



Gathering Darkness: A Falling Kingdoms Novel

By Morgan Rhodes

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Alliances form across Mytica and beyond as royals and rebels alike race to hunt down the Kindred—the four elemental crystals that give their owners god-like power. The stakes have never been higher for Magnus and Cleo, who are brought together by a life or death decision that will lock their fates and change the course of the kingdom forever.

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE for the *FALLING KINGDOMS* series:

"Morgan Rhodes has created a rich, living fantasy world and characters that immediately draw the reader in. This is one of those series you can't help but be obsessed with. I can't wait to see what happens next!"

—**Richelle Mead**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Vampire Academy* and *The Glittering Court*

"An otherworldly epic...evocative and intricate."—***Publishers Weekly***

"...You must have this book on your shelves." —**Bustle**

"*Falling Kingdoms* is a superbly written and character-driven narrative." —***Bookpage***

"[A] YA *Game of Thrones* full of intrigue, betrayal, lies and love." —***The Guardian***

"*Falling Kingdoms* will gut you emotionally. It will make you ache, cry, and beg for the sequel as you turn the last page. I absolutely loved it." —**Julie Kagawa**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Iron Queen*

"In this *Game of Thrones*-esque high fantasy, Rhodes has created a world that's raging with war, deceit, spoiled royals, and a populous needing little to spark a revolution." —**NPR/WAMC's The Roundtable**

"From an opening dripping with blood, magic, and betrayal through complex interweaving plots detailing treachery, deceit, and forbidden love, this novel is the first in a projected series that will immediately engage readers and keep them intrigued." —***Booklist***

About the Author

Morgan Rhodes is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Falling Kingdoms* series. Under another pen name, she's an award winning author of more than two dozen novels. Morgan lives in Southern Ontario, where she's currently hard at work on the next *Falling Kingdoms* book.

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PROLOGUE

The young man woke up surrounded by fire and chaos.

Swords clashed nearby in a violent battle in the shadow of the mountains. The sharp cries of the dying sliced through the cool early morning breeze. He could smell the acrid scents of both fear and hate from those who fought for their lives. He tasted the copper tang of the blood that had sunk into the ground.

It was the taste of blood that had awoken him.

He pressed his hands against the dry earth, flames licking at his bare skin, and tried forcing himself to his feet. He failed, his body screaming from the effort.

As his vision cleared he took a better look around. He was at the edge of a camp that was currently under siege. To his left, about fifty paces away, was a forest. It was dry and sparse and dying, but it offered more protection than his exposed position by the battleground.

Two men—one short, one tall, both wearing red guard uniforms—approached him, their swords drawn.

“What do we have here?” the short one said. “A slave thinking he can escape?”

“I’m no slave.” His voice cracked, and his throat felt as dry and brittle as the ground beneath him.

“Forget your clothes somewhere, boy?” the taller guard said.

He glanced down at his bare skin. “Something like that.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the tall guard snapped. “You won’t need clothes when you’re dead. We’ll make this quick.”

The tall guard brought his blade down hard, but the young man managed to roll out of its way just in time. He pushed himself up to his feet, his legs as weak as a newborn colt’s. Muscles screaming, he staggered toward the forest line.

“We don’t have time to chase after one runaway slave.” The tall guard spoke loud enough to be heard above the noise of battle.

“You’d rather have your throat cut by a rebel back there?” the short guard said.

“The king would prefer—”

“I don’t give a damn what the king would prefer. Let’s go.”

The forest was sparse, but the young man found a dry bush to hide behind. Its branches scratched his sensitive skin, but he stayed quiet and still. The guards ventured closer, whacking at the meager foliage with their swords.

He looked down at his hand and flexed. How long would it take before he got his strength back? He’d already waited an eternity to be free.

I’ve awakened before my time.

“Maybe we should let him go,” the shorter guard said, his previous bravado vanishing as fear entered his voice. “Maybe he’s the one who set the fire back there. He could be dangerous.”

“Don’t be a coward. Strays can lead to more trouble, and more strays. I want his blood on my blade before we do anything else.”

They drew closer, and he stumbled away from his hiding spot. As he fled, he tripped on the tangled roots of a large oak tree and fell, hard, to the ground. The guards swiftly found him, and he scrambled backward until he hit the tree’s thick trunk.

“You must feel so pathetic right now,” the tall guard sneered. “Hiding in a forest, naked, begging for your life.”

He did feel pathetic. It was not an emotion he savored. "I'm not begging."

"Oh, you'll be begging soon enough. I promise." The guard gave him a smile that revealed just how much he enjoyed inflicting pain and suffering on those who were smaller and weaker than him.

"What do you think?" the tall guard asked his companion. "Shall we take his hands before we kill him? Or his feet, so he can't try to run again?"

"Perhaps we should bring him back to the dungeon to rot with the other captured rebels."

"That's no fun." He touched the tip of his sword under the young man's chin, forcing him to meet the guard's cruel gaze. "Who are you, boy? A slave who would bow to my whip while working on the king's road? Or are you a rebel who mistakenly believes he can change the destiny of this kingdom?"

"Neither." His lips were parched and his breathing was shallow.

The sword wrenched his head up higher, biting into his flesh. "Then who are you?" the guard asked.

"I . . ." he began, very softly, ". . . am a god."

"A god, are you?" The guard snorted with amusement. "I'm curious . . . how much do gods bleed?"

"Wait." The shorter one's voice was trembling. "His eyes. Look at his eyes!"

The tall guard withdrew his sword and took a shaky step back. "What—?"

The young man unclenched his fist and looked down at his right hand. Etched into his palm was a triangle. Its edges glowed with the same blue light that now emanated from his eyes.

"You're a demon," the guard whispered. "That's what you are."

"I already told you what I am. But perhaps you weren't listening." He pushed himself back up to his feet. The symbol on his hand grew brighter as he held it out to the guard. "Shall I show you instead?"

Suddenly, a single flame appeared on the dry ground in front of them. It flickered, then shot up and licked the guard's boot. In a thin line, the fire snaked around his ankle and then began to wrap itself around his calf and thigh. He batted at it and touched it with his hand, which only made it grow even mightier. It clawed at his wrist and writhed around his arm like a bracelet.

"What's happening?" The guard reached out for assistance, but his short friend staggered away from him.

"Does it hurt yet?" the young man asked calmly. "If not, just give it a moment. It will."

The flames spread until the guard's legs, torso, arms, and, lastly, his confused, fearful face were all ablaze. The fire then turned from orange to blue.

That was when the guard began to scream.

The other guard stood frozen in place with horror, watching as his friend blazed like a torch in the early morning light. Suddenly, the flames grew wilder, leaping up thirty feet into the air and taking the guard with them. Finally, the guard stopped screaming.

Like a glass sculpture landing on a marble floor, his body shattered into a million pieces.

He turned to the guard he'd spared. "Run."

Eyes wide with terror, the guard turned and fled.

With what little energy he'd had now depleted, he collapsed to his knees. The symbol on his hand faded to only a trace, a mark resembling an old scar. The ground still smoldered where the tall guard once stood, although there was nothing left of him but an already fading memory.

Finally, his pain eased. His thoughts became clear, and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"Only the beginning," he whispered as darkness rose up to cover him like a thick cloak.

Soon he'd make them all burn for what they'd done to him.

CHAPTER 1

JONAS

PAELSIA

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

Rufus's voice was as distracting as a persistent horsefly. Jonas sent his fellow rebel an impatient look through the darkness.

"Really. Which part?"

"All of it. We need to get out of here while we still can." Rufus craned his thick, sweaty neck to scan the line of trees surrounding them, guided only by the light of a single torch they'd shoved into the loose soil. "He said his friends would be here any moment."

He was referring to the Limerian guard they'd captured after discovering him straying too close to the edge of the forest. He was currently tied to a tree, unconscious.

But an unconscious guard wasn't any use to Jonas. He needed answers. Though he had to agree with Rufus on one thing: They were swiftly running out of time, especially since they were so close to a village infested with the king's red-uniformed minions.

"Of course he said that," Jonas said. "It's called a bluff."

"Oh." Rufus raised his brows, as though this hadn't occurred to him. "You think?"

A week had passed since the rebel attack on the road camp in eastern Paelsia beneath the Forbidden Mountains. A week since Jonas's most recent plan to defeat King Gaius had gone horribly awry.

Forty-seven rebels had descended upon the sleepy campground at dawn in an attempt to seize the road engineer, Xanthus, and the Limerian heir, Prince Magnus, to hold as hostages against King Gaius.

They'd failed. A flash fire of strange blue flames had burned everything in its path, and Jonas had barely

escaped with his life.

Rufus had been the only other rebel waiting at the meeting spot later that morning. Jonas had found him standing there with tears streaming down his dirty face, trembling with fear and rambling about fire magic and witches and sorcery.

Only two of forty-seven had been accounted for. It was a crushing defeat in far too many ways, and if Jonas thought about it too much he could barely see straight, could barely function beyond his guilt and grief.

His plan. His orders.

His fault.

Again.

Desperately trying to push aside his own pain, Jonas had immediately begun to gather information about other potential survivors—anyone who'd been captured alive and carted away.

The guard they'd found wore red. He was the enemy.

He had to have answers that could help Jonas. He *had* to.

Finally, the guard opened his eyes. He was older than most other guards, with graying hair at his temples. He also walked with a limp, which had made him easier to catch.

"You . . . I know you," the guard muttered, his eyes glittering in the meager torchlight. "You're Jonas Agallon, the murderer of Queen Althea."

He threw these words like weapons. Jonas flinched inwardly, but showed no sign that the most heinous lie ever told about him caused him injury.

"I didn't kill the queen," he growled.

"Why would I believe you?"

Ignoring Rufus's squeamish expression, Jonas walked a slow circle around the restrained guard, trying to determine how difficult it would be to get him talking.

"You don't have to believe me." He leaned closer. "But you're going to answer some questions for me now."

The guard's upper lip drew back from his yellow teeth in a snarl. "I'll tell you nothing."

He'd expected that, of course. Nothing was ever easy.

Jonas pulled the jeweled dagger from the sheath on his belt. Its wavy silver blade caught the moonlight, immediately drawing the guard's attention.

It was the very same weapon that had taken his older brother from this world. That vain and pompous Auranian lord had left it behind, embedded in Tomas's throat. This dagger had become a symbol to Jonas, representing the line he'd drawn in the sand between his past as the son of a poor wine seller who toiled every day in his father's vineyard, and his future as a rebel, certain he would die fighting for what he believed in most: freedom from tyranny for those he loved. And freedom from tyranny for those he'd never

even met before.

A world without King Gaius's hands wringing the necks of the weak and powerless.

Jonas pressed the dagger to the guard's throat. "I suggest you answer my questions if you don't want your blood to be spilled tonight."

"I'll do more than bleed if the king learns I've done anything to help you."

He was right—the crime of assisting a rebel would undoubtedly lead to torture or execution. Likely both. Though the king enjoyed making pretty speeches about the united kingdoms of Mytica with a broad smile on his handsome face, he did not receive the nickname "the King of Blood" by being fair and kind.

"One week ago, there was a rebel attack on the road camp east of here. Do you know about it?"

The guard held his gaze unflinchingly. "I heard the rebels died screaming."

Jonas's heart twisted. He clenched his hand into a fist, aching to make this guard suffer. A tremor shook through him at the memory of last week, but he tried to focus on the task at hand. *Only* the task at hand.

Rufus raked his fingers through his messy hair and paced back and forth in nervous lines.

"I need to know if any rebels were captured alive," Jonas continued. "And I need to know where the king is holding them."

"I have no idea."

"I don't believe you. Start talking or I promise I'll cut your throat."

There was no fear in the guard's eyes, only a mocking edge. "I've heard so many fearsome rumors about the leader of the Paelsian rebels. But rumors aren't facts, aren't they? Perhaps you're nothing more than a Paelsian peasant boy—not nearly ruthless enough to kill someone in cold blood. Not even your enemy."

Jonas had killed before—enough that he'd lost count. In a foolish war that tricked Paelsians into allying with Limerians against Auranos. In the battle at the road camp. He'd only fought in order to strike down his enemies and bring justice to his friends, his family, and his fellow Paelsians. And to protect himself.

There had been meaning behind those deaths, even if that meaning had been jumbled and unclear. He fought for a purpose, believed in something.

He took no pleasure in taking lives, and he hoped he never would.

"Come on, Jonas. He's useless," Rufus said, his voice twisting with anxiety. "Let's go while we still can."

But Jonas didn't budge, and forced himself to focus on the task at hand. He hadn't come this far to give up now. "There was a girl who fought in the battle named Lysandra Barbas. I need to know if she's still alive."

The guard's lips twisted into a cruel grin. "Ah, so this is why you're so driven for answers. This girl belongs to you?"

It took Jonas a moment to understand his meaning. "She's like a sister to me."

“Jonas,” Rufus whined. “Lysandra’s gone. She’s dead. Obsessing about her is only going to get us killed, too!”

Jonas cast a glare at Rufus that made the boy wince, but it was enough to make him shut his stupid mouth.

Lysandra wasn’t dead. She couldn’t be. She was an incredible fighter—skilled with a bow and arrow like no one Jonas had witnessed before.

Lysandra had also been opinionated, demanding, and incredibly annoying from the first moment he’d first met her. And if she still lived, Jonas would do anything to find her.

He needed her—both as a fellow rebel and as a friend.

“You must know *something*.” Jonas pressed the dagger closer to the guard’s throat. “And you’re going to tell me right now.”

No matter how high the stakes, Jonas would never give up. Not until his very last breath.

“This girl . . .,” the guard said through clenched teeth, “is she worth your life?”

Jonas didn’t have to think twice. “Yes.”

“Then I’ve no doubt she’s every bit as dead as you are.” The guard smirked despite the trickle of blood now sliding down his throat. He raised his voice. “Over here!”

A crunch of dirt and a snap of branches were all that warned of the half-dozen Limerian guards that now burst into the small forest clearing. Their swords were drawn, and two of them carried torches.

“Drop your weapons, rebel!”

Rufus swung his fist at an approaching guard, but missed by a mile. “Jonas, do something!”

Rather than drop the dagger, Jonas sheathed it, then drew the sword he’d stolen from Prince Magnus last week before Jonas had managed to escape. He hoisted it up in time to block a blow aimed directly for his chest. Rufus tried to fight back, punching and kicking, but it wasn’t long before a guard grabbed hold of his hair, yanked him backward, and put a blade to his throat.

“I said,” the guard hissed, “drop your weapon. Or your friend dies.”

The world skidded to a stop as the memory of Tomas’s murder once again crashed into Jonas. It had happened so quickly—no time to save him, no time to fight or even beg for his life. And then Jonas recalled another memory that would be seared into his soul forever: that of his best friend Brion, slain by the same killer while Jonas watched, helpless.

With Jonas momentarily distracted, a guard took the opportunity to slam his fist into his face. As hot blood poured from his nose, another guard wrenched the blade from his grasp, nearly breaking his fingers. Another kicked the back of his knees and slammed him down to the ground.

The world spun and sparkled before his eyes as he fought to remain conscious.

He knew it would end now, that he’d been on borrowed time ever since his most recent brush with death. There was no magic here to save him this time. Death no longer scared him, but the timing was wrong. He

had too much left to do.

Just then, another figure entered the torch-lit clearing, causing the guards to spin around.

“Am I interrupting something?” said the young man. He looked a couple years older than Jonas, with dark hair and eyes. He wore a dark cloak, the hood back to show his skin was deeply tanned, and he gave an easy smile that showed straight white teeth, as well as his apparent nonchalance at the fact that he’d just casually strolled into the middle of a battle. He scanned the area, starting on one side with Rufus, who was still being held in place, then making his way over to Jonas, who braced himself against the mossy ground with two swords pointed at his throat.

“Get out of here,” a guard growled. “Unless you want trouble.”

“You’re Jonas Agallon,” the boy said, nodding at him as if they were meeting in a tavern instead of the middle of the forest in the dead of night. “This is quite an honor.”

Jonas never asked to be famous. But the wanted posters clearly sketched with his face that had been tacked up throughout all three kingdoms had ensured otherwise. Despite having few victories and more false accusations than actual crimes, his name had quickly become legend.

And the high reward his capture offered sparked the interest of many.

The older guard had been cut free from his ropes and was now gingerly rubbing his wrists. “You’ve been following this rebel scum?” he asked. “Does that make you aspiring rebel scum? We’ll save a spike back at the palace for your head as well. Seize him!”

The guards lunged for him, but he just laughed and dodged their grasp as easily as a slippery fish.

“Need my help?” the boy asked Jonas. “How about this—I help you, you help me. That’s the deal.”

He moved so well there was no way he was only a curious bystander. Jonas had no idea who he was, but right now he really didn’t give a damn.

“Sounds good to me,” Jonas managed.

“Then let’s get started.” The boy reached down and pulled out two thick blades the length of his forearms from beneath his cloak. He spun and sliced, moving faster than any of the guards could counter.

Jonas’s head was still swimming, but he managed to elbow the guard behind him directly in his face. He felt and heard the crack as the guard yelped in pain.

He jumped to his feet and grabbed his sword, thrusting the hilt behind him to catch the guard in his soft gut.

The new boy took down the guard holding Rufus. Now free, the unskilled rebel just stood there in place, staring at the violent scene for a frozen moment; then he turned and ran out of the clearing without looking back.

A part of Jonas was disappointed in Rufus, but another part was glad the kid finally had a chance to escape a fight he hadn’t been ready for since day one.

He might even stay alive if he played it smart and stayed out of trouble.

With the other guards now dead, scattered, or unconscious in the clearing, Jonas grabbed hold of his original prisoner and slammed him back against the tree.

The smugness in the guard's eyes finally turned to fear.

"Spare me," he gasped.

Jonas ignored him, turning instead to the boy who'd just saved his life. "What's your name?"

"Felix," he offered with a grin. "Felix Gaebras. Happy to meet you."

"Likewise. Thanks for the help."

"Any time."

If Felix hadn't intervened, Jonas would be dead. No doubt about it. He'd given him a chance at another day, one in which he might make a difference. For that, Jonas was damn grateful.

Still, he'd be stupid not to be wary of any stranger who knew his identity.

"What's your price?" Jonas asked.

"Price?"

"You said if you help me, I help you."

"First thing's first." Felix approached, nudging Jonas out of the way and taking the guard by the throat. "I've been eavesdropping. Rude, I know. But I heard you say you didn't think Jonas was ruthless enough to kill someone in cold blood. Well, what's your first impression of me?"

The guard drew in a shaky breath. "What do you want?"

"Answer the question. His friends—are any of them still alive?"

The guard trembled. "Yes. A handful were brought to the palace dungeon to await execution."

"How many's a handful?"

"I don't know exactly . . . three, four? I'm not sure. I wasn't there!"

Jonas winced. Three or four? There were so few survivors. . . .

"Names?" Felix pressed harder on the guard's throat.

He sputtered, his face reddening. "I don't know. I'd tell you if I did."

"How long till they're executed?" Jonas asked, trying to keep his voice steady. The thought of people he cared about trapped under the king's thumb turned his blood ice cold.

"It could be a few days, or maybe a few months. Please, spare my life! I've told you all I know. Show mercy to me now, I beg of you."

Felix regarded him for a long, silent while. "How about I show you the same mercy you would have shown

us?"

One swipe of Felix's blade, and the guard was silenced forever. His body slumped to the ground to join his fellow fallen guards in the flickering firelight, and Jonas found he couldn't look away.

"You know I had to do that, right?" Felix said, his voice as cold as stone.

"I know."

There was a hardness in Felix's eyes that was foreign to Jonas. They showed no flicker of remorse for what he'd done, nor did they show any joy.

It was true: The guard would not have shown them mercy. He would have executed them without a moment's hesitation.

"Much gratitude for saving my life," Jonas said as Felix wiped his blades on the mossy ground before sheathing them.

"You're welcome." Felix peered into the dark forest. "I think your friend ran away."

"He'll be safer staying far away from me." Jonas studied the bodies littering the area, then turned back to Felix warily. "You're an assassin."

With his fighting skills, his ease with a blade—it would have been obvious to anyone that he was a trained killer.

The coldness faded from Felix's eyes as he grinned. "Depends on the day, really. One does what one must with the talents they have."

That would be a confirmation. "So now what? I have far less gold than the wanted posters offer for my head."

"Somebody's a bit of a pessimist, isn't he? With the king's eyes everywhere lately, looking for anyone causing trouble, what I want is someone watching my back while I watch his. Why not partner up with the infamous Jonas Agallon, I say?" He glanced in the direction Rufus ran off. "I'm not seeing much competition. You need me. Simple as that."

"You want to be a rebel?"

"What I want is to cause trouble and create mayhem wherever I can." Felix's grin widened. "If that makes me a rebel, then so be it. How about I start by helping you save your friends?"

Jonas continued to eye Felix with wariness, his heart pounding as fast as it had during the fight. "The guard was only telling us what we wanted to hear. We've no way to know if my friends are really in the palace dungeon."

"There are no guarantees in this life, only strong possibilities. That's enough for me."

"Even if they are there, the dungeon would be impossible to breach."

Felix shrugged. "I kind of like impossible challenges. Don't you?"

Despite his best efforts to ignore it, hope had begun to well up in Jonas's chest. Hope often led to pain. . . .

But hope could also lead to victory.

Jonas studied the tall, muscular boy who'd just taken out five guards single-handedly. "Impossible challenges, huh?"

Felix laughed. "The most enjoyable ones. So what do you say? Shall we be partners in anarchy?"

Felix was right about one thing: Jonas didn't have a long line of skilled rebels waiting to fight by his side.

He relented, grasping hold of the fluttering hope inside of him and smiling. "Sounds like a plan."

Felix grabbed Jonas's outstretched hand. "And I promise I won't run off into the forest with my tail between my legs like your friend back there."

"I'd appreciate that." Plans and schemes were already racing through Jonas's head. The future suddenly seemed infinitely brighter.

"Tomorrow we get started on freeing your friends," Felix said. "And sending as many of the king's guards to the darklands as we can."

As far as friendships went, Jonas thought, this was an excellent beginning.

CHAPTER 2

MAGNUS

AURANOS

Magnus had no appetite for a celebratory feast, yet that's exactly what greeted him the day after he returned to the Auranian royal palace in the City of Gold. He'd just endured a grueling ride back from Paelsia and was now required to attend a banquet honoring his victory against the rebels.

Guests drank without restraint as bottle upon bottle of sweet Paelsian wine flowed like spring water. Not so long ago, Magnus would never have indulged in such frivolous things, which were forbidden in his homeland of Limeros.

But things had changed. Now, he'd decided, he would indulge whenever possible.

He arrived late. A few hours late, actually. He couldn't care less about punctuality, but as the guest of honor he was supposed to have made a grand entrance, and it seemed as if he'd missed his initial introduction. He managed to enjoy three goblets' worth of sweet wine before he was interrupted.

"Magnus." The sound of the king's voice cut through him like a blade. It was the first contact he'd had with his father since his return; Magnus had been purposely avoiding him.

He turned to meet his father's cold, appraising gaze. King Gaius had dark brown eyes, just like Magnus's, and their hair was the same nearly black shade—the king's had not yet shown any sign of graying. His father wore his finest formal surcoat, made from richly woven charcoal gray cloth and bearing the Limerian symbol

of intertwining snakes in red silk thread on the sleeves. Magnus wore a nearly identical coat, which was much too stiff and restrictive for such a warm day.

Standing with the king were Prince Ashur, a visitor from across the sea who had by now far outstayed his welcome in this kingdom, and a beautiful girl Magnus didn't recognize.

"Yes, Father?" Magnus's sheer hatred for the man before him caused his throat to constrict. He fought with all his strength to not let that hatred show on the surface.

Not here. Not yet.

"I'd like to introduce you to Princess Amara Cortas of the Kraeshian Empire. The princess has joined her brother Ashur as our most honored guests. Princess, I present my son and the heir to my throne, Prince Magnus Lukas Damora."

How Magnus wished he were anywhere else. Meeting new people and appearing cordial was such an unpleasant chore, even when he was in a relatively good mood. Which he wasn't.

Magnus tipped his goblet to the Kraeshian siblings.

He had heard rumors of Princess Amara's beauty, and now he saw all of them proven to be true. Her pitch-black hair was swept up into a tight coil at the back of her long, graceful neck; her skin was as dark and as flawless as her brother's and her eyes a pale, silvery blue to match his.

Magnus forced a smile and bowed his head. "An honor, princess."

"No," Princess Amara said, "it is *my* honor to have been welcomed into your father's palace so graciously after giving barely any notice at all of my arrival."

"My sister is full of surprises." Ashur's deep voice held the edge of a Kraeshian accent, just as his sister's did. "Even *I* wasn't made aware of her arrival until late last night."

"I missed you terribly," she said. "I couldn't bear to wait until you decided to return home. You left us with no idea of how long you'd be gone."

"I like Mytica," he replied. "Such a charming little cluster of kingdoms."

Magnus noticed the slightest twitch in the king's cheek at the word *little*. Perhaps Prince Ashur had not meant it to sound dismissive, but . . .

It sounded dismissive.

"You're both welcome to stay in my little kingdom for as long as you like," King Gaius said, his tone free of any noticeable animosity.

One thing Magnus endlessly admired about his father was how he always managed to slather on the charm when necessary. It was a talent Magnus had yet to acquire.

"Where has your lovely wife gone?" Princess Amara asked Magnus now. "I only had a chance to meet her briefly, when I first arrived."

Now, there was a word that made Magnus's cheek twitch. *Wife*. He glanced around the crowded banquet

hall, at the several hundred guests seated at long tables, mounds of food and drink set before them, swarms of servants ensuring no glass was fully emptied. A quintet of musicians played their instruments in one corner like a cluster of noisy crickets.

How different this was from the austere ways of Limeros, where there were few parties and it was rare to ever hear the sound of music. And how swiftly his father had altered his previous tastes and interests, adapting to new laws and rules in order to blend in with his surroundings. He was deceptive: a chameleon hiding in plain sight.

Magnus supposed it was easier to adapt to Auranian ways than to force a newly conquered kingdom to change their lives overnight. That would only lead to more rebellion than his father already had to contend with, and the Limerian army was spread thin across the entire continent.

It was all going according to the king's plan.

Or perhaps his father had begun to enjoy music and banquets and golden thrones more than he'd ever admit out loud.

"My wife? I don't know where she is," Magnus replied, taking a sip of his wine and beckoning a serving girl over to refill his goblet. He looked around the room again. All the faces blended together, and he couldn't see the pale golden color of Cleo's hair anywhere in the crowd.

"I'm sure she's very happy to have her new husband back by her side after such a long time apart," Amara said.

"It wasn't all that long." *Quite frankly, not nearly long enough*, he thought.

"Even a single day apart is far too long for two young people in love," Ashur said.

The wine Magnus had drunk nearly rose in his throat. "What a delightful sentiment, Prince Ashur. I had no idea you were a romantic."

"Ashur is the most sought-after bachelor in all of Kraeshia." Princess Amara hooked her arm through her brother's. "He's refused several potential brides. Father fears he'll never settle down."

"What can I say?" Ashur replied. "True love has yet to find me, and I'll settle for nothing less."

"Which makes you that much more desirable. Even here, you've easily managed to capture every woman's attention."

"Lucky me."

"If you'll excuse us," King Gaius interjected, "I must have a word alone with my son. Please, enjoy the rest of the banquet."

"Much gratitude, your highness," Amara replied. Touching Magnus's arm, she said, "I hope to see you again soon."

Magnus smiled and, despite the girl's unquestionable beauty and grace, the gesture felt so false it was actually painful. "I insist that you do."

As Magnus followed the king out of the crowded room, several guests tried to catch his attention, offering

greetings and congratulating him on his victory in Paelsia, where he thwarted the rebels from halting the construction of the Imperial Road.

Magnus then noticed the sharp glare of Nicolo Cassian, the young palace guard stationed by the great hall doors.

“Did you keep her warm for me while I was away?” Magnus said to him in passing, feeling the first flicker of pleasure all day as Nic’s expression grew more hateful, his face turning so red it almost matched his hair.

Nic would really have to learn to control his emotions if he wanted to stay out of trouble.

The foolish boy was in love with Cleo. And, as far as Magnus knew or cared, Cleo felt the same toward him. Yet he sincerely doubted that Cleo’s eye could be caught by a lowly guard, even one she considered a friend.

The king took him to the throne room, a grand hall with high ceilings and chiseled marble steps that led to an enormous and ornate golden throne studded with rubies and sapphires. The Auranian tapestries and banners that had previously hung above the throne had been discarded for those of Limeros, but the room had otherwise remained just as it was when King Corvin Bellos ruled this affluent kingdom.

The king’s guards stood just outside the heavy doors, leaving them alone in the cavernous room.

Magnus regarded his father in silence, willing himself to stay calm. He didn’t want to speak first for fear he’d say something he’d regret.

“We have a problem, you and I,” the king said as he took a seat upon the throne.

A breath caught in Magnus’s chest. “What do you mean?”

“The Kraeshians.” The king’s expression soured, his features turning sharp and unpleasant in an instant. “Those little fools think I don’t know why they’re here. But I do.”

This was not what Magnus had anticipated. “And why are they here?”

“They’re here on behalf of their emperor father, who hungers for more power and destroys everything in his path to get it.”

“Is that so? And what do you propose to do about it?”

“I will let nothing disrupt my plans. And if those two spies find out how close I am to seizing my treasure, I know they’ll try to steal it.”

Worry and doubt flooded his father’s eyes. Magnus had never before seen such weakness in him, this man whose confidence was perpetually blinding, no matter what he was saying or doing.

The king had lofty goals to match his incessant greed and ruthlessness. He sought the Kindred, the four crystals that held the essence of *elementia*—elemental magic. They were lost a millennium ago, but any mortal who possessed them would become a god.

Magnus had seen magic side by side with death in the shadows of the Forbidden Mountains, and he knew with deep certainty the Kindred were real.

And they would be *his*, not his father’s.

“Anyone who would dare try that would surely regret it, no matter who they are,” Magnus said.

The king nodded, and the shadow of uncertainty faded. “The battle at the camp—I’ve been told you handled yourself well. Sometimes I forget how young you are.”

Magnus bristled. “I’m eighteen.”

“Eighteen is still very young. But you’ve grown so much this last year. I can’t tell you how proud I am of all that you do, of all that you’ve had to endure and rise above. You are everything I ever dreamed you would be, my son.”

There was a time when hearing such words from his father would have been like receiving a sip of water just before dying of thirst.

Now, after everything he’d learned, he knew this was only a manipulation uttered by the man Magnus hated more than anyone else in the world.

“Thank you, Father,” he said tightly.

“I was disappointed to hear of my kingsliege’s fate.” Before Magnus could comment, the king continued. “But he was unskilled in battle. It’s no surprise he fell so easily to a rebel’s blade.”

The image of Aron Lagaris’s pale face and glossy, dead eyes flitted through Magnus’s mind.

“He will be missed,” he said evenly.

“Indeed.”

The king stood up and descended the stairs to stand face-to-face with Magnus. Magnus fought back the urge to reach for his blade. He had to be calm.

“Melenia hasn’t contacted me in weeks.” The king’s voice held frustration as he spoke of the mysterious immortal who allegedly advised him in his dreams. “I don’t know what she’s waiting for, and I need to know how to use Lucia’s magic to light our path. After all this time, your sister can still barely control her *elementia* and I can find no one trustworthy enough to tutor her.”

“Lucia’s prophecy remains true. She is the one who will lead you to the Kindred, not Melenia. Lucia is the key to all of this and I will always have faith in her—more than anyone else.”

His words stuck in his throat all the more because they were the truth.

He still believed in Lucia, even if she no longer believed in him.

The king clasped Magnus’s shoulders. “Of course, you’re right. Lucia will lead the way. It is my destiny to possess the Kindred’s magic for myself.”

No, Father, Magnus thought. *My destiny.*

“I’ll keep an eye on the Kraeshians,” he said. “If they show any sign of wanting what’s ours, we can deal with them together.”

The king nodded and pressed his hand against Magnus’s scarred cheek, a smile lifting the corners of his

mouth. "Yes. Together."

Magnus left the throne room. He walked swiftly down the hall until he reached a place where he could pause, unseen by his father, and will himself to stop shaking with anger. With frustration. The need to avenge his mother's murder and bring his father to justice crawled over his skin like ants.

The wine he'd had was no help at all; it had only blurred his vision and his mind.

He needed air. Badly.

He continued down the hallway until he found an exit to a large balcony overlooking the palace gardens. Illuminated only by moonlight, even he had to admit they were excruciatingly beautiful. The sweet scent of roses wafted up to where he stood on the balcony, about thirty feet above. His shoulders hunched, he clutched the cool marble banister and inhaled.

Suddenly, a small movement caught his eye. Down in the gardens, along the mosaic pathway winding its way through the lush area, he saw three figures: his adopted sister, Lucia, walking with the Kraeshian prince and princess.

He found he could not look away.

"Someone looks rather unhappy tonight."

The voice cut through his concentration and tightened the muscles in his back.

Without turning around, he said, "I thought I was alone out here."

"And yet, clearly, you're not."

"I would *like* to be alone out here."

"I'm sure you would. But I was here first. Actually, I was here for sixteen years before you arrived and murdered practically everyone I know and love, so I believe that definitely grants me the right to this particular balcony."

He turned to face the girl standing in the shadows and was shocked that he hadn't noticed her immediately. Known as the Golden Princess to the citizens of Auranos, Princess Cleiona's hair was so pale it nearly glowed beneath the moonlight. She had eyes of aquamarine, as vibrant as a lake's surface under a summer sky.

Perhaps he hadn't seen her because her dress was so dark: bluish, like the deepest shade of dusk in the moments just before nightfall.

Cleo emerged from her cloak of shadows and joined him at the balcony's edge. Following his gaze, her eyes locked on Lucia and the visiting prince and princess.

"I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that I've become rather well acquainted with Lucia in your absence," Cleo said.

"Have you, now?"

"Yes. I might go so far as to call us friends. She's very special, your sister. I see why you love her so much."

Taken at face value, it was a cordial observation.

But taken another way . . .

Magnus knew that rumors about his unrequited desire for Lucia were circulating the palace. Servants always enjoyed gossiping about people of higher stations. And sometimes they gossiped *to* those of higher stations.

"I'm very pleased to see that Lucia has been up and around the palace during my absence," he said, ignoring Cleo's unspoken accusations. "Have you met Princess Amara yet?"

"Briefly," she said crisply and without warmth.

"Is she also to become one of your *friends*?"

Cleo's demure smile remained, but her eyes stayed cold. "I certainly hope so."

He couldn't help but be amused by this girl. Princess Cleiona Bellos was an incredibly deceptive creature.

But there was something besides lies and passive aggression in her expression tonight. He saw fresh pain there—an edge of it that she couldn't hide.

He waited for her to speak again.

Cleo returned her attention to the garden. "They buried Lord Aron today."

His mouth went dry. "I heard."

She played with a long tendril of her hair that had come loose from its pins. "I knew him all my life, through good times and bad. To know he's gone now . . ."

Her grief over the fallen boy was misplaced. Aron deserved neither tears nor heartache from anyone, but Magnus understood grief. He'd felt it himself when his mother was killed. He still felt it, like a dark, bottomless hole in his chest.

Lord Aron had been betrothed to Cleo when, without warning, King Gaius changed their plans and bound Cleo to Magnus instead.

"How did he die?" she asked now, her voice soft.

"While battling the rebels who attacked the road camp we were inspecting."

"And a rebel killed Aron?"

"Yes."

Cleo turned and looked at him directly. "He died in battle. That sounds so . . . brave."

"Yes, it does."

"Aron was many things, but brave was never one of them." She turned away. "Perhaps I had him all wrong. If he was courageous in the end—"

"He wasn't." All the acidity Magnus had felt this evening poured out of him through those two words.

Cleo regarded him with shock.

“Apologies,” he said, attempting to rein in the poison that threatened to leak from him in a horrible gush of truth. “Lord Aron acted in battle exactly according to his experience, which was lacking. He had no chance. I only regret that I wasn’t able to save him.”

Such lies. He wondered how she’d react if he told her the truth—that Aron was an insipid bootlicker, a pathetic wimp who’d sooner bow down before a conquering king and do whatever was asked of him without question than defend his or his people’s honor.

Aron only got what was coming to him.

Cleo watched him now with a frown.

“This topic has upset you,” she said.

Magnus turned toward the garden to shield his face from her. His sister and the Kraeshians were gone. “I feel nothing other than eagerness to end this conversation. Unless there’s anything else you wish to know tonight?”

“Only the truth.”

“Excuse me?”

“I feel that there’s something you’re holding back.”

“Believe me, princess, even if I were, it’s nothing you’d want to know.”

She looked at him intently as he absently brushed his fingers against the scar that stretched from the top of his left cheek to the left corner of his mouth. He despised such close scrutiny.

There was a time when Lucia had been able to see through his masks, the invisible ones he’d perfected over the years to hide his emotions, to keep a necessary distance between himself and those around him. To appear as a younger version of his father. Now that his sister had lost that ability, he had the deeply unnerving sensation that Cleo had learned how to see past his masks as well.

“Tell me more about what happened in Paelsia,” she urged.

He met her gaze again only to find that she’d drawn alarmingly closer to him. “Careful, princess. Remember what happened the last time we shared a balcony. You don’t want that to happen again, do you?”

He expected to see disgust flash in her eyes at being reminded of their wedding tour, when they’d been forced to share a kiss in front of an eager, cheering crowd.

Their first kiss and, as he’d promised her at the time, their *last*.

“Good night, Prince Magnus.”

Without another word and only a chill in her voice to indicate her reaction to the memory, Cleo turned and exited the balcony, leaving him alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER 3

LYSANDRA

AURANOS

Lysandra pounded on the bars of her cell until she finally earned the attention of a passing guard.

“When is Gregor coming back?” she demanded.

“What do you care? Mind your own business, girl. You might stay alive longer.”

Why did she care? Because Gregor was her brother—something the guards didn’t know. And because she loved him, and wanted him to be safe and strong so they could escape this overcrowded dungeon stinking of filth and death.

Gregor had been arrested after attempting to assassinate Prince Magnus in Limeros during his wedding tour. He’d claimed to have had contact with an immortal Watcher named Phaedra through his dreams—a confession that most would consider to be the ravings of a madman. But it seemed as though King Gaius didn’t share that opinion. Gregor wouldn’t have been spared execution for so long if the king didn’t believe him valuable.

The guard still stood there, staring at Lysandra through the bars with growing interest.

She glared back at him. “What?”

“Pretty little girl, aren’t you? Such prettiness in an ugly place like this.”

“I’m not a little girl.”

Keep looking at me like that, she thought, and I will claw out your eyes.

“You’re a rebel.” He squinted at her. “Not too many girls I know like to fight.”

She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of a response, keeping her mouth shut until he left to speak to another guard. Their voices were low, but Lysandra watched as their expressions grew more smug and self-satisfied with every word.

Lit only by torches set into the hallway walls, the darkness of these sunken dungeons was oppressive. The metal bars were coated in slime, the walls caked with filth. The hard dirt floor spread with straw made for an uncomfortable bed during the few fleeting moments Lysandra had been able to sleep since her arrival. Echoing down the corridor were the horrible sounds of other prisoners, those who laughed at nothing, cried at everything, or talked to themselves like men and women who’d lost their minds long before their lives.

It was a nightmare.

But she would stay strong. She had no other choice.

The second guard looked over at her and nodded. “Very well. We need some entertainment today. Get her.”

The first guard unlocked her cell and roughly dragged Lysandra out by her hair. Her first instinct was to fight, but she held back. This might be her chance to escape, and if so, she needed to pretend to be weak and

docile. Locked behind the stone walls and iron bars she had no chance, but if he were to take her outside, she might be able to flee—although the thought of leaving without Gregor gutted her.

But he didn't take her outside. The guard led Lysandra down the dim and narrow corridor to another cell. He shoved her through the door and she fell to the floor hard enough to bruise her knees.

Though it was very dark, she knew someone else was in there.

The two guards stood on the other side of the iron bars, grinning. One threw something metallic into the cell and it landed a few paces away from her on the dirt floor.

A knife. She flicked her gaze up to the guard.

"You like to fight, rebel?" he asked. "Give us a show."

Suddenly, another prisoner came surging out of the darkness, rising to her feet and shoving Lysandra hard in her chest, causing her to stagger back into the wall. She was a girl, taller and more bulky than Lysandra, with a dirty face and matted hair. She snatched up the blade and stared at it for a moment with a wild look in her eyes.

"Go on, then," the guard urged. "Whoever wins gets to eat today. Let's see some blood."

The other girl's gaze snapped to Lysandra's. Then, with a cry, she charged at her, clutching the knife.

Lysandra was hungry and weak, but she hadn't lost her mind—not yet. She'd arrived here two days ago with three other rebels who'd survived the battle—Tarus, Cato, and Fabius.

She knew King Gaius had ordered them here to be publicly executed, to be made an example of. She didn't expect to be pardoned for her crimes. And she didn't expect anyone in shining armor to break in to rescue her.

But those had been her expectations her entire life. She was different from other girls who dreamed of strong husbands and a houseful of drooling babies. She'd been a warrior from the beginning. She would be a warrior till the end.

And that end was *not* going to be today.

She dodged the knife easily and shoved the girl away.

"What's your name?" Lysandra asked.

"My name?" the girl said, her gaze narrowing. "Why?"

"I'm Lysandra. Lysandra Barbas." Introductions could make friends of strangers, and this girl—she wasn't her enemy. They were both prisoners here; they had common ground.

"I don't care who you are." The girl lacked skill but was determined in her attempts to stab Lysandra.

"Need a little help, rebel?" The guard opened the door and shoved another prisoner in. He was short and skinny and wore a fearful expression.

Before Lysandra had a chance to say anything, the unmarked girl attacked and cut Tarus's arm.

Seeing the gash on his flesh was enough to incite Lysandra. She launched herself at the girl and punched her in the stomach, making her grunt with pain.

“Are you all right?” Lysandra barked at Tarus.

He clutched his injured arm. “Yeah. I think so. Be careful!”

The tip of the blade darted at Lysandra’s chest. She dodged it, and this time she punched the girl right in her face. Blood trickled from her nose.

“Stop it,” Lysandra hissed. “You’re better than this! Don’t give them the show they want. Don’t let them win!”

The girl’s eyes were red with tears of rage. “I haven’t eaten in days!”

“Take her down,” the guard snarled. “Kill her. I’ve put my silver on you, rebel. Don’t make me a loser.”

The girl continued to strike at them relentlessly until Lysandra finally knocked the blade out of her hand and grabbed it for herself. The girl fell hard to the ground and scrambled back into a corner, raising her hands to shield her face as Lysandra drew closer.

“Please! Please, no. Spare me. I’m sorry—I’m sorry!”

“Kill her!” the guard demanded.

Lysandra shot them a look of hatred. “No.”

“She would have killed you.”

“Perhaps. But she doesn’t deserve to die just for trying to survive another day in this cesspit.”

The guards stormed into the cell and disarmed Lysandra, then dragged her back to her original cell, throwing Tarus in with her.

“You can keep each other company while you wait for your turn to die.”

In the darkness, Lysandra pressed herself up against the wall with Tarus next to her. He began to sob softly; she put an arm around his shoulders to pull him closer.

“I know this is hard,” she whispered, “but I’ll get us out of here. I promise I will.”

“How?”

That was a very good question. “Working on it. Give me time.”

“If Jonas can find us, he’ll save us. I know it.”

“Jonas is dead.” The words tasted as bitter on her tongue as they felt in her heart, the cold, painful thought making her eyes sting with endless grief. “If he wasn’t killed in the battle, he’d have been captured just like us and we would’ve seen him or heard about it.”

Tarus’s eyes hardened. “I don’t believe it.”

"I don't want to believe it either, but holding on to hope that he's going to find us . . ." She let out a shaky sigh. She wouldn't let herself believe in Jonas because she knew she couldn't handle the disappointment if he didn't show. No, she'd rely on herself only, just as she always had.

Silence fell upon them and remained until Gregor was finally brought back, staggering, into the cell. He fell to his knees and Lysandra rushed to his side, taking his face between her hands to make him look at her.

He was dazed, his face bruised and bloody.

Fury ripped through her at the sight of someone she loved so horribly abused.

"Damn it." She tore a piece of cloth from her shirt and tried to clean his wounds. "Damn them! I'll kill every last one of them!"

"It's all right, little Lys. It'll be over soon."

Tears began to stream from her eyes and she angrily swiped them away. "Don't say that! We're getting out of here and we'll leave this stinking place far behind us. We found each other again for a reason. We're not going to die here. Just tell them what they want to hear so they'll stop hurting you."

"There aren't enough truths in the world to get them to do that."

It pained her to hear the defeat in his voice. This was so unlike the brother she'd grown up with—her rock, someone who showed strength even during the hardest of times. She'd always envied him that, ashamed of her own weaknesses.

"What did they want today?" she asked.

"Same as every other time." He leaned against the stone wall. "The king wants to know what Phaedra told me about the Kindred. He asks me the same questions again and again, but my answers never satisfy him."

Not so long ago Lysandra wouldn't have hesitated to tell Gregor he was a fool to believe in immortal creatures from a different world or magic crystals. What a laugh.

But no one was laughing now.

"She'll visit me again," he whispered. "I know she will. And then she'll tell me what to do."

Lysandra lowered her voice. "Did you tell them what Phaedra said about the sorceress?"

It pained her even to say such a thing aloud, but it was what Gregor believed. Helping him hold on to his beliefs might give him the strength he needed to hold on to life.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "I tried to say as little as I could. I need to be patient. Phaedra will visit me again. She wouldn't abandon me like this."

If this Phaedra really existed, then Lysandra hated her for what she'd done to her brother. For what she'd said to him.

"When the sorceress's blood is spilled, they will finally rise. And the world will burn."

Who would rise? There was no such thing as magic, only foolish people who believed in foolish things to

better explain what they didn't understand.

"So tell the king that—about this sorceress and her powerful blood," Lysandra whispered. "Let him scurry off to find some girl to blame! Get the attention off you."

"You'd wish something horrible like that on someone else?"

She flinched. Would she wish for something cold and brutal to happen to some innocent girl, all to save someone she loves?

She wasn't sure anymore.

Gregor touched his forehead, then brought his hand in front of his face and looked at the smear of crimson on his fingertips. "Blood is the key to all of this, little Lys. Remember that. Blood is life. Blood is magic."

"If you say so." She tried to keep her frustration out of her voice. Gregor had been through so much; she only wanted him to rest and regain his strength and his mind. "Do you know the identity of this sorceress your dream-girl told you about? Any idea at all?"

"No," he admitted. "But she exists."

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