

SAGE  
AND  
KING

molly ringle

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**SAGE AND KING**

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE GODS WERE SMILING ON ORZEI. THE LANDSCAPE was perfection: a narrow road; cliffs dropping beside it into the roiling sea; and a steep hill above, studded with mighty coast pines. Orzei laid his hand on one of the scaly trunks to feel the power surging through it. The forest of ocean plants beneath the waves, too—tangling kelps and seaweeds—grew so thick that even from high above he felt their life and could easily reach out with his magic and grasp them.

Best of all, he was alone. The crowds waving to the queen's cortege were all in the neighboring villages, north and south of this rugged stretch. What providence that he had found this spot in time.

Horses' hooves clopped on the packed dirt of the road. Wrapped in his travel-battered cloak, Orzei peered around a pine trunk, his hands beginning to shake. Could he do this? Despite the queen and Prince Mataz having destroyed his life, and despite Orzei's having remorselessly killed others who deserved it, doubt gripped him around the throat.

This was different. They were his siblings.

Purple, gold, and white gleamed between the trees like coddled flowers in the windswept landscape: the painted carriage, horses' caparisons, and guards' livery. The procession moved slowly, taking care on the precarious road. The carriage drapes were pulled aside, and silhouettes moved within: the queen, her husband, and her brother, along with a companion or two, gesturing to the view of the sea.

Their voices floated up to Orzei, full of animated happiness, and his breath caught. Longing and fury splashed through him. All these years, and still their voices made his body thrum in recognition.

*You've been banished, Orzei. You're dangerous. We can't have you here.*

*Don't come near us. What you do, it's wicked and vile.*

*Stop him! Don't let him escape! Kill him if you have to.*

He remembered Zaya's voice too, the last he had ever heard of his sib-

lings:

*No, don't hurt him!*

Just a child's voice back then. Zaya would be almost thirty now; likely Orzei wouldn't recognize his voice anymore.

Zaya wasn't on this journey, though. Orzei had made sure of it.

The memories gave him back his resolve. Not only for himself would Orzei do this, but for Zaya.

The cortege had drawn near. Any closer and Orzei wouldn't be able to act without sweeping the slope out from under his own feet. It had to be now.

He reached out with his magic, finding the energy of a huge pine beside the frontmost guards on horseback. With a whisper of thanks and apology to it—the tree surely didn't deserve to die—he commanded it to wrench itself up out of the ground.

He felt its pain as it obeyed, but he only gave it a fleeting thought, becoming quickly caught up in watching the results.

The tree groaned as it fell, crashing upon the road and bringing with it a minor landslide of earth and stones. The two guards in front were crushed at once, along with their horses. Everyone else in the cortege began shrieking and shouting.

Orzei acted fast: another tree, another, and another—a dozen—all of them yanking up the earth as they fell, until a whole swath of hillside thundered down and swept the party over the cliff. The jagged edge of the landslide lay a mere arm's length from Orzei; rocks bounced over his toes. But he sent strength into the tree he clung to, and both he and it remained standing.

When the slide settled, he scrambled down over the debris and peered into the sea. It was nearing high tide, and the waves slammed and swirled among jagged sea stacks, a cold maelstrom that even a skilled swimmer would have little chance of surviving.

The carriage seemed to be floating, just under the surface, and at least a few people were surfacing, arms flailing, frantically calling out.

Orzei focused on the weeds in the deep. He brought them up to wrap around the carriage, the people, the horses, anything from the land that had just so rudely intruded upon the seaweed's domain. They wrapped, held, and

pulled downward. The heads, arms, and floating bits of gaudy royal debris all disappeared beneath the surface. He maintained his control over the kelps and seaweeds for a full count of one hundred, soothed by the swooshing thunder of the waves.

Finally he released his magic and stepped back, so drained that he swayed on his feet.

No voices now, no clopping hooves. Only the surf and the seabirds. The silence was beautiful.

He had just created a new nation. Smiling, he shambled back into the forest.

\* \* \*

Three councilors got Zaya out of bed. It was the middle of the night, just past second bell. Zaya had only retired an hour earlier; he'd been at the theatre with several friends, and after the show they'd all gone backstage to hobnob with the actors and the director. Much brandy had been imbibed all around.

His bedchamber still wobbled as he tried to make sense of the councilors' message, likely because of the words themselves, not just because he was half-asleep and half-drunk.

Councilor Asha, who had served Zaya's family for the better part of her sixty-some years, had tears in her eyes, and her lips trembled.

"I'm so sorry, Zaya," she whispered.

Zaya hadn't yet responded. It couldn't be true; it was preposterous. His ears filled with a rushing noise.

"You can't mean they're *all* dead," he said.

His sister, the queen. Her husband. The unborn baby she carried. Zaya's brother. Ten more besides, the trusted guards accompanying them on their journey along the coast, headed south for a diplomatic visit to Sambrey.

Yesterday Zaya had called goodbye to them from the palace stairs. His sister Elzi had been wearing a long pink coat and a headband of wooden leaf beads. His brother Mataz had on that wide-brimmed hat that Zaya always made fun of.

“The lawkeepers on the coast confirmed it,” Asha said. “The whole party...”

“Killed by a landslide?” Zaya laced the words with acerbic incredulity.

“A narrow part of the road, steep bluffs. All were knocked off the cliff into the sea. They...drowned.”

“But it hasn’t even been raining, has it? Why was there a landslide? And—and they can swim! The sea—the waves can be fought against.” Zaya was becoming shrill. The noise in his ears had grown louder. He had begun to realize he was arguing against something one could not argue against.

Tears tracked down Asha’s weathered cheeks. “Oh, Zaya,” was all she said.

He took shallow breaths, gazing at each of them in turn, waiting for the nightmare to dissolve, the joke to be admitted to.

Then Asha knelt, and the other councilors followed suit. Asha murmured, “May the Mother and Father bless His Majesty.”

“May the Mother and Father bless His Majesty,” echoed the other two, their heads bowed.

And Zaya realized what else the news meant.

He was king.

After twenty-eight years of assuming the succession would never reach him, that he could forever be the rascalion prince who shirked as many responsibilities as possible, spent half his nights at the theatre, and caused minor scandals in the newspapers, the crown had landed with a crash upon his head.

This awful night had somehow become even more horrifying.

\* \* \*

Col Graygrove’s hands trembled as he read the letter, though it was addressed to the sages of Heartwood generally, not to him in particular. The blue ink made slashes on the speckled tan page and bled through to the back.

*Greetings from your long-lost runaway.*

*You will have heard the news that has shocked the country.*

*There is no love lost between my two deceased siblings and me, I admit. But the new King Zaya may have my affection, if he pursues a more welcoming path to those like us. I look forward to his reign with interest, and would like to approach him soon to discuss our future, which I hope is brighter than our family's dark past.*

*I know he will be visiting you. I trust you to broach this subject with him. Have him include the phrase "I will be welcoming old acquaintances" in one of his statements to the newspapers to show that I can approach safely. I expect this reunion will take place at Heartwood, where I hope you will have a friendly welcome for me. You and I do have interests in common; I don't forget it, and I'm sure you don't either.*

*I will be disappointed if my request is disregarded and Zaya maintains the same stance on our talents that our siblings and parents did. I must speak with him. I deserve a place in my own family.*

*I appreciate you for all I have learned at Heartwood, and I understand and forgive your censure of me. I hope you might forgive me too when we next speak.*

It wasn't signed. But given the content, Col could guess its author. He lifted his face to the elders. "Ogric."

The four women stood arrayed before the curved wall of windows, backlit by autumn sun. Forests blanketed the slopes beyond the glass, splashes of yellow maple trees bright among the firs.

"So we may assume." Lilam, the highest elder, took the letter from him and folded it. "Or, to give him his proper name, Prince Orzei."

"The sage we knew as Ogric—he was Prince Orzei? Orzei's been *alive* all this time? Why didn't I know?"

"During his year here, only we elders knew his identity. Then he ran off, and we never heard from him again and assumed him dead, or at least out of the country."

"But now he seems to have committed murder," added Pollu, another of the elders. "Regicide. Using magic."

"Can we be certain it was him?" Col felt colder than he should have in the sun-warmed room.

"The rider's eyewitness account," said Garnlei, the third elder, "put to-

gether with the tone of that letter, make it clear enough for me.”

Her wife, Anred, the fourth elder, glanced at her with a nod of agreement.

“Before today I didn’t think he would kill his own sister and brother,” said Lilam. “But clearly we misjudged both his power and his sanity.”

“What does the palace say about him?” Col asked.

“They don’t know yet, aside from Councilor Asha. The witness saw him, but doesn’t know his identity. No one else even knows he’s alive, including King Zaya. Currently, they all believe what happened to the queen’s party was an accident. When the king arrives here at the end of the month, we’ll tell him a magician likely killed his sister and brother. But we won’t yet tell him Orzei’s identity or his...connection to us.”

Col’s heart began galloping in alarm. Every new monarch came to Heartwood at the start of their reign, and didn’t learn about the magical aptitude of the sages until then. Col already knew that; the whole of Heartwood had been buzzing with excitement about the king’s visit almost as soon as they’d heard of the queen’s death yesterday. Having to inform Zaya of something this awful, though, was not a prospect anyone could look forward to.

Not to mention Zaya’s reputation left something to be desired.

“I do wonder, with Zaya...is he ready?” Col’s voice betrayed his skepticism.

It was hard to picture Prince Zaya as king. His handsome face was usually sketched in the newspapers alongside a gossipy story about which man had been seen slipping out of his bedchamber lately.

The monarch held the highest position in the country, chose the council members, upheld the godsayers’ proclamations. Heartwood was to explain the secrets of magic to *Zaya*, entrusting him to keep them safe for as long as he lived?

Gods help the nation of Lushrain.

“He will learn what he needs to,” Lilam said, “in order to preserve his life. For if Orzei doesn’t like what he sees, Zaya will likely be his next target.”

“We aren’t actually going to let Orzei come here and meet with him, are we?” Col asked.

“Certainly not. If we do use Orzei’s code phrase in an announcement for



the newspapers, it will only be to lure him closer and...dispatch him. But I suggest waiting on any such plan and seeing what Orzei attempts next.”

“Surely someone’s searching for him. The law, our people...”

“Both. Various parties have set out to seek him. With any luck, they’ll capture or kill him before he can endanger his remaining brother any further.”

“Zaya doesn’t seem the pious type, in any case,” put in Pollu, optimistically. “That at least makes him different from his sister, and thus perhaps less likely to enrage Orzei.”

“We can hope,” Lilam said. “Zaya’s likely to take a different approach than previous monarchs, if guided correctly. He may even end up doing us some good.”

Col folded his hands behind him. “Then we’ll ready the castle for his arrival? Is that my role?” Col was still confused as to why the elders had summoned him. He was only twenty-seven; though a fully initiated sage and a tutor in magic for the younger scholars, he was nowhere near the elders in diplomatic experience. There were dozens of sages with more seniority than him, and surely the important tasks in receiving a royal guest would fall to them.

“Your role,” said Lilam, “will be to teach the king about magic. Then, after his month here is done, we hope he will bring you back to the capital, where you will take up a position as one of his councilors, to better protect him and, ideally, improve the reputation and legal status of magicians.”

Col let his jaw drop. “*Me?* But I—I was going to—”

“Your plan to study in Thraum will have to be put off, I’m afraid.” Garnlei regarded him with sympathy.

“It wasn’t just to study. I might have ended up living there. Where I wouldn’t have to do all this...pretending.”

“You won’t have to pretend with the king,” Pollu said. “Except for not telling him about his brother.”

“Which is rather a lot, and even so, I’d still have to pretend with everyone else. And live at the court? I’ve never even been to Eylos! I—”

“No one expected this to happen,” Lilam said. “But since it has, we’re requesting this of you. You’re the most powerful. Also, you’re much closer to

his age than any of us. Perhaps the two of you will get along.”

Though he was tempted to continue pleading and arguing, Col knew it was no use. The set of the elders’ faces told him he was not going to wriggle out of this assignment, not without running away in the night.

*Your whole life, Heartwood will do all in her power to preserve you. And if Heartwood calls upon you, you will do all in your power to serve her.* It was in his initiation vows.

And even if it weren’t, disappointing his Heartwood family, after everything they had given him over the years, was simply something he could not do.

## CHAPTER TWO

“HOW ARE YOU, YOUR MAJESTY?” DELVYN embraced Zaya.

Zaya groaned. “Del, you cannot call me that. Not ever.”

Del let go of him, and they sat on the cushioned bench in the sunroom. “Had to try it at least once.” Concern shaded his eyes. “I wish I could have come sooner. They’ve kept you busy.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Thank you for writing, at least. I’ve only started having time for personal visitors today. There are loads of people trying to see me, and with all the council obligations...I don’t think I realized how many hours of council Elzi had to attend each day. And I also just needed time.”

“Of course.” Like Zaya, Del had donned the black-and-white silk of mourning rather than the colorful everyday attire they both preferred. Zaya appreciated the gesture, especially as Del had hardly known Elzi or Mataz. He had been Zaya’s best friend since their late teens, but he and Zaya mainly saw each other outside the palace, often at the theatre where Del worked as a director—the type of entertainment Zaya wouldn’t have time for anymore.

“It’s not even that I’m grieving exactly,” Zaya said. Yesterday he had ended up weeping alone in Elzi’s room, actually, but only for a little while. “Or I am, but...mainly I can’t stop thinking of the advice they’d be throwing at me. ‘King Zaya? Gods help us. Then you’d better grow up fast. Let me tell you all about taxes.’”

“Would that be Elzi or Mataz? Sounds more like Mataz.”

“Probably. Elzi would agree, though.” The autumn sun, streaming through the prismatic edges of the windowpanes, splashed rainbows onto the flower arrangements.

Flowers had been pouring in since the deaths were announced. They were all over the palace.

“It’s dreadful,” Del said quietly. “To be left with no family. They’d understand how hard it is for you.”

Though Del still had his parents, Del’s young wife had lost hers recently, and Zaya knew that Del felt her pain almost as if it were his own.

“Elzi and Mataz went through such a thing too,” Zaya said. “When our parents died.”

“You had to go through that also. You weren’t exempt.”

Their mother and father had died when Zaya was nine, in the marsh fever that had swept the country. That Zaya and his siblings had escaped was a miracle. Zaya suspected their immunity involved magic—a potion acquired by Asha from a countryside magician, perhaps. He did remember her making them drink an especially bitter “tea” one night. He preferred not to think about that. Magic was vile; that was the one point he and the godsayers agreed upon. Just look what it had done to his eldest brother Orzei’s mind.

“The funeral was beautiful,” Del said. “Did you choose the songs?”

For a moment Zaya thought Del meant the funeral of Zaya’s parents, before realizing he meant the one for Mataz, Elzi, and Elzi’s husband, just yesterday. “No, my aunt and uncle and the councilors did all the planning. I wouldn’t have known what to choose.” He slumped back. The leaf of a potted orchid brushed his shoulder. “I don’t know the first thing about the topics they’ve brought up in council either.”

“You did seem adept at avoiding governmental matters up till now.”

“I had a procedure. Elzi or Mataz would tell me I had to join a group regarding some issue fit for the endorsement of a younger prince. I’d agree, attend the first meeting—late, of course—tell everyone at the end of it they were doing splendidly and to carry on exactly as they were, then I’d never show up again. Except when it was all wrapped up and I could help by waving to a crowd and announcing a grand opening.”

“Showing up for the theatrics,” Del said. “It’s why I like you.”

“Except that’s over now. The monarch can’t get away with so little. My signature has to be on *everything*.” Zaya massaged his right hand, which had become cramped after the morning’s pile of documents. “I’m going to parcel off as many duties to the council as possible. They know better anyway.”

“Ah, give it time. Those buggers don’t need more power. There’s good

you could do for this land, with your young, fresh thoughts.”

“My thoughts are chaos. I’d probably start a civil war by complete accident.”

Del smiled and settled back, their shoulders touching. “When’s the coronation? Have they decided?”

“Not for another month or two. They want to give me time to settle in. As if it matters what date they officially set a crown on my head. I’m already there: on the throne and out of my depth.”

“You may not think you’ll feel better after a month or two. But you will.”

“Nothing can ever be the same again. I used to think I’d essentially go on as I had been. Mature a little, eventually. Find issues I did care about—other than the theatre, which everyone tells me doesn’t count. Well, everyone other than you.”

“Those people wouldn’t know fun if it came up and caressed their balls. And you *will* still come to the theatre, Zaya. I’ll make sure of it.”

“But not often; I won’t be able to. And the people I used to go with—gods, the twins were here a few hours ago,” he said, referring to a pair of sisters he’d spent many hilarious evenings with. “They had no idea what to say. It was dreadful. Then Bregg came after them.” Bregg was yet another theatregoing friend. “He told me it was all a damned shame, then mentioned he’d love it if I could arrange a marriage for him, something that came with land and a title.”

Del splayed his hand over his face. “Ugh. What did you tell him?”

“I said I’d try. But I admit it’s low among my priorities.”

“A friend gains a notable promotion, and becomes no longer a human but merely a ladder for social climbing. One of the oldest stories written.”

“Is this when you’re about to ask me for a position on the council?”

Del regarded him with sincere brown eyes. “Yes, do offer me such a position. I will take pleasure in refusing it in the rudest terms.”

Zaya grinned—it felt practically unfamiliar, like he hadn’t done so in years. “Thank you, Del.”

\* \* \*

Almost a month passed, every day of it packed with lessons and consultations. Then Asha announced it was time for Zaya's hermitage.

"My what?" Zaya said.

"Your month at Heartwood. The house of the sages. It's been done for every new monarch for at least a thousand years."

"Oh. Right. Up near...Lupinik."

"It should take us two days of travel to get there, and since the weather looks favorable, I propose we leave tomorrow."

Leave the city for a month? His inclination was to refuse, put off this hermitage. Then again, he had no good reason to stay. He had few steadfast friends, little time for anything enjoyable, and no current paramour either.

Leaning back from a stack of never-ending correspondence, he looked northward out the fifth-story palace window, across the jumbled chimneys of Eylos. "A change of scene might be nice," he admitted.

"You'll have work there too," Asha warned. "The sages have their own branches of knowledge to teach you."

"History and philosophy and such, I assume."

"More than that. Sages also serve as healers, you know. Or advisers for crops and forests. They're skilled in all the sciences, in addition to other subjects."

"Or they become councilors, like you."

"Indeed." Asha was a sage; had studied at Heartwood in her youth. Zaya sometimes forgot that. She didn't mention it much, her life having long ago become wrapped up in helping to run the country. "In fact, since I'd someday like to retire, you might consider possibilities for my future replacement as Sage Councilor."

"I see." The mountains looked blue from this distance, as clean and pure as the sky. It had been over ten years since he'd been that far north, but he had a pleasant, if vague, memory of Lupinik: a town clinging to an alpine slope, half the streets made of steps rather than paving stones. The smell of wood smoke and spiced breads. Houses with steep-pitched roofs to let the snow tumble off. Black-haired men with strong legs from all that mountain walking.

Truly, he wouldn't mind a change of scene.

“I’m sure it couldn’t be as bad as what the council puts me through here,” Zaya remarked.

“Hm,” Asha said.

He glanced at her, but she only nodded in acceptance and left the room.

## CHAPTER THREE

HEARTWOOD, THE HOUSE OF THE SAGES, WAS not *in* Lupinik, it turned out, but even higher up Mount Tigai, another half-day's slow ascent from the town. Zaya had never been to Heartwood before, as the castle tended to restrict visitors to new students—the select few admitted to become sages—and rare dignitaries.

Zaya stepped out of the carriage when it stopped. Stretching his stiff arms upward, he stared at the structure before him. They had passed through the gates a few minutes earlier—part of the tall, thorny fence that encompassed many miles of forest and farmland surrounding Heartwood—and his entourage had arrived in the circular front park. The golds and purples of the royal carriage and the horses' caparisons looked gaudy next to the gray castle.

Heartwood appeared to be made of pieces of the mountain: granite blocks, slate roof tiles, glacial boulders, round river rocks. It seemed to be all towers, cone-shaped and skinny, connected with narrow halls lined with arched windows. From the central entrance, two wings of the building stretched to each side, and others extended behind as well.

The paving stones under his feet formed a flat labyrinth in bricks, curling and spiraling. Brick walls lay beyond, enclosing kitchen gardens, he assumed; the tops of apple and pear trees showed over them, leaves turning red and yellow as the autumn advanced. Behind the castle rose the peak of the mountain, startlingly close and huge, blue-white glaciers mantling its slopes. Zaya fancied he felt their ice in his lungs as he inhaled the thin air.

The royal guards dismounted and led the horses to the stables. Two young people had come out from the castle to guide them, wearing fur-topped boots and long gray coats belted snugly. Asha and their three indoor servants remained with Zaya.

Asha stepped up and straightened a fold of his cloak. "The whole house



will greet us in a moment,” she told him, “then we’ll be shown to our rooms to rest and refresh. Before dinner the elders will convene with us to discuss your stay.”

“All right.”

The front doors of Heartwood opened, letting out a double file of people who formed lines to flank the front steps.

The majority were in their fifties or older, including the four women at the top of the steps, their flowing shirts, trousers, and coats in a lighter shade of gray than those of the others. Of the rest, there seemed an equal mix of men and women, and a few of indefinite gender, most with a scholarly look—modest hairstyles and little in the way of cosmetics or adornments; nowhere near as much concern for vanity as his noble friends in Eylos.

Zaya’s gaze snagged on a young man standing beside the elders: tall and thin, with black hair trimmed short, tan skin, and an expression of quiet intensity. He gazed back at Zaya for several seconds—his eyes seemed light, though from this distance Zaya couldn’t say what color they were—then dropped his glance without a smile.

Zaya felt pleasantly short of breath.

Those cheekbones, those wide and endearingly bony shoulders. Those shapely lips. That gaze.

All of a sudden the three days of tedium in the carriage, with all the stops to wave to village crowds and call out his awkward blessings, seemed entirely worth it.

But how would he manage it from now on, taking lovers, as king rather than a lesser prince? Would they come to his chambers just because he summoned them and they didn’t think they were allowed to refuse? Would they come willingly but want something from him, such as land and a title? No wonder his sister hadn’t married until after ruling for ten years and finding her footing.

One of the elders stepped forward, short and wiry, with a gray braid over her shoulder. She introduced herself as Lila and delivered a formal welcome. She bowed to Zaya, as did the rest of the house, and Zaya thanked her for her hospitality and assured the sages he was eager to learn from their wisdom. But all he could think, as the beginnings of a headache sank into

his eye sockets, was that he would never grasp everything he was supposed to understand about his role; and that given all the heartache and complications involved, it seemed impossible he would ever grow to enjoy being king.

\* \* \*

Oh, stars above. The new king of Lushrain *would* have to be even more attractive than rumored.

Certainly, the newspaper writers often called Zaya “handsome” or “charismatic,” and the illustrators provided dashing drawings of his face and fashions. But Col had rather thought those were exaggerations; and in any case, lately he’d mainly been reading the articles to gain an understanding of what sort of personality the king had, to prepare himself for working closely with Zaya. To judge from the many editorials dubious about Zaya’s ability to step into the role of monarch, it seemed likely he’d be shallow, asinine, and vain.

Possibly he still was all of those things. But, very well, he did have physical charm in abundance.

Col averted his gaze after that first glance they shared—the king hadn’t actually *noticed* him, had he?—and tried not to stare anymore.

But it was impossible not to steal glances.

Zaya didn’t strut or smirk. He walked with grace and spoke with clarity. Careless rogue he might be, but he didn’t carry himself like one. Compared to Col and other northern-born folk, Zaya, a southerner, had darker skin and lighter hair, both a rich brown, almost the same shade. His wavy hair held a touch of gold and fell to below his earlobes, in the style favored by the nobility.

He stood a bit shorter than Col and had broad shoulders, a strong jawline, and full lips. His clothes fit perfectly, of course, the black-and-white mourning ensemble set off by a cloak in deepest purple with goldwork around its hems. On the back of the cloak, Col saw when Zaya ascended the stairs and turned to greet the elders, was the royal insignia in embroidery, the same design that was painted on the carriage: a wildcat flanked by an iris and a dagger-like icicle.

Col wondered which of those symbols Zaya most resembled when one

got to know him: wildcat, flower, or icicle.

Of all the completely pointless things to wonder.

The royal entourage was a small group: just Zaya, Councilor Asha, three indoor servants, and a half-dozen guards. All except Asha—and soon Zaya—would be carefully kept from learning about the magic studied here. Magic would itself be used sometimes to make sure they noticed nothing.

Zaya was introduced only to the four elders at this stage, not to Col or anyone else. Those greetings having been exchanged, the elders brought Zaya's party inside and showed them to their rooms in the Peak Tower.

Col, meanwhile, went to the grand library and built up the fire in the hearth.

On the mantel were several ceramic cups, each labeled with their contents: pine, mountain rowan, lavender, spicebark, yarrow, and so on. Col had already applied a toadfoot moss oil to his chest before coming down for the visit and had been pulling upon its serenity-giving powers, but it wasn't enough. He plucked out a yarrow stalk, its flowers dried to a mustard yellow, and ate it. As he swallowed the dry fragments, he felt the plant give up its magical essence. He drew it into his body. Courage spread through him, a light but invigorating sensation.

He slipped one more yarrow stalk into the pocket of his cloak, in case the first wore off before the king came down for the meeting.

On the polished maple table, alongside a few candle lanterns, sat a clay pot filled with soil, an iris rhizome half-buried in it. Col lifted the pot, touched the rhizome to assure himself it was well, then sank into a chair with the pot on his lap and waited.

## CHAPTER FOUR

ZAYA'S ROOMS IN THE PEAK TOWER, AS THE TOWER'S name suggested, boasted a stunning view of Mount Tigai, along with the peaks and ridges flanking it. Within the middle of that forbidding mountain range lay the border between Lushrain and Thraum. Zaya felt uneasy being this close to the wicked country. Magicians ruled Thraum, and their religion was a warped version of Lushrain's, in which magic played a central role. Lushrain and Thraum had an uneasy truce in place, but nothing friendlier, not for centuries. Still, he was comforted by the massive amount of near-insurmountable rock and ice that stood between them. Given Heartwood had existed here unmolested for over a thousand years, Zaya supposed the location must be safe enough.

He turned from the window when one of his servants entered, and focused on the business of washing, changing, and consuming the food they brought: fruit, cheese, and spiced tea. The bath and the food dispelled his weariness, and by the time Asha and Lilam arrived to bring him to the meeting, the sun had almost set, leaving nothing but a pink glow on the snowy top of Tigai. After admiring its beauty for a moment, Zaya left the room and accompanied Asha and Lilam down.

Though darker, quieter, and chillier than the palace in Eylos, Heartwood did have its allure. Despite the exterior stone walls, nearly all the indoor furnishings were wood, in some places carved into flowers and vines and other botanical designs, elsewhere allowed to ramble and twist in the branches' natural shape, all of it polished to a gleam that reflected chandeliers and oil lanterns. The sages' love of learning was evident at every turn: shelves lined the stairs and halls, filled with books, maps, astronomical diagrams, magnifying glasses, telescopes, neatly arranged skeletons of small animals, and labeled jars of dried plants.

“The Tomes Tower houses our grand library, Your Majesty,” Lilam said as they approached a curved pair of doors twice Zaya’s height. “We’re proud to look after the largest and rarest collection of written knowledge in the country.” She pulled open one of the doors and stood aside to let Zaya pass.

His steps slowed as he entered the room. Four levels, perhaps more, rose above him on a spiral that circled the whole tower. Shelves of books packed every level, leaving only enough room for railings and walkways and a few tables and lamps. Branching beams crisscrossed the ceiling high in the shadows—apparently the library didn’t extend all the way to the top of the tower’s cone, but it came close.

“It’s amazing,” he said, gazing upward.

“It’s my favorite room here,” a man’s voice said.

Zaya pivoted.

It was the young man he had admired earlier. He stood with the elders near a blazing fireplace, hands folded before him.

“I begged to be allowed to sleep here, when I first came, when I was nine,” the young man added, “but they didn’t let me.” He cast a smile at one of the elders, who beamed in response.

“Sire, may we present Col,” Lilam said. “One of our foremost sages, a true prodigy. We hope you’ll be willing to spend time conversing with him while you’re here. He can teach you a great deal about Heartwood, and then you can decide how we might best serve you henceforth.”

Zaya was too charmed to speak for a second. “It would be an honor.” He extended his hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Col.”

Col took his hand and bowed over it. “Thank you, sire. A pleasure indeed.” His skin felt warm and dry.

Were Col’s eyes light blue? The orange firelight made it hard to say.

Asha shut the library door and joined the group. “Let’s not delay. What we have to tell you, Zaya, will likely come as a shock, so we’d best get straight to it.”

Zaya frowned at her. *What?* What in the world had Asha been keeping from him? “A shock?”

Rather than explain, Asha nodded to Col.

Col cleared his throat, but didn’t speak either. Instead he picked up an

empty flowerpot from the table and put his fingers into it. Zaya leaned forward to look in. Not empty—it held soil and a root of some sort, upon which Col rested his fingertips.

Something sprouted from the root.

Zaya started back. A leaf: a long blade of green was growing, widening, rising from the root at perhaps half an inch a second. Col kept his focus on it and breathed faster, his lips shut. The leaf-blades parted and a flower bud emerged. The tip of the bud changed from green to glossy dark, then the whole flower opened, spilling into bloom: a dark purple iris with a feathery white tongue.

Col pulled his fingers away from the root and extended the pot toward Zaya.

As if the ghastly thing were a gift.

Memories leaped out before Zaya like specters.

Struggling in agony, as a small child, beneath a tree branch pinning him to the ground, while his brother Orzei bellowed in rage at him.

Orzei's face contorting as he waved his hand at the courtyard gardens, making flowers uproot themselves to shoot like arrows at the guards.

Orzei running from the guards, flinging down trees behind him, disappearing into the forest, where he fell over a waterfall to his death.

Zaya hadn't thought of those things much, not for a long time. But he had never stood this close to a magician since then either.

A chill spread from his throat down to his knees. He did not touch the flowerpot. He took two steps farther back, his heart pounding.

"Arrest this man," he commanded.

But no one stepped forward, and Col only sighed and cut a reluctant glance toward Lilam.

She reached out and took the flowerpot. "Your Majesty," she said gently. "Magic has been a central part of Heartwood for its entire existence. This is the secret each monarch learns when they come here at the beginning of their reign."

"No. My sister—my parents—they would never..."

"They knew," Asha said. "They chose to keep magic at a distance. Your own decision on the subject will be yours to make. But first you must hear

everything.”

“What more is there? You’re a sage, Asha; have *you* been involved in magic? Have...” He let the question trail off. He didn’t dare ask, in front of all these...*magicians*, whether she had ever saved his life with it.

The marsh fever. That mysterious, bitter tea.

“Sages come only from Heartwood,” she said. “And Heartwood only allows students who show an ability for magic. I learned to hone my powers here in my youth, along with studying the more commonly known subjects. But my powers are modest compared to theirs.” She nodded toward the elders and Col.

She hadn’t gone mad from the use of it. That much seemed clear, at least.

“This is the secret, then?” he said, keeping his voice haughty to conceal his fear. “The shock I must know?”

“Let’s sit,” Asha said. “There’s...more.”

They all took seats, the seven of them close together around the modest-sized table.

Col didn’t look at Zaya, two seats down from him. The young sage kept his lips closed and his gaze fixed on the flickering oil lamps.

Oh, *he* was offended? After breaking national law and deliberately frightening a visiting dignitary?

He wasn’t half as attractive as Zaya had originally thought.

Zaya looked away from him, focusing on Lila as she began to speak.

“When Asha interviewed the sole survivor of the accident that took the lives of the queen and her party, she learned something troubling.”

The survivor had been one of the guards. Zaya had read the written report of the woman’s firsthand account already, many times—the landslide, the cliffs, the sea. He had even spoken to her in person, to thank her for her valiant service, though he didn’t press her to repeat the details. “I recall nothing unusual in her report,” he said.

“It was something she reported only to me, when she was brought back to the palace,” Asha said. “I asked her not to mention it to anyone else, for it would only cause unnecessary alarm. She said...she saw a man standing near the road. He seemed to be performing magic.”

The blood seemed to drain from Zaya’s head and lungs, pooling in the

pit of his stomach. He moved his gaze to Lilam, then the other three elders. Col dropped his gaze to his interlaced hands resting on the table. “Who?” Zaya said. “What was he doing?”

“He hasn’t been found yet,” Lilam said. “He vanished afterward. Thus we cannot say with certainty who he was, or whether he was acting in cooperation with anyone else.”

“Such as Thraum?” Their magic-worshipping neighbors had never stooped to the level of assassination before, to Zaya’s knowledge. But if it had been staged as an accident each time...sweet gods.

“We mustn’t rush to judgment, let alone war,” Asha said. “Thraum has no reason to meddle with our rulers. Chances are far better this was a magician acting alone.”

“How did he do it?” Zaya asked. “What sort of spell?”

Pollu spoke up, another of the elders, with a deeply lined face and bushy gray hair. “The way we access magic, sire, is through plants—the energy of the earth, of its growing things. Accordingly, though we can use it to affect ourselves or other creatures, the strongest spells are those in which we manipulate or channel living plants themselves.”

“What did he do?” Zaya repeated through clenched teeth.

Pollu cleared her throat. “The survivor was just behind the head of the cortege. She reported it seemed like no ordinary landslide—no rain, no excess of mud. Instead it seemed the great trees overhanging the road uprooted themselves and crashed onto the party, bringing much of the slope down with them.”

Zaya’s vision lost focus for a moment. Elzi, Mataz...what they must have suffered.

“Then once the victims were in the sea,” Pollu concluded, “the kelp seemed to rise up and grasp them and pull them below. Or so it appeared to the survivor, who had caught hold of some boulders on the cliff and hid herself.”

Zaya’s exhalation of breath shook within his chest. “Yes. A magician can do such things, from what I’ve seen.”

“To manage it from that distance, and with that force, is a rare ability,” said Garnlei, the tall elder with reddish-gold braids wound around her



head. “Very few magicians can. The four of us can’t, and we’ve practiced for decades.”

“Col perhaps could,” added the soft-voiced Anred, beside her, “but he wouldn’t use his powers for such a thing.”

“Never,” Col said quietly, without raising his glance.

Zaya chose not to answer that point. There were more important considerations to face.

His siblings had been *murdered*.

“When the survivor told me,” Asha said, “I had my suspicions, and I sent word to the elders. They agreed that when you came here, we should tell you at once.”

“Why not before? Why not the first night? Considering this man—sorry, could you please confirm this—*killed my sister and brother?*” Zaya was suddenly shouting. The words rang off the hearth stones and ricocheted up into the tower.

Everyone was silent for a few seconds.

The lantern light shone on tears in Asha’s eyes. Elzi and Mataz had been like her own children all these years, same as Zaya was. He should have been considerate toward her; should probably have felt more grief himself, not merely this anger.

But anger was what chose to inhabit him—rage toward this unknown magician as well as toward all the people at this table who had kept secrets from him.

“I am sworn by Heartwood,” Asha said, “not to tell the uninitiated of magic outside these walls. It’s been the practice ever since Heartwood’s genesis, and given the laws and the citizens’ fears, it’s been the best choice.”

“But you sent someone out to find this person, surely?” Zaya said. “It’s been a month! Tell me he isn’t still at large.”

“We have several parties seeking him,” Asha said. “Some from secret forces among the palace guard, some from Heartwood. They’re the only ones who know he’s a magician and involved in the recent deaths. They’re searching up and down the country, from the coast to here, and every town in between, and listening for reports of similar magical crimes.”

“So you haven’t found him,” Zaya said.

“He’s too well hidden,” Pollu said.

“Hiding in the forest among thriving trees and plants,” Lilam said, “would supply him with all the magic he could need. It would be easy for him to shield himself from anyone trying to track him.”

Zaya leaned back, letting his elbows drop to the chair’s arms. Fury clawed at him from within.

He was king. Dignity was important. He did have legal power, if not magic.

After several slow breaths, he looked at Col—who still kept his gaze lowered and his hands folded—and then at Asha. “And you brought me here and began by showing me a startling demonstration of magic—why?”

“Because a demonstration is the best way to make someone believe it,” Asha said. “And because a better understanding of magic could have saved your siblings. It’s also the best way to save *you* if a magician bent on assassination—this one or any other—comes after you next.”

“You wish me to grow fonder of the method of power that killed them? Forgive me if I find that prospect unappealing.”

“Magic can do immense good, as well as harm,” Garnlei said. “The same as any skill or power.”

“All I’ve seen it do is harm,” Zaya countered. “Which is the reason it’s illegal.”

“And you, as the head of the law,” Asha said, “can decide after adequate study whether it’s a sound reason. Or whether perhaps it’s based in misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” His voice jumped to almost a shriek. “You’ve just *said* a magician murdered my family.”

“And here are several who never would.” Asha waved her hand around the table. “Who indeed would use their powers to protect you.”

“It’s no use,” Col said. He didn’t lift his eyes or unlace his fingers from their placid state on the tabletop. “The king doesn’t wish to become better acquainted with magic. We shouldn’t press him.”

Which was correct, but Zaya’s resentment flared at having this uncanny stranger speak for him.

“I shall decide what I wish.” He shoved back his chair and stood.

Everyone leaped up with him.

“This meeting is over,” Zaya said. “I’ll spend the evening alone. I will not be attending dinner.” He turned and headed for the door.

Asha hastened to his side. “Zaya, we have more to discuss.”

“Not tonight.” He yanked the massive door open.

“Please let me talk to you.”

He rounded on her in the cold hallway, a few steps out of the library. “You? It’s you who’s betrayed me worst. All these years, who knows what you’ve been practicing? After magic drove Orzei mad, no less.”

She flinched. “He—he is a very different case. His madness was not the result of his magic. I feel sure of that.”

Zaya waved it aside; that old, unresolvable debate mattered little compared to this latest shock. “And now, knowing what you knew about Elzi and Mataz’s deaths, you didn’t tell me. Because of a vow you took regarding *matters illegal*.”

“I’m so sorry. Yet even if I had broken my vow and told you, mightn’t it have been too upsetting, too much to take?”

He only shook his head—he didn’t know, couldn’t manage any speculation on his proper state of mind when he wasn’t in it. He turned away, and when she began to follow, he held up a hand to halt her. “I’m going to my rooms. Alone.”

She stood still, withdrawing her hands within her long sleeves as he walked away.