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# The Prophecy Problem

*Book One of The Problem Series*

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# Chapter 1

Caelan came home after archery practice. He casually told me tomorrow he'd be shooting an apple off my head. He's my friend, but sometimes he's such a dick.

Of course, he meant it as a joke, I think. With Caelan, it was hard to tell. I'd been his servant since childhood, raised alongside him in the sprawling shadow of Castle Eldermoor, the seat of his father, Duke Valemark. But always a step behind, always expected to laugh when he laughed and quietly accept the subtle reminders of my place. My father had served Caelan's family before me, just as his father and his father's father had served the great lords of Eldermoor through generations. It was assumed from the moment of my birth that I'd follow in their footsteps. I didn't mind, really. Or at least, that's what I told myself. Loyalty and duty had their merits, even when your best friend never quite let you forget you weren't his equal, and he damned well knows I hate apples.

The elders had spent years grooming Caelan as the prophesied hero, the Messiah. Can you imagine that? The Messiah destined to lead Eldaria from darkness into an era of peace. His lineage, revered and ancient, traced back to the kingdom's founding and was spoken of as the source of the prophecy itself. As his servant, I'd grown up listening to the prophecies repeated so often they

became as familiar as my own breath. But honestly, at twelve years old, all that prophetic nonsense seemed less important than simply surviving Caelan's jokes and avoiding apples.

I asked Caelan what exactly he would be Messiahing.

He just smirked at me in that annoyingly confident way of his, leaning casually against the stone battlement overlooking the castle courtyard.

"Saving the world, Eldrid," he said, as if it were obvious. "Uniting kingdoms, slaying monsters, inspiring the masses, the usual."

I glanced across the peaceful landscape below. Farmers tending fields, children chasing each other, the occasional knight patrolling the road. "Saving it from what, exactly?" I asked. "It seems fine enough to me."

Caelan shrugged, clearly annoyed I wasn't suitably impressed. "Oh, come on. You know how it is. Bandits on the roads, disputes over borders, nobles squabbling for power... The kingdoms have barely held an uneasy peace since forever. There's always someone or something ready to tear it all apart."

He waved dramatically toward the horizon, rolling his eyes at my skepticism. "It's prophesied. Something big, dark, and terrible is bound to show up eventually. And when it does, obviously, I'll handle it."

I snorted softly, turning back to watch a pair of knights lazily jousting in the yard below. Caelan could believe what he wanted. To me, the world seemed full of ordinary problems and ordinary people, not exactly waiting for a Messiah, and definitely not him. I'm not sure he even puts his boots on the right feet.

Ok, ok. You're probably a little confused about my relationship with Caelan. Are we friends, not friends, just drinking buddies? Since we're only twelve, we haven't really formed that kind of

bond yet. But it's complicated to explain.

First off, Caelan isn't a bad guy. Well, not entirely anyway. He just has that confidence you get when you're raised knowing you'll be the hero of legends. And me? I'm the servant kid. The elders have spent our entire childhoods reminding him, and by extension, me, exactly where we stand in the grand scheme of things. He's meant to lead, I'm meant to follow; he's important, I'm just...there. I don't even think Caelan realizes he's doing it half the time. It's just who he is.

But there's also a weird comfort in our roles. Caelan can be arrogant and bossy, sure, but he's also fiercely protective. I've seen him punch an older boy for mocking my clothes. Granted, he mocked them himself the next day, but still. That counts for something, doesn't it?

Sometimes, though, I wonder if it's me who's gotten comfortable. Maybe I'm just used to being in his shadow. After all, my father, grandfather, and everyone else before me served his family, it feels like it's practically baked into my bones. If you asked Caelan, he'd say we're best friends. But if you asked me...honestly, I'm not sure. We live in two different worlds, even though we're standing side-by-side.

See what I mean? Complicated.

"I need to get ready for dinner tonight," Caelan announced suddenly, breaking me out of my thoughts. He thrust his bow and arrows into my arms without even waiting for me to respond. "Put these away and go draw me a bath."

So, that's exactly what I did. After carefully hanging his bow and quiver, I found a scrap of parchment and a stick of charcoal. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, I meticulously drew a steaming bath, complete with bubbles, soap, and a little duck floating cheerfully on the water. It was probably one of my

better pieces, actually, definitely bath-like. I presented my masterpiece proudly, just as Caelan began undoing the laces of his boots.

His reaction wasn't exactly what I'd hoped for. He stared at the drawing, blinked once, then twice, before leveling me with a look usually reserved for particularly uncooperative horses. "Very funny, Eldrid," he said dryly, snatching the parchment from my hands. "Hilarious."

He crumpled the drawing and tossed it at my head. "Now get the water ready. And hurry, or I'll make you bathe in the stables."

I sighed dramatically as I headed toward the washroom. Caelan might be the chosen one, but his sense of humor was tragically underdeveloped.

I stowed Caelan's archery gear in the armory, taking my time arranging each arrow neatly in the quiver. It's not like they'd invite me to their fancy dinner table, anyway. I had the rest of the evening free, which meant avoiding nobles and finding something useful, or at least quiet, to do.

I ducked through the bustling castle kitchen, dodging cooks waving wooden spoons and assistants balancing steaming trays of roast meat. I'd nearly reached the safety of the courtyard beyond when someone called my name.

"Eldrid!"

I froze mid-step, recognizing the voice instantly. Turning slowly, I saw Mirabel smiling warmly, a basket of freshly baked bread balanced expertly on her hip. She brushed a loose curl from her forehead, leaving a faint smudge of flour across her cheek. Mirabel was the baker's daughter, around my age, and lately, every time I saw her, my stomach did a strange flip that felt both amazing and terrible.

## CHAPTER 1

“H-hi, Mirabel,” I stammered, suddenly unsure what to do with my hands. “Bread looks...um, nice.”

“Thanks,” she said, grinning as she stepped closer. “Do you want some? It’s still warm.”

I nodded dumbly, silently cursing myself. Why was talking suddenly so difficult? Mirabel handed me a small loaf, her fingers briefly brushing mine. Instantly, warmth rushed to my face, and other places I’d rather not mention. Head groom Padrick had laughed heartily when I’d described this feeling, calling it “tinglies in your jinglies.” I wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but it sounded terrifyingly accurate.

Mirabel tilted her head slightly, giving me a curious look. “Are you alright, Eldrid? You look flushed.”

“I’m fine,” I managed, desperately wishing the stone floor beneath me would swallow me whole. “It’s just hot... in the kitchen.”

She smiled softly. “Well, be careful, then. Wouldn’t want you getting overheated.”

I nodded again, trying desperately to remember how breathing worked, then escaped into the cool evening air. I had faced mockery from Caelan, threats from knights, and stern lectures from castle elders without breaking a sweat, but one smile from Mirabel completely unhinged me.

Maybe monsters and prophecies weren’t the only dangers lurking in Eldermoor.

You’re probably wondering what it’s like to grow up with a Messiah. What exactly does he do as Messiah-Elect? And what even is a Messiah anyway?

Well, the first thing you should know is that no one outside Caelan’s family actually knows he’s the Messiah-Elect, so far, anyway. That’s why there aren’t crowds flooding Castle

Eldermoor begging him to bless their favorite pig or asking him to heal their stubbed toes. Caelan's family insists that the world isn't ready to know yet. They say there are plenty of people who wouldn't exactly be thrilled to have a Messiah around, disrupting kingdoms and changing the balance of power. To protect Caelan, the whole Messiah thing is a carefully guarded secret.

Why Caelan, specifically? Well, some dusty old scrolls and vague prophecies finger him as Eldaria's eventual savior, claiming the Messiah will emerge from the noble House of Valemark. The prophecy is oddly nonspecific about the details, mostly filled with ominous warnings about darkness and disaster, and something about "one who will bring balance," whatever that means. According to the signs outlined by the scrolls, the Messiah will be born at a certain time, to a certain family, under certain mysterious conditions, conditions that Caelan, of course, perfectly fits. It's like fate stamped "Messiah" right onto his forehead at birth.

Sometimes I suspect some of the older staff around the castle know, or at least suspect, that Caelan's not exactly a normal noble heir. There are quiet conversations that abruptly stop when I walk into a room, sideways glances when Caelan does something particularly impressive, or particularly idiotic. But no one talks about it openly. As far as I know, I'm the only outsider who's fully aware, thanks mostly to growing up practically glued to Caelan's side and my family's longstanding service to House Valemark.

And then there's Therias, the family sage. Or soothsayer. Or prophet. Honestly, no one's exactly clear on his official job title, but he's always lurking around muttering cryptically about "alignments" and "omens." Therias showed up at Castle

Eldermoor decades ago after deciphering the ancient scrolls, convinced the promised hero would come from the Valemark line. Since then, he's made it his life's work to make sure Caelan's ready to Messiah all over everyone's ass the moment evil makes its inevitable appearance.

So that's what a Messiah is, at least around here. Less of a religious figure, it's not like he walks on water or anything, and more like a hero-in-waiting, prophesied to save the kingdom, maybe even the whole world, from... something evil and terrible, probably. Like I said, it's pretty vague.

But vague or not, I hope evil takes its sweet time arriving. Because as much as I enjoy teasing Caelan, I'm not exactly in a rush to see what happens when we actually need him to start saving the world.

So that's my story, such as it is. Servant, friend, and occasional target practice dummy to the prophesied savior of Eldaria. Sure, maybe it's not the stuff legends are made of, at least, not my part in it, but it's probably still more interesting than the castle latrine digger's tale. Although, come to think of it, maybe his story has fewer apples and arrogant Messiahs-to-be.

Honestly, I wouldn't mind a little more excitement in my life. Don't get me wrong; I'm not hoping for the apocalypse or anything. I'm perfectly content letting Caelan handle all the doom and gloom prophecies. But just once, it might be nice to feel like I'm part of something important, rather than standing around watching history happen from behind Caelan's shoulder.

Still, careful what you wish for, right? Knowing my luck, I'd end up right in the middle of things, and probably holding another apple.

## Chapter 2

It was Caelan's thirteenth birthday, which meant I was officially two weeks older and, at least in my mind, two weeks wiser than the kingdom's prophesied Messiah. Caelan hated being reminded of that, so naturally, I brought it up as often as possible.

The summons to Duke Valemark's study arrived just as I'd finished carefully packing Caelan's freshly polished armor into a travel chest. Well, it was supposed to be freshly polished. Mostly, I'd breathed heavily on it and rubbed it with my sleeve until it looked less dusty. I doubt anyone could tell the difference once we were out on the road.

"Eldrid," the steward said, stepping neatly around the pile of discarded clothes I'd left in the corner, "the Duke wishes to see you."

I glanced over my shoulder, noticing through the narrow window the preparations underway in the courtyard below. Extra horses were being saddled, two more than usual, which told me exactly what this summons meant: I'd be joining Caelan on the duchy tour. Everyone else seemed to think these things were grand adventures. Personally, I'd always found "grand adventures" meant twice the chores and half the sleep.

Turning quickly toward the door, I nearly collided with Sir

Darran as he strode past. He paused just long enough to level me with his signature glare, sharp and cold enough to freeze milk straight from the cow. I'd grown used to it by now, though I still had no idea what I'd done to earn his eternal irritation. Probably breathing too loudly.

Sighing, I followed the steward down the hall toward the Duke's chambers, wondering if turning thirteen had actually improved anything, or if growing older simply meant finding more creative ways to embarrass myself.

The Duke's study always smelled vaguely of old parchment and leather polish, two scents that instantly reminded me of lessons I'd usually rather forget. Caelan was already inside, standing beside his father's massive oak desk. Duke Valemark sat upright, his broad shoulders framed by sunlight streaming through the tall, narrow windows. The Duke was the kind of man who always seemed carved from granite, his dark beard neatly trimmed, gray threads woven through it like veins in marble. He had Caelan's same sharp jawline, only set firmer, probably from years of ruling a duchy or scolding his son, both equally demanding tasks.

He glanced up as I entered, and for a brief moment the stern lines around his eyes softened slightly. "Good. You're here, Eldrid."

"Yes, Your Grace," I said, standing stiffly beside Caelan, who elbowed me lightly in the ribs. I resisted the urge to elbow him back, barely.

"You've noticed the preparations, no doubt," the Duke continued, folding his calloused hands together atop the desk. "This tour isn't simply ceremonial. It's a necessary step in preparing Caelan to assume leadership one day. He needs firsthand experience with the people, the lands, and the... complexities

we currently face.”

His gaze briefly settled on Caelan, something unreadable flickering across his expression. “However, my son insists that your presence will be beneficial.”

I shot Caelan a sideways glance. He returned it with his usual smug smile. “I convinced Father you were useful,” he said lightly. “Well, useful enough.”

The Duke sighed quietly, pinching the bridge of his nose as if fending off a headache, a gesture I imagined he performed frequently in Caelan’s presence. “Regardless, I agreed. You’ve proven observant, Eldrid, and your presence grounds Caelan. Heaven knows he could use it.”

Caelan’s smile faded just slightly, replaced by mild annoyance. “Father—”

The Duke raised a single eyebrow, silencing him instantly. “This is no simple jaunt around the countryside. There are troubling reports near the borders: villages falling silent, strange whispers from Tharnesse. You’ll both need to keep your eyes open and pay attention.”

I nodded, feeling a surprising thrill despite myself. For once, it almost felt as if the Duke were addressing both of us equally, not just Caelan with me standing invisibly behind him.

“Do you understand, Eldrid?” the Duke pressed.

“Yes, Your Grace,” I said, and this time I meant it.

“Good. Gather your things and be ready to ride within the hour. There’s much to do, and very little time.”

As we turned to leave, Caelan leaned closer, whispering, “Try not to embarrass me too much.”

“Only if you promise to put your boots on the right feet,” I muttered back.

He grinned, nudging my shoulder roughly. For a moment,

stepping into the corridor, it almost felt like we really were just two friends setting off on an adventure, prophecy, duty, and destiny be damned...until Caelan shoved his empty waterskin into my hands and said casually, “Fill this, would you? And make sure it’s cold this time.”

Right. Friends.

I sighed and took the waterskin, heading toward the kitchens, where the water was always coldest. Caelan had a special talent for reminding me exactly where I stood, usually right when I started to forget. Maybe it was a Messiah thing. Or maybe he was just naturally gifted at being irritating. Honestly, it was hard to tell the difference sometimes.

The kitchen staff bustled around me, barely noticing as I slipped past and dipped the waterskin into a stone basin filled with chilly water drawn fresh from the castle wells. I’d just finished tightening the stopper when a shadow fell across the doorway behind me.

“Setting out on an adventure with the chosen one,” Therias remarked idly, as though discussing nothing more important than the weather. “You must be excited, Eldrid.”

I turned slowly, already knowing exactly who I’d find. Therias leaned casually against the stone archway, his long, pale fingers steepled beneath his chin. Everything about the sage seemed elongated, as if someone had stretched him like taffy and forgotten to push him back into shape. His silver hair hung straight and loose, framing a thin face dominated by eyes so pale they seemed colorless, catching the lamplight like shards of ice.

I snorted, tying the waterskin onto my belt. “Excited isn’t exactly the word I’d use. In stories, chosen ones are usually more of a pain in the ass than anything else, especially to the

people stuck following them around, cleaning up their messes.”

Therias’s lips twitched slightly. “True enough. But every hero needs someone reliable nearby, even if only to remind them which end of the sword to hold.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Then I’ll make sure Caelan remembers. Wouldn’t want him stabbing himself before fulfilling his glorious destiny.”

Therias chuckled softly, his gaze drifting past me, momentarily distant. “Indeed. It’s a familiar tale, isn’t it? Destiny calls, the hero rises, the world holds its breath.”

“Sounds tedious,” I said lightly, trying not to feel uneasy at the sage’s vague gaze. “Especially the breath-holding part.”

Therias smiled gently, refocusing on me. “Ah, but the world does love its familiar stories, doesn’t it?”

He didn’t wait for my answer. Instead, he turned gracefully, robes whispering across the stone floor as he vanished back down the corridor.

I sighed and adjusted the waterskin again, silently cursing sages and their endless riddles. Therias couldn’t help himself, he lived and breathed cryptic commentary, just as Caelan lived for heroic dramatics.

As for me, I was just hoping our “chosen one” could manage this trip without getting us both killed, or worse, bored to death by his own legend.

The courtyard buzzed with activity as the final preparations were made. Stable boys tightened saddle straps, knights checked their gear, and Caelan stood beside his horse, looking every bit the hero he was supposed to become, at least according to prophecy. I stood a few paces back, quietly double-checking the packs, because prophecy or not, forgotten bedrolls and cold nights made poor traveling companions.

“Eldrid!”

The familiar voice brought an immediate warmth to my cheeks, and, unfortunately, to the ears of several nearby knights. Mirabel hurried toward me, basket in hand and a bright smile on her face. I fought the sudden urge to hide behind Caelan’s horse.

“I almost missed you,” she said, slightly breathless as she stopped in front of me, pushing back a loose curl. Flour dusted her fingertips again, which seemed to be her permanent state, and I suddenly found it difficult to think clearly.

“Um, hi,” I managed brilliantly. “You’re here.”

“Yes, well spotted.” Mirabel laughed softly, holding out the basket. “I made these for your journey. Just some fresh bread and honey cakes.”

Behind us, a knight chuckled loudly, followed by a low whistle and whispers that were clearly not subtle enough. My face flushed hotter, but Mirabel ignored the amusement, her eyes focused only on mine.

I took the basket awkwardly, suddenly aware of my hands feeling too big, too clumsy. “Thank you. I—I’m sure Caelan will love these.”

“They’re not for Caelan,” she said firmly, lowering her voice and leaning a bit closer. “They’re for you, Eldrid. Someone has to remember you’re going too.”

“Oh,” I said, eloquent as always. “Right. Good.”

Mirabel laughed again, a gentle, genuine sound that made my heart feel like it had suddenly forgotten how to beat properly. “Safe travels,” she said, stepping back and meeting my eyes one last time. “Try not to get yourself killed.”

“Definitely the plan,” I said quickly, instantly wishing for a second chance at that response. But Mirabel only smiled warmly

and turned back toward the kitchens, leaving me standing awkwardly with a basket and the amused eyes of half the courtyard on my burning face.

As I turned back toward Caelan's horse, I caught sight of Sir Darran. He stood beside his massive black stallion, his face shadowed by the wide brim of his battered leather hat. Darran was easily the duchy's fiercest warrior, a veteran of countless border skirmishes and shadowed confrontations. Most people believed the kingdom was entirely at peace, but men like Sir Darran knew better. Rumors of missing patrols, attacks by bandits, or worse, near the edges of Tharnesse were becoming increasingly common, though the details rarely reached the common folk.

Darran's reputation had been forged quietly, battle by unseen battle, in those hidden, bloody exchanges at the edges of our supposedly peaceful land. A jagged scar sliced from his temple to his jawline, evidence of at least one conflict that hadn't remained hidden. Now those same cold, piercing eyes fixed directly onto me. It wasn't unusual, Sir Darran often glared at me like I'd personally burned down his ancestral home...or eaten his favorite pig for breakfast, but knowing his reputation didn't make the stare any less unsettling.

I quickly looked away, busying myself with stowing Mirabel's basket among the rest of our supplies. Whatever his problem was, I had enough to worry about already.

"You and Mirabel looked cozy," Caelan said, appearing beside me as I adjusted the last of our saddlebags. He wore that familiar grin, the one he reserved specifically for tormenting me.

"Shut up," I muttered, feeling heat creep back into my cheeks again. "Not everyone around here sees me as just a servant."

Caelan laughed lightly, elbowing me. "Relax, Eldrid. She's

cute. And she clearly has terrible taste. Good news for you.”

I shot him a sidelong glance. “Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you. Of course, last I checked, only barnyard animals were showing interest.”

Caelan snorted, seemingly unbothered by the jab. But his smile faded slightly as he watched the final preparations around us, a thoughtful expression crossing his face, an expression I rarely saw.

“You know, Mirabel might be the only girl who talks to you because she wants to. Everyone else has some political angle.” He glanced toward the castle gates, lowering his voice. “We’re meeting Duke Albrecht at the border, right? He has a daughter about our age. What do you want to bet she’ll conveniently be there too?”

I raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. Caelan wasn’t usually this perceptive, especially when it came to politics. Maybe all those tedious lessons on alliances and court etiquette had actually sunk in a little.

“Seriously?” I asked, impressed despite myself. “You think this whole tour is secretly about matchmaking?”

Caelan shrugged, forcing another easy smile. “Not entirely, but Father keeps talking about alliances and stability. A marriage between two duchies would do more to solidify bonds than a thousand treaties. Honestly, I feel like one of those prize cows farmers parade around the market square before an auction.”

I stared at him incredulously. “You’re comparing yourself to a cow?”

“Well, a very handsome cow,” Caelan replied, puffing out his chest slightly, though there was little genuine humor in his voice this time. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. If it’s my duty, I’ll do it. Marriage, alliances, all part of the job, apparently.”

I shook my head, genuinely baffled by his calm acceptance of it all. Duty or not, the idea that Caelan could casually discuss his future marriage, like selecting a horse at market, was astonishing. Then again, perhaps that was the benefit of knowing your whole life had been planned out since birth. No surprises.

“Sounds like fun,” I muttered quietly, busying myself with checking a saddle strap to hide my smirk. “Can’t wait to meet the future Mrs. Messiah.”

“What was that?” Caelan asked sharply, looking suspicious.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied quickly. “Just thinking about cows.”

Caelan frowned at me suspiciously, but thankfully chose to drop it.

A sudden hush fell over the bustling courtyard. Heads turned in surprise as Duchess Isadora stepped slowly from the shadowed archway leading into the castle’s grand hall. Even Caelan paused mid-laugh, his face shifting instantly to a careful, solemn expression. It had been weeks, maybe longer, since anyone had seen the Duchess in public.

She moved with quiet dignity, though her pace was measured, cautious. Her slender form was wrapped in a cloak of deep emerald, the hood drawn partly forward as though to shield her eyes from the morning sun. Rumors of illness had circulated quietly for months, whispered between servants in dim corridors, but no one dared speak openly about what might truly ail her.

The Duke stepped forward immediately, his strong presence softening as he gently took her arm. She smiled faintly at him, reaching up with one delicate hand to lightly touch his cheek in a tender gesture that felt strangely private, even here in full view of the gathered crowd.

Caelan approached his mother respectfully, clearly aware of

every eye watching their interaction. “Mother,” he said softly, bowing his head.

“My son,” she replied, her voice gentle yet somehow distant, like it carried from a faraway place. She brushed her fingertips lightly over his hair, a motherly gesture but hesitant, careful, almost as if touching him might break something fragile.

Then, unexpectedly, her gaze found me standing awkwardly just behind Caelan. Her eyes were a deep, thoughtful blue, touched by shadows that spoke silently of exhaustion or pain. She gave me the slightest of nods, acknowledging my presence in a way that surprised me. Few nobles, even fewer Duchesses, ever bothered to notice servants, much less greet them.

“Travel safely,” she said quietly, turning back to her husband and son. “I’ll be here when you return.”

She lingered just a moment more, looking between Caelan and the Duke as though committing their faces to memory, before turning slowly and retreating toward the castle, vanishing again into the cool darkness.

As she disappeared, conversations gradually resumed, though quieter now, more subdued. Caelan stood silently, his eyes following her until she was out of sight. For a brief moment, the ever-confident *Messiah-in-waiting* looked uncertain, vulnerable. Then he blinked and straightened his shoulders, slipping the careful mask of calm confidence back into place as if it had never slipped at all.

By the time the gates of Castle Eldermoor opened, the energy from earlier in the courtyard had faded into something more subdued. The buzz of last-minute preparations, the laughter, the awkward goodbyes, it all quieted as the reality of the road ahead settled over the group.

The Duke rode at the head of the column, upright and unread-

able as ever, with Sir Darran on one side and Therias on the other like two very different shades of threat. Darran looked ready to fight off an ambush at any moment, while Therias looked like he might give the ambush a cryptic warning and then politely let it pass.

Caelan and I rode closer to the back, behind the senior knights and supply wagons. Technically he was the heir to the duchy, but at thirteen, he was still junior enough to be tucked safely near the rear. Not that he seemed to mind. He sat straight in his saddle, playing the role, but I could tell he was already day-dreaming of dramatic speeches and sword fights and winning the hearts of the people.

And speaking of people, the townsfolk had gathered at the gates to watch us leave. Bakers and blacksmiths, stablehands and stonemasons, lining the street with curious eyes and hopeful cheers. They clapped and waved as we passed, calling out blessings for the Duke and polite encouragements for his son.

No one cheered for me, of course. Not that I expected it. The best I could hope for was not falling off my horse in front of everyone. I gripped the reins tightly and tried to look like I belonged here.

The castle walls shrank behind us, and soon the road opened up into the countryside. I'd left before, sure, but only on errands or supply runs. This was different. The world outside felt bigger now. Not just wider, but older, heavier. Like it had been waiting.

I glanced over at Caelan. He looked calm, even excited. But I couldn't shake the feeling that this trip, this tour, wasn't going to be the routine exercise in diplomacy everyone said it was. Something about it felt... off. Not wrong exactly, just not ordinary.

Then again, maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe it really was

## CHAPTER 2

just a formal ride through villages and border towns. Speeches, dinners, boring small talk with minor nobles. Nothing dramatic.

Still, I tightened my grip on the reins and sat a little straighter in my saddle.

Just in case.

## Chapter 3

We made camp just before nightfall beside a shallow stream that wound through a grove of poplars. The trees were tall and thin, and no matter where you stood, they always seemed to lean just slightly in your direction, like they were listening. The Duke's tent went up first, sharp and precise as a war map. The knights staked their claims in a neat half-circle beyond it. Caelan and I were near the edge of camp, close enough to be included, far enough to be forgotten.

While the others sharpened swords or loosened boots, I was stuck hauling firewood from a splintering cart and helping the cook scrub soot from the bottom of the traveling pot. My hands were blistered by the time the stew was simmering. No one thanked me, but someone muttered "finally" when I passed out bowls.

I sank beside the fire at last, my legs aching and my fingers raw, just as the stories began.

Ser Jerric launched into one first, claiming the woods we'd passed through were haunted by a headless hunter, a soldier from a forgotten war who now roamed the duchy's edges, antlers sprouting from his shoulders and blood dripping from where his mouth should've been. Apparently, if you heard the sound of antlers scraping bark, you were already marked.

A few of the knights chuckled and leaned in. Another added that the hunter could mimic your voice, calling out in the dark to lure you away from camp. Someone else swore he'd once chased the spirit off with a burning brand. Caelan and I listened from our corner, the firelight flickering in his eyes. He didn't speak, but he looked more focused than usual, drawn in. He always liked stories. I just liked watching how people told them.

When the laughter lulled and the wine had made everyone just loose enough, Caelan leaned back and looked right at me.

“Eldrid’s got one,” he said with a smirk. “Tell us yours.”

I blinked. “Me?”

Caelan nodded like it was obvious. “Come on. Surely a stable-rat like you has a terrifying tale from the hayloft.”

The knights laughed, and a few turned toward me with interest. I could've refused. But that would've meant more teasing later, and probably latrine duty. So I sat up straighter and put on my best deadpan expression.

“Alright,” I said, stirring the fire with a stick. “Here’s one. True story.”

That got a few grins. Everyone loves a “true” story.

“There was a boy, not me, definitely not me, who lived in a castle a lot like this one. Full of nobles, full of rules, full of staircases that creaked at the worst possible moments. One night, this boy snuck into the kitchens to steal a honey cake, and when he opened the oven—”

I paused for effect.

“—he saw it. The ghost of Cook Margelin. Still wearing her flour-stained apron, and still furious that someone had used her rolling pin to clean out the chamber pot.”

A few knights chuckled.

“She raised her wooden spoon and said, ‘BOY! IF YOU TOUCH

THAT CAKE, I'LL HAUNT YOUR BLOODLINE FOR SEVEN GENERATIONS.' And you know what he did?"

"What?" someone called out.

I held up an imaginary cake.

"He took it anyway. Worth it."

The knights laughed, and even Caelan let out a sharp breath of amusement. Someone threw a crust of bread at me, which I considered a compliment.

"Not scary," one of them muttered.

"Wasn't meant to be," I said with a shrug. "I deal with nobles every day. You think a ghost is worse than that?"

That got another round of laughter.

Caelan grinned and leaned closer. "You're the idiot."

"You're the idiot," I muttered.

He didn't reply, but he didn't deny it either.

Across the camp, Therias still sat apart from us, beyond the reach of firelight. He wasn't laughing. He wasn't even listening. He just kept watching the trees, like he expected them to lean in closer any moment, and tell a story of their own.

It's strange, watching grown men try to scare each other with stories that sound like bedtime tales, until you remember they carry swords for a reason. Makes you wonder what they've actually seen. Or what they're trying not to remember.

Back home, back in the servant quarters below the castle kitchens, ghost stories were a regular thing. My father told them like they were lessons, my mother told them like they were warnings, and my older brothers told them just to make me jump. We'd crowd around the hearth with day-old stew and crusts of bread, trading tales of shadow wolves and whispering wells, always acting braver than we were. Even the littlest stories, like the one about the old laundry girl who haunted

the linens, had a way of sticking with you after the fire burned out.

My family, every last one of them, took pride in serving House Valemark. Fierce, honest, unshakable pride. You'd think they were part of the bloodline themselves, the way they spoke about duty. My father always said we were the hands that held up the House. Not knights. Not nobles. Just steady people doing necessary work. My mother used to say we didn't need a title to matter, we just needed to be *worth* the trust we were given.

I used to roll my eyes at all that. But now, out here in the dark, with firelight flickering and ghost stories thick in the air, I find myself thinking about it a little more than usual.

Stories have a way of creeping in like that. Quiet at first. But they always stay with you.

And I have a feeling this one's only just begun.

By dawn, the camp was already stirring. The fire had burned down to ash and bones, and a fine mist clung low to the ground, curling between boots and bedrolls like it was reluctant to let us go.

I was up before Caelan, of course. I always was. While he snored lightly under a blanket I'd folded for him the night before, I was hauling water to rinse the stew pot, shaking the dew off his boots, and trying to figure out why one of the pack horses had chewed through its tether again. I don't know what it is about horses, but they always seem to hate me on sight.

Knights grunted and stretched, some of them already strapping on gear, others mumbling about dreams they didn't care to repeat. The Duke emerged from his tent already dressed, already composed, like he slept in his armor and held meetings in his dreams. Therias appeared not long after, looking like he hadn't slept at all.

Caelan finally stirred when I dropped a saddlebag next to his head. Not my most subtle move.

“Is it breakfast?” he groaned, cracking one eye open.

“No,” I said. “It’s your dignity. Thought you might want to find it before we meet actual people.”

He sat up and rubbed his face. “Funny. You’re hilarious. Remind me to have you promoted to Royal Comedian.”

“I think I’d need to be paid first.”

He stood and stretched, looking out across the camp. “How far to Bramblecross?”

I shrugged. “Half a day, give or take. Depends how many times your horse decides to relieve itself in the middle of the road.”

We packed quickly after that, falling into the rhythm we were starting to learn by heart. Roll the bedrolls, douse the fire, check the straps, count the horses, lose one, find it again, argue about who left the water skin open, pretend none of us heard the strange rustling last night.

The road sloped gently downward, following a stream that widened the closer we came to civilization. Trees thinned. Fields appeared, orderly, tilled, and dotted with scarecrows that looked like they were guarding more than just crops. The air felt warmer here, and yet... heavier. Not quite wrong, just not entirely right either.

We knew they’d be expecting us. Runners were always sent ahead to announce the Duke’s arrival, galloping days before, bearing crested messages and ceremonial phrasing that basically translated to: *Get your best tunics on and sweep the mud out of the square.*

So it wasn’t a surprise when we saw a small crowd waiting at the entrance to Bramblecross. What was surprising, at least to

me, was how polished it all looked. The village was neat as a ledger. Whitewashed cottages stood in tidy rows, the cobbled streets had been freshly scrubbed, and a banner bearing the Valemark crest hung proudly above the meeting hall. Even the chickens looked like they'd been warned to behave.

The Duke led the column, flanked by Sir Darran and Therias, as usual. Caelan and I followed near the rear, more symbol than safety, but at this point I didn't question it. Heir or not, Caelan was thirteen. People liked to see their future lords, but no one expected them to lead the charge just yet.

And Bramblecross was watching.

The crowd gathered in the square straightened as we approached, their eyes fixed on the Duke like he was royalty himself. Technically, he wasn't, but he was close enough, and he carried himself like someone who didn't much care about the difference.

The reeve of Bramblecross stepped forward, round-faced and red-cheeked, with a beard that looked like it had been combed with a ruler. He bowed low, the kind of bow that had clearly been practiced in front of a mirror.

"Your Grace," he said, voice booming just loud enough to carry, "on behalf of the people of Bramblecross, we welcome you and your household to our humble village. It is our greatest honor to host the Duke of Valemark."

The Duke inclined his head, neither cold nor warm, just the right amount of formality. "We thank you for your welcome, Reeve Haldren," he said. "Your village does the duchy credit."

The reeve beamed as if personally responsible for every swept doorstep and flowering window box.

"And may I also present my son, Caelan of House Valemark," the Duke said, gesturing slightly behind him.

Caelan rode forward a step. A polite wave of applause rustled through the onlookers. He hesitated for a heartbeat, then straightened in his saddle.

“People of Bramblecross,” he began, with the forced clarity of someone remembering a memorized line. “It is... an honor to ride among you. Our duchy is made strong not only by walls and swords, but by the loyalty and efforts of villages such as yours.”

Not bad, I thought, until he added, “You are... um... the roots beneath the tree of our strength.”

Someone coughed, possibly to hide a laugh. Caelan pressed on.

“May your harvests be plentiful, your health unwavering, and your spirits high.”

A smattering of applause followed, along with a few exchanged glances among the villagers that suggested either confusion or politeness. Possibly both.

I leaned slightly in my saddle and muttered, “Still more dangerous with a bow than a speech.”

Caelan didn’t look back at me, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

The Duke nodded approvingly and turned back to Reeve Haldren, already moving toward the ceremonial business of the visit, supply reports, harvest counts, troop rotations. The kind of things I wasn’t important enough to listen to, but would probably still get roped into carrying parchments for.

I watched Caelan settle back beside his father. He sat tall, composed, maybe even proud, but I could tell it was effort, not ease. He was used to eyes on him, sure. He was the Duke’s son, after all. But this was different. This was expectation. Responsibility. People listening like his words meant something.

He was still figuring out how to wear that kind of attention.

But he didn't flinch. He didn't fall apart.

And that, I had to admit, took more courage than most people gave him credit for.

After the speech, everything moved with the smooth, practiced rhythm of a village that had hosted nobility before. The Duke's party was led through Bramblecross with polite efficiency, people bowing and nodding like they'd rehearsed the sequence ahead of time. Maybe they had.

We were taken to the village's finest inn, *The Antler's Rest*, which, based on the carvings above the door, took its name very literally. Antlers framed every doorway, and a giant pair hung over the hearth like a warning to any deer who dared to walk upright.

The Duke was shown to the largest chamber upstairs. Caelan to the one next to it. I was shown to exactly nowhere, because, of course, my job wasn't to *rest*. It was to unpack the Duke's belongings, lay out Caelan's fresh clothes, fetch warm water for washing, and find someone to track down extra candles because Caelan "hated the lighting" in his room.

By the time I was done smoothing the last wrinkle from the Duke's ceremonial cloak, the bell in the square was chiming the hour, and I was officially not invited to the welcome banquet.

Not that I was surprised. Nobles don't eat with servants, especially not in front of other nobles. Not even messiahs-in-training.

So I wandered back out into the courtyard behind the inn, rubbing my sore hands and wondering whether the kitchen staff would sneak me something later. Probably not the roast, but maybe a heel of bread or a bone with enough meat on it to chew for a while.

That's when I heard the voice behind me.

“Eldrid.”

I turned to find Therias standing there, as usual, looking like he’d simply appeared out of thin air. His robes were dusted with road grit, and his expression, as always, was unreadable. He didn’t blink enough for my liking.

“I was just not being invited to dinner,” I said. “You?”

“There’s something I wish to show you,” he said simply, already turning away. “Saddle your horse.”

I hesitated. “Now?”

“Yes. Before the sun sets.”

That was the only explanation I got.

So I found my horse, still sulking about earlier, as if *I* had chewed through *its* tether, and followed Therias out of the village. We rode in silence. Not the awkward kind, though. The kind where you feel like saying something would only disturb whatever invisible current the other person is quietly studying.

The road narrowed as we went, then turned to a trail that wound through low hills and mossy glades. After nearly an hour, Therias slowed and raised a hand.

There, ahead of us, half-sunken in the earth and ringed with creeping vines, stood a strange field of stones. Massive slabs jutted from the ground in long, uneven rows, some upright, others leaning like they were drunk on time. A few had toppled completely, swallowed halfway by earth and ivy. Faint carvings traced their surfaces, symbols I didn’t recognize, worn almost to nothing by centuries of wind and rain.

Therias dismounted and approached the nearest stone, running his fingers lightly along its surface like it might whisper back.

I followed slowly, keeping to the edge. The place had a stillness that felt different than silence, like it was waiting for

something.

“What is this place?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. Not right away.

Therias stood with one hand resting on one of the stones, his fingers spread like he was feeling for a heartbeat beneath the lichen-covered surface. For a long moment, I thought he might not answer at all.

Then he said, “A question better left open.”

I stared at him. “That’s not an answer.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

He stepped away from the stone and moved slowly along the alignment. I stayed back, just outside the row, instinctively aware of some line I wasn’t ready to cross. The wind picked up, faint but cold, stirring the long grass between the stones.

“These were here long before the duchy,” Therias said, voice soft and distant, like he was speaking from somewhere else. “Before the kingdom. Before the prophecies were ever written. Before anyone remembered what had come before them.”

I squinted at one of the stones. Faint markings were carved into the surface — half-circles, lines, overlapping spirals. I couldn’t read them. I wasn’t even sure they were letters.

“Are they sacred?” I asked.

Therias turned slightly. “To some. Forgotten by most. Which makes them dangerous in the right, or wrong, hands.”

He crouched beside one of the fallen stones, brushing aside the grass. Something was etched into the earth there too, just barely visible — a shallow line of broken symbols, worn down to ghosts.

“What do they say?” I asked.

“They don’t say,” he replied. “They remember.”

I frowned. “Remember what?”

He looked up at me then, his voice lower, more serious. “There were empires before the Kingdom of Aurelthar. Before the Aethlin Realm that came before it. Before Caedros, before written banners and blood-bound thrones. Names forgotten even by stone. And once in a while, something survives. Something so old it doesn’t fit. It defies time.”

I stared at the nearest stone again. It didn’t glow or whisper or hum. It just stood there, unbothered by how little I understood it.

“But what is it?” I asked.

“Evidence,” he said, standing again. “Of something no one remembers. And maybe no one was meant to.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a warning or just more sage weirdness. Probably both.

I looked around at the silent field, the way the stones all leaned toward the same invisible horizon, like they were still listening. “So why bring me?”

Therias’s eyes met mine, pale and unreadable.

“Because you see things.”

That wasn’t an answer either, but I didn’t press him.

We stood there for a while in silence, the stones looming quietly around us. Somewhere in the grass, a bird gave a single chirp and then thought better of it.

Eventually, Therias turned back to his horse. “Come. We should return before your kitchen scraps go cold.”

I followed, still glancing back over my shoulder as the stones faded into the hills behind us.

The ride back was quiet.

The sun had started to sink behind the hills, casting long shadows across the trail. Therias didn’t speak, and I didn’t ask any more questions. There was a strange peace to it, riding

in silence with the stones behind us and the village lights just beginning to glow ahead.

For most of my life, the world had seemed pretty simple. You served where you were born. You did your work. You didn't ask too many questions. But now... now I wasn't so sure.

Maybe the world wasn't as straightforward as it looked from the castle walls.

Maybe there were things buried deeper than roots.

Therias had said I "see things." I guess I am pretty observant, good at catching what people don't say, noticing things others miss. It's useful when you're at the bottom of the ladder.

But I don't think that's what he meant.

And that, somehow, bothered me more than if it had been.

The sun had all but disappeared by the time we reached the outskirts of Bramblecross, replaced by a watery twilight that turned the village into a place of uncertain shapes and soft shadows. I slid off my horse, grateful for solid ground, though the unease from the ancient stones still clung to me like a damp cloak.

Therias dismounted silently and moved away without another word. Typical sage behavior, leaving you alone with too many questions and not nearly enough answers. I guided my stubborn mount to the makeshift stables near the inn, trying not to jump at every rustle and sigh from the gathering dark.

Inside The Antler's Rest, muffled laughter and the clinking of cups drifted through closed windows, sounds of nobles celebrating their arrival and probably toasting Caelan's glorious future. A future that, I realized with a bitter twist, I'd always just assumed would sweep me along in its wake. But what if it didn't? What if the current changed direction and left me stranded?

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I jumped at the familiar voice. Caelan stepped out from the shadows near the back door, arms folded, studying me in the dim light. He’d swapped his ceremonial tunic for something simpler, something more himself.

“You’re supposed to be at the banquet,” I pointed out.

“Father and the Reeve are busy talking about grain yields and border patrols.” He shrugged, leaning against the wall. “Thought I’d sneak out before they tried to marry me off.”

I raised an eyebrow. “They started bringing out daughters already?”

He nodded grimly. “Two of them.”

I tried not to smile, mostly succeeded, then sighed as I glanced back toward the darkness we’d left behind. “Therias took me to see something strange.”

Caelan straightened, looking intrigued. “Strange how?”

“Old stones,” I said slowly. “Really old. Like before-your-family-built-a-castle old. He called them ‘evidence.’ Said they remembered things.”

Caelan snorted softly. “Therias says a lot of strange things. Usually on purpose.”

“This felt different.” I hesitated, unsure how much to share. But this was Caelan, prophecy or not, he was still my closest friend, for better or worse. “He said I ‘see things.’”

Caelan studied me carefully, his expression unreadable. For a moment, I thought he might ask more, push harder. Instead, he simply shook his head, the easy grin sliding back into place. “You sure he didn’t mean ‘hear things’? Like orders to clean my boots or fetch my water?”

I rolled my eyes. “Speaking of hearing things, hear this clearly: I’m not getting you another waterskin tonight.”

He chuckled, nudging my shoulder. “Fair enough. Come on, the cook saved you something. Probably burnt.”

We crossed the courtyard together, the chill of night now firmly settled over Bramblecross. A few torches burned weakly around the edges, their flames flickering uneasily, like they, too, weren’t quite sure about the shadows around us.

The cook, true to form, handed me a plate with a scrap of bread and a generous portion of stew, blackened at the edges, just as Caelan had predicted. I wolfed it down anyway, hunger overriding taste, grateful Caelan pretended not to notice how eagerly I ate.

The rest of the evening passed quickly, slipping into that easy familiarity between exhaustion and silence. The knights drifted back to their rooms, conversations fading, replaced by the gentle murmur of sleeping horses and the soft shuffle of sentries changing watch.

As I lay down on my bedroll, placed strategically between Caelan’s cot and the draftiest corner of the room, I stared at the timber beams of the ceiling, trying to ignore the thoughts spinning in my head. Ancient stones. Forgotten empires. Prophecies and expectations. Therias’s cryptic comments.

“Eldrid?” Caelan’s voice cut through the dark, drowsy but sincere.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think it’s true? All the prophecy stuff? About me, I mean.”

I hesitated, staring upward as if the beams might somehow hold the answer. “Do you?”

He didn’t answer immediately, and when he finally did, his voice was barely a whisper. “I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like everyone else knows exactly who I’m supposed to be, and

I'm just... pretending."

Something about his honesty made my chest ache a little. "Well, if it helps," I said, closing my eyes against the dark, "I don't think anybody really knows anything. Especially Therias."

Caelan laughed softly. "Good."

He fell silent, and gradually his breathing deepened, leaving me alone with my thoughts again. I waited for sleep, but it stubbornly refused to come. Instead, my mind wandered back to the stones, to Therias's quiet intensity, to the unsettling certainty that something was beginning, something bigger than duchy tours and awkward banquets. Something that might change everything.

Eventually, exhaustion took pity on me, pulling me under until my dreams were filled with of stones, whispered prophecies, and shadows that watched with pale, unreadable eyes.

## Chapter 4

I hate mornings.

Don't get me wrong, I understand the appeal, theoretically. Birds chirping, fresh air, sunrises painting the sky. But my mornings weren't like that. They started well before dawn, fumbling through darkness to make sure Caelan's gear was packed, his boots polished, and his horse saddled. My mornings meant waking quietly so as not to disturb his precious, prophesied slumber while I cursed under my breath about having to do his chores. I sometimes wondered if ancient heroes had servants waking them gently each morning, whispering sweet reminders of their impending glory. Probably not. Heroes in the old stories usually had more dignity.

I glanced at Caelan, who was still sprawled across his bedroll, mouth slightly open, oblivious. "Wake me at dawn," he'd mumbled last night. Easy enough for him to say. Dawn was another hour away, but I'd already loaded his saddlebags, checked the horses, and endured three separate glares from Sir Darran, who apparently woke even earlier than I did, just to be angry at the world.

As I tightened the last strap on Caelan's saddle, I noticed the villagers beginning to gather in Bramblecross's main square, preparing for the traditional farewell ceremony. I'd seen

variations of this ritual performed before in the smaller hamlets around Castle Eldermoar, but Bramblecross's version seemed especially intricate. Villagers passed carefully wrapped bundles from hand to hand, speaking quiet blessings over them as they moved toward the town center. The bundles themselves looked humble enough, simple twigs, tufts of wool, smooth river stones, but the solemnity in the villagers' movements made them seem almost sacred.

I couldn't help but feel curious. Back home, most of our customs made some sort of practical sense. But even Therias had admitted once, in a rare moment of openness, that the precise origins of this tradition had long since faded into myth. All we knew was that the bundles supposedly protected travelers. Protected them from what exactly, robbers, storms, bad stew?, was never clearly defined. The villagers simply called it the "Traveler's Ward," and insisted on its importance without ever saying why.

"Planning your escape?"

I jumped slightly at Caelan's voice behind me. He stood rubbing his eyes sleepily, his hair sticking out at angles that would take a heroic effort on my part to fix.

"I wish," I said, not entirely joking. "But someone has to ensure the future savior of humanity doesn't embarrass himself."

He yawned dramatically. "Humanity appreciates your sacrifice."

We both turned back toward the villagers as an elderly woman, probably the village matriarch, raised her hands for silence. Her voice was clear but carried a faint tremble, whether from age or reverence, I couldn't say.

"Long ago," she began, "when darkness nearly swallowed

the world, our ancestors were saved by these humble tokens. Though their true power has been lost to memory, the protection remains. We gift them now to you, brave travelers, as you journey beyond our borders.”

I glanced sidelong at Caelan, wondering if he felt the same faint unease I did. Usually he dismissed rituals as quaint superstition, but today even he seemed thoughtful.

The bundles were distributed to each member of our traveling party. Caelan accepted his with a gracious nod, smiling warmly at the woman, his mask of nobility already firmly in place. When the matriarch reached me, she handed over the bundle without really looking, servants didn’t merit a meaningful gaze, after all, but I held it gently, feeling the smooth stones shift beneath the coarse wool. Whatever these bundles represented, it felt strange holding something whose purpose had been forgotten, whose power had faded into mystery.

Therias was the last to receive his. Unlike everyone else, he studied his carefully, pale eyes narrowing as if expecting it to whisper its secrets to him. Maybe it would. If anyone could coax forgotten memories from ancient wool and stones, it was Therias.

The Duke thanked the villagers formally, Sir Darran grumbled orders to prepare for departure, and Caelan stretched leisurely beside his horse, oblivious to the last-minute preparations I was still expected to handle.

Typical.

As I tucked the small bundle into my saddlebag, I couldn’t shake the feeling that these humble gifts carried weight we couldn’t yet comprehend, like pieces of a puzzle we didn’t realize we were supposed to be solving. But there wasn’t time for riddles right now. Sir Darran’s impatient glare told me

everything I needed to know: it was time to ride.

With a sigh, I climbed onto my horse, casting one last glance at the villagers of Bramblecross as they stood quietly, watching us leave. None of us knew exactly what waited ahead, or whether wool and twigs could truly protect us from whatever darkness lingered beyond the horizon. But I decided that if the world insisted on waking me before sunrise, the least it could do was offer a little magic in return.

We rode in companionable silence for most of the morning, the rhythmic clopping of hooves against packed earth filling the quiet between us. Occasionally, Caelan would sigh dramatically or mutter something unintelligible under his breath, probably rehearsing grand speeches he expected to deliver at the next village.

After an hour or so, boredom finally got the better of him. Caelan nudged his horse closer, breaking the silence. “So,” he said casually, leaning toward me as if sharing a great secret, “where exactly were those old stones Therias showed you yesterday?”

I squinted thoughtfully toward the distant hills, then shrugged. “Over that way somewhere, I guess. He didn’t exactly draw me a map. You know how he is.”

Caelan laughed lightly. “Yeah, he always seems like he’s either too mysterious or too cryptic. Sometimes both at once.”

“Must be exhausting,” I said dryly.

“You have no idea.” Caelan shook his head, clearly amused. “He’s been trying to teach me bits of the prophecy lately. Not exactly the clearest instruction I’ve ever had. Half the time he just mutters things like, ‘The threads of fate are woven tight’ and stares at me as if that should mean something.”

I smirked. “Sounds about right.”

He chuckled again, though his expression grew more thoughtful. “But there’s one thing he keeps mentioning clearly, at least, clearly for Therias. He says magic is coming back.”

I blinked, genuinely surprised. “Therias said something clearly?”

Caelan snorted softly. “Well, clear by Therias standards, anyway. But he’s been pretty insistent about it. Says the return of magic is crucial for the prophecy to come true.”

“Did he explain what that actually means?” I asked, skeptical.

“Not exactly,” Caelan admitted with a frustrated sigh. “But lately he’s been trying to teach me magic, or so he says. It’s ridiculous. I haven’t been able to do anything but wave my hands around and feel foolish.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You? Magic? Seriously?”

“Hey,” he protested, feigning offense. “I could probably be a great mage.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure, if magic involved tripping over your own feet and missing every target by at least five paces.”

“Very funny,” he muttered. “The thing is, I thought it was all nonsense too, until Therias showed me something. It wasn’t much, just a spark of flame hovering over his fingertips, but it was enough to make me wonder.”

I looked at Caelan sharply, curiosity piqued. “You actually saw Therias do magic?”

“Just that little bit,” he said, lowering his voice slightly. “He kept saying, ‘The magic is building again,’ whatever that means. Honestly, it still feels like unclear mumbo jumbo to me.”

“Everything Therias says is unclear mumbo jumbo,” I pointed out.

“True,” Caelan agreed, nudging his horse forward again. “But maybe, just maybe, there’s something real behind it this time. I

don't know. Either that, or he's finally driven me insane with all his riddles."

We rode quietly for a while longer, each lost in our own thoughts. Therias performing actual magic, no matter how small, was something I hadn't expected. I had always seen him as a man who thrived on vagueness, wrapped comfortably in cryptic layers. But if magic really was returning, even in small ways, that changed everything. Maybe those bundles from Bramblecross weren't just superstition after all.

Still, until Therias decided to be genuinely clear, an unlikely event, I supposed Caelan and I would have to keep stumbling blindly forward, hoping we'd eventually find our footing before it was too late.

We stopped again that night, camping well before reaching the next village. By the time we finished settling in, twilight painted long shadows across the trees, and the air felt heavy with the quiet anticipation that always seemed to come at dusk.

I was smoothing out Caelan's bedroll when my earlier curiosity finally got the better of me. Glancing toward him, I lowered my voice. "Will you show me what Therias has you practicing?"

Caelan looked up sharply, eyes narrowing. "No way. I told you, I haven't been able to do anything. It's humiliating."

"Come on," I urged quietly, smiling a little. "I promise I won't laugh."

He sighed heavily, clearly torn, then reluctantly nodded. "Fine. But you laugh, and I'll tell everyone you're the one who burned breakfast last week."

I grinned, and we slipped quietly away from camp, moving deeper into the forest until the campfire became a distant flicker. Finally, Caelan stopped, looking around nervously.

"All right," he muttered. He raised his hand awkwardly, eyes

squeezing shut in deep concentration. Long seconds passed. Nothing happened.

He groaned, lowering his hand in frustration. “See? Nothing. I told you, I feel ridiculous.”

“Maybe you’re trying too hard?” I suggested gently, more sympathetic now.

He eyed me skeptically. “You try, then.”

Surprised, I raised my hands, mimicking his earlier stance, feeling just as ridiculous as he had looked. “Like this?”

“Exactly,” he said dryly. “Now imagine some nonsense about threads or flows or whatever Therias keeps rambling about.”

We both stood there silently, eyes closed, hands extended. The woods were quiet, save for the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze. Just when I was about to lower my hands and admit defeat, Caelan sucked in a sharp breath.

“Eldrid, look!”

My eyes snapped open. A small cluster of dry leaves and twigs on the ground near our feet had caught fire, flames dancing gently in the darkness. We both stumbled backward in shock.

“Did you do that?” Caelan hissed excitedly, his eyes wide and bright.

“I—I don’t think so!” I stammered, heart racing. “It must’ve been you!”

Caelan looked down at his hands, clearly overwhelmed. “It couldn’t have been me, could it?”

We stared at each other for a long, confused moment. Neither of us spoke, but I could see the anxiety creeping into Caelan’s expression.

“You can’t tell anyone about this,” he finally whispered, his voice tight. “Please, Eldrid. The last thing I need is for everyone thinking I can do magic too. It’s enough pressure already.”

For the first time, I truly felt the weight of expectation pressing down on Caelan, and a quiet pity tugged at my chest. “I won’t tell a soul,” I promised softly.

Caelan nodded gratefully. “Thanks.”

He hurried back toward camp, casting worried glances at his hands. I lingered for a moment, staring at the smoldering leaves, my mind reeling with questions.

When I finally turned to follow, I saw a shadowy figure standing silently at the edge of the clearing. Sir Darran’s gaze pierced mine, cold and unreadable. My stomach tightened sharply as I realized he’d probably been there the entire time.

He said nothing, merely turned and vanished silently back toward camp. Heart pounding, I followed slowly, wondering just how many of our secrets had been discovered, and how long they could possibly remain hidden.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, but sleep didn’t come easily. My thoughts kept returning to that brief moment in the woods, the flames crackling to life on the dry leaves, Caelan’s shocked expression, and Sir Darran’s piercing, silent stare. Despite Caelan’s doubts, I couldn’t shake the feeling he had truly conjured those flames. The prophecy, Therias’s riddles, magic, it all felt suddenly closer and more dangerous, as if we’d stepped unknowingly into deeper waters.

Eventually, exhaustion took pity on me, pulling me into restless dreams filled with shadowy figures, whispering stones, and threads of flame woven by unseen hands.

The next morning, the sharp voice of a knight barking orders shattered whatever peace I’d managed to find. My eyelids dragged open reluctantly, greeted by the cold gray light of dawn. I groaned softly into my blanket.

I really, really hated mornings.

Camp broke down quickly, knights and servants alike grumbling and yawning as bedrolls were packed and horses saddled. Caelan moved slowly, avoiding eye contact with me, still unnerved by what we'd witnessed last night, no doubt. Sir Darran, as always, watched silently from the edge of camp. If he'd mentioned anything to the Duke, there was no sign of it yet.

We rode through most of the morning in silence, the landscape growing steadily busier, the road wider, lined with fields and distant clusters of cottages. By midday, the horizon ahead grew crowded with roofs, chimneys, and high stone walls that marked the outer limits of Ravensford, a bustling town large enough to be mistaken for a small city.

Its walls, constructed of weathered gray stone, rose imposingly from the banks of the wide, slow-moving River Verandis. Several riverboats drifted lazily along the current, sails furled and oarsmen at rest. From outside, Ravensford was usually inviting, gates flung wide open to travelers and merchants alike. But today was different.

Today, the gates were firmly shut.

## Chapter 5

Duke Valemark brought the column to a halt at Ravensford's iron-bound gates, heavy timbers dark and forbidding. The town rose impressively atop a bluff, overlooking the slow-moving river below. Ravensford was one of the largest towns in the duchy, a crucial hub for trade and defense near the border. The closed gates, therefore, felt deeply unsettling.

Two armed guards stood atop the battlements, their faces wary and tense. The Duke raised a gloved hand and spoke clearly.

“I am Duke Valemark. Open your gates.”

Silence stretched awkwardly. The guards exchanged nervous glances, neither stepping forward. The Duke's posture stiffened slightly as irritation flickered across his features. “Did you hear me clearly? I command you to open these gates at once.”

A guard leaned cautiously over the battlement edge, his voice trembling but holding firm. “Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but we have orders from Lord Aric himself. No one enters Ravensford until further notice.”

Murmurs rippled through the knights behind us. Caelan shifted nervously in his saddle, glancing toward me with wide, questioning eyes. I could only shake my head, just as baffled as he was.

The Duke's expression darkened. His voice carried a quiet and

dangerous intensity. “And what reason does Lord Aric have for barring entry to his liege lord?”

The guard swallowed visibly before answering. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but we’ve been warned that danger rides toward Ravensford. Darkness follows in your wake.”

His words hung ominously in the air, echoing with unsettling clarity.

Sir Darran shifted beside the Duke, jaw tightening. “Something’s wrong, Your Grace.”

The Duke said nothing for a long moment. His eyes narrowed in deep thought. Finally, he spoke again, his voice sharp as a sword edge. “Tell Lord Aric that Duke Valemark stands at his gates, and the only danger he faces is in refusing me entry. He has one hour to reconsider.”

The guard nodded quickly and disappeared from view. An uneasy quiet lingered heavily over the gathered knights and soldiers. Sir Darran and the Duke exchanged a silent look filled with tension. Caelan leaned closer, whispering to me, “What’s going on?”

“No idea,” I admitted, glancing around at the townspeople gathering cautiously outside the walls, whispering nervously and watching us with curiosity and fear. “But it doesn’t look good.”

Almost exactly one hour later, the guard returned. He cleared his throat loudly, sounding even more uncertain this time. “Your Grace, Lord Aric sends this message. He will allow you entry only if you defeat him in single combat.”

A shocked gasp rippled through our group. Several knights moved their hands toward their swords, and Caelan went rigid beside me. Even Therias raised his eyebrows in surprise. Duke Valemark’s eyes flashed with genuine shock, quickly replaced

by anger.

“Combat?” he repeated sharply, as if doubting he had heard correctly.

The guard nodded nervously. “Those are his terms, Your Grace.”

Sir Darran growled softly, his hand tightening on his sword. “This is an insult, Your Grace. Something has clearly happened within those walls.”

“Lord Aric is no traitor,” the Duke said firmly, though his voice carried an edge of uncertainty. He drew in a slow breath before dismounting. “Very well. Tell Lord Aric I accept. I will meet him before these gates in full view of his people.”

The guard quickly disappeared to deliver the message, leaving stunned silence in his wake.

Caelan stared at me, pale-faced. “My father’s going to duel Lord Aric?”

I could only nod dumbly. “It looks like it.”

The gates finally groaned open with reluctant heaviness. Lord Aric himself strode forth, clad in armor that gleamed coldly in the pale sunlight, sword already in hand. He was tall, powerfully built, and wore an expression as grim and serious as the Duke’s own.

“I regret it comes to this, Valemark,” Aric called, his voice grave and cold.

“As do I,” Duke Valemark replied tersely, accepting his sword from Sir Darran.

Every knight watched silently, fingers tight on sword hilts. Townspeople held their breath. My heart thudded painfully against my ribs.

Without another word, the two men charged.

Blades clashed sharply, echoing through the tense silence.

Each strike was calculated, quick, and controlled. The seasoned warriors tested each other carefully. Knights watched rigidly, uncertain whether to intervene or obey their Duke's implicit command for stillness.

Suddenly, after a fierce exchange, Lord Aric lunged forward aggressively. Duke Valemark sidestepped smoothly, effortlessly catching Aric off balance. Before we could process what had happened, the Duke spun gracefully and delivered a decisive blow to Aric's armored chest.

A stunned gasp rippled through the gathered crowd. Knights prepared to draw swords.

But Lord Aric staggered back and laughed.

“Damn it all, Valemark,” he said, chuckling deeply as he removed his helmet. “You haven’t lost your touch.”

Confusion rippled visibly through the crowd. Duke Valemark smiled broadly and clapped a hand on Aric’s shoulder. “And you’re still as dramatic as ever, old friend.”

Aric shrugged, grinning widely now as all hostility evaporated. “It got your attention, didn’t it?”

The tension shattered like glass. Knights visibly relaxed, some chuckling awkwardly while others exchanged bewildered glances. Caelan stared openly at his father, dumbfounded.

“What just happened?” he asked, clearly baffled.

“I think your father has a sense of humor,” I said, equally stunned. “Who knew?”

Duke Valemark shook his head and addressed the gathered knights and townspeople. “Forgive Lord Aric’s theatrics and my part in them. It seems we haven’t outgrown our youth as much as we thought.”

“Come now,” Lord Aric called loudly, addressing his townspeople. “Did you truly think I’d bar entry to my oldest friend?”

Laughter rippled through the gathered crowd. Relief mingled with amusement. As the gates opened fully to welcome us, Duke Valemark embraced Aric warmly, their friendship clear and genuine.

Caelan stared incredulously. “My father’s friends with people who threaten to duel him publicly?”

I shrugged, unable to hold back a smile. “Apparently. Must be how nobles bond.”

We moved forward into Ravensford, townspeople smiling and waving. The knights relaxed into conversation as tension gave way to relief.

But as the last of our party crossed through, the heavy gates swung shut behind us with a deep, resounding thud. The sound echoed sharply through the stone streets, cutting conversations and laughter short.

Duke Valemark turned, watching the gates close, and leveled a questioning look at Aric. “Your theatrics aside, is there something else going on here?”

Lord Aric’s smile faded quickly. He glanced at the curious faces around them and lowered his voice. “We should speak privately, Your Grace. At the castle.”

Duke Valemark nodded, understanding immediately. “Lead on.”

We followed Aric up the cobbled streets toward the castle, looming above the town like a guardian of stone and slate. Ravensford’s streets were busy enough, but quiet, too quiet for a town of this size. The townspeople, though polite, watched us cautiously from doorways and shuttered windows, whispering in small clusters as we passed.

From my spot near the rear with Caelan, I took it all in: suspicious glances from shopkeepers, children pulled hurriedly

inside, and the grim set to the guards' shoulders. Even the dogs seemed wary, tails low, watching us with eyes suggesting they'd seen too many strangers lately, and not enough bones.

"Friendly place," I muttered, mostly to myself.

Caelan glanced sideways at me, a little uneasy. "You noticed it too?"

"Hard not to," I said, nodding toward a baker who paused mid-sweep, eyes narrowed as we rode past. "Either we're uglier than usual, or something's really spooked these people."

Ahead of us, Aric spoke quietly to the Duke. I couldn't hear their words clearly, but Aric's shoulders were tense, his voice careful and low. Whatever was happening, his theatrics at the gates hadn't erased the worried lines etched deeply into his face.

We climbed slowly up the winding main street toward the castle, its walls rising higher around us, imposing and gray against a darkening sky. The closer we drew, the more the weight of whatever troubled Ravensford pressed down around me, heavier than the pack of Caelan's spare boots I'd been forced to carry since dawn.

I glanced at Caelan, who had fallen quiet, staring upward at the stone towers above us. The town around us wasn't hostile exactly, but it wasn't comfortable either. People moved quietly, cautiously, as if holding their breath, waiting for something they couldn't yet name. It reminded me of the faint buzzing you get in your ear sometimes, easy to ignore at first, until it slowly becomes all you can hear.

Lord Aric's keep stood imposing at the highest point of Ravensford, a fortress of dark stone and narrow windows, its high walls crowned by crenellations sharp against the sky. It had the rugged appearance of something built to withstand wars that had ended generations ago, yet it remained watchful, a

grim guardian above the town.

Inside the courtyard, soldiers and attendants gathered quickly, their voices a respectful murmur as Lord Aric led us beneath the wide, vaulted gate. Torches burned in iron brackets, flickering and snapping quietly as we passed, casting elongated shadows across weathered stones. Moss crept stubbornly in the crevices, green veins in the ancient gray rock, whispering of age and permanence.

Duke Valemark dismounted smoothly, handing his reins to a waiting stable hand before turning to Sir Darran. “See to the men. Have the horses tended. We may stay longer than planned.”

Sir Darran nodded crisply, signaling the knights into formation as Aric stepped forward to address the Duke quietly.

“My study is private enough, Your Grace,” Aric said, his voice pitched carefully low. “What I have to say requires discretion.”

Valemark studied him silently a moment, weighing his friend’s cautious expression. Finally, he gave a single, decisive nod. “Agreed.”

He turned slightly, and his gaze settled firmly on Therias. “Therias, you’ll join us as well.”

Therias inclined his head respectfully, his pale eyes glittering with quiet intensity. “As you command, Your Grace.”

That didn’t exactly surprise me. Therias always managed to insert himself wherever things turned particularly mysterious. But when the Duke’s eyes next fell on Caelan, my heart stuttered in unexpected alarm.

“Caelan, you too,” he said quietly. His tone held a careful balance of authority and something gentler, almost fatherly. “It’s time you began seeing what your duties will truly entail.”

Caelan hesitated for only a fraction of a second before he

straightened, visibly gathering courage. “Yes, Father.”

I tried to keep my face neutral, but my mind raced ahead. Therias, Caelan, the Duke, if this wasn’t about prophecy and messiahs, I’d eat Caelan’s spare boots. Was this the moment things truly began? Was Caelan’s path finally taking shape, leading him toward whatever grand destiny everyone had been whispering about since we were old enough to understand?

Not for the first time, I wondered what Caelan’s future was going to look like. Everyone seemed so certain he was meant for something enormous, leading armies, uniting the duchies, fulfilling some ancient promise. For now, he was still just a boy trying to look taller on a horse. But one day, all those expectations would land on his shoulders like a hundred pounds of iron. I carried bedrolls and boots. One was heavier, sure, but at least I knew I could set mine down.

Then Duke Valemark paused, glancing briefly back in my direction, his brow furrowing slightly. “Eldrid, you’ll accompany Caelan as well. Your eyes and ears will be helpful, and you’ll need to understand these matters if you’re to serve him effectively.”

I blinked, momentarily stunned into silence. Sir Darran’s eyes narrowed slightly at the Duke’s words, but he remained silent, though clearly unhappy. Still, I quickly nodded, trying to look appropriately serious despite the sudden twist in my gut. “Yes, Your Grace.”

As I followed them toward the keep’s interior, my earlier uncertainty was replaced by a different kind of anxiety, the sudden realization that, ready or not, I was being pulled deeper into events that felt far too big for me, a place I wasn’t sure I belonged.

Lord Aric’s study was quiet for a long moment. The room was comfortable yet aged, its walls lined with shelves of an-

cient books and carefully preserved scrolls. The soft flicker of candlelight played across faded maps depicting lands I'd never even heard of. The scent of parchment filled the air, lending a weighty feel to the silence that followed.

Aric slowly walked to a shelf and selected a thick book bound in cracked leather. He placed it gently on the table, resting one hand thoughtfully on its cover. When he finally spoke, his tone was quiet and careful.

"You know how seriously my family has studied the prophecy, Dorian," Aric began, using the Duke's first name, a sign of their long friendship. "We've kept these records secure since before Ravensford was even built. But we've always had more questions than answers."

Duke Valemark nodded thoughtfully. "We all have, Aric. The signs have been subtle, but lately, impossible to ignore."

Therias stepped closer, examining the worn book thoughtfully. "Tell us exactly what's happened, Lord Aric."

Aric took a slow breath. "Two weeks ago, delegates from Duchy Calavere arrived for their annual trade discussions. We've received them for years without incident, but this time was different. They were silent, withdrawn, and behaved oddly. Then, without warning, they attacked us in the main hall."

Caelan leaned forward, eyes wide. "Did anyone get hurt?"

Aric shook his head, though his expression remained dark. "My guards stopped them quickly. We lost none of our own, but all the delegates were killed except one. He's still in our dungeon. I've spoken to him several times, but there's something terribly wrong. He's barely recognizable as the man we knew."

Therias exchanged a cautious glance with the Duke. "This aligns disturbingly well with early signs from the prophecy. Dark influences, subtle corruptions. But it's still not entirely

clear.”

“What exactly does the prophecy say?” Caelan asked, sounding uncertain but clearly intrigued.

Therias turned toward him slowly, eyes distant and thoughtful. “The scrolls we study came from a civilization older than ours. We know very little about the people who wrote them, only that they believed they’d seen visions of our future. They spoke of three great conflicts. The first, a war of darkness against humanity. The second, a long war among ourselves. The third, the coming of a chosen one who would bring salvation. But the details remain unclear.”

Caelan looked to his father, absorbing Therias’s words quietly. The Duke laid a reassuring hand on his son’s shoulder. “That’s why we’re here, Caelan. To understand and prepare. These aren’t mere stories to frighten children. They’re warnings we must respect.”

Caelan nodded solemnly. “I understand, Father.”

I shifted quietly beside Caelan, feeling out of place but unable to deny my curiosity. Listening felt almost intrusive, yet something compelled me to understand these vague warnings everyone seemed so worried about.

Aric spoke again, carefully measuring each word. “My family’s been watching these events unfold slowly. The prophecy hints the signs will start subtly. And now, with this sudden attack, I’m convinced we’ve reached a critical moment.”

“You believe we’re at the brink of the first war?” Duke Valemark asked quietly.

Aric nodded. “Yes. The texts suggest events we’re now witnessing mark the start of something larger. The prophecy also speaks of a chosen one emerging to guide us, though it’s never clear exactly who it will be.”

A heavy silence filled the room. Caelan shifted nervously, clearly uncomfortable. Duke Valemark and Therias shared a look filled with quiet tension. Even I held my breath, suddenly aware that whatever Aric said next could change everything.

Aric finally spoke, his voice full of quiet certainty. “I’ve studied the texts carefully, and I think I know who the prophecy is referring to.”

Duke Valemark tensed visibly. “Who?”

Aric hesitated briefly before speaking, his voice gentle but firm.

“I believe it’s my daughter, Lira.”

## Chapter 6

Stunned silence hung in the air, thick enough to choke on. Aric's words echoed loudly in the quiet of the study: *I believe it's my daughter, Lira.* I glanced around the room. Caelan's mouth opened and closed silently like a fish pulled from a pond, his face pale with shock. Duke Valemark stood rigid, clearly wrestling with disbelief, while Therias merely observed with quiet curiosity, unsurprised as usual.

I'd spent my whole life hearing whispered conversations and hushed debates about Caelan's supposed destiny. He was meant to be the chosen one, the prophesied savior. What if the Duke had been wrong all along? What if everything House Valemark had prepared for was suddenly turned on its head?

Finally, Duke Valemark spoke, his voice careful, measured to mask the strain underneath. “Aric, we’ve discussed the prophecy countless times. You’ve studied it deeply, I know, but your daughter?”

Aric’s posture stiffened slightly, his eyes steady but cautious. “Believe me, Dorian, I shared your doubts at first. But the signs we’ve seen lately, subtle though they may be, seem consistent with some of the indications from the prophecy. And Lira’s dreams have given me pause.”

“Dreams?” The Duke’s brows knitted together skeptically.

“Dreams can mean anything, Aric.”

“I agree, dreams alone aren’t enough,” Aric conceded, raising a calming hand. “But they’ve grown persistent, almost nightly. She speaks vividly of places she’s never visited, describes people she couldn’t possibly know. It’s...unsettling.”

The Duke glanced thoughtfully at Therias, who nodded slowly. “Persistent dreams can indeed be meaningful. The texts speak often of visions granted to those near significant events. But caution is wise, prophecy resists being pinned down.”

Caelan finally found his voice, though it trembled slightly. “Has she said anything specific? Anything that clearly aligns with prophecy?”

Aric hesitated, clearly uncertain how to answer. “Nothing explicit, nothing that can be directly confirmed. Just impressions, strange feelings that have become too consistent to ignore.”

I glanced at Caelan, who was suddenly very interested in the floor. I wondered if he was remembering our own strange encounter with the small fire in the woods. Caelan’s life had always been heavy with expectations, and now, faced with the possibility someone else might carry that weight instead, he looked both confused and conflicted. I almost pitied him.

Almost.

“Dorian,” Aric continued carefully, “I’m not claiming absolute certainty. You know me better than that. But something is happening, something beyond mere coincidence. If there’s even a slight chance Lira has a role to play, we cannot afford to dismiss it.”

The Duke sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as if fighting off a headache. “No, we cannot afford to dismiss anything, not now. Therias?”

Therias leaned forward, fingers steepled thoughtfully beneath

his chin. “Perhaps we should speak with Lira directly. Those touched by prophecy rarely understand it clearly, yet their insights often provide valuable guidance.”

Aric nodded. “Very well. I’ll bring her here.”

As Aric left the room, Caelan finally glanced up, exchanging a troubled look with his father. Clearly, no one in this room had anticipated this development.

Least of all me, I was still trying to wrap my head around the idea anyone could even question Caelan’s role. As far as shocks went, that ranked higher than the day he’d actually managed to hit a target.

As soon as Aric left, Duke Valemark sank slowly into a chair, the mask of calm slipping slightly from his features. Therias studied him thoughtfully, his pale eyes as unreadable as ever, while Caelan shuffled his feet awkwardly, clearly uncertain whether to say anything or wait quietly.

Finally, Therias broke the silence, his voice soft. “It’s certainly an unexpected possibility, my lord.”

The Duke exhaled heavily, nodding. “We’ve always known interpretation of prophecy is uncertain. But Aric’s daughter?” He glanced toward Caelan. “That would be quite the turn of fate.”

Caelan cleared his throat nervously, clearly uncomfortable with the discussion now revolving around him, or, rather, around the idea it might no longer revolve around him. “Do you...do you think it could be true? Could someone else really be—?” He didn’t finish, but his meaning was clear enough.

Therias steepled his fingers beneath his chin again. “The prophecy is vague enough that many interpretations could fit. The signs we’ve seen thus far are subtle at best. And yet...subtle signs are exactly what we should expect at first.”

The Duke shook his head slowly, clearly wrestling with the idea. “And Lira’s dreams, do you think they could genuinely indicate something important?”

“It’s possible,” Therias conceded cautiously. “But dreams alone won’t suffice as proof.”

I watched Caelan from the corner of my eye. He’d grown pale, his usual confidence nowhere to be found. If someone else truly carried the weight of destiny, it would remove his burden. He should be relieved. Instead, he looked strangely conflicted. Maybe even a little lost.

I’d never envied Caelan’s role, but at least it had always been clearly defined. Suddenly having it questioned had clearly thrown him off balance.

Before any of us could dwell further on the implications, the door reopened and Aric stepped inside, gently guiding a young girl into the room.

Lira was about Caelan’s age, slender and poised, her long, dark hair falling in careful waves over her shoulders. Her eyes were bright and sharp, taking in the room with a confidence that suggested she wasn’t easily intimidated. Caelan immediately went rigid, eyes widening slightly as a flush crept onto his cheeks.

I rolled my eyes inwardly. Of course he would instantly lose the ability to speak clearly.

“My lords,” Aric said formally, though his voice softened slightly with pride, “allow me to introduce my daughter, Lira.”

She dipped gracefully into a curtsy, eyes briefly meeting Caelan’s before settling respectfully on Duke Valemark. “It’s an honor, Your Grace.”

Caelan opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, then finally managed a weak, “Hello.”

Therias nodded warmly. “We’ve heard much about you, Lira.”

Lira’s gaze flickered briefly toward her father, a shadow of uncertainty passing over her otherwise composed expression. “I hope only good things.”

“Nothing to the contrary,” Therias assured gently.

The Duke leaned forward, studying her intently, though not unkindly. “Your father tells us you’ve had dreams, persistent ones.”

Lira nodded slowly, visibly considering her words. “Yes. They’re not always clear, but they feel...important. Like messages I should understand, but can’t.”

“What sort of messages?” Therias pressed gently, his curiosity clear.

She hesitated slightly, glancing at her father again before continuing. “I see darkness. Sometimes it’s just shadows and whispers, other times more vivid, flames, and people running. Once, I saw Ravensford itself engulfed in smoke.” She swallowed visibly. “But there’s always a voice, far away, whispering that something is coming. Something we have to be ready for.”

An uneasy silence followed her words. Even Therias seemed unsettled, though he hid it quickly. The Duke and Aric exchanged a tense glance. Caelan simply stared at her as if transfixed, clearly torn between fascination and unease.

I kept silent, taking in everything carefully, feeling as though I’d stepped directly into one of Therias’s cryptic riddles. As usual, I didn’t much like the feeling.

Caelan finally cleared his throat again, awkwardly attempting conversation. “Your dreams...um, sound troubling.”

I sighed inwardly. Clearly his extensive training in diplomacy hadn’t included talking to girls his own age.

“They are,” she admitted, offering Caelan a polite, slightly strained smile. “But they’re just dreams. I don’t know why my father believes they mean more.”

Aric placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Because some of the things you’ve seen match symbols and phrases that appear in the oldest records. I can’t say what it all means, not yet, but your dreams echo things that have long been watched for. They’re... familiar in ways that are hard to ignore.”

Duke Valemark studied her for another long moment before nodding slowly. “We will consider everything carefully. For now, thank you for speaking openly.”

She nodded respectfully, though her expression remained uncertain. Caelan, meanwhile, had apparently lost the ability to do anything other than stare, his face still flushed.

I almost pitied him, but this time I couldn’t resist leaning subtly closer and whispering, “Careful, Caelan. You’ll catch flies.”

He shot me a half-hearted glare, though his ears reddened even further.

Aric gestured toward the door, leading his daughter gently out. “Come, Lira. Let’s leave them to their deliberations.”

Once they’d gone, silence returned to the room, heavy and uncertain. Therias spoke first, his voice quiet yet firm. “Whatever we believe or doubt, one thing remains clear: prophecy is rarely straightforward.”

Duke Valemark rubbed tiredly at his temples, clearly weary from more than just the long journey. “And we cannot afford to guess wrong. Too much depends on this.”

Caelan finally found his voice, hesitantly meeting his father’s gaze. “What if we’ve been preparing for the wrong person this whole time?”

“Then we adapt,” Duke Valemark said firmly. “Our duty remains protecting this land. We’ll watch closely, consider carefully, and move cautiously.”

Therias inclined his head in agreement. “Prophecy reveals itself slowly. Patience will serve us best.”

I remained quiet, the weight of their words settling heavily around me. Watching Caelan struggle with the uncertainty of his own future, I couldn’t help but wonder if the vague and troubling dreams Lira had described were merely the first hints of something much larger.

Whatever it was, I had a sinking feeling that clarity, like so many other things, would arrive far too late to do us any real good.

After a long moment, Duke Valemark stood decisively, breaking the heavy silence that had settled over the room.

“We’ll speak more of this later,” he said, glancing between Therias and Caelan. “Lord Aric is holding a banquet this evening, a formal welcome in our honor. It’s important you’re prepared, Caelan. The people here should see the heir to the duchy ready to assume his responsibilities.”

Caelan straightened, visibly pulling himself together. “Yes, Father.”

“Eldrid,” the Duke continued, turning sharply toward me, “Find the bathhouse. See to it that Caelan is presentable, and try not to let him embarrass us.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” I said, hiding a smirk as Caelan shot me a glare.

The Duke nodded briskly. “Good. Therias, with me. We have preparations of our own.”

Therias bowed slightly, his eyes glinting with that usual unreadable intensity. Together, he and the Duke left the room,

the door closing with a solid, echoing click behind them.

For a moment, Caelan and I stood alone in silence, the weight of everything we'd just heard still lingering in the air. I glanced sideways at him, unable to resist. "So—"

"Don't," he warned quickly, eyes narrowing. "Just don't."

I raised both hands innocently. "Don't what? I'm just the bathhouse guide, remember?"

Caelan sighed, visibly deflating as he rubbed his face wearily. "Can we just get this over with?"

"Absolutely," I said, heading for the door and gesturing grandly for him to follow. "After all, we wouldn't want to disappoint your adoring public."

He rolled his eyes, following reluctantly as I led us from Lord Aric's study and out into the stone corridors. I'd spotted the bathhouse earlier, down one of the lower halls near the servants' quarters. It wasn't exactly luxury, but it was warm, secluded, and hopefully free of any prophecy-spouting sages, at least for now.

Caelan trailed along beside me, uncharacteristically quiet. The joking felt hollow, even to me. It wasn't just Aric's revelation about Lira, it was the uncertainty, the questions neither of us knew how to ask. I wasn't usually sympathetic to Caelan's woes, but today even I felt a slight pang of pity. Slight.

Finally reaching the entrance to the bathhouse, I pushed open the heavy wooden door. Steam and the scent of clean herbs drifted out, warm and comforting against the chill of stone walls.

"Here you are," I said, waving Caelan through the door. "Your private sanctuary awaits, Your Future Grace."

"You're hilarious," Caelan muttered as he stepped inside.

"I try," I said lightly, following him into the warmth.

Inside the bathhouse, thick steam rolled gently through the room, fogging the small windows and curling lazily around the stone columns. Warmth radiated from polished stones set into the floor, and the gentle scent of rosemary filled the air. It was, annoyingly, nicer than I'd expected from a castle like Ravensford. Not quite Castle Eldermoor, perhaps, but impressive enough to make me wonder if Lord Aric was trying to subtly outshine the Duke.

Two large copper tubs were already filled, hot water shimmering invitingly. Clean towels, soaps, and fresh clothes had been neatly laid out nearby, clearly, Aric's servants had known we'd be coming to freshen up. Nobles. Even bathing was planned in advance.

Caelan began tugging off his boots without comment, his expression carefully blank. I stood there a moment, watching him quietly, before finally breaking the silence.

“Sooooo...” I began casually.

“No.” Caelan’s reply came immediately, firm and final.

I raised my eyebrows innocently. “No? I didn’t even say anything yet.”

Caelan shot me a pointed glare as he dropped one boot to the ground. “You were going to ask about Lira and all that...chosen-one stuff. I don’t want to talk about it. Not until my father and Therias are here.”

“Oh, relax,” I said, waving dismissively. “I don’t want you to talk about Lira the Messiah. I was just curious about Lira the girl. But if you’d rather wait until your father’s around for that conversation too, by all means...”

Caelan’s cheeks went instantly red. “Eldrid—”

I grinned wickedly, unable to resist pushing a bit further. “I mean, you’re usually so smooth with the ladies. Like that time

you tried to impress the blacksmith's daughter by showing off your archery skills, and nearly shot her father's prize goat?"

"One time," Caelan muttered, splashing angrily as he stepped into the steaming bath. "That happened one time, Eldrid. Are you ever going to let it go?"

"Absolutely not," I said cheerfully, leaning back against the wall, arms crossed comfortably. "In fact, I think I'll share that story at the banquet tonight. I'm sure Lira would love to hear it."

Caelan sank deeper into the water, looking utterly miserable. "Why do I even bother talking to you?"

"Because I'm delightful," I replied easily. "And you have terrible taste in friends."

He snorted softly, finally managing a faint smile. "True enough. Though I'm hardly the only one with issues around girls. Or do I need to remind you about Mirabel?"

Now it was my turn to flush slightly, though I tried to cover it by examining my fingernails casually. "Mirabel's different. She's—"

"—the baker's daughter, yes, I'm aware," Caelan said smugly, clearly enjoying his revenge. "And every time she looks at you, you turn the same shade of red as a badly cooked lobster."

"That is blatantly untrue," I muttered, cheeks now uncomfortably warm.

"Not really," Caelan continued happily. "I'm pretty sure she knows exactly how many freckles you have. Not that she could miss them with how closely you stare at your boots whenever she smiles at you."

"You're a terrible human being," I informed him firmly.

"Must be why we're friends," he shot back, sinking into the bath with a satisfied grin.

I scowled at him, but found myself smiling despite myself. For all the seriousness surrounding prophecy and destiny, it was moments like these, simple and completely idiotic, that reminded me Caelan was still just a thirteen-year-old boy like me. Even if one of us was destined to save the world...maybe.

By the time Caelan finally climbed out of the bath, I'd already laid out his best tunic and polished his boots, again. He glanced at himself in the polished bronze mirror, fiddling nervously with the embroidered cuffs of his sleeves.

“Do I look alright?” he asked, sounding far less confident than usual.

“Like a prince,” I assured him dryly. “Or at least a duchy heir who occasionally remembers to brush his hair.”

He shot me a glare, but I caught the faint tug at the corner of his mouth. “Very funny. You’re one to talk.”

“I’ve never been invited to a noble banquet,” I pointed out, shrugging as I straightened his collar. “We servants just steal pastries from the kitchens afterward. Which, to be fair, probably tastes better.”

Caelan snorted. “I’ll be sure to sneak you something edible, then.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Careful. If you keep being nice to me, I might start to suspect you’re actually nervous.”

He turned away quickly, pretending sudden interest in the stitching on his sleeve. “It’s not the banquet I’m worried about.”

I glanced up, waiting. When he didn’t continue, I sighed dramatically. “Right. Just the banquet guests, then. Especially certain raven-haired daughters of overly dramatic nobles,”

“Shut up, Eldrid,” he interrupted, cheeks reddening again. But his voice softened after a moment. “It’s just...what if she’s

right? What if Lira is the one everyone's been waiting for?"

I hesitated, sensing the real fear beneath his usual bravado. "If she is, you'll still be Caelan. Heir to a powerful duchy, decent with a bow—"

"Decent?" He feigned offense, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Passable," I corrected. "And you'll still be my friend. Whether you're the chosen one or not."

Caelan studied me a moment, visibly relaxing. "Thanks, Eldrid."

"Anytime," I said lightly, nudging his shoulder. "Now, unless you plan to charm Lira with wet hair and a half-fastened belt, we should hurry."

He rolled his eyes, pulling himself together as we left the bathhouse. We found Duke Valemark, Therias, and a small cluster of knights already waiting in the great hall. The Duke gave Caelan an approving glance before looking at me.

"Good," he said simply, nodding once. "You're ready. Let's not keep our hosts waiting."

Sir Darran hovered nearby, his usual scowl aimed squarely at me. He didn't say anything, but the pointed look made it clear he thought my presence was unnecessary. I resisted the urge to smile sweetly at him, settling instead for a carefully neutral expression.

As we moved through the corridors, torches flickering softly along the stone walls, I noticed Caelan straighten his shoulders, slipping once more into the role he'd practiced since childhood. Duke Valemark walked ahead, calm and composed, his demeanor unchanged despite the revelations of the afternoon.

And me? Well, I hung back slightly, comfortable in my spot near the edges, where people rarely looked. It was easier that

way, watching quietly as events unfolded around me.

I'd served at feasts before, usually back home at Castle Eldermoor, where the grandeur was real and the silver had been polished by someone with obsessive attention to detail. Ravensford's banquet hall wasn't bad, exactly, but it felt smaller somehow, its decorations a bit too deliberate, as if trying to convince everyone it belonged in the same league as the Duke's own hall. Not that I minded. A noble feast was still just nobles talking too loudly and servants silently hoping no one spilled wine.

My role tonight was simple: stand along the wall, pitcher ready, quietly invisible until needed. It was a good way to eavesdrop on conversations, but the real gossip, the kind that wasn't diluted for noble ears, was happening back in the kitchen.

I slipped back into the kitchen, pretending to refill my pitcher. Two servants stood by a simmering stew pot, an older woman whose sharp eyes suggested she'd once stared down a bull, and a younger, jumpy man who constantly wiped his sweaty hands on his apron.

“—telling you, she's right,” the young man whispered urgently. “Things ain't been right around here lately. Something dark is coming. She's never wrong about these things.”

The older woman stirred the stew dismissively, clucking her tongue. “Oh, please. Old Maritha? She's half-crazy and all trouble. You shouldn't listen to her ravings.”

“She's a seer,” he insisted stubbornly. “A proper one, she saw that big flood five summers ago, didn't she? And last month she said the fields would burn, and what happened? The miller's field caught fire.”

The woman rolled her eyes, unimpressed. “Maritha sees disaster every week. Eventually, she's bound to get a few right.”

He frowned, glancing anxiously around the bustling kitchen. “All the same, there’s talk she’s been ranting lately. Says the end times are coming. Says the whole world’s about to turn upside down, old magics waking up, ancient darkness rising, all of it.”

The older servant snorted loudly. “End times? Really? If the world ends every time Maritha starts rambling, we’d all have died a dozen times by now.”

The younger servant looked frustrated. “All I know is, even Lord Aric looks worried lately. You saw the gates today, closed tight at midday? That’s not normal.”

She hesitated slightly, the skepticism on her face faltering a bit. “I’ll give you that. Closing the gates early was strange, even for Ravensford.”

He leaned in closer, eyes wide and serious. “Exactly. And if Maritha’s saying something’s wrong, maybe we ought to listen.”

She huffed, clearly uncomfortable. “Listen all you like. Just don’t go telling everyone you believe that old fool. You’ll cause a panic.”

At that moment, the older woman glanced up and caught me watching. Her eyes narrowed sharply. “You, Valemark boy. Does your lot put stock in seers and witches?”

“Only when we run out of better options,” I replied dryly. “Who’s this Maritha?”

The young man straightened eagerly, clearly glad to have a fresh audience. “Lives out near Duskwood, half a day’s ride east. Folks around here call her a witch, but she’s just an old woman who sees things. Real things.”

The older woman shook her head impatiently. “She’s nothing but trouble and superstition. No good comes from disturbing

her.”

The young servant lowered his voice, ignoring her glare. “If your lordship and them knights want real answers, someone ought to tell them to talk to her. She might actually know something.

I nodded slowly, pretending disinterest while carefully storing the information. A half-crazy seer claiming the end times were near sounded exactly like the sort of trouble Therias and the Duke might find interesting, though whether that was a good thing or not, I wasn’t sure.

I left the whispers of old witches and end-times safely in the kitchen and slipped back into the banquet hall. Spotting Caelan at the high table, still next to Lira, of course, I moved quietly along the wall and stationed myself discreetly behind him. Servants were supposed to be unobtrusive, after all. Invisible. Silent.

Well, mostly silent.

Caelan’s back stiffened slightly as I took my place, clearly aware of my presence but unable to acknowledge it openly. His attention, for now, was fixed squarely, and rather awkwardly, on Lira. He cleared his throat for the third time in less than a minute, which had to be some kind of record even for him.

“So,” he began hesitantly, apparently grasping for whatever noble-approved conversation he could find, “you, uh... you’ve lived here your whole life?”

Lira glanced at him, lips twitching slightly. “Yes. My father’s ruled Ravensford since before I was born. And you’ve always lived at Eldermoor, right?”

Caelan nodded quickly, maybe too quickly. “Right. Born there. Always lived there.”

“Fascinating,” I murmured under my breath, just loud

enough that he could hear. Caelan's ears turned pink.

Lira watched him, politely waiting for him to continue. When he didn't, she tried again, a patient smile on her face. "It must be interesting, growing up in the duke's household. I imagine your tutors keep you busy?"

Caelan blinked rapidly, clearly not expecting to discuss tutors at a banquet. "Oh, yes. Very busy. History, politics, etiquette... swordplay too, of course."

He straightened slightly at the mention of swordplay. Apparently, weapons were safer ground than small talk.

"He's very good," I whispered quietly. "Only stabbed himself twice last week."

Caelan subtly kicked backward, his boot landing squarely on my shin. I bit back a grunt, smiling sweetly instead, but said nothing further.

Lira raised an eyebrow slightly, seeming amused. "You enjoy swordplay, then?"

"Yes," Caelan said, a little more confidently. "Well, mostly. Archery's my best skill, though."

"That's impressive," Lira said politely. "It takes real patience to master archery."

Caelan sat taller, clearly encouraged. "I suppose it does. But I like the precision of it, the feeling when everything lines up perfectly."

I silently agreed: the precision was impressive, considering he usually struggled to line up his tunic buttons.

Lira studied him thoughtfully, and I could see her slowly reassessing. "My father says you're on a formal tour, visiting different towns in the Duchy?"

"That's right," Caelan said earnestly. "Learning governance, diplomacy, all that."

“It must be strange, being paraded around,” Lira said quietly. “Everyone watching you, expecting so much.”

Caelan hesitated, suddenly thoughtful. “Sometimes,” he admitted. “I mean, I’m used to attention, being the heir, but lately it feels different. Heavier, maybe.”

He paused briefly, as if realizing he’d said too much. But Lira just smiled sympathetically. “I understand. My father has ideas about my own role. Expectations aren’t easy.”

“No,” Caelan agreed softly, “they’re really not.”

I felt a small, unexpected pang of guilt for teasing him so much, seeing the sincerity on his face. Caelan was awkward, yes, but also genuinely trying to navigate expectations bigger than he understood.

Then he continued, stammering again. “So, uh, those dreams your father mentioned, what are they really like?”

I winced. And here he’d been doing so well.

Lira glanced around cautiously. “They’re strange. Sometimes I see shadows or flames, people running. It feels...real. But it’s hard to explain without sounding like I’ve lost my mind.”

Caelan nodded seriously, and then, as if summoned by a sudden burst of courage, said, “I believe you.”

She blinked, clearly startled. “You do?”

“I, well, yes,” he stammered, turning slightly red again. “Stranger things are happening lately. You might not be wrong.”

She studied him carefully, and for the first time her smile seemed fully genuine. “Thank you, Caelan. It means a lot, coming from you.”

He swallowed hard, face fully red now, looking desperately pleased and terrified at once. “Of course. Glad I could... help?”

Behind him, I fought back laughter, making mental notes for future teasing. It wasn’t every day you saw the supposed

Messiah nearly choke on his own tongue while talking to a girl.

Caelan might become a great hero one day, a leader of armies, a savior of kingdoms. But right now, he was just a thirteen-year-old boy, completely lost in the face of expectations, and a pretty smile.

I lingered there another moment, watching Caelan try to remember how words worked. He wasn't exactly failing, just... improvising poorly. I could almost feel sorry for him. Almost.

The thing is, I understood exactly half of what he was going through. The part where you suddenly forget how to speak in the presence of someone smarter, cooler, and entirely out of your league? Yeah, I knew that half very well. I lived it every time Mirabel looked at me for longer than a heartbeat.

The other half, the one where you're also expected to lead a duchy, maybe save the kingdom, and carry the weight of an ancient prophecy on your still-developing shoulders, that part? That wasn't mine.

And for the moment, I was more than happy just being the one who got to make fun of him for it.

## Chapter 7

Nothing inspires gossip quite like a banquet, especially when whispers of prophecy, dueling chosen ones, and mysterious witches have already been thrown into the stew. By morning, Ravensford buzzed louder than a hive poked with a particularly sharp stick, and I was forced to endure it all far too early.

I hate mornings. Really, I despise them. I'm pretty sure I've mentioned that before. They always start cold, dark, and worst of all, early. The castle seemed especially eager to reinforce my dislike today, with servants bustling around at a speed that bordered on obscene, clearly energized by last night's revelations.

I ducked out of the kitchens before the cook could spot me and invent a reason to lecture. The Great Hall was already filled with knights clinking cups of steaming cider, servants whispering in doorways, and Caelan, poor, miserable Caelan, sitting at the high table, trying desperately to look dignified while also eating a sausage.

“How’s breakfast, Your Grace?” I asked sweetly, sliding onto the bench across from him. “Enjoying the weight of destiny with your eggs?”

Caelan paused mid-chew, narrowing his eyes. “You’re in a fine mood.”

“I’m always in a fine mood,” I said breezily. “It’s just particularly fine when someone else has bigger problems.”

“Glad to be of service,” he muttered darkly, stabbing his fork harder than necessary.

I glanced around the hall, leaning in conspiratorially. “Speaking of bigger problems, did you hear about this witch everyone’s whispering about?”

Caelan’s brow furrowed. “What witch?”

“Apparently some seer named Maritha, lives out near Duskwood,” I said, snagging a sausage from his plate. “The kitchen gossipers say she predicted floods and fires, and now she’s claiming something big is coming, something dark.”

He sat back slowly, fork forgotten. “Does Therias know?”

“If he doesn’t yet, he will soon. Those kitchen servants gossip more than you do around pretty daughters of noblemen.”

He scowled, cheeks turning a familiar shade of red. “Keep it up and I’ll remind you about Mirabel again.”

“Low blow, Caelan,” I grumbled, biting aggressively into the sausage. “Anyway, there’s talk that the Duke and Therias might ride out to speak with her today.”

“And I suppose that means we’ll ride out too?”

“Wherever your father goes, you go,” I pointed out. “And wherever you go, I get dragged along, carrying all your burdens.”

Caelan cracked a reluctant grin. “Well, at least one of us has to work.”

“Very funny,” I muttered. But he was right. The idea of a prophecy had always been distant, almost abstract, something I overheard Therias droning about, but never something concrete. Now, with talk of chosen ones and seers spreading through Ravensford, I was starting to think this vague destiny business

was becoming annoyingly real.

I glanced up as a familiar figure entered the hall. Lira walked alongside her father, Lord Aric, poised as ever. She wore a dark riding cloak, a practical choice that somehow still managed to look elegant. Caelan straightened noticeably, trying far too hard to appear casual.

She spotted us, a small smile crossing her lips as she led her father directly toward our table. I nudged Caelan discreetly. “Incoming.”

“Shut up,” he hissed, quickly wiping his mouth and doing his best impression of dignified. “Morning, Lord Aric. Lira.”

Lord Aric nodded warmly. “Good morning. Your father has informed me that he and Therias plan to ride out today, toward Duskwood. I’ll be accompanying them.”

“And I’m coming along as well,” Lira added lightly, glancing between us with casual confidence. “Apparently this Maritha might have answers about my dreams.”

Caelan’s attempt at dignity cracked slightly. “You...you’re coming?”

“I insisted,” she said, with the kind of calm authority only someone raised as nobility could possess. “It involves me, after all.”

I shot Caelan a sideways glance. His face had gone bright red again, and he nodded vigorously. “Of course. Absolutely.”

Lord Aric raised a curious eyebrow, clearly amused by Caelan’s fumbling, but was merciful enough not to comment. “We depart shortly. Be ready.”

They moved off, leaving Caelan staring after Lira with a dazed expression.

“I don’t think you blinked once,” I said dryly, nudging his shoulder. “Careful or your eyes might dry out.”

He groaned, dropping his head onto the table with a quiet thunk. “Kill me now.”

“Nope,” I said cheerfully, pulling him up by the elbow. “Destiny awaits, remember?”

“Wonderful,” he muttered, trudging behind me toward the stables. “Just what I needed, another prophecy-spouting woman to make my life more confusing.”

“I think she likes you,” I teased. “Or maybe it’s just pity. Hard to tell.”

He shot me a glare. “You’re the worst friend in the history of friends.”

“And yet, here you are,” I pointed out lightly. “Must say something about your standards.”

Outside, the stable yard bustled with activity, knights checking armor, squires loading packs, and horses snorting impatiently. Duke Valemark stood near Therias, their conversation quiet and serious, as always. Lira and Lord Aric waited nearby, already mounted. I quickly saddled our horses, keeping a cautious distance from Sir Darran, whose ever watchful glare had managed to intensify lately, something I’d thought impossible.

We rode out from Ravensford at a steady pace, the morning air crisp and sharp. Despite my dislike of mornings, I found myself alert, watching the landscape slide past us. Rolling fields gave way to wilder, wooded terrain as we headed east toward Duskwood.

Lira rode just ahead, speaking quietly with her father. Caelan’s eyes kept flicking toward her, darting away quickly whenever she looked back. I resisted the urge to comment, at least for now. Instead, I let my thoughts drift toward this supposed witch. Prophecy and destiny had always felt distant, safe topics reserved for old men and ancient scrolls. But the reality of a

flesh-and-blood seer, one who apparently foresaw doom with unsettling accuracy, was a stark reminder that we were riding into more than just a simple journey through the Duchy.

Therias fell into step beside us, his pale eyes scanning the horizon thoughtfully. “Interesting, isn’t it? The closer we get to prophecy, the less clear everything becomes.”

Caelan frowned. “How is that interesting? It sounds awful.”

“Because uncertainty is the space where potential thrives,” Therias said cryptically, glancing my way. “We’re all shaped by the choices we make, and those we don’t.”

I rolled my eyes slightly. “And here I thought you’d forgotten your daily dose of vague.”

Therias chuckled quietly. “Never.”

Caelan shifted nervously in his saddle. “Do you think she’ll have real answers?”

Therias’s gaze turned distant. “Real answers rarely come from seers. But questions, they offer plenty of those.”

We rode in thoughtful silence after that, the woods around us growing thicker, shadows lengthening as the trees pressed closer, their branches reaching like long, grasping fingers. Therias’s words lingered uncomfortably in my thoughts, echoing quietly alongside the rhythm of hooves and creak of leather.

I had the sinking suspicion he was right. Answers seemed scarce lately, while the questions kept piling up. But I was starting to realize that the real problem with prophecy, at least from where I sat, was that it rarely came alone. It brought along destiny, uncertainty, and expectations, all tangled up like knots impossible to untie.

Caelan finally broke the silence as we crossed beneath the looming branches at the edge of Duskwood. “Therias,” he ventured quietly, “how can we even be sure this witch actually

knows anything useful? Aric himself seems skeptical of her.”

Therias’s gaze stayed fixed ahead, thoughtful but calm. “Skepticism is healthy. But the seers scattered across the duchies; witches, wise women, prophets, call them what you will, each possess some unique insight. Often it’s buried in riddles or metaphor, but at their core, these insights tap into deeper truths. Lord Aric’s caution toward Maritha suggests respect, despite his doubt.”

“Or maybe he’s just afraid she’ll turn him into a frog,” I muttered under my breath.

Caelan snorted softly, glancing toward Lira, who was now riding close enough to overhear. She gave me a curious look, clearly wondering what she’d missed.

Therias, ignoring my comment, continued gently. “Each seer senses disturbances differently. Maritha’s visions might be wild and unsettling, but that chaos itself tells us something.”

Lira shifted uneasily in her saddle. “My father says Maritha has spoken of a coming darkness. But darkness could mean anything.”

“It could,” Therias agreed carefully. “But prophecy, even in metaphor, tends to follow certain patterns. The scrolls speak of three great conflicts, wars that mark humanity’s struggle with darkness each time magic reawakens.”

“Three wars?” Caelan echoed, sounding uneasy. “How do you know which one you’re heading toward?”

“The prophecy’s first war,” Therias explained patiently, “is said to come after a long period of quiet, a time when magic has vanished almost entirely. The signs, small sparks of magic, strange dreams, unexplained disturbances, match descriptions in the ancient texts. Those same signs tell us we’re approaching the first war, the so-called ‘War of Shadows.’”

“War of Shadows?” I said skeptically. “Did anyone try just calling it the ‘War of Clearly Defined Danger’?”

Therias sighed. “Unfortunately, poets rarely seek your practical opinion.”

Lira laughed softly, though a shadow lingered in her eyes. “But how can anyone know who the Chosen One is, even if the signs match?”

“They can’t, not absolutely,” Therias said, glancing briefly at Caelan. “Prophecies rarely offer names, only descriptions or conditions. Magic returning is one condition. Dreams like yours, Lira, are another.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “My father is certain my dreams mean something significant. But what if he’s wrong?”

Therias nodded sympathetically. “He might be. Many people across the duchies believe they’ve spotted signs of the prophecy. Some claim their heirs are the Chosen One. Others look to seers or oracles. But genuine certainty is elusive.”

Caelan hesitated. “So every duchy has a seer?”

“At least one,” Therias confirmed. “Some duchies rely heavily on their seer’s counsel. Others, like Aric’s Ravensford, maintain distance. But even skeptics can’t deny that lately the whispers have grown louder. More reports of dreams, minor magic, unsettling incidents.”

I frowned, absorbing the information. “If everyone’s seeing signs, doesn’t that mean no one really knows anything?”

Therias smiled grimly. “Or perhaps it means the signs are stronger and wider than we thought, making it difficult to see clearly through the fog.”

We rode deeper into Duskwood, the ancient forest growing thicker and darker around us. A damp chill clung to the air, the trees so close now their limbs tangled overhead like woven

fingers, blocking most of the sunlight. Shadows moved oddly, the wind whispering strange things I couldn't quite catch.

"So," Caelan asked after a moment, clearly attempting to sound casual, "what happens in this War of Shadows?"

Therias hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "According to prophecy, the first war arrives when dark forces begin to stir after centuries of silence. Magic's return signals their awakening. If we interpret the texts correctly, darkness, whatever form it takes, seeks first to destabilize humanity from within. Alliances fracture, loyalties shift, and trust erodes. By the time open conflict breaks, the damage is already severe."

"Sounds cheerful," I said dryly. "Let's hope this Maritha gives us a better forecast."

"Perhaps," Therias murmured. "But remember, Eldrid: even unsettling answers have value, if they push us toward clarity."

"Sure," I said, eyeing the darkening woods suspiciously. "But you know what else pushes us toward clarity? Clearly labeled warnings. Or a nice, detailed list of impending doom."

Lira laughed quietly again, but her voice sounded nervous, the humor a little forced. "I don't know, maybe being vague is a seer's job security."

Caelan grinned at her remark, looking slightly less awkward now. "You might have a point."

Lira returned his smile softly, their shared discomfort gradually fading into something a bit warmer. "At least we'll know soon enough. Maritha's home is supposed to be just up ahead."

Caelan's shoulders stiffened slightly at the reminder, and even I felt tension coil uneasily in my stomach. Therias's warnings about prophecy and darkness didn't exactly inspire confidence. If this so-called witch truly had answers, or more troubling questions, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to hear

them.

I shook off the feeling as best I could, nudging my horse forward. Whatever waited for us deeper inside Duskwood, we'd face it soon enough. For now, I was grateful the shadowy forest kept most of my own unease hidden.

The forest thickened abruptly, branches intertwining into a nearly impenetrable wall before suddenly opening into a small clearing. At its center stood a weather-beaten cottage of grey stone, half-smothered in ivy. Small offerings, woven charms, bowls of berries, dried flowers tied with twine, littered the doorstep, hints of respect from villagers who outwardly dismissed Maritha's warnings.

We dismounted quietly. Before Therias could knock, the cottage door creaked open, revealing a frail woman leaning upon a gnarled staff. Maritha's hair hung in tangled, grey-white waves, and her eyes, though clouded by milky blindness, moved as if seeing far beyond us.

"You've come seeking answers," she said softly, voice gentle but heavy with an unseen weight.

Therias stepped forward respectfully. "We seek clarity about the times ahead."

Maritha smiled faintly, without humor. "Clarity? A rare luxury. But truths I have, truths to twist the path you think you walk."

Her gaze drifted slowly across us, first resting heavily upon Caelan, then shifting deliberately to Lira. Finally, her eyes stopped on me, her stare lingering in a way that made the hairs on my neck rise. Her brow creased momentarily, as if troubled, before she finally spoke again.

"Among you stand two souls bound tightly to what comes next," she whispered, almost sadly. "One shall rise as the

Chosen One, light against the shadow. The other, gifted with sight beyond sight, a seer powerful enough to shape destiny or break it.”

Caelan glanced toward Lira, then back at Maritha, clearly uneasy. “But who—?”

Maritha raised a trembling hand, silencing him gently. “Prophecy binds and blinds, young lord. The threads of destiny twist and knot in ways we never fully grasp. Beware simple answers. They rarely speak the truth.”

Therias stepped closer, voice careful. “Can you offer anything clearer? A hint, perhaps, to guide us?”

Maritha hesitated, cloudy eyes distant. “Three moons hence, beneath the blade once broken, noble blood will spill. The rider without shadow comes, heralding darkness and the blade’s return. These things will come to pass, no matter who you think you are.”

Lira paled slightly, glancing toward her father, while Caelan’s jaw tightened in quiet resolve. Duke Valemark moved protectively nearer his son, though uncertainty flickered briefly in his eyes.

As they focused on Maritha’s words, something else caught my attention. Her left hand, partially hidden by her sleeve, trembled slightly, the skin beneath marred by a dark, unsettling stain, like ink spreading slowly beneath parchment. No one else seemed to notice, their eyes locked instead on Maritha’s cryptic expression.

She turned slightly, murmuring almost to herself. “One chosen, one who sees, but both will suffer. Fate offers no kindness, even to those who bear its burdens.”

Therias drew a slow breath, clearly unsettled. “We understand your warning, but—”

“No,” she interrupted quietly. “You hear, but you do not yet understand. When you do, it will be too late.”

Silence fell heavily around us. Maritha stood quietly in her doorway, frail yet somehow imposing. Her words lingered in the air, unsettling and unclear, precisely as she’d promised.

Duke Valemark cleared his throat gently, signaling our audience was at an end. “Thank you, Maritha. We’ll reflect carefully on your words.”

As we turned to leave, her voice whispered once more from behind, barely audible:

“Remember, destiny’s chosen and destiny’s seer, each has their role. Mistake one for the other, and darkness gains strength.”

Her words sank into my chest like stones. I glanced quickly at Caelan, who was watching Lira with open uncertainty. She, in turn, stared blankly ahead, clearly shaken.

For the first time since leaving Ravensford, I felt the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world wasn’t quite finished surprising us yet.

## Chapter 8

The ride back from Maritha's cottage was uncomfortably quiet. Even the horses seemed subdued, hooves padding softly along the forest path. Sunlight filtered weakly through the canopy above, casting uncertain shadows around us.

I stole a glance at Lira, riding just ahead with her father. Her posture was rigid, the usual quiet confidence missing from her shoulders. Maritha's words had clearly shaken her, even more deeply than she'd let on at the cottage. Caelan seemed to sense it, his eyes constantly flicking toward her, opening his mouth several times as though he might speak, only to close it again awkwardly. Apparently, prophecy and girls were two topics he hadn't mastered yet.

Therias rode beside Duke Valemark at the front of our group, their voices low but tense. Though I couldn't make out their exact words, the Duke's tight jaw and Therias's furrowed brow were enough to signal that Maritha's vague declarations had landed heavily, particularly her claim about a "Chosen One" and a "powerful seer." It didn't take a scholar to guess what, or rather who, they were discussing.

The silence stretched until Caelan finally couldn't bear it. He leaned slightly toward Lira, forcing his voice casual. "So...do you really think what Maritha said could be true?"

Lira turned her head slowly to look at him, her expression careful but uncertain. “I don’t know. I mean, she’s always been called a seer, but...now I’m not sure what that means.”

Caelan nodded quickly, clearly relieved she’d spoken at all. “Right. Exactly. Prophecy always seems so important until it happens, or...until it doesn’t. Or until you realize you don’t understand it.” He winced slightly, clearly aware he was rambling.

Lira’s lips twitched, almost smiling. “Are you always this reassuring?”

I snorted quietly, earning a quick glare from Caelan before he hurriedly tried again. “Sorry. I just meant...maybe she’s right, but maybe she’s also just confused. Prophecy feels like a story you know by heart, until someone starts changing the words.”

Therias glanced back over his shoulder, an odd approval in his expression. “Well said, Caelan. Prophecy is rarely clear, even to those who study it closely. What seems obvious today might prove entirely false tomorrow.”

“So why bother with it at all?” I muttered under my breath, half-expecting Therias not to hear me.

Of course, he did. Therias glanced my way, eyes sparkling slightly. “Because uncertainty is precisely what makes prophecy valuable. If prophecy were clear, people would either rush to force its fulfillment or try desperately to prevent it. That’s when true chaos begins.”

I frowned. “You’re saying prophecy stays vague on purpose? To keep us from messing it up?”

“Exactly,” Therias said gently. “The uncertainty protects us as much as it frustrates us. Prophecy shapes our choices without dictating them, leaving us just enough freedom to determine our own fates, for good or ill.”

I sighed heavily. “Great. So, vague and frustrating by design. Sounds perfect.”

Therias’s smile was faint, barely visible beneath his beard. “It would seem we have little choice.”

We fell quiet again, but the earlier awkwardness seemed slightly less oppressive. Caelan’s shoulders relaxed a bit, and Lira no longer looked quite as if she’d seen a ghost. Duke Valemark, however, still rode stiffly, eyes narrowed thoughtfully ahead. Whatever conversation he’d had with Therias had done little to reassure him.

I felt a quiet unease settle in my chest as the shadows lengthened around us. Maritha’s warnings, vague as they were, carried an unsettling weight. One Chosen One, one powerful seer, both standing quietly among us, hidden in plain sight. Everyone else seemed determined to identify them immediately, like characters in a bard’s tale, neatly labeled and perfectly heroic.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling reality wouldn’t be nearly so cooperative. Real life had a nasty habit of defying simple labels, something that worried me more and more each passing moment. Because the closer we got to destiny, or whatever Maritha thought destiny looked like, the more certain I felt that clarity was the last thing we’d find.

We stopped briefly to rest the horses and stretch our legs beside a small clearing edged by a narrow stream. Duke Valemark dismounted gracefully, stretching tiredly before turning toward us.

“Caelan, Eldrid,” he called, gesturing toward the stream, “Fetch some water for the horses. Quickly, now.”

Caelan nodded dutifully, grabbing two waterskins from the packs without comment. I followed, catching a subtle but meaningful look pass between Valemark and Therias as we left.

Whatever they were discussing clearly wasn't meant for our ears.

Caelan stopped abruptly beside the stream, staring down into the water as if expecting to find answers swirling among the pebbles. I stood quietly, waterskin in hand, waiting for him to speak. Caelan hesitated, the silence stretching until I considered poking him to check if he'd forgotten how conversations worked.

"I keep thinking," Caelan finally said, voice barely above a whisper, "what if it really is Lira? What if I've spent my whole life preparing for something that isn't mine to do?"

I shifted uncomfortably. Caelan had been worrying more than usual these days, about prophecy, about expectations, but this was something else. A kind of quiet unraveling. Seeing him genuinely troubled felt as unnatural as seeing Sir Darran smile.

"I mean, it'd be a relief, right?" I ventured lightly. "No more heavy destiny stuff. You could finally work on hitting targets from more than ten feet away."

He shot me a look that hovered between annoyance and gratitude, then sighed heavily. "You don't get it, Eldrid. My father, Therias, everyone back home, they've built their lives around me being this great hero. If I'm not... then what am I?"

For once, I had no quick retort. This was Caelan, confident, charismatic Caelan, suddenly laid bare and vulnerable. Except around girls, of course. But this wasn't a joke, and the realization sobered me more than I liked.

"You're still you," I said slowly, feeling clumsy with words. "You'll still be Caelan, who trips over his own feet when he tries to dance, and forgets speeches halfway through. Destiny can't change that."

He looked sideways at me, lips twitching despite himself.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

“Always happy to help,” I replied with exaggerated cheerfulness. “It’s why you keep me around.”

Caelan chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I guess I just didn’t expect it to feel this unsettling. I’ve always complained about the expectations, but at least they gave me direction. Now I feel like I’ve lost my map.”

I hesitated, staring down at my reflection rippling faintly on the stream’s surface. “Maybe you haven’t lost your map. Maybe you’re just reading it wrong.”

He blinked at me, eyebrows raised. “That almost sounded wise.”

I shrugged, dipping the waterskin into the cold water. “It happens occasionally. Don’t get used to it.”

Caelan smiled faintly, bending to fill his own waterskin. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

As we straightened, waterskins heavy, the quiet settled comfortably between us. Caelan still looked troubled, but some of the tightness had eased from his shoulders. I hadn’t solved anything, couldn’t even pretend to, but maybe just listening was enough.

Or maybe Caelan was right. Maybe we were both stumbling forward without a clear path, hoping we’d recognize the right road before we wandered too far off course.

Later, as dusk deepened into twilight, we made camp near a sheltered clearing at the forest’s edge. The tents rose quickly, knights moving with practiced efficiency. Fires crackled, pushing back against the creeping darkness that seemed heavier now, pressing against our circle of light.

After dinner, I found myself tending quietly to Caelan’s gear, eavesdropping shamelessly while Therias and Duke Valemark

spoke in hushed, serious tones beside one of the smaller fires. Therias, pale eyes thoughtful, stirred the embers distractedly as he spoke.

“I spoke to several of Aric’s people last night, my lord,” Therias began carefully. “There have been troubling reports from beyond Ravensford, especially from the eastern duchies. Traders and travelers alike whisper of strange happenings, sudden fevers spreading without cause, livestock falling sick overnight, and villages growing suspicious of outsiders.”

Duke Valemark stared into the flames, his face solemn. “Rumors always thrive in uncertain times. But Aric wouldn’t close his gates without good reason.”

“One of Aric’s patrols returned two days past with a troubling report,” Therias said carefully. “They found a village near the border, quiet, but wrong. The gates were unguarded, animals loose in the streets, and not a single soul in sight. Inside the homes, food was left half-eaten, fires still burning low. It was as if everyone had simply vanished in the middle of living.”

Duke Valemark’s brow furrowed deeply. “And no sign of struggle?”

“None,” Therias confirmed. “But there were marks, symbols scorched into the wooden beams. Old ones. I’ve seen sketches in ancient texts, but never with my own eyes until now. They predate the founding of most duchies. Forgotten by most... but not by all.”

Valemark’s jaw tightened. “Aric said nothing of this.”

“I suspect he’s still trying to understand it himself,” Therias replied, voice low. “But we must assume whatever happened there could be spreading.”

Duke Valemark nodded slowly, considering the implications. “Thrain’s Reach is near the border of Tharnesse. If this corrup-

tion, whatever it is, originates from there, it's far worse than simple unrest."

Therias hesitated briefly before continuing. "There's more. I've spent years studying prophecy, as you know. The Scrolls speak often of a creeping darkness, of blight and madness preceding conflict. These signs, people driven mad, villages shutting their gates, the return of old fears, could very well be the beginnings of what we've feared."

Valemark frowned deeply, his voice heavy. "Yet Maritha spoke of moons, blades, blood. It's impossible to know what to trust."

Therias nodded gently. "Prophecy thrives in uncertainty. Yet even vague warnings mustn't be ignored."

The Duke sighed, rubbing his forehead as if easing a headache. "This grows more complicated every day. Caelan is barely thirteen, Therias. If events escalate, if conflict truly arrives now...he may not be ready."

Therias leaned closer, voice firm but gentle. "No chosen one ever is, my lord. And yet, they rise to meet it, because they must."

I glanced toward Caelan, now sitting quietly by another fire, staring moodily into the distance. For a moment, I saw him clearly, not as the heir, nor even the potential chosen one, but simply as my friend, burdened by expectations he neither sought nor fully understood.

"Then we prepare him," Duke Valemark said decisively. "And ourselves."

Therias inclined his head solemnly. "Indeed, we must."

They fell quiet, gazes fixed on the fire. I turned back to Caelan's belongings, heart heavier than before. Prophecy and destiny, darkness and blades, it all felt suddenly less abstract. Real threats lurked closer now, shaping events in ways we

couldn't predict.

Glancing again toward Caelan, I silently resolved to keep an even sharper eye on him from now on, if only because destiny seemed increasingly inclined to catch us unaware.

We broke camp at dawn beneath skies that promised no kindness. A heavy mist had settled overnight, cloaking everything in ghostly silence. As we mounted up, moisture clung stubbornly to our cloaks, soaking through wool and leather alike. Every breath hung visibly in the chilled air, each exhale a small cloud drifting slowly upward, dispersing into nothingness.

We rode in silence at first, the trail weaving gently through hills that rose like green waves on a restless sea. The forest pressed close on either side, branches drooping with dampness, dripping steadily onto already sodden ground. A deep, earthy scent lingered, mingled with the sharper tang of pine resin and decaying leaves. But despite the fertile scent, something felt off.

I scanned the trees, realizing only gradually what troubled me most. It was the quiet. No morning birdsong welcomed us, no rustle of wildlife stirred among the underbrush. Even the horses seemed unsettled, ears twitching nervously, hooves landing softly as though reluctant to disturb the eerie calm.

Ahead, Caelan rode between his father and Sir Darran, shoulders tense. Occasionally he glanced back toward me, perhaps seeking reassurance. I tried to offer a small nod of encouragement, but my own unease likely showed clearly enough. Therias rode beside me, his narrowed eyes fixed thoughtfully on some distant point. Every now and then he scribbled furiously into his notebook, lips moving silently.

After an hour or so, the road rose slightly, then opened suddenly to reveal a small village nestled at the bottom of a

shallow valley, surrounded by fields whose edges were blurred by mist. At first glance, it looked exactly as a village should in the morning hours, smoke drifting lazily upward from a chimney here and there, laundry hanging limply on lines, waiting vainly for sun.

Yet as we drew closer, the illusion began to fray. The smoke drifting from chimneys was thin, almost gone. Laundry hung forgotten, soaked through by the dampness, left unattended despite the morning being well underway. Gardens stood half-weeded, their neat rows abandoned, as though their caretakers had simply stepped away mid-task. And nowhere, among the quiet buildings, was there any sign of life, no voices carried through the air, no children laughed or chased each other, no dogs barked to greet or warn.

The Duke raised a hand sharply, bringing us all to a halt. He studied the village, eyes narrowed, jaw tight.

“Dismount,” he ordered quietly.

As I dropped to the ground, an odd shiver passed through me, crawling up my spine like cold fingers. Therias slowly closed his notebook, tucking it away into his robes. Caelan lingered beside his horse, watching his father carefully, as if waiting for reassurance that did not come.

I looked again at the village, feeling dread settle like a weight in my chest. It was silent, utterly and completely. Not a single sound rose from the sleepy cottages below. No movement stirred.

The silence deepened as we stepped cautiously down the gentle slope toward the cluster of houses. Hooves and boots alike left faint impressions on the muddy path, the sucking sound of each step strangely muted. I glanced over to see Aric, normally so composed, shifting uneasily, his eyes flicking to

the forest's edge and back again, as though expecting to catch sight of something hidden in the shadows.

Lira moved slowly forward, her head tilted slightly as if listening intently to something none of us could hear. She reached out gently to touch the leaves of an overgrown shrub, then quickly pulled her hand back, eyes narrowing.

The Duke broke the silence first, his voice low but firm. "Therias. How many souls dwell here?"

Therias hesitated, eyes flickering briefly upward as though consulting some internal ledger. "About a hundred, perhaps a bit more. The last census placed it at one hundred and twelve."

"And yet," Duke Valemark murmured, stepping further into the deserted village square, "we see not one."

Caelan swallowed visibly, looking around. "Could they have fled toward the border?"

"No," Therias replied quietly, shaking his head. "The border town, Darrensford, is still a half-day's journey east. They'd never abandon their homes en masse without urgent cause."

"Then perhaps they're still here," Sir Darran said grimly, hand on the pommel of his sword, eyes scanning windows and doorways warily. "Inside, hiding."

"From what?" Caelan asked, barely louder than a whisper.

No answer came.

The quiet deepened, pressing in from all sides. A thin fog drifted slowly between buildings, coiling around our feet, adding to the oppressive atmosphere.

"Stay alert," Duke Valemark ordered softly, motioning us forward into the village square. "Look for anything unusual, but stay together."

We moved carefully forward, each step cautious and uncertain. Caelan walked so closely beside me that our shoulders nearly

touched. Aric had drawn his sword quietly, eyes wary, glancing toward the shadowed doorways that surrounded us. Lira remained a half-step behind the Duke, her expression distant, as though listening to something beyond our hearing.

As we reached the center of the square, my eyes caught on something odd etched into the rim of the stone-lined well. Without thinking, I took a few steps toward it, drawn by an instinctive curiosity I couldn't explain.

Carved roughly into the stone was a strange symbol: two loops joined together at the center. One loop was smooth and whole, perfectly shaped, while the other was cracked and broken, its lines fractured as though someone had violently struck it, shattering its curves.

"Here," I said quietly, feeling the others move closer behind me. "Look at this."

Lira leaned forward first, staring closely at the carving. Her eyes widened, and a faint shiver visibly traveled through her. "I've seen this before," she whispered.

"Where?" asked the Duke, studying her face carefully.

"In a dream," she admitted softly. "Not long ago. It was etched into stone, just like this."

A heavy silence settled among us again, thick with unease.

"Therias?" Valemark prompted gently, turning toward the sage, who had been lingering at the edges of our group, brows knitted tightly together. "Does it mean anything to you?"

Therias stepped forward, his normally calm expression now deeply troubled. As he studied the carving closely, his fingers unconsciously traced patterns in the air, as if recalling something long-forgotten.

"I've seen this symbol," he murmured finally, his voice distant, distracted. "I am not certain where, precisely. Perhaps in

an old manuscript. Something very old.” He paused, frowning even deeper. “When we return to Eldermoor, I’ll consult my texts. There may be answers there.”

Caelan shifted uneasily beside me, his voice barely audible. “Do you think it’s important?”

Therias met his eyes solemnly. “Symbols this old always are.”

The Duke scanned the village square, jaw tight. “Fan out. Check the buildings. Look for any sign of where they went or why.”

No one asked questions. We split off in quiet pairs, weapons loose in hand. Caelan and I took the nearest cottage. Lira moved off with Aric toward a narrow barn. Therias drifted alone, gaze distant, notebook in hand, already scribbling. Sir Darran strode across the square without a word, his armor glinting dully beneath the mist, and stepped toward the weathered old chapel, as if drawn there by instinct.

The homes were all the same. Meals left uneaten. Beds unmade. Tables still set with half-played games or unfinished stitching. I found a pipe still warm on the hearthstone, its ashes recently stirred. Not enough time had passed for everything to feel so hollow. It wasn’t just that the people were gone. It was like the place itself had been abandoned by breath.

Caelan was checking behind a pantry curtain when the shout rang out.

“My lord! In here!” Sir Darran’s voice, sharp and urgent, came from across the square.

We ran.

The chapel loomed taller than it had seemed before, its crooked steeple almost vanishing into the gray. The wooden door stood open now, casting a long, crooked shadow across the flagstones.

Inside, it was colder than the outside air. Light slanted through narrow stained-glass windows, washing the stone walls in sickly reds and greens. Pews sat warped and water-stained, some leaning to the side as if trying to flee the altar.

High above the altar, barely visible through soot and dust, a mural sprawled across the curved wall. It was faded and cracked with age, but I could still make out the shapes. Human figures, small and hunched, fled from a sky writhing with fire. Not flames in the natural sense, but something more chaotic, more unnatural. Spirals of light. Streaks of gold like falling stars. A sense of motion that made the painted sky seem alive and angry.

Sir Darran stood at the front of the room, sword still drawn, not in battle stance but not relaxed either. His eyes were locked on the stone floor just before the altar.

There, drawn in fresh, glistening blood, was a symbol.

Two loops joined at their center. One loop was clean and whole. The other was cracked, shattered as if broken by force. The image felt precise, deliberate, ritualistic.

No one spoke at first.

Caelan let out a slow breath beside me. Lira's eyes had gone wide, and she took a single, slow step forward, gaze locked on the mark.

"It's the same one," she said softly. "From the well."

Her hand hovered just above the blood, fingers trembling slightly. "But this time... it feels different. Closer. Like it's waiting."

Sir Darran shook his head. "No blood trail. No footprints. And the door was closed when I came in. This was placed here deliberately."

"By whom?" Aric asked, his voice rough.

No one answered.

Therias stepped forward slowly and knelt beside the symbol, studying it closely. His fingers hovered over the blood, not touching it, but following the jagged arc of the broken loop with unsettling precision.

“This confirms it,” he said, more to himself than to anyone else. “It’s not a singular mark. It’s part of a pattern.”

The Duke turned toward him. “You’re certain?”

“No,” Therias admitted, standing slowly. “But I’ve seen it now in two separate places. Etched in ancient stone, and now painted in blood. That is not coincidence. It is recurrence.”

“From what?” Caelan asked, voice tense.

Therias didn’t answer right away. His gaze drifted to the mural above the altar, the one depicting people fleeing a storm of fire in the sky. He stared at it a long moment.

“This symbol doesn’t just warn,” he said at last. “It remembers.”

We stood in silence.

I glanced again at the mural above the altar. The fire in the painted sky seemed to flicker in the colored light, and the tiny painted figures below it looked less like people and more like shadows trying to outrun something far too big to fight.

A cold knot settled behind my ribs.

No one said what we were all thinking. That whatever had happened here, it wasn’t over.

Then, from outside, a voice broke the stillness.

“Ho! The village!”

We all turned at once. I was nearest the chapel door and moved instinctively toward it, heart pounding harder than before.

Through the mist, a rider approached at speed, his cloak snapping behind him. His horse’s flanks were slick with sweat, and the royal crest, blue and gold, was stamped clearly on his

satchel.

He reined in sharply as we stepped out to meet him. "Message for Duke Valemark."

The Duke took the scroll, eyes narrowing as he broke the wax and read quickly.

The rider cleared his throat. "You are summoned to present yourself before His Majesty the King at once. Direct orders. No delay."

## Chapter 9

Being summoned by the king was not nearly as thrilling as the bards always made it sound. For one thing, it involved turning completely around and heading back exactly the way we came, which was irritating. For another, it meant riding toward even more nobles, ceremonies, and tedious political conversations. None of those ever seemed to include me but they always managed to ruin my day anyway.

Around me, knights moved with quiet urgency, packing quickly and efficiently. Duke Valemark had already taken on that expression nobles get when summoned unexpectedly. It was half annoyed and half worried. Caelan looked nauseous. Therias just looked thoughtful, which was not new.

I sighed. The capital meant politics. Politics meant long meetings. Long meetings meant endless waiting outside closed doors listening to whispers about ancient prophecies and mysterious disappearances while I tried desperately not to fall asleep.

“Cheer up,” Caelan said as he approached, catching my less than enthusiastic expression. “You might finally see the king.”

I snorted. “Right. Kings love meeting servants. Maybe he will let me polish his royal slippers. That has always been my dream, you know.”

Caelan rolled his eyes, though a faint smile crept through his

worry. “Your dreams need work.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered, tightening the straps on my saddlebag. “Seriously though. Why the sudden royal summons? Did someone finally notice how terrible your dancing was at Ravensford?”

He ignored that and shook his head slightly. The king held an annual gathering of duchies at the capital, Aurelios, and that had taken place only a couple of months ago. Kings rarely summoned their dukes directly outside those scheduled meetings. If His Majesty wanted Duke Valemark in Aurelios immediately, something serious must have happened.

Aurelios was at the kingdom’s heart, deliberately placed after the vague but terrible cataclysm that had forced the founding of the kingdom centuries ago. Twelve duchies, each positioned like spokes of a wheel, touched the capital at their center. Equal shares, equal power. From what I had seen of nobles, equality usually lasted only until someone wanted something a little nicer than their neighbors had.

Duke Valemark, Caelan, and Therias rode slightly ahead of me, deep in quiet, tense conversation. Lira and Aric kept close behind them. Lira occasionally glanced back with a thoughtful, uncertain look. Sir Darran brought up the rear, grim as ever, eyes fixed forward.

I tugged on my horse’s reins and sighed deeply. Politics, prophecy, royalty. Every step forward lately felt like stumbling further into the sort of trouble I spent my days trying to avoid. Yet here I was again, riding toward even bigger problems, all because Caelan had the misfortune of being born a noble and I had made the questionable decision to become his friend.

I sighed again. The capital meant politics. Politics meant long meetings. Long meetings meant endless waiting outside closed

doors while other people discussed ancient prophecies. I had little chance of staying awake.

“Cheer up,” Caelan said again. “You might finally see the king.”

“Right. Slippers. Polishing. Dream of a lifetime.”

He laughed softly then went quiet as Duke Valemark called back.

“Less talk. More riding. The King’s seal does not wait on conversation.”

That ended it.

We rode hard through the rest of the afternoon. The road unspooled in a pale ribbon between hedgerows and quiet fields. The air had that late season edge, not cold but sharp enough to keep you awake. No one said much. There was not much to say. When kings called, even silence felt like obedience.

Aric urged his horse forward until he was beside the duke. “If the summons is as serious as you suggest,” he said, “then perhaps I should accompany you. The archives in Aurelios may hold records the King’s scholars will need.”

The Duke kept his eyes ahead. “The summons named me alone.”

“Then the King is mistaken,” Aric said. His tone sharpened. “He will want counsel from those who understand the texts. You know what has been stirring, what Maritha said, what Lira has seen. If this concerns the prophecy, I should be there.”

“The message did not mention prophecy,” the Duke said.

“That does not mean it is not about prophecy,” Aric pressed. “You have seen the same signs I have. The omens. The dreams. This could be what we have been waiting for.”

They said waiting, but the way they said it made it sound more like dreading.

The Duke slowed slightly. The knights ahead drifted forward to give them space. “Aric, the King does not summon half the realm every time a candle flickers strangely. He called for me. I intend to obey.”

Aric exhaled sharply. “Obedience is a virtue when it is deserved. But if he is meddling in things he does not understand...”

“Enough.” The Duke’s voice was calm but final. “You forget yourself.”

The line of riders fell silent. Even the wind seemed to pause.

After a moment the Duke sighed. “Forgive me. You have been my friend too long to deserve a public scolding. But the King’s word is not something I can ignore.”

Aric looked away, jaw tight. “Old habits.”

“I know,” the Duke said quietly. “And you are not wrong to worry. But there are matters a King entrusts to a Duke that friendship cannot share.”

Before Aric could reply, Therias spoke from behind us. His tone was quiet and firm. “Then perhaps the girl should go.”

Everything stopped.

Aric frowned. “You cannot be serious.”

“Quite,” Therias said. “If this summons concerns what we suspect, then the insight of one who dreams may prove more useful than a hall of scholars.”

“She is my daughter, not an experiment,” Aric snapped.

“No one suggested otherwise,” Therias said. “But the signs point to her. Whatever is waking seems to reach for her.”

Lira said nothing, but her hands tightened on the reins.

“You would take her from her father’s protection?” the Duke asked.

“I would suggest,” Therias said, “that protection sometimes means allowing the world to see what it fears most.”

Aric's voice softened. "You speak as though this is a lesson." "It always is," Therias replied.

Lira looked between them, pale but determined. "He is right," she said quietly. "If this summons is about the prophecy, I should be there."

Her voice carried more conviction than volume. It cut through the cooling air like a truth that refused to pretend it was anything else.

Aric closed his eyes briefly then sighed. "You have your mother's talent for finding trouble."

"I have your patience," she said, almost smiling.

"That is what worries me."

The Duke watched them both. "You will ride under my word," he said. "You will do as I command and you will not wander from the road. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," Lira said.

By the time the spires of Ravensford appeared, the sun was a red smear on the horizon.

Aric slowed. "You will at least rest at the castle before pressing on."

"One hour," the Duke said. "No more."

The gates opened at the sight of his banner. We entered the courtyard as torches flared along the walls. Ravensford always looked older at dusk. The stones darkened. The air cooled. The river below sent up a sharp, metallic smell.

We dismounted. Stable hands hurried forward. The Duke handed off his reins and gave instructions before Aric led us inside.

The halls were tall and narrow. Books lined the walls. Tapestries hung like faded memories. The fire in the study was already lit.

“You could wait until morning,” Aric said as he poured wine. “Even kings can survive one night without their dukes.”

The Duke accepted the cup but did not drink. “The messenger looked half dead when he reached us. The King would not send him like that unless it mattered.”

Aric set his cup down too hard. “Then forgive me if I do not share your faith in royal timing.”

“Faith is not the word I would use,” the Duke replied. “Duty. Or habit.”

Lira stood near the door, quiet. Firelight turned her hair to copper.

“If you are taking her,” Aric said, “promise me she will not be dragged into court intrigue.”

“I know what Aurelios is,” the Duke said. “She will stay with us.”

They clasped forearms and we left Ravensford soon after.

The night was clear. No fog. Just the sharp scent of air that could not decide whether it might rain.

We rode under stars that drifted slowly across the sky. The torches burned low. The conversation burned lower.

Somewhere behind us an owl called and sounded disappointed in everyone.

I rode up beside Caelan. He was pretending to study the stars but was mostly studying Lira. She rode well. Steady. Sure. The reins loose in her hands.

“You are staring again,” I said.

“I am not.”

“You are. If you keep it up she will start charging rent.”

He muttered something about me being insufferable. I accepted this as fair.

Therias rode near the Duke, murmuring to himself or the wind.

It was hard to tell which.

Lira glanced back. When she saw me watching, she smiled faintly then looked forward again. She had the look of someone listening to something no one else could hear.

When the horizon began to pale, the Duke raised a hand. The river lay ahead, quiet beneath a thin veil of morning mist.

We stopped while scouts checked the far bank. The horses shifted restlessly.

“Comfortable?” I asked Lira.

She smiled slightly. “You make it sound like we have been riding for days.”

“It feels like it,” I said.

Caelan checked her saddle strap. Their hands nearly touched. He looked away first.

“You two keep that up and the prophecy will start writing itself,” I said.

Lira tilted her head. “You think this is how destiny begins?”

“No. Destiny starts with a bad decision and ends with everyone blaming the gods.”

She laughed softly. Caelan sighed, which I counted as a victory.

When the scouts returned, the Duke nodded and we crossed as dawn broke. Mist rose from the water in silver sheets. The first light spilled across the bridge, and by the second morning of hard riding Valemark Castle emerged from the morning haze. The towers rose from the hills like they had been carved from the land itself.

They looked solid. Permanent.

Too permanent.

Because I was beginning to think everything in the world could be touched.

THE PROPHECY PROBLEM

Especially the things that thought they could not.  
Whatever the Duke meant to fetch, I had the distinct feeling  
it was going to ruin breakfast for everyone.

## Chapter 10

Dawn was just starting to push at the edge of the sky when Valemark Castle came into view. The towers rose through the mist in their usual steady, immovable way. We had been awake all night, but the castle looked much the same as always, calm and unbothered by how miserable the rest of us felt.

The gates opened as we approached. Valemark guards stood straight and polished, eyes forward, not a strap or buckle out of place. No one who served under the Duke dared look anything less than ready, even at first light.

We rode into the courtyard at a tired, uneven pace. Stablehands hurried toward us, taking reins and murmuring quick greetings. They looked us over without surprise. People here were trained to recognize a hard ride when they saw one, and to ask no questions until the Duke answered them first.

The Duke dismounted, his expression composed despite the long night. “See to the horses,” he said to the grooms. Then, to the rest of us, “Warm yourselves. We leave again as soon as preparations allow.”

Caelan got down stiffly. Lira followed, rolling her shoulders to work some feeling back into them. Sir Darran looked exactly as he always did, which meant I had no idea whether he was tired or thinking about murdering someone.

Therias slipped from his horse with the same calm he had worn all night. He took in the courtyard with a slow glance, then began walking toward one of the side passages without a word or explanation.

The Duke watched him go, then turned back to us. "I must speak with Lady Selene," he said. "Half an hour. Meet me in my study."

He went inside before any of us could answer.

That left Caelan, Lira, Sir Darran, and me standing in the cold morning air while the stablehands led the horses away. The sun was just clearing the tops of the towers, painting the courtyard in soft gold that made everything look gentler than it actually was.

I stretched my back and yawned. "Half an hour," I said. "Plenty of time for something unfortunate to happen."

Caelan shook his head but smiled. "Try not to be the cause of it."

I was about to tell him that accidents were rarely entirely my fault when the stable door swung open.

I didn't think much of it until Caelan nudged me with his elbow, the very deliberate kind of elbow he used when trouble was about to walk directly into my path.

I turned.

Mirabel stood in the doorway with a small bundle of feed in her arms. Her hair was tied back with a few strands escaping around her face, and she looked far more awake than any person had a right to be at this hour.

She stopped when she saw me.

I stopped when I saw her.

Lira raised an eyebrow.

Caelan made a sound that meant he was already enjoying this

more than he should.

And just like that, the morning became complicated.

“I heard riders were returning,” she said, her voice softer than I remembered. “I came to see if anyone needed anything.”

Caelan made a sound that was somewhere between a cough and a laugh. It was not subtle.

Mirabel stepped fully inside, her eyes narrowing slightly at him. Caelan straightened at once and pretended to check the saddle straps on his horse.

I cleared my throat. “We are only stopping briefly. Important matters to discuss. Royal business.”

Caelan nodded without turning around. “Yes, royal business. Very secret. Very important.”

My fist nearly found his arm. I stopped myself only because Mirabel was watching.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Royal business.” She sounded impressed, which I absolutely did not deserve. I opened my mouth to clarify that I had exaggerated, but the words that came out were worse.

“The King summoned the Duke personally, and I am assisting.”

Caelan snorted so loudly that the horses shifted in their stalls. I shot him a look that promised future violence.

Mirabel smiled, although she tried to hide it by looking at the floor. “Well. That is very responsible of you, Eldrid.”

“Responsible is practically my middle name,” I said. I regretted it immediately.

She gave a small laugh. The kind that managed to sound both kind and painfully genuine. “I am glad you are safe. They said you were traveling near the coast and that strange things were happening out there.”

“That was mostly Caelan’s fault,” I said before thinking. “He attracts trouble. It follows him around like a stray goat.”

“I do not attract goats,” Caelan said. He turned around with the most injured expression I had ever seen. “And the last one followed you.”

Mirabel laughed again. This time brighter. The stable seemed warmer for it.

She stepped closer, then paused as if realizing she was too close. “If you need anything before you leave for the capital, I can fetch it.”

“We are not leaving yet,” I said quickly. Too quickly. “The Duke wants everyone in his study soon. We are preparing for the journey.”

Caelan muttered, “So many words to say nothing.”

I pretended not to hear him.

Mirabel nodded. “Then I hope the road is a safe one. And I hope you return soon.” Her eyes stayed on mine a little too long, and my brain immediately forgot how sentences worked.

“I will,” I said. “I mean, we will. I mean, unless we do not. But we probably will.”

Caelan leaned against a stall post and made a quiet, strangled noise that sounded like he might actually die from holding in laughter.

Mirabel’s cheeks colored. Mine probably did too. “Well. I should return to my mother.” She lifted the linens in her hands. “Welcome home, Eldrid.”

She slipped out of the stable, leaving the scent of soap and lavender and my dignity slowly burning behind her.

Caelan waited exactly one second before speaking. “Responsible is your middle name.”

“Shut up.”

“And you are assisting the Duke.”

“Shut up.”

“And you will return soon. Or not. But probably.”

I lunged for him. He dodged me with the smug grace of someone who had just witnessed a historic embarrassment.

“You are never speaking of this again,” I said.

He grinned. “I am speaking of this forever.”

We left the stables once the horses were settled. Caelan was still wearing that insufferable grin, the one that made me want to trip him on principle. Lira walked just behind us, quiet but observant in that way she had, like she was waiting for the world to reveal a secret. Sir Darran brought up the rear, which meant he could hear everything and judge us silently for it.

The courtyard stones were still warm from the afternoon sun. Stable boys hurried past with brushes and feed buckets. A pair of laundry women crossed the yard with baskets balanced on their hips. A few servants looked up at us as we passed, not surprised, just attentive, the way people get when a Duke is home and moving with purpose.

I tried to look important, which did not help.

Lira finally spoke. “Your friend seems nice.”

Caelan brightened. “Mirabel? She is. Eldrid forgets how to speak around her, though.”

I elbowed him. “I do not forget how to speak.”

“You forgot how to pronounce the word probably.”

“That was a choice.”

Lira gave a soft laugh. Her laugh sounded like it belonged in a cathedral, even when she was laughing at me.

Sir Darran did not laugh. He somehow walked even more stiffly.

We crossed the courtyard toward the main keep. Servants

stepped aside, bowing or offering respectful nods. The cool air inside the keep smelled faintly of parchment and old stone, the sort of silence that always made me nervous, like the walls remembered more than the people living in them.

“What do you think the Duke needs to retrieve?” Lira asked.

Caelan shook his head. “He did not say. But it must be important if the King commanded it.”

I lowered my voice. “Maybe it is some kind of royal trinket. Or a secret weapon. Or a book. Nobles love important books.”

Caelan frowned. “Why would the King need a book now?”

“Kings always need books. They like holding them. It makes them look thoughtful.”

Lira hid a smile behind her sleeve. “You two sound very certain about things you do not actually know.”

“We prefer to call it educated guessing,” Caelan said.

“I prefer to call it guessing,” I added.

“So why is it educated?” she asked.

Caelan opened his mouth, realized he had no answer, and closed it again. I savored that.

The corridor narrowed as we approached the inner hall. Sunlight from high windows painted gold stripes across the floor. Footsteps echoed somewhere distant. A door closed far down the passage, heavy and final.

“What if it is something dangerous?” Lira asked softly.

Caelan straightened. “Then we will help however we can.”

I nodded. “Right after someone explains what it is we are helping with.”

She looked between us. “You two are strange.”

Caelan grinned. “You have no idea.”

We reached the landing outside the Duke’s study. Two guards stood at attention by the door, armor polished so well it almost

hurt to look at. Sir Darran stepped ahead of us and rapped once with his knuckles. The knock echoed sharply through the hall.

No one spoke while we waited.

Footsteps approached inside. A bolt shifted. The door opened inward and one of the Duke's guards stepped aside.

“His Grace will see you now.”

Sir Darran gestured for us to enter.

We stepped into the study.

The Duke's study held the kind of quiet that made sound feel like a guest. Tall shelves crowded the walls with rolled parchment and weighted tomes. The fading afternoon light caught the dust in the air, turning it into slow moving sparks. Selene sat by the hearth, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Her color had improved, but a fragile stillness lingered around her.

Therias stood near a tall cabinet, his attention already fixed on the Duke. It was as if he knew exactly what was coming.

The Duke closed the door behind us. The click sealed the room, and suddenly the study felt smaller.

He faced us. “You know why we returned here. The summons brought us home, but the written order revealed what the King truly intends. He would not speak it aloud, even at court.”

His voice carried a weight that settled over the room.

Caelan stepped forward. “What does he ask of us?”

The Duke held Caelan's gaze for a long moment, then walked past him toward the far wall. I expected him to stop at the shelves or the cabinet, but instead he moved to a section of blank paneling that looked no different from the rest.

He pressed his palm against the wood.

At first nothing happened. Then a faint click sounded within the wall.

A narrow seam appeared that I had never noticed before. The

panel swung inward, revealing a small alcove carved into the stone. Inside lay a heavy iron coffer, its surface dull and dark except for the faint glimmer of old markings etched into the metal. They were not decorative. Not accidental. They looked like something older than the castle, older than the duchy, perhaps older than the kingdom.

The Duke reached into the alcove and lifted the coffer with both hands. Even he handled it carefully, which told me more than words ever could.

He carried it to the central table and set it down with a muted thud.

Selene watched with quiet worry. Lira drew closer without realizing it. Caelan stood as if something had struck him square in the chest. Therias bowed his head slightly, not in reverence, but in recognition.

The Duke placed his hand on the lid. “This has been in our family since the founding of Valemark. Passed from Duke to Duke, and guarded with silence. Even most of our own household does not know it exists.”

He opened the coffer.

Inside lay a single scroll.

Its parchment was yellowed and cracked at the edges, but the ribbon that bound it looked impossibly dark, as if it refused to age. Faint lettering ran along the ribbon in a script I did not recognize.

No one breathed for a moment.

Therias finally spoke. “So it is true. Each house carries a verse.”

Selene looked sharply at him. “Verse?”

“Fragment,” Therias corrected. “A piece of something whole.”

Lira's voice was quiet. "A piece of the prophecy."

The Duke nodded. "Our house was entrusted with this fragment at the birth of the kingdom. My father gave it to me the day I inherited the title. He told me to guard it, and never to unseal it unless commanded by the King or by necessity."

He lifted the scroll with a reverence that felt almost sacred.

"It has remained untouched for generations. Until now."

Caelan swallowed. "What happens when all the fragments are brought together?"

The Duke met his eyes. "I do not know. And that is what frightens me."

He placed the scroll back into the coffer, closed the lid, and locked it.

"We leave at first light. Whatever has begun in the kingdom, the King means for all twelve fragments to answer it."

I looked at the coffer. I could not feel anything from it. No magic. No pulse. No whisper. But the room itself felt changed by its presence, like the study was remembering something it had tried to forget.

The Duke rested his hand on the coffer one last time.

"This is what the King requires."

That was the moment I realized the world was larger than I had ever imagined.

And whatever waited in Aurelios was not waiting patiently.

We left the study in a quiet line, as though noise might crack something fragile behind us. Sir Darran closed the door once we were clear, then took his post beside it like a carved warning against misbehavior.

The corridor outside was dimmer than earlier, the lamps casting long shadows across the stone floor. The air felt heavier too. It was as if pulling that ancient coffer out of the wall had

stirred something awake in the castle.

Caelan walked beside me with his brows drawn tight. Lira moved a few steps behind us, her expression unreadable, her thoughts clearly not calm. Therias lingered near the rear, his hands clasped behind him as though measuring possibilities with each step.

We headed toward the family corridor where our rooms were located.

Caelan exhaled. “I thought he meant a relic. Or a weapon. Something tangible.”

“It looked tangible to me,” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

I did. The scroll in the coffer looked like something forgotten in an attic, not something that could change the kingdom.

“Maybe it is a very dramatic shopping list,” I offered.

Caelan gave a short, frustrated laugh. “You cope with everything by pretending it is smaller than it is. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I will continue to do so. You should try it.”

He shook his head, though a faint smile softened his worry.

Lira stepped up beside us. She did not speak at first. She walked with her eyes lowered, listening to something inward. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet.

“It felt wrong to look at it.”

I frowned. “Wrong how?”

“I am not sure,” Lira said. “Cold, maybe. Or old in a way that feels unkind.”

Caelan slowed. “Do you think it is dangerous?”

“I think it remembers something we do not,” she said.

Therias finally spoke. “It is wise to treat anything that remembers more than you with caution.”

I glanced at him. “Is that a general warning or a personal one?”

“A bit of both,” he said.

We reached the point where the hall branched toward our separate rooms. The castle felt too quiet, as if everyone inside it had stopped to listen.

Therias paused. “Rest while you can. Tomorrow begins a different road than the one we expected.”

He nodded once and continued toward his chamber.

Lira hesitated. “Goodnight,” she said softly.

Caelan nodded. “Goodnight.”

She gave a brief, uncertain smile and walked down the west hall.

Caelan watched her go a moment too long.

I elbowed him. “Careful. People will think you like her.”

He rolled his eyes. “It is not like that.”

“It is exactly like that.”

“You do not know what you are talking about.”

“I know everything,” I said. “And what I do not know, I make up with confidence.”

Caelan shook his head and stepped into his room. “Goodnight, Eldrid.”

“You too.”

I stood alone for a moment while the lamplight flickered along the walls. The shadows shifted like thoughts I did not want to think.

Somewhere below, the Duke was locking the coffer away. A fragment of something ancient and forgotten, waiting to be carried into the capital by morning.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Great. Tomorrow we bring an ancient secret to the most political city in the realm. Perfect.”

The corridor did not answer.

Which was probably for the best.

Sunlight pushed through the curtains before I was ready for it. I dressed quickly and made sure Caelan's things were arranged properly: his satchel packed, boots cleaned, cloak brushed, and sword belt checked twice. He never noticed the work, which was exactly how it should be.

When everything was in place, I left my room and walked down the corridor to his. I leaned against the wall, arms folded, trying not to look impatient. I lasted twelve seconds before I gave up and knocked.

A muffled groan answered from the other side. Something scraped, then a thump, then another groan that sounded like a larger version of the first.

Finally, the door opened.

Caelan stood there with his hair sticking up in confused directions and his shirt halfway tucked in, as if he had attempted to dress while falling down a flight of stairs.

"You are awake," he said.

"I am always awake before you," I said. "If you ever rose before first light, the bards would write songs about it."

He muttered something that might have been an insult and stepped aside so I could enter. His room looked exactly like it always did in the morning: blankets on the floor, boots under the wrong chair, and a single abandoned sock that had somehow reached the windowsill.

He began adjusting the tunic I had set out. "Is everything ready?"

"Of course it is," I said. "That is why I wake at a reasonable hour. Someone has to."

Caelan grabbed his cloak. "You are insufferable."

“I know,” I said. “It is part of my charm.”

He strapped on his sword belt, then paused just long enough for me to fix the buckle he had twisted the wrong way. He pretended not to notice that I fixed it.

Outside the door, Lira was already waiting. She wore a plain traveling cloak and had braided her hair back neatly. She offered a quiet good morning to both of us.

“You wake early,” Caelan said.

Lira tilted her head. “Someone should.”

Caelan looked at me as if she had just stolen his line. I looked at him as if she had done it better.

Sir Darran appeared at the far end of the corridor, already armored and prepared, which made both of us look inadequate by comparison.

“The Duke is not yet in the hall,” Darran reported. Even he sounded faintly surprised.

Caelan frowned. “He is never late.”

I nodded. “Something must have happened.”

“Or someone,” Lira said.

We walked together toward the entrance hall. Servants moved quietly, carrying bundles for the journey. The castle felt alert, but there was a wrinkle in the rhythm that even I could sense. A missing beat.

We reached the foot of the stairs that led to the private chambers. Voices murmured above us. A moment later, the Duke appeared at the landing.

Lady Selene walked beside him.

Her hand rested lightly on his arm. Her chin was high, her posture steady, and her expression left no room for debate.

The Duke looked like a man who had argued for hours and lost every round.

He addressed us as he descended the final steps.

“We ride within the hour. There is one addition to our company.”

Selene stepped forward.

“I am coming to Aurelios,” she said.

The hall went silent.

Caelan stared. Lira drew in a breath. Sir Darran blinked once, the closest he ever came to shock.

And I thought, as I usually did in moments like this:

Yes. Breakfast is absolutely ruined.