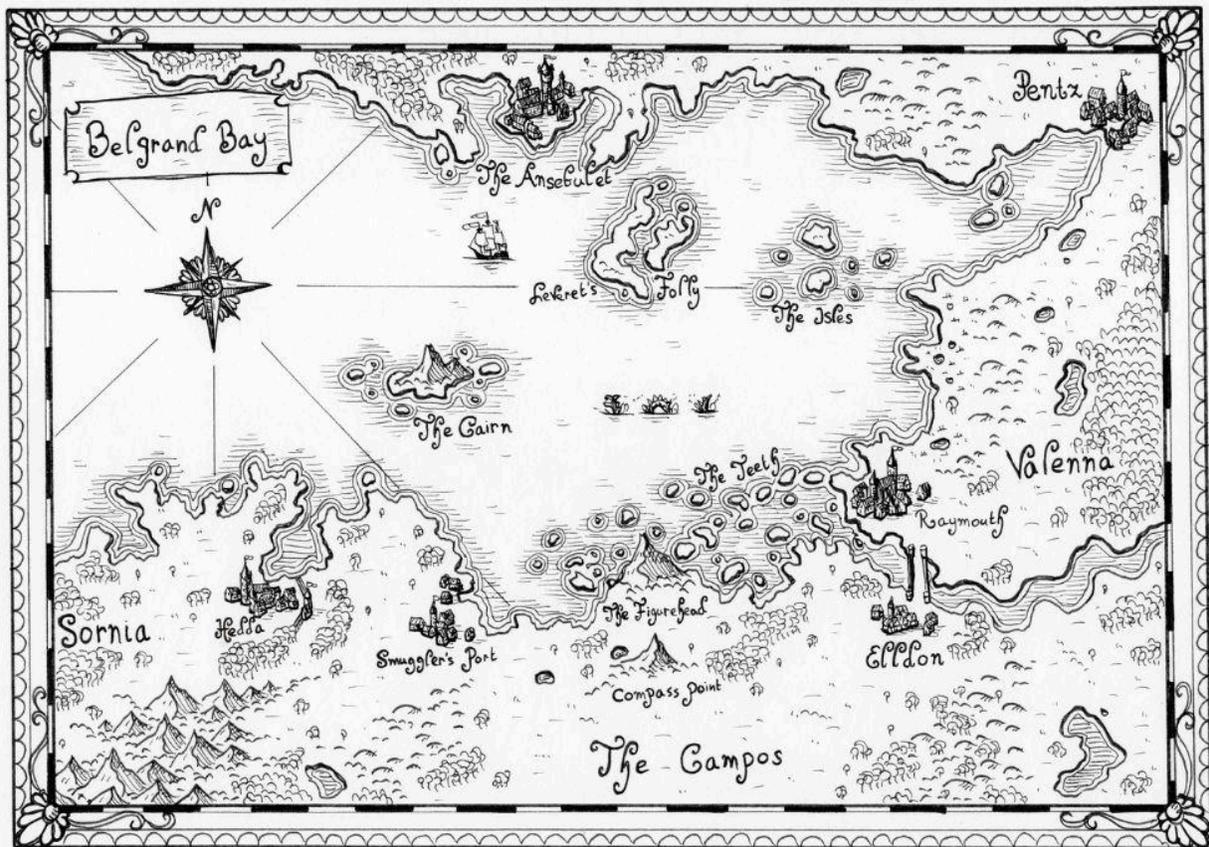


# KOL OF SORNIA

A LEGENDS OF ANDOLIN PREQUEL NOVELLA



*When the Heart of Mundil was stolen, The Lady of the Deep sent forth her Twelve Calamities in retribution.*

- *Paloma, Scribe of Andolin*

## CHAPTER ONE: *THE ASSIGNMENT*

Kol drew his cutlass and, turning his attention inward, straightened his back. He bent his knees and raised his arm, leveling the blade as he sank into the guarded position he had practiced nearly every day for the past ten years. Stepping forward, he leaned into the lunge to stretch his sore muscles. With a quick jab, he thrust and sprang back, then repeated the actions more quickly. Again and again, he advanced and retreated, practicing the rote movements without pause. When his limbs ached, he shifted the cutlass into his left hand and continued practicing with the other side.

“Didn’t you get enough of drilling this morning,” a voice taunted at his back, “or don’t you have anything better to do?”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t,” Kol replied, continuing his practice undaunted. “And clearly, neither do you.”

“You broke Jais’s nose,” another soldier cut in, stepping into Kol’s path. “You’ll have to pay for assaulting your betters, bastard.”

Kol lowered his weapon and turned to meet the first man’s steely gaze. Behind the soldier stood a third; all of them waited to see what he’d do. He was outnumbered, certainly, but Kol had two advantages. Though he was thin from years of meager rations, he was easily a head taller than nearly every other soldier in camp. And while they might look at him and see a gaunt figure, his clothes hid sinuous, knotted muscles built over a decade of drilling and hard living—he had years of fighting experience over these men. “He had it coming,” Kol replied with a smirk. “No need to send his lapdogs after me.”

“*Lapdog?*” The soldier snarled. “I’ll show you—” He drew his sword and charged.

Kol parried with a swift, powerful motion, sending the man stumbling. The other two soldiers leapt into the fray, taking him on from each side. Deftly sidestepping the thrust of the first man’s blade to sweep the second’s away, Kol jabbed his elbow hard into the first man’s open side. The second soldier lunged again, but Kol shoved his blade away with the side of his cutlass, following the motion with a kick to the man’s chest, sending him sprawling backward.

Regaining his footing, the first attacker lunged at Kol again. With a measured parry and a smooth riposte, Kol jabbed the tip of his cutlass into the soldier's upper arm, drawing back as the metal pierced flesh.

The man bit back a yelp, clapping a hand over his arm. From across the encampment, the shrill call of a fife summoned everyone to mess. "Enough of this," he growled as the others ran to his side. "Forget him. He's not worth the trouble." He then turned to Kol, sneering. "You may be a good soldier, but nothing more than that. And if you don't learn to choose your battles, that's all you'll ever be." With that, he retreated.

"And you should practice more," Kol called after them as they hurried away. Frowning to himself, he sheathed his cutlass. *What does he know, anyway?* Those men didn't understand what it was like to be born with nothing, to be treated like nothing, nor the way it honed an edge on him to protect himself against the world.

\* \* \*

Kol ate his paltry meal by the horse pen, in no hurry to return to his shared tent and face Jais's ire. While he hadn't meant to break his tent mate's nose, Jais's relentless, snide comments had pushed Kol beyond the limits of his self-control. And yet, after a decade of being left behind, watching everyone he enlisted with pay their way through the ranks, he couldn't help but wonder if there was some truth to what Jais's friend had said. Perhaps this was exactly what kept Kol stuck where he was, with no hope of promotion. No matter who started the fights, he was always the one to get in trouble. After ten years of it, he only had himself to blame.

*Ten years.* That's how long it had been since he had arrived as a new army recruit, only fifteen years old, stationed at the palace with the main garrison. Young and inexperienced, he had carelessly bumped elbows with one of the royal family as he hurried through the hall, late for mess. The prince rebuked him sharply, and without thinking, Kol had spat something rude back at him, all too used to the rough environment of the orphanage. But that prince made him regret it. He summoned Blackburn, still stationed at the palace at that time, who ordered Kol's first caning.

The guards had dragged him from the table and struck him mercilessly, for all to see. That was his first taste of real inequality. The welts eventually healed, but the humiliation remained, hardening into a permanent scar on his heart. Since then, Kol's contempt for the aristocracy, for Blackburn, and for everyone who claimed to be his betters, had only grown. And yet, the caning had its intended effect; he'd learned his lesson. Never again did he defy his superiors. Instead, he channeled his frustration and anger into motivation and honed his skills. As the years went by, his swordsmanship, along with his imposing height, grew to give him an edge among his fellow soldiers, a distinction on the battlefield that the rigid hierarchy of the city could never afford him. He'd always hoped his skills would eventually

get him chosen over others with deeper pockets, but now that seemed like a childish dream.

He drew a deep breath and took in the view of the Campos beyond the pen. The vast, gently rolling grasslands, shadowed under a thick blanket of grey clouds, felt a little like home somehow. Perhaps this time, he would finally find the freedom to become the man he was meant to be.

The early spring wind, still edged with winter's chill, cut through his thin clothing. Well-worn doeskin knee-breeches, tucked into the tops of his riding boots, and a thin linen shirt beneath his green soldier's jacket afforded a little protection against the cool air, yet Kol was glad to be out of the palace barracks. A couple of years prior, he had been stationed here as part of the border patrol, when smugglers from Hedda, Sornia's capital, had escaped the walls and taken refuge in the wilderness. It had been swiftly dealt with, but his unit remained encamped in the Campos for some time thereafter. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing back the black curls that hung in his eyes and blew about his face.

He preferred it out here in the elements than in the crowded, stinking city, where the nobles looked down on him wherever he went. While the military also had its strict hierarchy, everyone here was a soldier. Though he didn't particularly like his current company, at least he understood them. With the main cavalry division held in reserve in Hedda, those stationed here were considered the dregs of the military, himself included. Each of them was unfit for palace life in some way, and they were treated accordingly—with limited supplies and never enough horses. Far from the vigilant gaze of the Azbarian royal family, the officers didn't concern themselves with official protocol but instead were bound by the whims of General Blackburn, who kept the men in line through the threat of violence. Because of this, campaign life was difficult and dangerous, but Kol still preferred the open landscape and fresh air to the stifling atmosphere of the palace, where the walls seemed to close in around him.

Behind him, soldiers in emerald jackets readied a string of wagons, loading supplies and hitching teams of horses. *That's strange*, he noted. *I wonder what they're preparing for?*

"You," a voice shouted.

Shoving the last piece of bread in his mouth, Kol searched the camp for the source.

"Come here," an officer in green ordered from the opening of the general's striped pavilion, holding back the canvas flap. With a sinking feeling, Kol realized it was Captain Roen.

"Me?" Kol asked, glancing behind him to be sure. He wondered if he would be reprimanded for fighting with Jais, with the man's friends, or both.

"Now," the captain snapped, and the flap closed.

Reluctantly, Kol trudged across the well-trampled grass to the pavilion.

"Are you sure about him?" a deep, gravelly voice asked from inside as Kol approached the canvas door.

He knew Blackburn's voice. Kol's pulse flared, hammering through his veins. *Why is Blackburn asking about me?* Kol paused to listen.

"He's the perfect soldier for the job," Roen replied from inside the tent. "He came to us at a very young age, so he has a lot of experience. Highly skilled with a sword. Though he's often at odds with his peers, he's obedient to his superiors, follows every command without question. Most importantly, he's expendable."

"They're all expendable," the general grumbled darkly. "What about Drego?"

"I don't trust Drego to see this through to the end," Roen countered. "We need someone who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Someone who won't let finer sensibilities get in the way."

"And Weylan?" the general prodded.

"His mother is cousin to the third royal consort," Roen replied. "It would look bad if we lost him. This Kol, though, has no family. Unmarried. Not even any friends. No one will miss him."

Kol flinched to hear the painful truth spoken so coldly. His face burned as he pulled open the flap and entered.

"You wanted to see me?" The words came out sharper than he intended. "Captain," Kol added with a polite nod. He had no intention of being caned for his tongue. Before him, the massive form of General Blackburn sat at a desk with a parchment map sprawled out before him, a large feather nodding above his large cocked hat. Kol stood by, muscles tensed, waiting for acknowledgement.

"Captain Roen tells me you're the man responsible for taking down the band of brigands that breached the wall in the south two years ago," Blackburn said at length. "Is that right?"

Kol nodded.

"You accomplished this alone, after being left for dead," Blackburn went on, raising his brows questioningly. "You snuck into the enemy camp, and set it on fire while they slept?"

Kol swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. "Yes, General."

"Do you feel any remorse for that?" Blackburn asked, his piercing eyes narrowing further.

Kol's heart dropped at the unexpected question. "They were outlaws, General," he replied, trying to keep his voice steady. "I was following orders."

"Even though there could have been women and children among them?" Blackburn prodded.

Kol lowered his gaze. He didn't think that had been the case, but so much time had passed since that dark night, now he couldn't be sure. He'd taken a gruesome blow to the leg in the skirmish and, unable to retreat with the others, had been left behind with the dead in enemy territory. It had seemed his only option. Even so, he knew the answer expected of him. "An enemy is an enemy, no matter their form."

Blackburn's dark, unwavering stare remained on him. "Have you ever felt any remorse for the lives you've taken?"

Kol looked up, meeting his eyes steadily, his face betraying nothing of the churning in his gut. "No," he replied firmly. "It's what I was trained for."

A smile pulled at the stubbled corner of Blackburn's mouth. "Good. As it should be." He turned his attention to the map.

"We're looking for someone to head a scouting party," Captain Roen explained, his thin, sandy-colored mustache twitching as he spoke. "The soldier who was supposed to do it, Lieutenant Edmont, is injured. I've recommended you to the General."

Kol nodded without hesitation. This would be extra duty, and that meant extra pay. Aside from that, any additional responsibility would be a chance to advance in the ranks, and now it seemed the position of lieutenant might soon be available. "What's the assignment?"

Blackburn motioned him closer. "Can you read a map?"

"I can read well enough," Kol muttered, stepping forward.

"The Valennians have an illegal military outpost beyond their border," Blackburn explained, sweeping a finger over the words *The Campos* written across the parchment, "encroaching into the wilderness between our two countries. It's been there for several years, but we've recently been ordered to investigate it."

Although the contested territory was officially a no-man's land, Valenna and Sornia had maintained a tense truce for nearly a century; each kingdom conceded to the other minor footholds in the grasslands in a delicate balance of power. On the Sornian side, King Berento tacitly benefited from the Smuggler's Port, located not far outside the border near Hedda, which operated as a politically neutral trading hub. Kol couldn't help but wonder what had changed.

"Captain Roen will be establishing an encampment nearer to the outpost," Blackburn continued. "You will relocate with his unit and report directly to him from here on out. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Kol replied.

"Good." Blackburn folded the parchment and handed it to him. "Your first task is to complete the map."

Kol nodded, and turned to leave.

"Oh, one more thing," Blackburn added. "I was also told you were fighting with your peers?"

"It was a misunderstanding," Kol replied. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," Blackburn ordered. "The urge to fight is a good thing in a soldier, so long as it's directed toward the true enemy. Remember that, or we'll find someone else for the job."

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Inside his tent, Kol's stomach twisted with anxiety as he packed his few belongings, along with the map, into a haversack. It was unusual for the general to give orders directly to a common soldier; this assignment must be more important than they were letting on. If they wanted someone expendable, it meant the task would be dangerous. But just how dangerous, he couldn't imagine. *Even so, this is my chance.* Despite his apprehension, he felt a surge of hope. So many years had passed since he promised himself he would make a better life, and now he finally had a chance to keep it. In his first winter at the palace, he'd nearly died from the plague that had swept through Hedda. At just fifteen years old, an orphan and newly enlisted, he hadn't a single coin to his name. The physician's fee to cure the red ague had been far too expensive, and his empty pockets had almost cost him his life. After finally recovering, thanks to a homemade remedy another soldier had shared with him that Kol recreated it for himself with wild herbs, he vowed to improve his circumstances, but never managed to follow through. Since then, he dedicated all his spare hours to improving his swordsmanship to become the best soldier he could be, even at the expense of any other education. Moments when he could have been teaching himself to write—a skill he hadn't learned in the King's Home for Boys, though he could read passably—had been spent drilling instead. Despite his dedication, he was always overlooked for promotion. But now, this would be his chance to prove himself. He wasn't sure how he'd complete the map without being able to make letters, but he would figure that out later. With fresh resolve, Kol tucked his bedroll beneath his arm and slung the knapsack over his shoulder.

Crossing camp, he spotted Captain Roen standing by the horse pen in his green officer's jacket. Already, a group of soldiers surrounded the captain, waiting to be assigned a horse. Some were already tacking up their mounts by the time Kol joined them.

"You there," Roen called, turning toward him with a bridled horse in hand. "What was your name again?"

Kol winced. He hated that question. "Kol," he answered flatly.

"Yes, I know that. Kol what?" Roen asked, brows furrowing. The lanky gelding champed the bit, prancing sideways around him. "There's more than one of you with that name."

"Just Kol." Even after all these years, it still stung to admit. "No family name."

"Well, *Kol*," Roen replied, shrugging it off, "this is your mount, Bayard."

"I'm familiar with him," Kol said, reluctantly taking the reins. If given his pick of the entire herd, this was the last horse he'd have chosen. The animal liked to bite. Turning to go, Kol paused. "You mentioned the man who was supposed to do it was injured," Kol recalled. "What happened to him?"

"He was thrown from his horse," Roen replied, then turned back to his duties.

Kol darted a sideways glance at Bayard with a sinking feeling in his gut. Groaning to himself, he grabbed a saddle from the pile on the ground beside the fence and buckled the

girth quickly, dodging snapping teeth. With his rucksack and bedroll tied securely over the blanket behind the cantle, he stepped up into the stirrup. Even though he was the last to arrive, he was one of the first to mount up, which meant he thankfully had time to lengthen the stirrup leathers to keep his knees from getting too sore. The army's saddles were uncomfortable—cheaply made and flat. With a low pommel and cantle, they were hardly more than a pad of leather to hold the stirrups in place. The rider's well-being was not the priority, but rather using the horse to its full advantage. With the saddle's unobtrusive design that left plenty of room on either side, the soldiers could easily ride double or transport loot and captives when necessary. While it seemed cruel to constantly overburden the horses in that manner, it was customary in the military. The men weren't treated any better. He'd surely feel every league in his aching muscles and backside by the time they arrived. Moving his legs aside, he reached down and adjusted the leathers.

The Campos, with its sprawling vistas and far horizons, provided Kol some distraction from the monotony of travel. Two hours after setting out, the weather turned foul. The company rode through a miserable, cold drizzle, but Kol could not deny the beauty of his surroundings. The Campos's plains offered no shelter. Even the few wind-stunted trees that grew by the seasonal brooks struggled to survive there. The northern Belgrand Bay route allowed them to bypass the harsher climes to the south. This early in the year, being exposed in the rough terrain of the higher elevations, bad weather quickly grew deadly and the way was easily lost. For the first leg of their journey to the eastern fields, they headed along Belgrand Bay's coast instead, where the sea-warmed air kept the rain from freezing into ice and snow.

Their first night, they set up camp by the steep cliffs overlooking the bay. While the others were still unpacking their bedrolls and securing the horses a safe distance from the precipice, Kol wandered toward the ledge. The wind wicked away the sweat from the day's ride, raising goosebumps on his skin. There would be no fire to warm them tonight, as they couldn't risk the light being seen, and had to be content with only the cold moon that painted the waves crashing against the rocks in glittering silver.

Far in the Bay, a lone ship sailed. Its broad, red and black striped canvas caught Kol's eye against the sunset. *Reavers*. This one, with its distinct colors, he had seen before in Smuggler's Port lurking along the coast, lying in wait to attack merchant ships as they approached to anchor. Here, only criminals braved the dangerous coastline that separated the Campos from the stormy waters of Belgrand Bay. Reavers and smugglers frequently used the area to seek refuge from the Sornian Navy or temporarily stash their contraband in the tidal sea caves that pocked the rocky shore. The last time he'd passed this way, Kol had gone down there and seen it himself. He and some other soldiers had climbed down at low tide and found a crate of Madorran poppy spirits waiting to be smuggled into Hedda. Though the drink was forbidden in Sornia, some of the noble families' illicit habits kept it in demand. Kol and his companions had each taken a bottle to sell, but the climb up was too difficult to carry more than that.

“Do you think they’ll give us trouble tonight?” Hobbs asked, coming up beside him. “Scale the cliffs to attack us?”

Kol knew the man from the palace barracks; large and gruff, what he lacked in intelligence he made up for in brute strength. Behind, a few others had followed him to the shoreline and took in the view.

“No,” another soldier replied, joining them. “We’re the only ones stupid enough to climb that.” It took a moment for Kol to recognize Jais with his swollen nose. He braced himself at the sight of his former tent mate, unsure if the man meant to cause trouble.

“They’ll likely sail on to Smuggler’s Port,” Kol replied, trying to sound nonchalant. “It’s high tide; the beach here is underwater.”

“Come,” a voice called out to them from further away. “The captain is rationing out spirits!”

Kol followed the group back to the campsite, where the horses were corralled in a makeshift pen of rope and stakes. They would have to keep a watch to ensure the herd didn’t escape while they slept. But for now, he joined the others sitting haphazardly in the grass, setting out their sleeping places for the night, while Captain Roen, flanked by the second lieutenant and ensign, measured out the rations. With the officers so close, it was unlikely Jais would try to pick a fight. Kol grabbed his bedroll and sat among them with a weary groan; it looked like they were forgoing the tents tonight. Thankfully, the sky had begun to clear, revealing a few bright stars that twinkled in the blackness.

“What’s this?” Hobbs said loudly, cup sloshing as he sat down among them. “Jais, mingling with the commoners?” he taunted, slapping the man on the shoulder. “He beds the princes, you know,” he added archly, turning to Kol.

“Princess,” Jais hissed, covering his face with his hand. “I said ‘princess.’”

“Which princess?” another soldier asked, leaning toward them. With a small frame and no trace of a beard, he was clearly very young, perhaps the same age as Kol when he first entered the military. Kol wondered if the boy was an orphan too, like he was.

“Dagny,” Jais replied. “But you didn’t hear that from me.” Having been handed his dram in a gill cup, he knocked it back at once and grimaced.

“And how did you manage that,” Kol asked, raising a brow, “without being arrested?”

“It’s simple,” Garen interjected, sitting on Kol’s other side. “If you catch a lady’s eye, she sends for you.”

“You too?” Kol asked incredulously, eyeing the man’s grizzled face. Finally, the captain came by, pressing a gill cup of brandy into Kol’s hand. He took a drink, the pungent liquid burning his throat and warming him from the inside.

“Not Dagny; her older sister. When I was younger,” Garen admitted. “The ladies get bored in the palace. You were stationed there for some time; has that never happened to you?”

Kol furrowed his brow. “No. Seems I only catch the attention of a different sort of woman.”

Jais shrugged. "Considering your station, perhaps you shouldn't be so picky."

"I'm not," Kol retorted, dropping his gaze to his cup. "I just never have any coin." To his surprise, the others laughed, and a sudden wave of embarrassment warmed his face.

"Oh!" Hobbs exclaimed with a snort. "That sort. Yes, they expect that."

"Tovey, you're too young for this conversation," Garen reprimanded. Jokingly, he shoved the boy's face with a broad palm and took his brandy cup. "Go to sleep."

"I'm old enough to die in the king's service," Tovey countered, voice muffled behind Garen's hand.

"Ah, that's true." Giving up the argument, Garen downed the brandy.

"Are you from the King's Home for Boys?" Kol asked as Tovey shoved Garen's hand away. Many of the soldiers here were, like himself.

"I'm not a bastard," Tovey replied with a hard look in his eye, "if that's what you're asking. My father died last year. I send my pay to my mother."

Kol tensed. "What's wrong with being a bastard?" he asked sharply.

"Shouldn't want to be that," Tovey retorted, looking away.

"If you want to catch the ladies' eyes, try smiling next time," Hobbs said, resuming his conversation with Kol. "Look at you; you'll frighten them with that expression."

Kol frowned. "What expression?"

"That one!" Hobbs let out a hearty laugh, slapping his knee.

"That's just my face," Kol muttered sullenly. With his sharp features and prominent nose, Kol was all too used to being overlooked by the ladies in favor of men with more refined faces—like Jais and his delicate bone structure.

"I think you've had enough," Garen said, taking Hobb's cup. He tipped it back like he'd done with Tovey's, but found it empty.

"There's never enough," Hobbs commented. The reminder that there would be no more brandy after this round sobered them quickly, and they fell silent.

"So why are we crossing the Campos?" Kol asked at length. "Why the sudden interest in Valenna?"

"Haven't you heard?" Hobbs blurted out in disbelief. "One of the royal ships was attacked on its return from the Iron Coast. It's the talk of every tavern."

"I haven't been in the taverns lately." Kol raised his empty palms. "No coin, remember?"

"It wasn't just a reaver attack," Garen interjected. "It was plundered by Valennians." The old man leaned in, elbows on his knees, and lowered his voice. "They stole a priceless treasure. An Old Andolinian relic made of solid gold. They say it was Leveret's Key."

"Leveret's Key..." Kol repeated under his breath. To hear that an object he knew only from ancient legends might have resurfaced after a millennium left him speechless. For a moment, his thoughts swept him back to his childhood in the orphanage, listening with rapt attention to the legends of Leveret and the Heart of the World for the very first time.

“King Berento would do anything to have it back,” Hobbs continued. “He’d scour the whole world for it again.”

“I see.” Kol rubbed his stubbled chin. “So now the Valennians have caught their attention.”

“They’ll soon wish they hadn’t,” Jais replied. “As far as the king is concerned, the truce is broken.”

“Do they intend to use it to find the Heartstone?” Kol wondered aloud.

“Let them have it,” Hobbs said darkly. “The legends are clear about one thing. If you take what belongs to Mundil, she will come for you.”

A chill crawled over Kol’s skin, and he drew his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

“Don’t say that name out loud,” Garen grumbled, casting his eyes nervously to the heavens. A silence settled over them.

Kol removed his sword belt and boots and lay back on his bed of heavy blankets set upon his cloak. *Did they really find Leveret’s Key?* It seemed impossible. His whole life, he’d heard the legends of Andolin told as bedtime tales in the orphanage, then later in the taverns and around campfires. While he’d always taken their truth for granted, the thought that the ancient relics could reappear now, after a millennium, felt too surreal. Yet, if the Valennians were to use the Key to locate the Heart of Mundil, that would change everything. The truce between the two nations had endured nearly a century because they were evenly matched; if Valenna were to gain an advantage, they’d surely make use of it. Perhaps this assignment meant more than Blackburn and Roen let on.

Removing his throwing knife from its usual place inside the cuff of his boot, Kol put it beneath the sheepskin that would serve as his pillow for the night. Though it had no real worth, the small weapon was his most cherished possession simply because he’d had it the longest; it had been on him when he was found as a child. It had been one of the reasons he’d chosen the military when he left the orphanage. It felt fitting that his oldest belonging was a weapon, like he’d been born to this life. But now, he wanted to be more than just a lowly soldier. Lying awake, staring up into the night sky, he gripped the smooth wooden handle in his palm and found the inscription with his thumb—only two faint letters carved into the side. Someday, he would understand its meaning. Someday, he’d find out who he was, and then his life would be more than this. *Someday...*

## CHAPTER TWO: *A NEW WORLD*

After days of riding, Kol’s unit arrived in the eastern fields of the Campos. They had traveled hard, stopping now and then only to relieve themselves as a group wherever they could graze or water the horses, and camping briefly in the open between sunset and sunrise for fitful bouts of sleep in the fickle weather. When they finally slowed their horses on the last

day, every joint in Kol's limbs ached, and bruises had formed where his knees met the saddle. Clusters of trees blotched the landscape in every direction, gathering in the ravines and small valleys that offered refuge in the harsh, rocky terrain where otherwise only grasses and withered shrubs could grow.

"Dismount and make camp!" Captain Roen's voice rose over the group. At the head of the loosely grouped formation, he stepped down from his stirrup. "Pack away your jackets; there shall be no wearing of uniforms from here on out."

"We're camping here?" Kol muttered, glancing around at the vast nothingness of the prairie. With flat grassland as far as he could see, his surroundings seemed to be mostly sky. The low, overbearing clouds lay unbroken in every direction, like a fleece over the world.

"It certainly seems that way," a nearby soldier replied. He was younger than Kol and looked well-fed, with a broad belly. As the soldier dismounted, his horse gave a loud sigh. Given that the army was always stingy with rations, his stoutness, along with a freshly shaved scalp, made it clear he was new to the ranks. "I don't have a tent," he added, eyes wide with worry. "Nor an assigned tent mate."

"Neither do I," Kol replied, understanding all too well the anxieties of a new recruit. "They let us sort these things out ourselves." After his fight with Jais, he could do with different company. From his vantage in the saddle, Kol searched the fields and spotted the wagons still following in the distance. If he was quick about it, he could grab a pack tent while the supplies were being unloaded. "Come with me."

"What is your name?" the soldier asked, following closely.

Kol braced himself. "Kol."

"It's good to meet you," the soldier replied. "I'm Derrin."

Kol let out a breath, relieved that the uncomfortable question of his family name didn't follow. After untacking, they turned their horses loose in the temporary rope pen just as the other soldiers finished setting it into the ground. A sturdier fence would be built once the camp was established. Striding so fast that Derrin had to jog along to keep up, Kol came to the cargo wagons that had rolled to a stop and clambered up into one immediately. Under the guise of helping to distribute supplies to the soldiers on the ground, he passed bundles and boxes down one after the other until he reached the camp tents, protected from the weather beneath a tarpaulin.

"Quick," he whispered as he passed Derrin the heavy roll. "Go set it with our belongings." The last thing he wanted was for someone to see and try to take it for themselves. Supplies were so short, he'd often had to fend others off for them, and it always seemed that, no matter who started it, Kol was the one who got reprimanded.

After the wagons had been unloaded and the soldiers moved on to pitching the tents, the once-empty field finally began to resemble a military encampment. There would be no officer's pavilion here; everything had to be easy to disassemble and cart away at a moment's notice when on campaign. Shortly after camp had been built and Kol had eaten his meal—hard bread and cheese, a little salted beef—that he sought out Captain Roen.

Passing through tents and around the horse pen, he found the captain beside one of the supply tents, overseeing the distribution of weapons for the night watch. Though each soldier had their own blade, usually a second-hand cutlass or saber, crossbows were expensive, and so were only given sparingly to those on watch.

“Captain,” Kol began as he approached. “About my assignment—”

“Take a few days’ rest first,” Roen interrupted. “At least until the camp is established. In the meantime, pick your scouting party. Take five men with you, and when you do ride out, remember to leave the jackets behind. No uniforms in the field. Is that clear?” He held Kol’s gaze, awaiting a reply.

Kol nodded. “Understood.”

“Good,” Roen went on. “Due east, two or three hours out, you’ll find the Valennian outpost. I want a full assessment: their numbers, the layout of their camp, supply routes—everything. But keep your distance.” He pointed a finger emphatically. “Stay hidden. If the Valennians catch you this far across the border, they won’t hesitate. They’ll kill you on sight.”

“Right,” Kol replied. “Do I get one of those?” he asked hopefully, gesturing to the crossbows lying on a blanket at their feet.

“No,” Roen replied, an eyebrow arching. “Not yet.”

“I’ll need a compass, at least,” Kol insisted. “I hadn’t been issued one.”

Roan pressed his lips together, then reached into his jacket. “This is my own,” he warned, holding out the small brass instrument. “Break it, and it’s coming out of your pay.”

Kol took the compass and carefully tucked it into his haversack.

“Choose your men now, before they’re wasted on picket duty. Dismissed,” Roen clipped the word, turning back to the weapons. He paused. “And Kol,” he added over his shoulder. “Remember, I personally recommended you to the general for this assignment. Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t,” Kol promised eagerly, then hesitated. “And the horse—”

“Bayard is your assigned mount,” Roen snapped, patience gone. “Now go.”

Kol tramped across the grass toward a dozen men gathered around a cookfire. Standing silently, he watched them try to fry something inside a large stew kettle. Black smoke issued from within.

He eyed each of them in turn. Garen, with his grey beard, was the oldest among them, but that also made him the most experienced. He would likely be good to have in the scouting party. Then there was Hobbs, with his muscular frame and broad, square face. Nearly as tall as Kol but twice the weight, Hobbs was likely the strongest among them. Beside him sat Tovey, the youngest by far, with his freckled face overshadowed by a cocked hat too large for his head. *No, not him*, Kol decided. *He’s just a child*. The general had made it clear that this task would be dangerous.

His gaze moved onto the next soldier, Jais. He was newly recruited and around Kol's age, but unlike Kol, he kept his scalp and beard neatly shaved in the current fashion. The man was from a wealthy merchant family and would likely buy himself a promotion soon, but in the meantime, he was of the same rank as Kol. Given their personal squabbles, he wasn't sure if Jais could take orders from him without causing more trouble. If he could, his sharp wit, along with the high regard the others had for him, would make him a valuable asset.

"I've been given orders," Kol announced, crossing his arms. "To form a scouting party. I need five men. We ride out in a few days to survey the eastern fields." He paused, letting the words hang in the cold air as he gauged their reactions.

"I'm in!" Tovey jumped up, waving his hand eagerly.

Kol didn't hesitate. "Not you."

"But—" Tovey began, looking heartbroken.

"Sit down," Kol said firmly.

"I'll do it," Garen offered from his spot on a log. "I wouldn't mind seeing what's out there."

"Same here," Hobbs grunted, poking the contents of the stew kettle with a stick. "I'm in."

Kol turned his attention to the others sitting by the fire, most of whom avoided his gaze. "I need three more."

The silence stretched, broken only by the hissing of the kettle over the coals. Finally, Jais let out a sharp breath. "I'll do it," he conceded, though he didn't meet Kol's eyes. "It beats picket duty."

"You two—" Kol pointed to a pair of soldiers trying to blend into the shadows nearby. "Names?"

"Hemet," the first replied, a plain man with beady eyes.

"Saer," answered the other, unfolding a wiry frame with long, pointed features that reminded Kol of a crane.

"You make five," Kol ordered, relishing the unfamiliar weight of authority. "We'll rest a few days. When we ride out, I'll explain the assignment then."

He cut the conversation short as the officers made their rounds, rationing the evening spirits. Captain Roen approached, handing Kol a gill cup filled with brandy. Kol took it, downed the burning liquid in one swallow, and turned to leave.

"Too good to drink with us now?" Jais scoffed behind him.

Kol paused but didn't look back. "Next time," he replied over his shoulder. "There's something I need to do."

Hurrying to his tent, Kol found Derrin not far off amid a group that had gathered, drinks in hand. It seemed the recruit had a knack for making friends, as already the others were laughing heartily at something he'd said. Inside, Kol pulled out the map to get a good

look at it before heading out. While the general location of the Valennian outpost had been roughly sketched, there were no further details. Filling it in would be up to him, and the first thing he wanted to find was the enemy garrison. With the map's features fresh in his mind, he folded it and slipped it into his haversack.

He grabbed a few other items and packed them away, then reached for his green jacket. *No uniforms*, he remembered. It felt strange to leave it behind, but plain clothes would be less visible in the field. Instead, he grabbed his thick oilskin cloak and threw it around his shoulders. Since this new assignment was of the utmost importance, not only to Sornia but to him personally, he had to do everything he could to ensure its success. *I need to see things for myself first*. Keeping five men and their horses hidden from the Valennians in unfamiliar surroundings would be far more difficult than going alone. It was risky, he knew that, but he couldn't take any chances of them being seen. If this was to go well, he needed to see it for himself first. Striding across camp, he came to the pen and found Bayard.

Soldiers commonly used their assigned horses in their free time, often going hunting afield to supplement their rations, so he likely wouldn't be missed. As he had no hunting bow, if anyone asked, he'd say he was gathering medicinal herbs. Since many kinds grew wild in the Campos, it wouldn't seem too suspicious. Soon, he had readied Bayard and headed toward the eastern horizon.

Alone, Kol traveled quickly. After enduring about an hour of Bayard's jarring trot, he pulled the reins, slowing to a walk. Though the horse was just as weary as he was from days of travel, leaving the herd behind made the animal anxious. Kol could sympathize; riding alone was always dangerous. If he should fall or otherwise become unhorsed, he could easily die. Though spring was beginning to set in, with young leaves already appearing on branches, the wind still carried the bite of winter. The prolonged effort of rising in the saddle to the rhythm of Bayard's ungainly trot had kept Kol warm, but being stranded in the wilderness so early in the year, with the threat of snow not yet passed, could be deadly.

The lowering sun broke through the clouds and shone on his back as he rode eastward. He took in the landscape. Knowing he may soon have to find his way in the dark, Kol tried to commit every ridge, brook, and copse to memory. *I must be nearing the Valennian outpost by now*. Roen's compass guided him onward.

After he'd ridden about three leagues from camp, as the bright rays slanted across the fields, painting them in a wash of gold, a distinct shape moving in the distance ahead startled him. He'd only caught a glimpse before it vanished behind a rise, but the knot in his stomach reminded him he might not be alone.

Kol hopped down from the saddle and tied a hasty hobble around Bayard's forelimbs. Crouching in the grass, he crept up the slope to get a better look. Just as he feared, a horse and rider galloped northward in the field below, cutting across his path. The rider seemed to be looking in the other direction. Kol let out a breath. Then, the horse halted. *Shit!* Kol winced, pulse racing. *Did he see me?* He ducked lower into the grass.

*It must be a Valennian...* The figure turned, and Kol's mouth parted in surprise. Long, loose hair—a shade of brown, he guessed, though it was unclear from so far away—hung over narrow shoulders, cascading down the slim back to a cinched waist. This was no soldier. *A woman?* He blinked, taken aback. *Out here, alone?* Unarmed in the wilderness, among the wolves and large prairie cats, that would be incredibly dangerous. *Is she lost?*

He watched motionless as she dismounted and let her horse graze, leisurely petting its mane. *No, not lost. But what would a woman be doing so far from the safety of the outpost?* It had been so long since he'd last seen a woman, he couldn't look away. His mind raced to find a plausible explanation for her presence there. Beneath her grey cloak that billowed behind her, rather than riding clothes, she wore a gown cut in a foreign style, with ruffles at the elbows and a low neckline. The pale gold brocade of the fabric shimmered in the evening light, and jewelry glittered on her neck and ears. With the amber rays illuminating her silhouette against the distant dark clouds, the pretty scene reminded him of the fine paintings that adorned the palace walls. As she bent down and pulled her skirts up her slender leg to tighten the laces of her riding boot, Kol's pulse rose. It took him a moment to realize he was staring at her lacey under-breeches. His face burned, and he turned away, struck by a strange mix of guilt and fascination. He was supposed to be scouting the area, not ogling Valennian women. *This is not why I'm here,* he reminded himself, his thoughts returning to his mission. Resolutely, he shifted his attention to the fields beyond. He needed to find the outpost.

But there was nothing else around, only grass and trees as far as he could see. Sneaking back down the slope, he returned to his horse and mounted up again. Keeping out of sight, he passed widely around the field where he had left the Valennian woman and continued eastward, all the while puzzling over seeing her. He had a feeling that her unexpected presence meant something, but he wasn't sure what it was.

About five leagues from the Sornian encampment, he finally spied signs of civilization as smoke rose above the trees ahead. Upon a hill overlooking the western fields, a large building came into view as he drew nearer. Around it lay stables and paddocks with horses grazing peacefully. The stone house was plainly built, but so massive that it could shelter many people under its roof. *Could that be the barracks?* he wondered. He'd have to see the rest of the outpost to know for certain, but he gave it a wide berth to be safe. Yet, he saw no one about the grounds as he passed, keeping close to the trees for cover. *Perhaps they're at mess...*

Cresting the rise, Kol drew up toward the house's front entrance, then halted Bayard behind a cover of tall shrubs. A rider approached, the horse's shod hooves crunching loudly on the gravel path, and dismounted near the entrance. Kol craned his neck over the foliage to get a better look.

A middle-aged man, with a dark mustache and silver at his temples, hastened toward the door. His long hair was tied back at the nape of his neck, with the length hanging over his large rain cloak. Even so, the man's confident posture and precise, quick steps

revealed a life of military training. Soon, the door opened and another figure stepped out, taking the other man's horse by the reins. This one was more portly than the first, yet still moved with the same directness, his footsteps receding in an even march as he led the horse away. The other vanished into the building. *I was right*, Kol thought with satisfaction. *This has to be the barracks.* His first task was already complete. After waiting until all was quiet again, he continued onward.

In the grey twilight, a dirt road lay before him, winding over the landscape. Beyond the fields surrounding the barracks, a cluster of small buildings lined unpaved roads. *This*, he realized with a jolt of excitement, *must be the outpost!* He had to take a closer look. All the while he approached the settlement, his mind was on the woman he'd seen in the Campos.

Warm hearth-light spilled from the windows of the small buildings ahead. The unfamiliarity of his surroundings intrigued him. He'd never left his homeland before, save for the times he'd ventured into the Campos. But that was merely wilderness, a natural extension of his homeland's borders. This was his first time laying eyes on a truly foreign land. A new world lay before him, and the thought made him shiver—not from fear or apprehension, but from some newfound feeling he couldn't name, as though the walls of his small world suddenly flung open wide. He wanted to see more.

The style and material of the structures were not particularly unusual—after all, the two nations were once colonies of the same empire. Yet they felt foreign. Compared to the compact shape and the cramped heights of the architecture in Hedda, the buildings here sprawled comfortably over the open ground, as though they had all the space in the world. A few people came and went from the few shops, one of which seemed to be a tavern, judging by the voices that carried from within. The rich scent of wood-smoke filled the chilly air, mingled with the savory aroma of spiced meats over fire. Kol's stomach growled; all he had brought with him was hardtack and a waterskin. Though the outpost was modest, certainly nothing compared to the sprawling port city he'd come from, it surprised him to think such a settlement could be supported by the barracks' soldiers and their families. *There must be a larger military presence here than I realized.* The wind rose, carrying the scent of rain and burying the moon behind clouds, cloaking the land in shadow. He needed to estimate their number. But with the cold night setting in, many were likely retiring to their beds, if not already asleep. He'd have to come back in the daylight. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Reluctantly, he turned Bayard homeward, hoping to return before the coming storm.

### CHAPTER THREE: *THE COMPASS*

Kol woke at first light, shaken back into reality by unsettling dreams. The nightmares that plagued him all of his life didn't seem to care how little he slept each night, nor how his travel-worn body ached for rest. Though they ebbed and flowed over the years, it seemed his recent sighting of Belgrand Bay agitated his anxieties. He tried to blink the images away, but the dark, tempest-tossed sea lingered in his mind. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep; soon, the encampment would be roused by orders to wake. Normally, this was followed by inspection, but the officers were often lax about such things when on campaign in the Campos, away from Blackburn's critical gaze. Kol dressed quickly, buttoning his fall-front breeches over his linen shirt. His breath plumed white in the crisp air. He wished he could put on his wool jacket, but didn't want to be caned for disobedience.

Across the tent, Derrin stirred. He gave a loud snort and sat, rubbing his eyes. "Good heavens, are you awake already?" he asked in disbelief, seeing Kol up already. "It seems you only just came in. Don't you sleep?"

"Sometimes," Kol replied darkly.

"I dreamed I was at home." Derrin's tone grew wistful, "We were celebrating Candletide, and Father was there, frying bacon."

Kol gave a half smile. "That sounds like a good dream."

"Do you ever miss home?" Derrin asked, buttoning the knees of his breeches over his stockings.

"No." It wasn't a lie; Kol had no home to miss. Whenever it came time for his yearly leave, he always declined it just to keep a roof—or canvas—over his head. But he couldn't imagine choosing this life if he had anywhere better to be. "Why are you here?"

"I'm the second son," Derrin explained. "I won't inherit anything, but Father promised he'd pay for my advancement through the ranks so I'll have a comfortable life."

"*Comfortable?*" Kol repeated incredulously. "Aren't you afraid of war?"

Derrin snorted. "We've been at peace for a hundred years. I'm sure whatever is going on in the Campos can be resolved with a bit of diplomacy. What about you?" he countered. "Why are you here?"

Kol opened his mouth, unprepared for that question. "There aren't a lot of places to go after the King's Home for Boys," he finally replied. "They gave us drudgework, not an education. It was this or the dicing-house. And after ten years, soldiering is all I know."

"That's a long time," Derrin commented, "to not be promoted."

Kol flinched. "Why would they choose me when so many are willing to pay a fortune for it?"

"Where does your pay go, then?" Derrin asked, not unkindly.

"There's so little of it to begin with," Kol replied. "But last winter, I bought new riding boots. The year before that, an oilskin. This year, I'm saving for a new sword. These things are expensive," he sighed with exasperation. "And the rations are never enough for me; I have to supplement them out of my pay with beef from the market. Don't you?"

“No,” Derrin muttered, self-consciously rubbing his neck. “My father buys all of that for me. Sends it in a package.”

The call to wake pierced the outside silence. The two tent mates buckled on their sword belts before stepping out into the chill air. After muster and a small breakfast of yesterday’s salt pork on toasted bread, they spent the rest of the morning drilling intensely to make up for the lack of travel, only stopping well after midday. All the while, Kol was eager to be done, his thoughts already roaming the eastern fields, where he hoped to catch a glimpse of the Valennian woman again. More importantly, he still had no guess as to the number of soldiers in the barracks, nor had he located the routes that connected the outpost to the rest of Valenna. He had to return in daylight.

When he was finally free to tack up Bayard and ride out, the clouds had parted and sunlight warmed his face. He tightened the girth, stepped up into the saddle, and turned east. Blue skies lay before him, the warm air filled with the fresh, herbaceous scent of spring. He pressed his heels into Bayard’s sides and headed into the wilderness, leaving winter’s chill behind him.

Trotting down into a shallow valley, carpeted with low-lying herbs whose wiry branches were just beginning to bud with spring leaves, he heard the muffled pat of hoofbeats, like an echo, behind him. He swung his horse around. Behind him, the boy Tovey trotted along on a borrowed horse, his freckled face scrunched up against the sunlight.

Kol sighed loudly. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, uh. Nothing,” Tovey replied off-handedly, trotting up beside him. “Just hunting, you know...” He trailed off with a shrug.

“You’re following me,” Kol said flatly. “Turn around and go back.” With that, he trotted off again.

“I want to come,” Tovey said, spurring his horse behind him. “I can be a lookout.”

Kol halted as the boy drew alongside him, looking him in the eye. “No. I’m ordering you to go back.”

“You can’t give me orders,” Tovey countered. “We’re the same rank. I just want to know what’s out there.”

“Do you?” Leaning in, Kol lowered his voice, “Do you really want to know what’s out there?”

“Yes,” Tovey whispered. Following Kol’s lead, he bent toward him, balancing precariously on the saddle. “I can keep a secret.”

“Good,” Kol said under his breath, and cupped a hand around his mouth. “I’ll tell you—” Grabbing the boy’s shoulder, Kol shoved him away and Tovey tumbled into the grass with a small cry of surprise. Kol urged Bayard into a canter and rode off. Chuckling, he left Tovey scrambling to catch his horse as it trotted homeward.

Since he had been there and back once already, the journey felt familiar now, and so the distance seemed to pass more quickly. There was no more meandering while he found his heading. With the land so flat and open, the landmarks he followed, having committed

them to memory, could be seen for leagues around. There was no chance of getting lost in broad daylight under fair weather. Bayard, too, seemed to know the way this time, charging straight onward.

As Kol neared the eastern fields of the Campos, he slowed to a walk. The air grew fragrant with the scent of wild lavender, crushed beneath his horse's hooves. Though he searched carefully, glancing from one shadow to the next, he saw no sign of the Valennian woman. He tried to shrug off his disappointment. *Of course she wouldn't be here again. Why would she?* Still, he lingered there, dismounting to relieve himself, then loosening the saddle girth to let Bayard graze hungrily, all the while keeping a sharp watch.

Here and there, the grass was churned in small patches, revealing fresh soil beneath, stamped with the prints of iron horseshoes. He wondered if she had been there that morning, and then stopped himself. *Don't get distracted.* And yet, her presence, as a lone, unarmed woman in the wilds of the Campos, was something he couldn't account for, given what he knew of the outpost. Perhaps it was only natural, and indeed his duty as a scout, to investigate further. A nagging in his gut told him it meant something, and he needed to discover what. He continued onward toward the barracks.

When he neared the rear of the barrack house in the broad daylight, he kept close behind the thick shrubs and trees that surrounded the grounds, shielding him from any that might watch from even the highest windows. Through the foliage, he searched for signs of movement, and froze as a figure emerged from a door.

The young man was thin, yet he still bore the softness of childhood in his features. He carried a hunting bow slung over his shoulder. Long blond hair hung down his back, tied with a black ribbon at the nape of his neck—quite unlike the close-cropped fashion in Sornia. His bright, well-pressed wool jacket and tall riding boots, polished with care, betrayed a life of discipline. *Definitely a soldier.* Kol waited until the young man disappeared into the stables before he hurried on his way. Keeping to the sheltering elms for cover, he swung wide around the front of the imposing stone building, hidden from its windows that loomed over the landscape like dark, watchful eyes.

He cut through farmers' fields, passing by small cottages with little gardens, their barns barely large enough to house a couple of horses or cattle. Their small fieldstone chimneys filled the air with the comforting scent of wood-smoke. Soon, he came to the main road, and pulled his hood up to hide his face and hair, though the sun was bright and warm.

Going among them was an immense risk, he knew, but it was the surest and swiftest way to get the information he needed to complete the map. So long as he hid himself well beneath his cloak and kept to the outskirts of the settlement, he could likely pass through without drawing attention. Indeed, none seemed to pay him any notice as he approached the cluster of buildings that lined the main road. He avoided the eyes of the people he passed, pulling his hood further over his face. While the men wore their hair long, tied neatly back in the same unusual style as the young soldier, the women's style was not much different from what he was used to. Other than that, and some strangeness in the cut of the

clothing, there weren't any obvious differences that would set Kol apart as Sornian at a glance, so long as he hid his hair beneath his cloak. Though it had been months since he cut it—now far too long to be fashionable by Sornian standards—it still only skimmed his shoulders, hanging loosely about his face in thick black curls. This would certainly mark him as foreign.

On the green, close to the market square, Kol dismounted and tied his horse near a watering trough beside the unpaved road. While Bayard drank greedily, Kol took advantage of finding himself alone there and dug through his haversack. He pulled out the map and, with a bit of charcoal he'd brought with him, filled in what he could see of the buildings and streets around him. Though he wanted to write *market* upon the parchment, the lump of coal didn't make fine enough lines for letters, and anyway, he didn't know how to spell the word.

Leaving Bayard to graze, he ventured off to get a better view of the main road, which curved out of sight behind a blacksmith's shop. With the map tucked beneath his arm, he snuck behind the building, and followed the road with his gaze until it disappeared behind a rise in the distance. Kol pressed his lips together. *I wonder where it leads?*

"Can I help you?" a deep voice jarred him from his thoughts. The accent was so strange and thick, it took him a moment to understand the words, but the warning in the tone was unmistakable.

Without looking back, Kol walked briskly onward, holding his hood over his brow. "You there—" the man called out after him.

Kol didn't hear the rest as he hurried around the corner, shoving the map into his haversack. Roen's warning hammered in his mind: *They'll kill you on sight*. He slunk down one alley, then another. The smell of horse dung hung thickly in the air as he darted between rolling carriages and ducked behind groups of people carrying packages. When he no longer heard the quick, heavy steps that followed him, he slowed to catch his breath.

Kol turned, trying to find his bearings in the shadow of the tall brick buildings that surrounded him, until something caught his eye in the shop window beside him.

A pair of andirons rested just behind the glass, holding rolls of embroidered fabric on display. However, it was the unusual, figural shapes of the metal that captured his attention. Two serpentine sea creatures, expertly cast in brass, adorned each andiron. Their tails entwined around a gleaming ship, its perpetually billowing sails frozen in a single sculpted moment.

Then, his attention shifted to movement behind the window, and his breath caught in his throat. On the other side of the glass stood the Valennian woman from the Campos, her arms laden with goods. She wore the same gold brocade bodice and skirt, which seemed to shimmer even beneath her rain cloak. He only caught a glimpse of her face before she turned and strode away.

Kol pulled his hood lower over his eyes and peered inside. There were other women browsing the shelves, and a well-dressed man sitting at a table with his back to the window,

writing in a ledger. Like the other men, his long brown hair was tied with a ribbon. Squinting, Kol tried to find her again, but his view was blocked by another young woman, with a freckled face and ginger curls, wearing a dingy apron, who came to the table where the man sat to pay for her merchandise. As she looked up, her eyes met his, and narrowed. Startled, Kol scrambled back from the window, turning so fast that he bumped into someone behind him. Packages tumbled to the ground with the crash of shattering glass.

“Oh!” a soft voice exclaimed, and Kol found himself looking down into the face of the very Valennian woman he’d been watching, her eyes wide with surprise.

The scent of rosewater enveloped him, cutting through the dust and horse-sweat of his own clothes. Sweet and clean, it was a stark, dizzying contrast to the stench of unwashed bodies and open privies of the soldier’s camp he was used to. At his feet, the sweet-smelling liquid pooled from a broken bottle, seeping into the paper-wrapped boxes, soaking the edges of her ruffled petticoats.

“I’m so sorry—” she began, a strange lilt in her voice. Her eyes, the color of Belgrand Bay before a storm, searched to meet his beneath his hood. He braced himself for a reprimand, the contempt of those above him that had become all too familiar since his first caning. But no anger showed on her face, only concern.

He opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it again. His accent would surely give him away. He knew he should flee, that he risked getting caught. Yet, as she crouched to collect her dropped things, he bent down to help.

“Thank you,” she said, tucking the packages under her arm as he handed them to her.

Kol stared, unthinking, unable to turn his eyes away from her, until something sharp pricked his skin. He drew his hand back with a gasp. A small bead of ruby blood welled up on the pad of his thumb where a shard of glass had nicked it.

“Are you all right?” she asked. Without hesitation, she pulled out a small embroidered handkerchief and reached for his hand.

Kol flinched as she pressed the fine cloth to his skin. Her touch was unexpectedly light and warm, shocking against his cold, rough hand. He stared at the white silk now staining red against his dirt-streaked skin, his mind reeling in confusion. *What is she doing?* He expected her to recoil, to look at his grime with disgust, but she didn’t. She wasn’t like the palace ladies who looked through him as if he were nothing at all; she saw him, and for some reason he couldn’t fathom, she cared.

He blinked, his thoughts whirling in confusion. Then, he noticed the horsehair that clung to her bodice, her short nails edged with dirt, like his own. The toes of her boots, peeking out from beneath her skirts, were nearly caked as thick with mud as his. *She rode here, readied her own horse...* And she was clearly no stranger to venturing out alone into the wild terrain of the Campos, despite the dangers lurking in the tall grass. Perhaps he was wrong about her; maybe they weren’t so different after all.

“Have we—” She tilted her head, trying to meet his gaze beneath the shadow of his hood. “Have we met?”

“You should watch where you’re going.” The sharp voice drew him back to his senses as the ginger-haired girl stood over them. Shooting him a dark glare, she knelt to help the other woman gather her things.

“What’s happened?” An older woman, her chestnut hair streaked with grey around her pale forehead, asked as she came out of the shop and stood behind them. Like the woman from the Campos, she wore expensive clothes, and a large ruby necklace glittered at her throat.

“Some clumsy oaf ran into Miss Adella, Your Ladyship,” the girl replied, piling the items into a basket on her arm.

Kol’s face burned with embarrassment as he stood, still clutching the stained kerchief, unable to speak for fear of being discovered. He’d pressed his luck too far.

“I’m sure it was an accident,” the woman from the Campos—Adella—replied.

Kol didn’t wait to hear another word. He turned on his heel and ran through the street, picking his way through the maze of buildings and alleys back to the green where he’d left Bayard. He untied the reins and tightened the girth with unsteady hands.

Kol put a palm over his pounding heart. He hadn’t really been in immediate danger. *So why the strange reaction?* He’d wanted to see her face up close, but hadn’t expected her to be pretty. *Adella.* He was relieved to finally know her name, but a warning in the back of his mind urged him to forget it. *Stop it,* he scolded himself. *That’s not why you’re here. Or is it?* Perhaps that was the true reason he risked going into town; he hadn’t seen her in the fields. His interest in the Valennian woman had jeopardized the mission, and with it, his only chance at a better life. He mounted Bayard and spurred the horse into a frantic gallop toward the open plains.

He pushed his horse hard, soon leaving the small outpost behind him, his heart drumming a frenzied rhythm against his ribs. He had come dangerously close to being caught, exposing his presence to the enemy for a foolish, inexplicable fascination with a highborn woman—an enemy noble. After all, she bore a striking, and most certainly familial, resemblance to the older woman, whom the other had called *Your Ladyship*, carrying her things for her. It seemed so clear to him now—the Valennian’s fine clothing, the sense of entitlement she must bear to be so at ease in the fields around the settlement, and the free time in which to ride for pleasure—all the details revealed a life of privilege. Kol was all too familiar with her kind from the palace at Hedda. He hated them for how they treated people like him. If she had been merely a merchant’s daughter, he wouldn’t feel so conflicted. *And yet...*

She had been kind to him during their brief meeting. He still clutched the handkerchief in his hand, even as he held the reins. *No, forget it. Forget about her.* It was stupid to let himself dwell like this; she didn’t even know he existed. He lifted his hand to drop the handkerchief and rid himself of it, but wavered, unable to let it go. Instead, he tucked it into his haversack.

He had crossed most of the distance back to camp when a distinctive shape slunk through the grass ahead, drawing nearer as he rode. Its long, lithe body and thin tail that ended in a slight curl could only be one thing. *A prairie cat.* Bayard tossed his head and let out a loud snort that reverberated through Kol's legs as he urged him onward.

"Keep going," he pleaded under his breath. "We can outrun it."

Bayard tossed his head again and again, fighting against the bit. Then, with a sudden duck of the neck, the horse kicked up its hindquarters and sent Kol through the air. Green and blue blurred together as he rolled across the ground. Sitting up, he clutched his spinning head, then groaned to himself when he spotted Bayard bolting home. It would be a long walk back to camp, and it would be dark soon.

Hairs bristled on his neck, tingling down his back. Squinting over the distance, Kol scanned the fields, but the cat was nowhere to be seen. *That's odd...* Shrugging it off, he pulled Roen's compass from his bag.

A massive force slammed him to the ground, sharp points digging into the thick canvas of his cloak. He let out a cry and, rolling in the grass, grabbed handfuls of furred flesh. Struggling against its weight, he pushed the beast away from his body, keeping it at arm's length. Fangs flashed dangerously close to his face. Beneath him, his scabbard dug into his back; he couldn't draw his cutlass.

As he turned away from the snapping jaws, a hard, smooth surface brushed across his scalp. He pried his fingers into the soil, grabbed the rock and swung it with all his might. With a dull thud, it connected against the cat's skull, sending the creature tumbling.

Gasping for air, Kol jumped to his feet. The prairie cat stumbled, shook its head, and bounded away, its dun coat soon blending into the landscape. Wiping his sweaty palms on his breeches, Kol huffed to catch his breath.

"Shit," he muttered. There was no time to waste if he wanted to get back before dark.

The lowering sun painted the clouds in red and gold when Kol returned to camp, shirt soaked with sweat despite the cool breezes that swept over the fields. Finding Bayard grazing just outside the pen, content to be reunited with his herd, he untacked the animal and released him with the others.

Stepping inside his tent, Kol emptied the contents of his haversack onto his bed to find the last of the smoked beef he'd bought in Hedda. Out fell the map, still folded but a bit more rumpled than before. He opened it to see if his markings had been smudged in the turmoil of his travel. The northeastern edge was still incomplete; in his recklessness, he'd neglected his assignment. He'd been so flustered after meeting the Valennian woman face to face, he ran off without finding the route connecting the outpost to the rest of the country. He would need to do that before bringing the others. *I'll have to go back again tomorrow.* His stomach rumbled loudly; putting the thought aside for now, he reached for the salt beef, wrapped in wax cloth, and his heart dropped. *Where's the compass?* He dug through the pile

of his things, turned his haversack inside out, frantically searched his pockets, but to no avail. It was gone.

Grimacing, he smacked his forehead. He'd been using it when the cat attacked; it must still be in the field. He'd have to search for it in a sea of tall grass. But there was nothing he could do about it now. *That's tomorrow's problem.* Grabbing the wrapped meat, he went out and found the others seated by a fire, cups already in hand. Kol let out a breath in defeat. He hadn't returned in time for his gill of spirits, but he'd rather go without it than face Captain Roen after losing his compass.

"Where've you been?" Garen asked as Kol sat among them. "The captain doled out evening rations, but you missed it."

Kol unwrapped the salted beef, his stomach grumbling loudly. "Hunting," he replied, not meeting their eyes. "Bayard threw me, and I had to walk back."

"You're lying," Jais scoffed. His nose was still bruised yellow-green from their previous altercation, but his voice was once again filled with his usual arrogance. "You've been scouting alone. You want to take all the credit for yourself so they'll give you the lieutenant position."

Kol's face burned with anger, but he bit his lips. There was no denying that he'd hoped for promotion, same as they all did.

"Well, you won't get it. I've already handed over the gold to Roen to secure it." Jais grinned with satisfaction. "Once it's official, I'll be the one giving orders, and you can go back to digging privies, where you belong."

Kol took a deep breath, the cold air stinging his lungs. Clearly, Jais was trying to goad him into a fight. Meeting his eyes, Kol could read the expectation of triumph on the other man's face, and wanted to knock the smirk away. But with Blackburn's warning still ringing in his head, he knew better than that. After ten years, this assignment would likely be his last chance. If he gave in now, he'd lose hope of ever making something of himself, and he'd surely be caned for fighting again. Instead, he turned his attention back to the salted beef, tamping down the rage that threatened to overcome him.

Jais reached over and snatched the chunk of meat from Kol's hand. "Look at that," he mused, turning it over. "I haven't had any of the good cuts since we left Hedda." He picked off a piece and popped it into his mouth.

"Give it back, Jais," Garen warned. The others sitting around the fire watched, motionless and silent.

Jais ignored him. With his eyes locked on Kol's, he took another bite. "You're just a poor, nameless bastard," he said, eyebrows peaked with feigned sympathy. "Unwanted and alone, without a friend in the world. And that's all you'll ever be."

Kol froze, jaw clenching. Every muscle in his body tensed. The familiar, fiery urge to strike surged through him. The insults were one thing, but that was the last of his salted beef, which he'd spent hard-earned money on. Now, his evening meal would be only hardtack and water, and Jais knew it. He drew a deep breath.

“Have it,” Kol said flatly, a forced calm in his voice. “It’s rotten anyway, so it’s only fitting for you.” The others snickered as he turned and walked away from the fire, the rumbling in his stomach drowned out by the burning indignation in his heart. But he had made a promise to himself, and he would keep it, even if it meant swallowing his pride.

Back in his tent, Kol pulled off his boots and collapsed onto his makeshift bed. The scratches the cat had left on his back burned, but he ignored the pain. Thoughts of the lost compass, Jais’s taunts, and his embarrassment in front of the Valennian woman all swirled into a bitter medley of defeat. Jais’s words stung all the more because they were true. If Edmont’s position was already taken, then this assignment may amount to so much trouble and work for nothing. And if Kol couldn’t find the compass in the sea of tall grass, his pay would be docked for the next few months. Hunger left him restless, but with the taste of beef still on his tongue, he knew the hardtack wouldn’t satisfy it. He hoped his exhaustion would put him to sleep, where he could forget some of his troubles, for the time being.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: *THE EDGE OF THE MAP*

The emptiness in Kol’s belly had tainted his dreams with a fitful uneasiness. Like so many nights before, dark images swam through the troubled waters of his sleeping mind. Sharks, eels and rays circled great ships in the night. A woman, her features shrouded in shadow, called out to him, reaching out a hand, and his heart ached with long-buried memories of love and comfort.

In an instant, she fell away, leaving only the ink-black sea. A long, sinewy shape wove through the waves, a creature he’d never seen before in waking or dreaming. A large, predatory eye turned, unblinking, in his direction. Long, toothy jaws parted in anticipation.

Kol woke with a gasp. Cold dew clung to his skin. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, waiting for his heartbeat to settle. While he was used to strange dreams, they had always dissipated quickly. This time, the visions lingered in his mind like an ember in the dark. The woman was new to him, but there was something strangely familiar about her presence. *Was that my mother?* He must’ve had a mother, of course, but, try as he might, he could never remember her. After so many years in the orphanage and then the military, his heart secretly longed for the simple comfort of a true home, a place where he could belong, a family to remember. But with his current circumstances, that hope was far out of reach. He shook his head, blinking the images away. Seeing the Valennian noblewomen together, who he assumed to be mother and daughter by their similar features, must’ve prompted the unusual dream. *Yes, that’s all it was.* And the andirons he’d seen in the shop, with the sea serpent design, had surely inspired the rest. He let out a long breath and put it all out of mind.

By the faint light peeking through the tent, he knew that was all the sleep he'd get before the call to wake. He dressed, and as he pulled on his boots, his tent mate stirred.

"Let me borrow your horse," Kol said, even before Derrin had opened his eyes.

"What?" Derrin squinted at him.

"Mine needs a rest," Kol explained. "You won't be riding today, right?"

Derrin rubbed his face. "Smokey. He's the—"

"The grey," Kol interrupted. "I know. Thanks," he added, and left.

During morning muster, dark clouds gathered. Kol's mind remained on the compass even as he moved through the routine drill, working in formation alongside the other soldiers. When he was finally free of his daily duties to ride out into the Campos, rain pattered on his face.

As Kol crossed the camp, he stopped beside Captain Roen's tent. A strange voice carried from inside, and he stepped closer to listen.

"Greed will do the work for us," Roen said, replying to the question Kol had missed, muffled through the heavy canvas. "If it's there, we will find it."

"Don't forget our arrangement," a voice spoke in a strong Valennian accent.

"Yes, of course," came Roen's ingratiating reply. "It will be done as requested."

There was a mutter of agreement from the officers inside. Then, the canvas flung open, and a figure emerged. Kol only caught a glimpse of the cloaked stranger as he ducked around the corner of the tent. *Shit*, he thought, heart pounding at the risk of being caught. *What is going on?*

"Can we really trust him?" one of the officers asked after the stranger had left, drawing Kol's attention back to the conversation inside.

"I'm not sure," Roen replied. "Prince Matei seems to. We'll know for certain after the scouts finish their investigation. Then, we'll see if his information lines up with their report." Boots shuffled within, and Kol hurried on his way to keep from being seen eavesdropping.

Coming to the pen, he found Bayard, who now seemed to expect their daily jaunts, greeting him with perked ears.

"Not today," Kol said, stroking the gelding's soft neck. Finding Smokey among the herd, Kol readied the animal quickly in the hopes of finding the compass before yesterday's tracks weathered away.

Not far after leaving camp behind, he came to the field where he'd lost the compass. He dismounted to search for it, but couldn't quite remember exactly where the prairie cat had attacked him. The area was too vast to search thoroughly, and already the rain had erased any signs from the grass. Kol let out a long breath in resignation and mounted up empty-handed. Though he rode out with the intention of searching for the compass, he continued eastward toward the Valennian outpost, compelled by duty and curiosity.

An hour from camp, long after the rain had tapered off, he spotted a rider in the distance to the east, the dark shape passing between stands of trees that poked the shallow valley of a small stream. He wondered if it was the Valennian woman. *Adella*. Simply knowing her name felt like an intimacy he hadn't earned. Below, the rider dismounted at the water's edge to let the horse drink. Even over the distance, her long skirts, this time in a sea blue rather than gold, were clearly visible. Kol recognized the wide blaze running down her horse's muzzle, and his heart jumped. *It's her*. He guided Smokey behind a clump of tall shrubs, their branches already thick with fresh, yellow-green leaves, and climbed down from the saddle. Since his horse needed a rest anyway, he loosened the girth and let him graze. With the reins in his hand, Kol crouched behind the shrub, stretching his weary muscles and sore back. Absent-mindedly, he watched the woman below as she picked some wild herbs at her feet and tucked them into her bag.

"What are you doing?" a voice said behind him, startling Kol so much that he lost his balance and fell backwards onto the wet grass.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Kol whispered angrily as Tovey loomed over him on horseback. "Get down!"

The boy dismounted and joined him behind the cover. They knelt side by side, watching the figure in the distance. "Are we spying?" Tovey asked at length.

"You shouldn't have followed me," Kol reprimanded. "It's too dangerous."

Tovey scrunched his freckled face. "Is that a woman?"

"I didn't expect to see her here," Kol muttered, more to himself than to the boy. "She's a lot further west today."

"Are you familiar with her?" Tovey asked, raising a brow.

"Yes—I mean, no," Kol amended quickly. "But I've seen her around."

"Is she lost?" Tovey asked with a hint of concern.

"I don't think so," Kol replied. "She seems to know the area well."

The boy shivered and drew his cloak tighter around him. "Well, she's hardier than most, wanting to ride in this desolate place."

Kol chuckled. "True," he admitted. Perhaps she wasn't much like the other aristocrats he'd met after all. Maybe she was also searching for a way to escape the pressures of society, just like he was.

They watched quietly for a while until Tovey broke the silence again. "You know, we have women in Sornia—"

"We're not in Sornia," Kol interrupted with a smirk. "Come on; we'll go around and leave her in peace."

As they mounted up, Kol deliberated whether to send the boy back to camp or let him come with him to the outpost, until he remembered the prairie cat. The ride back would be far more dangerous to do alone. Instead, he let Tovey follow, but led him wide of the barracks, well out of sight of the grounds.

They passed small cottages with crop fields and kitchen gardens, still empty after last year's harvest. Though they kept at a distance, Kol caught glimpses of the occupants now and then—an old man throwing seed to his doves, a stout woman scrambling to bring the laundry in from a clothesline in the wind.

Eventually, they came to the center of the outpost, which was hardly more than a few rows of shops around a market square, and the green where Kol had watered Bayard the day before. Modest townhouses filled the spaces between the shops, but there weren't many people about. All in all, Kol figured, such a settlement could probably support a hundred people, two hundred at most. He wondered which building the Valennian woman called home. None seemed grand enough for nobility.

"Where are the soldiers?" Tovey asked. "No one is in uniform."

"Neither are we," Kol replied. "This is contested territory. Openly displaying a military presence here would be an act of war, so they may try to hide it."

"Oh, I see," Tovey said, reining his horse nearer to Kol's. "Subterfuge. Like we've been doing."

"Right." Though the boy's words were spoken lightly, they hit Kol like a stone. Sneaking in the shadows, spying on the Valennian woman, relaying information back to Roen—suddenly, it all weighed heavily on his heart, sinking down into his gut. He pulled his water flask from his haversack and took a swig to wash the feeling away.

They continued to follow a ridge that overlooked the main road, leaving the buildings behind until a slope in the landscape, topped with trees, limited their view. Soon, a distant roar rumbled ahead.

"Wait here," Kol ordered. "I want to see what's beyond."

Tovey opened his mouth to protest, but Kol urged his horse into a trot, leaving the boy behind.

At the crest, Kol halted. Beneath the heavy grey clouds, the dirt road stretched before him, descending toward the steep banks of a broad, rushing river that sprawled as far as he could see in either direction. A wooden trestle bridge spanned the turbulent water, joining the road on either side of its deep gully. Far to the north, the tall, crowded buildings of a large city loomed like shadows in the mist. The slope of the land and the distant cries of gulls made it easy to imagine the sea lay not far beyond. From his high vantage point, he scanned the river's path upstream and down. The waters thundered wide, deep, and fast; it would be impossible to ford or ferry across. The bridge was the only path connecting the outpost to the rest of civilization.

"Is that Valenna?" Tovey asked, drawing beside him on his horse.

"I told you to wait back there," Kol grumbled.

"I waited," Tovey replied with a shrug.

Kol turned Smokey around. "I've seen all I need to see today. Let's go." He needed to hurry back while it was still fresh in his mind. Pressing his heels into the horse's sides, he trotted westward.

“Will you bring... the others now?” Tovey asked between breaths, trying to keep up with his jarring pace.

“That’s my plan. I wanted to find the thoroughfares first. I didn’t think there’d be only one.” As the market square shrank behind them, Kol nudged his horse into an easy canter. Now that he’d seen enough to complete the map, he knew exactly where to send his scouts to get a more accurate population estimate, and to investigate the number of soldiers in the barracks. With the others’ help, they could report their findings to the captain within a few days. When Kol agreed to take on the assignment, he’d been so afraid of failure. But it had gone smoothly after all, and a thrill surged through him to think the hardest part was now complete.

They passed wide around the large fieldstone house on the hill, and soon the rolling plains stretched before them, mirrored above by a vast expanse of unbroken clouds. Their horses picked up speed, hooves pounding across the open landscape, eager to rejoin their herd.

Keeping pace beside him, Tovey gave a wide grin. “Shall we race back?”

With a cluck of his tongue, Kol gave his horse free rein to stretch into a gallop. For the first time, he was nearly as excited to return to camp as the horses, now that he could finally complete the map. He inhaled deeply as the wind whipped through his hair, clearing away the tension that had troubled him since arriving in the Campos. The sun broke through the clouds, and the fields came alive with color. Wildflowers dotted the spring-green grass, awakened by the rain and gilded by warm sunlight. As they raced onward, Kol’s mind swirled with thoughts of advancement, of achieving everything he had desired for so long. Each beat of his horse’s stride echoed the resolve hammering in his heart; everything he wanted was finally within reach.

When they returned to camp, the sun was low, casting long shadows on the grass. Captain Roen and his officers were making their rounds with the gill cups, and the men in Kol’s small scouting unit had gathered around a cookfire near the soldiers’ tents. Kol and Tovey halted their sweat-soaked horses at the edge of camp and dismounted.

“Cool them before you turn them loose,” Kol ordered, passing Tovey his reins. “There’s something I need to do.”

Returning to his tent, Kol dug the map from his bag and spread it on the floor. He took great care to sketch the layout of the settlement, the main road, and the bridge, hoping that the meticulous details would make up for the lack of handwritten words. As he worked, a vague unease nagged at the back of his mind. Something felt off about it, but he didn’t know exactly what. It made sense to position the garrison at the western edge, between the more vulnerable inhabitants and the direction of potential threats. The development of a civilian settlement around a military outpost wasn’t strange in and of itself; that was, after all, how Smuggler’s Port was formed years ago, before it was abandoned to the reavers. But, as he filled in the edge of the map, something still felt out of place. The image of the

Valennian noblewoman, Adella, riding alone in the windswept plains kept surfacing in his thoughts. *Where was she riding to?*

When he had completed the map, he inspected it carefully, pressing his lips together. With the great, deep river slicing through the corner, separating the outpost from the rest of Valenna, one thing was clear: the bridge was their only lifeline to civilization. With only one route by which to receive supplies or reinforcements, the outpost, whatever its intended function, was at a huge defensive disadvantage. *These people are completely vulnerable.* He folded the map and tucked it under his arm. Captain Roen needed to see this.

\* \* \*

“There you are,” Roen chastised, throwing a sideways glance at Kol in the doorway of his tent. “I’ve had the officers looking for you.”

“I, uh—” Kol wavered, then stepped inside. “I just got back from the field. I completed the map.” With fumbling fingers, he unfolded the parchment, hoping his work would suffice.

“Excellent,” Roen said, snatching it from him. “Perfect timing, in fact.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll take the men to get a better population estimate,” Kol continued while Roen looked over the map. “I still haven’t encountered any posted guards, which is unusual for a—”

“The Valennians are very undisciplined,” Roen interrupted. “They make war as badly as they do their ships.”

Kol blinked in surprise. “You don’t think it’s strange?”

“Not at all,” Roen countered. “It’s rather expected. Ah, you’ve located the governor’s house,” he said, eyeing Kol’s markings. “Good work.”

“Governor’s house?” Kol lowered his brows. “I thought that was the barracks. I was told this was an outpost, but I’ve seen no other building large enough for a garrison.”

“One and the same,” Roen replied with a dismissive wave. “Our country estates often quarter troops when needed, so it shouldn’t come as a surprise to you it would be the same in Valenna. Are you—” He narrowed his eyes, piercing Kol with an unwavering glare. “Are you having doubts about your duty, soldier?”

“No,” Kol replied hastily. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“Good. You’ll be needing this for your next task,” Roen said, folding the map and handing it back.

“Which is?” Kol asked, slipping it into his haversack.

“We’ve recently been given inside information,” Roen replied, “and now that I’ve seen this map, I know it can be trusted. In two days, their leadership will be absent. That will be our chance.”

Kol raised his brows. “Sir?”

"You're being promoted to squadron chief," Roen replied, folding his arms behind his back. "You will be in charge of leading the attack."

"We're attacking the outpost?" Kol asked, voice sharp with disbelief.

Roen gave a slight nod. "It's more sudden than I'd have planned, but we have to seize this opportunity. You will, of course, be allowed to keep whatever spoils you can carry."

"You mean for us to pillage it?" Kol's mind raced to make sense of what he was hearing.

"Your orders are to terrorize, loot, take captives, and burn the rest." Roen struck his palm emphatically, his thin mustache stretching as he frowned. "Drive them back to Valenna, until there is no sign of them left in the Campos."

Slowly, Kol nodded. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

"Until then," Roen went on, "continue to keep an eye on the outpost. In two days' time, you will be given your squadron. Congratulations," he added, flashing a grin. "I know this was long-awaited."

Returning to his tent, Kol slumped down onto his blankets and rubbed his face. How he didn't see this coming, he had no idea, but his stomach twisted at the thought. Attacking the Valennains when they were so ill-prepared for war seemed almost unfair, like hunting a wounded animal. But, orders were orders. *And taking spoils...* After raiding the houses, shops, and stables, he would become wealthy overnight. He'd finally be able to buy his way up the ranks, afford anything he hungered for, get any supplies he needed. *I could pay off the lost compass.* His chest tightened. *So why do I feel this way?*

Again, the image of Adella came, unbidden, into his thoughts. The pale gold of her dress against the sunlit prairie, her long hair the same red-brown of Bayard's coat, the storm clouds reflected in the color of her eyes—all came together to paint a tranquil scene in the familiar, muted shades of the Campos. She seemed to belong there, in a way he'd never felt for himself.

The captain had mentioned taking captives, and it was that which brought her to mind now. After Sornia had closed its borders, the cities had become crowded, the jails and prisons overflowed. *When you have enough laws, everyone becomes a criminal,* he thought bitterly. The Azbarian dynasty had come up with an ingenious solution: rather than imprisonment, criminals were forced to serve out their punishments through labor instead. Soon after the practice had been instated, it became fashionable for the upper classes to secure the service of foreign prisoners of war, especially the women, as marks of status due to their rarity. It was one thing he hated most about the nobility, as the sentence was often repeatedly extended to keep the servants indefinitely.

He wasn't innocent either, though; this wouldn't be his first time taking captives back to the auction at Hedda, some as young as Tovey. Because they were always outlaws, murderers, and smugglers, he could shrug off any twinges of guilt, but this time felt different. Now, he was faced with a dilemma. When his squadron attacked, the Valennian

woman—who had shown him the only glimpse of genuine kindness he'd seen in years—would either be killed or taken captive by him and his men. He wasn't sure which would be worse for her. Of course, part of him couldn't help but feel satisfaction at the thought of an aristocrat being thrown into a life of servitude. He wished that for all of them. *Not to mention, all the gold she'd bring in at auction...* Any noble would pay a steep price for a beautiful Valennian like her to adorn their chambers. But now, the thought made him uneasy.

Kol shook his head, forcing the thoughts away. He was finally about to get everything he'd worked so hard for. *Now's not the time for weakness. I must do this.* He had his orders, and he intended to follow them. *At any cost.* He didn't have a choice.

## CHAPTER FIVE: *THE HANDKERCHIEF*

After muster, Kol gathered the scouts beside the horse pen. While he'd given them enough days to rest, as instructed by the captain, he hadn't taken any himself. Now, he'd have to keep up with fresh horses over leagues of rough terrain while already tired and travel-sore. He took a deep breath to steel himself, then bridled Bayard and stepped into the saddle.

"Wait," Tovey called out, dragging a reluctant horse along by the reins as he hurried to meet them. "I want to come."

"No," Kol said flatly. "You didn't follow orders when I told you to wait near the bridge. I won't let you jeopardize our mission."

"But—" Tovey began to protest.

"This isn't a game!" Kol snapped. "This is war. If you disobey again, I'll have you caned for disobedience." Kol cringed the instant the words left his mouth. He'd sounded exactly like Blackburn.

Crestfallen, Tovey led his horse slowly away. Though Kol well understood the humiliation of being openly scolded, he couldn't risk anything going wrong—not now that he was so close to achieving his goals. Shrugging it off, he turned his horse eastward.

"Stay behind me," Kol ordered the others. "And keep a single file." Jais glowered but reined in his horse, which had been pressing too close to Bayard's rear. The last thing they needed was to lose control of the horses in the field, especially as some of the other soldiers weren't experienced riders. Seeing the others mounted and ready, Kol spurred Bayard into a trot.

With Bayard's spirits renewed after his day's rest, Kol led the way over the vast plains, marked with smaller patches of rocky highland terrain. As the leagues passed, they rode through the lowland fields of bog cotton, with remnants of last year's tufts still clinging to the stalks, through seasonal streams that now rushed with the recent rains, and shallow pools that had gathered in low places where they paused to let their horses drink.

Then, the land rose again, soaring up toward the wide, blue sky, as their fleeting hooves trampled the wild lavender and sage into a fragrant mix that lingered in the air.

Kol led them far around the fields where he'd seen Adella riding, going wide beyond the barracks—the governor's house, as Roen called it—to keep from being seen. They didn't stop to rest until the Valennian buildings came into sight in the distance, approaching the settlement this time from the southwest rather than dead west as he had done the days before. When he found a sheltering grove of trees large enough to cover his men and horses, he ordered them to a halt and dismounted.

"Take a rest here," Kol began, holding the reins as Bayard drank from a puddle. "Eat some of your provisions. Then, we'll split up. I'll assign each of you a section to watch—" Reaching into his bag, he pulled out the map. The handkerchief fell out with it, fluttering to the ground.

Jais snatched it up. "What's this?" he asked, lowering his brow.

"It's nothing," Kol replied, reaching for it, but Jais held it back.

"It doesn't look like nothing," Jais replied, turning it over. "I know imported silk when I see it. But I don't know this crest. Who gave this to you?" he demanded.

"A woman," Kol answered flatly, his patience waning. "Why the sudden interest in my private life?" Again, he reached for it, but Jais pulled it away.

"I'm just surprised," Jais sneered. "I didn't think you'd ever been with a woman."

"I have," Kol replied hastily. "More than one, in fact. Just... not recently," he admitted.

Jais folded his arms, still clutching the handkerchief. "How many for more than an hour?"

"I can't see how that would matter," Kol scoffed, trying to hide his rising anger.

"Certainly not the sort of woman who would own something so expensive," Jais replied. "You said as much yourself."

"He's right," Garen interjected, coming between them. Kol held his breath, expecting the old man to join in the accusations. Instead, he turned on Jais. "You're suddenly interested in his personal affairs," Garen went on, pointing a finger at him. "Is there a reason? Jealousy, perhaps?"

"Why would I be jealous of *him*?" Jais sneered, eyes darting toward Kol. "I just don't trust him. He's been sneaking off on his own, doing who knows what."

Kol took a step forward, his jaw tightening. "All right, I stole it. So what? You don't have to trust me. You just have to follow orders." He held out his hand. "Now give it back."

"Do as he says, Jais," Hobbs muttered. Saer and Hemet watched, silent and motionless.

"Fine," Jais relented and held it out, stopping just short of Kol's hand. Then, with a smirk, he dropped it. The white silk shimmered briefly as it fell to the wet ground. The embroidered crest remained bright for a moment before the mud swiftly swept into the fine fabric, staining it brown.

Kol drew a long breath, trying to tamp down the urge to punch Jais in the mouth. Doing that would only prove the accusations right. It was silly, Kol knew that, but the handkerchief did mean something to him. Seeing it ruined with mud stung more than the insults. Kol felt the other men's eyes on him, waiting for his response. He clenched his jaw, forcing the anger back down into the churning pit of his stomach, determined not to give Jais the satisfaction of a reaction—not now, when so much was at stake. He needed to concentrate on the task at hand and forget the Valennian woman.

Kol drew his attention back to the map, flattening it out over his saddle while Bayard grazed. "Enough," he ordered, his voice low and tight. "Jais, I take it by your nonsense, you've had enough rest. We are splitting into three groups."

Kol turned to Garen, who stood at his right. "You and Hobbs will take the area near the river and the bridge," he said, pointing at the map. "Tally all the riders and carriages you see crossing, and note how long it takes for any to return. It's their only route to Valenna, so it will tell us their capacity for resupply and reinforcement."

Garen and Hobbs nodded, and readied their horses.

"Jais, you take Hemet," Kol ordered, moving his finger over the map. "Yours will be the area around the market square, because of your keen interest in imported silk," he said sarcastically, and the others snickered. "Do a rough population count. Civilians, military, anyone you can spot. Like us, they aren't in uniform, so judge by their manner or weapons as best you can. Identify the homes or shops likely to hold the most valuables for raiding. Pay attention to the structures of greatest importance; those, we will need to destroy."

"As you command, *Squadron Chief*," Jais said with a derisive roll of his eyes. Hemet and Saer shifted uncomfortably.

"Saer, you'll come with me to the governor's house and the surrounding fields," Kol continued, ignoring Jais's barb. "I want to confirm the number of soldiers stationed there, their routine, and any other information I can get. I'll also make note of the horses, as we'll need mounts for any captives or goods. We will regroup in the field behind the manor house this evening, two hours before sunset. Any questions?"

They shook their heads.

"Good," Kol said. "Let's go."

As the others mounted up, Kol paused, gaze lingering on the handkerchief in the mud. He grabbed it and stuffed it into his pocket.

\* \* \*

Kol and Saer moved carefully, sticking close to the line of trees and brush that bordered the property of the large fieldstone house. Already, they had spent hours observing the small cottages that lay between the barracks and the small gathering of buildings around the market square at the heart of the settlement. All they found were smallholders and crofters, few people of meager means. Even so, it was a lot of ground to

cover while remaining out of sight, perched just behind sloping terrain or hurrying from cover to cover.

Slowly, they made their way to the barracks. Kol directed Saer to keep an eye on the stables and the manor house while he circled the perimeter to the rear of the building, observing the outbuildings and tallying the horses he could see in the paddocks. *A dozen*, he figured after combining their number in the pastures and their heads that stuck out from the stables over the stall doors. It would suffice for a small garrison. *But where are the men?* A building of this importance should have sentries posted, but he'd seen only one young man earlier, and no one since. Save for the occasional birdsong or whicker of horses, all was quiet.

*It doesn't matter*, he dismissed the concerns. His thoughts echoed the very thing he had told Jais, *You just have to follow orders*. Whether it was a garrison block full of soldiers, or a poorly-defended governor's house, it wouldn't change his plans. All that mattered was completing this assignment and getting promoted. Then, he could finally prove to everyone that he was more than just a nameless bastard. If the task turned out to be easier than expected, all the better.

After he had observed the fieldstone house for some time and found everything quiet, he left Saer to his watch and rode out into the fields beyond to scout out their assigned meeting place. He swung wide around the open grassland, again keeping to the brush and trees on the margins so as not to be seen by any Valennian guards that may be hidden in the area. Yet, he found everything quiet here as well, and soon felt safe enough to dismount and allow Bayard to graze, tethered behind the cover of a patch of trees.

Crunching over twigs and leaf litter, he passed through the little copse to keep watch on its eastern edge, half a league from the manor house. As there was still some time before the men would arrive, he sat on a large rock and dug a piece of hardtack from his haversack. The thing was nearly inedible, even with mouthfuls of water from his hip flask, but the gnawing hunger in his gut was too persistent to give up. Hopefully, the captain would have something better to ration out for their evening meal. Soon, dark clouds blew in on the rising wind, dimming the landscape.

Kol had choked down the last of the hardtack when he was pulled from his thoughts at the sight of a rider in the field ahead, and he scrambled into the brambles to hide. The figure dismounted. *Shit!* Kol scolded himself for his carelessness. *That isn't one of my men.* Ducking lower, he reached for his cutlass handle under his oilskin cloak. He was glad he'd kept to the cover rather than riding through the open, where his track would be clearly visible in the tall grass. Hopefully, the rider hadn't seen him.

Peeking through the bright green foliage, he was surprised to find it was the Valennian woman, idly patting her horse's neck, only a stone's throw from where he crouched. A light rain began to fall, pattering on his shoulders. As he watched her, he wondered what her life was like, unburdened by menial labor, clothed in silk. Despite the envy it stirred in him, he couldn't hate her for what she was, not anymore. *Who wouldn't*

*choose that life for themselves, if given the chance?* He certainly would. She had everything he'd ever wanted: wealth; a warm home, certainly; a name; a family. He wondered what it felt like.

The sky darkened and thunder rumbled at his back. Kol held his breath as Adella straightened and turned in his direction. *Not now*, he pleaded silently, his grip tightening around the hilt of his sword. He didn't want to hurt her, but he'd have no choice if she saw him at that moment. Being so close to the garrison quarters, he would have to kill her to keep her from alerting the soldiers to his presence. But the thought of cutting her down in the field soured his stomach.

She turned her attention back to her grazing horse, and he let out his breath in relief. He'd much rather take her to the auction in Hedda and make a small fortune. After all, if he found himself at the mercy of the nobility—her kind of people—he'd be treated with the same indifference. What became of her after that wouldn't be his concern. But by sparing her life, he could repay the small kindness she'd shown him.

She continued along the edge of the field, leading her horse away from his hiding place. His gaze drifted to the manor house sitting on the crest of the hill in the distance, overshadowed by tall trees, and he wondered if she lived nearby. He tried to think which building they had scouted that day that she might call home. *Doesn't matter*. He would find out soon enough, when his men attacked the settlement tomorrow. His heart ached at the thought. *When we meet next, it will be as enemies*. But he had no choice; this mission was too important to let finer feelings get in the way. He had to prove himself to Roen, to make enough gold to repay him for the compass, and to fill the hollow in his stomach.

She had mounted up and spurred her horse eastward to outrun the storm when a rustle came from behind Kol. He turned to see Saer approaching through the foliage. His deeply lined face scrunched further, squinting against the rain.

"The others will be here soon, coming wide 'round the hill," Saer whispered as he joined Kol. His eyes widened briefly as they settled on the woman ahead. Then, the two crept back through the brush.

On the far side of the trees, they waited for the rest of the group, who arrived one by one from the same path Kol had taken.

"Did you see that woman?" Saer asked when they had regrouped. "That's a fine target," he mused.

"I caught a glimpse of her," Hobbs replied darkly. "She'd be worth keeping alive." His insinuating tone made Kol's skin crawl.

"She's not to be harmed," Kol ordered, the words surprising even himself. The others stared blankly at him, awaiting an explanation. "I've had my eye on that one," he added, trying to match Hobb's lewd inflection. "She's mine."

Hobbs nodded slowly, almost reluctantly. Jais darted a sharp glance at Kol but said nothing.

Kol, pulling the map and his writing charcoal from his bag, set about tallying all they'd seen, careful not to ruin any of the captain's iron-gall ink markings.

By the time Kol and his men returned to the encampment, they were thoroughly soaked from the sudden squall that had quickly moved in. At the lead, Kol had navigated through the gloom nearly blinded by a relentless downpour, and had gotten turned around in one small valley after stopping briefly to adjust the tack on his bedraggled horse. Eventually, he'd found the way again after a long trek to the summit of a distant ridge, but that had set them back over an hour. The grumbling disappointment of the weary men behind him was more disheartening than the driving rain. The thought of brandy—strong enough to warm his belly and numb his hunger—at the end of his ride had kept him going.

It was pitch black and still raining heavily when Kol found Captain Roen in his tent, drinking from a silver stirrup cup.

"What's your report, Squadron Chief?" Roen asked, motioning him in.

"I have our tallies for population and horses," Kol began, pulling the map from his bag. Setting it on the captain's desk, he showed the markings he'd made on the back. "This one here," he went on, pointing, "is the count for the horses. We had to get it down quickly before the rain ruined it."

"Good, good," Roen muttered, looking the tallies over. "This will be easier than I thought."

*Easier*, Kol repeated the word in his mind, trying to convince himself that what lay ahead was just another assignment. This time, however, it all rested on his shoulders.

"I'll be doubling your party," Roen said, folding the map and tucking it into his waistcoat pocket. "You must await my command before setting out tomorrow, but be ready. Plan to arrive at the Valennian outpost before sunset."

Kol nodded. Though Roen turned his attention back to the papers on his desk, Kol lingered until the captain shot him a questioning glance. "Uh," Kol began. "It was a hard ride in bad weather. I could really use a drink right now."

"Yes, yes," Roen said dismissively. Grabbing a tin cup, he filled it with a golden liquid from a pitcher on his campaign table, and passed it to Kol. "There you are. We must keep a clear head for tomorrow."

Taking the gill cup into the shelter of his tent, Kol stripped off his wet clothes and wrapped a musty wool blanket around himself, then wrung out the soiled handkerchief and laid it out to dry. His tent mate's presence was marked only by the gentle, steady rhythm of his breathing, already deep asleep. Taking a seat on his makeshift bed, Kol took the gill cup in both hands and lifted it to his mouth. Rather than the warm, pungent scent of brandy, a sour tang wafted up.

"What the hell?" Kol grumbled to himself, trying not to wake Derrin. Taking a sip, bitter disappointment hit him in the taste of ginger and vinegar. *He gave me switchel?* He groaned to himself. *That stingy bastard!* Even so, he knocked it back, and the spiced vinegar

spread its own kind of warmth in his belly. He knew there would be enough brandy to dull the edges after tomorrow, but the gnawing sense of discontent remained with him, lasting through the night and into the morning.

## CHAPTER SIX: *THE ATTACK*

The next day, the encampment bustled with preparations as the anticipation of violence invigorated the air with a frenetic energy. Kol readied in his tent with the door-flap open to let in the fresh breeze. The night's bad weather had passed, leaving the wet grass sparkling under the light of a clear dawn. *If I had brandy last night*, Kol grumbled to himself, *I'd have slept better*. He pulled on his boots and slipped his throwing knife, in its leather sheath, inside. Then, he grabbed the stained handkerchief from the edge of his bedding and tucked it into his shirt.

With a slight tremor in his fingers, stomach pitted with anxiety, he practiced his forms and sparred with the others. Derrin and Tovey were among the newly joined to his party, which Kol wasn't pleased about, given their lack of experience. But he understood. There weren't all that many to choose from in their encampment, and there was a chance the squadron wouldn't return. Despite the captain's apparent optimism, Kol couldn't rule out the possibility that the large manor house was harboring more than he'd accounted for. Some seasoned soldiers needed to remain behind to defend the camp in case of a counterstrike if he and his men didn't make it back. *There's probably a very good chance of that*, the dark thought came to him suddenly, *given they're sending me to lead it rather than one of the officers*. But of course, they had paid their way up the ranks with coin instead of blood and sweat wrung out over years.

All of these concerns filled Kol's mind while he waited at the cookfire with the others for the captain's command, crowding out thoughts of the Valennian woman. He didn't allow himself to dwell over the uncertainty of her looming fate, swallowing down the turmoil that rose in his gut.

When Captain Roen finally summoned Kol into his tent, a cloaked stranger, face hidden beneath a hood, brushed past him. Something about the figure struck Kol with an odd familiarity, though he couldn't quite place it. He pressed his lips together, puzzling it over while he waited for the captain's acknowledgment.

Seated at his desk, Roen finished writing and set his quill on its stand before looking up at him. "I've just received word that all is in order. Set out with your squadron immediately."

Kol gave a curt nod.

"Use whatever weapons you require from the supply tent," Roen continued. "When you're taking your spoils, keep an eye out especially for objects made of gold that are small

enough to carry. The Valennians may have something we've been ordered to retrieve, so take care searching. And remember, when you return, you must present your loot to me for inspection. After that, it's all yours."

Kol's brows lifted at the unusual request, but he nodded.

\* \* \*

Kol distributed to his men crossbows, horse bows, oilcloth-wrapped torch staves, and various other weapons stockpiled in the supplies tent. His heart pounded a furious rhythm against his ribs as he readied Bayard. He buckled the girth, cinching it tight, and paused. All around him, the men worked quickly, securing their weapons and tack in silence, and he wanted to take it all in. These soldiers were under his command. For the first time, he was in charge. He finally had power over the course of his own life. No matter what lay ahead, whether glory or death, he would carry the pride he felt at that moment with him over the plains.

"Listen up," Kol called out, steadying his horse as the squadron came to attention. "When we ride out, keep your pace in check to preserve our horses for the return journey. Hemet, Hobbs, and Saer, you each will be responsible for a pack horse as well as your mounts. We will regroup at yesterday's meeting spot before descending on the settlement. Understood?" he asked, and they all nodded. When they had finished tacking up their horses and mounted, he turned Bayard eastward. "All right, let's go."

Into the quieting prairie, they rode as shadows became longer. Though dark clouds blotted the horizon at their backs, forming a distant shadow over the land, the way ahead remained clear, promising an easy journey.

After an hour and a half, when they had traveled about halfway to the settlement, Kol stopped the group to rest among the lowland fields. Loosening their saddles, they let the horses graze and drink from a small, trickling brook fed by the recent rains. Kol stood, absent-mindedly holding Bayard's reins while the animal wandered slowly, lips to the ground, in search of grass. His thoughts returned to the day he'd met Adella outside the shop window. Again, he couldn't deny that her presence seemed important somehow. He realized with some surprise that the same feelings of comfort he'd felt in his dream with the strange, yet somehow familiar, woman came to him now again when he thought of Adella, but he pushed the feelings aside. She was Valennian, and that made her his enemy.

Garen, holding his horse, crept closer, drawing Kol from his thoughts. For a moment, the two men stood together in silence, their horses grazing side by side, until Garen spoke.

"Don't you wonder why they picked you for squadron leader?" he asked, his voice conspiratorially low.

"It's because I'm the best one for the job," Kol replied indignantly. "What other reason could there be?"

"Think about it," Garen said, leaning in. "If Jais is being considered for the lieutenant position, why isn't he leading this operation?" He glanced over his shoulder, then added in a whisper, "Why would they hold back his promotion until this was over?"

Kol opened his mouth, then closed it again. He couldn't think of a reason.

"You have no connections and no money," Garen continued, "and a history of starting fights. If Valenna retaliates and Blackburn throws you to the King as a sacrifice, who would speak up for you?"

"That's not—" Kol began. He wanted to protest, but was at a loss for words.

"Don't you ever wonder," Garen interrupted, "if the outlaws we were sent to cull in our previous campaigns were really criminals? Or were they simply soldiers like us, out of uniform, slain for fulfilling orders that were never meant to see the light of day?"

"No, it isn't like that," Kol protested finally. "Those people—the ones we killed—they were brigands."

"Are you so sure about that?" Garen asked, though his tone was gentle. "Your superiors trust you to follow orders. But you should ask yourself, do you trust them?"

"What about you?" Kol retorted. "You're here following orders, aren't you?"

"Sure," Garen said with a shrug. "But I'm not the one with my neck under the axe. How do you think I've made it this long?" With that, his horse pulled him toward the brook, leaving Kol standing with mouth agape and brow furrowed.

*They're going to paint us as outlaws when this is done?* Though he couldn't be sure if Garen's words had any truth, Kol couldn't ignore the doubts they ignited in his heart. *Perhaps that's what Roen meant by 'expendable.'*

*No.* He shook his head, willing the thought away. *Not now. Not when I'm so close.* Everything he'd ever wanted was within his grasp. In only a matter of hours, he'll have made a name for himself on the battlefield. He just had to keep a clear head and leave no room for uncertainty.

When they had mounted up again and continued eastward, Kol held his horse back until he drew alongside Jais. Though he wanted to ask him about what Garen had said, he couldn't find a way to do so safely. If Jais were to think Kol questioned their superiors, he'd certainly take advantage of it. So Kol rode beside him, waiting for the right words to come.

"As the next lieutenant, what do you make of this?" Kol asked at length, hoping to sound casual. "If the outpost has been there for years, why would King Berento ask us to attack now?"

"It wasn't the king, as I understand it," Jais replied. "I heard the orders came from Matei."

"Matei the Bastard?" Kol asked, trying not to flinch at the word that had been flung at himself so often.

"What other Matei do you know?" Jais snapped. "And who cares? It's probably just a little unsanctioned funds collection." He shrugged, one hand on the reins. "You know Roen takes the good stuff under the guise of inspection."

“That would make us no better than reavers,” Kol muttered sullenly. “But why would Matei be giving orders to the military?”

“He’s still a prince, isn’t he?” Jais replied. “Perhaps he relays his father’s wishes.”

Kol, not daring to question him further, pressed his heels into his horse’s sides to take the lead once more, and tried to put it all out of mind. There would be no room for hesitation on the battlefield. If his superiors considered him expendable, then he would just have to prove otherwise. He would simply have to execute this mission perfectly, run the Valennians out of the Campos and return with enough valuables to show his commanding officers that it would be a mistake to dispose of him.

The leagues passed quickly beneath the horses’ rhythmic hooves. They came to the fields that surrounded the large stone building that would be their greatest target. Whether it was a manor house or garrison quarters didn’t matter, it would eventually succumb to their torches all the same. And when he gathered his men in the flower-speckled plains beneath the watchful gaze of its dark windows, with the golden light of the evening sun at their backs, he reminded himself that everything he longed for lay on the other side of this attack. As a foundling child, pulled, bedraggled, from the city streets, raised in the cold, uncaring orphanage and then spit out into the harsher world, the men around him now were the only family he’d ever known. To waver now would be to betray them all.

“We will break into our groups and ride to our assigned areas,” Kol began, turning his horse to face the men as they halted. “Remember, this is a raid, not a leisurely market stroll. We have the advantage of surprise, but we’re still greatly outnumbered. We need to do as much damage as we can as quickly as possible, but keep the bridge intact. Then, we will converge on the barracks—I mean, the governor’s house—and take on the garrison together. Any questions?”

“Why leave the bridge?” Jais blurted out as he reined his horse beside him. “Then they can escape.”

“Those backed into a corner fight more fiercely,” Kol replied, steadying Bayard. “Our orders are to drive them out, not hold a siege. So let them leave.”

“You say to do this quickly,” Garen interjected. “Didn’t Roen order us to bring back valuables?”

“Why don’t we just set the governor’s house on fire,” Hobbs interjected before Kol could answer, “and burn the garrison inside? Nothing like fire to clean up a problem.”

“The noise and smoke will probably draw them out before we get there,” Kol began, trying to address both questions at once. “But if not, that is where the most valuables will be. Roen wants us to bring back any golden objects we find; he’s looking for something in particular. But don’t get greedy while looting,” he ordered, holding Hobb’s gaze. “Don’t get distracted by spirits or food. Prioritize high-value goods we can easily carry—gold and silver that can fit into our saddlebags. Keep the captives to a minimum, as they’re hard to transport. Understood?” he asked, glancing from face to face.

The others nodded, resolve hardening in their eyes at the mention of plunder. Finally, Kol found himself standing at the precipice of action. With a deep, steadying breath, he turned Bayard toward the settlement. "Move out."

Kol waited until the groups had split off, then led his contingent forward, urging Bayard into a canter. They hit the outlying cottages first. The small homes that dotted the surrounding fields, with their chicken coops and dovecotes a flurry of wings, and their gardens only just awakening with reaching, yellow branches, burned easily. Kol was the first to set a home ablaze. He and his men did not bother to enter first to search for valuables among those poorer than themselves. Some of the small crofts were so humble, they were not worth the trouble of reaching out and touching with their torches. The barns, they entered quickly, taking the few healthy horses they found inside by throwing ropes around their necks, and then they moved on to the next. All the while, fires bloomed in the distance like red summer flowers as the other men rode toward the town.

Cracking wood and terrified screams defiled the quiet of the fields as Kol's group swept through the landscape, leaving destruction behind. Kol had taken the newest soldiers, Tovey and Derrin, into his own group to keep an eye on them. His heart ached for them, fresh from warm homes and loving families, to be tested so soon. Beneath the eaves of one small house, Tovey paused with the burning torch in his hand, and turned, pale but determined, to Kol for encouragement. With a resolute nod, Kol watched as the boy set the small thatched roof alight. At another homestead, Derrin hesitated when an old woman froze, staring into his eyes. Then, she turned and fled, her back a shadow against the setting sun. Derrin, reaching for his crossbow, cast a questioning glance to Kol, searching his face for an answer.

Kol's heart thrummed against his ribs. He couldn't afford to waver now, nor let his men see the uncertainty in his eyes. And yet, his gut lurched at the terror that had flashed across the woman's face, still lingering in his mind. "Let her go," he said, keeping his voice steady. "Don't waste your bolts."

When the others came galloping down the main road, leaving the town a fiery ruin, Kol gave the orders to converge on the manor house. "Take the horses, burn the stables," he instructed as they rode, coming toward it from the side behind dense, shrubby cover. "We'll draw them out and finally see their real numbers."

When smoke filled the air, thick and dark with burning hay, Kol led them around to the front, where wide steps led up to the grand entrance. Leaving Tovey to watch the tethered horses, Kol and his men rushed up the steps. With the crack of splintering wood, they kicked until the doors fell aside. Kol drew his cutlass and held out his torch to illuminate the dark interior, muscles tensed in anticipation of attack.

But all was quiet within. He'd expected to be met by armed soldiers and clashing steel, but instead found silence. Tapestries hung on the walls, dulling the sound of his footsteps. The torch in his hand felt suddenly heavy, its heat uncomfortable against his cheek as he stepped into the foyer. His men rushed in from behind him, blades drawn and

torches blazing, knocking over a vase on a small table with a sharp crash that echoed down the quiet hallway. As he followed them into the house, its walls lined with gilded mirrors, he caught his reflection. A shudder ran through him at the grim, hollow-eyed sight of his own bronze face, smeared with soot.

While the men flooded into the other parts of the mansion, their boots muddying the fine carpets, he paused. A door hung ajar beside him. He pushed it open.

The room inside was no soldier's quarters, but a dining room, still and pristine. Portraits hung on the walls in heavy, carved frames: a man in scarlet uniform, a saber at his side, looking down with proud, painted eyes; a woman in blue with a large ruby hanging from a gold chain around her neck. They watched him accusingly from faces that bore an odd hint of familiarity. The air didn't smell of war, of honed steel and oiled leather, but of tea and freshly washed table linens. The unexpected reality made him dizzy.

A small figure shrieked and fled from him, ducking behind the large dining table.

Kol strode forward, his heavy leather boots loud on the floorboards. The woman cowered in the corner, ginger curls falling over delicate, pale hands that hid her face. As she looked up, eyes wide with terror, the recognition hit him like a blow to the gut. The plain clothes, the soiled apron—it was the maid from the market, the very one who'd called him a clumsy oaf. This wasn't a camp follower or a spy; she was a servant in a family home. Even so, he sheathed his cutlass to free his hand, and grabbed her arm. She had been so free with her insults. There would be no guilt selling this one at Hedda.

A sudden blow to his side threw him off balance. He crashed onto the floor, hitting his jaw on the stone tile as stars burst in his vision. A woman's voice shouted orders, and something warm clenched around his neck. Scrambling to his feet, Kol threw the weight off his back. The attacker thudded against the wall. He spun, reaching for his cutlass, but froze.

It was Adella. She stood pressed against the wall, chest heaving, unarmed and burdened by heavy skirts. And yet, she had attacked him to save her maid. The weight of his actions crashed over him like a wave of icy seawater. *This is no barrack house.* There were no soldiers here. *This is her home.* This was the enemy Blackburn had sent him to destroy, an unarmed woman who had shown him kindness, and who now risked her own life to protect a servant. He could no longer deny the evidence that had been right before his eyes all along. The settlement was no military outpost, it was a peaceful, civilian town. The manor he once thought housed troops was just a family home. This enemy aristocrat clearly didn't consider the maid to be expendable—Valenna wasn't like Sornia. And he'd come to burn it all down.

He crouched before her, and she gasped, pressing herself against the wall. He wanted to reach out to her, to tell her this was a mistake, that he hadn't meant to hurt her, but her eyes, wild and stormy like the sea, filled with fear. She squeezed them shut and turned away, her long hair, shimmering a fiery hue in the torch light, fell over her face like a curtain. For a moment, he froze, unsure what to do.

Footsteps echoed outside the dining room. Grabbing the torch, Kol hurried out, afraid the others would enter and see her helpless on the floor, and shut the doors behind him.

"That's everyone," he said, quickly counting the men gathered in the hall. "Let's go!"

Outside, on the steps of the manor house, Jais rounded on him. "Why did you order us out?" he demanded. "We hadn't even gone upstairs."

"Things aren't as we've been told," Kol said, pushing past him toward the horses. "I need to speak with Roen."

Garen's grizzled brow lowered. "Where are the soldiers?"

"Who cares?" Hobbs shrugged, jangling a heavy haversack. "I've got enough silver to last me fifty years."

Jais glowered. "Well, I want more."

"This isn't about loot," Kol said, stepping between them. "Not anymore. Roen needs to know the truth."

Tovey looked up at him, eyes wide with surprise as his freckled forehead creased. "What do you mean?"

"Blackburn was wrong." Kol opened his arms wide, gesturing around them. "This isn't a military outpost. These people have no idea we're at war."

Jais shoved Kol's shoulder. "I knew you'd do this. Turn coward." He wrenched the torch from Kol's hand and strode to the manor doors, hanging crooked on their broken hinges.

"Stop!" Kol ordered, scrambling after him. "What are you doing?"

"If we're not going back in," Jais said, holding out the torch to the wood, "then there's one thing left to do."

"No—" Kol uttered.

"He's right," Hobbs interjected. "Burn it!"

Around them, others murmured in agreement. Jais held the fire to the door.

A growl crawled up Kol's throat, and he ran at Jais. Grabbing him by the clothes, Kol threw him aside into the hedges, then tossed his cloak over the flames that licked along the door's splintered edge and tamped them out.

Jais charged at him, knocking the wind from Kol's lungs as they fell, sprawling out over the gravel walkway. Knuckles pounded into his face, pain searing through his skull, as Kol struggled to regain his breath. With a swift knee to Jais' groin, Kol knocked him away. For a moment, the two lay on the ground, groaning.

"Are you protecting someone?" Jais asked, voice thick with accusation as he rose, hunched in pain. "A woman, perhaps? I remember you had mentioned one."

Kol opened his mouth to protest, but couldn't deny it.

"I knew it," Jais sneered. "You're in league with the Valennians!"

The surrounding men stood silent, staring at Kol in the dim evening light. In the distance, voices mounted from the direction of town.

"Listen," Kol snapped, turning to address them all. "I'm the one in charge here. Unless any of you want to be caned on our return—" He flashed a dark glance at Jais. "Then get on your horses; we're leaving."

Still, the others hesitated. Behind the group, Jais retrieved something from the ground.

"Now!" Kol shouted, and they stepped into motion. "I'll explain everything to Roen when we get back."

## CHAPTER SEVEN: *THE PRICE OF TREASON*

It was late when Kol and his men finally returned to camp, riding straight through under the light of a full moon. Some had brought captives, whom they bound and gagged, with their hands tied to the saddles. The cruelty of it weighed on him, but there was nothing he could do about it at that moment. The captain would sort things out once he knew the truth. Along with the heavy goods the other two groups had pillaged from town, though, the extra weight slowed their horses. Of the area he had assigned for his own group, only the manor held the promise of treasure. Now, Kol returned empty-handed, but the whole way, only one thought occupied his mind: *I have to tell Roen everything we know about the outpost is wrong.*

Stepping out of the saddle, Kol left his horse with Tovey and ran to look for Roen in his tent, but he wasn't inside. The camp was quiet, with most of the men asleep. Some, however, remained outside, warming their hands around dying fires in the dark, while others readied a small convoy to take the spoils to Blackburn's encampment to the west. Kol passed from person to person in search of the captain, growing more anxious even as the wagons were loaded with the spoils his group brought back. A young man, clearly Valennian judging from his long blond hair tied back in a ribbon, caught his eye, seated inside one wagon. *A captive, no doubt,* Kol thought. Guilt pierced him at the sight of a life ruined by his actions.

"Where's Roen?" Kol demanded, stopping one soldier who carried a heavy canvas bag on his shoulder, but the man shook his head.

Kol continued to search, making his way across camp in the dark. Face after face flashed by, but none was the captain's. The men offered only shrugs.

Then, as he came to one cook fire, its flames still casting a warm glow, a voice came from behind him. "Is it true?" Kol turned, and Roen stepped into the firelight. Over the captain's shoulder, Jais's smug leer appeared like the glimmer of a nightmare. "Have you taken up with the Valennians?" Roen demanded.

“No—” Kol couldn’t hold back the urgent plea in his voice. “Don’t listen to him. I came to warn you; everything that Blackburn told us about the Valennian outpost, none of it is true. We’ve been sent to terrorize innocent people!” Even as he spoke, the absurdity of his words hit him: that he, ever the unquestioning, unfeeling soldier, should now care about the morality of his orders.

“No one is innocent!” Roen shouted, nostrils flaring. “Not I, nor you. And certainly not them. The Valennians are trespassers, illegally encroaching on neutral ground.”

Kol shook his head in disbelief. “You would hold them responsible for the orders of their king?”

“Yes,” Roen stated flatly. “For following them.”

Kol’s gut dropped, hitting him with a wave of nausea. “You—” he muttered breathlessly. “You knew all along.”

“He stopped us from burning the governor’s house,” Jais spat. “He’s on their side.”

Roen, clutching something in his hand, held it up. A scrap of pale cloth fluttered in the rising wind.

*The handkerchief.* Kol’s pulse leapt. *It must’ve fallen out of my shirt!*

“A Valennian crest,” Roen thundered. “Found on your person days before the attack. And now you’re protecting the enemy?” Beside him, Jais grinned.

“This is wrong,” Kol replied. “They’re not our enemy.”

“Kol,” Roen began, voice as oily as his forced smile. “You’ve been such a good soldier up until now. I was planning to promote you to lieutenant after this, even though I’ve already taken Jais’s money. You turning traitor would make things so much easier for me. Unless you tell me there’s been a misunderstanding?” His insincere expression fell away, shifting into something more threatening. “Do you accept the promotion, or will you side with the Valennians?”

Kol’s heart leapt. *Lieutenant.* He stepped back, gaze flitting from the captain to the soldiers surrounding him. It would be so easy to relent and take Roen’s offer. He just had to say the words, and he’d have everything he ever wanted. *No more gnawing hunger, no more digging privies...* He could pay for the lost compass ten times over. He would finally have a rank, a decent wage, and respect earned with his own blood and sweat. He would be an officer. He would be safe.

Behind Roen, Jais watched on, his frown unable to hide the fear in his eyes. *I could take his place,* Kol realized. *Everything that he’s been holding over my head could be mine.* All he had to do was swallow his conscience and say the right words, like he’d done many times before.

Kol looked at the torch in Saer’s hand, sputtering in the wind, and then at the stained kerchief in Roen’s fist. He thought of the woman who had tended his hand when she had no reason to—a foreign aristocrat treating him with the kindness he’d never found among his own people.

*'The urge to fight is a good thing in a soldier,'* Blackburn's advice echoed in his mind, *'so long as it's directed toward the true enemy.'* Those words held a different meaning now. The Valennians weren't his enemy. Roen, Blackburn, and every Sornian officer who knowingly made war against the innocent—they were the true enemy. The price of the lieutenancy was too steep; if he took it, he would be no better than them. The longing for the rank fizzled in his chest, replaced by a cold, hard resolve. He would rather die at the hands of his fellow soldiers than betray himself now.

In a smooth but deliberate motion, Kol drew his cutlass and stepped into the very same guarded position that he had practiced so often. He was greatly outnumbered. It was stupid to even try. But he couldn't stay quiet anymore. "I won't let you continue to hurt innocent people."

"Then you're a traitor," Roen replied. "And will die a traitor's death. At sunrise, you will burn—a lesson to anyone who dares question my command. Seize him!" Metal flashed in the firelight as Roen ripped his sword from its scabbard.

Garen, Hobbs, Derrin, and all the men who were the nearest thing to family he'd ever known, who he'd shared tents and meals with, drew their weapons against Kol. He couldn't blame them. He'd never been easy to live with, and siding with him would cost them everything. But it stung all the same.

"Garen," Kol pleaded, "you're the one that warned me. Tovey," he called as the boy joined them from the horse pens.

Seeing the others, Tovey drew his blade, determination set on his youthful face.

"What you're doing—what we've been doing in the Campos—is wrong," Kol urged, lifting a palm toward the boy. "You don't need to be a part of this."

"Shut up!" Roen shouted, leveling his cutlass. "It's not for you to decide what's right and wrong." His voice lowered to a growl, "A soldier only needs to follow orders." With a burst of movement, Roen lunged at Kol.

He hardly had time to dodge. The steel tip pierced his sleeve, grazing his skin as he wove left. Gasping through his teeth at the stinging pain, he slashed his blade toward the captain's chest, but it clanged loudly against the man's parry.

The men closed in around him, their faces flickering with shadow in the dim firelight. Hands grabbed at Kol's arms and wrists. Roen lunged again, and Kol, twisting himself free, side-stepped the attack, instinctively answering it with a thrust of his blade. Over the shuffle of boots, a gasp rose.

Roen's eyes widened, then his jaw went slack. Kol pulled his cutlass from the man's side as he slumped to the ground, hand slipping from the hilt of his weapon. But the captain's sword remained in place.

Turning on his heel, Kol looked down into Derrin's face, pale with shock. Roen's sword protruded from his broad belly. When Kol had dodged the captain's blade, it was Derrin, standing just behind Kol, who took the hit.

"Derrin!" Kol shouted, voice breaking. He moved to catch him before he fell, but the others crowded in. Seizing Kol by the arms, they dragged him away, leaving Derrin behind, merely a dark shadow slumping to the ground.

Under the wan moonlight, they lashed him to a tall hitching-pole. With Kol's arms tied tightly around the rough-hewn wood, Jais leaned in closely toward him, his sour breath warming the air. A mocking grin spread across his face.

"You killed Roen," Jais sneered quietly. "Bad choice." He rose and, taking a torch from one of the other men, held it up in the air. "You all heard the captain," he shouted, turning to face the group that had gathered. "He burns at dawn!"

Kol's stomach clenched.

"Keep a watch on him," Jais ordered, passing his torch to Saer. "If he tries to escape, raise the alarm." With that, the group dispersed into the darkness.

Soon, Saer's torch burned out, but Kol could still hear him stirring now and then behind him. *If I'd spent more time with my men, they might have listened.* If he stayed to drink with them more often, got to know them better rather than worrying so much about himself, he might not be in this position. Then, his thoughts turned to Adella. He'd traded his own life for that of a woman he didn't know, but he didn't regret it. It wasn't about her, after all; it was so much more than that. Her presence, though distant and brief, had cast some small light in his life, like a star guiding him in the night. But his choices were his own. *Of course, the one time I try to do what's right instead of following orders, it would get me killed.* That was the sort of life he'd lived, always caught beneath someone's boot heel. But now, at least he'd had a glimpse of the man he could have been if he'd only found the courage sooner.

Kol strained against the ropes binding his wrists. If the other soldiers were only good at one thing, it was tying knots. He had his boot knife, of course, but he'd never reach it. *Even if I escaped, where would I go?* He would be forced to roam the wilds of the Campos until his former allies hunted him down, or beg for refuge in a foreign land that now certainly would see him as the enemy. No matter what, he could never return to his homeland. He was no longer Kol of Sornia, but a traitor.

While he'd earned this fate for himself after the lives he'd taken over the years, Derrin hadn't deserved to die. *If I hadn't pressed the captain into a fight, or dodged that strike, Derrin would still be alive.* There was no denying that. Kol's chest tightened with the weight of his failure as he drew a shuddering breath. Putting aside the thought of escape, he hung his head, bruised and defeated, beneath the cold, indifferent moon.

Eventually, the faint sound of Saer snoring nearby was interrupted by a nicker from the horse pen, and the scent of rosewater carried in on the wind. Puzzled, Kol narrowed his eyes; though the moon hid behind the clouds, he could just make out a shadow moving toward him in the grass. The way the figure moved, and the floral perfume wafting in the dark, struck him with surprise. *Adella.* He blinked, but the silhouette remained.

*Am I dreaming?* Of all people, at that very moment, seeing her was the last thing he ever expected. *Could it be real?* Maybe it was only the delusions of a despairing mind, imagining the one person who had occupied his thoughts so often lately. He held his breath, unsure what to do. Then, she continued toward the pen.

“Wait,” Kol pleaded, desperate but quiet. Though he didn’t want to wake Saer and put her in danger, he couldn’t let this moment pass. “Untie me.”

\* \* \*

Kol’s story begins here, but it is only the first step into a greater tale.

*Legends of Andolin* continues in *Adella of the Campos*, where the world widens, new voices emerge, and the consequences of these choices take shape.

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