

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *WHEN TREASON RUNS IN THE FAMILY*

He marched to Jeron's suite of rooms. Florian pounded on the door but did not await an answer before barging in. Florian couldn't—no, he refused to—mask his infuriation or urgency, and his trepidation grew with each passing step. He slammed the heavy door closed and stood in the middle of his uncle's room.

The candles glowed, flickering waves of eerie light and shadows across the walls with the swift displacement of air from his hasty entrance. The shimmer of the shifting flames danced a sinister tempo in the reflection of Jeron's eyes.

Jeron didn't move from his seat by the fire, a goblet raised part way to his lips. "What manner of thoughtless behavior is this, Nephew?"

"I don't know, Uncle. You tell me."

Florian flexed his fingers open wide as the tension rippled through his shoulders and arms where Jeron's nonchalance added kindling to the fire burning inside him.

"Don't be ridiculous. Since you are here, you may as well sit and have a drink with me. You are man enough for it now, I suppose."

"I'll not be drinking with you, Uncle. I want answers."

Jeron moved without concern as he set his goblet on an end table to his side before uncrossing his legs and resettling his robe. He pointed to the other seat, but Florian refused to budge. He knew if he stepped closer to his uncle it wouldn't be that much farther to grab him by the throat and choke the answers out of him. Something about this whole situation did not bode well, and he couldn't understand how his uncle could put his sister—Jeron's own niece—in harm's way. When Jeron finally spoke his annoyance could not be mistook.

"Really, Florian. I treat you like a man, and you insist upon acting like a child. Take the blasted seat, and then we will talk."

The king's veiled threat upon Florian's sister consumed him, but he saw with all too much clarity that Orn and his uncle held the keys, that whatever his part entailed he was nothing but a means to an end; end of what, he had no idea, but he planned to find out. He did his best to rein in the crushing anger and in stilted movements approached the chair offered him.

"That's better. I had my doubts, thinking the prince had chosen poorly in you. What royal in his right mind would choose a childish, disobedient boy as a guardsman of the first order? Oh, that's right, Prince Theiandar would. Never mind."

"Silence your disrespectful tongue, Uncle."

"Ah, the child has grown brave. Or stupid."

"I have sat, but I will have answers and no more of this useless, insolent talk. What is this you and King Orn have schemed, and where is Faye?"

Jeron's displeasure appeared genuine, but Florian, with terrible distress crushing his chest, finally realized he couldn't trust his father's brother.

"You mean to say King Orn didn't tell you? Oh, that's troubling." His fingers tapped against the armrest while he stared off into the fire's dying flames.

“Uncle. Where is Faye?” Urgency spurred Florian on—and fear, but that much he refused to admit.

“Faye. Ah, well. Faye is where she is best kept, and safe for the time being,” Jeron answered without looking at Florian.

Unable to contain himself further, Florian sprang up from his seat and grabbed hold of the thick material of Jeron’s robe. “Where is she?” he said through clenched teeth, his eyes boring into those of his uncle.

Jeron’s response was anything but fearful. He grasped Florian’s hands and pried them loose from his collar, rested his hands on the arms of the chair, and pushed himself into a standing position, his face mere inches from Florian’s as they moved with one accord.

“Honestly, you continue to be an immature and stupid boy. Faye has been placed in the care of King Orn and taken to a location I do not know. I am at his mercy in this regard as much as you, though for my part I am quite relieved.”

“Blackguard! I don’t believe you,” Florian yelled and slapped his uncle, surprising them both.

He watched in stunned silence as Jeron’s head snapped sideways, but he couldn’t believe he’d done it. Never in a thousand years would he have thought himself capable of truly laying a hand on his uncle, his father’s only living relative.

Jeron touched his lip and looked at the smear of blood sullyng his fingertip. He dabbed at his lip with a handkerchief and glared.

Florian breathed hard, hot air escaping his nostrils in quick puffs and tickling his newly shaved upper lip.

“Do not ever do such a thing again, or you can be sure there will be consequences. If you choose to deny the truth of what I’ve said, Faye might as well already be dead. She is safe for the time being, but you will do everything—and I mean *everything*—you are told without question and without exposing the minutest detail of our plans to anyone, or I swear she will be punished. I do not care for that outcome any more than you, therefore I suggest you heed our words.”

Florian could not assimilate anything his uncle said. His mind reeled with truth, deception, lies, threats, fear, in unending loops of insanity. His words came out mumbled and weak. “The king has revealed nothing except that he claims he has custody of my sister, that you are a party to some plan. That I am to speak to no one.” His raging thoughts were interrupted only by a vision of punching his uncle, a man whom he’d never believed carried a cruelty so deep no matter how hard he had been on Florian growing up.

“Orn is intelligent. He’s much smarter than most give him credit for, and there are those of us whose loyalty cannot be questioned. I’m sure when the time is right he will tell you what you must know. Now get out before I have you thrown out.”

“I’m not leaving until I know where Faye is.”

“Insipid child. You best make yourself comfortable in one of those chairs if that’s the case, because I tell you I do not know where the king has taken her. I only know she is being gently cared for at this time, but if you do not play along there are orders set in place to have her abused and then killed. I do not know the manner; I only know you and that you will not let such a thing happen to her. If you care for her at all, you will do as you are told, no questions asked. Her life is in your hands.”

“That’s exactly what King Orn said.”

“That’s exactly what he means. Now leave me or sleep in the chair. I care not which you choose,” Jeron said and climbed in his bed as though he didn’t have a care in the world. He blew out the nearby candles.

Florian stood helpless, his fists balled at his sides and more questions than answers filling his mind. He knew he would gain nothing else from his uncle so he left the room, but the haze of

clouded thought blocked all else from his mind and caused him to wander the streets of High Castle in aimless torture, wondering and worrying over his sweet younger sister's safety. There had to be a way to get to her, to save her from her own king. The preposterous thought tore at his heart as he questioned his very place in the world and the purpose of loyalty when such betrayal could fall from the hands of family and leaders.

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Idra looked from Bastien's precious face to the shadow of night out the window of the nursery. Caityn had insisted her dressing salon be converted into the baby's room. She knew it went against the way of royalty, of having the nursemaids care for the babies, except for feedings and special occasions, but she vowed to raise her children as her mother, Queen Ismene, had raised them.

Bimala, Princess Caityn's nursemaid while a child, had been a young woman of the castle Taisce. When Ismene had first married Othniel she had befriended Bimala who'd been given charge of the royal couple's children as they came. But even with Bimala in that capacity, Queen Ismene had been continually near and always mother.

Idra, gathering wool—reminiscing on the past—leaned on the cool stone of the wall by the window and swept a gentle finger along the curve of Bastien's forehead and cheek. "Precious one, you are already intensely loved," she whispered.

"You know, Idra, you could have gone to the party tonight," Caityn said from her seat where she sewed by the bright firelight.

Idra sat next to her on the settee and leaned in to let Caityn smile down at her sleeping son. "I couldn't leave you right now. That wouldn't be right."

"Nonsense. Bastien and I would be fine. Besides, the nursemaid is nearby."

"Mmm." Idra made no other reply as she imagined going to the party and what she might encounter there—who she might encounter.

"Idra, I know you better than you realize. Why are you afraid to see him?"

Bastien stirred in her arms and she stood to rock him softly from side to side. "I'm not afraid."

"What is it then?" Caityn set aside her sewing and folded her hands in her lap.

"I-I told him I loved him, and he didn't say it back." Idra laid Bastien in his cradle and touched his soft brown hair. "He's beautiful."

Caityn came and stood next to her, both of them staring down at his angelic face. "Yes. I could not disagree." Caityn took Idra's hand and pulled her back to the settee. "Just because he didn't say it doesn't mean he didn't want to. Did you not tell me by your own admission that you ran away just after telling him?"

"Yes," Idra conceded with some reluctance.

"You see? He didn't have a chance. If you'd gone to the party you may have been able to speak without causing a stir."

Caityn's words, though meant kindly, irritated Idra. "I have had enough gossip whispered about me in the last two days. I don't think I could stand to see the giddy eyes of courtesans at the Hamlin's, though I'm sure Hilde would have had some witty remarks."

"You two have gotten close over the last few months."

"Mmm. When she comes to the castle with her father she always seeks me out. 'Tis strange, but she makes the spurious words of others seem trivial in a way that not many have the ability to do, I think. And other than you, my dear cousin, she is the only one I feel capable of being myself around."

"I'm glad you've found a friend here, Idra. I didn't realize how my marriage and now Bastien's arrival would give us less time together and leave you alone in an unfamiliar and vast place such as High Castle."

A flicker of gratitude overcame Idra. “You are good to me, Cousin. Thank you for this attempt to take my mind off my absurdity.”

“Tis not absurd to wonder about Ahmad or his intentions. He has offered his love then taken it back in a most confusing fashion. I, for my part, have no doubt that he is entirely and deeply in love with you and will soon renew his attentions. You must be patient with him. He is no different than any man—act first, listen later.”

Their eyes met in a moment of amusement.

“Men,” they said in unison and giggled.

Bastien stirred in his sleep, a dreamy whimper catching their attention. Caityn moved to the cradle again and gazed down at her son. Idra watched, touched by the scene.

“Yes, my sweet Bastien, even you will grow up to be a man. But you will know the love of your mother who will teach you how to treat a woman with respect. You will be a good man like your father, my son.”

Idra hated to disrupt the moment, but the hour drew late and soon the high prince would return. She swept up next to Caityn and kissed her cousin’s cheek then left the room without another word.

On her way to her room she turned the corner and quite literally ran into Sir Florian who flew down the hall; he moved as though his own sort of tumbling storm. The knight caught her by her upper arms for a second as she staggered back due to the shock of their collision.

“My lady!” he gasped. “My sincerest apologies. I—”

“No, Sir Florian, I am well. I did not expect to meet anyone in the hall this evening. I assumed the guests near my room would be at the gathering still.”

He seemed altogether in a different mental world, only half-listening to what she said. “Yes, well, most are. If you’ll excuse me, my lady.”

He bowed at the waist and stepped around her, his motion once again a raging storm ready to burst forth from below the surface. Idra watched him go and with great compassion wondered what had caused him such distress, wishing she could be of some help in easing his mind. But she had no right to press him further. She continued on to her room where Noreeta waited in a chair by the fire.

The lady’s maid stood and curtsied when Idra entered. “My lady.”

“Noreeta, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were waiting for me. I was holding Prince Bastien and lost track of the hour.”

“I can help you undress, my lady.”

“Thank you. If you’ll just undo the stays I can take care of the rest, but you have already had a long day. You have thrown yourself into your work, helping me and performing the thousand other tasks you’ve taken on that are not your responsibility. I feel you will work yourself into an early grave if you do not rest.”

Idra could see the heat rise in Noreeta’s cheeks. It never failed that any time she spoke of the girl’s diligence or good deeds the lady’s maid would balk. She denied such praise and often stammered in her speech in such moments. Idra found herself terribly curious to learn the girl’s history, but Noreeta refused to open up about herself.

Noreeta went to work undoing the stays, and when she finished she curtsied and whispered her farewell before slipping out the door. Idra watched her squeeze through the crack of the open door and vowed to uncover whatever mystery lay buried in her past.

“Good night, Noreeta,” she called as the door latch tapped into place.

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Florian tossed his belt onto the end of his bunk and, after ripping off his vest, yanked at the ties of his shirt. If he had any idea where the king had taken his sister he would be on his way there right

now; nothing would stop him from locating her and taking her far from the grasping, greedy hands of Jeron and Orn. He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled his boots off, dropping them haphazardly on the floor with no concern over the amount of noise he made.

Xavier leaned upon his elbow and cleared his throat just loud enough to catch Florian's attention.

"What?" he asked and wished he hadn't. He really didn't care to know what the young knight wanted.

"Your horse is back in his stall, though he seemed almost as agitated as you do now. What's bothering you? Did your business not go well?"

"That is none of your concern." Florian leaned his forehead into his hands, his elbows resting on his knees.

"I was only being—"

"Meddlesome," Florian said, a glower screwing up his handsome features in the shadows.

"—a friend."

Xavier had said the two simple words without malice or anger. It caused Florian to reconsider his angry retort. Xavier wasn't the problem. He acted as a friend would.

Florian shook his head, and his shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, X. I received some unpleasant news, and I'm not sure what to do about it. I'll . . . figure something out. Not to worry. Sleep well." He swung around to lie flat on his bed, his arms clasped on his stomach and his eyes unfocused on the boards of the bunk above.

Xavier didn't respond but Florian could feel his analyzing, pondering stare. If King Orn was serious, Florian wouldn't be able to say a word to anyone or risk his sister's safety. The thought left him sick to his stomach and unable to sleep.