

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.”

One of the servants waved wildly at Mauro and Garnet from the safe-haven. “Come on, you two!” he called. “Get to the dungeon! Quickly now!”

Mauro made haste towards the servant and passed the grand hall just as it erupted into balls of flame. The heat from the burst singed all three of the desperate victims. Garnet screamed as both of her ankles caught fire, then screamed again as the servant vehemently put them out. Then the servant pushed Mauro forward, away from the massive inferno and towards the door to the dungeon.

That was the moment when four scaled legs as thick as tree trunks plunged through the ceiling of the grand hall. Talons of mercury breached the leathery limbs and clawed the gravel of the once marble floor. When the deep purple head drooped down to eye its prey, the beast ceased to hesitate in extending its long jowl to expose its slithering tongue and fangs like scimitars. Garnet’s eyes grew wide as she dared to peer down the creature’s throat where she watched the flames dance, just waiting to soar out of its mouth and wrap her in a blanket of death. Unable to bear it anymore, she shut her eyes tight and turned her head away.

Then, with Garnet and Mauro only feet away, the inevitable surge of fire ignited behind them and they heard the servant shriek in anguish. They dared not look back as they could feel the heat swiftly growing closer, larger, until the sparks licked their backs. Mauro shouted in both ache and desperation to make it to the dungeon before he was engulfed and consumed as the servant had been. The servants already inside the sanctuary saw the wall of fire expanding and started to pull the door closed on the two desperate slaves...

•

Polaris and Drake took a separate road from the one Nadia was on. In the day, they would probably be able to see each other if they were looking, but as it was night, Polaris couldn’t see the coach and Nadia wouldn’t have been able to see Polaris even if she knew his exact location. Fortunately, fireflies inhabited this forest and they swarmed it tonight, which aided

to light the way for Polaris and Drake, and the driver of Count Rallian's coach.

Soon, Polaris heard the sound of a vast number of hooves thrashed the dirt road behind him. Saíd had attacked Aimonbay and now a dozen of them were after the rest of the family. He looked over his shoulder and managed to spot the dim lights of many torches as they protruded through the dark trees. They moved fast and Polaris quickly deduced the approximate point where they were to catch up to the coach.

"Do you suppose they have a dragon with them?" Drake asked.

"Doubtful considering the denseness of this forest," Polaris replied. He peered over his shoulder again. "Ready your sword, Drake."

In the coach, the passengers could hear the war cries of the enemy soldiers and terror showed on all their faces. Nadia and Skye peeked out of their windows to see the soldiers draw nearer and nearer.

"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 respect she had received in the Obsidian Palace. She decided that talking to this girl was a waste of breath and secretly concluded that when they got attacked, she'd make no attempt to save her.

In no time at all, the Saídans caught up to the coach and one of the soldiers lunged on top to get to the driver. Skye released a shriek more torturous than the fear of death, and Nadia almost slapped her lady for it. Instead, however, Nadia jumped out of the coach and rolled away, barely missing the hooves of the many Saídan horses which surrounded the coach. Two of the soldiers noticed this escape attempt and veered away to charge after her. Without a thought, Nadia snatched a nearby rock and chucked it at one of their heads, which successfully knocked the helmet off one of the soldiers and caused him to fall from his horse. His comrade extended his sword towards her with a thirst for revenge, but Nadia leapt out of his way and rolled into the damp foliage, where she disappeared into the darkness.

Polaris and Drake emerged on foot from the blackwood trees and stopped in front of the coach right as one soldier slit the driver's throat. He brought the coach to a sudden halt at the sight of the figures in the path ahead of him. Polaris had to push through the regret of being too late to save the driver, but fortunately his assistant's letmonian tiger helped to distract. Laertes released a guttural roar which reverberated in the chests of all present and successfully snatched everyone's attention.

"What in hellfire?" one soldier said after laying eyes on the living skeletons before him.

"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 Saídan 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 Saídans,” 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.”

Without hesitation, Laertes followed his master’s orders and charged at the closest Saídan soldier with an ear-piercing howl. The rest of the soldiers reciprocated the attack and Polaris and Drake had little trouble matching them.

Nadia got back to her feet and emerged from the wet foliage into which she had rolled. That was when she learned that the soldier who had charged at her moments ago had dismounted his horse and strode towards her with his sword in one hand, and a scabbard in the other. Then Nadia heard the crunch of footsteps creep up from behind. She turned just in time to see the Saídan whom she took out with a rock raising his massive bade above her. With all the strength she could muster, Nadia swung her satchel around and the impact of her orb to the soldier’s cranium was a lethal one. Without much thought, she tried the same technique with the other soldier, but his sword sliced the strap of the satchel and the ball tumbled into the brush. He brought his sword down on her, but Nadia ducked it and in a split-second decision lurched herself at his legs. The force bent his knees backwards with a stomach-churning CRACK, and he collapsed in screams of agony. Finally, in this long, blurry episode of panicked adrenaline, Nadia ripped the pointed necklace from her neck and imbedded the sharp end into the soldier’s throat, forever silencing his screams.

Meanwhile, Skye downright refused to abandon the coach. With sobs collecting in her throat, Miss Lynn pleaded with her lady to leave, but Skye remained inside with her eyes shut tight and her arms tensely wrapped around her quivering knees. All the while, Laertes ripped soldiers apart and fed on their blood right outside her door. The sight was almost enough for the lady’s maid to desert her lady, but should she survive this night, she would most certainly not survive the count’s wrath.

Polaris and Drake fought viciously against multiple highly experienced Saídan soldiers at a time, but as Polaris was experienced in Iah-Ra, the Saídans hadn’t a chance; especially since he had taught Drake everything he knew. Moments into the battle, Drake made use of a pointed Saídan helmet as a shield, and sometimes as a secondary weapon. Though he paled in comparison to Polaris as a soldier, he was fortunate enough to where only minimal effort was necessary as his skeletal appearance was ammunition of its own. There was almost a sense of pity within Drake’s heart as he spotted expressions of sheer dread wherever his gaze landed. It almost didn’t seem right to run these soldiers through and end their lives in such a

degrading state of panic. Nevertheless, now was not the time to question one's morals: should he survive this battle, there would be plenty of time to examine his actions and reasoning later. Drake continued to bash and slice his opponents while Polaris chopped and stabbed his own, both of them dodging and ducking assaults from their enemies. Noelle blood mingled with Saïdan blood on their weapons, in the dirt, and even soiled their clothing.

Polaris took advantage of unclaimed swords to doubly arm himself while Saïdans came at him left and right. It had been some time since he'd seen any real combative action and it took him a fair amount of time to summon all his lessons back to the present. He welcomed each attack and forced himself not to focus on any one thing; such as the grimace on the soldiers' faces as they charged at him, or the death grip on their weapons as they wielded them. He made himself well aware of his surroundings so that he was ready to parry the moment a third soldier attacked him from behind. Blades sliced at him from every direction and as he solely focused on ceasing their efforts, he nearly forgot the threat to his life as it faded somewhere into the darkness of the forest around him.

The battle axe, Polaris had to admit, was unexpected and he watched in a momentary state of confusion as the massive blade plunged in his direction. At the last second, he dodged the weapon so that it buried itself into the mud where he had stood only a moment ago. Polaris gave the axe-wielder a look which begged the question, "Where were you carrying that?" Of course, the question which haunted Polaris the most was, "What dishonorable man would bring a battle axe to a sword-fight?"

Polaris swallowed this new challenge with much difficulty and fought on. While the soldier freed his axe from the ground, Polaris managed to cut his number of opponents down by one after he rammèd his sword into a soldier's chest and sliced downward before he took his weapon back. Then Polaris waited for his victim's comrade to attack. He was patient with this much younger soldier, who was probably fresh out of training. This was likely his first mission. Polaris recognized the hesitation and the look of naiveté in the boy's frightened eyes.

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

Though Polaris's intentions were honorable, the boy took offense to his seemingly arrogant assumption. So, the nobleman thought this kid had no chance against him? Well he would show this ignorant high-born that Saïdans could wield a blade too! The soldier lifted his sword in the air and with a mighty battle-cry for his size, brought it down on Polaris. Polaris raised his two swords against the boy's attack to block it, almost too easily, and elbowed him in the jaw.

Polaris moved away from the young soldier just in time to dodge another swing of the battle axe from his previous opponent. While the momentum from the heavy weapon held the man's arms down, Polaris managed to remove the soldier's right forearm from his elbow and barely escaped the fountain of blood which spewed from the wound. Polaris didn't have an angle of the left arm, but he doubted his opponent could lift the axe one-handed.

Polaris brought his attention back to the boy dressed in the enemy armor that was embellished in strange geometric designs. He stood ready for another bout with the royal advisor. The poor amateur.

“If you’re capable of fighting with two weapons, I advise you to do so,” Polaris suggested with a gesture 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,” the young soldier argued.

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 child if it came down to it.

Polaris and the young soldier circled each other for a moment, and the Saídan stared him down.

“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 that 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 kid’s methods memorized and concluded that the act of fighting him had some semblance of dancing a tango. The only challenge offered was finding a way to subdue the soldier without killing him.

The moment Polaris found an opening, he took it. While the soldier was in the midst of an up-stroke, Polaris angled his sword between them, loosened his grip on the hilt, and ran the blade across his opponent’s side where the armor failed to protect him. The soldier jolted away and fell to his knees, clutching the gash in his side with both hands.

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

The royal advisor took a moment to gather his surroundings: blood fused with the soil, Laertes bathed in it, the bodies of Saídan soldiers lay scattered about, and then there was Drake on the other side of the coach killing the last of the enemy. Well, Polaris had thought that was the last of the enemy until he heard a light footfall behind him. Polaris spun on the ball of his foot with his sword at the ready and drove the long blade up to the cross-guard through the small opening in the Saídan armor. He swiped his sword from the enemy’s abdomen and took a step back, eyeing the ax-wielder who held his sizeable weapon high above his head with his one remaining hand. Polaris was admittedly impressed. He would’ve been honored to befriend this man, but alas, fate had other plans.

After he verified that they had successfully eliminated all threats, Polaris wasted no time and yanked open the coach door opposite of the lady's maid. He nearly scared her to death, but he paid her little attention. He looked at Skye who hadn't moved an inch, and he immediately noticed that Nadia was missing.

Polaris frantically searched about the coach and peered deep into the forest around him as far as the darkness would let him see. There was no sign of Nadia anywhere.

"There were three of you, where's the other?" Polaris asked quickly as he tried desperately to subdue his panic.

"The third was a slave, don't worry about her," Skye answered as she recovered from 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." One could almost detect a growl accumulating 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 fought.

"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 over her chest. Miss Lynn also remained silent to keep her lady's approval.

"Polaris," said Drake. "Observe northwest."

He pointed behind the coach and in the light of the 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 same direction of Nadia, but he didn't call out to her as he didn't want Skye and Lynn to know that he was aware of the slave girl's identity. Once he believed that he had run a safe distance away from the coach, he finally shouted out to her.

"Nadia! Nadia stop! *Nadia!*"

But Nadia didn't stop. She heard her name, but somehow it scared her into running faster. This was her chance. There was hope in this flight and she had to take advantage. She zig-zagged through the trees and brush, hopping over fallen logs and other obstacles in the hopes of tricking her pursuer, but he seemed to only progress closer. When she could feel him near enough to reach for her, she screamed.

Polaris managed to tackle her into the grass. With a cry of panic, Nadia brought up her blood-stained necklace to

strike her captor, but Polaris caught her hand just in time.

“Nadia! Nadia, it’s Polaris!”

Nadia stopped, breathless. “Y-your Honor!”

“Who did you think I was?”

“I didn’t know, sir!” Nadia said. “Everyone’s 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.

Understanding the fear of death, Polaris calmed down. “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 that no harm comes to you. Do you understand me?”

Nadia nodded her head.

“Very good, then we’re on the same page. Now come, let’s get you somewhere safe until the end of this siege.”

Polaris 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 Saïd 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 arrived back to the coach which sat surrounded by deceased Saidan soldiers, and it appeared that Laertes had finished his feast. Polaris drove the coach to Thorncove, and he took the longer route so to avoid being spotted by any more enemy soldiers or dragons. Drake and Laertes followed behind while Nadia, Skye, and Lynn remained inside. Although it was a bit too dark to see, Nadia could feel Skye glaring at her. Nevertheless, no one spoke the entire ride to Thorncove. To remain distracted from her lady’s angry stare, Nadia peered out the window of the coach to look upon the burning kingdom beneath them, where dragons circled above and waited for their next command.

Everyone remained silent for the most part once they reached Thorncove Estate (including Skye, much to Nadia’s relief). As Polaris had explained, he led them to a shelter beneath the manor. It was furnished with fairly comfortable cots, a cozy little fireplace, a sizeable cupboard, and a small dining table complete with chairs. Polaris directed the girls to where they were to sleep and offered them some food and drink. Nadia was the only one to politely decline while Skye and Lynn turned up their noses at the offer. At this point, everyone silently agreed that it was time to head to bed. Polaris, however, remained awake reading as an entertaining way to stand guard against a possible attack, just as another precaution. After a

few hours or so, he felt comfortable enough to gather some shut eye himself.

•

The following day, Polaris returned the three girls to Aimonbay Estate, but they could hardly recognize the place. Bodies from Noelle were led away on carriages while those from Saïd were carried to the bonfire ablaze in the rear courtyard, which emitted the awful stench of rot and death into the air. The plant life and farm animals had been destroyed, and the castle itself appeared unlivable. However, it seemed as though Count Rallian refused to move elsewhere, even temporarily. Nadia couldn't wait to see how his construction of the mermaid trap held up, however the well-being of her friends was priority. While Skye cried to her father and immediately complained about the treatment she endured from Polaris the previous night, Nadia rushed inside to search for Garnet and Mauro. The interior of the castle looked almost as bad as the exterior, but as the count had his slaves and servants clean and repair what they could, the appearance improved quicker than imagined. Of course, there would be no repairing the estate completely overnight and the damage could not be masked by a simple scrubbing.

"Garnet!" Nadia cried. "Mauro?"

"Lila!" came Mauro's voice. Mauro bolted out of the sitting room and gave Nadia a tight hug with one arm. "I'm so glad you're safe! We heard that the coach was attacked in the forest and then you didn't come back last night!"

"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 up with tears and Mauro held her as she sobbed into his chest.

"Lila!" Rallian boomed. The bags under his eyes made it clear to all how little sleep he suffered the previous night.

His clothes were torn, his face scratched and cut, and there was a fresh bandage soaked with blood on his left forearm. "Pull yourself together and help everyone else clean up!"

Nadia and Mauro left to do his bidding. Then Rallian turned back to face Skye and Polaris.

"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 soldiers obtain of any country they attack. Of course, it has been a while for you."

"Indeed, it has. 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 cared 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." There was a look of mischief in Rallian's eyes as he glanced back at Polaris. "Polaris will be joining us for luncheon."

Skye stomped away to do as she was told.

"I really can't stay," Polaris said. "I'm sure Their Majesties need me back at the palace."

"Oh, I'll send word to Their Majesties and if they truly require your assistance, they will send for you," Rallian insisted as he led Polaris to what was left of his private dining hall, though it was in much better condition than his grand dining hall. "And if for any reason the king is cross with you, I will vouch for your detainment."

Polaris wondered if this was an opportunity of which he should take advantage. Perhaps he could maneuver around whatever plot Rallian so clearly had in mind. "Well, if you insist."

The private dining hall quickly became the cleanest room in the castle so to make Polaris more comfortable; not that he particularly cared any, and not that it appeared very clean in the end. By the time the slaves had finished straightening it up, the seats remained wobbly, the table remained charred and creaky, and the room lacked most of its walls, thereby ceasing to be a much of a "room," by definition. Count Rallian took a seat at the end of the long mahogany table and motioned for Polaris to sit 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. I actually take offense since I trained most of them."

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

"That's very true," Polaris replied. "I suppose now I must add 'methods of slaying dragons' to my training."

Rallian chuckled again while his slaves served him and his guest some wine. "I have no doubt you'd teach it well, but I can't help to be 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 dragon fire leaves no evidence behind. We’ve found no bodies. In order to tally the dead, we’ll have to count the survivors.”

“You don’t say,” said Polaris, intrigued.

“Fantastic, isn’t it?”

Polaris was a bit unsettled by Rallian’s lack of evident remorse at the thought of losing anyone who served him during the attack. “Indeed,” was his reply, and he turned his attention to the slave who served them bowls of fresh fruit.

“Normally, I’d have my servants serve us in your presence as I recall your feelings about slavery, but it appears that many of my servants are 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, hardly finding it logical reasoning. “It’s no bother.”

“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 Larry.”

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

“Yes it has. Anyway, I knew that 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 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 their units were able to see to it that the royal family remained safe. In the meantime,

I remembered that you had lent the queen your mercenaries which meant that your estate was left unprotected. Thorncove is closer to Aimonbay than it is to the palace. So, I followed the queen's White Knights to be sure that they covered everything they needed to, but I noticed that none of them went to protect your coach. That's how I decided my mission. We arrived the moment the Saídans 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.

That was the moment Lady Skye made her entrance all dressed up in a bright green dress with silver accents. She had washed her turquoise locks and raised a portion of them up into a thick bun while allowing some to drape over her shoulders. She kept a pale pink smile on her face as she stepped over a large hole that was left in front of the entryway into 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 said.

"Don't worry about it, Skye," said Rallian. Skye took a seat at her father's right. "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 Skye 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 that 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 have given them a reason to live. I've saved them from the streets and provided them with a wonderful place to 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, and they realize that."

It was everything Polaris could do to keep himself from storming out of the castle in disgust. Instead, after swallowing the insults he had almost vomited, he managed 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 took a look around the dining hall in search of a new topic while they were served a main course of meat and vegetables.

"So, I've been meaning to ask, 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 presume that I own a few *mermaids*."

"Mermaids. Really. How's that?" Polaris made sure to appear skeptical about the topic.

"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?"

"I shall show you. Alik!" Rallian called. Alik 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 that they are merpeople. I've mentioned my suspicions to each of them and only one of them has confessed."