

ICON

ORIGINS OF ISSALIA

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PREFACE

I wrote this novella with my readers and fans in mind. For those who have read the Runes of Issalia series, this story offers you a glimpse into the lives of characters from that series, years after the Empire was dissolved and was replaced by a reincarnation of the kingdoms of old. For those who have not yet read my books, these chapters provide a foundation from which you can glean something of the world of Issalia, its history, and the political climate prior to the where the Wardens of Issalia series begins. This story ties directly to A Warden's Purpose, but that book and the entire Wardens series can be fully enjoyed without knowledge of these chapters.

Know that this work is ONLY for you, my fans, for the duration of 2018 and perhaps longer. You will not find this work anywhere else. I hope you enjoy ICON and perhaps this tale will increase your appreciation for Delvin when you read of him in the Wardens of Issalia.

The tale of ICON begins thirteen years after the Runes of Issalia concludes. Enjoy.

Best Wishes and Happy Reading,

-Jeff

THE GAME

“**Y**ou must be bold in this life. Take chances and drink from the cup, I always say.” Taking his time – as if the moment were nothing of consequence – Delvin meticulously buttoned each button of his white shirt, all the way to his neck. “It’s not about the gold, you know. Coin is merely a means to keep score.” After securing the last button, he reached for the black serving jacket draped over the doorknob and slipped it on. “In truth, each new objective is about testing yourself – finding how far you can push the boundary. And, of course, there is the exquisite thrill in that moment of almost being caught.”

He picked up the silver serving tray and held it before him, examining the reflection in its polished surface. Using his fingers as a comb, he raked them through his black hair to clear the long bangs from his forehead. His thumb and forefinger smoothed his thin mustache down to his chin – a habit he had developed when he first began cultivating his goatee. An adjustment of his collar prompted him to nod in approval. With a twist of his body, he tilted the tray and eyed his side profile, the slight hump of his back – one that others might perceive as poor posture rather than the coil of rope strapped beneath his coat.

Turning about, he smiled at the man who shared the storage room with him. “What do you think? I look quite dashing, wouldn’t you say?”

In response, muffled groans emerged as the man squirmed, accomplishing nothing more than rope burns on his wrists.

Delvin's brow furrowed. "I suggest you relax, Humbol. Fighting it will only make things worse. That shelving is far too heavy to move, and the knots will only grow tighter if you pull on them." He squatted and patted the man's shoulder. "Just sit back and try to get some sleep. Someone will find you in the morning. I'm sure of it."

The man's eyes remained a bit wild, but the squirming ceased. His black hair matched Delvin's, although far more disheveled at the moment. Delvin put the tray down and gathered the guard uniform he had been wearing earlier. He then carried the leather armor to the back of the room and stuffed it between two barrels. It wouldn't do to make the sleuthing too easy, after all. That was part of the game as well.

When he returned, Delvin again lifted the serving tray and moved to the door. "Thank you for the outfit, kind sir." He gave the man a slight bow. "Now, be sure to get a good night's rest. There will be many questions for you, come morning."

Delvin draped a cloth over the glowlamp on the wall, and the room plunged into darkness. He opened the door carefully, peeked into the empty corridor, and slipped out as he closed the door behind him.

Whistling a happy tune while he walked down the dimly lit corridor, Delvin headed toward the second door on his right. When he opened it, light poured through, joined by a ruckus from the other side.

The citadel kitchen was massive – with two oversized ovens at one end and four rows of counters where food was busily being prepared. A quick visual count registered a dozen kitchen workers dressed in pale blue smocks, toiling on the dinners that would soon be served. Six servers, including Delvin, were dressed in fine black coats that were short of reaching their waists at the front but with split tails dangling past their rears at the back. Standing among the servers was a woman who lacked a rune on her forehead. He said a silent thanks to the king for abolishing the Choosing ceremony. Old prejudices against Unchosen had dwindled over time, which made it easier for people to overlook his lack of rune than when he was a youth.

A handsome woman, easily twice Delvin's age of twenty-four summers, strode into the chaos and barked out orders. Matching the woman's hair and accentuating her curves, her shoulderless dress was

yellow with ruffles on the skirt. A prickle of alarm arose when he recognized her.

"I need eight plates of the baked fish ready for the king and queen and their guests. Don't let those vegetables steam too long and get soggy. Someone get the dessert into the ovens as soon as the dinners head out the door. We don't want to leave them waiting." Her demeanor was firm, demanding attention and instantly yielding a response.

As Delvin approached, she eyed him with a knit brow. "Do I know you? You seem familiar, yet I don't recall seeing you in my kitchen."

Delvin kneaded his hands, as if worried. "I don't think so, Miss Sally. My name is Delbert. I...I'm Humbol's cousin, and I work for the palace guard, so you may have seen me in that capacity. However, Humbol is ill, hunched over a bucket and puking his guts out when I last saw him. I had the night off, so he asked me to serve in his stead."

The blond woman's lips pressed together in a thin line, and her eyes narrowed as she glared at Delvin. A slight twinge of anxiety tingled in his stomach as her glare lingered. When Sally had last seen Delvin, he was a pre-teen boy, sipping cider in the underground bar she had managed. That was back when Unchosen were still ostracized. He hoped that the years had changed him enough so she wouldn't recall his eleven-year-old self.

"Fish is ready," one of the cooks announced.

"Vegetables ready," another chimed.

"Bread is ready."

Sally turned away from Delvin and resumed command. "Get the plates prepared and begin loading the trays." She turned toward the servers. "Two of you serve wine, two serve water, the other two bring plates out. When you are finished serving the king, return here for the second group's meal." She put her hands on her hips – hips that were difficult to miss. "Be sure to mind Burtles while you are in the dining hall. If you cross him, he'll come complaining to me, and I don't need that."

As instructed, Delvin took his tray to the counter, carefully arranged four steaming plates of food upon it, and followed the other servers out the door at the far end of the room.

They emerged into a corridor lined with tapestries and paintings, illuminated by glowlamps mounted to the wall every dozen strides. After passing a handful of closed doors and climbing a flight of stairs, he followed the others through a double-doorway and into the dining hall.

A massive table sat at the heart of the room, masterfully carved and long enough to seat twenty. Seven people were seated to either side of the table while one empty chair waited at the nearest end. An attractive woman with brown curls and striking blue eyes sat at the opposite end, speaking to those seated with her. The woman's dress was open at the top, revealing the tawny, smooth skin of her neck and shoulders, along with just enough of her upper chest to attract a glance but not draw a leer. Delvin tore his eyes from her to survey the rest of the room.

A man in his late years stood beside a fireplace made of pale stone, the flames inside crackling eagerly. The man turned toward Delvin and the others before giving them a slight nod. As if held with glue, the white hair upon the man's head remained firmly in place, slicked-back and shining like the waxed and curled tips of his peppered mustache. His white collared shirt and black coat were wrinkle-free, leaving Delvin wondering if they had been steamed while he wore them. The man stepped forward as Delvin and the other servers gathered around him.

"Excuse me, Your Highness." The white-haired man announced. "Dinner is ready. Shall we serve your meal now, or shall we wait for the king?"

The woman with striking blue eyes shook her head as she responded. "No need to wait for Brock. He received an urgent missive, and he may be a while." She smiled, almost glowing in the radiance she cast. "Please, let's eat, Burtles. I'm sure our guests are famished. I know I am."

Burtles gave the woman a bow. "Very well, My Queen."

With two fingers, he gestured toward the man and woman who carried the carafes of wine. They each took a side of the table and began pouring wine into stemmed glasses. The two women serving water followed, filling the small cups that waited upon the table. As they finished, Burtles gestured toward Delvin and the other server. Delvin took the side of the table across from the queen and rested plates before the four people seated there. Once finished, Burtles waved them off, and they retreated to the kitchen.

When he returned, Delvin found himself delivering another tray of meals to a smaller dining hall, two stories above the kitchen. With the other food server following close behind, he exited the stairwell and headed down the corridor to his destination.

The moment Delvin entered the room, a white object sailed toward

him. He shifted to the side, and it flew past, narrowly missing his face. A crack sounded behind him, followed by "Aargh." The crash and clatter of plates hitting the tiled floor caused him to dance forward, careful to keep his tray from spilling as he dodged clear of the food splatter.

Delvin turned to find bits of white eggshell, yellow yolk, and clear goo dripping down the face of the server who had been behind him. The man grimaced and wiped the egg from his eyes, the goo sticking to his fingers. Miss Sally circled around the man and placed her hands on her hips as she glared toward the table.

"What is the meaning of this? Who's been stealing eggs from my kitchen?"

Sally glared at the three children at the table, seated beside an older couple. A boy and a girl, each perhaps twelve-years-old, giggled in spite of the fire in Sally's voice. Beside them sat another boy, a year or two older. He snickered with his hand over his mouth but failed to hide his mirth.

Sally's eyes narrowed. "Brandt? Was this your doing?" The younger boy shook his head, but the giggling continued. Sally's gaze shifted toward the older couple. "Landon, Ashley. Surely one of you two witnessed who threw the egg."

Like the older boy, the man with graying hair had his hand over his mouth, hiding a grin. The woman, who had brown curls and lines around her blue eyes, nudged the man in the ribs. "You have the right of it, Sally. It was Brandt."

"Oh, Grandma! Why did you rat me out?" the boy whined.

"Thank you, Ashley," Sally strode into the room, leaned over the table, and pointed at the boy named Brandt. "Your hijinks caused three plates to fall. Look at this mess!" She turned and looked at the plates, two of them shattered and the third chipped. Fish and vegetables lay strewn about the floor. "Since you children think this is so funny, you will have to wait until new plates are brought up." She flicked a finger at the server who had found himself on the wrong end of the egg prank. "Samuel, go get yourself cleaned up. Delbert here can serve the meal and get another tray for the children."

Delvin approached the table and began placing plates before the seated couple. As he set plates before the two empty chairs, a man with thinned brown hair entered the room.

"Good evening, everyone."

Sally smiled. "Hello, Milan."

He slid close and kissed her cheek before turning toward the mess on the floor. "What happened here?"

Sally frowned. "Your grandchildren, of course."

Milan sighed. "As I suspected. Was it Cass or Brandt?"

"Wait," the little girl complained. "Why might it be us and not Broland?"

"What?" The older boy glared at the girl. "You two are the trouble makers. I know how to behave properly."

"You mean that you're boring. Booooring." The girl stuck her tongue out at him, earning her a grimace from the boy.

With his tray emptied, Delvin headed toward the door. He paused briefly to allow three servers to enter the room, each carrying a pitcher filled with wine, water, or cider.

"Delbert." He turned to find Sally addressing him. "Take your time. No need to hurry for these rabble-rousing children."

Somehow, Delvin restrained a grin, his face remaining stoic as he nodded in response. *Perfect*, he thought. Sally turned and claimed a seat as Milan sat beside her.

Delvin emerged into the hallway and headed toward the stairwell. Rather than descending toward the kitchen, he darted up the stairs and ducked around the corner at the landing. There, he paused and listened, hearing the slow rhythm of pacing boots in the corridor above him. He leaned the tray against the wall and crawled up the stairs to peek over the top step.

A guard dressed in the red-paneled black leather armor of Kantaria was strolling toward him. Delvin eased himself back down the stairs to the landing, grabbed the tray, and eased around the landing corner with his back against the wall. The tapping of boot heels on tile drew closer until he heard the scraping of a boot as the man spun about and began walking in the opposite direction.

Slipping around the corner, Delvin put the tray back down, snuck up the stairs, and found the guard's back facing him as the man headed toward the far end of the corridor. Careful to time his steps with the tapping of the man's boots, Delvin followed him down the hall until he reached a pair of double doors stained a dark walnut color. He gently turned the knob, eased the door open, and slid inside.

When he turned and gazed upon the room that lay beyond, a chuckle emerged.

"Royalty sure know how to live," he said to nobody.

The room was expansive, long enough to be a dozen rooms – also long enough that it required four sets of round pillars to hold the high ceiling from collapsing. The wall opposite the door contained a series of glass-paned doors that led to a long balcony.

Moving at a nonchalant pace, Delvin strolled through the room, passing an ornate desk with a red velvet high-backed chair behind it. He passed the next set of pillars and found himself in a seating area, with a pair of chairs and two sofas facing a fireplace with an arched opening and a deep hearth that might double as a bench. Past the seating area, two copper tubs waited beside a hand pump used to draw water from somewhere below. Masterfully crafted artwork adorned the walls, ranging from a painting of the king, queen, and their children to a tapestry of a gorgeous vista.

When Delvin came upon the bed, he shook his head in wonder. Four strides across and nearly as long, tall posts marked each corner and red drapes hung from the canopy above. He began to wonder how soft the bed might be, what dreams he might dream when embraced by such comfort.

"Don't even think of it. That's not why you're here." Delvin said aloud to himself, which was a common act. "Let's get to work."

Reaching up, he tore the curtains from the canopy and began tying them together. Not having enough fabric from the bed alone, he began doing the same with the curtains that covered the five sets of doors that led to the balcony. He then walked about the room and began collecting items that he deemed to hold street value. After dumping a load upon the bed, he made another circuit of the room, stopping at the desk, where he found a drawer that contained a crown of gold, the front bearing rubies – of varying sizes – arranged in the shape of a starburst symbol. At the heart of the symbol was a diamond that could alone buy him a good-sized house in Upper Kantar. Beneath the crown, he found a dozen gold pieces and another seven silver marks. Almost as an afterthought, he grabbed an ornate statue off the desk – a proud dog, hand-carved from a block of black onyx.

Delvin slid the gold and silver coins into a pouch at his waist. The rest of the goods – including two paintings and a tapestry – he rested upon the bed and then wrapped within the bedspread, tying the opposite corners

together. He then tied one end of his rope made from curtains to the knotted bundle of goods. A grunt emerged as he hefted the load and carried it to the balcony. When he put the bundle of goods down, he leaned over the edge to see what lay below.

A small courtyard waited below, five stories down, empty other than a wall of shrubs and a waiting carriage. He grinned, happy that the carriage had arrived as scheduled. Past the carriage stood the tall wall that surrounded the Citadel, dividing it from the rest of Kantar. To the west, beyond the city, was a bustling harbor. The white sails of a cutter drifting off to sea drew Delvin's attention, and he found himself humming. There was something about the ocean he found romantic.

"I must try sailing sometime soon," he mumbled. "Perhaps I'll take a ship to a new city, one that would present new challenges."

With a sigh, he lifted the bundle of goods, rested it upon the balcony railing, and gripped the curtain tied to it. Hand over hand; he lowered the bundle of goods. Just before reaching the ground, he ran out of curtain and was forced to let it drop the remaining three feet.

He watched it land with a thud and shook his head. "I hope nothing was broken."

Removing his coat off and tossing it aside, he unhooked the coil of rope from his back and began securing one end to the railing. As he finished tying the rope, he noticed movement from the corner of his eye.

"Who are you?" It was a firm, commanding shout.

He turned to find a man with brown hair looking at him from the far end of the balcony. The man wore a black shirt of a fine cut, with tight breeches tucked into tall riding boots. While older than Delvin, the man couldn't be older than thirty summers. Despite the man's athletic build, he lacked the size or mass to be a guard. Of course, Delvin knew the man by sight. Most citizens in Kantar did.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I have an appointment to keep," Delvin climbed atop the balcony rail with the rope in hand, balancing on it with ease as he gave a bow. "If you'll excuse me. I must be going."

He then leaped off the edge, swinging down to the balcony below. Moving quickly, but with practiced ease, he then lowered himself toward the ground, knowing that he had just made the most famous heist in the history of Kantaria.

ESCAPE

Brock Talenz stepped into his office and found someone seated before his desk, facing away from the door. The man's baldpate and easy manner were instantly recognizable, as they should be. After all, he had spent countless hours with the man over the past thirteen years.

"What's so urgent, Gunther?" Brock walked past the man, who remained seated. "The dukes and duchesses are here, and I am to join them for dinner." He plopped into the cushioned wooden desk chair with a sigh. "Besides, I'm starving."

The man seated across from him leaned forward. A frown twisted his graying goatee. Brock's attitude shifted toward concern. He knew General Budakis well. Only bad news could accompany that look.

"I have bad news, Brock."

Brock pressed his lips together and braced himself. "Let's hear it."

"There has been a prison escape."

Sitting forward, Brock asked, "From the mine?"

The general nodded. "Yes."

"How many?"

"All of them."

"When?"

Budakis sat back and rubbed his chin. "That is not quite as easy to answer."

"Well, give me what you know."

Budakis absently tapped his armchair while grimacing. "About a month back, a squad from Wayport made a trip for the annual inspection. When they reached the prison, they found a portion of the wall destroyed. Fearing the cause, they advanced with caution and were ambushed when they drew close to the wall. Of the twelve men in the squad, five escaped and returned to Wayport. Upon hearing their report, Duke Chadwick sent fifty armed men for another attempt. When they reached the prison, they found the door open and the complex abandoned. An inspection found the stores bare. All food, gold, and anything else of value was gone."

"What about the flashstone?"

The frown on Gunther's face deepened. "Gone."

Brock stared at the desk, thinking. "What else do you know?"

"Well, we tracked down the traders who had contracts to deliver food to the prison. Two said their contracts were broken when they were informed that their services were no longer welcome. That happened about six months back."

"What about the third man?"

"He was found dead in a mining tunnel – dead no more than a few weeks."

With the situation now apparent, Brock expected this news might be the beginning of something more significant. His intuition told him that a troubled future awaited the kingdoms of Issalia.

"Thank you, Gunther."

Brock stood and walked toward the door.

"What are you going to do?"

Pausing at the door, Brock stared at it. "I'm going back to my room to get my crown, and then I'm going to eat dinner."

"And the escapees?"

Brock nodded. "I'm sure we will have to deal with them, but we need more information. Where did they go? What are they planning? Who helped them escape? How many follow them? Until we have some idea, I don't even know where to begin. Until then, I will think on it."

With a twist of the knob, Brock pulled the door open and slipped into the hallway. Although unsure of what to make of the Gunther's news, he suspected that it would become a problem. He took a deep breath and

began walking toward the royal apartment as his thoughts cast back to when those people had first been sent to the prison.

It had been the right thing to do, a decision he would have supported if anyone had asked – which they did not. Killing the lot of them may have been more expedient, but such a heinous act would have been unjust. Yes, their crimes had been vast, yet subtle – a result of people in power following what they believed was the correct course, regardless of how others felt about the means. Brock's views differed from theirs, but he had learned during his reign that right and wrong are ideals of perspective rather than pure facts. While he wished that worldly issues were black and white, he now knew that most were merely shades of gray.

When Brock first accepted the position as king, he had little idea of what might come with the job. Thirteen years of rule only fortified the realization that there was forever more to learn about governing a kingdom.

A sigh slipped out as he found himself longing for a more peaceful life. If things had been different, he and Ashland would have been ecclesiasts, healing people and saving lives while raising a family in a quaint home. Instead, he found himself governing a kingdom of people – a thankless job by any measure. Many local citizens seemed to love and support him, but there would forever be a gap he could not bridge. While he had made the impossible possible a number of times, pleasing everyone was not among his achievements, nor would it ever be so. He did his best to rule fairly and place the interests of Kantaria ahead of his own, but he could not stop every instance of social injustice. Worse yet was the issue of taxes. It was human nature to resent them, yet running a kingdom required funding. Someone had to feed, house, and clothe officials to make the laws and the soldiers to enforce them...and those expenses were merely the beginning of his problems.

A patrolling guard approached, heading the opposite direction. The man bowed his head, and Brock gave a nod as he passed by. As Brock reached for the knob, a twinge in the back of his head told him that something felt off. Trusting his instincts, he readied himself and opened the door in a burst.

The first thing he noticed was the small statue of Wraith missing from his desk. He turned and found the walls bare, his bedding and curtains gone, and the farthest balcony door standing open.

Circling his desk, he opened the glass balcony door and stepped outside. At the far end of the balcony, he found a dark-haired young man busily securing a rope to a railing post.

"Who are you?" Brock demanded

The man turned toward him, and smiled. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I have an appointment to keep," He then climbed atop the rail and gave a bow. "If you'll excuse me. I must be going." He stepped off the balcony railing, five stories above the courtyard.

Brock ran to the railing and found the man dangling from a rope, swinging to the fourth-story balcony. The man then began lowering himself toward a carriage that waited below. Hot anger flared inside of Brock when he saw the bundle of goods beside the carriage. He ran back inside and opened the top desk drawer. His crown was gone, as was the gold he kept there. However, the stick of charcoal remained. That's all he needed.

He sketched a Power rune on the back of his hand and used the anger he held to grab ahold of the Chaos surrounding him, drawing it in like a flood. When he poured that Chaos into the rune, it glowed an angry red, pulsed, and faded. Exhaustion engulfed Brock for a moment and then he stumbled, his vision going white as the feeling of raw power filled him. When his vision cleared, it remained unstable, tilting and pulsing. He grabbed his steel-reinforced staff that he kept in the corner and darted back to the balcony.

Brock ran along the railing, watching below as the thief reached the ground. Without hesitation, Brock leaped over the rail. His breath caught in his throat as he fell, the balconies and windows of each story moving past him at an alarming rate. He focused on the stone pavers of the courtyard as they rushed toward him, extending his legs until they met the courtyard and then crouching with the landing. Empowered with Chaos-enhanced strength, his thighs absorbed the impact in an extended moment of colliding forces, his muscles burning from the effort. He then turned about as the carriage lurched into motion.

Darting forward, Brock grabbed the back of the carriage with his free hand and lifted it off the ground. The horses whinnied in surprise and stumbled backward at the sudden surge of resistance. He dropped the carriage and sent it bouncing, creaking, and rocking as it settled. Brock

then shifted his position until he had a view of the driver's seat and found the thief staring at him, his rounded eyes reflecting shock.

"What? How?" the man stammered.

Brock stood ready with his staff held in both hands. "By my authority as King of Kantaria, I place you under arrest. I strongly suggest that you surrender. You don't want to fight a man armed with magic."

THE HUNT

Cameron DeSanus rested his palm against a massive tree and looked to the side. Hitarri and three other Tantarri archers stood behind similarly towering trees, hiding in the thick shadows that were common in this forest. Each of them had dark hair tied into a topknot, the remainder of their heads shaved clean. Dressed in black leather vests, their exposed arms covered in body art, the Tantarri had a fierce appearance – one that was very intentional.

With a hushed voice, Cam reiterated his orders. “When the stag clears our line of trees, fire. If any arrows stick, we give chase until it wears down.” Nods from Hitarri and the three women with him confirmed that they understood. “And for Issal’s sake, please don’t shoot any Torin soldiers. We don’t need any incidents.”

Without waiting for a response, Cam turned the other direction and found his father behind a tree, a hundred paces away. Dressed in leathers with the brown and dark red of Torinland, four archers waited beyond the man, hiding in the shadows of the giant trees. Cassius’ hair had begun to gray over recent years, perhaps a result of age – perhaps a result of governing a country. Regardless, Cam’s resemblance to his father remained obvious.

Narrow beams of sunlight streamed through the canopy high overhead, shining upon the ferns and rumberry bushes that covered much of the

ground between the trees. Being among the Red Towers always made Cam feel insignificant – a tiny being among monstrous trees that had existed centuries before him and would remain centuries after his death. As he was blessed with a muscular build that easily exceeded six feet in height, Cam rarely felt small in any situation. As a result, the Towers gave him much discomfort. More so than he could articulate.

A horn blew to the south, and a wave of anxiety washed over Cam. He gripped his enchanted sword and a calm resolve filled him, the anxiety falling away as if it had never existed. Carefully, he eased the longsword from its scabbard and leaned around the tree for a better view.

Long moments trickled past. No breeze. No birds tweeting. No movement to be seen. Through tree trunks so massive that ten men linking hands couldn't fully encircle them, Cam watched for movement. A distant rustle sounded, and he held his breath. Motion ahead drew his attention when a flash of white darted through a sunbeam before disappearing behind a tree. The noise grew louder, and the stag burst into view, much closer and approaching fast.

The beast was massive, approaching ten feet in height, thirteen feet at the top of its antlers. Covered in white fur, the stag was a gorgeous creature – but deceptively deadly. Over the past year, the animal had killed nine people and injured a dozen more. Nobody knew why it had grown violent – or why it had grown so large – but his father, Cassius, had pledged to protect the people of Torinland and that made the hunt necessary.

Moving with speed and power, the deer ran directly toward the gap between Cam and Cassius. When it ran past them, Cam found himself marveling at the raw power of the animal – like an overgrown horse with a massive weapon mounted upon its head. Living with the Tantarri for thirteen years had given Cam a new perspective on horses, a greater appreciation than he had previously expected.

"Shoot!" he shouted.

The twang of numerous bows sang through the forest. Arrows flew over the beast, behind the beast, and struck the beast – two in the shoulder and another in the opposite thigh. The stag stumbled with a rumbling snort as it smashed through a rumberry bush.

Cam burst into a run with the Tantarri following him. He glanced to the side and found his father leading the Torinland soldiers in a chase after the

wounded animal. Still in his prime, Cam soon outpaced his father as he leapt over downed trees and dodged the undergrowth among the Towers.

While the deer outran him at first, it began to slow, losing momentum until it stopped. As Cam drew closer, the animal turned about to reveal crimson eyes that almost glowed.

Cam slowed, suddenly aware that he was in the vanguard and faced the beast alone. When the stag passed through a sunbeam, the silvery tips of the barbed antlers glinted in the light. The beast huffed with labored breaths. It wheezed, snorted, lowered its head, and charged. Cam raised his shield to ready himself and considered how to respond. *That thing is massive, likely weighing four times my own weight. A collision could kill me as easily as the weapon upon its head.*

As the deer drew near, Cam dove to the side and swung his shield around to knock the antlers aside when the beast turned its head toward him. Rolling through the ferns, Cam regained his stance to find the beast slowing and turning toward him. Beyond the animal, the others had gathered with bows aimed at its backside. Aware that a high shot might miss the animal and hit him, Cam kept his shield high as he tried to hold its attention.

A rumbling snort blasted from the stag, and it lowered its head. The twang of firing bows followed, with four arrows striking this time. An errant arrow sailed past the animal and struck Cam's shield, the clang ringing through the glade as the broken arrow pieces scattered into the undergrowth.

The stag made a sound akin to a scream as it reared and charged again, albeit much slower than the previous attack. Just before the beast struck him, Cam spun away with his sword arm extended, the blade opening a long slice across the animal's ribs in a spray of blood. The deer's front legs seemed to collapse as it stumbled and crashed into the forest undergrowth. Cam ran toward it while the animal attempted to regain its footing. As the injured animal pushed itself off the ground, Cam plunged his blade into the stag's belly. The beast stumbled and crashed down with a massive thud.

There it lay, whining in agony, its head thrashing, red eyes rolling back. Cassius ran in and drove his sword into the thick neck for a killing blow. The animal stilled.

Cassius put a hand on Cam's shoulder. "You take on too much risk, Son. That thing almost killed you."

Cam grimaced as the realization flooded in. "You may be right. I guess I got caught up in the moment."

The rumble of hooves approaching interrupted the conversation. Both men turned to find twenty horses approaching, half of them lacking riders. When the horses slowed to a stop, Cassius addressed the man in the lead.

"The plan worked, Oren. It was a bit dicey for a moment, but this beast will torment travelers in the Red Towers no longer." Cassius looked down at the dead animal. "Let's dress the deer and bring the hide, antlers, and venison back to Nor Torin."



Cam stared out the window, watching the sun sink into the dark ocean waters outside the harbor. A single ship at the horizon eclipsed the red orb as its silhouette drifted south. Closer in, gulls circled above the docks, the slips filled with boats moored there for the evening.

His gaze shifted to the city that lay between the docks and the Citadel. Rows of rooftops stretched out before him, each row lower than the one before it in a descent toward the shoreline. Here and there, dark smoke rose up from chimneys, leaving trails that angled to the northeast. The streets below remained busy with carts, carriages, and people on foot filling them. Life here now seemed so...chaotic. Cam thought of Mondomi. The Tantarri city was peaceful in comparison to Nor Torin, even on its busiest day. Music could often be heard echoing in the caverns and across the stone rooftops of Mondomi. Sometimes that meant soft arias that threatened to lull listeners to sleep, while other times one heard lively tunes that almost demanded people to dance. It had taken Cam some time to shed his fear of dancing and embrace the music, as the Tantarri did. He smiled when he thought of Puri dancing. The joy it brought her was the reason he had agreed to try. Despite his initial reluctance, he realized that it now brought him joy as well. And then, there were his children...

Hearing the door behind him open, Cam turned to find his father entering.

"Where's mother?" Cam asked.

"She will be joining us shortly. I requested that a steward bring us wine."

Cam circled the desk and sat on a sofa. He enjoyed the quiet of his father's study – a place of peace, away from the bustle outside the door. Since his father was first crowned king of Torinland, Cam had only visited a handful of times, and this was the first trip without Puri or the children.

Cassius sat on the sofa across from Cam. "An announcement has been released to the public, notifying them that the stag is no longer a threat."

"I'm sure that will bring them relief," Cam noted. "The stories that have been circling sound even worse than the truth – and that was already a scary thing."

"Yes. Such is the way of rumors. They often do more damage than reality might bring."

A knock echoed from the door.

"Come in," Cassius said.

The door opened, and a young man entered, dressed as one of the castle wait staff.

"I have the wine you requested, Your Majesty."

Cassius gestured toward the short table before them. "Set it here. We will serve ourselves."

"Very well, Sire." The man approached the table with a carafe of wine and three glasses.

After the man set the carafe and glasses down, Cassius addressed him. "Thank you...I'm not sure I know your name."

"Oh, I used to work in the kitchens, washing the dishes, Sire." The man gave a shaky smile. "You wouldn't have seen me until now, after my recent promotion."

"Congratulations..."

"Dirk, Sire. My name is Dirk."

"Well, congratulations, Dirk. You may leave us now."

The man bowed and retreated to the door. When he opened it, he moved aside as Janis DeSanus entered.

Cam stood and approached her with a hug. "Hello, Mother."

"I'm glad you're safe, Cameron." She released her embrace and looked at him with a critical expression. "Your father tells me that you took an unnecessary risk today, and the result could have been deadly."

Cam's lips pressed together in frustration. *Why did he have to tell her?*

"I've been in worse situations before, Mother. Besides, I had Father and eight archers backing me."

Her frown matched his. "I'd rather you act with a bit more caution. You are a grown man with a wife and children. You have responsibilities."

Cam said, "Very well."

As Cam returned to his seat, Janis sat beside Cassius. The man leaned forward and poured a glass of wine.

"None for me, Father. I plan to leave at daybreak and would rather travel with a clear head."

Janis held her hand over her glass. "I'm not in the mood for wine either, Dear."

Cassius sat back with his glass in hand and took a sip before addressing Cam. "You're in a rush to get back, then?"

Cam nodded. "Yes. I miss Puri and the children." His gaze drifted off as he thought of his family. "Jurli is reading already, and it seems that Curan grows each time I turn around. I've been gone for two weeks already and I'm afraid that they've grown or achieved some new accomplishment that I missed while I was away."

Cassius took another sip of wine and swallowed. "I remember the feeling. It's why I retired from the Holy Army when you and your brothers were young. You grew so quickly; it used to seem as if a new trio of boys had replaced the old set each time I returned from a mission. I...decided I couldn't live that way."

Janis snuggled against him. "I was also happy to have you home. Raising three boys is difficult in any situation, doing it alone was that much worse."

Cassius smiled, but the expression fell away in a blink. His eyes bulged and beads of sweat bubbled on his forehead. His breathing grew rapid, his gasps urgent. The man's body spasmed as spittle blasted from his lips.

"Father, are you okay?"

"Help," Cassius' voice croaked.

Cam ran toward the door, tore it open, and bellowed. "Get me a healer! Now!"

LIBRA TE

Ashland Talenz eyed herself in the mirror, biting her lip as she tried to decide if her hair was arranged as she wanted. Blessed with natural curls, they often seemed like anything but a blessing. She adjusted the bun atop her head, where her crown rested, and set one more curl free. The lock of hair dangled near the ear on the left side of her head, balancing those on the right.

Brock's voice came from behind her. "How do I look?"

She turned toward him and smiled. He appeared dashing in his double-breasted black coat, cinched at the waist with a golden belt. Stepping close, she adjusted his collar and nodded when both sides mirrored each other, standing tall as per the current fashion. Her eyes flicked up to the crown nestled within his short, brown hair – hair he had tamed just enough to appear intentionally arranged.

"You look as handsome as ever."

Adoration reflected in his green eyes. He cupped her chin and leaned close for a kiss, giving her a small smile as he stood back. "You are too kind. On my best day, I barely hold a candle to you on your worst."

She tried not to smile, but found her will insufficient. The rueful grin spreading across her face was accompanied by the shaking of her head. "You are so bad, Brock Talenz."

Brock somehow retained an innocent look. "Whatever do you mean, my Queen?"

Ashland laughed. "I wonder if our citizens realize that their king is such a scoundrel."

The comment elicited a chuckle from Brock. "Only you know me so well."

A knock drew their attention toward the door.

"Come in," Brock beckoned.

The door to the royal apartment opened, and Burtles walked in, visibly distraught. The old man's normally white hair was now bright pink. Unable to restrain her reaction, Ashland chuckled out loud, her laughter joining Brock's. Burtles' wrinkled face drew a frown, and he huffed audibly.

Brock stopped laughing first and addressed the head of the serving staff.

"What happened, Burtles? I assume that your hair color was not of your choosing."

"It most certainly was not, Sire." Burtles moved closer and then pointed toward the door. "It was your children, I'm sure of it."

Ashland found herself nodding in agreement. "You are, most likely, correct, Burtles."

"What am I to do?" The man's voice rose two octaves. "I look like a flower!"

Biting her lip as she held back laughter at the comment, she found herself agreeing with the imagery.

"Why today?" Brock groaned.

Ashland put her hand on Brock's shoulder. "Don't worry about it, dear. Things can proceed as planned so long as we keep Burtles out of sight." When he nodded, she added, "I'll go talk to the children and meet you downstairs." She then followed Burtles out the door, not releasing her sigh until she was in the corridor and beyond Brock's sight.



Ashland smiled at Brock in hope of making him feel at ease. *You'll do wonderful, dear. You always do*, she sent across their connection. She felt his gratitude in return. He smiled, gripped her hand, and turned his attention

toward the open doors and the filled square outside. As Budakis spoke to the crowd, she turned toward her children.

Broland wore a serious expression, a common sight when the other two weren't causing mischief. Brandt nodded when her eyes met his. She glared back, not wishing to give him any openings. She then noticed Cassilyn staring at Burtles with a smirk on her face. Apparently feeling the heat of Ashland's glare, the girl turned toward her. Cassie's eyes grew wide, and she bit her lip before turning away. *Good, Ashland thought. When you're nervous, you cause less trouble.*

She sighed as she recalled various incidents the twins had caused over the years, the scope of which only became worse as they grew older. Now at the onset of their twelfth summer, the two of them were constantly pressing her and Brock – testing the limits of what disaster they might accomplish.

The deep voice of Gunther Budakis drew her attention.

"...and I now present to you, King Brock and Queen Ashland, the benevolent rulers of Kantaria."

Brock glanced at Ashland with a question in his eyes. She heard his voice in her head. *Are you ready?* She nodded in response, took his arm, and the couple walked outside. When they emerged on the platform, the mid-day sun of late spring shone upon them with a heat that drew a sweat in mere moments. Despite the attempt, the sun could not outshine the applause that came from the crowd. The cheers were deafening, so loud that the intensity brought Ashland a moment of dizziness. A sea of people crowded the square before the Citadel, the people of Kantaria – people nearly as close to Ashland's heart as her own children.

As they neared Budakis at the fore of the platform, Brock and Ashland came to a stop, waving at the crowd with smiles. After a moment, Brock raised his arms and the crowd quieted.

"Thirteen years ago, I stood in this very spot to inform you that the Empire was no more. I begged you to give me a chance, promising that I would rule as fairly as possible and that I would forever keep the interests of Kantaria ahead of my own."

The crowd cheered again and Brock waved his hands to quiet them.

"I now stand here to thank you. I thank you for believing in me and for making Kantaria, and this city, a wonderful place to live. Today, we celebrate our twelfth Libra Te, and I hope to celebrate many more with you."

Somehow, the crowd roared even louder than before, the volume such that Ashland couldn't hear Budakis from merely three feet away. When she turned toward Brock, something in his eyes gave her pause.

Brock suddenly tackled her and drove her to the platform, her breath thrusting from her lungs as he landed on top of her. She rolled to the side in an attempt to get air and found Budakis stumbling backward with a dagger in his shoulder. The man fell to one knee as he gripped the knife and pulled it free. Screams rang out, and pandemonium broke loose. When Ashland's lungs regained function, she gasped – a gasp she would have taken regardless when she noticed the black streak on the edge of the blood-soaked blade.

A PROMISE

Brock climbed to his feet, his eyes searching the crowd as guards – dressed in black leather armor with red panels and gold-tinted steel plates – formed a half-circle along the platform edge between him and the crowd. When he located the man from the vision that had flashed in his head a moment before the attack, Brock found him surrounded by a mob, held fast while angry citizens beat him. Stepping forward, Brock tapped the shoulders of the nearest guards – a woman and two men.

“Get down there and stop them before they kill that man. I want him arrested and brought to me. I need answers, not bloodshed.”

The female sergeant turned and led the two men into the crowd.

When he spun about, Brock found Ashland kneeling beside Budakis with her hand on his arm. The man’s eyes were rolled up, the whites showing as he twitched and jerked. Despite the fact that she was healing him, his color appeared off – pallid, green, and unnatural. The man began to shake violently. His back arched and his face froze for a moment before he collapsed, rolled to his side, and began to retch. When his stomach emptied, his eyes closed and he fell still, as if sleeping. His wound had healed, the bleeding stopped. However, there had been blackbane on the blade, a poison created from scorpion venom – a poison capable of killing in moments.

Ashland looked up at Brock. “I healed him the best I can, but the

poison...it's done something to him. When I try to use his Order to expunge the wrongness, it just slides past the poison as if...it's intangible."

"Guards!" Brock shouted over the noise of the crowd. "I need two of you to carry the general inside and get him to his bed. The rest of you, try to keep the crowd under control as they leave. Give them the food we prepared and send them on their way. There will be no further celebration here today."



Brock paced in his office, thinking upon what had occurred. When he last saw Gunther, the man had been unconscious. Ashland said that he would remain so for some time, and she wouldn't guess at the lasting effects of the poison. Regardless, Brock thanked Issal that the man still lived. *Few men can rival Gunther's will to survive. He will fight to the end. I just pray his end is not sometime soon.*

Hearing a knock, Brock turned toward the door. "Come in."

Wharton, captain of his Elite Guards, stepped into the room. Two others followed, the metal plates of their armor clanking as they dragged a man into the room. The man's head drooped and bounced with each step, his toes skidding on the stone tiled floor.

Brock frowned as he stared at the man in the brown coat. "Is he alive?"

Wharton shook his head. "I'm sorry, my King."

"The mob killed him?"

"No. He died while we were ushering him into the castle."

When Brock's brow furrowed, Wharton explained. "He had a vial in his coat and was able to drink from it before we could stop him. Within seconds, he was twitching violently and foaming at the mouth." Wharton looked at the man. "It took no more than a minute before the twitching stopped and he was dead."

Brock sighed and moved closer. He lifted the man's chin and found his face discolored to an unhealthy shade of green, his tongue swollen and black as it hung out his mouth. The man was around Brock's age – thirty or perhaps thirty-five years old. Brock released his grip on the man's chin, and his head fell limp. With brown hair and an average build, there was nothing of note about the man. His clothing was as average and non-descript as anything Brock could imagine.

Why try to kill me? Brock wondered until he remembered something – something he hadn’t seen for years. He leaned close and pulled the hair at the base of the man’s neck up, using his fingers to part it until he found something. Brock’s heart began to beat faster as he shifted the part until he was able to confirm a mark in the shape of a hand. He stared at it for a long moment, dread seeping through him as the truth became apparent. This man was an assassin – an assassin sent by The Hand.



The glowlamp swaying in Wharton’s grip cast a pale blue light down the stairwell, lighting the way for Brock and the two elite guards that followed. As they approached the bottom, Brock noted the damp air, the musty odor. Wharton walked down the corridor and led them through the third door on the left.

A glowlamp mounted to the wall lit a long room lined with five heavy wooden doors to either side and a single door at the far end. In the heart of the room was a desk and a chair, occupied by an overweight man who slept sitting up. With thick arms crossed over his chest, his head drooped to the side and a trail of drool tracked through the curls of his black beard.

“Ira!” Wharton bellowed.

The man in the chair jumped with a start, blinking in surprise. He hastily rose to his feet, wiped his face, and stood at attention.

Stepping close to the man, Wharton bellowed. “How are you supposed to watch the prisoners if you are sleeping?”

“I’m...I’m sorry, Sir. I had a long night, and it must have caught up with me. Our newborn wouldn’t sleep. My wife and I took turns rocking her, neither of us getting more than an hour or two of rest.”

“There’s no...”

Brock gripped Wharton’s arm, interrupting his tirade. “Allow me.”

When Brock moved close to the man, Ira’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open. Despite the man being a head taller and many pounds heavier than Brock, his shifting gaze and fidgeting stance made his intimidation apparent.

“I remember when my children were young. There were nights where I considered sleep a gift from Issal, one he teased me with until I felt like crying.” Brock rested his hand on the big man’s shoulder. “Duty to your

family and duty to your king should not be in conflict with one another. I'm thankful that you care for your wife and children, Soldier. However, you must find a way to remain awake on the job, so I suggest that you and your wife sort it out. You won't do her any good if something happens down here and you end up dead because you had fallen asleep."

Ira nodded. "Yes, of course, Your Majesty."

Brock smiled. "Good. Now, I am here for a prisoner."

Ira glanced toward the last cell on the right. "We only have one at the moment, Sire."

"Open his cell, please."

The man kneaded his hands and looked toward the ground. "That might be...dangerous."

Wharton passed his lamp to Brock and hefted a pair of shackles, the chains jingling as they swung from his outstretched hand. "He will be wearing these, Ira. Besides," he gestured toward the two guards standing behind Brock. "The man will have these to contend with." Each guard raised a loaded crossbow and shifted to stand across from the cell door.

The jailor turned with his ring of keys in one hand and a heavy cudgel in the other. After sorting through the keys, he slid one into the lock and leaned close to the door.

"Stand back, you slug! If you're near the door when it opens, you'll feel the rough end of my cudgel." He glanced back at the armed guards. "Even worse, you may find a crossbow bolt making one more hole in you than you want."

"As you command, Your Lumpiness." The man inside the cell responded.

With a turn of the key, Ira opened the door and Wharton walked past him, unarmed so the prisoner had no access to a weapon. The clanking of shackles followed before he led a man from the dark room.

The captive appeared much as Brock remembered, although his dark hair was a bit of a mess and ten days growth had roughened his well-groomed facial hair, now spreading far beyond a thin goatee. The man squinted at the light, but his manner appeared at ease, relaxed.

Delvin gave Brock a nod. "I thought you might come visit me, Your Majesty. Our last meeting ended far too abruptly and gave us little time to chat."

Brock's brow furrowed, but he didn't reply. Wharton grabbed the pris-

oner's arm and led him toward the door at the far end of the room, with crossbows following the entire time. After opening the door, Wharton and the prisoner entered as Brock and the two crossbow-wielding guards followed.

The glowlamp ate away at the darkness in the room, shedding light upon the grim equipment within. Despite the unspoken threat of their surroundings, the man had an easy smile on his face when Wharton spun Delvin around and forced him into the black chair. While Wharton secured the man to the chair with leather straps, Brock surveyed the room. Memories resurfaced of what they had found here when Brock first took over the castle all those years ago – the type of memories that yielded nightmares or worse. *How many Unchosen were subject to the horrors of this room? How many deaths caused as the Ministry sought answers?*

Shifting his focus back to the prisoner, Brock stared at him while addressing the guards. "Leave us and close the door."

The men nodded and slipped outside. The door clicked shut, sending an echo throughout the torture chamber – a sound that carried an ominous weight.

Brock moved closer to the man and looked him in the eye. In his mid-twenties, Delvin was a handsome man, but not overtly so. With dark hair and brown eyes, he was the type who blended well in any surrounding. He had certainly done well breaking into Brock's chambers.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions," Brock said.

"Whew! That's a relief." Delvin smiled and said, "I was afraid you might ask me to dance. You see, my accommodations don't provide sufficient room to properly practice. I'd hate to disappoint my king."

An unintentional sigh escaped Brock's lips, but he regained his composure. "I have the power to help you, Delvin. I also have the power to keep you here forever. In fact, I have the power to ensure that you never leave this particular room alive, although you will have wished you were dead long before that would be allowed to occur."

The flippant tone fell away as Delvin responded. "I accept that what you say is true. After all, you are the king."

"Good." Brock exhaled. "In truth, I have no reason to wish you any harm, despite the fact that you scratched my wife's favorite painting."

The man shrugged.

"What I do wish is to know how you did it. How did you get into the castle and into the royal apartments?"

"If I tell you this, am I free to go?"

"Not just yet. However, honesty in this case will put you on a path that offers hope and a simple promise."

Delvin frowned. "A promise?"

"Yes. A promise that I will think upon how I can let you go in good conscience. A promise that I will seek a means to give your life meaning." Brock's eyes narrowed. "I know what it's like to have few choices, what it's like to find yourself on a path of self-preservation and lacking purpose that supports a greater cause." Brock looked the man in the eye and revealed his secret as he tapped his forehead. "Don't let the runes fool you. They are fake. Like you, I am Unchosen."



"It's been a week and we've learned nothing," Brock collapsed on the sofa with a grunt.

"At least Gunther is awake and is eating," Ashland noted from the tub.

Brock watched as she poured water over her head, washing soap away. Normally, the sight of her in the bath was a welcome distraction, allowing him to forget the worries of the world. Unfortunately, such was not the case today.

"I'm afraid he'll never be the same." Brock recalled sitting with the man during breakfast, a painful thing to witness. Each scoop of porridge was a labor, accompanied by the violent shaking of an unsteady hand. "I value him more for his mind than his muscle, but I'm afraid he won't see it that way. He's been a warrior his entire life – fit and strong. How will he take it if he can no longer walk, can no longer wield a sword?"

Ashland used a pumice block on the bottom of her feet, scrubbing away dead skin. "I understand your concern, Brock, but you should give him more credit than that. Beyond the practice yards, he hasn't drawn his sword in a decade. Advice, on the other hand, he seems to wield on a daily basis."

As she stood from the tub and grabbed her towel, Brock watched in appreciation. Once again, he found himself marveling at the luck of meeting Ashland and sharing his life with such an amazing woman –

amazing inside and out. After drying her hair briefly, she wrapped the towel around her head and grabbed a second towel for her body. A knock at the door drew their attention.

"Who is it?" Brock called out.

"You have a visitor, Your Majesty," Burtles announced from the hallway outside. "One whom I expect you will wish to see."

He glanced at Ashland as she slid her red velvet robe on and tied it together. "Very well," Brock announced. "You may come in."

The door opened and Burtles entered the royal apartment. With an extended hand before him, he held the door open as a tall man entered the room. Brock stood and smiled, happy to see his friend's face.

At well over six-feet, the blond-haired man struck an imposing figure. Burtles glared at the longsword at the man's hip, frowning in annoyance that he was allowed to wear it in the Citadel. Brock knew too well that Burtles valued rules and propriety far too much.

Brock approached the man with his arms open. "I'm happy to see you, Cam."

When they met, Cam thumped him on the back, forcing a grunt from Brock. He stepped back, his grin sliding away when he saw Cam's sullen expression.

"What's wrong, Cam?" Ashland asked as she approached the man for a hug of greeting.

When he released her, Cam's gaze fell toward the floor. "Something has happened. It's my father. He was...poisoned."

THE HAND

Cam glanced toward Budakis as he relayed his story. It was difficult to see this man he had admired for so long, now bedridden. Worse yet, the shaking and twitching reminded him of his father.

With a shake of his head, Cam continued his story. "...and when the healer arrived, he was on the floor, foaming at the mouth. Less than a minute had passed before he was healed, but the ecclesiast said he was merely seconds from dying when she reached him. Even then, he was unconscious for a week." Cam glanced at Budakis again before turning toward Brock and Ashland. "I left five days after he woke. At the time, he still couldn't walk and...the shaking would not stop."

Brock looked toward Budakis, likely connecting the similarities in the man's condition and that of Cam's father. Brock's gaze shifted toward Cam, and he asked a question.

"Did you discover who was behind it?"

Sitting back in his chair, Cam sighed. "Yes and no." The faces of his companions reflected confusion. "I sent guards to locate the man who had served the wine. They cornered him as he was trying to leave the building but were unable to arrest him." Cam grimaced. "He drank from a small vial and was dead in less than a minute. We later confirmed that he was not part of the castle staff. How he had been able to sneak into the Citadel

remains unknown, but we did discover how he got the uniform when we found a staff member dead beneath a bed in the servant's quarters."

Brock leaned forward from the sofa, his elbows on his knees. "Did you find the mark?"

"Yes. It was there at the man's hairline."

"The Hand."

Cam nodded.

Brock sat back with a frown. "You heard about the prison break?"

"A messenger arrived two days after the assassination attempt." Cam exhaled a long breath that spoke volumes. "It likely would not have made a difference to know before the assassination attempt, but knowing now changes things."

"Do we have any idea where the prisoners went after the escape?" Ashland asked.

Brock turned toward Budakis, who shook his head. "No."

Brock then tented his fingers before his mouth and stared into space. After a moment, he spoke again.

"We have long suspected that there were members of The Hand who went unnoticed and were never captured. They could have been among us the entire time, waiting as they schemed. Worse, their numbers are unknown. We held their leaders in that prison for more than a decade, so they must have been using that time to rebuild until they had the means to storm the compound and free their leaders." Brock stood and began to pace with his hands clasped behind his back. "Last I heard, roughly two hundred men and women remained in the prison before their liberation. That mine is a fortress, and it would require dozens of fighters to capture it. We have no idea where they are, but we know that they number in the hundreds or even thousands."

He continued to pace, lost in deep thought. Cam's gaze shifted toward Ashland, and then to Budakis. They both watched Brock in silence, waiting for him to continue.

"All along, we have struggled with an inability to determine who remains loyal to The Hand. They can exist anywhere, with spies, informants..." he frowned, "and assassins, surrounding us without our even knowing it. How do we fight something we cannot see? How do we get ahead of them? We must somehow discover their plans before they happen."

Cam mumbled, "I wish we could spy on them, instead."

Brock's gaze shot toward Cam and his eyes lit up. "Yes. We need to play the same game, but we need to do it better. If we had our own network of spies and assassins, we could infiltrate The Hand and take it down from the inside."

A knock sounded at the door. Brock's lips drew a thin line as he stared toward it before he replied, "Come in."

The door opened and Wharton entered the room. Cam noted the grim expression on the man's face and the message he held in his hand.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Your Majesty. However, a messenger just arrived with this, and I thought you would wish to see it immediately." Wharton held the note toward Brock.

All eyes watched Brock as he read the message. When finished, he waved his hand. "Thank you, Wharton. You may go. Please close the door behind you."

When the man left and the door clicked shut, Brock closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Ashland stood and put her hand on Brock's arm. "What is it, dear?"

Without a word, he handed the note to her. She read it and gasped. Her hand covered her mouth and tears emerged.

Unable to remain patient, Cam asked. "What is it? What happened?" He prayed the news had nothing to do with his father.

Brock opened his eyes and looked at Cam. "Talvin is dead. Vinacci's king is dead."

ICON

Delvin completed his pushups and sat on his pallet to catch his breath. He took a sip of water and used the pitcher to refill his cup. A fortnight in the dark cell had improved his ability to navigate without light. Still, sometimes his eyes would play tricks on him, showing him things that were not there – things that could not be there. As his breathing calmed, he heard the murmur of voices outside his cell. The conversation carried on for a minute before all fell quiet.

A great crack sounded, and his door was torn from its hinges, splitting apart to send splinters spraying through the air and chunks of stone to rain down. He squinted at the open doorway, blinking as he willed his eyes to adjust to the light of the glowlamp in the room outside. A figure emerged, blocking his way out, but not the hulking figure of his jailor. Rising to his feet, Delvin realized that this figure was short, yet athletic – another figure he knew.

“Your Majesty. What a surprise. What do I owe the pleasure?”

“Nobody is here but the two of us, Delvin. We can dispense with the formalities. My name is Brock.”

Delvin took a step closer and peeked past the king, finding nobody else in the room. “Where are your guards? Who will protect you and ensure I do not escape?”

Brock shook his head. "No guards. Just you and me. As for protection, I can protect myself." He lifted a pair of shackles in the air, but rather than using them on Delvin, he crushed them in his grip as if they were paper.

"I see," Delvin was suitably impressed, but he had trained himself not to show such emotions.

Brock turned and strode from the cell with his hands clasped behind his back. "I have an offer to propose. You appear to possess unique skills – skills I wish to cultivate in others."

Delvin followed him into the room, squinting in the light of the glowlamp. "What do you mean?"

Spinning about, Brock faced him with an expression lacking humor. "The world is changing, Delvin. I fear that our period of peace and prosperity is nearing an end. With this change, comes an opportunity for people like you, people who have the means to shift the tide in our favor."

A frown spread across Delvin's face. "I don't understand."

Brock moved closer, his eyes narrowing. "I need you, Delvin. I need your help to find the right people, to train them, to create an infrastructure that can gather information...and execute orders without failure.

"I plan to create a network of spies – people who can blend in, people who can infiltrate our enemies and gather information, people who can act as needed, even if that need includes assassination." Brock turned about and stared Delvin in the eye. "The Issalian Clandestine Operative Network can be your new home. I offer you an opportunity to give your life meaning, purpose." The passion in his king's voice was unmistakable. "Not only can you be free of this cell, but I can free you of a life without meaning. You can help to lead this network of spies, and in doing so, perhaps you can save us from the dark times ahead."

After a lifetime of living for the moment, planning no further than his next heist – his next challenge – something new stirred inside Delvin. He looked at this man, his king...an Unchosen, and saw someone he admired, someone who found value in an Unchosen-turned-thief.

"So, let's assume I accept this job." Delvin grinned. "Are meals included?"



This ends our origin story, detailing the events that led to the formation of the Issalian Clandestine Operative Network. A dark future awaits Brock, Cassius, and his fellow rulers – at least for the rulers who survive the first wave of terror. ICON will become the focal point for gathering intelligence and protecting the citizens of Issalia. The story continues in *A Warden's Purpose*, book one of the *Wardens of Issalia* series.

ALSO BY JEFFREY L. KOHANEK

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