

THE STAFF & THE SWORD



A DRAW OF
KINGS

PATRICK W. CARR



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To my editors at Bethany House,
Dave Long and Karen Schurrer:
To say that I couldn't have done this without you
is a ridiculous oversimplification.
You made me a better writer
and, Lord willing, will continue to do so.

And to Steve Laube:
Your unswerving commitment to tell me the truth
instead of what I wanted to hear
is why I love having you as my agent.

I hope we all get to work together again.



A HOUSE DIVIDED

DEEP WITHIN, ADORA CONTINUED to harbor the possibility that her uncle, King Rodran, might still live, but the pallid faces of those on the ship, especially Errol's, refuted all hope.

As always, Errol's presence drew her gaze as a lodestone drew iron, and the thought of him made her acutely aware of herself: the feel of her hair against her face, the way the fabric of her clothes caressed her skin as she moved, the warmth of her blood pulsing through her veins.

She resisted the urge to scan the deck for him. He would be at the stern, close to the rail. Seasickness, dosed at intervals by Tek's store of zingiber root, kept him at the rear of the ship, away from her bout with Rokha.

Knees flexed, Adora attempted to distribute her weight as evenly between front foot and back as skill and practice could contrive. Tucking a contrary strand of her golden blond hair behind one ear, she sighted along the wooden staves that served as her practice sword and circled her opponent, searching for an opening that didn't exist.

A DRAW OF KINGS

The wind, bitter with cold and grief, carried the tang of salt to where she stood. When she wet her lips, the taste of decay beneath the flavor of the waters of the Beron Strait filled her mouth. Errol's majority was still less than a year in his past, yet she, the only princess of Illustra, wavered between desiring his protection and wanting to safeguard him in turn. She started to laugh but held it back.

"Is something funny, Princess?" Rokha asked. Naaman Ru's raven-haired daughter stood two paces from her, a practice sword tracing lazy circles, like a snake waiting to strike. Her dark eyes, which usually blazed with hawklike intensity, were limned with smudges of grief and fatigue over the death of her father. Only the presence of Merodach, the watchman Rokha loved, managed to kindle her customary fire.

Adora moved to her right, testing her footing on the deck through her soft-soled boots. "Yes. I don't know whether to protect him or kiss him. He may be the strangest man I've ever met."

Rokha's soft chuckle misted the air. "You've led a sheltered life on your isle, Princess. The women of Basquon will tell you all men are strange—and they speak the truth—but mostly they are all strange in the same way. Errol is odd in his strangeness. He's seen more in the past year than most men could boast in a lifetime and has saved the kingdom twice under a burden that would crush most men, yet he still seems a boy in many ways."

The princess basked in the knowledge that Errol was hers before allowing a sigh to whisper from her lips. "The kingdom hardly treats him like a hero."

Rokha's dark eyes flared, making her resemble a bird of prey even more than usual. "They made him bait for Illustra's enemies." She spat across the deck. "There is steel in that man of yours that surprises even me." Rokha's full lips parted in a grin, and she chuckled deep in her throat. "And he has other skills, Princess. His lips are soft and his kisses stirring for one so young."

Adora knew this trick—it was Rokha's favorite—but even so, a spasm of jealous anger broke her concentration for an instant

before she could suppress it, and in that moment Rokha struck. The clack of swords sounded in a desperate staccato before Rokha landed a blow on Adora's shoulder. Again.

Adora held up a hand, flexed the arm. "That is a cheap trick."

Mirth melted away from Ru's daughter. "In battle there is alive and there is dead. That is all, Princess."

She shook her head in denial. "And how many will know to use Errol against me that way?"

"More than you think. You haven't made your love of him a secret. That was foolish."

For a moment she bristled, but the truth of Rokha's words couldn't be denied. She'd been rash—first to follow him, then to proclaim her love in Basquon. "He needs me, Rokha. How much can one person suffer?"

Rokha nodded. "True. I thought the priest's confession had broken him."

A fist closed around Adora's heart at the memory of Martin's revelations, how they had drained the life from Errol's eyes. She had never seen anyone still breathing appear so dead, yet some inspiration or circumstance in Merakh had restored him.

He smiled readily now, but Adora did not find herself reassured by his new, easy familiarity. Raised at court, she'd learned early to read the gestures and expressions nobles, churchmen, and courtiers used to hide the secrets locked within their hearts. Errol's dimpled smile held everything she'd once desired from him—warmth, affection, and love—but behind the deep cerulean of his eyes lurked a secret. She did not trust secrets, not with Errol, not after Martin stabbed her through the heart by announcing either Errol or Liam must die. She fumed, angry at her inability to pry Errol's plan from his lips.

The ship entered King's Port to the sound of Amos Tek calling for less sail. The captain maneuvered his charge past a pair of high-decked cogs manned by guards with crossbows.

Adora stumbled, her concern over Errol forgotten. Gusts of wind lifted oiled cloaks, revealing the livery of the men on those

ships, men who should have been wearing the red of kingdom guards. Instead, each wore royal blue with a slash of white across the chest. Duke Weir's colors. And the ships were closing in. She searched the royal compound on the cliffs above, darted a glance over the port rail, and hurried to starboard. The harbor swarmed with ships, all manned by sailors in those same colors. King's Port was blockaded.

What had happened?

She spun, making for the broad steps that led below, intent on warning Martin and the rest. They met her halfway, Karele and Rale in the lead. Their pinched expressions told Adora they too had seen Weir's men. They stampeded past her, heading back toward Amos Tek, drawing her in their wake.

On the aft deck, Martin peppered Tek with questions. "What's the meaning of this, Captain? Those are Weir's men."

Tek rolled his shoulders, but the planes of his face, grown hard at the sight of the blockade, belied the casual gesture. "They've bottled up the harbor, right enough."

Martin rubbed a beefy hand across his jowls. "A precaution?"

Tek shook his head. "I doubt it, by the sea, I do. There are other ships entering the harbor without attracting this attention."

Errol came forward from his spot on the rail. He brushed his fingers across Adora's cheek in passing, and the sensation brought warmth and chills to her skin.

"They know who we are," he said. "By now the conclave and the Judica realize we've survived the trip to Merakh."

Luis nodded his agreement. Martin turned to face Karele, head of the solis, one of those who claimed to hear Aurae, the spirit of Deas. "How were they able see us?"

If the presence of Weir's ships bothered Karele, the little man gave no sign. His large brown eyes remained calm, and no hint of alarm showed on his sharp features. "For some reason, Aurae has allowed us to be discovered."

"Why?" The question crackled in the air before Adora fully realized she'd asked it. A thread of panic wormed its way into her

heart. The Weir family wanted her. As the only surviving member of the royal family, Adora's hand would bestow legitimacy on the next king, and Weir meant to claim the throne.

Karele gave a brief shake of his head, the breeze ruffling his dark hair. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. I don't know."

"Then I suggest we get everyone below," Cruk said. His voice sounded like gravel being broken to dust. "If Weir is searching for us, let's make sure he doesn't find what he's looking for."

Luis demurred. "There's no need. As Errol has said, the duke knows we're here. If we are visible to those readers loyal to Weir, they've seen us coming for the last two weeks."

Cruk's hand moved to his sword. "I was afraid you'd say that." He squeezed his eyes shut. "You'd think with war on our doorstep we'd be wise enough not to fight each other." His heavy face wore a deep scowl, and his right hand clenched the pommel of the sword at his waist.

Martin waved a hand, and a measure of the tension in Cruk's stance eased.

"Let us see what the good duke's intentions may be," Martin said. His gesture took in the ships that surrounded them, and his face became somber. "Conflict will only serve his ends. We must reach the Judica."

Hemmed in, Tek ordered more sail furled to keep the wind from driving them into their escort. The ship on their starboard side, bristling with blue-coated soldiers armed with crossbows, glided closer. A tall man, his hair and beard dark with oil, hailed them. "You do not fly the colors of Illustra. Drop anchor, in the name of the regent." A cloaked and hooded figure stood behind him, leaning forward as if whispering directions.

Martin stepped to the rail, his face clouded. "Regent? What man styles himself regent at Erinon?"

The man in blue flushed, but his eyes narrowed at the tone of authority in Martin's voice. "Duke Weir rules until a king is chosen."

"And by what right does the duke assume regency?" Martin

asked. As he spoke, he opened his cloak to reveal his seal of office, proclaiming himself a benefice of the church.

The man bowed. "I crave your pardon, Excellency. The Judica installed Duke Weir as regent upon King Rodran's death."

Martin's lips formed what would have been a smile had his eyes not remained so very cold. "Ah, I have been away from the Judica on church business. I pray you, Captain, please give the order to allow us to proceed. I have news that must be delivered to the Judica as soon as possible."

The hooded figure behind the captain stepped around to address Martin. "Of that, I have no doubt, but I think it best if the captain and his men escort you personally to the isle."

The muted afternoon light did not penetrate the hood, but the voice held a self-satisfied tone. Adora suppressed a chill. Her status and authority had been altered by Rodran's death. In hundreds of years no princess had ever outlived the succession of Magis's line. Until now.

She drew herself up and approached the rail, in hopes the habit of obedience to the royal family would allow her to countermand the stranger's order. "Do you know who I am, Captain?" She paused for the captain's nod and reply—"Yes, Princess"—before continuing. "I thank you for your offer of passage, but I assure you we are capable of delivering ourselves to the isle and the Judica."

Amused laughter erupted from the hood of the captain's advisor, and freckled hands rose to doff the covering. "But you won't be going to the Judica, Princess—at least not yet." A shock of red hair above a cold blue-eyed stare stabbed shards of ice into her heart. "Your business is with the regent. The captain has been commanded to deliver you to the duke, and to him you will go."

Benefice Dane gave Martin a mocking bow. "I don't think you'll be surprised to learn you've been stripped of your orders and authority, *Pater*." He stressed the last word with laughter.

His gaze lingered a moment on Martin before moving to search the rest of the party. "Ah, there you are, Earl Stone, hiding behind the legitimacy of others as usual. I must say I was surprised to

find you'd survived your trip to Merakh." Rabid hunger showed in Dane's face, and he leaned toward Errol with an expression of longing. "I think the Judica will give you to me now. Once we've proven my charge against you, you will die."

Burly men with grappling hooks and rope hauled the boats together, straining until the hollow thump of their hulls struck a funeral sound, as though Rodran had died all over again. Adora crossed into the custody of Weir's men along with Errol, Martin, and Luis.

Benefice Dane laughed at the sight of Rale, Merodach, and the rest of their party lining the rail on Tek's ship, their eyes filled with violence. He turned to the captain, who tugged his beard with short, nervous jerks. "Pass the order to the other ships: keep these men on their ship and in the harbor until you hear from us."

As guards escorted the men to quarters below, Errol threw Adora a smile that was surely meant to be encouraging but only succeeded in emphasizing her vulnerability. She tried to go with them, but Dane's arm blocked her way, his smile lazy and indulgent. "Not you, Princess. You'll dine with me."

Adora straightened. She'd never been tall, but Rodran had taught her how to dominate a room despite her average stature.

The benefice fluttered a hand at her indignation. "Please spare me your royal displeasure. Duke Weir rules now, and soon the Judica and conclave will confirm him as king."

Adora laughed, filling her expression with scorn and derision. "You think the cast will fall to Duke Weir? Any number of men could be chosen."

Dane gave her a smile one might bestow on a dim-witted child. "I'm surprised to find you so naïve, Princess. Duke Weir is the most powerful man in the kingdom. There is no alternative."

Adora bit the inside of her cheek. "The cast will have to be confirmed. The Judica knows Earl Stone is alive."

Benefice Dane stepped forward, his eyes ravenous. She flinched as he brushed her cheek in a gesture that was a caricature of Errol's caress. "Earl Stone will be executed for usurping the Judica's

authority. His trial is a mere formality. He will have the chance to make himself useful to the duke beforehand, however, as a way to offer penance.”

She backed away until the rail stopped her.

Dane followed. His warm breath moved across her face, heavy with the scent of wine and cloves. “Don’t fret, Princess. Unlike the omne, you will find your station is secure.”

Blood dropped so quickly to her stomach the ship reeled and black spots danced in her vision. “What do you mean?”

Dane favored her with a tight-lipped smile, basking in her discomfort. “You will be queen, Princess.” The benefice’s smile grew, baring his teeth. “Oh yes, Duke Weir knows his only son lies dead in Merakh. You have much to thank me for. Originally, he blamed you almost as much as that puffed-up little peasant boy you’ve favored. He was going to have you both killed, but I persuaded him that your position and”—he leered—“other attributes were too valuable to waste. Duke Weir will make you the mother of the next dynasty.”

She backed away. His threats couldn’t be true. The archbenefice and primus would never allow it. “The duke already has a wife.”

A look of profound regret twisted the benefice’s features into a facade of sorrow. “I’m afraid the duchess has suffered an unfortunate accident. She fell down a flight of stairs. Oddly enough, it happened shortly after the duke learned his son had died and you were returning.”

Horror threatened to overwhelm her. She clenched her hands into fists. They trembled anyway. “You’re insane.”

“Possibly.” Dane shrugged, his smile remaining intact. “I don’t think you’ll find Duke Weir to be a particularly gentle lover. It seems that despite my best efforts, he still considers you at least partially responsible for his son’s death. But be of good cheer, Princess. At least your fate will be better than your paramour’s. Once the Judica has convicted Errol Stone of tampering with the succession, the duke plans something truly imaginative and lingering for him.”

When the ship glided into dock, Adora spied more of Duke Weir's men lining the piers. The sight of the blue-clad men affronted her as if the change in attire had been designed to expunge the memory of her uncle.

When the guards brought Errol and the others from below-decks, she edged close to Martin as they crossed over from the ship to dry land. "How many men does Weir have?"

The ex-benefice shrugged, but lines of worry creased his bluff face. "By all accounts, the duke has nearly fifty thousand under arms."

Adora tried to school her features, but shock pounded through her chest like a second heartbeat. The garrisons of the kingdom totaled one hundred thousand, but few of those men could be pulled back to the Green Isle. The troops were needed to safeguard the provinces bordering Merakh and the steppes. Weir could exert total authority over the island with half the men under his command.

She looked up to see Martin watching her. "I see you've grasped the problem, Your Highness. The duke may not be Deas's choice for king, but he may end up being the Judica's. The idea of martyrdom is stirring in the tales and histories, but few men have the constitution for it in the present."

"We are undone, Martin," she whispered. Desperation constricted her throat.

"Not yet, Highness," the priest said. "Deas has surprised me too much of late for me to surrender to hopelessness. And do not forget Errol."

At the mention of him, her heart skipped. She turned to spy him some ten paces back under heavy guard.

Martin nodded. "The hand of Deas is on him. Would that I had known it sooner."

They ascended the long winding incline toward the imperial compound. Absence and circumstance made the familiar lines of the palace strange, as if the next turn might place her in a location she wouldn't recognize.

A DRAW OF KINGS

Once in the palace, the guards escorted them toward the king's—she corrected herself, the regent's—private audience chamber, where they separated them—most leading Errol, Martin, and Luis away while the rest hemmed her in.

Massive doors swung open. The echo of her footsteps warned Adora before she lifted her head to survey the nearly empty hall. Long stone benches to each side were devoid of the usual crowd of courtiers and functionaries, but at the far end, Weir filled the chair on the dais, flanked by eight blue-garbed soldiers. A jolt shot through her chest. Where were the watchmen? Granted, Weir was not king, but as regent he should have been guarded by the king's elite.

Adora noted the closed ranks of the soldiers and shook her head in disgust. Her uncle had never used more than four watchmen at a time. Perhaps it was a sign of Weir's vanity or insecurity. Either way, she chose to view it as weakness. She would not let him see her tremble.

Duke Weir, regent of all Illustra, beckoned her forward.

2

A CAST IN THE DARK

A HARD KNOT OF RESOLVE formed in Errol's midsection as the guards led him away from Adora. Benefice Dane remained with the princess, and the soldiers didn't appear to be in the mood to provide information. Martin and Luis walked ahead of him, their feet barely clearing the ground before shuffling forward.

Errol coughed to clear his throat. "Where do you think they're taking us?"

The butt of a spear in his back propelled him onto the granite floor. Errol rolled with the fall, came to his feet facing his antagonist.

A hint of a smile played around the guard's mouth, suggesting a desire to strike again. "No talking."

Errol rolled his shoulders, his hands grasping for a staff he didn't have.

They left the palace compound and walked across the broad expanse toward the watch barracks. Errol craned his neck to peer at the openings and windows as if he'd never been to the isle before, but despite his efforts, no trace of men in black could be

seen. Not one watchman transited the grounds on the kingdom's business. When they passed through the large archway leading to the practice grounds of the watch, the clash of swords came, and a knot of tension between his shoulder blades eased. The watch remained.

A cold gust deepened his shock as they entered the courtyard and he saw men in Weir's livery facing each other with naked steel. A broad-shouldered man at the far end towered over them, his smile cruel. Here and there among the ranks, splotches of red discolored the blue uniforms.

Errol hadn't realized he'd stopped walking until a guard prodded him forward. They passed through the yard to the sound of strike and riposte, then moved into the quarters of the watch. The halls teemed with men whose faces were unknown to him. Of Liam, Captain Reynald, and the rest of his friends, there was no sign.

At a signal from the leader of their escort, the men around Errol separated him from Martin and Luis. A net of swords surrounded him, leaving him no choice but to watch Martin and Luis disappear into the confines of the barracks.

In moments Errol and his guards entered the sprawling complex that headquartered the church. By habit, he made the turn toward the broad granite stairs that led down toward the halls and offices of the conclave, but instead the guards directed him toward the cathedral proper, where the Judica met to decide the fate of the kingdom.

Were they going to try him immediately?

But they turned aside, and the hallways and staircases grew smaller until they entered a long corridor populated with plain wooden doors: the postulates' wing. Hundreds of men, young or old, who wished to take orders could have been housed there, but the sound of their footsteps and the stale smell of the air told him the rooms were empty.

The guards shoved Errol into an empty cell close to the middle of the hallway, then locked the heavy door. He grimaced. His

cell contained even fewer comforts than the quarters on Tek's ship. Against one wall lay a cot with a hard pallet and a small blanket. Opposite that was a small desk and chair with a candle. He struck flint to light the candle, watching as the flame grew in the dead air, tapering to a point a handsbreadth above the wick.

He settled himself to wait.



Martin followed Luis down a broad granite stairwell through air chilled by the assault of winter cold enough to raise gooseflesh on his skin. They passed a guard station, a cavernous room populated by heavily cloaked men who dined at rough oak tables or sharpened weapons. A few of the guards paused to spare them a glance. One gave a raucous laugh. "About time to let the headsman thin out the populace a bit."

They marched down a long hallway lined with doors showing barred portholes and narrow slits for food and water. Through the bars Martin caught glimpses of black-robed watchmen. Farther on he stumbled at the sight of a benefice behind one of those stout doors, still wearing the deep red of his ceremonial robes, and later, a flash of a blue reader's cloak in a cell completed his grief.

They turned a corner, and the parade of colors continued. The guard hadn't jested; every cell they passed held an unwilling occupant.

Around another corner, light from the last torch faded, forcing them to continue into deepening gloom. The echo of bootheels against the floor seemed louder, and it became difficult to see. Rough hands propelled him with Luis through an open door into a cell. The door closed with an echoing boom, bringing darkness so thick it repudiated any memory of light. The smell of must and ancient decay filled Martin's nose.

"Unexpected," Luis said. His voice sounded hollow in the confines of their prison.

Martin grunted in the darkness, the tenor strange to his own ears. "Captivity hasn't lessened your gift for understatement, my

friend. I am a fool. I should have at least suspected Weir would attempt to usurp the throne upon Rodran's death."

They shuffled toward the hint of light that came through the small barred grill in their prison door. Martin slid down the rough-cut granite wall to seat himself, trying not to think about what might be on the floor. Cold stone sucked the heat from his back through the thick wool of his cloak. His thoughts roiled like a boiling pot. "Why didn't Auae warn us?"

A chuckle that failed to disturb the air in their cell preceded Luis's reply. "I remember being impatient with Karele's refrain about how the solis served Auae and not the other way around. Now I begin to understand his meaning." Mist from his sigh ghosted across Martin's vision.

"I am too new to this, old friend. In the last six months the primacy of lots and the unassailability of centuries-old doctrine of the church have both been overthrown. I find myself without what we believed to be the foundations of our faith."

Martin grunted as he tested the strength of the door. "Weir is foolish in the extreme to squander the kingdom's power in a fight for the throne. The Merakhi and Morgols will come flooding across our borders as soon as winter breaks."

"If he is foolish and we are his prisoners, what does that make us?" Luis asked. His wry tone blunted the sting of his words.

"Dangerous," Martin said. "If they bring us before the Judica, the truth of what we saw in Merakh would be enough to send Weir to the headsman."

Silence greeted him for a moment before Luis spoke. "They will not bring us before the Judica, my friend. They dare not. Weir fears discovery. They will keep us here until they are sure of their power, and then they will kill us."

Luis's dour pronouncement stood at odds with the note of abstraction in his voice. Something besides the likely outcome of their fate wandered through his friend's thoughts. Now that Sarin Valon was dead, Luis Montari possessed the second finest mind in the conclave, behind Primus Sten.

“Something more troubles you.”

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light from the door grate, Martin thought he saw his friend shake his head in the gloom.

Luis sighed. “I forget sometimes how well you know me. It is the same question that has bothered me for months, and I am no closer to finding an answer. Why did the cast to reveal our future king fail? Despite my protests to the contrary, the preliminary cast in wood should have foretold the draw in stone.” He flung his hands up in surrender. “Yet the query in wood appears to have succeeded while a cast of stones, which should have been incontestable, failed. If the account of this time is ever written, Martin, I will be recorded as the reader who failed in the most important task in the history of the conclave.”

The depth of Luis’s self-doubt echoed his own, but he had few words to offer, for the lore and training of the conclave lay outside his expertise. Martin sighed. “You were born for your craft. No reader outside of Enoch Sten possesses greater skill at discerning the question. What did you ask?”

“It was always the same. Who will be king? I held the thought of the *soteregia* in my head for years.”

Martin nodded. In all the writings of the church and the conclave, the king was referred to as *soteregia*, the title Magis earned for himself by taking the crown and becoming Illustra’s savior through his death.

Since he could not comprehend the workings of the cast, Martin offered no succor for Luis’s failure, turning his efforts instead to diverting him. “If you could cast now, what question would you ask?”

His friend’s eyes might have twinkled in the dim light as he reached into the pockets of his cloak and withdrew a pair of wooden cubes.

Surprise and suspicion warred within Martin. “They left you with blanks? Are they so foolish?”

Luis shrugged. “They’re soldiers . . . not churchmen. They considered the blade the bigger threat.” He paused. “What

is it we most desire to know?” Luis rose to peer through the small barred window of their cell. Martin had done so earlier. Little could be seen. A man could conceal himself in the hall just outside without their knowledge. “Does he still live?” Luis whispered.

He nodded. Names were unnecessary. The two men who mattered most to the kingdom’s survival were Errol and Liam, the lots Luis pulled times without number for his cast for king, and they knew Errol was imprisoned.

But did Liam still live? A whisper in his mind told him he would have known if Liam had died, but doubt warred against the thought. He stared through the dusk of their cell at the blocks in Luis’s hands. “You can’t cast without a knife.”

“I can . . .”

A noise like the scrape of cloth against stone froze him, and he held his hand out for silence. He rose to press his ear against the barred opening of their door, counting fifty beats of his heart before putting his mouth next to Luis’s ear.

“There may be guards in the hall,” he breathed. “Keep your voice low, but tell me.”

Luis nodded assent and pointed with his free hand toward the walls of their prison. “The roughness of the stone and mortar will suffice to grind the lots to shape.”

Martin stared. “Deas have mercy. How long will that take?”

His friend shrugged in the darkness. “Hours, but it has been done before.”

Luis’s suggestion daunted him. A reader held the question and its possible answer within his mind for the duration he crafted a lot, usually taking only ten to twenty minutes for a single sphere—after which, the reader could stop to clear his mind of distractions before repeating the process with the same question and another answer. Readers trained for years to extend their ability to produce lots with shorter breaks, but this . . . ? “Do you know what you’re suggesting? You will have to hold the question and answer for hours.”

Luis stiffened as if he could redeem his inadequacy. “I failed before. If I must, I will hold the question for days.”

If the *secondus* had any say in it, they would know if Liam was safe. Only Deas’s will could block the truth. He squeezed Luis’s shoulder. “I’ll keep watch at the door.”

A pause in the air, as if the entire prison held its breath, settled over their cell as Luis stilled. Then he took a cube of wood no wider than half the length of his hand and scraped it against a seam of mortar.

The scratch fractured the silence, and Martin winced. A second later he chided himself. This far from the guardroom, only screams would alert Weir’s men.



Endeavoring to treat the armed men at her side not as guards, but as her escort, Adora moved forward, her back tense, to face Weir. He smiled. With wide-spaced brown eyes and a cleft chin, the most powerful man in *Illustra* would have been considered handsome by some, perhaps even herself at one time, but perpetual arrogance had twisted his features. She doubted whether the duke could gaze upon anyone or anything without the look of condescension he now wore.

His hair, cropped just above his eyebrows, held most of the light brown of its youth. She amended her assessment. Some women would consider him attractive still, but she fought to keep from clenching her fists in disgust under the baleful gaze of his regard.

“Welcome home, Princess.” Weir didn’t bother to stand or even offer a bow from his seat.

At the bottom of the dais, Adora was forced to look up to meet Weir’s eyes. “Your hospitality fails to warm me.”

His mouth compressed at the absence of his title, and he nodded to the guard on her left. Her head whipped to the side, and her cheek burned from the impact, but days of sparring with *Rokha* had inured her to such small hurts. Her eyes remained dry, but she allowed her hatred to blaze in them.

The duke's gaze widened a fraction at her silence, but he settled himself deeper into his seat. "You will remember to address me as *Your Grace*, Princess."

Laughter bubbled from her before she could prevent it. "And when did I become your inferior, that I should address you so, *my lord*?"

Weir glowered at the insult and flicked a finger. The guard on her right struck her other cheek. Adora straightened from the blow, fixed her smile on her face. Did he think to break her with such treatment? She savored the surprised look on the face of her guards.

"You became my inferior in name when your uncle did Illustra the favor of dying." The duke's eyes flared with anger. "You became my inferior in truth when my son died at the hands of your peasant."

Adora tossed her head. "Your son died a victim of his own pride and arrogance in the hall of the ilhotep. That *peasant*, as you call him, saved the kingdom while your son preened through the palace like a peacock in love with his reflection." She let the scorn she felt twist her face into an expression of contempt. "Do you intend to kill me, Weir?"

Weir's mouth compressed into a line, and she took the blow across her temple. Spots swam in her vision.

Blood rushed into Weir's face. "What makes you think I would find you deserving of such favor? You owe a debt to my house, Princess. Since I currently have no heir, you will spend your days repaying that debt, with interest. After I deem it paid, we shall see what kind of end can be devised for you."

"I think you should make for your province now, Your Grace." She added the title not out of fear, but from a simple desire to finish speaking. "The hand of Deas is on Earl Stone. You will find yourself outflanked by circumstances beyond your ability to predict or understand."

The strike across her cheek took her by surprise, and she stumbled.

“Let that be a lesson, Princess,” Weir said. “Every breath you take from this point is mine to give. Every moment you have without pain or punishment for the death of my son is by my whim.” Weir nodded to the guards. “Escort the princess to her quarters. I want a pair of soldiers outside her room at all times.” He waved a hand in dismissal, then signaled the guards to a halt. “Before you leave, Princess, there is a piece of information you could provide that might make your stay here in the palace more pleasant.”

Weir’s posture betrayed no hint of tension; if anything, his relaxed pose suggested his change of conversation carried mere idle curiosity, but the gleam in his eyes told her a different tale. They had at last come to the point of his questioning and threats.

She gave the briefest incline of her head. “What might that be . . . Your Grace?”

A smirk creased his face, and his gaze became avid. “Rumor has it that your uncle made use of a nuntius just before he died.” He shrugged, no doubt in an attempt to appear casual, but his shoulders jerked as if he wrestled. “Yet there is no record of a nuntius sent to him in the logs of their office. Doubtless you would wish to hear your uncle’s dying words and there may be some knowledge he would wish passed on to me, his successor. Who was his messenger?”

She did not need to feign surprise. News of a nuntius taking her uncle’s dying words stunned her, and the room wavered in and out of focus. She shook her head, both to clear her vision and to respond. “My uncle did not trust the nuntia. He seldom used them. He would certainly not give his dying words to one of the crows.”

Weir’s mouth tightened. After a moment he forced it to relax. “Perhaps you will recall the name of the king’s nuntius later, after encouragement.” He waved his hand at last in dismissal. “We’ll talk anon, Princess. I have a kingdom to run and a coronation to prepare. Oh, I’ve taken the liberty of assigning my daughter, the lady Sevra, to be your chief lady-in-waiting. I’m sure you remember her. She’ll be your constant companion.”

Adora walked between the guards to her quarters, her feet finding the way without direction. She could hardly forget Lady Sevra. In the duke's daughter all the haughtiness and arrogance of Weir and his son had been distilled to purity without the slightest hint of compassion or mercy.

They entered the portion of the palace containing the royal family's personal quarters. Adora grieved the absence of any familiar faces among the staff who walked the halls. She sighed. Weir's suspicious nature would allow for no less than a complete purge. She ascended a broad spiral staircase to the upper floors, then moved down a hallway wide enough to hold ten men abreast to the large double doors of her private quarters. One of the guards stepped forward and opened the door for her, the first sign of deference she'd seen, admitting her to her own waiting room.

Sevra stood waiting. The duke's daughter, gangly and fierce, gazed at her with a pair of ladies she could not recall seeing around the palace before. Doubtless Weir had imported them from his provincial stronghold.

The duke's daughter smiled, and for a moment Adora felt again the chill wind from the Beron Strait. With a flick of her wrist, Sevra signaled her ladies, who came forward. Too late, Adora noticed the riding crop in Sevra's hand and surmised her intention. Hands strong enough to belong to milkmaids clamped her arms.

Adora allowed the scorn she felt to narrow her glance, used her anger to stifle the quiver that threatened to rob her voice of its strength. "Have a care, lady. My memory is long, and your father is not yet king."

Sevra hesitated but then straightened, as if ashamed of her momentary weakness. "My brother is dead because you chose to consort with that peasant." She ran the tip of her crop along Adora's jawline, the leather smooth and cold to the touch. "You are nothing but a strumpet, a gutter woman, with your base desires that you misname love." She smiled, and her voice dipped to a purr. "Father has given your discipline into my hands. I will

train you as I would a reluctant brood mare.” She nodded to the women, who forced Adora around.

Sevra’s hand yanked Adora’s cloak from her shoulders, the fabric scraping across her neck. Then the duke’s daughter ripped her shirt, exposing her back.

Sevra’s mouth rested against Adora’s ear. “Such beautiful skin, strumpet. It’s a shame, really, that Father has forbidden me to mark you until you’ve given him an heir, but that won’t save you. You’re about to discover how much pain I can inflict without leaving a scar.”

The crop whistled before it fell across her back to lace her skin with fire. She jerked and for a moment managed to pull one arm free. She doubled her fist and punched the nearest lady in the nose before a blow like a hammer to her stomach doubled her over.

Sevra’s lash fell again, and Adora’s arm was caught once more. “Be still, little princess.” Her voice cracked like a whip. “Learn to accept your penance with such royal reserve as you can muster, and perhaps I will shorten your punishment.”

Adora knew Sevra spoke the simple truth. Yet she realized with a clarity that squeezed her insides with fright that she must fight. There would be no going back if she surrendered. One act of concession would surely lead her to ever greater acts of submission until Sevra owned her. She did not have to win. Indeed, she could not. The two women who held her arms were each stronger than she, and even if she managed to break free, one cry of alarm would bring the guards stationed outside the door.

Adora lifted her leg and kicked the other lady in the stomach. Once again she was free. She jumped and twisted, taking the blow intended for her gut on the thigh. As she descended she head-butted the woman on the nose. Blood spurted across her face.

Before the first woman could catch her, Adora launched herself at Sevra. The duke’s daughter gaped as if the princess had turned into something unrecognizable, and she shrank away, eyes wide. Adora managed to land a blow between Sevra’s eyes that dropped the fiend to her knees.

Then the women were upon her, their weight bearing her to the floor, their fists pounding into her until the blows forced her to curl into a ball. The pointed toe of a lady's boot joined in after a moment, and Adora covered her head and chest.

"Courtesan! Strumpet! How dare you strike your better!" Sevra punctuated her screams with kicks to her legs and arms. The door creaked and for a moment the blows stopped. "Get out of here! The affairs of the duke are not your business."

Then the beating began again. A kick landed between her hands and the room went black.



Less than an hour after Errol entered the postulate's cell, the door opened to admit Benefice Dane, his blue eyes glittering with malice, his grin splitting the face under the crop of red hair, showing full white teeth. "I see you are surprised to see me, boy."

Dane gave Errol an indulgent smile. "There are pressing duties that require our attention." He gave a theatrical shrug. "Alas, the business of the church compels us to ever greater efforts on her behalf."

Errol didn't rise, but despair bubbled behind the mask he made of his face. No trace of reason or pity marked the benefice's demeanor. Only the fact Duke Weir hoped to use Errol in some way kept him alive.

Dane crooked a finger at the door, where two hooded figures waited. They entered, knives drawn.

"I find myself in your debt, Earl Stone," Dane said. "Your return to Erinon has bolstered my argument before the duke that every remaining member of the Judica and the conclave should be tested for their loyalty."

Errol forced himself to speak past his revulsion. "It is unlawful for the church to cast against its own."

Dane's smile grew. "It was unlawful, true, but it seems that Duke Weir's ascension has provided those who remain in the

Judica the motivation required to change the law.” He neared until Errol could smell the sour wine on his breath. “Once those remaining in the Judica and conclave have passed their test, we will turn our attention to hunting down the pretender.”

Pretender? Someone else had laid claim to the throne? “Who is it the duke fears so much?”

Dane shrugged away the question. “We have not yet discovered his identity, but when the purity of the conclave is established we will find him, along with those of the watch who think to support him, and root them out of their hiding places.”

Errol coughed to hide his surprise. Dane didn’t know the results of Luis’s cast. More, Liam must have survived Weir’s coup.

With a snap of his fingers, the benefice signaled the men in hoods, who disappeared into the hallway and then returned, each carrying a large crate of pine blanks. Errol sighed. Dane meant to cull the Judica and the conclave without delay, but it would take days to cast so many lots.

The benefice pulled several sheets of parchment from his robes and showed the first one to the hooded men, who nodded and began carving, their hands moving with the fluid motions of those who’d exercised their art for years. Desperation welled in Errol. If Weir and Dane felt compelled to test everyone, there must be some remnant still loyal to Illustra, men willing to risk their lives to save the kingdom from Weir.

Errol could not allow the cast to proceed. That they used him at all meant that even these two readers were not completely trusted. Could he turn the duke’s distrust to his advantage? Possibly. If he refused to verify the cast, Dane would be less than sure of the results and only a fool killed his allies.

He looked up to see the benefice eyeing him with amusement. “We hold the princess. Failure to cooperate would prove . . . unpleasant.”

Inside he raged. Dane held his aid captive. Once the Judica and conclave were tested, the duke would force him to confirm the read for Liam’s location. There had to be something he could

do. Adora would never forgive him if he sacrificed the kingdom to save her.

If he sacrificed her to save Illustra, he would never forgive himself.

If only Karele were there. The head of the solis had shown himself superior to the conclave. That thought brought Errol up short. It hadn't been Karele. The former Morgol captive had said so himself. It had been Auras working through him.

Which only made sense. The book of Magis said Auras, the spirit of Deas, was knowable. And Errol believed it. Could someone besides the head of the solis call upon Auras?

The readers had almost completed their lots. Errol floundered. How did one call upon Auras? Karele had never explained.

In the vault of his mind, he blindly cried out to Deas, Eleison, and Auras.

Nothing happened. Only a puff of wind swirled through the crack under the door, lifting a bit of sawdust from the floor. The readers continued to sand the first pair of lots they would use to test some reader's loyalty, while Dane wore his triumph like a jackal over his kill.

The lots went into the drawing bags. *Oh, Deas.* He hoped Adora would forgive him. The men drew, tallied their results before passing the lots in turn to Errol. He turned them in the light of the lantern. "This one says *Traitor.*" He gave the lot back to the reader who cast it, then read the other one. "This one says *Loyal.*"

Dane's brows, red like his hair, furrowed over his aristocratic nose, but the smile of triumph remained. The readers drew again. Errol looked at the writing. It seemed unfamiliar. His time in the conclave had been short, but he'd thought he'd seen an example of every reader's script. These readers were unknown to him. "Loyal. Traitor."

Dane shrugged, but his smile slipped.

The third draw swapped the results again. Traitor. Loyal. When the fourth draw changed the results once more, Dane confronted the readers.

“What is the meaning of this?”

The reader on the left spoke, his voice dusty, unfamiliar. “I don’t know, Benefice. But he tells the truth, we are reading the same.”

Errol stood. “You’re not from the conclave.”

Dane pointed at him. “Is he doing this?”

The reader shook his head. “An omne does not have the power to confound the draw.”

Errol couldn’t help but smile. “Maybe the duke’s readers lack the proper training to cast, Benefice Dane. Of course the use of unlawful readers would explain the duke’s vast wealth. Perhaps if he petitions the rightful king, he’ll be granted some measure of mercy.”

Dane confronted him with a snarl. “Are you doing this?”

Errol allowed all of his joy to show in his smile. “No.”

The benefice snapped his fingers at the two readers. Ten minutes later, their lots confirmed what Errol had spoken. Led by Dane, they left.

Errol’s heart exulted in his triumph—and somehow in the victory of Deas.



Hours passed. Martin kept his ear to the door while Luis, head bowed and eyes unseeing, turned and scraped without ceasing. Martin’s sense of time became confused. Finally, Luis’s hand on his shoulder startled him, though his eyes were still open.

“The first one is done.”

Creases lined Luis’s face, and sweat beaded on the dome of his bald head despite the chill, and his eyes appeared even deeper set.

“Is it so difficult, then?” Martin asked.

He nodded. “The concentration required is no more than for an ordinary cast but must be held without interruption. I can assure you, stone-ground lots will never come into favor in the conclave. My shoulders ache.”

Martin sighed. They were so close, but the effort would be wasted if fatigue ruined the cast. “Rest, my friend. We appear to have all the time you will need.”

A DRAW OF KINGS

Luis nodded and slumped down the wall to sit with his head on his arms. Soft snores echoed in the cell moments later. Martin slid down next to him and pulled Luis toward him so his friend would not fall in his slumber.

The sound of footsteps woke him, and he jerked. Luis came awake, rubbing his shoulders and wincing. A sneeze and a clank of metal just outside their cell brought him to his feet, his hands groping the air. In the gloom a tin plate came through, filled with water. There was no food.

Martin pushed his face against the small barred window. "Guard, what time is it?"

Rough laughter answered him. "Morning or evening," the guard said. "What does time matter to you?"

"I wish to know whether to offer the prayers for lauds or vespers."

"Ha. You and all those other churchmen caught in your own web. Do you think your prayers will make it to Deas from here?"

"Deas is everywhere," Martin said without anger. "If you tell me the time of day, I will pray for you."

Silence greeted his request for a moment.

"It is evening. Say your vespers."

The footsteps moved away.

He turned his attention to the water. It held the same musty smell as the air in their prison, but other than that it seemed safe enough. He took a sip, then drank half.

"Here."

Luis drained the tin, and when the guard's footsteps receded from their hearing, Luis took the other blank and began grinding.

Hours slipped by, measured by the increments in which Luis ground a cube into a sphere. When, wan and lined by the effort, he held it up to the light, Martin rejoiced. "Circumstances have taught me to doubt everything now, my friend. Draw and let Deas's truth be known."

Luis dropped the lots into his oversized cloak pocket with a soft clack, shook the garment, and drew. He rotated the wood

against the faint light, squinting with the effort. Then he nodded. Eleven more times he drew before his smile blazed like a torch in their cell.

“He lives.”

For a brief instant, Martin’s heart leapt. Illustra could still be saved if they could somehow free Errol. If they could determine whether he or Liam should be king. His joy faded as he tallied up all the *ifs*.

Boots thundered in the hallway, coming for them. “Quickly, hide the lots.”

The door flew open and guards entered, steel drawn. Lantern light filled their cell, and Martin shielded his eyes against the glare, but not before he saw a hole in the back wall and furtive movement beyond it. They’d been heard.

“Search them.”

Martin knew that voice. He’d spent decades despising the self-indulgence of its owner. He lowered his hands and squinted against the light. “Benefice Weir.”

Duke Weir’s brother didn’t bother to reply. Two guards ran hands up and down his clothing, searching. Another pair copied their movements with Luis. When they got to his cloak, one of the guards thrust his hand in and pulled out the lots. The smile Benefice Weir bestowed on Luis reduced his eyes to slits. “Thank you, reader. Your information is timely.”

Martin kept his face neutral as he faced the benefice. “And what information would that be?” He didn’t trouble himself to add Weir’s title.

The benefice’s eye twitched. “Lowborn priests are tiresome, always forgetting your manners. I refer to the identity of the pretender who thinks to challenge my brother for the throne.”

Martin laughed while his mind raced across his conversation with Luis. Had they mentioned names? “Interesting supposition. I don’t seem to recall knowing any pretenders—outside of the obvious one, of course.”

Weir laughed in return. “You were always so impressed with

your own cleverness, Arwitten.” He turned to the guards. “Fetch him. Let the former benefice hear his words.”

The guards left and returned a moment later with a man between them, thin, with a receding hairline and a hooked nose, his cloak emblazoned with the red-stitched scroll of a church messenger.

Martin’s insides clenched. A church messenger would be able to recite every word uttered within their hearing. *Oh, Deas*. Had they mentioned names?

Weir addressed him. “Nuntius, discharge all you’ve heard.”

Inside his chest, Martin’s heart hammered against the restraint of his ribs. If Weir discovered Liam’s identity, the boy would be hunted with all the resources at the duke’s disposal. Casts might be diverted by Aurae’s power, but if Liam remained in the city, enough money would buy his location.

The nuntius, his eyes devoid of thought, spoke in a low monotone, extended gaps revealing those times Martin and Luis had whispered or been out of earshot. His guts knotted as the messenger replayed the conversation about the cast. The nuntius imparted the last of the conversation and stilled. The knot in Martin’s chest slipped away, and he took a deep breath. Liam was safe. When the messenger’s eyes returned to awareness, Weir gaped. “Where’s the rest?”

The nuntius shook his head. “That is the conversation in its entirety, Your Excellency.”

Weir’s mouth worked as he tried to find words. “That can’t be all, blast you. The name, Nuntius, I need the name.”

The messenger’s eyes grew round and he stammered. “I . . . I’m sorry, Your Excellency. If I repeated no name, it’s because they didn’t use one.”

Weir flicked a finger, and one of the guards slammed the nuntius against the wall so hard his eyes went out of focus. “I am displeased. You were to listen until they mentioned the name of the pretender and then summon us.”

The church messenger tried to prostrate himself. “I did what

you asked, Excellency. I can only recite their conversation, not control it. Please, forgive me.”

Weir glowered. “Of course I forgive you. I must. I am a benefice in the church, after all, but forgiveness without penance is useless. Guards, find him a cell.”

The nuntius’s eyes bulged. “For how long?”

Weir shrugged. “Forever.”

The benefice turned his attention to Luis. “What was the outcome of the cast, reader?”

Luis shook his head. “The archbenefice, the primus, or the Judica has the authority to compel the answer from me. A single benefice does not.”

Blood turned Weir’s face crimson. “In this place I am Deas. Do you hear me?”

Martin kept his voice level with an effort. If he responded to Weir’s anger in kind, he and Luis might well end up on the rack. “Only a joint decree from the king and the archbenefice may put a reader or priest to the question, Excellency. It has not been done since Magnus’s time.”

“Times change,” Weir snarled and turned to Luis. “If you will not disclose the cast, reader, there is someone who will. The omne is also our guest, as is the princess.”

Luis smiled. “He can only read the lots, Excellency. He cannot tell you the question that was cast.”

Weir laughed. “Weakly played, reader. The peasant has been in your confidence since the beginning, and he loves the princess. If you will not reveal the name, perhaps he can.”

3

TAKEN

COLD WOKE ADORA to a room bereft of light or warmth. Sevrá and her ladies had withdrawn. The polished stone of the floor pressed against skin laced with welts and bruises. She pushed herself up, gasping with pain as tortured muscles trembled and protested against the movement. Limping to the fireplace, she struck steel and flint into the tinder until a blaze started. For long moments she measured by shuddering breaths, she nurtured her flesh with the feeble warmth.

She turned at last to retrieve her shirt and found it discarded to one side of the couch, the fabric shredded, useless. She huddled into the rough wool of her cloak. The wood in the fireplace caught at last, providing light enough to see by and Adora considered her situation.

Sevrá's beatings would eventually wear away her resistance, and the duke's daughter meant to make quick work of any defiance Adora mustered. Errol and the rest of her companions were in no position to help her. She had to escape on her own.

Logic only tempted her toward despair. She moved to her bedroom, lighting candles as she went. Everything remained as

she had left it. She moved to a broad wardrobe on the wall opposite the balcony and searched for warm clothes.

Silks and satins spilled across her hands like water, but most of the dresses she'd delighted in before traveling to the sand kingdom seemed frilly and superfluous to her now. As she moved them aside, her gaze fell on a pile of plain, sturdy clothes in muted shades of brown and gray. She fingered the breeches and tunic she'd used to disguise herself for her visits to the healer, Norv.

A foolhardy idea formed in her mind, but she grasped it with the desperation of a drowning woman. She lifted the pile, her heart drumming against her ribs.

It was still there. Adora raised the heavy key to the garden gate as if it were holy.

Replacing it, she moved to the balcony and surveyed the torchlit courtyard. Her plan would require preparation, but if she could forego the sleep she so desperately needed, she might be able to make the attempt the following night.

The air blew off the great sea to the west of Erinon, but rather than chilling her, it invigorated her and filled her with hope. She looked across the broad courtyard waiting for the telltale movements in the darkness that would tell her how many men patrolled the grounds. *There.* A shift in the shadows betrayed the presence of a guard.

After a few minutes, the cold forced her back into her bedroom to fetch a blanket off the bed, but she quickly settled herself into a corner of the balcony to watch. Her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and she sought to memorize the movements of the guards. By the time the moon set some four hours after midnight, she felt confident in her ability to evade Weir's men. With reluctance, she retreated back into her room. If fatigue caught her unaware and Sevra found her on the balcony, the duke's daughter might suspect she planned to escape.

She climbed into bed still dressed. Sleep claimed her almost before she laid her head on the pillow. Her last thought was of

Errol. Unconsciousness overtook her in the midst of a prayer to Deas on his behalf.

A stinging slap across her face brought her awake. She rolled, ready to fight, but the sight of Sevra's ladies at the foot of her bed armed with cudgels stopped her. Laughter rasped in her ears.

"That's good, strumpet. If you step out of line—and I'm sure you will—you'll find the penalty to be quite severe."

Adora noted that none of the women seemed in a hurry to approach her. She chose to take that as a sign of caution and savored the thought she'd won that much. Seating herself as if entertaining friends, she skewered Sevra with as much disdain as she could muster. "What do you want, Lady Sevra? Your father wishes to cement his power in the kingdom, but until he's proclaimed king, it appears he has no need of me."

Sevra laughed. "I've told you, strumpet. I am to train you to be a dutiful queen. Come. I will show you the price of disobedience." Sevra turned on one heel and left the bedroom. For a moment the temptation to ignore the command raged hot in her chest, but curiosity won out. She rose and followed. Outside her suite of rooms, the two guards fell in line to accompany her, one in front and the other behind.

The sight of the lead guard's sword on his left hip made her fingers twitch with need. She would require a weapon. They proceeded down the long marble staircase into the main hall of the palace with its gilded bannister and heavy chandeliers. The furnishings, which should have been as familiar as her own reflection, struck her as though she were unaccustomed to them.

They left the light of the palace to venture into the leaden gray of Erinon in winter. The blue of the guards' uniforms, vibrant under bright torchlight, faded to slate. They passed through the broad archways that led to the courtyard used by the watch. The absence of the black-garbed men struck Adora as an immense corruption, a disease that raged within the compound.

"Your father will doom us all."

One of Sevra's women approached Adora, her cudgel held

high, ready to strike, but Sevra held up a hand, restraining her. “And how would a cloistered princess know such a thing?”

Despite the cold, Adora threw her shoulders back. “The Mera-khi and the Morgols mobilized their countries in preparation for King Rodran’s death. Your father squanders the kingdom’s strength on his bid for the throne.” Adora could not help but shake her head at the brazen stupidity. “Without an omne to confirm his ascension, competing factions will divide Illustra at a time when every man is needed to fight the threats from the south and east.”

Sevra laughed and favored Adora with a gaze that traveled slowly from head to foot. “You are ignorant, Princess. If not for your bloodline, you would doubtlessly have had to find work in some menial trade.” She turned to continue toward the far end of the yard, where two guards and a cloaked and hooded figure waited. “There will be no war. Father has already struck an agreement with the Merakhi.”

Adora’s laugh cracked in the cold air. “Then your father is a fool. The Merakhi are led by a man possessed by a malus. Belaaz will not settle for rule. He longs for destruction.”

Sevra nodded to one of the women, who thrust her cudgel into Adora’s midsection. She doubled over, retching, gasping for breath.

“When you mention my father, Princess, you must speak with respect as befits a queen of her king. Come.”

They drew closer to a hooded figure, his hands tied behind his back. The hood concealed his identity, but his height was just slightly less than average.

Errol.

No. Please, Deas, no.

Sevra smiled, her eyes glinting, lit by avid cruelty. She flicked her wrist, and one of the guards reached up to yank the hood off. Adora found herself facing Oliver Turing, Rodran’s flamboyant chamberlain. Bruises marked his face like splotches of plague, and one eye was swollen shut, but his insouciant smile remained despite a pair of broken teeth.

Adora's relief flooded through her, taking her to her knees. Guilt at feeling it brought the tears that Sevra's beatings could not.

"Your father's chamberlain refuses to tell me the name of his nuntius," Sevra said. Her voice rasped with frustration. "There is information that I require. I am merciful, strumpet. I am giving you a chance to provide it."

Above her, she heard Turing sigh. "The Merakhi sun favors you, Princess. The freckles give you a fresh, girlish air, but you shouldn't cry. Your eyes and nose turn red. It completely ruins the look."

"I want the name!" Sevra screeched.

Turing looked heavenward and sighed. "I told you already, his identity is hidden. I'm no more able to identify him than be him."

Adora laughed and raised her head to meet Oliver's gaze through a fresh onslaught of tears, but the chamberlain's expression, deadly serious, bored into her, as if commanding her to understand something. Then the moment passed.

A guard struck him, and he staggered. Turing rolled his eyes and sighed theatrically. "These people have no sense of style. There's just no color that goes with facial bruises."

Sevra's mouth compressed into a line. "You have more to worry about than style, popinjay."

Turing donned a look of exaggerated horror. "You mean you're going to force me to make you presentable? I'm sorry. It just can't be done. You can't make silk from burlap, you know."

A guard clubbed Turing across the mouth with the hilt of his sword. The former chamberlain dropped to the ground spitting blood. At a nod from Sevra, the guard kicked him in the head so hard he flipped to land on his back.

Weir's daughter snapped her fingers, and two of the guards hauled Turing to his feet. She turned to Adora. "This is your first and most important lesson, Princess. Every time you contest me, every time you think to thwart my desire, one of your friends will die."

Adora shook her head. "Please, you don't have to do this. I won't fight you anymore."

Sevra's smile stretched her face into an obscene parody of childlike joy, her eyes wide. The expression chilled her. "Then tell me the name of your uncle's nuntius."

Adora gaped, desperate to surrender a name she didn't possess.

"Well then, Princess, I'm not killing him." Sevra motioned and the guard next to her drew his sword and ran Turing slowly through the chest. "You are."

The guard pulled his weapon from Turing's body, his face blank. The chamberlain collapsed, his arms and legs folding in on themselves like discarded rags. Adora fell to his side, pulled his head to her lap. Turing smiled through the blood on his lips.

"Take . . . care . . . Princess . . . Don't ruin . . . the . . . look."

Sevra laughed like a child at play as she turned back toward her quarters.

Adora's hair cascaded down, hiding Turing's face and hers. The chamberlain inhaled wetly. His eyes glazed, bringing a stab of grief, but the chamberlain forced air through his lips. "I swear the message I am to deliver is the word of Rodran son of Rodrick, king of Illustra." He stiffened, desperate to force the words of her uncle's disclosure through his lips, his hands clutching at her, their strength fading as he spoke. "*You* don't look like your father." The fingers slipped. "Find him."

Turing's head rolled to one side. The king's nuntius was dead.