.

The field of honor was an hour's ride outside of Adopest, the capital of Adro. The wheat had been harvested and the ground lay bare but for the chaff and trampled stalk. In the distance, a farmer and his wife stood outside their stone-walled hovel

and watched as Tamas's second, and the second of his opponent, paced off the points for the duel.

Tamas's second was a man named Matin. He was only an officer cadet preparing to enter the army at the rank of lieutenant, but it had been the best Tamas could do at such short notice. Few commissioned officers wanted anything to do with him.

Tamas checked his pistol for the third time. His powder was dry, the pan primed, and bullet loaded. The seconds had inspected both pistols but Tamas would rather be confident in his weapon and have his opponent think him nervous than suffer a misfire.

The ground was paced out, the center marked, and the swords stuck point-first into the ground where the opponents would turn and fire. Matin spoke quietly to his opposite number and then approached Tamas.

"Sir, I beg you to reconsider."

"Has he apologized?" Tamas asked.

"No, sir." Matin rushed on before Tamas could respond. "But this is a mistake, if you don't mind me saying."

"And why is that?" Tamas stared at the cadet, forcing the young officer to look up and meet his eye.

Matin swallowed hard, and Tamas was secretly pleased he could have that effect on a man. At twenty-one, Matin was six years younger than Tamas, the third son of a baron and already engaged to be married. While Tamas had nothing but his name.

"It's just," Matin said slowly. "It doesn't seem wise. You'll risk your rank! Captain Linz's father is a duke and, uh, well you're a..."

"A commoner? I'm aware, Matin. You don't have to stutter." Tamas had fought over two dozen duels in the last ten years, almost exclusively against nobles, and he'd even killed a few of his opponents. But he'd never challenged the son of a duke before. Even if he was a second son. "If you would rather not be involved, I will understand. I just ask that you speak to my opponent and schedule a new date for the duel."

Matin visibly steeled himself, straightening his back. "I gave my word I would second for you, sir."

"And I'll remember that when I'm your commanding officer."

Matin smiled as if Tamas had made a joke. Tamas ignored that, turning to eye his opponent from across the field. Captain Linz was a tall man, broad in the chest with gold hair like a lion—a natural-born grenadier if Tamas had ever seen one. He was grateful that Linz had not demanded sabers, as he would have likely defeated Tamas.

"I am not without mercy," Tamas said. "Would you please remind the captain that I am a powder mage? I'll accept his apology for the slur against my parentage and the parentage of my hounds, and we can part as friends." Tamas caught Linz's eye and gave him a wan smile.

Matin looked at him as if he were mad.

"Well, go on," Tamas said.

"Yes, sir." Matin headed across the field to meet Linz's second.

Tamas used the time to check his pistol yet again, and wonder about his own wisdom in pursuing this duel. If he were wounded, he had no funds for a Privileged healer and his recovery would keep him from leaving on the next campaign. If he won and wounded or killed his opponent, he would gain the enmity of a duke.

Absently, Tamas tore the end off a powder charge and sprinkled the granules on his tongue. He could feel the effect immediately. His vision and hearing sharpened, his blood pounded in his ears and everything else in the world seemed sluggish. The powder trance would give him increased strength, agility, and speed, but he had no intention of using any of those for this duel.

No, he just needed focus.

Matin spoke with Linz's second, who relayed Tamas's message to Linz. The big captain threw his head back and gave a booming laugh. Even without the benefit of a powder trance Tamas could have heard his reply.

"Tell that son of a whore that I don't believe in fairy tales. He can shoot at me with whatever powder sorcery he thinks he has."

Tamas sighed and waited for Matin to return.

"He said," Matin began.

"I heard him," Tamas responded. "Bloody fool has a third cousin in the royal cabal. He's fought beside Privileged sorcerers, and he thinks the idea of powder magic is a fairy tale?"

"Sir?"

"I've killed men at a mile and a quarter. Pit, I've killed Gurlish Privileged at that distance. There is no rule that keeps me from using my powers in a duel, so long as my opponent knows about them." Tamas could feel his ire rising and forced himself to take a deep breath. *Bloody nobles. Arrogant and ignorant, every one of them*, he thought. After a second deep breath, he said, "Shall we?"

The seconds accompanied both opponents to the middle point, and Tamas and Linz took up a stance back to back.

"Damned peasant," Linz said in a low voice.

Tamas didn't respond.

"Gentlemen," Matin said. "You will each proceed to the furthest point at a measured pace, at which time you will both turn and fire one pistol. Upon firing both parties will consider the matter closed and honor satisfied. Do we agree?"

"Yes," Linz said.

"Of course," Tamas said.

"Very well. Begin!"

Tamas took slow steps until he reached his marker and turned sharply on his heel. Linz did the same, his pistol coming up in one quick motion. Tamas could tell that Linz had pulled the trigger prematurely, and his preternatural senses heard the bullet smack into the ground just in front of his feet.

Tamas watched Linz for a moment. He could sense Linz's uneasiness begin to grow as he realized he had missed, could see Linz pull the trigger again and again, as if willing out a second bullet.

Tamas turned toward his opponent sidelong and slowly raised his pistol. He took a long, steady breath, leveling his weapon. Linz glanced at his second as the

moments ticked by, and Tamas briefly wondered if he'd shout out an apology in hopes of a reprieve.

He didn't.

Tamas pulled the trigger. He *could* have willed the bullet along a straight path with the strength of his sorcery, taking it through Linz's heart with surgical precision. At thirty paces, however, he didn't have to. The bullet flew from the smoothbore barrel of Tamas's pistol and took off Linz's right earlobe.

Linz immediately clutched at the side of his face. "Bloody pit!" he screamed, dancing about, nearly tripping over the sword that marked the end of the dueling ground. Blood streamed through his fingers and his second rushed to help him, brandishing a handkerchief.

Tamas turned away from the swearing officer and savored the sulfur smell of spent powder, his mind already moving to other things. "You may tell Captain Linz that I am satisfied."

"Did you aim for his face?" Matin asked, mouth agape.

"No, my good man. That would not have been gentlemanly. I aimed for his earlobe."

"You're that good?"

"I am."

"It may have been safer to kill him, sir."

Tamas cocked an eyebrow at his second. "And why is that?"

"He'll either think you were showing off or that you meant to aim at his face. One is an insult, and the other, as you said, is ungentlemanly."

"Or," Tamas countered, "He'll learn not to challenge a powder mage to a duel with pistols. Either way, I expect I'll be hearing from Linz or his father. You may tell either of them that I'd welcome another duel."

Tamas couldn't help the spring to his gait as he jogged up the front steps of the House of Nobles clutching a summons from General Seske.

The letter did not say why he had been summoned. His duel with Captain Linz had been eight days prior, and he suspected that if any action were to be taken against him it would have happened already. No, Tamas had been called before the general for an entirely different reason.

His advancement to the rank of major had been approved.

The hub of the Adran government was an immense, six-story building in the center of Adopest. It had marble floors, gorgeously-wrought stonework, and magnificent arched hallways. It was a building that could take away the breath of even a seasoned campaigner—which Tamas was.

He marched swiftly up to the second floor, where he reached the landing only to be shoved roughly to one side.

A challenge died on his lips. He'd been shoved—or rather, brusquely shouldered—by a hulking woman in the crimson and gray of the royal cabal. Tamas pressed himself against the wall without comment to let her and the other five guards tramp past him. Each of them bore a pike, with a heavy saber at their belt and a cuirass on their breast, and they marched in a diamond formation around a Privileged sorcerer.

The Privileged was a handsome woman of about forty-five with streaks of gray in her raven hair. She had a regal bearing and wore the runed gloves that allowed her to draw sorcery from the Else. In his thirteen years in the army he'd seen countless Privileged, both at home and abroad, but had never spoken to one. And he'd never seen one in the House of Nobles.

He watched her proceed down the stairs, troubled for a reason that he could not pinpoint, the smell of jasmine perfume lingering behind her.

When he'd managed to shake himself of his reverie, he looked down at the summons in his hand and proceeded down the hallway. He entered a small antechamber, where the general's secretary immediately ushered him into the general's office.

The man behind the desk was *not* General Seske.

Tamas snapped to attention. "Colonel Westeven, sir!"

The colonel was a tall man, thin as a fencepost, and in his late forties, he was already completely bald. He was one of the few superiors for which Tamas felt any sort of respect. Both a capable commander and politician, he was expected to be named general before the end of the year.

"Sit down, Captain," Westeven said without looking up from the letter he was writing.

"Thank you, sir." Tamas took the chair across from Westeven and smoothed out the message he received. "I was told that I was to meet General Seske here, sir." He resisted the urge to rub at his nose. He could still smell the Privileged's jasmine perfume.

"General Seske is in Budwiel," Westeven said.

Tamas frowned. "Sir?"

Westeven finally looked up. His face was somber. "The general has me handling all of his business while he is on holiday."

"I see."

"Indeed. Captain, do you mind if I call you Tamas?"

Tamas hesitated. The colonel was acting very strangely. "No, sir."

"Tamas, I like to think of myself as an honest man, so I will not lie to you. Until five minutes ago I had intended to present you with papers honoring your advancement to the rank of major. I would have done so with pleasure."

Tamas wet his lips. This was not going anywhere good, and he didn't trust himself to speak.

"Five minutes ago, I was informed that you have been accused of cheating in a duel. Furthermore..."

Tamas leapt to his feet, hand on his small sword. "That is a lie!"

"Furthermore," Westeven continued, talking over him and gesturing that he sit, "I have been instructed to suspend you until we can convene a hearing before two magistrates and two members of the General Staff."

"I must protest, sir! I would never do such a thing. My last duel was completely legal and witnessed by two seconds. My opponent was barely wounded!"

"Be quiet, Captain, and let me speak!" Westeven gave a frustrated sigh. "Your suspension from duty begins immediately. I know this means you'll miss the next campaigning season in Gurla, and I know how much that means to you. But this is a grave accusation that the Adran army takes most seriously."

"Sir, the hearing may not be for months."

"That is true," Westeven admitted.

"Is Captain Linz my accuser?"

"I'm not able to give you that information right now," Westeven said. "And I strongly suggest that you don't do anything rash. You and I both know that a man of your station cannot afford to make any mistakes."

"Which is why I would not have—" Tamas began.

Westeven cut him off. "That is not for me to decide. Again, Tamas, I do this regretfully." He got to his feet and crossed to the window, clasping his hands behind his back as he looked out over the square below. "I'm your greatest admirer, Tamas. Only a handful of commoners have ever risen to captain in the Adran army and none of them have made major. Unlike many of my colleagues, I see it not as an embarrassment to the system but rather a testament to your own skill and bravery. I've watched you lead men into battle. I've seen you fight. You're a damned good soldier and a natural leader."

Tamas sat stiffly, the summons that he had so happily grasped as he hurried to the House of Nobles now forgotten on the desk. "Thank you, sir," he rasped. He stared at his boots, cursing his pride. If he had just walked away from Linz the night he had been insulted, none of this would have happened. "Is there anything I can do for myself, sir?"

"Keep your boots polished and mind your manners. Cheating in a duel is enough to see you lose your rank. It shouldn't be enough to see you tossed from the army completely, but I wouldn't be surprised if someone pushes it that far. There are a lot of men who don't like seeing a commoner climb the ranks."

"Thank you, sir."

"And Tamas, I can do one thing for you; this will be a private suspension. You will continue to receive your pay and be allowed in the officer's mess until the hearing."

Tamas nodded, unable to speak. This was an outrage. It went beyond politics and decorum. Certainly shooting off Linz's earlobe had been an insult. But nothing worthy of this!

He was dismissed and retired to the hallway, where he slumped against the wall, his energy gone. For years he had fought his way up the ranks. He had played their games, kissing asses and leading suicide charges. And all for his next advancement to be snatched away because he'd dueled a duke's son.

He took a sharp breath, fuming at the indignity, and suddenly stopped himself. That smell of jasmine still clung to the air. Too closely, he suspected. It had followed him down the hall and even into the general's office.

The Privileged sorcerer had been in to see Colonel Westeven just before Tamas.

His thoughts turned, and he wondered if there was something else behind this accusation and suspension. On the last campaign he had killed two Gurlish Privileged from a great distance using his powder magery. Word had it that made the royal cabal nervous. They didn't like anything that could challenge their elemental sorcery, not even if they were ostensibly on the same side.

"Captain."

"Sir!" Tamas leapt to attention as Westeven came out into the hall beside him. The colonel looked him up and down. "Nothing rash, remember?"

“Of course, sir. I’ll lie low.”

“This is above my head, Captain,” Westeven said, his voice suddenly a whisper. “But it might not be above General Seske’s. He’ll be attending Lord Ildal’s masquerade in Budwiel in two weeks. You may be able to talk him into letting you go on the campaign.”

Tamas ground his teeth. His suspicion about the royal cabal would have to wait. If he could speak with General Seske, none of this would matter. “Yes, sir. I’ll leave for Budwiel tomorrow. Thank you, sir.”

The city of Budwiel sat at the southernmost point of Adro and formed the border between Adro and its southern neighbor, Kez. The city was positioned deep in a mountain valley, flanked by a pair of immense cliffs, and received very little sunlight during most of the year.

To combat the malaise caused by such a state of perennial shadows, the city held twice as many public festivals as any other in Adro, and the local nobility held twice as many gaudy parties. Lord Ildal, a wealthy baron from the southern mountains, often threw the most decadent parties of all.

Tamas spent the entire week before the masquerade trying to see General Seske. He had little interest in the lavish entertainment that the nobility threw for themselves, and he was seldom welcome. But his attempts to contact the general were unsuccessful, and he found himself at the Blackstead Opera House on the night of the masquerade.

The main ballroom of the opera house was a cavernous affair with three separate domes rising high above a series of open rooms and grand staircases. The walls were of white marble with gold trim, and the room was lit by chandeliers of crystal. Frescos of the saints looked down from the ceilings and busts of famous opera singers watched the festivities from high columns. Servants rushed about with glasses of the finest champagne and trays of foreign delicacies. The elite of southern Adro had gathered in the handsomest suits, most elaborate dresses, and a sea of masks that gave Tamas a headache.

Tamas wore his best dress uniform but even his dark Adran blues with silver trim and crimson cuffs seemed drab amongst the display of wealth. His sword was buckled to his belt, but he’d left his pistol back at his room. He had enough black powder tucked into the corner of his cheek to put him in a mild powder trance, keeping him alert.

He stood on the second floor balcony, watching the ballroom for any sign of General Seske and wondering if the whole trip had been a mistake. What if General Seske didn’t arrive? What if Tamas ran into one of Captain Linz’s relatives and was provoked into another duel?

The room swirled with motion. Men and women danced in the middle of the ballroom below, holding their masks, while clusters of nobles spoke in overly loud voices along the sides of the room. The sound of music drifted over the entire event.

The hours passed. Tamas sipped a single glass of champagne and refused all other drink, though he eyed the passing platters of food, his stomach rumbling.

He wouldn’t allow himself to eat until after he spoke with General Seske.

The night began to grow late. Tamas was about to give up and leave when he spotted a figure making its way across the ballroom floor surrounded by an entourage of young men and women looking to gain favor.

General Seske was a small man in his mid-fifties with the chocolate skin of a full-blooded Deliv. He wore his Adran dress uniform, complete with dozens of medals and four golden stripes on the breast, one for every five years he'd served in the military. Like Tamas, he had forgone the customary mask as an insult to his uniform.

Tamas wound his way through the crowd and made his way downstairs, not letting General Seske out of his sight. He cut across the ballroom and intercepted General Seske by the far wall. He approached quietly, taking up a position that would allow the general to see him the next time he looked up.

Seske leaned over to whisper to one of his companions. He giggled and stumbled, barely caught by a young major at his side. The stumble didn't seem to faze him. He wrapped one arm deftly around the waist of a woman half his age and dipped the opposite hand into her ample cleavage, only to come up with a silver pendant, which he admired closely and at some length. The woman blushed while Seske gave her a charming, if rather long-winded, explanation of his family's silver mines in northern Adro.

Tamas waited as long as his patience allowed before he cleared his throat.

The general looked up and seemed genuinely surprised to see Tamas there. He lurched forward, a happy smile on his face, and pulled his companion closer. "Captain Tamas!"

"Good evening, sir."

"I didn't know you were in Budwiel, my good captain. I thought you were back in Adopest."

"I was, sir."

"Amazing!" The general paused long enough to hiccup, then regain his composure. "What brings you to Budwiel?"

"You actually, sir."

"Me?" Seske exchanged a glance with his companion. "I am terribly complimented. Now Captain, how did you get invited to one of Lord Ildal's masquerades? They're very exclusive, you know. And you're a commoner!"

The woman on Seske's arm gave Tamas a sudden critical look up and down. Tamas felt his cheeks redden. The general didn't bloody well need to advertise the fact. "I know, sir. I'm also a captain in his majesty's army. I called in a few favors. The officers down here like me quite a lot."

"Incredible!" It was clear that Seske's exclamations had very little to do with how he actually felt. The general swayed slightly. "And what was it you wanted to see me about, young Tamas?"

"Sir, I've been... well, sir, this is rather embarrassing. May we speak in private?"

"It's about that dueling business, isn't it? Hah! I knew it. I can tell. I can always tell, my dear," he whispered loudly to his companion. To Tamas, he said, "I was just informed of your predicament yesterday, my dear man. It seems you're in quite a pickle."

"Yes, sir. I am." Tamas stepped forward to catch Seske beneath the arm when he swayed dangerously away from his companion.

Seske glanced down at Tamas's hand, giving him a half-hearted smile, then took his arm from Tamas's grasp with a none-too-subtle amount of distaste. "I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for it, good man. Orders from on high and all that. Your promotion has been cancelled, and you've been put under suspension. Nothing you can do but wait it out until the hearing."

"Sir," Tamas said, clearing his throat and glancing meaningfully at the general's companion, "This is a private matter, sir. A private suspension."

"It is?" Seske seemed startled by that. "Well damn me, I wasn't told. Or maybe I was? I don't remember. Half of Budwiel likely knows by now." He laughed loudly. "Come, my dear." He began to walk away, and Tamas had to step around him quickly.

"Excuse me, sir. Perhaps if we could meet tomorrow."

Seske's jovial drunkenness dropped like a stone. His gaze was cold, and he said, "Captain, I am on holiday. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't take up any more of my time. I'll be back in a month after my tour of Southern Kez. You can make an appointment then."

"I'm sorry, sir. I understand." Tamas had not yet finished speaking before General Seske had walked away.

Tamas couldn't help but stare slack-mouthed after the general. He'd been bullied and dismissed by the nobility every day of his career but never so baldly by a senior officer. Most of them had, if not tact, then a sense of decorum. Had Seske really been *that* drunk?

"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting something," a voice said.

Tamas turned to find a young lady standing at his elbow. She was attractive, with deep-set blue eyes framed by long lashes, and was certainly no older than nineteen or twenty. Her blond hair was done up in the latest fashion of loose curls and she wore a modest, understated dress of a crimson the same shade as the cuffs of his uniform jacket.

"No, of course not," he said absently, glancing after General Seske. *The nerve of that man!* Incompetence riddled the Adran army, almost every officer having bought their commission from the crown. Seske was no better or worse than most of them but rudeness could not be excused. "Can I help you with something?"

"I thought you looked like you needed a drink."

Tamas glanced back at the woman to find her holding up a glass for him. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to put Seske from his mind. "It's terribly rude of me to say, but I barely drink, and I've had more than enough tonight for a man in my state."

"It's chilled cider." She gave him a smile that was just charming enough to make him suspicious.

He blinked at her and took the glass. "Thank you, madam. I apologize for not introducing myself. You caught me somewhat off guard, I..."

"You're Captain Tamas," the woman blurted, then seemed to catch herself. "We haven't met. I know you only by reputation."

"I didn't realize I *had* any sort of a reputation in these... circles."

"You don't. I mean, you do. But I hadn't heard of you before a few days ago."

Tamas glanced off, trying to see General Seske, but the general had disappeared. And with him Tamas's hope of going on the next campaign to Gurla

and ending this nasty business of the duel before it could go to a hearing. "Good things, I hope. I mean, I hope you've heard good things."

"Not really," the woman said, with a half-smile that seemed meant to soften the words.

"I see."

"Would you care for a dance?"

Tamas hesitated. The offer caught him off guard, and it was very tempting. He usually welcomed a conversation with a woman so fetching, and there was something about her that he couldn't quite put his finger on. But he was in a foul mood and spending any more time in this place would likely set him off. It wasn't a good idea. "I'm a terrible dancer. I would only embarrass us both."

"You can't be that bad, Captain."

The word *captain* slid off her tongue in a silky manner that made Tamas forget all about General Seske, and against his better judgment the two of them were suddenly in the middle of the floor, swirling among a dozen other couples.

"I don't know your name," Tamas said, counting steps desperately in his head as he tried to remember the waltz that went with this song.

"Erika. Erika ja Leora."

Tamas searched his memory for the name. It tickled something in the back of his mind, just out of reach. The *ja* indicated she was Kez nobility. Not surprising in a city right on the border. To her credit, she didn't have the slightest accent. "It's my pleasure, Lady Erika."

"This was not a chance meeting," Erika said.

"I gathered that it might not have been. What can I help you with, my lady?" *What the pit does a Kez noblewoman want with a powder mage*, Tamas wondered. *The Kez hate powder mages.*

"This is a rather sensitive matter, actually. Can you give me your word as a gentleman that you'll keep quiet about what I tell you?"

"My word as a gentleman is worth very little, my lady," Tamas said.

"Still..."

"You have my word."

That seemed to satisfy her. The music grew quieter and the tempo slowed, and Erika stepped forward to press against Tamas's chest. Her head came just up to his chin, and she looked up at him. "I am a powder mage, and I need someone to train me how to use my powers."

Tamas's mouth went dry and he missed a step, nearly tripping. The couple beside them bumped him, and the entire dance floor nearly fell into chaos. The music continued, however, and Tamas felt the gentle pressure of Erika taking the lead.

"You weren't kidding about being a terrible dancer," Erika said. She pursed her lips, her cheeks suddenly rosy. "I'm sorry, that was awfully rude of me. Is something wrong?"

"Erika ja Leora," he repeated. "Now I know where I've heard that name. You're that Kez powder mage everyone talks about."

She seemed to stiffen, and their step faltered again. A moment later they were back in the rhythm of the dance. "Half Kez," she responded.

Tamas tried to wrap his head around the woman with whom he danced. Erika ja Leora was the heiress of a Kez duchy on her mother's side. On her father's side, she was third in line for an Adran duchy. Within the world of Adran nobility, she was one of the most eligible young women in all the Nine. Even Tamas had heard of her in that fashion.

Tamas caught a break in the dance to disengage from Erika and retreat to the side of the room. He turned to find that she'd followed him, a troubled frown on her face.

"I'm sorry," she said, "Did I say something to upset you?"

Upset him? Tamas felt like a pauper caught nabbing the crown jewels. "My lady, I cannot train you to be a powder mage."

She scowled. "And why not?"

"I'm a commoner, my lady."

"All of my tutors have been commoners."

"Men and women of reputation, I'm sure. There is very little good said of me amongst the nobility."

"I'll be the judge of that, thank you. Do you have any other excuses?"

Tamas felt a flare of anger. Powder mage or not, her noble arrogance was coming through. Did she think everything was owed to her because of her station? He could think of a dozen reasons not to train her. The Privileged cabal already had it out for him. His status as a powder mage was well known, and while mages weren't executed outright for the crime of their birth as they were in some other countries, they weren't exactly welcomed into society. If he began actually training other mages, the cabal might come after him openly.

"It wouldn't be right," he finally said.

"Right?" she said, taken aback. "How is that not right? You're the only powder mage known to be good at what he does. I want you to teach me to shoot, to burn powder, to fight with a powder trance."

Tamas made a calming gesture and changed tactics. "My lady, you just met me. I know the state of magery in Kez. I know you've only escaped the noose because of your family. If word got out that you were being trained, they would kill you outright. You shouldn't have told me any of this."

"I know your background," Erika said. "I'm not a fool. I wouldn't have come to you if I didn't know your dislike of the cabals or of the nobility. You're not going to turn me over to the Kez cabal."

"What if I disliked nobles so much that I'd want to see you dead because of your station?"

Erika was aghast. "You would not!"

"No," Tamas agreed. "I wouldn't. But you shouldn't have risked it. My lady, I cannot train you."

Erika opened her mouth, but she was interrupted by the arrival of a man and woman. Tamas recognized them as the couple that he'd disrupted with his terrible dancing.

The man looked Tamas up and down disdainfully. "You, sir, owe my fiancée an apology. She turned her ankle because of your clumsiness."

Tamas turned to the woman, who, beyond her angry scowl, looked completely unharmed. He bit his tongue. This wasn't the time or the place for him to get into

any more trouble. Through clenched teeth, he said, "My apologies, madam. I'm not a very good dancer."

The man gave Tamas a brisk nod and turned away, seemingly satisfied. Suddenly he stopped. "I recognize you."

"I don't think we've met," Tamas responded.

"I do. You're Captain Tamas, aren't you?"

Tamas glanced at Erika, hoping that she would see trouble on the horizon and take this opportunity to make her exit. "I am."

"Hah! No wonder you were such a klutz. My love, this man is that commoner upstart I was telling you about."

Tamas forced a smile onto his face. *Stay out of trouble*, Colonel Westeven had said. Tamas had promised to lie low. Pit, this whole trip had been a mistake.

"A commoner!" the man continued. "Pit, Ildal will have a stroke when he hears they let a commoner into one of his masquerades."

Tamas continued to bite his tongue. Erika was still here, watching the interaction with her jaw set, eyes narrowed. Something about the way she had set her feet made him rethink his initial opinion of her. She may be a noble, but she was nothing like these two. "My lady, I should go. Dancing with you was the best part of my trip to the city. I do hope you'll forgive me for leaving early."

"Don't you turn your back on me!" the man said as Tamas made to leave. He grasped Tamas by the arm.

Tamas pulled away insistently and straightened his jacket. He could feel his face turning red, and several dozen sets of eyes turning to watch the confrontation.

The man pointed at Tamas. "You have no right to be here, commoner. And you," he said, turning to Erika. "What kind of a whore do you have to be to dance with a man like that?"

"That's quite enough!" Tamas roared. He had his hand on his sword, and he stepped forward, finally pushed to his limit.

Erika was quicker. She stepped in front of him, facing the noble. "It is quite enough, I agree. What is your name?"

The noble drew himself up. "My name is Lord Vendril."

"Spell it out for me," Erika said, leaning forward. "Because I'm going to carve it into your chest." She removed one of her gloves and slapped it across his startled face. "Small swords in the Dirkwood Courtyard tomorrow at noon. Captain Tamas?"

Tamas was just as startled as Vendril. "Yes?"

"Will you act as my second?"

"I will."

"Excellent. Lord Vendril, I will see you tomorrow afternoon or all of Adro will know you for a coward. Good day."

"I think this is a mistake," Tamas said.

The sky overhead was a brilliant blue, the sun just past its zenith. They stood in the Dirkwood Courtyard, a small, walled practicing ground used by local fencers in northern Budwiel. Today it was abandoned, and Tamas wondered if Erika had arranged that.

Lady Erika wore form-fitting soft leather trousers, riding boots, and a light jacket. Tamas had his uniform on under a black greatcoat and could still feel the chill, and he wondered how she was staying warm. The first snow of the winter would come any day.

"You don't think I can fight a duel?" Erika asked. She squared her shoulders and bent at the waist, touching the ground, staying that way for several minutes.

"I would not dare to comment upon your abilities with a sword," Tamas said, though he had his doubts. "Knowing who you are, it seems unwise for you to fight a duel with the best-known powder mage in Adro as your second."

"My mother mentioned that very thing this morning," Erika said. "We decided that it was best I not release you as my second. That would attract even more attention."

"Your parents know about this?"

"Of course they do! You think I keep secrets from them?"

"Most young ladies do, in my experience."

"Do you have a lot of experience with young ladies?" Erika asked, the look in her eye warning him to be careful about how he answered.

"More than I should. Less than I'd like."

Erika laughed, a sound like wind chimes in a light breeze.

Tamas cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, my lady, that was inappropriate." What was he doing? Did he think he was flirting with her? This woman would be a duchess someday! He would conclude this business and head back to Adopest where he could forget her entirely.

"Apology accepted," Erika said.

"About the duel," Tamas continued. "It's my duty as your second to try to talk sense into you." He paused for only a moment to consider the irony of his words, after ignoring a very similar warning from Matin only weeks ago. "I hope you're not doing this on my account."

"Why would you think that?"

"The man was provoking me."

"Was I not insulted as well? Should I have stood by and let it continue?"

"No, my lady. You're right. I apologize again."

She gave him the slightest of smiles. "And I accept your apology again."

Tamas was at once relieved and conflicted. He didn't *need* to be defended by a noble. At the same time, a noble thinking that he was worth defending was a rather nice sentiment.

As she said, though, this was for her own honor. "What in the Nine are you doing?" Tamas asked.

"Stretching," she said, bending first to her right and then to her left.

"Why?"

"It limbers the muscles before a fight."

"You look ridiculous."

"I'll look more ridiculous with blood on this jacket."

Tamas pursed his lips. He couldn't very well argue with that logic. He watched as a pair of figures ducked through the arched entryway to the courtyard. Lord Vendril had arrived. He wore a fine, loose-fitting fencing jacket and tight pants,

and he carried his sword on his hip. His second was a broad-shouldered man with skin several shades darker than Tamas, hinting at Deliv ancestry.

"What are your terms?" Tamas asked Erika.

Erika sniffed. "I suppose you'd argue if I said *to the death*?"

"I would."

"A pity. First blood, then, even if I won't be able to carve his name into his chest."

Tamas coughed into his hand.

Erika sighed. "You have no sense of humor, do you, Captain?"

"Very little, my lady." Tamas was about to comment on how little use a sense of humor was when dealing with the nobility but instead just added, "I'm a military man."

"We'll have to change that."

"I wouldn't give up the military for the world, my lady."

"I meant your sense of humor, Captain."

"I see." *Little chance of that*, he thought. Aloud, he said, "Lord Vendril is waiting, my lady."

"Let him wait."

Tamas couldn't help but crack a smile. Against his better judgment, he liked this woman. She flirted with levity, but there was something ruthless about her floating just beneath the surface. "Would you like to give him the chance to apologize?"

"Pit, no. He called me a whore. No one gets away with that. My grandfather would have me flayed." She finally seemed satisfied with her stretches and looked toward Lord Vendril, who stood watching her with a curl to his lip. "He's been there long enough. Let's get on with this."

Tamas met Lord Vendril's second in the middle of the courtyard. The man's face seemed set in a perpetual scowl.

"My lady proposes the duel go until first blood," Tamas said.

Lord Vendril's second responded, "And my lord wouldn't have it any other way. He doesn't want to be forced to do more damage to that pretty face than he has to."

"My lady doesn't consider him worth the time."

They stared at each other for a moment before the second looked away. "We are agreed?" he mumbled.

"We're agreed," Tamas confirmed.

Tamas returned to Erika and gave her a nod. She drew her small sword and handed the scabbard to Tamas, giving a few theatrical flourishes. Tamas had a pang of doubt, wondering if she'd ever actually experienced anything more than a bit of light sword play. If she embarrassed herself here, he would be forced to step in and take things further with Lord Vendril.

"Tell me, Tamas, are you any good with a sword?"

Tamas felt goose bumps on the back of his neck when she said his name. "Only moderately. I prefer to kill with a pistol or a rifle."

"And in close quarters you wield a sword like a butcher, is that correct?" She made a tut-tutting sound with her tongue. "Adran swordplay is so... primitive." She didn't wait for his answer, proceeding to the center of the courtyard where she

faced Lord Vendril and raised her hilt to her face in a Kez salute, then fell into a loose, almost careless stance.

Her confidence made her seem so much older. Regardless, Tamas's worry deepened. Was she not taking this seriously? She was young, but she was the heir to a duchy. Surely she would have been taught the rules to this sort of game. Blood *would* be spilled.

Vendril attacked first. He stepped forward swiftly, the point of his sword flicking forward. Erika parried the attack. And then the one that followed. And then another.

Within moments she seemed to have fallen into a pattern of deflections, not offering a single attack of her own. Tamas cursed her silently, willing her to go on the offensive. What the pit was she playing at?

Vendril changed up his tactics, feinting and pulling back, ducking and moving. He went through half a dozen basic fencing moves while Erika parried every single one.

Slowly, Erika increased the speed of her parries. It was so gradual that Tamas might have missed it, but there were soon openings in Vendril's attacks during which Erika could have easily counter-attacked. But she did not follow through.

Tamas could see a bead of sweat on her brow. *Was she afraid of winning?* he wondered. He'd heard of duelists overcome with that fear. As silly as it sounded, some people did not have the constitution to draw blood.

In the blink of an eye, he almost missed her riposte. Vendril's sword was slapped aside violently and his middle exposed. Her blade darted forward, slashing, and Vendril gave a startled yelp. He stumbled backward and landed on his elbows. Lady Erika just stood above him, bloodied tip of her sword hovering over his chest.

"If you call me a whore again," she said, "You won't have to worry about how you spell your name. My honor is satisfied. Now get out of my sight."

Vendril was helped to his feet by his second, and the two men fled from the courtyard.

Tamas offered Erika a handkerchief with which to clean her sword. "You only spelled the first three letters," he said.

"His name was too long. Sorry to disappoint." Erika wiped her sword then took back her scabbard.

"I'm not disappointed at all. That was..."

"Exciting?" she asked.

"Impressive," he finished. "Where did you learn to fence like that?"

"I had a very good teacher." Erika's smile faltered for just a moment, then returned. "Tell me, from the eye of a military man, what did you think?"

Tamas hesitated. He'd gotten into trouble before being honest with nobles, even when he thought he was giving them a compliment. "You're extraordinarily fast. I'm no expert in fencing, but I am somewhat skilled in drawing blood. With the right training, you'll be an unrivaled killer. But I think you should have finished it quicker."

"I was learning his tells. His cadence."

"All for a show of bravado."

"You don't approve." She tilted her head to one side.

"I don't. I don't believe in toying with my prey."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows raised in mock shock. "You don't? Tell me, Captain, what is a duel for?"

"To settle a matter of honor."

"And to send a message. He'll remember me. His second will remember me."

"Perhaps not in the way you'd like."

"When you blew off Captain Linz's ear a few weeks ago, what message were you trying to send?"

She knew about that? Tamas wondered. "I don't see how..."

"By taking off his earlobe, you were telling him that you could have made a canal out of his skull, but he wasn't worth your time. Am I wrong?"

Tamas watched her carefully, once more thinking that there was far more to this woman than met the eye. He thought he should be uncomfortable having his expectations challenged in such a way, but found that he rather enjoyed it. "No."

"I thought not. Dueling is not just about blood or honor. It's about the message. Don't they teach you anything in Adro?"

"I've never had a fencing instructor, beyond the odd military sergeant with some talent. I could never afford one." Tamas grimaced, reminded once again at the gulf between them. Erika, talented as she was, was a noble's daughter. She had everything she could possibly want. She did not need to struggle for her future.

Tamas's entire career was on the line because of a duel.

"That won't be a problem anymore," Erika said.

"What do you mean?"

She leaned forward, her face suddenly earnest. "Take me on as your student! I'll pay you handsomely."

"I can't. I won't." Tamas bristled at the mention of money. His captain's salary went toward a great many things, stretching him thin, but he was finally at a place in life he did not have to rely on anyone's generosity. Nor would he.

"Please." Erika reached out to touch his hand, and he stepped backward. "You said before, *with the right training*. You meant as a powder mage, didn't you?"

"No." He could hear his tone, formal and gruff, and could see that it angered her. "I'm sorry, my lady, but I won't do it. It would be a danger to you."

"I don't care."

There it was. That noble arrogance again. "I do. It'll also be a danger to myself. It would risk everything I've worked for. The royal cabal would like nothing better than an excuse..." Tamas trailed off. "I've said too much."

Erika stepped forward, inside Tamas's guard, her face twisted in a scowl. "Do you fear them?"

"Of course I do!"

"I know your reputation. I'm looking in your eyes, Captain Tamas. You are not the sort of man to fear anything. Nor do you care one bit for the life or reputation of a member of the nobility. You shouldn't care what happens to me. You should relish a chance to train a new powder mage, to spit in the face of the Privileged cabal. So why don't you?"

Tamas was saved from having to answer by the sound of hoof beats outside the walls of the courtyard. He glanced toward the gate, only to see a messenger in the colors of the king's personal guard stride inside.

"Captain Tamas," the woman barked.

"I am he."

"You have a summons from the king."

Tamas felt cold sweat on the back of his neck. He took a letter from the messenger and ran his finger over the royal seal. Opening it with his thumb, he read the contents.

"What is it?" Erika asked.

"I've been ordered back to Adopest. The king himself wants to see me in four days!"

Tamas rode his horse up the hill to Skyline Palace.

The immense home of the royal family and their cabal of Privileged sorcerers sat high above Adopest, its myriad of twinkling lanterns visible on this clear night even from the far side of the city. The building itself covered more ground than ten city blocks, while the grounds spread out over two thousand acres.

Tamas's credentials and the royal summons were checked at the base of the hill, then once again at the top by the king's royal guard. The carbine, which he kept in his saddle by habit, was confiscated along with his pistol but he was left his sword.

He continued up the gravel drive, marveling at the palace yard. Decorative walls crisscrossed the property, dividing the gardens and manicured lawns into a maze that would fool the best of memories. The splash of running fountains followed him constantly. At one point he stopped to wait while a pair of trainers led two tame cave lions across the drive.

By the time he reached the front gate of the palace it was after dark and the wind had picked up, blowing his greatcoat to one side, as frigid a breeze as any in the northern oceans.

He gave his horse over to a groom and noted that in his entire ride up the drive he had not once gone unobserved. The royal guard were everywhere in their somber gray uniforms and plumed bearskin hats.

Tamas was led through the mighty silver-plated doors of the palace and into the grand foyer, where he was asked to surrender his sword. Then he was led upstairs, down hallways with high, vaulted ceilings and crystal chandeliers, until he reached the personal quarters of the royal family.

Tamas's disquiet grew. The late hour of his audience seemed strange. The king normally dealt with all of his business during the day. What could he possibly want from Tamas that couldn't be dealt with in the throne room?

The servant leading Tamas stopped suddenly at a pair of double doors at the end of a hallway and pulled on a corded rope. Tamas thought he heard a distant gong. A moment later, the door was opened by a young woman.

One of the royal concubines, Tamas suspected, though she wore a modest servant's dress. She gestured him inside, down a dark corridor, and then into a bedchamber as large as most houses.

Manhouch XI, better known to most as the Iron King, was not an imposing man. He sat beside a fire, hunched over in his chair, one finger held to his temple and his eyes downcast. He was of medium height with light brown hair and hard, slightly almond-shaped eyes. Thanks to cabal sorceries that kept his mind and

body young, he hadn't aged a day since Tamas had last seen him on a parade ground in Gurla eight years prior. His exact age was not public knowledge, but he was said to be in his seventies.

Tamas fell to one knee. "Your majesty."

There was no answer. With his own eyes fixed to the floor, Tamas couldn't tell if the Iron King was even looking at him. He stayed that way for at least a minute before clearing his throat. "Your majesty," he said again.

"I heard you the first time," the king responded. If his body belonged to a younger man, his voice certainly did not. It was guttural from years of pipe smoking and carried the weariness of time, along with the tone of inconvenienced peevishness that only old men could master.

Tamas swallowed hard, daring not to look up.

"You can stand," the king said, sighing.

Tamas got to his feet and stood at attention. The Iron King, he could now see, was reading a book tucked into the furs on his lap. He flipped a page slowly, tilting his knee up slightly so as to see the page better.

"You summoned me, your majesty?" Tamas ventured.

"Very astute. Certainly earned the rank of captain there, didn't you?" The king continued to read.

"I like to think so, your majesty."

The silence stretched on for several minutes. Tamas kept his face forward but examined the king in the light of the flames. Was there something wrong with him? Was the monarch's mind slipping in his old age?

"Your grace," Tamas finally said, "May I ask why you've summoned me?"

The king turned another page, staring intently down the end of his nose. "Don't get your belt in a knot, Captain. You're only here because I need you to be present for a short time."

"May I ask why, your majesty?"

The king finally looked up, drumming his fingers on his book. He peered at Tamas as if examining him for the first time. "So you're the one who led the charge at Herone, eh?"

"I am, my lord."

"You scaled a wall and slaughtered a gun crew on your own after every one of your unit had been killed. And they made you a second lieutenant for it."

"Your majesty gave me the promotion yourself."

The king sighed again, as if this were a great inconvenience. His eyes took on a faraway look. "That's right. I remember now. Pit, I pin so many medals on young fools, they ought to give *me* a medal. You're also a powder mage."

It wasn't a question, and Tamas did not answer it.

The king lifted a pocket watch from the table beside him. "You may stay here for another ten minutes and then leave. Nothing further is required of you."

"Your majesty?"

"As I said, nothing further." The tone brooked no argument.

Tamas stood and waited, counting in his head while the Iron King read. When he reached six hundred, he coughed politely into his hand.

"That's right," the king said without looking up. "You may go."

"Your majesty?"

The king glanced up. His eyes narrowed at Tamas. "What is it?"

"If I may be so bold," Tamas said, trying to speak quickly while maintaining a measured tone. "My lord, I've been falsely accused of cheating in a duel. It will prevent me from going on the next Gurlish campaign. If you could speak to the generals or to the magistrate on my behalf, I would be forever in your debt."

The king harrumphed. "Yes. Yes you would. You think a king would speak on behalf of a commoner? I'll give you credit for ambition, young man."

"Your majesty?" Tamas's heart fell.

"No, of course not. Get out."

Tamas hurried from the king's chambers, unwilling to push his luck any further, his heart hammering in his chest. Had he really been so rash as to ask the king of Adro for a favor? Outside, the servant waited to lead him back to the main foyer.

Tamas turned his mind from his faux pas and to the reason for his summons. The king had said nothing of import, barely even speaking to him. He had brought Tamas all the way up from Budwiel for what? Some kind of a whim? To see him stand and sweat?

Tamas had just buckled his sword back on in the foyer when he heard footsteps hurrying toward him across the marble floors. He turned, wondering if perhaps he'd been summoned back for the real reason of his visit.

The man that halted a dozen paces from Tamas was vaguely familiar. He had a barrel chest, wide shoulders, and a white mane of hair that flowed freely about the collar of his shirt. He could not have been less than fifty, and he stood with one hand planted threateningly on the hilt of his sword.

"Captain Tamas," the man boomed.

"I am he." Tamas responded warily. Everything about the man spoke of imminent violence. He glanced toward the royal guard stationed in the foyer, but they ignored him.

"Then you are a bloody fool," the man said.

"I don't know who you are, sir, but I would suggest you watch your damned mouth." Tamas didn't care that he was in the palace. He would not be insulted by a stranger.

The man drew himself up. "I am the Duke of Linz."

Tamas reined in his budding anger. Captain Linz's father. Of course he looked familiar. "I know your son."

"You know him?" Duke Linz said, spittle foaming at the corners of his mouth. "Who the bloody pit do you think you are? I'll not have some common upstart insult my son. You challenge him, and then you shoot his ear, as if you're showing off!"

"If it were within my station, I would challenge you right now," Tamas said quietly. His fingers inched toward his sword, wondering if anyone would defend him in a court of law if he was forced to defend himself here, now. Not that he'd win anyway. Duke Linz was well known to be a fine swordsman.

"It's not within your station, nor was challenging my son."

"He insulted me. We are both captains."

"And you," Duke Linz said, swaying forward angrily, "have no right to be an officer in his majesty's army."

"I earned it with blood!"

"And you'll lose it with blood!" Duke Linz's knuckles turned white on the hilt of his sword, and Tamas could sense him moments from drawing steel.

Tamas fingered his own hilt, wishing that he had powder at his disposal. The duke seemed ready to surge forward when a soft voice suddenly interjected itself.

"My good Duke of Linz."

The duke went white. Tamas turned to find a Privileged standing nearby, hands tucked into the sleeves of her long dress with just a hint of white to show that she was wearing her gloves. It was the woman from the House of Nobles, the one who smelled of jasmine, and he even now got a whiff of her perfume.

"Privileged Dienne," the duke said, ducking his head and taking a step back.

"Excuse us please, Duke Linz."

"Of course, Privileged." The duke gave another bow and hurried off.

Tamas eyed the woman suspiciously. He had seen Privileged out on campaign. He knew that they could speak on an equal footing to most noblemen, but he'd never seen one dismiss a duke!

Dienne turned her gaze toward Tamas. He felt his palms begin to sweat. "Privileged Dienne," he said, giving her a bow somewhat lower than the one she'd received from Duke Linz. He tried to remember how one was supposed to address a Privileged. With a noble it was easy—a lot of bowing and scraping and "my lord this, my lord that." But a noble could only have you flayed, while a Privileged could flay you themselves. That meant a world of difference in Tamas's mind.

"Captain Tamas," Dienne said. Her voice was soft like satin. "I understand that you have just been to see the king."

"I have."

Privileged Dienne glanced at the nearest member of the royal guard and then walked a little further away. Tamas had no choice but to follow.

"Please, Captain. Tell me what the king wanted of you."

Tamas tried to hide his confusion. He opened his mouth to ask her what she could possibly mean, when everything snapped into place.

If his suspicions were correct, the Privileged were already watching Tamas and may have even encouraged his suspension. They didn't like a man—a powder mage—who could kill from such a distance climbing the ranks of the army. The king, on the other hand, had no such qualms. Summoning Tamas to his personal chamber, even to just stand there for fifteen minutes, would cause a mighty stir inside the cabal.

This was some kind of petty politics between the king and his Privileged. Tamas almost laughed at the simplicity of it.

"Is something amusing, Captain?"

"No, Privileged. I regret to inform you that I'm not at liberty to discuss my conversation with the king."

Dienne tilted her head. Her hands came out of her sleeves, baring her white, rune-embroidered gloves and their ever-present threat of elemental sorcery. "Are you sure about that?"

"I am." He eyed her gloves for a moment, then met her gaze. He would play the king's game. For now. The Privileged would likely not believe him if he told her the truth anyway.

Dienne stepped forward. There was something vaguely threatening in the simple movement, and Tamas steeled himself. "Captain Tamas," she said in his ear, "Be very, very careful what you say and what you do. We're watching you. If you misstep, even slightly." She snapped her fingers, making Tamas jump. Then she reached up, touching his cheek gently with the fingers of one gloved hand. "Be careful, Captain."

Tamas left the city the next morning.

He headed north past the university, then left the main highway to travel east toward the King's Forest. It wasn't a long journey, no more than three hours by horseback, and by the time he reached his destination it was just half past ten in the morning.

The sun was shining but the world was bitterly cold, frost crunching beneath his horse's hooves as he made his way down a little-used dirt track that ran along the very edge of the King's Forest.

Tamas crossed over a hill, upon which he turned to look back toward the city rooftops still barely visible in the distance. He contemplated the view for several minutes, wondering about his past and his future, examining the web of choices and actions that had taken him this far in life and trying to predict those which would take him even further.

His eye was caught by a small group of figures a couple of miles off across the farms and rolling hills, following his same dirt track. The village of Huntshire was further down the road. Not more than a dozen houses all told, but it seemed their likely destination.

He continued on his journey, soon leaving the dirt path for a barely perceptible trail through the trees that took him down into a glen just outside the official borders of the King's Forest. The cottage at the end of the trail was disheveled and falling apart. Weeds grew around the doorway and the thatched roof looked ready to cave in.

He hitched his horse for long enough to check on the house. It had belonged to his parents since long before he was born. His father had passed eight years ago and his mother not long after, but he liked to keep the old place for when he was off campaign. He suspected he would be spending far more time here than he'd planned over the next few months.

He swept the cobwebs out of the rafters and brought in enough firewood to last him for the weekend. Once he was done he rode his horse another mile through the woods, following a path that only he knew.

The glade was a wide meadow in the forest, flat as a city street and almost three hundred yards from one end to the other. Tamas walked the length of it, the brittle fall grass crackling beneath his feet, and set up a number of cans and old newspapers with faces drawn upon them.

Back by the close end of the glade, he sprinkled a charge worth of powder on his tongue before loading his pistol. He closed his eyes, listening to the chirp and

rustle of the forest, letting anger flow out of him. He put his fist in the small of his back, then opened his eyes.

He drew, leveled his arm, and pulled the trigger, all in the space of a heartbeat.

A normal pistol had an effective range of not much further than ten yards. Anything beyond was wildly inaccurate and likely not even to make it to the target.

Unless you were a powder mage.

Tamas's sorcery lit the powder still in his kit at his belt, transferring the energy with his mind, adding it to the strength of the powder that had been loaded in the barrel of his pistol. The bullet soared through the air. Ten yards. Fifty. A hundred. Two hundred.

His sorcery focused and pushed the bullet onwards, allowing for less powder. He nudged the flight of it with his mind, correcting slightly for wind and the inaccuracy of the pistol itself. At three hundred yards it connected with a newspaper, shearing straight through the name of Duke Linz on the second page.

Tamas nodded to himself. It was a good shot. In the city he was always limited by the length of the military ranges, and practicing out on some farm or another always attracted attention. It had been too long since his last attempt, and he was worried he had grown rusty.

He only wished his shooting range was longer.

He began to load the pistol again, already envisioning the next target. An old empty peach can, stamped with the portrait of a peach on the front. He aimed to take off the peach stem.

Deep in his thoughts, Tamas barely noticed the crunch of boots in the leaves off in the forest. He paused, wondering if his ears had played a trick on him.

It was a very slight sound. Someone used to moving stealthily was on the approach, their boots barely stirring the leaves. A normal person would not have heard them. But his mage senses picked up the slightest movements, and he swiftly finished loading his pistol.

He couldn't be sure if there was only one of them. He remembered the figures following him down the dirt track and cursed himself. He should have given them more heed. He pictured them again, deciding that there had been five.

He pulled his carbine down from his saddle and checked to be sure it was still loaded, then loaded and primed his rifle, leaning both weapons against a nearby tree. He took up a position behind his horse. The forest was dense here, and he was standing out in the open. They would see him well before he could see them.

Reaching outward with his mage senses, he felt for black powder. No one nearby was carrying any.

Whoever they were, they had come prepared for a powder mage. Had Duke Linz sent them? Or perhaps this was the Privileged cabal making good on their threat? Maybe neither party wanted to wait for the results of Tamas's hearing.

Tamas crouched down, listening carefully for the approach of his assailant. The rustle of the leaves drew closer and Tamas leveled his pistol. He thought he saw a movement among the trees, a flash of light blue.

"How the pit did you know I was here?" a voice called.

Tamas lowered his pistol. Glancing suspiciously at the surrounding woods, he stood. "I could hear you from a hundred yards."

"No one is that good."

"I'm not no one."

Erika ja Leora emerged from the forest a few moments later. She wore an outfit much like the one she'd worn to the duel the previous week; pants with a loose blue jacket and riding gloves, though she now wore a greatcoat and bicorn to cover it all. She wore a small sword and stiletto at her belt, but had no pistol or musket.

"You're very stealthy," Tamas said. "You move quieter than I could have in all these leaves." Plenty of nobles learned to hunt, Tamas noted, which required a light step, but not a lot of them had real talent as woodsmen. For Erika to almost sneak up on him was impressive.

"I was raised in forests like these, just on the other side of the mountains to the south," Erika said. "You're in a powder trance, aren't you? That's the only way you could have heard me."

Tamas tapped his kit where he kept his prepared powder charges.

Erika licked her lips and eyed the kit, and Tamas wondered just how much experience she had with powder. It was said that the few powder mages in Kez who avoided the culls were men and woman with rank and connections, and that even they had to be forsworn of the powder, taking an oath before the king that they would never touch the stuff or even fire a gun. It made him wonder why she was so eager to learn to use her powers.

Tamas put his pistol in his belt. "I suppose I should ask why you followed me out here?"

"I want you to train me."

"I told you no."

"And I think you should reconsider."

"Why? Because you followed me into the middle of nowhere? That seems awfully foolish for any woman, let alone one of your station."

"I left my guards halfway between here and the cottage."

Tamas frowned at her. "Guards, or chaperones?"

"I'm not that young," Erika protested. "If they were chaperones, they wouldn't have stayed where I told them when I went into the woods to speak with a dangerous man." The corner of her mouth went up, and Tamas could have sworn she was flirting with him.

"Why are you so eager to learn?" Tamas asked, getting control of himself. He could not let his guard down. Especially not with the young, attractive heir to a duchy.

"So that I can be stronger. Faster. Better than everyone else."

Reasons similar to why Tamas had taught himself to use his powers. But he had done so by necessity. She didn't need that. Was this some passing fancy to a noble's daughter? "Is that all?" Tamas asked.

"All that you need to know."

"I won't train you," he said. She was holding something back, but that wasn't his concern. For the safety of them both, he could not become involved with her.

She seemed to ignore his statement. "What happened to 'my lady?'"

"I won't train you, my lady."

"No, no. Don't correct yourself. I'm curious, do you drop these pretenses when you go off alone?"

"I'm not sure what you mean." Tamas steeled himself, unsure as to whether he should be offended.

"I think you do. I've heard cousins speak as if commoners are another race entirely. As if their subservience is part of the natural order. But you, out here, seem to defy that."

"Nature has nothing to do with it," Tamas blurted before he could stop himself.

"Go on."

"I shouldn't."

"Go on, please."

Tamas knew he was treading dangerous waters. No matter how forward thinking this young woman might be, she was still a noble. "Nature," he said, "would not see one man or woman above another by right of birth. That is earned. And the duty of those who earn such a right is to protect those that cannot protect themselves."

Erika paced the edge of the glade, watching Tamas through half-closed eyes. It reminded him of a big cat he'd seen once in a Gurlish shah's private zoo. He wondered if he was the meat.

"You say these things as if you mean to do something about it," Erika said.

"Change can only be affected from the top."

"And?"

"And I intend to be field marshal someday." Tamas could hardly believe that he'd said those words. Not here, not to her. He'd never spoken them aloud before to anyone he thought would matter.

Erika stopped pacing, a smile half-formed on her lips. "I'll fight you for it."

"Excuse me?"

"Fight me. A duel." She removed a pair of wooden balls from her pocket. "I have two blossoms here. We'll fight to the first touch. If I win, you'll agree to train me when it's convenient for us both. I won't interfere with your campaigns or the rest of your life. If you win, I'll leave you alone. You'll never have to see me again."

"I've seen you fight," Tamas said. "I know you're better than me."

"But you're faster. Your powder trance and the fact you know how to use it gives you a clear advantage."

Tamas conceded the point. "Even if I thought I'd win, why would I agree when I've already refused to teach you?"

"I give you my word that you'll be free of me if you win. And because you've been looking at my chest and ass every time you think you can get away with it."

Tamas blanched. "You..." he snatched the wooden blossom from her fingers and fixed it to the tip of his small sword, his cheeks warm. He discarded his pistol and took up a position with his off-hand balanced to one side. "If that's the case," he said when he'd found his tongue, "Then why would I want to lose?"

Erika smiled and crossed to Tamas. He felt his cheeks warm further as he felt a tug on his belt, and he dare not look down. A moment later she stepped away holding one of his powder charges. She split the end with her fingers and licked the granules off her thumb. Not nearly as much as he'd imbibed, but it was enough for any powder mage to get a buzz. "Shall we begin?"

"Whenever you're ready."

Tamas knew he was fast. He had fought hundreds of men, both in duels and on the battlefield. In a full powder trance he could carve through half a dozen men in the blink of an eye and carry on with a charge, gore dripping from his blade. He'd always lacked finesse, but what he lacked he made up for in speed and strength.

It was different fighting a duel. He knew this. He had lost a few of those duels because of his own overconfidence. But he didn't think that would be a problem now.

He leapt forward, determined to end this quickly. His sword was a blur, flashing in a shaft of sunlight.

He barely felt the gentle tap of his blade being parried to one side before the wooden blossom on Erika's sword smacked him in the throat hard enough to leave him choking. He stumbled back, clutching at his throat, bewildered.

"Predictable and sloppy," Erika said clinically. "You can be as fast as lightning and a good duelist will still beat you. How about this; you teach me to shoot and to use my powers, and I'll teach you how to fence. Deal?"

Tamas had never been so easily beaten in his life. He tried to cough out a reply.

"Excellent," she said. "I have time this afternoon. Let us begin."

Three weeks after his first visit to the Iron King, Tamas was summoned once more to Skyline Palace.

The summons was more immediate—that very evening—and Tamas wondered how the king's people knew he was in the city, or that he had been in Budwiel last time. Snow had fallen on the city but the palace and its gardens seemed to have been missed by the storm. The bushes were wrapped for the winter and the smaller fountains drained, the gardens much quieter than his last visit.

Inside the palace he was led past the royal chambers and into the king's billiards room. Like all the rooms in the palace it had vaulted ceilings. The walls were red, the floors black marble, and the light provided by gas lanterns at regular intervals.

Manhouch studied the single billiards table in the middle of the room. He stood on the opposite side from Tamas, a cue held lightly in both hands. He did not look up when Tamas was quietly introduced by one of the royal concubines.

Tamas dropped to one knee ten feet from the table. "My lord summoned me?"

"Yes, he did," the Iron King said distantly. "You may stand."

Tamas adopted an attentive stance and wondered whether this would be a repeat of the last time. Was this another visit to annoy the royal cabal? Or was this finally something else?

Perhaps he'd changed his mind about helping Tamas with his hearing?

Manhouch slowly paced around the table, squinting at the one red and two white ivory balls. He tapped the end of the cue gently in one hand before he stopped and lined up a shot. The cue ball ricocheted along the flat walls of the table a dozen times, brushing the other two with each carom, barely moving them.

It was the type of shot that would have won him the night at any officer's club.

Last visit Tamas had come away thinking that, despite the cabal sorceries that kept him young, the king *seemed* his advanced age. Slow, impatient, perhaps weakened by age. But now, watching him prowl around the table, his eyes focused, step light, Tamas reconsidered that opinion.

Manhouch XI still had many years left to him.

Tamas watched him take two more shots, considering each for several minutes before setting his cue to the cloth, each shot more masterful than the last. After that third shot Tamas dare to speak up.

"How may I serve you, my lord?"

The king pointed the cue at him. "You may serve me by standing just there and not speaking unless spoken to."

What was he, a schoolchild? Tamas felt his cheeks warm and a flare of indignity. "Yes, my lord."

The old king took several more shots over the next twenty minutes. There was only one in which he scored less than six counts on a stroke, and when it happened he swore quietly to himself.

Tamas had seen similar behavior from senior officers. They would call a man in and ignore them for some time, going about a leisure activity like solitaire, letter-writing, billiards, or what-have-you for some time before addressing the subordinate. It was meant as an intimidating tactic. Something to make the victim feel insignificant.

Of course, the king didn't need to make it clear he was more important than you. The king, if Tamas guessed correctly, was sending an entirely different message. And it was to the royal cabal. Tamas could very well have been as important as a piece of paper.

Tamas let his mind wander to Erika. She has occupied his thoughts quite a lot the last few weeks. More than she should, that was for certain. They had trained nearly every day for at least a few hours, either shooting out in the glen or dueling in an abandoned warehouse in the factory district of Adopest.

She had learned the basics of controlling her powder trance almost immediately, and Tamas had no doubt that she could defeat any two men at a time with her newfound speed and strength. It was remarkable, really. He had never met a woman of that age with such grace and confidence. And the way she smiled at him made him wish that he was half as good a student for her dueling techniques as she was for shooting.

After his tenth shot, Manhouch glanced at the grandfather clock at one end of the billiards room and nodded to himself. "That's about right," he said. "You may go."

Tamas ducked a bow. "Thank you, your majesty. My lord, if I may?"

"You may," Manhouch glanced at Tamas with some annoyance. "But if you're about to say anything that isn't advice in improving my game, I suggest you not."

"I think it is, my lord."

Manhouch set the cue on the far end of the table and rolled it beneath his fingers. "Oh, is it? Well then this is something I had better hear." There was a note of bemusement to his tone, as well as danger. *Be careful*, it said. *You are a worm to me*.

"My lord," Tamas said, swallowing hard, wondering if he were about to commit career, political, and possibly literal suicide all at once. "I'd call your memory back to a couple of weeks ago. I mentioned a hearing in which my status and rank were up for review, and a request that you step in on my behalf?"

Manhouch snatched up his cue, looking somewhat disappointed. "And I told you no. That's quite enough, Captain. Do not lie to me again."

"I didn't, your majesty," Tamas rushed ahead. "If no one represents me at the hearing I will lose my status and rank, and I will be no more use to you."

Manhouch paused lining up his next shot, watching Tamas like a cat watches a mouse.

"The cabal will have won," Tamas finished, his mouth dry.

"I don't know what you think you know, Captain. But you've overstepped your bounds. Leave."

Tamas tried not to seem as if he were fleeing, but he couldn't help a hurried step as he left the king's billiards room.

Tamas left his horse with the boy at the stable down the road from the small house he rented in a northeastern borough of Adopest.

It had begun to snow on his way back from Skyline Palace. Three inches lay on the streets when he left the stable and he guessed there would be that much or more again in the morning, turning to muddy slush with the daily traffic. He could sense that it would be a miserable winter and wished that he was on campaign in sunny, warm Gurla.

There was a chill deep in his bones. He didn't think even a warm bath would get it out. He had made a terrible mistake with the king. At the very best all chances of future favor were gone. At the worst? He might not even have to wait for a hearing. He could awake in the morning to a message that his rank had been withdrawn and he was back among the non-commissioned soldiers.

The thought left him sick to his stomach, and at first he barely noticed the figure that hurried up from behind and fell into pace beside him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Erika brushed the straw out of her hair and straightened her bicorn. "I was waiting for you in the stables but I fell asleep."

"I can see that. But what are you doing here?"

"I thought we could go shooting."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, trying to decide what she was getting at. She noticed the look and gave him a sly smile. "It's almost midnight," he said.

"You said I would have to learn to shoot at night."

"And it's snowing."

"Adverse conditions," she replied, her smile widening to a grin.

Tamas felt the corner of his mouth lift slightly. Erika was already shooting better than most infantrymen. Once he taught her how to float a bullet she would take the apple off a tree at three quarters of a mile. Spending the night out in the country with a gorgeous woman, shooting pistols and muskets, sounded like the best idea he'd ever heard.

He cursed silently to himself. He had to remember who she was. Fighting his urge to say yes, he shook his head. "Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"I... I just don't think it would be appropriate without a chaperone."

"Not appropriate? You keep telling me how well I'm doing and you still insist on helping me adjust my aim. *That's* not appropriate."

Tamas thought about standing behind her, pressed close, his hand on hers under the stock, arm around her shoulder as they look down the rifle barrel together. He suppressed a smile. Pit, what was he doing? He couldn't help himself. "You haven't stopped me."

"Maybe I like it." Erika swayed into him, her shoulder gently knocking against his chest, and then gave a playful skip. "Come on. Tell me what the matter is."

Tamas stopped and watched her walk on ahead. When she noticed, she came back around, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"I've just come from an audience with the king," Tamas said.

Erika's playfulness was gone. She leaned forward. "Really? A private audience?"

"It wasn't anything good. This is the second time he's called me in and had me stand there while he ignored me."

"Perhaps he's testing you."

"I don't think so. He's using me in some game with the cabal. I'm no use to him otherwise. Just a common soldier."

"You're a commoner who has risen to the rank of captain. You're nothing short of extraordinary."

Tamas looked up sharply to see if she was mocking him, but her expression was in earnest. "No," he said. "It's the cabal. I know it. But anyways, that's not it. Tonight I tried to use that knowledge to get him to help me."

"You tried to *leverage* the Iron King?" Erika said, giving a nervous laugh. "How big are your balls?"

Tamas blanched at her choice of expression. "It was a mistake."

"I'll say. What did you want his help with?"

"Nothing," Tamas said. This wasn't something she needed to know. She might want to offer help, and he could not accept it. He would feel too much a cad.

She leaned closer to him and looked up. He could have kissed her without bending more than a few inches. "I don't think it's nothing," she said. "Is it about that duel with Captain Linz?"

"It is nothing for you to concern yourself over," he said.

She stepped away. "If you insist. Do you have anything scheduled tomorrow?"

"No," Tamas said. He was an unwanted soldier without a campaign. He was under suspension. What few duties he had left to him could be finished in a couple hours each week.

"Then we should leave the city tonight. We can shoot until our eyelids are heavy then camp until afternoon. Then in the evening we'll work through the fencing forms I've been showing you."

They had arrived at the door to his small, first-floor tenement. Tamas used the opportunity to turn away from her. Every instinct was telling him to say no. If he went, it could be nothing but practice, even if he wanted something more. Even if she wanted something more, which seemed beyond possible.

He tried to tell himself that her flirtatiousness was just his imagination. There was no possible way that a girl of her cleverness and station would allow herself to feel anything for a commoner.

She looked at him, eyes half-lidded, biting her bottom lip. His heart hammered in his head.

"All right," he said breathlessly. "Let me just..."

He caught it then. It was very faint, and at first he thought it just his imagination. But a moment later the scent intensified.

Jasmine perfume.

"No," he said.

"You just..." Erika began.

Tamas cut her off. "No. I can't. Too much to do. This is just... just child's play. You should go. Now." His voice rose until the last word was nearly a shout. Erika stepped back, her face scrunched with alarm, her hand on her sword, and Tamas realized how violently the words had come out.

"I'm not a child." Erika said. Her tone was steel.

"Yes, you are. Now leave."

Erika whirled on her heel without another word, striding through the falling snow. Tamas couldn't help but feel a deep regret as she left, but he knew it was for the best.

He cracked a powder charge and sprinkled half of it on his tongue. The scent of jasmine intensified, and Tamas could feel the presence of the Privileged on the other side of the door. He removed the iron key from his pocket and turned the lock, then stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

He kept a hand on the butt of his pistol and peered through the darkness with his heightened senses. His was not a large home. The living space was nothing more than a coal stove, a table, two chairs, and a cupboard. A door to his left led to his small, cramped bedroom.

Privileged Dienne sat on the other side of the table, fingers steepled in front of her face, wearing her gloves. The window behind her into the courtyard of his tenement was open, allowing the snow to blow gently onto his floor. She was flanked by two of her cabal guards, their hands resting on the pommels of their sabers. Two more guards stood to either side of the door, and when he had closed it they moved almost silently to take up positions behind him.

The attack came so quickly Tamas could hardly react. The two guards each grasped one of his arms, yanking his hand away from his pistol. He spun toward one of them, wrenching his opposite arm free, grasping for his belt knife.

His free arm was snatched again, and he was forced into a brief wrestling match. His powder trance gave him more speed and strength than both men together. He cracked one in the nose with his elbow and finally got a hold of his knife. He brought it up and around.

And found himself unable to move.

He strained at the invisible bonds that held him, eyes seeking Privileged Dienne. Her fingers twitched slightly, and he could feel the trickle of sorcery that she pulled into this world.

His arms were forcibly returned to his side, his knife and pistol taken from him. By the time the sorcery released him, the two guards held him in such a way as would force him to break his own arms if he struggled.

"Who's the girl?" Dienne asked, finally breaking the silence.

"No one of importance," Tamas said through clenched teeth.

"Shall I go after her, my lady?" the guard beside her asked, his voice a bass rumble.

"We'll find out who she is soon enough," Dienne said, waving dismissively. "Captain Tamas, you have one opportunity to tell me what the king wishes of you. If you don't, I will begin to burst the molars in the back of your mouth, one at a time, until you have no teeth left."

Tamas relaxed completely, letting himself sag against the two guards that held him. "I won't be able to talk through that kind of pain."

"You're a powder mage. I suspect that your pain tolerance is rather high, and considering how well you saw me in the dark I imagine that you're running a powder trance right now. Don't try to toy with me, Captain. You'll do fine."

"Why do you care what the king wants with me?"

"This isn't a conversation," the guard holding Tamas's left arm said. "You will not ask questions."

Tamas turned his head and coughed, as if clearing his throat, then spit a wad of phlegm into the guard's eye.

He was rewarded with a punch to his gut that doubled him over, the pain shooting like a bolt through his powder trance. He remained that way, stars floating before his eyes, until the guards forced him back up.

"What did that gain you?" Privileged Dienne asked.

The bastard on my left doesn't have a proper hold on me anymore, Tamas thought. He said nothing aloud.

"You're very stubborn," Dienne said. "I'll give you this; the king wants you because you're a powder mage. But I imagine you know that already. Regardless of what he may have told you, you will gain nothing from serving him in any capacity. In a few months your rank will be stripped from you. You will be discharged from the army, and no one in all the Nine will be willing to employ you in any profession that has even the slightest scrap of dignity. You will spend the rest of your life shoveling shit or mining coal, wishing that I had killed you. Now what did the king want?"

Dienne might as well have admitted that she was behind his suspension, confirming Tamas's suspicions. Not that the knowledge gave him any satisfaction. He could feel the pressure build in the back of his jaw. It started as a niggle, then an increased force, as if someone was drilling his molars from the inside out. He gave an involuntary whimper.

The pressure lessened. "What was that?" Dienne said, leaning forward with a smile.

"He's playing you," Tamas finally got out.

The smile disappeared. "Explain."

"What does he want me for? Nothing. Nothing at all."

"You're trying my patience."

"And you're trying mine. If you're going to torture me, get on with it. But I just told you what you wanted to know."

Dienne stared at him as if she were looking at a particularly hideous dog. Tamas wondered if anyone had ever shown her any kind of defiance in her life as a Privileged. "Have it your way," she finally said with a snort.

Tamas felt the pressure in his teeth increase suddenly, and he anticipated the scream that was about to tear itself from his throat.

"That's enough of that," a voice said.

The room grew very suddenly still. The guards all looked at the Privileged, Dienne's posture was suddenly stiff as if there was something pressed against the small of her back.

"If you so much as twitch a finger I will splatter your heart across the front of Captain Tamas's nice uniform." Erika's face appeared in the open window just over Dienne's shoulder. "Tell your guards to step away."

"Do it," Dienne said.

Tamas was released, and the four guards pressed themselves into the corners of the room without protest.

"Now hold your hands in the air, fingers splayed," Erika instructed the Privileged. Dienne's raised her hands slowly, and Erika reached one hand around to pluck off the gloves, one finger at a time. When she had pocketed the gloves, she said, "Tamas, get out of here."

Tamas's mouth was dry. He snatched up his knife and pistol, then put on his hat. He wasn't about to argue.

"You've just killed yourself in the most painful way you can imagine, girl," Dienne said.

"And you'll kill yourself in a very fast way if you move even the slightest bit," Erika said.

Tamas unlatched his door and swung it open with one elbow, trying to watch the guards and Privileged all at once. He checked to be sure his sword was still attached to his belt—the guard hadn't bothered taking something that would be no use to him in such close quarters.

He stepped out the door and immediately began to sprint, following Erika's tracks in the fresh-fallen snow. He slid around the corner, then around another until he reached the rear entrance to the courtyard behind his tenement. Erika met him there, pistol still in her hand.

"You saved my life," he said. The thought floored him.

"Just returning the favor."

Tamas was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"No time to explain," Erika said. Her hair was soaked with sweat, and as he clutched her shoulders he could tell that she was trembling fiercely.

"Powder," he told her. "It'll help with the nerves."

"I don't..." she fumbled with her belt pouch.

Tamas took a powder charge from his kit and tore it open with his teeth. He took her by the chin, pulling her lip down with one thumb, and pressing the powder into her gum. She licked the powder away and looked up at him.

She smiled as he pulled away. Her trembling had stopped. The whole exchange had taken just a dozen heartbeats, but Tamas knew that it had been too long.

"We have to run."

"I took her gloves."

"She'll have extras."

As if to prove his point, Tamas felt his sixth sense pricked as sorcery was pulled violently into this world. He hugged Erika to him and threw them both backwards. The fireball that tore through where they had just been standing cut through the brick of the tenement like a cannonball.

They leapt to their feet, sliding on the snow, and began to run.

"She won't open up entirely," Tamas said. "Not in the city." *I hope*, he added silently.

They fled hand-in-hand down the alley, then cut across the road and down another. Tamas turned to see the four cabal guards barreling after them, sabers drawn.

"We're going to have to fight them," Erika said.

Tamas replied, "You're bloody mad; we can't stop for that long."

"We'll never lose them with a fresh coat of snow."

Tamas swore. She was right. Even if they used their powder trances to outdistance the guards, they would be able to track them without too much trouble. "We'll have to cut through taverns, inns. A few crowded places and we'll lose them."

"We're not leading an angry Privileged through an inn full of people!" Erika said.

"It's that or our heads."

"That is not acceptable!"

Erika stopped, and Tamas almost fell on the slick cobbles. "Don't be a fool," he said.

"Run if you want, but I never took you for a coward, Captain Tamas." Erika grasped the hilt of her sword.

This was a damned bad time for her to prove she was a better person than he'd thought. "Bloody pit," he said, "Not here. We'll choose better ground."

Tamas pulled Erika further up the street, looking for an alley where they could face the guards two at a time, hoping to cut them down before the Privileged caught up. He felt a tug at his hand and turned to see Erika run down a narrow alley.

"This way," she said.

"No, that will take us back around in a circle, I..."

Privileged Dienne appeared in the far entrance of the alley. Tamas didn't bother finishing his sentence. He drew his pistol and fired, pushing the bullet around Erika and at Dienne, whose fingers had begun to move when she saw Tamas draw. Dienne darted for cover. Tamas's bullet blew through her left hand, and she tumbled into the snow.

Erika barely seemed to register what had just happened. Tamas shoved her through the narrow alley and into the next street, where Dienne lay clutching her hand and bleeding. Tamas drew his sword. If he left her alive, he was as good as dead.

The cabal guards caught up too fast.

Tamas whirled to face them, discarding his spent pistol.

The four guards had heavy sabers and cuirasses, making them all but impossible to fence conventionally. Both he and Erika would be at a disadvantage with their small swords, even if Tamas had the experience of fighting heavily armored men.

He and Erika stood back to back, swords drawn, as the four guards surrounded them. "The Privileged won't be able to fight without her hand," he said to her. "It's just us against them."

"And them," Erika said.

He glanced over his shoulder to see four more cabal guards heading up the street. They wore the same breastplates but bore long pikes in addition to their sabers, and they were coming on at a dead run.

"Let's make this quick," Erika said. She lifted her pistol as she spoke, shooting a guard in the face. She followed through by discarding the pistol and leaping forward, sword swinging at the next guard.

Tamas wasn't able to watch how she fared. Two guards came at him quickly. One, the same person who'd elbowed him in the House of Nobles, was a tall, muscular woman. Her saber hit the base of his small sword with enough force that he worried she'd shatter it on a second blow.

He shoved forward but was unable to find purchase on the cobbles, his boots sliding under him. Abandoning that plan, he stepped to the side and let her momentum carry her past him. His sword flicked at the second guard, remembering the way Erika had showed him to use precision above brute force. He caught the tip of the man's saber and slapped it aside, then stepped forward to plunge his sword into the man's throat.

He spun, expecting to see the tall woman bearing down on him.

Instead, he found her on her back, twitching, blood fountaining from one eye. Erika stood panting above the corpses of all three of the remaining guards. Her face shone with sweat, her eyes alight with a kind of savage glee. "Pit," she breathed, "I thought I was good, but with the powder trance..."

"Pikes," Tamas reminded.

Erika turned toward the coming guards, and seemed to falter. "Do we run?"

Tamas caught sight of Dienne. She had gotten to her feet and fled during the brief fight and was now behind the other four cabal guards and running for a waiting carriage parked at the end of the street.

"No," he said. "Load me a pistol." He grabbed a powder charge from his kit, setting his own sword down in the snow and drawing his knife. He ran forward. Ten paces from the lead pikeman, he threw the charge overhand. It hit the pikeman in the face, and Tamas ignited the powder with a thought.

The pikeman went down with a cry, and Tamas was inside the guard of the rest of them within a moment. His knife flashed, opening two throats in the time it took to blink. A chance raising of the third man's pike shaft knocked the knife from Tamas's fingers. He grabbed the man by his cuirass and slammed his forehead against the man's nose. The man went down in a spray of blood.

The first guard had recovered, his face a mess of blood and black powder, and rushed at Tamas with pike set. Tamas smacked the pike blade out of the way with the flat of his hand and bore down on the man. He snatched the guard by the throat and flexed his powder-strengthened fingers, crushing the man's windpipe.

"Pistol!" Tamas shouted.

Erika finished loading the pistol and tossed it to him underhand. He twisted to catch it by the butt and brought it up, only to find Dienne's carriage fleeing down the road and around the corner, out of sight.

He pulled up, knowing even he couldn't make a shot around the corner like that. Erika came up beside him, steam rising from her face and shoulders.

Tamas retrieved his pistol and finished off the guards with his knife. He expected some kind of protest from her, but she watched silently. This was not, he decided, the first time she had killed. "You were magnificent," he said.

Her eyes glistened. "You were like something out of the pit."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was."

Tamas could feel his heart still hammering inside his chest. He looked down, seeing blood on his hand.

"You cut yourself on that pike," Erika said.

"Not as fast as I thought I was, I guess."

Erika shook her head. "I've never seen anyone do anything like that."

"Did she see your face?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

"Are you certain?"

Erika hesitated. "No."

"All right. We'll have to..." Tamas paused. "We're being watched."

"A fight like this would attract attention. We should go."

Tamas looked around. He traced the various footprints in the snow, glancing at the alleyways. He had sensed something more than just mild interest. "We'll get our horses. Looks like you're coming with me out of the city after all."

Erika took his wounded hand, lifting it to inspect the cut, then threading her fingers into his. "That's what I was hoping for."

Tamas lay on a wooded hilltop above his cottage near the King's Forest. A dusting of snow covered his back and shoulders, and his elbows hurt from propping him up for half the night. He burned a heavy powder trance to fend off the cold and his need for sleep. Erika dozed lightly just beside him, wrapped in a greatcoat and furs.

It was less than twelve hours after their fight with Dienne, and there was no sign of pursuit. Yet. His vantage allowed him a view for three miles toward the highway to Adopest to the south and to the west along the edge of the King's Forest. If anyone came looking for him at the cottage, he would see them long before they saw him.

And most importantly, his bullet would take them off their horse before the sound of his gunshot hit them.

Tamas shifted slightly and glanced at Erika. Her cheeks were red from the cold, her face peaceful. He swallowed a lump in his throat and resisted the urge to look at the bedroll—his bedroll—they'd shared all night.

His greatcoat seemed suddenly very warm.

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. Whatever had happened between them was a onetime thing. He would have to disappear, perhaps leave Adro altogether. Erika would have to lie low for a few weeks until she could discover whether Dienne knew her name. Tamas would never be able to see or speak to her again.

Tamas resolved to tell her this upon her waking. As if his thoughts had been a summons to bring her out of sleep, she rolled over and stretched. "Good morning," she said quietly, without opening her eyes.

He swallowed. "Sleep well?" he asked.

"Very." The word was almost a purr.

Tamas blinked, trying to remember what he was about to tell her. Something important, he was certain.

"Anyone coming this way?" she asked.

"Not that I've seen."

"What time is it?"

Tamas glanced up through the bare branches of the forest at the sky above them. It was a low cloud cover, the sun invisible, so he pulled his stiff fingers from the stock of his rifle and fished in his pocket for his watch. "Half past eleven," he said.

"Have you slept?" she asked.

"No."

"I could stand watch."

"I wouldn't be able to sleep if you did," he said. "Took too much powder."

Erika sat up and stretched. "You still think they'll come looking for you here?"

"I don't have any idea. If the cabal knows about the cottage, they will. All I can do is wait and watch."

"For how long?"

"Days? A week or two? I would rather force a confrontation with whoever they send where I can pick my own battleground."

"I'm not sure if I can be gone that long," Erika said. "My parents will wonder."

"About that," Tamas said, "You should get back to the city as soon as possible. You don't want to raise any kind of suspicion."

She gave him a coy smile. "You don't enjoy my company?"

"Look, it's..." Tamas hesitated, his mind blank. He spent so much time holding back what he wanted to say, that having no words at all was disorienting. "About last night," he continued.

"Admit it, you were impressed."

"I'm not talking about the fight. I'm talking about after."

"So was I," she said.

Tamas coughed. "This is serious."

Erika's expression sobered. "I'm sorry. I know. The royal cabal is probably hunting you. Maybe hunting me. It's a little hard to wrap my head around. I'm just avoiding the subject."

"That's not the subject..."

"I know what you're talking about," Erika cut him off, "And I think it's the least important conversation we could be having right now."

Tamas's mouth snapped shut. He couldn't exactly argue with that. He chewed on his words, trying to form a response. He was her elder by seven or eight years. The gap between them was not uncommon, but it made him feel as if he should be in control of their relationship. In reality, he felt anything but.

"You should go somewhere your family can shield you from the wrath of royal cabal," Tamas said.

"I will. Once you're safe."

Tamas almost scoffed at that. He was the experienced soldier, and she the sheltered noblewoman. Why would *she* be protective of *him*? "That might not

happen.” Tamas was still trying to come to terms with the consequences of their fight with the Privileged, trying to decide if he could salvage his career.

“I’m young,” she answered, “I have all the time in the world.”

He shook his head. “Why would you bother?”

Erika settled back with one elbow beneath her. “Because I like you. Or did I not make that clear?” She paused for a moment, then said, “You think I’m naive and foolish, don’t you?”

“A little.” *She liked him.* The phrase made Tamas feel like a giddy schoolboy, and he immediately felt ashamed of it. He was a soldier. He was a commoner, proud of his birth, rising above his station. What was he doing with a noblewoman?

“I *am* naive,” she admitted. “But I am not foolish. Do you think I’m here because of some passing fancy? That I’m looking for the thrill in the arms of a dangerous man?”

“It had crossed my mind,” Tamas said honestly, immediately wishing he hadn’t.

Erika pressed a finger against his chest. “You asked me why I want to learn to use my powers. Last night, you asked me what I meant when I said I was returning the favor by saving your life. I will answer both those questions, Captain Tamas. I first heard your name when I smuggled a fugitive powder mage child past the Kez Longdogs and into Budwiel not more than a few days before we met.”

“You *did* that?” Tamas breathed. The Longdogs were the royal magehunters. Had Erika been caught, she would have been tortured and executed despite her family name.

Erika went on, ignoring his question, “The child I brought across the mountains was able to enter Budwiel because the guards there were prepared for fugitive powder mages and let her in despite the Longdogs on her tail—on *my* tail. They didn’t do it for money. They did it for a little wine and some new boots that you brought them. But most importantly because they admired and respected you.”

Tamas was astounded. Nobility, he had always found, put themselves before others with very little exception. Erika had already proved herself above any noble he had ever met, but this was beyond his imagination. “You risked everything,” Tamas said.

“I did.”

“For what?”

“To save the life of a child who didn’t deserve to die. That seemed good enough cause. That’s why I want to learn to be stronger and faster. Because it won’t be the last time I do something like that.”

Everything Tamas had ever fought for seemed suddenly so petty. Certainly, he strove for rank so that he could one day make a difference for the common man, but he battled primarily for his own gain and honor. In the end, he had nothing to lose but his life. This woman had so much more to lose and nothing to gain.

“Perhaps I’ve been wrong about the nobility all this time.”

Erika laughed. “Oh, you’re right about most of us. But there are a few who try to be better than what’s expected. My point is, neither of us would not have escaped had the guards on the Adran border not thought so much of you. You saved my life and hers, and that, ultimately, is why I sought you out.”

"I am... humbled." Tamas took her by the hand, touching her knuckles softly to his lips, and wondered if he might, against all odds, be in love. It was a gut-wrenching, forbidden thought.

"Don't be. I have never seen fire in the eyes of a man like I saw in yours the first time we met. You will do great things one day." She looked down at her hands. "Now see, I just refused to have this conversation and here I am having it. I think that's enough." She leaned over and kissed him, and he forgot about the world for the next few minutes.

Tamas made a decision. He was not going to wait and hide, wondering if the cabal was hunting him, wondering if his life and career had been destroyed. The cabal be damned.

Tamas climbed to his feet and rubbed the stiffness out of his legs.

"Where are you going?" Erika asked.

"To see the king. He's the only one who can call off the royal cabal." Silently, he added, *It's the only hope I have to keep my life here in Adopest, near you.*

"Is that a good idea?"

"No," Tamas said. "Not at all."

Tamas was shocked to find a messenger in the king's colors waiting for him just outside the city with immediate summons from the king. Tamas was led east, skirting the walls of Adopest, straight toward Skyline Palace.

Tamas and his lone escort reached the palace by late afternoon, and Tamas's unease deepened as they took the gravel drive that wound up the hill. He could feel the eyes of every royal guard on his shoulders, and he remembered realizing that they would do nothing if Duke Linz attacked him.

The guards, after all, were for the safety of the king. Not some commoner upstart. If they hadn't been willing to step in against Duke Linz, they would not protect him from a Privileged.

Once they reached the front of the palace Tamas saw Privileged Dienne only a moment before she saw him. She stood outside the silver doors to the main foyer, arms crossed, jaw set, surrounded by a brand new cadre of guards. She looked none the worse for the wear of their battle, her hand likely healed by one of her compatriots.

Their eyes locked and her lip curled, and Tamas edged his hand toward his carbine only to remember that the guards had already relieved him of it. He braced for the inevitable onslaught of sorcery.

Nothing happened.

Dienne's sneer turned into a cruel smile, and she watched as Tamas was led past. He turned in his saddle to look back at her, worried now about that smile. Why had she not come after him? What did she have planned?

The messenger led Tamas down the facade of the palace until they reached a small door where they dismounted. As he was taken inside he realized this was the first time he had entered the palace in daylight. And the first time they had taken him this particular way. Did either of those items contain any significance? Or were they mere coincidence?

He was kidding himself. The Iron King was still playing a game with his Privileged. One that would get Tamas killed.

Inside, he did not recognize the myriad of narrow servant's passages that he was brought through until he was, once again, ushered into the Iron King's billiards room.

Manhouch stood with his back to the fireplace, hands clasped, and fixed Tamas with a long, thoughtful look the moment he came through the door. Tamas thought it was the first time he had locked eyes with the king, and he felt a cold sweat break out in the small of his back.

Tamas had prepared a speech for when he had managed to bribe, bully, or fight his way into Manhouch's presence. Now that he had been led in without incident, he had forgotten it all.

"Your majesty," Tamas said, dropping to one knee.

"Stand up," Manhouch said.

"Yes, my lord."

Manhouch strode toward Tamas and did a quick circle. Tamas stood stiffly during the brief inspection. The king finished his circuit to stand in front of Tamas, studying his face for several moments before he returned to the opposite side of the billiards table.

"Captain Tamas," he said. He shuffled through a number of documents spread out across the billiards table. "On your first campaign at the age of sixteen, you were commended for valor in the field on seven separate occasions, suffering eleven wounds in that campaign alone. On the next campaign, as a sergeant, you single-handedly ended the siege of Herone. As a lieutenant in charge of just thirty marksmen on special assignment you captured the town of Lukanjev and held it against two companies of Gurlish cavalry."

"There are at least thirty letters here from infantrymen and non-commissioned officers whose lives you saved at one point or another. Commendation, commendation. Thirteen recommendations for rank advancement. Thirteen!" The Iron King flipped absently through the rest of the papers before finally throwing them down in apparent disgust. "Tell me, Captain, why are you not a general?"

Tamas guessed it was a rhetorical question, but answered it anyway. "Because I'm a commoner, sir."

"That's right. You're a commoner. And my noble cousins would rather hang themselves with their own belts than take orders from someone of lesser birth."

"As you say, my lord."

"Nothing to be had for that at the moment, though," Manhouch said, stepping away from the table. "Last night, you and the duchess-heir of Leora killed eight members of the cabal guard and wounded a member of the Adran royal cabal."

How the pit did he know about Erika, Tamas wondered. He felt a surge of panic. If the king knew, the cabal might know, and Erika was surely in danger. "My lord, the duchess-heir..."

Manhouch cut him off. "I don't really give a damn about the Leora girl. Privileged Dienne is not aware of her identity, and I'm not about to admit that I spy on my own cabal just to impart such a trivial bit of information. Now then," he continued, "you did not have my attention before because you were a nothing more than a diversion. Something to annoy the cabal. But last night one of my spies witnessed your altercation with Privileged Dienne and saw you shoot her through the hand." Manhouch barked a laugh.

Tamas did not see what was so funny. "It was instinct, my lord."

"Instinct, when faced with a Privileged, is to flee. Instinct is to cower. You did none of those things."

"Fleeing from a battle usually makes things worse."

Manhouch nodded sharply. "Something that few people truly understand. Captain Tamas, you now have my attention."

The question, Tamas asked himself, *was whether he truly wanted the king's attention*. Tamas tried to consider where this conversation would go. The king wanted something. Otherwise Tamas would not be here. But what? He bowed his head. "My duty is to serve, your majesty."

"Everyone's duty is to serve," Manhouch said. "Even I, king of Adro, live to serve my people. It's the way of civilization." He began to pace the room, clearly agitated. "But the cabal does not see it that way. They feel that they are above reproach, even from me. They need to be disabused of this notion."

Tamas suddenly knew where this was going, and he did not like it one bit. Working moisture into his mouth, he repeated, "My duty is to serve."

"You're a remarkable soldier," Manhouch said. "You may, if you survive the next few decades, one day make it to general. To do so you will need a powerful patron. One who doesn't give a damn about who leads his armies, as long as they win their battles." Manhouch stopped pacing and crossed the room to stand beside Tamas. "And I, Captain, need killing done."

"He wants you to *what*?" Erika demanded.

Tamas was in Budwiel, a week after his meeting with the king. He had decided that Adopest was not safe and had sent word for Erika to meet him here, at a small apartment he kept under a false name on the Kez border. She was still in his arms, both their jackets already on the floor, when he told her the news.

"Kill Privileged Dienne," Tamas repeated.

Erika stepped away from him and snatched the blanket off of his bed, throwing it around her bare shoulders. "You'd be mad."

"I shot her once. I can do it again."

"And you have to be sure that shot is lethal this time."

"There's that," Tamas admitted.

"Why does he want her dead?" Erika asked.

Tamas retrieved his jacket from the floor, wishing he had kept his mouth shut until after they had some time together.

"Don't put that on, I'm not done with you," Erika said. "Tell me why he wants her dead."

Tamas took a deep breath. This was a bad idea. He shouldn't have told Erika any of this. Pit, she shouldn't even *be* here. As far as the he was concerned, he was still a wanted man. He knew that he couldn't trust anyone at court or in the city.

"Because," he said, "the cabal has been flexing their muscles. They've ignored his summons. Disobeyed his orders. They have more than a hundred and fifty full-fledged Privileged. That's enough to raze the entire country if they wanted and they know it. They're growing drunk with their own power. Privileged Dienne bungled a

major operation on the last campaign in Gurla, so she's the best choice for an... example."

"It has the added benefit," he continued, "that Dienne's job is to see me dead or disgraced. It's not me against the cabal. It's just me against her. This is no longer impossible."

"You're still a madman to try it."

"I have no choice. The king forbade her from killing me outright but even he admits that his grasp on the cabal is tenuous. She'll try for my head sooner or later."

"You said it's her assignment. Does that mean if you kill her this will be over? Or will they just send someone else? What if she gets reinforcements?"

Tamas hesitated. "I'm not sure. The king claims that no one else actually knows about our fight with the cabal guards. He says that Dienne will try to kill me on her own to avoid losing face with the rest of the cabal. Oh, and he knows you're involved."

Erika dropped down on the bed and bit absently at one of her fingernails. "How does he know?"

"He has prominent members of the cabal followed, and his spies told him about our fight. Somehow they knew who you were."

The information did not seem to faze her. "How will you kill her?"

Tamas patted the rifle he had leaned against the doorpost. "Bullet to the head from a half mile. It's my only real option."

"Can't do that," Erika said.

Tamas frowned. "What do you mean?"

She pointed to his rifle. "The cabal can't know you were involved."

"That's the point, isn't it?"

"Is that what the king told you to do?"

"No," Tamas said. "He just said to kill her."

"Nothing about how he wanted it done?"

"None," Tamas said.

Erika got up and crossed the room, pulling a bottle out of her bag. "Everberry cordial," she said. "All the way from Fatrasta, and not a drop of alcohol in it." She produced two wine glasses wrapped carefully in newspaper, then poured them each a glass of the black cordial. "The cabal can't know about your involvement," she repeated, handing Tamas a glass and leading him by his hand to the bed. "If Dienne simply dies, the cabal may lose interest in you. At least long enough for you to get back your footing. However, if they suspect that a powder mage killed her they *will* come for your head. Your shot would have to be flawless, made to look like it came from a nearby window. Are you that good?"

"Not yet," Tamas admitted. He sipped the cordial, savoring the sweetness.

She took the glass from his hand and set it on the bedside table, moving into his lap. "Then we'll have to think of something else."

"Wait, wait. What do you mean, we? I'm not going to let you have anything to do with this." Tamas tried to push her gently from his lap, but her arms were firmly around his neck.

"At what point," she whispered in his ear, "will you realize that you will never be in the position to let or not let me do anything?"

"You can't become involved any further. This is serious."

"I already am involved. And I'm deadly serious, my love," Erika said.

Tamas felt a shudder go down his spine at the word *love*. "Don't say that," he said quietly.

"Don't say what?"

"Love. This can't last." As much as he wanted it to.

"Why not?"

Tamas looked away. "You know why not."

Erika snatched him by the chin and jerked his face toward hers, staring him in the eye. "Am I wasting my time, Captain Tamas? Am I with a man who doesn't want me?"

"Absolutely not," Tamas growled. *This was too quick*, he told himself. They'd barely known each other for a couple of months. She was extraordinary, but she was still a noble. She would never be allowed to marry him. "But I want you more than a passing fancy. And I'm a commoner."

"If I hear you say you're a commoner once more, so help me Kresimir, I will pull out your tongue. You're a man with ambition. With strength. Use it. And when you're Field Marshal Tamas no one will question you taking a foreign duchess as your wife."

"And in the meantime?" he asked.

Erika shoved him down and straddled him on the bed. He grabbed her by the waist and threw her aside, rolling on top of her, satisfied with a surprised squeal. She grabbed a hand full of his hair.

"In the meantime," she said, "We have a Privileged to kill."

Tamas watched from a second-story window as twenty-odd cabal guards crept down the street toward him.

He was back in Adopest, three weeks after the king had ordered him to kill Privileged Dienne. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, the night lit by a full moon, and the streets in the factory district were all but silent.

The street below ended just a few yards past Tamas's hiding spot in a cul-de-sac of four large, multi-story tenements. The lanterns were dark, nothing moving but stray cats fleeing before the cabal guards. The whole block had been struck by plague last year and remained abandoned.

A perfect place to kill a Privileged.

The guards passed below his window, and he wondered how many more were flanking the streets on either side of the tenements. Not many, he suspected. Privileged Dienne would want to keep this quiet until she was sure she had dealt with him.

He edged toward the window, as close as he dared, and looked toward the main thoroughfare. There, not fifty yards from where he stood, was the same carriage he had seen Dienne flee in a few weeks prior.

She had honored his request for a meeting, it seemed, even if she hadn't come alone as he requested.

Not that Tamas had expected her to.

He double-checked his preparations. Set up just inside the open windows of the apartment were eight flintlock muskets. Each was loaded and propped to aim into

the cul-de-sac. They would jerk and fall when he set them off, but accuracy was not important.

Only the illusion of conspiracy was important.

Tamas took his own musket and aimed it at the guard wearing a captain's red epaulette on one shoulder. The man whispered and gestured to his troops, positioning them by the windows and doors of the center-most tenement. One of them braced himself and kicked the door in with a crash that rattled the windows, and about half the platoon of cabal guards rushed into the empty building.

Tamas lit a match and set it to the end of a quick-burning fuse. The spark traveled like lightning out the window, following the fuse between the tenements, above the heads of the guards.

One of them noticed the spark, shouting and pointing upward. By the time any of his compatriots had looked up, the spark was gone through the window of the tenement now filled with a dozen or more cabal guards.

Tamas lifted his musket again, sighted toward the carriage waiting at the end of the street, and pulled the trigger. The shot blew through the window, and the carriage rocked from the motion of a body collapsing against the wall. Chaos erupted.

Guards shouted in confusion, pointing at Tamas's vantage. He reached out with his senses and touched the powder in each of the eight muskets, causing a volley to pepper the street. A second roar of muskets erupted from the windows across the street as Erika touched the powder of her own small firing line.

Cabal guards threw themselves through tenement windows and doors, looking for cover. Most of them wound up in the building at the end of the cul-de-sac, trying to regroup with the bulk of their platoon.

They did so just as Tamas's fuse hit the stack of powder barrels in the tenement basement.

Tamas had dropped his musket and sprinted for the far end of the apartment, when the explosion blew him off his feet. He went right through a flimsy plaster wall, landing in a heap in the room next door.

He got to his feet, coughing on plaster dust, hoping that Erika was all right. His head pounded and his vision took a moment to clear. They had, it seemed, overdone it on the powder.

He went to the window and looked down into the main avenue on the other side of the tenement from the cul-de-sac he had just attacked. The street was lit by flames caused by the explosion, and a few passing night laborers stared open-mouthed before running off at a sprint, shouting about the fire.

A few dark shapes did not run away from the fire. Cabal guards crossed the avenue, and Tamas heard the door below him kicked open.

"Go around," a gruff voice said, "Keep your eyes open! You two, see to the Privileged!"

Tamas didn't bother with the window. He backed up and ran at the wall, shoulder first, bursting through the aged brick and plaster and soaring out into the cold night air. He hit the avenue below and rolled.

His shoulder ached as he regained his feet, and he questioned the wisdom of that maneuver even as he whirled to face the two cabal guards that rushed toward him. He drew his sword, waving dust out of his face, and parried the first swing of

a guard's heavy saber. He drew his belt knife with his off-hand and stepped inside the man's guard, opening his throat.

The second guard was more wary. She circled Tamas, crouched, eyes shifting as she watched for his next move.

Tamas didn't have time for this. Once she'd made a half circle, Tamas turned and sprinted, followed by the guard's startled shout. He turned at the next intersection and surged ahead.

Privileged Dienne's carriage nearly flattened him. The two horses, eyes rolling in fear of the explosion, plowed forward while the driver frantically tried to get them under control. Tamas threw himself out of the way of the panicked animals, then changed directions to chase after them.

Catching the carriage while in a full powder trance took little effort. Tamas leapt onto the running board at the back, snatching the rail with one hand, swiping at his pursuer with the sword in the other.

His swipe missed, but the guard could not hope to keep up as the carriage careened ahead. Tamas sheathed his sword and climbed on top of the carriage. Holding the roof rack, he swung feet-first into the compartment.

Tamas came into the carriage ready to grapple with an enraged, wounded Privileged. He drew his knife the moment his hands left the roof rack, and he landed heavily on the cloaked figure on the bench, ready to plunge the weapon into Dienne's chest.

He needn't have worried. The body below him was still as a corpse, shirt soaked with blood. Tamas's bullet had ripped through her heart and lungs, killing her almost instantly.

The only problem was, the corpse was not Privileged Dienne.

It was a young woman with auburn hair, too young to be a full Privileged but wearing the gloves. Dienne's apprentice, perhaps.

"Oh, pit," Tamas said. He leapt for the door, throwing himself from the moving carriage only a moment before sorcery tore it in half.

He landed in a clumsy roll, feeling his ankle turn beneath him. He forced himself up, a sharp pain shooting up his leg, and ran for the nearest alley, batting at his ass to put out the flames on his greatcoat.

He searched windows and alleys for Dienne, trying to determine the direction of the next attack.

Two cabal guards emerged from the alley, putting themselves in his path. He drew his sword at a dead run, trying his damndest not to fall from the pain in his ankle. If he stopped moving Dienne would kill him with the merest flick of her fingers. That thought was the only thing that made him fling himself to the side just a moment before the cobbles erupted in a geyser of flame.

He gave a triumphant shout that turned into a scream as his ankle turned below him. He fell, slamming his knee hard enough to rattle his teeth. His sword was pinned beneath him, and he rolled, trying desperately to free it as the two cabal guards closed in on him.

Erika arrived like a flash, her sword a blur. She took one with the flick of her sword at his neck and the other in the belly, just below the cuirass. She spun toward Tamas and snatched him by the arm, dragging him to his feet even as he tried to wave her off.

"Dienne's still out here!" Tamas said.

"I know."

Erika yanked him into the mouth of the alley where Tamas snatched at his kit, cracking a powder charge and shoving it into his mouth. The pain in his knee and ankle gradually subsided, reduced to a distant throb. He gingerly put weight on the ankle.

"Can you run?" Erika asked.

"No. I won't be able to do much more than hobble."

"All right. But we have to move."

Tamas nodded his thanks, cursing himself for allowing Dienne to trick him. He had depended on the king's assurances, on her not bringing any other Privileged into the conflict. He hadn't even considered an apprentice.

"Guards?" he asked.

"All accounted for," she said. "We got more than we expected in the initial blast and the rest were easy to clean up in the confusion."

Tamas noticed there was a thin cut beneath Erika's eye and her sleeve was black with blood.

"It's nothing," she said. "I can still move it."

Limping, Tamas took point, leading her down the alley and into the next street. "Did you see where she was?" he whispered.

"The sorcery came from above. She's on one of the tenements. Why hasn't she just leveled the whole block yet?"

Tamas shook his head. "Trying not to hit her own men, maybe. Cabal guards are hard to replace."

"How long until she realizes they're all dead?"

"Not long enough." Tamas swore. "I lost my pistol."

Erika drew hers and shoved it into his hand. "I have two," she said.

Tamas checked to be sure it was loaded, pan primed. "We have to split up," he said. "It will make it harder for her to track us. We flank her and wait for an opportunity. Don't risk a shot to the chest. If you miss her heart she'll kill you before you reload. Go for the head."

"Are you sure we should separate?" Erika glanced at his leg.

"I'm sure," he said. "Stay off the tenements. It makes too easy a target. She can just blow the roof off like that." He snapped his fingers.

"I'm ready," she said.

He reached out and took her hand. It trembled slightly, and he gave it a squeeze. "Whatever happens..."

Erika took a handful of his greatcoat and kissed him deeply before he set off at a limping run across the street. Each step sent an agonizing spear of pain up his leg, breaking the focus of his powder trance. He moved from alley to alley, sticking to the deepest shadows out of the light of the full moon, eyes on the rooftops as he waited for the first attack.

A flicker of movement was his only warning before a fireball streaked out of the sky, rocketing past his head, and splashing against the wall behind him. He stumbled forwards, catching himself on the street curb, then running forward, forcing himself to ignore the pain that threatened to overwhelm him.

Blast after blast followed him down the street, flaring into the night sky, getting closer and closer to his heels. He tried to put on a burst of speed only to falter, ankle turning beneath him.

He looked up helplessly, snatching out his pistol and trying to pinpoint the moving shadow that threw fire from above.

A pistol blast made him jump. Erika's shot was low, hitting the lip of the wall just below Dienne, showering the street with masonry and forcing the Privileged to jump back.

Tamas limped to cover, then watched as a gout of flame lit up the ground just down the street. Dienne had Erika in her sights now.

He tore open the closest door, stumbling through the dark halls of the tenement until he found the stairs, and climbed them one agonizing floor after another. He battered open the door to come out on the flat roof, searching to get his bearings.

The night was silent. He crouched, creeping as fast as he dare, searching the surrounding rooftops. His noisy entrance had stopped Dienne from firing at Erika, but it had also given away his element of surprise. He kept his pistol raised in front of him, listening for any sound of movement, trying to hear above his own labored breathing.

Tamas's foot hit something, and he tried to step over it out of instinct. His leg didn't move. Nor, he found a moment later, did anything else.

He stood frozen in place, his hands suddenly trembling, unable even to pull the trigger of his pistol. Dienne emerged from the shadows of the rooftop only a dozen feet away, stepping into the moonlight, her gloved hands held high. One of her fingers twitched and Tamas's pistol was torn from his hand and thrown into the street below.

Tamas strained against the sorcery that held him. The helplessness of his position made him furious, fueling his strength, but even with his powder trance he could do nothing. Over Dienne's shoulder he saw a figure on the next rooftop over.

Damn it, Erika, he thought. She had ignored his advice to stay off the roof. He tried to will her to flee. She wouldn't be close enough to bluff Dienne, and he doubted she'd had time to reload her one pistol before Dienne could capture her as well.

"Finish it," Tamas grunted, using all his strength just to move his mouth. If she killed him now, Erika would see it a lost cause and flee.

Dienne shook her head. "You would like that, wouldn't you? No, I'm going to enjoy this. I'm going to kill you slowly, painfully, over the next several years. You and your companion, whoever the pit she is. I'll make you watch each other scream. I'll..."

"Oh, shut up," Tamas said.

Dienne looked startled.

A heavy clay shingle soared through the air and slammed into Dienne's shoulder with enough force to throw her to her knees. Dienne turned, her fingers twitching, and at this range Tamas could feel the sorcery she pulled into the world.

But her focus had been broken, her attention turned from him.

He surged forward, free of her spell, covering the distance between them in the blink of an eye. He broke her wrist first, then spun her away from Erika just to be sure. Tamas snatched her by the throat and lifted her above his head.

"You and your damned arrogance," he said. "It's going to get you killed some day."

He threw her from the roof, watching her body strike the cobbles with a sound like a hammer striking meat. She lay at an odd angle, staring upward at him, her neck almost certainly broken.

Tamas drew his knife and limped for the stairs.

With a Privileged, one always had to be sure.

Three days before his scheduled hearing Tamas was summoned to see General Seske.

He arrived half an hour early, feeling somewhat wary, and was made to wait in the sitting room outside Seske's office. He sat stiffly, hat in his hand, wearing his best dress uniform, and practiced the breathing techniques that Erika had taught him for fencing. Calm, she claimed, could be attained without black powder.

The magistrates and generals for his hearing had been appointed and Tamas's attempts to see any of them beforehand had been rebuffed. His appeals to General Seske—after his return from holiday—were dismissed. His letters to the Iron King had been ignored. Even Erika had been away with her family. He had not been able to see her for some time. He felt blind, betrayed, and entirely too vulnerable.

The clock struck the hour, and Tamas was left alone in the waiting room. Fifteen minutes stretched into forty-five before he was finally admitted.

General Seske sat behind his desk, fist beneath his chin, examining Tamas down the bridge of his nose with an annoyed expression. Colonel Westeven stood at ease beside him, a more welcoming smile on his face.

Tamas was not asked to sit.

"Good afternoon, General, Colonel. Captain Tamas reporting in."

Westeven seemed about to respond, but he was silenced by a glance from Seske. Seske watched him for several moments, allowing Tamas to stand at attention, before he spoke.

"Do you know why you're here, Captain?"

"I do not, sir."

"The hearing about your duel is in three days."

"Yes, sir, it is."

"I know it is, that's what I just said," Seske said peevishly. "Or rather, it was. The hearing has been cancelled."

Tamas frowned, not daring to hope. "Has it been rescheduled?"

"No. You will return home and await further orders. You are dismissed."

His hearing cancelled? Surely there was more to the story than that. "Sir," Tamas said, "May I know the details surrounding the hearing?"

"You may not."

Colonel Westeven bent over to General Seske. "He has the right, sir," he said gently.

Seske glared at Tamas before plucking an open letter from his desk. He produced a pair of reading glasses and lifted the letter, allowing Tamas to glimpse the broken seal of the king. Tamas's heart soared.

"To whom it may concern," Seske read aloud, "Hearing number seven four three five eight, regarding one Captain Tamas, has come to my attention. I myself pinned a medal on Captain Tamas eight years ago and therefore have a vested interest in the nature of his character. I have conducted multiple interviews with the captain and determined that he is beyond reproach. I consider the matter closed. He should be returned to active duty and his application to the rank of major reconsidered."

Seske lowered the letter. "It's signed by the king."

Several moments passed while Seske reread the letter silently to himself, as if still unconvinced by the contents. "Our esteemed monarch," he finally said, "pins a thousand medals on a thousand heroes every year. Why he took interest in you, I cannot fathom."

"I don't know, sir." Tamas sighed inwardly, a great weight lifted from his shoulders. He had thought the king had forgotten him, or even gone back on their agreement.

"Of course you don't know," Seske snapped. "You're a captain and a commoner. If this whole business is above my head, then it is certainly above yours." He took off his glasses, pointing them at Tamas like a weapon. "The king has practically ordered me to make you a major. I won't disobey that, but I don't have to like it, either. The paperwork will take many months. In the meantime, you'll be assigned to a garrison in the Black Tar Forest, well out of my sight."

"Thank you, sir. I understand, sir."

"Don't thank me. Whatever twist of fate or fancy has swayed the king will not happen again. My fellow officers and I will not suffer your ambition. You will be watched, Captain, and don't think you could ever hope to rise above the rank of major."

"I would never dream of it, sir."

"And don't be sarcastic with me. You will be watched, I say. Now get out of my office."

Tamas left from the room, glad to be away from Seske's ire, but paused in the hallway to allow himself a victorious smile. Colonel Westeven met him there a moment later, offering his hand and congratulations. Tamas shook with the colonel and then left the House of Nobles, with a spring back in his step.

He jogged down the front steps, pausing in the public square to look around at the organized chaos of the daily traffic, feeling confident in his career for the first time in months. He spread his arms, breathing in deep. Spring would arrive soon. Black Tar Forest was cold and dark in the spring, but it was better than having his career dashed to pieces. Come the summer they would prepare for another campaign and he'd be back in Gurla where he could hope for advancement.

"Captain Tamas."

The voice was sharp, like a whip. Tamas turned to find it belonged to a tall woman in her early forties, clothed in fine furs and standing beneath a frilled

parasol. Two young retainers flanked her at a respectful distance, wearing demure black suits with small swords at their waists.

The woman looked him up and down, much like a noble preparing to buy a race horse. He stared back at her, suddenly defiant. Who was this woman? What did she think she was doing, looking him over like a piece of meat?

"My lady," Tamas said, bowing hesitantly. "You have me at a disadvantage."

She didn't answer but rather approached him, walking slowly as she did a circuit around him. She was obviously a noble, and Tamas remembered that the king had done something similar to him on their last meeting. What was it about the nobility that made them treat the common people like cattle?

He felt his anger begin to rise. He did not deserve this. He did not need this. Not today of all days, when he had finally come away from a conflict with the nobility triumphant.

"What business," she finally said, halfway around her second circuit of him, "do you have with my daughter?"

"Excuse me?"

The woman came to stop in front of him. Her eyes were severe, her chin raised in a distasteful vein of superiority. Tamas thought he saw a hint of Erika in this woman, but it was difficult to say. "You heard me, Captain. I am the Lady Pensbrook, daughter of the duke of Leora, mother of the duchess-heir of Leora."

Nothing had prepared Tamas for this. He could see the resemblance now in the eyes. This woman was much taller than Erika, but she had similar ears, similar blond hair. He felt himself sweating, and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Their voices had not raised above a casual tone, and no one seemed to pay them any mind as they stared at each other in the public square.

"You're not a very good liar, Captain. I will ask once more, and I demand an honest answer."

Tamas balled his fists at his sides. The curl of her lip. The disdain. This woman already hated him and they had barely met. It made him want to scream. "I intend to marry her," Tamas said. "I intend to climb the ranks to field marshal, and then I will make her my wife, and there's nothing you can do to stop that."

"Nor would I." Lady Pensbrook's face softened immediately. Her sneer dissolved, her cheeks looked suddenly less severe. She gave him a soft smile that made her look exactly like Erika, and she continued, "I'm glad that's cleared up. Lord Pensbrook and I do not agree with all of Erika's decisions lately, but... I think you'll do quite well for her. Please close your mouth, Captain, you look like a fool."

Tamas snapped his jaw shut, then worked his tongue as he tried to come up with a response.

Lady Pensbrook turned away, twirling her parasol absently, and looked at him over her shoulder. "We've agreed that you needn't wait until field marshal to be an acceptable member of our family. General will do. Until then, I expect you to behave as a gentleman. Carry on, Captain."

She strode off, shadowed by her retainers. Tamas watched her go.

"You met my mother, I see," a voice said.

Erika stood next to Tamas at a casual distance. He felt her fingers brush his very lightly and then her touch was gone. He looked over to find her in a red dress

that matched the cuffs of Tamas's uniform and a parasol much like her mother's. It was the same dress she'd worn when they first met.

"I did," Tamas said. "I'm afraid I was a little tongue-tied."

"Most people are."

"I did not expect..."

"Her approval?" Erika finished.

Tamas nodded.

"I'm not entirely certain myself. She has a particular disdain for politics amongst the nobility. My grandfather calls it a rebellious streak, but if that's the case, she got it from him." Erika smiled, still not turning toward him. "She's insisted that we keep our public lives very separate for the next few years. Your courtship would stir up a great deal of contention in the Kez court."

Tamas felt his throat go dry. That was a facet to this whole thing that he could not ignore. She was still a Kez noble, and to the Kez a powder mage was worse than a dog.

"Will it really work, even once I'm a general?" Tamas asked.

"My grandfather thinks so, and he's the one who will pass on his title to me. That's all that matters. You're to be assigned to the Black Tar Forest, correct?"

"How did you know?"

She smiled. "I have a favor to ask of you while you're there."

"Anything."

"Not now. I'll tell you tonight."

"I thought we couldn't see each other."

She lifted her chin, still looking away from him, and seemed regal and cold. She spun her parasol the same way her mother had. "In public," she said. "In private... I expect you there at eight tonight."

"Where?"

She began to walk away, following after her mother, and he barely heard her response: "In your pocket."

Tamas considered her response a moment before checking his pocket. He withdrew a key, and then a carefully folded note. The key was labeled for a suite at the Goldtile Hotel, one of the finest hotels in Adopest. On the note was scribbled a brief message:

We have a lot of work to do to get you where you need to be.

—E

