



Chapter Ten



“Slaves that are too old to work may be disposed of by the owner. The owner must report the death of the Slave to the Association of Slave Owners within forty-eight hours of the death.”

The world around Mauro blurred into smoke and flame. He focused only on the weight in his arms and the next desperate step. His legs burned. His injured shoulder screamed. But he kept moving, carrying Garnet through the choking heat, away from the monsters which reaped fiery chaos upon Aimonbay Estate. Ahead, a figure appeared in the haze. One of the servants waved wildly from the open dungeon door, his darkened form lit by blazing firelight, the only clear shape in a world which quickly fell apart. Mauro tightened his grip. He was almost there.

“Come on, you two!” the servant called. “Get to the dungeon! Quickly now!”

Mauro pressed forward, pushing through the dark clouds just as the grand hall behind them erupted in a violent burst of flame. The blast hit them like a wall. Searing heat licked across their skin. All three cried out, but Garnet’s scream rose above the rest as fire caught her ankles, flames clinging like tiny hungry creatures. The servant

bolted forward and smothered the flames with a scarf. Then he shoved Mauro forward, away from the inferno and toward the dungeon door.

The ceiling above them groaned, then caved. Four scaled legs as thick as tree trunks crashed through in a thunderous descent. Talons like sharpened mercury breached the leathery limbs and clawed the gravel of the once-marble floor. A massive head dipped into the opening, deep violet and crowned with black ridges. Its eyes, glowing like molten amethyst, locked on the three below. Then its jowls parted to reveal fangs like scimitars and an arching, serpentine tongue. Garnet's eyes grew wide as she dared to peer down the creature's throat where she watched the flames churn like a living thing, just waiting to soar out of its mouth and wrap her in smoldering chains of death. Unable to bear the sight any more, she shut her eyes tight and turned her head away.

Then it came, the inevitable roar of fire surging behind them. Garnet and Mauro were only feet from safety when the heat exploded across the hall, and a piercing scream tore through the air. The servant. They didn't dare look back. The blaze bore down on them, its heat swelling with a vengeful force. Sparks lashed their backs, stinging skin and scorching cloth. Mauro's cry broke from his throat in a mix of pain and sheer desperation as he pushed his failing body to carry them just a few steps more. The servants already inside the sanctuary gawked at the wall of fire which rapidly expanded toward them.

"Close it!" someone screamed.

Hands reached for the door, and the gap begin to shrink...



Inside Count Rallian's escape coach, the air was thick with fear. The raw war cries of the enemy pierced the night, growing louder with every passing second. The sound vibrated through the wooden frame of the carriage like a steady heartbeat. Nadia and Skye leaned toward the windows, hands trembling as they parted the curtains just

enough to glimpse outside. What they saw turned their blood cold. Dark figures tore through the trees at an unnatural pace: enemy soldiers, their weapons flashing through the leaves like a warning, their forms skewed by the darkness. With each breath, they grew closer.

“Go faster, you fool!” Skye shouted at the driver.

“We can’t go any faster in a coach, my Lady,” Nadia explained to her.

“Oh, shut up, *Slave!*” Skye snapped. “What do you know?”

Nadia missed the deference, the quiet reverence she’d known in the Obsidian Palace. Here, she was disposable. And the girl across from her? Whimpering, naïve, and loud. She decided that talking to her was pointless. Nadia turned her head, and made a quiet decision: when the attack came, she wouldn’t lift a finger to save her.

It didn’t take long. The Saïdan cavalry closed in, fast and brutal. A soldier leapt onto the roof of the coach, grappling for the driver. The carriage rocked violently, and panic surged through its occupants. Skye let out a shrill, piercing scream, the kind that shattered composure.

Nadia’s hand twitched. She nearly struck her then and there, but chose something else. She acted. With no warning, Nadia flung the door open and hurled herself from the moving coach, hitting the ground hard and rolling through the mud just beneath a stampede of pounding hooves. Horses thundered past, the ground shaking beneath their fury.

Two soldiers spotted her. They veered from the group, blades drawn, spurring their mounts toward her in pursuit. Nadia didn’t hesitate. She snatched up a rock from the forest floor, and flung it with all her strength. It struck one soldier clean across the helmet, knocking it loose and sending him tumbling from his horse with a stunned grunt. The other roared, sword outstretched, eyes locked on her. She ducked. The blade sliced the air above her as she dove sideways into the underbrush, wet leaves slapping against her skin as she vanished within the shadows.

Nadia rose from the sticky foliage, twigs clinging to her skin, breath ragged in her throat. Her muscles ached, but she forced herself forward, emerging into a patch of

moonlight. She froze. The soldier she had dodged was no longer mounted. He advanced on her now, step by step, his sword gleaming in one hand, and a long dagger clutched in the other. His eyes locked on her like a predator closing in.

A *crunch* came from behind. A footfall. Nadia spun on her heels. A second Saïdan, the one she'd struck with a rock, was already on her, towering, blood streaking his face. His sword rose high above his head, its edge catching the firelight. Nadia whipped her satchel around with everything she had. The golden orb inside struck the soldier's temple with a sickening *crack*. He dropped like a stone, motionless.

Running on pure instinct, Nadia swung the satchel again, aiming for the first soldier's head, but this one was ready. His blade flashed, slicing clean through the strap. The satchel snapped from her grasp, and the orb tumbled into the underbrush, lost in the dark. Before she could react, his sword came down. She ducked low, the blade missing her by inches, singing through the air above her head.

With no time to retreat, Nadia lunged forward, ramming her shoulder into his legs with everything she had. His knees buckled with a stomach-churning *snap*, and he collapsed in screams of agony. Nadia's heart pounded, her vision blurred with sweat and smoke, but she didn't hesitate. She tore the necklace from her throat, its pointed charm glinting in her shaking hand. She drove it into his neck. His screams died with a wet gurgle, silenced forever, blood bubbling from his lips.



Polaris and Drake stepped out from the shadows of the blackwood trees, their boots crunching on the forest floor as they halted directly in the path of the fleeing coach. Just as they arrived, a Saïdan soldier sliced the driver's throat and hurled him from the box seat. The man hit the ground with a lifeless thud, limbs splayed. Polaris flinched, a flicker of regret tightening his jaw. Too late to save him.

The coach lurched to a stop, the soldier gripping the reins at the sight of two figures standing in his path. Then came the sound that changed everything. Laertes

stepped forward from the treeline, bones glinting beneath the torches and specks of moonlight. The letmonian tiger reared his head and unleashed a feral roar that shook the forest, raising hairs and silencing breath. Every soldier turned. Every heartbeat paused.

“What in Barhollow...?” spoke one soldier.

“What sorcery is this?” asked another.

“The kind I suggest you don’t meddle with,” Polaris replied. “I think it’s about time you take your business back to the estate, and leave this coach alone.”

“You dare speculate that a man and two ... *skeletons* can take down a dozen Saïdan soldiers?” one laughed.

“We’re willing to prove it if you’re foolish enough to risk it,” Drake said.

“It talks!” exclaimed another soldier.

“What interest is this coach to you?” asked the soldier who appeared to be the commander of this smaller unit.

“My interests are no business of yours,” Polaris replied. “Simply disregard the coach and return to Aimonbay.”

“You forget that we are Saïdans,” said the commander. “We don’t take orders from the nobility of Noelle.”

“Very well.” Polaris twirled his sword as if to simply loosen his wrist. “You’ve been offered a fair warning.”

“Laertes,” said Drake calmly. “Attack.”

With a snarl that split the air, Laertes lunged at the nearest Saïdan soldier, his roar echoing through the clearing like a battle cry from another world. The man barely had time to scream before the tiger was on him, fangs flashing, claws raking through flesh. The remaining soldiers rushed to retaliate. Polaris and Drake met them head-on, blades drawn, their movements swift and merciless. The clash of steel and roars of fury filled the space around the coach as chaos erupted.

Inside, Skye refused to move. With sobs collecting in her throat, Miss Lynn clutched the doorframe and pleaded with her Lady to leave with her. But Skye only

curled tighter, eyes squeezed shut, arms locked around her knees as if the world might vanish if she simply refused to look.

Behind Miss Lynn, Laertes tore through soldier after soldier, blood painting the soil in wide, red arcs. Bones cracked. Flesh gave way. The monstrous sound of it all pressed in against the thin walls of the coach. Miss Lynn's breath hitched as she watched a soldier's lifeless body crumple right beside her. The sight alone nearly drove the maid to flee, every instinct screamed at her to run, to save herself. But if the count learned she'd abandoned his daughter, she'd envy the soldier beside her.

Polaris and Drake sliced through the Saïdan soldiers with ruthless precision, each movement honed by years of blood-soaked experience. The enemy didn't stand a chance. Polaris moved fluidly, lethal and unrelenting, like an assassin bound to purpose. The ancient art of Iah-Ra was etched into his bones, and the Saïdans fell before him one after another, unable to counter the speed or brutality of his technique.

Drake fought just behind him, wielding chaos with a jagged grin. He had learned from Polaris, and it showed, if not in elegance, then in effectiveness. He snatched a fallen Saïdan's helmet and used it as both shield and bludgeon, slamming its pointed crown into armored chests and unguarded jaws alike. He lacked Polaris's finesse, but he didn't need it. His otherworldly appearance did half the work for him. Wherever he turned, terror followed. Faces twisted in dread, and blades hesitated. A part of him felt something close to pity. They were dying not as warriors, but as frightened animals. There was no glory in that. Still, this wasn't the time for a conscience. If he made it through the night, he could pray for forgiveness later. For now, he fought—bashing, slicing, ducking, dodging—while beside him, Polaris carved a ruthless path through the fray. Together, they were death in motion.

Polaris seized a fallen sword without breaking stride, now armed in both hands as Saïdan soldiers closed in from all sides. Steel clashed against steel, sparks flying with every parried blow. It had been too long since he'd seen real combat, too long since muscle memory had been tested in the heat of bloodshed. But it was all coming back. He forced himself to remain smooth, detached, refusing to focus on any one detail

such as the panicked grimaces twisted across enemy faces, or the white-knuckled grips on their hilts. The chaos became a blur, and for a fleeting moment, the danger of it all receded. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't thinking. He was simply *moving*.

Until the axe came. Polaris's focus snapped back into razor clarity as the massive blade came swinging out of the dark. He twisted away in a heartbeat, and the axe slammed into the ground where he'd just stood, kicking up soil and splinters. He looked up at the axe-wielder, brow furrowed. His expression said it all: *Where were you hiding that?*

Polaris swallowed this new challenge and surged forward. While the axe-wielder wrestled his blade from the mud, Polaris struck quick and merciless. He rammed his sword into a soldier's chest, feeling the armor give beneath the pressure, then dragged the blade down through bone and sinew before yanking it free with a wet snap.

Polaris stepped back, eyes locked on the next soldier. He was a young man, barely older than a boy. His stance was uneven, shoulders too tight. Polaris stood, noting the tremor in the recruit's grip and the wide-eyed fear betraying his inexperience. Clearly, this was his first real battle.

"We can end it here," Polaris offered. "I feel no need to kill you."

Polaris's calm demeanor, meant as mercy, sparked fury in the boy's eyes, insulted. A Saïdan could match any high-born blade. With a fierce cry that belied his slight frame, the boy hoisted his sword skyward and swung it down with all his might. Polaris met the strike with both blades crossed, deflecting it with effortless precision, then drove his elbow into the boy's jaw, sending him staggering.

Polaris backed away just as a heavy whoosh cut the air. The other soldier's battle axe curved toward Polaris who sidestepped, the weapon's momentum dragging the man's arms low. Seizing the moment, Polaris slashed, severing the soldier's right forearm at the elbow. Blood sprayed, a crimson arc he narrowly dodged. The axe, too heavy for one hand, sagged uselessly in the soldier's grip.

Polaris's gaze flicked back to the boy, clad in enemy armor etched with sharp geometric patterns. With his jaw clenched, the young soldier steadied himself,

defiance burning through his naïveté, ready to clash again with the royal advisor. The poor amateur.

“If you’re capable of fighting with two weapons, I’d advise you do so.” Polaris gestured to a sword at the boy’s feet.

“I don’t take lessons from Noelle nobility,” the soldier replied.

Polaris couldn’t help but pity the boy’s ignorance. How could he get through to him? “If it’s any consolation, I wasn’t born here.”

“But your alliance is here,” argued the young soldier.

Polaris risked a glance at the axeman, who was momentarily detained tying a tourniquet around his half-limb. Polaris sighed heavily in response to the boy’s comment. Perhaps he could merely disable the soldier.

“Very well,” said Polaris as he dropped his second sword. There was no sense in over-killing this juvenile if it came down to it.

Polaris and the young soldier circled each other. The Saïdan stared him down, hatred searing in his eyes.

“Won’t you attack?” the soldier snapped.

“I don’t attack,” Polaris answered calmly. “And if you don’t attack either, we don’t fight. Which means we could all go home, alive and well.”

Somehow, this only angered the soldier further, and he attacked Polaris with his same predictable move. At this point, Polaris had the child’s methods memorized enough to dance it blindfolded. The soldier was stuck in repetition, as if sheer will might make up for lack of skill. The only challenge offered was finding a way to subdue the soldier without killing him.

The moment Polaris found an opening, he took it. As the boy lifted his sword in another overhand strike, Polaris angled his blade low, loosened his grip, and let the weapon glide. Steel kissed flesh just beneath the armor’s edge. The boy gasped, stumbling back as blood spilled from the shallow gash along his side. He crumpled to his knees, clutching the wound, his blade forgotten.

“I implore you not to stand, Soldier,” Polaris said.

The royal advisor took a moment to gather his surroundings: blood fused with the churned soil, Laertes bathed in it, the bodies of Saïdan soldiers lay scattered across the forest floor, their armor glinting dully in the torchlight. Behind the coach, Drake drove his blade through his final opponent, the body crumpling with a final gasp.

Polaris had thought that was the last of the enemy, until he heard a faint scuff of boots on gravel behind him. He pivoted, sword flashing, and thrust the blade through the narrow gap in the Saïdan's armor, the steel sinking to the cross-guard. With a flick, he freed the weapon and took a step back. The warrior staggered, gripping the massive axe high above his head with his one remaining hand. Polaris's lips twitched, a fleeting spark of respect for the man's grit. He would've been honored to befriend this man, but alas, fate had other plans.

Upon verifying they had successfully eliminated all threats, Polaris wasted no time. He strode to the coach and tore open the door, startling the lady's maid who had retreated inside after failing to get her Lady to leave. Polaris didn't spare her a glance, which was all he gave Skye. The two girls held each other tightly, trembling. But Nadia was gone.

Polaris's stomach dropped. He turned and raked his gaze across the tree line, straining to pierce the dark. Nothing. The forest swallowed everything beyond a few feet with shadows and silence. There was no sign of Nadia, and it set his blood on fire. He faced the girls again.

"There were three of you; where's the other?"

"The third was a slave; don't worry about her," Skye answered, hiccupping through her tears. "Take us from here, quickly!"

"Not without the slave," Polaris insisted. "Where did she go?"

"I'm the count's only daughter!" Skye cried. "The slave is unimportant!"

"The slave wouldn't have been in this coach if she was unimportant." A growl accumulated in Polaris's voice. "I see that you and your lady's maid are safe and unhurt, so where is the slave?"

"Shouldn't you want to save me instead?" Skye argued.

“It appears she is unable to deduce that she has already been saved,” Drake proposed to Polaris.

“I’m going to ask both of you one last time,” Polaris said. He was exhausted, and controlling his temper grew more difficult as the minutes rolled by. “Where. Is. The slave girl?”

Skye shut her mouth and crossed her arms in defiance. Miss Lynn also remained silent to maintain her Lady’s favor.

“Polaris,” said Drake. “Observe northwest.”

In the light of the distant fireflies, Polaris eyed a little girl who ran deeper into the trees.

“Stay here with Miss Useless and her crony,” Polaris said. “I’ll return momentarily.”

“Excuse me?” Skye snapped.

Polaris ran in the direction of Nadia, his strides cutting clean through the underbrush. He didn’t call out to her yet, as he didn’t want Skye and Lynn to know that he was aware of the slave girl’s real identity. He ran fast and focused, the pounding of his boots muffled beneath the weight of urgency. Branches clawed at his arms. Leaves whipped past his face. Only when the light of the torches had faded into a dim glow did he finally break his silence.

“Nadia! Nadia stop! *Nadia!*”

But Nadia didn’t stop. She weaved through the trees in sharp, unpredictable turns, leaping over fallen branches and ducking beneath low-hanging limbs, basic maneuvers Polaris recognized to throw off a pursuer, but it wasn’t enough. Polaris was gaining, outmaneuvering every twist and turn. He reached for her, and she screamed.

The next moment, he tackled her to the ground. The wind burst from their lungs as they tumbled into the damp grass, tangled in motion and panic. Nadia didn’t hesitate. With a wild cry, she brought up her blood-smeared necklace and swung it

toward his face. His hand shot up and caught her wrist mid-strike, inches from his skin.

“Nadia! Nadia, it’s Polaris!”

Nadia froze, her arm shaking in Polaris’s grip, her eyes wide with fury and fear. “Y-your Honor!”

“Who did you think I was?”

“I didn’t know, sir!” Nadia said. “They’re all looking for me!”

“Well perhaps you’re unaware, but you can’t run away like that! You’re a slave!”

“They were trying to kill me, sir!” Nadia sobbed.

Polaris’s shoulders eased. “Indeed. Well, rest assured that *I’m on your side*, and it’s in the best of both our interests that you remain safe. I know when you’re in danger, and I’ll be there to make sure no harm comes to you. Do you understand me?”

Nadia nodded her head.

Polaris pushed himself to his feet. “Very good. Now come, let’s get you somewhere safe until the end of this siege.” He helped Nadia back onto her feet.

“Where would that be, sir? I thought the whole kingdom was being attacked.”

“It is,” Polaris answered as he quickly led Nadia back to the road. “We’re going to Thorncove, my estate. Most royal advisors don’t have their own private estates, so Saíd won’t expect it from me. Of course, we’ll take cover below ground as a precaution in case they’ve done their research. We’ll stay there for the night, and I’ll take you back to Aimonbay tomorrow when all has passed.”

They returned to the coach, now surrounded by the bodies of fallen Saídan soldiers. Laertes lay in a puddle, his bloodstained bones gleaming and his tail swishing with satisfaction. It appeared he had finished his feast. Polaris climbed into the driver’s seat and took the reins. He didn’t speak—just clicked his tongue and guided the coach away from the carnage, opting for the longer, safer route to Thorncove. Avoiding open roads meant avoiding dragons, and tonight, stealth was survival. Drake followed behind on horseback with Laertes steadily trotting at his side.

Inside the coach, the silence was suffocating. Nadia sat still, alert to the tension in the cabin. Though it was too dark to see her, she could feel Skye's sharp gaze burning holes into the side of her face, accusatory and unrelenting. Lynn sat stiffly beside her Lady, equally quiet. No one spoke for the entire journey. To distract herself, Nadia turned her face toward the window and watched the kingdom burn below. Flames devoured rooftops. Smoke poured into the sky like ink. Dragons spiraled above the inferno, their dark forms circling, biding their time for the next command.

By the time they reached Thorncove Estate, Polaris led them to a hidden shelter beneath the manor, which was a compact but livable space tucked into stone. It was furnished simply: a handful of cots, a small hearth, a modest cupboard, and a wooden table surrounded by chairs. It was no palace, but it was safe. Polaris offered food and water with a gesture to the provisions. Skye and Lynn didn't bother to respond, noses tilted upward in habitual disdain. Nadia declined with a quiet, polite shake of her head.

The silence remained unbroken as they took turns washing away the blood and dirt which clung to their clothes and faces. Then they each found a cot, and settled in. Polaris, however, stayed awake. He took a chair by the empty fireplace with a book in hand, his posture relaxed but alert. The light of a single lantern cast soft shadows across his face, and though his eyes moved along the page, his thoughts were elsewhere. He tracked every creak in the floorboards above, every distant howl of wind. Hours passed before he finally allowed his body to rest. He leaned back, and let his eyes close—just for a moment.



The following day, the siege had ended, the battle won. Polaris returned the girls to what was left of Aimonbay Estate, which was little more than a smoldering ruin. Ash drifted through the air like snow as they rolled down the road, and a thick odor of rot and decay hit them before the castle even came into view.

Nadia leaned out the window, her breath catching as the estate crested into sight. What had once been a proud symbol of wealth and influence now resembled a battlefield grave. Wagons rolled slowly across the scorched soil, piled with the bodies of Noelle's dead, their faces stiff and still. In the rear courtyard, a bonfire roared, thick with flames and the unmistakable stench of burning flesh. The bodies of Saïdan soldiers were tossed into it without ceremony, fueling the inferno. Smoke curled into the sky, defiling the Northern sunrise. The pastures were barren. Every plant, every animal, had been slaughtered by fire or sword. The castle itself stood hunched in its own shadow, its walls cracked, windows shattered, and towers blackened at the edges. Barely more than the west wing survived. And yet—even now—Count Rallian refused to abandon it.

Skye didn't make it past the front step before the tears came. She clutched her father and wailed about Polaris's "cruelty" the night before, her voice rising over the commotion of restoration. Rallian barely acknowledged her as his attention turned to Polaris, the dull gaze in his stare betraying a night spent without rest. His tunic hung unevenly from one shoulder, torn and dirt-smeared, with blood caking the collar. Scratches crisscrossed his face, fresh and stinging, and the bandage wrapped tightly around his left forearm had already begun to seep through with dark red blooming against the linen.

Nadia, however, didn't stop to listen to whatever exchange took place between her master and the royal advisor. The moment the coach halted, she ran. Inside, the estate fared no better. The grand hall was littered with debris, splintered banisters, blackened tapestries, and floors smeared with soot and blood. Columns leaned slightly, groaning under their own weight. The scent of fire and charred flesh clung to every surface. And yet, there were signs of life.

Slaves and servants moved through the wreckage like ghosts, collecting shards, sweeping ash from the floor, heaving fallen stone in wheelbarrows. It would take months—perhaps years—to restore the estate, but still they worked, breathing life into the ruins with every scrape of a broom. Nadia stepped over a toppled statue, her heart

thudding wildly in her chest. Her mind screamed only two names: *Garnet. Mauro.* She didn't stop to marvel at the fact that some walls were still standing, or wondered how the mermaid trap had fared.

"Garnet!" she cried. "Mauro?"

"Lila!" came Mauro's voice. He bolted from around a corridor and gave Nadia a tight hug with one arm. "I'm so glad you're safe! We heard the coach was attacked in the forest!"

"I'm glad *you're* safe!" Nadia replied. She examined Mauro's arm which rested in a make-shift sling. "What happened to your arm?"

"I dislocated my shoulder last night," Mauro explained. "Parts of the ceiling fell on me."

"Oh no! Where's Garnet?"

"Recovering in your bedroom."

"*Recovering?*" Nadia asked.

"Yes, she broke her ankle trying to escape a dragon."

"But she's all right?"

"Yes, she'll be fine." Mauro swallowed hard before he continued. "But Miss Mirriot didn't make it."

"Oh no!" Nadia's eyes welled with tears, and Mauro held her as she sobbed into his bare chest.

"Lila!" Rallian boomed. "Pull yourself together and help everyone else clean up!"

Nadia and Mauro plodded away to do his bidding.



Then Rallian turned back to face Polaris, fatigue clinging mercilessly to his eyes.

"I received your message by some miracle," he said. "How did you know they would attack the coach?"

“To be honest, I’m surprised you didn’t,” Polaris said. “Resources are a vital piece of knowledge most leaders obtain of any country they attack. Of course, it has been a while for you.”

“I suppose, it has. I suspected my estate, but not my safehouse. Were Skye, Lynn, and Lila the only survivors of the coach?”

“I’m afraid so. All were very fortunate. More soldiers attacked than I thought was necessary.”

“He cared more about the slave than he about me, Father!” Skye cried. “He kept asking where she went!”

“I’m sure he was looking out for all of you, my dear. Now go clean yourself up. Lord Polaris will be joining us for luncheon.”

Skye stomped away to do as she was told.

“I really can’t stay,” said Polaris. “I’m sure Their Majesties need me back at the palace.”

“Oh, I’ll send word to Their Majesties,” Rallian insisted. “If they truly require your assistance, they will send for you. And if for any reason the king is cross, I will vouch for your detainment.”

Polaris weighed the moment like a poised predator, wondering if this was an opportunity of which he should take advantage. He was certain he could at least maneuver around whatever plot Rallian so clearly had in mind. “Well, if you insist.”

The private dining hall was hastily scrubbed until it stood as the cleanest space in the ruined castle, though by any true measure, it remained far from spotless. Wobbly chairs protested with every shift, the mahogany table propped up with stone groaned from carrying the weight of char and rubble, and several walls had crumbled away, leaving the room more an open shell than a proper chamber. Count Rallian settled at the head of the long table, his eyes flicking to Polaris with a sharp nod, beckoning him to take the seat to his left.

"I hate to say it," Polaris began as he glanced around, "but it doesn't appear that Her Majesty's White Knights were much help last night. As their master of arms, I can't help but take offense."

"There's no need for you to take offense, Polaris," said Rallian. "They don't see much action involving dragons. Few of us have. And still, we won."

"True I suppose." Polaris took the offered seat. "It seems I must add 'methods of slaying dragons' to my curriculum."

Rallian chuckled while his slaves served him and his guest some wine. "I have no doubt you'd teach it well, but I can't help being thankful that you haven't yet. I am the happiest man in the world right now. Due to our history, the queen has promised to insure my estate during times like these. After last night, she will have to completely repair Aimonbay to twice its original size, thus raising my title so that I shall be known as Sir Rallian, *Marquis* of Helvetica."

"Well, I will toast to that," Polaris said as he raised his cup.

Rallian raised his as well. "Hear, hear."

Both drank before Polaris asked, "So, how many did you lose last night?"

Rallian shrugged and set his drink down. "I can't say for certain at this time. It appears that dragonfire leaves little evidence behind. We've found few bodies. In order to tally the dead, we'll have to count the survivors."

"You don't say," said Polaris, intrigued.

"Fascinating, isn't it?"

Polaris felt a chill at Rallian's cold indifference; there was no hint of remorse for those who'd been lost defending him during the attack. "Indeed," was his reply, and he turned his attention to the slave who served them bowls of fresh fruit. "I see you've managed to salvage some things."

"Fortunately, I keep most of my supplies in the lower levels," Rallian explained. "And forgive me, normally I'd have my servants serve us in your presence as I recall your feelings about slavery, but many of my servants seem to be missing, and those

who are available are helping with the clean-up, so I can only have my slaves serve us.”

“I understand,” Polaris replied. “It’s no bother at all.” He considered suggesting he pull the servants from the clean-up, but opted against it.

“I’m relieved to hear it,” said Rallian. “So why don’t you tell me of your experience with yesterday’s attack? I can’t help my curiosity.”

“Well, truly it’s not so grand,” said Polaris. “I wouldn’t have succeeded without the help of Drake and Larry. You remember Laertes.”

Rallian beamed at the memory. “Of course! My, it’s been a while.”

“Yes it has. Anyway, I knew the Saïdans were going to attack Aimonbay Estate if they knew anything about our kingdom, and of course they would’ve learned of your safe house.”

“I didn’t realize they had so much time to conduct such extensive research.”

“I’m convinced they have numerous connections with the high-born of Noelle as we’ve had a peaceful alliance for some years. I’m sure it was common knowledge to them.”

“Indeed. Why didn’t you stay with the royal family?” Rallian asked.

A couple of slaves set plates of salad in front of them, and removed the empty fruit bowls.

“As it so happens, I had decided to spend the night at Thorncove. Not only did I feel as though I wouldn’t have made it to the palace in time, I knew they were well-protected with the king’s Black Knights at the very least. Generals Mika, Laufgar, and Testan were there as well, so portions of their units were able to see to it the royal family remained safe. In the meantime, I remembered you had lent the queen your mercenaries, which meant your estate was left unprotected. So, I followed the queen’s White Knights to be sure they covered everything they needed to, but I noticed none of them went to protect your coach. That’s how I decided my mission. We arrived the moment the Saïdans attacked, and your slave barely escaped the coach to hide in the brush. Once I fought the soldiers away, I made sure that your daughter was safe and

asked her and Miss Lynn if they saw where your slave girl hid. The Lady grew somewhat upset that I was asking about such a matter, but then Drake caught sight of her. All three girls were pretty shaken up about the whole experience, of course. They hardly spoke a word when I got them to Thorncove. Who could blame them?"

"The poor dears," said Rallian.

At that moment, Lady Skye made her entrance, radiant in a bright green sari gown adorned with silver accents. Her turquoise hair, freshly washed, was styled with a thick bun atop her head, while a couple dreads cascaded gracefully over her shoulders. A pale pink smile played on her lips as she carefully stepped over the gaping hole marred at the entryway to the dining hall.

"Oh, Skye," said her father. "My dear, you look lovely."

Skye twirled around to show off her dress. "It was one of the few gowns that survived last night's scourge." She took a seat at her father's right.

"Don't worry about it, Skye," said Rallian. "We'll replace your entire wardrobe within the week. In the meantime, we must relax and recover. Polaris just finished telling me about last night's events."

"Oh, it was horrible," said Skye.

A slave entered to serve her a goblet of wine and a plate of salad.

"I hope you found the chance to thank Polaris for saving your life," said Rallian.

"Oh, no I hadn't. Thank you, Your Honor. I very much appreciate it."

"Of course, my Lady," Polaris replied. "It was an honor to serve."

"Our slaves don't bother you, do they?" Skye asked.

"Oh. No, I'm certain I can handle it," Polaris replied. It then occurred to him this might be the opportune time to "lighten up" to slavery. "They're a lot like servants themselves, I suppose."

"Except there's no need to pay them," Skye added with a gleeful smirk.

"Yes. They do seem rather downcast, however. Perhaps that's because of last night's events."

“Perhaps,” said Skye. “In either case, you get used to it. After a while, you hardly notice them at all.”

“Honestly, I don’t believe either appears more sad or happy than the other on a routine day,” Rallian acknowledged. “After some time in service, they eventually realize that I provide them a reason to live. I’ve saved them from the streets, and gifted them with a beautiful place where they may thrive with nice clothes and good food. All they must do in return is serve me some of that good food and clean the glorious place in which they live. They are more fortunate than many other slaves in the country, and they realize this.”

Polaris fought every urge to storm out of the castle in sheer disgust. Instead, he swallowed the bitter sting of the insults that nearly escaped him, and forced a simple shrug. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“Of course it does,” said Skye. “If you see the condition of the slaves in other people’s homes, you’d see what we mean. They’re so poorly kept, it’s deplorable. It makes me understand why Her Majesty can’t bear to have them in her palace. I couldn’t stand to have one of them walk in here looking the way they do.”

“I’ve seen them myself as well,” Polaris replied solemnly. He played with the leaves in his salad. “It breaks my heart.”

Rallian and Skye silently acknowledged his words while they worked on their salads. In an effort to switch from this uncomfortable subject, Polaris scanned the dining hall, searching for a safer topic, just as the main course of meat and vegetables was brought before them.

“So, I’ve been meaning to ask, Sir Rallian,” said Polaris when the slaves left. “What’s this construction that you ... *had* going on around here?”

Rallian perked up, delighted in this change in conversation. “Oh, yes! You remember how much I like to study the ocean?”

“I do...”

“Well believe it or not, I have reason to believe I own a few *mermaids*.”

Polaris made sure to appear skeptical about the topic. “Mermaids. Really. How’s that?”

“Well, first of all, mermaids have distinct patterns—birthmarks, if you will. And I have found such markings on some of my slaves.”

“I see. How are these markings different than those on other ethnicities?”

“Allow me to show you. Alik!” The footman approached. “Fetch me Tate, Paola, Lila, and Kellen.”

“Unusual names,” Polaris commented as Alik left to summon the mentioned.

“I suspect they’re names of the sea. Another sign they are merpeople. I’ve mentioned my suspicions to each of them, and only one of them has confessed.”