

Chapter 1

Irrefutable Charges

Cursing, the two brainless hulks dragged me from the tavern.

“Don’t ever come back!” the innkeeper, Tamil, shouted from the dark, inner depths.

His high-pitched, annoying, nasal voice failed to succumb to the noises of the early morning traffic and the sound of my own boots dragged across the cobbles. Not even the heavy, labored breathing of the hulks drowned out his obnoxious tirade, even when the doors closed behind us. Tamil owned the loudest set of lungs in the district.

You think I’ll ever want to? I half-thought. My brainwaves malfunctioned, shorted out, and created a vacuous state of euphoria combined with an impressive hangover. I saw little save blinding early morning sunlight. The strong ale and mead I drank the night before churned in my belly, and my head ached like a log recently split by an axe. The nasty sickness in my gut quite effectively incapacitated my instinctive urge to fight back. Between them, I’d no more will power or ability to remember my own name much less prevent my immediate eviction from The Horse’s Ass.

Annoyed I hadn’t paid him for a night’s stay, even on the floor beside the hearth, that greedy bastard Tamil ordered his bully boys to toss me out. As though I hadn’t earned a night’s lodging with all the rounds I bought for his regulars. With the ease they might toss a bag of garbage, Tamil’s bouncers flung me headlong from the tavern’s front porch and into the street. I rolled three times, skinning my arms, chest and nose before fetching up against the rear wheel of a passing wagon.

The wheel’s spokes smacked the back of my head in quick succession at the same time the driver’s curse spilled into my ears. Along with the spittle that struck my shoulder. “Get oudda way, bleeding wanker.”

The wagon passed on. Without its questionable support, I fell flat into something cold and wet. Opening my eyes didn’t help much. I witnessed little save whirling stars and flashing lights. The pain from my injuries hadn’t yet bypassed the liquor. I knew they would, however. As I’d passed out cold in the tavern’s corner amid the half-gnawed bones, nasty straw and the tavern hound’s shit sometime around midnight, I knew the alcohol would soon free me from its clutches.

Not much past dawn, I guessed, half-rising, peering about. I squinted into the piercing rays, and shut my eyes against the awful glare. The stars still spun, and my head with them, but the flashing colors had wandered away. Things improved, such as they were. I sat up carefully, stiffly, running my tongue over my teeth. All accounted for and wearing their usual fuzzy sweaters. Did I sleep with my jaws open? My mouth tasted as though Tamil's fat tabby used it for a litter box. I sighed, and thought, *that's scarcely new*.

I ran my hands down my shirt, wiping them dry of the piss wetting them. I wiped my fingers streaked the cold, aromatic urine of some delightful creature down my shirt, then hesitated. *Whoa*. Something isn't right, hold on. My fingers encountered clammy skin, not dirty cotton. What's wrong with this picture?

I glanced down. My shirt wasn't there. I gazed down at my own bare and dirty chest, pronounced ribcage, and the new streaks of malodorous piss and filth my fingers traced downward. Hello? I'd no shirt to wipe my fingers on.

Dammit. Who stole my shirt?

I cast about, half-thinking to find it there in the horse or cow or camel piss I sat in, but no go. No shirt. Who in the name of hell would steal my only shirt? I know I wore it when I passed out, er, fell asleep. Maybe Tamil's bum stole it. He forever eyed me with envy and a sort of covetous greed. But – my shirt? Please!

I tossed my stringy black hair from my eyes with my dripping and reeking right hand. *It might help if I could see straight*, I thought, trying to regain some semblance of normalcy. I peered about, bleary-eyed, before glancing downward. At least I wore my britches. Safe, at least, from too many outraged stares and scornful sniffs. Encompassed in frayed brown homespun stained with too much drink and not enough food, at least some parts of me remained decently covered. I still owned my boots, though they prayed for a resoling. Had I tried, I could count my every rib. I didn't bother.

Dirty, my pale skin exactly matched the color of a fish's belly. My chest appeared almost piebald, white with patches of black grime. I sighed, my head spinning like a wicked imp. I seriously needed a bath and a tan, in that order. Wishing heartily for the bath, I leaned on my right hand, my left rising to assist my equilibrium onto a new path of self-discovery.

As I floundered, trying to rise with little balance and zero ability, I fell backward, on my ass. My already stained breeches soaked up some critter's pit stop with rapid enjoyment. My nose wrinkled, offended, as the early morning sun suddenly vanished. I sank back down. On my butt with the damp cobbles, I

grimaced. *Oh, great.* Whoever stole my shirt now stole the sun. My morning started out just dandy: tossed from my comfortable bed with no shirt and now no sunshine – gods help us all.

My eyes not quite working correctly, I squinted, trying to see past the crap in my eyes. I swiped half-heartedly at my blood seeping into the right one with my balancing left hand. The urine's salt stung something chronic, but my gesture helped. In a manner of speaking, that was. My sight stilled blurred, but if I looked downward, I saw grey cobbles, red stains and my boots. *Feet, must stand on. Get them flat, get them under you and stand, you alcoholic nimrod. Hop it.*

In preparation for rising, I turned first my shoulder, then my neck, and – froze. A very peculiar object stood on the brown cobbles, slightly in front and to my right. Large dark and black, it seemed hauntingly familiar. *Wait, give me a second, I know what that is.*

A black hoof.

Glossy, immaculate, attached to a black pastern. Hooves travelled in pairs. Where one found one, one might find two. I slewed around, my damp black hair falling across my eyes. Aha! Just where I expected it, another black hoof stood on the cobbles to my left. *Save your applause, folks, I know, I'm a genius.*

But what's attached to the hooves?

Um –

You're in trouble, mate.

Craning my neck, I lifted my face, my reeking hair obligingly sliding from my questionable vision. I blinked rapidly, swiped my hand across my eyes again. This time, I cleared some haze and blood from my eyes. Yet, the great, abominable shape remained indistinct. Backlit by the sun, it peered down at me, surrounded by a bright halo of light. Long hair framed a dark face with hooded, shadowed eyes. Like a great shaggy demon from the depths of hell, it stared at me as though plotting how best to steal my soul. A blast from the past spoke up, its voice deep and humorous –

“Hello, Van.”

I wilted, flopping like a wet sack onto my back as though I no longer had a backbone. My useless hands fell limp to my hips and I shut my eyes. My spine's qualifications never entered the equation, but that was beside the point. I thought not to hear that deep voice ever again. I ran from it, hid from it; I survived in the shadows and rejoiced in its absence.

However, despite my best efforts, that melodic yet quirky lilt haunted my restless sleep over the last two years. No night but passed with that same voice overriding the alcohol in my blood. It never asked anything save the same question, over and over and over –

“Are you ready?”

Never, I tried to answer.

Yet, my blood leaped forward and saluted. *Yes. Yes, I am.*

Are you effing kidding me? How in the name of all the gods did he find me here, in the kingdom’s arsehole? I know I covered my tracks, for who in the name of hell would search for me in the city’s nastiest pisspot? I ask you! *Surely all my dues have been paid?* I wanted to scream.

I shut my eyes, but he shifted his feet slightly and permitted the sun’s entire light to blaze in all its glory into my face. I winced at its piercing agony, the spears lancing my eyes and my head, my belly roiling in protest. I scrubbed my hands over my face, feeling the growth of at least three days on my jaws.

“Still trying to drown your sorrows, I see.”

I lowered my hands enough to squint up. *“Can’t,”* I replied around my thick tongue. *“Little bleeders know how to swim.”*

“Imagine that.”

Though I tried not to slur my words, I knew they sounded as though I newly woke from a heavy binge. I did, but let’s not tell *him* that. *“What’re you doing here? Please don’t say you’re just in the neighborhood. I know better.”*

“Get him up.”

Hooves clopped on brick cobbles behind me, striking sparks in my sensitive hearing. Strong hands lifted me, raising my once inert body, standing me, within reason, on my feet. Had their hands not kept me upright, I’d no doubt collapse back into the dirt and piss. Which was worse? Lying in the gutter or facing one’s best and oldest friend?

I shook off their hands and, had I a shirt, might’ve straightened it. As it was, I squared my shoulders and flung my hair from my face. Dignity scattered to the four winds, I could at least appear as though I faced him on even ground. Sticking my thumbs in my belt, I drew a deep, steadying breath and locked eyes with him.

“How’d you find me?”

Malik'an'lakna'ra, Lord Captain Commander of the King's Weksan'Atan Forces, folded his arms across his massive chest. A tiny smile rose to his deep eyes and no further. "I've kept tabs on you."

Sobriety took a firm hold on my runaway wits at last. *I'll need every damn one of them right now*, I thought, as I summoned the shards of my dignity. Though I stank of shit, piss and last night's sorrow, I straightened my spine. Dirty, bleeding, I summoned all my willpower to remain upright and sober. *I am of the Einion'nalad Clan*, I reminded myself. *My blood is as good, as pure, as any here. I wear the black scars on my cheeks, the marks of the Clan. I am worthy.*

At least, once, not so long ago, I was. Now? Big question mark.

I glanced up into my once-upon-a-time friend's face and set my hands on my hips.

"I ask again: what do you want?"

Malik's lip curled. "His Majesty commands you."

"I don't work for him anymore."

"You're an officer in his Atan."

"Oh, right. His Majesty's Secret Police. But if it's a secret, why does everyone know about it?"

"Blabbermouths."

"I never said a word."

"Never said you did." Malik tried for a smile but failed. His face stern façade wasn't conducive for humor or smiling. Too military, too disciplined, for the common proclivities of life. "You're an Atan. You'd know better."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm retired, remember?"

Malik sighed. "Once an Atan, always an Atan."

"Don't quote scripture to me, bro," I snapped.

His heavy brow lifted. "Bro, is it? So you remember your old ties, after all."

From his polished black hooves to the top of his head, Malik stood taller than an average man by several hands. A Centaur of the highest order, Malik descended from the Old Blood, the *Malana'akana*. From his hips up, Malik appeared fully human. Broad chest, flat belly, his biceps bulged under their arm bands of beaten silver. The black headband across his brow not only held back his

wealth of shoulder-length black hair, but the multi-rayed star badge on the silk proclaimed his high rank in His Majesty's service. Battle harness crisscrossed his huge chest, as his sword hung in its leather sheath across his back and dangled over his equine withers. Silver steel cuffs protected his wrists from his bowstring; his quiver of bristling arrows hung from his belt over his massive horse shoulders. The hilt of a slim dagger hung in its sheath in his harness, ready to hand. As black as his hooves, his stallion's jet coat gleamed under the new sun's rays; his thick black tail swept across his hocks, expressing the annoyance his expression carefully hid.

A collar of beaten gold around his bull-neck proclaimed him royal. Malik descended from Centaur kings of old, who claimed kinship with the gods themselves. Still, he bent his great knee, bowed his royal head, to the human King. As did most everyone else in Bryn' Cairdha.

Except me.

I sighed in my turn. "Tell your boys to back off."

Malik tossed his head. Instantly, the Centaurs under Malik's command retreated, abandoned me, and stalked into line with their brothers. There, behind Malik in classic military formation, they stood at parade rest. Arms behind their backs, eyes blank and facing forward, their front hooves stood shoulder width apart. Swords hung at precise angles, leather harness polished to a sheen, long hair under their brow-bands curled onto their bared human shoulders. Military discipline at its finest. I tried to forget how I once stood as they did.

Beyond them, Malik's troop of cavalry disrupted the new morning's commerce by standing silent in the street, thereby forcing wagons, carriages, foot and horse traffic, mule-skinners, traders, and the local whores and vagabonds to move around their silent horses. The King's banner floated on the early summer breeze, tickling its silk and set it to dancing like a Faery-child. Heads swiveled in my direction. Horse, mule and ox traffic slowed as the onlookers gaped. The King's own royal Atani forces arrested a common drunk. I didn't need to hear their whispers: *He must have murdered someone. Surely he'll hang. Let's attend the execution, wot? I'll bring the ale, you bring your sister.*

"You still haven't answered my question."

"I need you," Malik replied simply. "You were, and always will be, the best."

"Please," I said, my tone bitter. "No one's missed me for two years. Why am I so popular now?"

“Princess Iyumi has been kidnapped.”

“Good riddance.”

Malik sighed, his dark face darkening further in annoyance. However, his military bearing, calm façade and unflappable nature kept his tone and expression even. “She’s the High Priestess and our future Queen.”

I snorted, crossing my arms over my bare, mottled chest. “You don’t like her any more than I do. She’s insufferable.”

“Whether I like her or not doesn’t make a difference. I’m putting together a team to fetch her back, and I want you on it.”

I stared at him, stunned and uncomprehending. “Are you daft? No!”

Malik had the gall to smile comfortingly – comfortingly – down at me. “Here’s your opportunity to find redemption.”

“What makes you think I’m searching for – that – what did you call it? Redemption?”

His eyes wandered the street, the piss and shit-laden cobblestones toward the less-than busy activity of the folk who lived in this section of town. A few low-class merchants worked here, yes, men who sought to cheat more than they hoped to sell. Out of work mercenaries wandered in search of any master, the honest as well as the desperate. Thieves watched the unsuspecting from shadowed doorways. Those few women about at this hour were the whores whose johns left their one-room hovels last night.

His deep brown eyes roved over the sign behind me, the emblem of the white rear-end of a laughing horse. The Horse’s Ass. A tavern so seedy even the whores and cutthroats found little to attract them there.

“You like living in the gutter?” Malik asked conversationally.

“It’s home, be it ever so humble.”

“His Majesty has commanded you restored to your former rank and all its privileges. Reluctantly, however. He doesn’t like you much.”

“Tell him I respectfully ask him to kiss my arse.”

“Dammit, Van, I need you.”

“No, you don’t.” I crossed my thin arms over my scrawny, filthy chest. “Order Cian to this detail.”

Malik lifted his broad shoulders and glared down his hooked nose. “I did. He and ten others of your Clan and ready and waiting for you to lead them. My team consists of a wing of Griffins, a troop of Minotaurs, three units of cavalry and an untold number of creeping spies.”

I shook my head, grinning faintly. “You really don’t need me.”

“I do, indeed.”

Malik’s fist clenched as he half-raised it, his expression tight. “You’re the best of them, Van. No other Shifter has your precise detail. None have your nerve, your wit, nor your cunning. You take on what others fear to. No one can fly, run, wriggle, creep, crawl or jump as you do. Unless you’re part of it, my mission will fail utterly.”

“Nice speech.” I hooked my thumbs in my belt again. “Pity you bet on the wrong Shifter.”

Malik’s fist dropped to his side and opened. He relaxed. Not a welcome sign, in my book. His expression shut down, frozen into that my-way-or-the-highway-Malik face. “You’ll make me force you?”

“You don’t have to force anything on anyone.” I shrugged. “It’s your choice, brother. Make it and go. And leave me be.”

A thinning of his lips created something akin to a smile at the same time his eyes hardened. Malik’s hard-bitten Atani face wasn’t designed for emotions like humor. A shiver of dread wriggled like a grave-worm down my spine. I’d seen that look before. I saw that exact expression at the precise moment his powerful hooves knocked a man’s head clean from his shoulders. My hand tried to creep to my neck, but I quashed its cowardice with firm resolve.

“No can do,” Malik replied, feigned sorrow shadowing his tone. “I’m under orders to take you back.”

I loved the guy, yet I always hated that aspect of his personality. Malik adored mockery, and sarcasm was an art he practiced often. He never failed to poke sardonic humor at those beneath his royal nose. The egotistical, self-centered bastard that he was.

“You’ll come with me either of your own free will or in chains,” Malik promised, his hands resting on his horse shoulders, akimbo. “Either way, you come with me. Your choice, of course, my dear Van.”

“Spare me.”

Laughing, I reverted to my favorite form, the falcon. Leaping into the morning sunlight, I soared upward, its welcoming rays lingering on my feathers. Rising on the light breeze, I caught a thermal and rose yet higher within an instant. Far below, Malik stood amid his soldiers, gaping upward like a landed fish. “Catch me now, meathead,” I called.

Below me, Malik and his cronies fell away quickly. I pushed my wings into working hard, seeking the sun. Climbing high and fast, I left the stench of the street, the Ass, and the piss I fell into far behind. I always loved flying. When I flew, I imagined the world far away, where I was no one and nothing. I had no past and no future. There was no present, no cares, no sensations save the whisper of the wind beneath my wings, the cool breeze tickling my beak. Up here, all just *was*.

In my falcon body, I rose high, swift, my wings taking me away from the grief, from Malik, his patrol, and his crisis. I saw them with my keen raptor vision, far below, shading their eyes to see me better. *Ah, Malik, my brother, you forgot who I am. You called me the best. And so I am. Go away and leave me alone.*

I reckon I forgot who he was.

His magic struck like a knife in the dark. Twin manacles of dark pewter fastened upon my wing joints. Like malicious tentacles, they bit deep and no amount of fighting on my part would or could shake them loose. *Damn you, Malik. You can kill me with these bloody things.*

Only one magic in the known, and unknown, world prevented a Shifter from changing forms: those dark pewter manacles. The power of the Old Ones, the magic the Centaurs, the Minotaurs, the Griffins, the Faeries all called their own, rested within them. No one knew exactly how they worked, not even the scholars. Save for those gifted few.

The dark manacles’ secrets, the inhibitors of any and all magic, only a small handful knew. A dire, dark spell woven into the fabric of magic stilled it completely. A Shifter’s magic permitted the change from one’s own form into any shape within the known universe. The pewter’s power rendered a Shifter incapable of utilizing his gods-given powers.

The Minotaur’s magics were stilled completely when chained with those strange objects. The Griffins learned to fear it, and the Centaurs hated the very sight of that dark gleam. Only the Faeries laughed at its ancient magic, but they laughed at everything. Even humans with the awesome powers at their disposal were rendered as helpless as infants when the manacles were employed.

Obviously, Malik learned, or was taught, the secrets of the dark metal. And he never told me, the cad.

Frozen, my wings refused to work properly. My helpless flapping prevented a death drop to the very hard ground below me, but the remaining airborne option departed swiftly. I beat hard, desperate, my body spiraling rapidly out of control. My raptor's sharp vision caught glimpses of the town beneath spinning like a top, and forced one simple conclusion from me.

I'm in trouble.

Dizzy, last night's mead threatening to reverse itself with a vengeance, the world spun around and around and around. *I'm gonna die*, I thought. *My Lady Goddess, as you love me, let me hurl on Malik's impeccable shoulder before you take me to your bosom.*

My swift wings failed to save my life, therefore I must rely on others if I wished to breathe a while longer. However, that prospect sucked rocks. Down, down, I spiraled, my small body rotating as it dropped. The ground below rose faster than I liked, and I'd hit terra extremely firma within moments. Without help, I'd smash into little bits of feather and falcon on the dirty brown cobbles. Though I wished myself dead many times over the last couple years, I wasn't so sure I wanted to meet my Maker just yet.

Malik, if you want me alive, you'd better do something.

I always suspected a sadistic streak ran down his spine, the kind that enjoyed watching a worm wriggle in the mud at his feet. An even-tempered beast under normal circumstances, I supposed I pushed his good nature to its limits. He wanted me to think I'd die, just so he could save me, and preen under my gratitude. While I wanted to spit on his polished hooves, I wished he'd rush in to save me, post-haste.

Uh, Malik? Hello? Anytime now.

Malicious, Malik waited until the very last instant to catch me within the folds of his power. Like a cold blanket, his magic seized me in its grip. I felt my body slow its rapid descent, seconds too late. I'd hit ground, but not fatally.

I fell with a wretched, ignominious thud to the cobblestones at his feet, losing precious feathers and waking a headache that rivaled my best hangover. Dazed, I gasped for breath, my beak wide, my form locked into that of my falcon. I breathed in piss and coughed out mead. Choking, gasping, I floundered, unable to get my talons under me so I might yet stand.

The sun vanished again as Malik bent down. He picked me up.

Not by my small body, the falcon that could fit nicely into his sword-calloused palm. Hell, no. Malik had a vicious side to his calm and affable nature. He plucked me up by my feet and held me before his eyes as though evaluating his next meal.

Upside down.

Viewing the world, dangling toes up and beak down from the hand of a Centaur gave me much needed perspective, I'll admit. The Horse's Ass wasn't the home I thought it was. I liked The Signal Seller, an inn across town kept by a woman who loved books and often quoted chapter and verse. She also adored cats. If I turned myself into a long-haired, striped tabby, she'd allow me into her lap and would read to me. Maybe I'll saunter on down to the Signal and be her cat for the next year or ten.

A scroll appeared in Malik's left hand. "Vanyar ap Llewellyn ap Hydarr," he announced in a deep rolling tone. I swear the vagrants in the streets halted long enough to listen to his captivating voice. "I've a list of charges against you."

I sighed and the world steadied a bit. At least my stomach calmed. "Tut," I commented. "Your desperation is showing. Terribly unsuitable for one of your calling, you know."

The manacles on my wings didn't allow for furling them across my back. Forced, however hateful this action was, I spread them wide. Much easier on the wings, less so on my raptor's immediate dignity.

"His Royal Majesty has charged this miscreant with public drunkenness and intoxication," Malik intoned, pretending to read from his scroll.

"Um," I answered, slow, careful. "It's legal, and expected, on this side of town."

"– lewd and lascivious behavior –"

"She said she was eighteen."

"– indecent exposure –"

"Uh, from where I sit you'd be accused of the same. Your whatsis hangs as large as –"

"Part of my culture." Malik cut me off primly. "What's your excuse?"

"Someone stole my shirt."

“Are you sticking to that pathetic story?”

“I don’t have a chance, do I?”

“A snowball’s in hell. Maybe. If you’re lucky.”

“Gods forbid –”

Malik’s voice rose. “Conduct unbecoming an officer and an Atan.”

“I left the Atan years ago. That doesn’t qualify.”

“– disrespect to His Royal Majesty –”

“I’ve disrespected him for years, too, however that’s mostly private. How’d you know about it, anyway?”

“I know everything.”

My eyes chanced upon his glassy, shined and polished, hind hooves. “We’re friends, aren’t we, Malik?”

My question halted his feigned gaze on his magic-inspired scroll. He frowned, half-turning toward me, his brows lowered. I interrupted his train of thought, yet he’d forgive me. This time. “Yes, Van.”

“Friends can ask one another personal questions, isn’t that true?”

“Of course, my dear chap.”

“Inquiring minds must know.”

He sighed, his hand raising me up to eye level. “Is there a question in your future?”

I jerked my beak toward his rear. “How do you polish your back ones? I know you hate servants and such noble pleasantries.”

“Can we stay on topic, please?”

“I ask,” I went on slowly, “because I suspect it’d be very difficult for one of your, er, stature, to polish your own hooves. Do you, like, bend under?”

“His Majesty also charges –”

“If you’re that bendable, dear boy, please suck your own –”

He shook me vigorously. The ale and mead I drank last threatened an immediate and chronic upheaval. “Don’t,” I choked. “I’m gonna hurl.”

Malik extended his arm, and me, well away from his military and pristine self. “Knock yourself out.”

I managed not to barf, but my belly roiled alarmingly. “Quick shaking me, will you?”

He did so again, just out of sheer cussedness. My belly heaved, but I managed to lock my throat in the nick of time. “This is a side of you I’ve never encountered before,” I gasped, viewing the Horse’s Ass and its customers from an odd vantage point. Tamil’s poxy face looked just like the painted Ass, from its’ rear-view appearance. How extraordinary.

“His Majesty also charges you with high treason and murder.”

“Fine,” I replied, willing my revolted belly into submission. The world spun for a few more awkward moments, then quieted. I met his dark eyes and grim expression with jovial mockery. Shrugging my feathers, I quite effectively blew off both him and his juvenile threats.

“Take me to jail. I need a vacation, anyway. I can sleep, eat three squares a day, no worries.”

Malik lifted me higher, his deep eye on level with mine. His aristocratic lips smiled in a way that sent a shiver down my falcon spine.

“Oh, no, Van,” he replied softly, waving me gently back and forth. “No cushy cell for you. A high treason sentence, for an ex-Atan, means you go straight to Braigh’Mhar.”

A sudden, icy chill ruffled my every feather. *Gods, no.*

The royal courts sent the worst of the worse to Braigh’Mhar upon their conviction. Raithin Mawrn terrorists, murderers, rapists, robbers, killers, soldiers convicted of treason – all save the petty crimes of theft or burglary, prostitution or debt – eventually found their way to the frozen north. The locals, and cursing inmates, named it the hell beneath hell.

Bound on all sides by glaciers and bald mountains, any who escaped Braigh’Mhar died from exposure within moments of leaving its high, protected walls. None might survive but within the comparative safety of the prison’s protections. Native, six-limbed trolls guarded the twenty-five rod-high icebound prison walls. Trolls were all but mindless; they ate anything that moved, or didn’t move. That menu included road kill, the occasional rat and freedom-seeking prisoners. To date, no fool bypassed their alert senses, nor their voracious appetites, to escape into the sweet freedom the mountains offered.

Long accustomed to this brutal landscape, the trolls inherited inches thick layers of fat beneath their tough, reptilian hides. Their warm skins and their diet of high fat and protein, fed raw and bloody by the prison officials, prevented the deepest cold from killing their species in infancy. Their natural protection and constant hunger kept them alert, cautious, and prowling for inmate-meat. Their efficient night vision and breath of flame caught many unsuspecting escapees before the brutal cold could. Only by remaining inside might one escape certain death from either the blasting cold or the trolls. Braigh'Mhar effectively shut the world out, and its enemies in.

The mountains also hungered for blood.

Had a fortunate inmate succeed where others failed, ducking the alert guards and starving trolls, and survived the perilous trek into the sharp-toothed mountains, he'd face a worst death than what he'd fled from. Ice, starvation and a lengthy, agonized death awaited him with open legs. Running to her for comfort, he'd perish under her lethal, icy kiss. Blinded by white, his blood turning to ice in his veins, his body slowly froze as he believed he lay warm and safe under layers of warm quilts. The bald, ice-enslaved rocky peaks held more traps than a willing whore. Men tried. Men died.

Those prisoners who opted to remain within the prison walls found savage means of survival. Savvy prisoners created gangs for protection, and killed the off the weakest prisoners. The strong led, the less than strong followed. Wars between gangs flared often, and kept the prison's funeral services (the trolls) busy. Prison guards left the inmates to their own devices, unless they rioted. If that occurred, the wardens simply turned the hungry trolls loose to run amongst the rebelling prisoners and shut the heavy steel doors behind them. Any riots ended rather quickly.

Criminals not immediately executed were sentenced to Braigh'Mhar either for a later death sentence or for a life inside its heinous walls. No parole was offered or expected. Stories spread of the convict gangs that ruled inside its tall towers. With the massive trolls outside, human and Minotaur guards inside, one didn't stand a chance of either escaping or living beyond a year. If the gangs didn't gut you, insanity surely would.

"I can't go there." My tongue felt numb.

"The manacles you wear now will accompany you," Malik went on, implacable. "Your hands will be bound behind you, twenty-four seven. There's no chance you'll change your form into that of a mouse and wriggle free, or escape. There you will remain till the end of your, er, single, tortured week."

My tongue all but refused to work. “You wouldn’t.”

Malik half-smiled with a shrug, indolent. “I don’t pass sentence. His Majesty will.”

“I gave His Majesty many years of loyal and dedicated service,” I said, my voice wild.

Malik frowned at his scroll. “Oh, there it is. I almost overlooked it. Absent without leave. Almost two years to the day. Wow. What a coincidence.”

“I had to run, dammit.”

“Oh, yes.” Malik smiled thinly. “From your Atani brothers.”

My soul cringed. “I didn’t mean for it to happen,” I whispered. “I –”

“Your own arrogance and callous stupidity caused many Atani deaths. No punishment is good enough.”

“Then execute me. Cut my head off.”

Malik drew me close to his face, eye to eye, his expression wide, cunning and cruel. “Oh, Van,” he replied softly. “That’s much too easy for one such as you.”

“Gods –”

“You deserve nothing less than incarceration for what little remains of your life.”

“Send me anywhere but Braigh’Mhar. Please.”

“Why? You sent ninety-nine point nine percent of the Braigh’Mhar inmates there yourself? Right?”

I raised a scoff. “Ninety five point eight, bro,” I snapped, my voice hoarse. “You did your share.”

He shook me again. My feathers rattled from stem to stern. “I never committed treason.”

“Nor did I –”

“You did. Disobeying a direct command from the King or his first-in-command – that would be me – is treason at its highest level.”

“What order did I disobey?” I demanded.

Malik smiled. “I ordered you to see me in my quarters after Dalziel, to explain what happened. Instead, you bolted like a rabbit.”

“I had to, dammit!” I shouted, my wings wide. “They were going to kill me.”

“Of course they wanted you dead. You got their brothers blown to kingdom come.”

“I sent them in to save lives, rescue hostages. My intel was sound, they were hot to go in. I didn’t know – There was only one, I was told, only one – You weren’t there. Nor was His Majesty. I did what I had to do.”

“You broke protocol,” Malik sneered. “And it cost the lives of your unit. You live though they died.”

I groaned, shutting my eyes. “I’d trade places with them all in a heartbeat, given the chance. But that matters as much as a flea in a sandstorm. Don’t it?”

“You’re pathetic, Van.”

“And then some. How long?”

“Oh, the boys are wagering you survive anywhere from two days to a month,” Malik remarked agreeably, his smile bright and more predatory than a shark’s. “Among the general population.”

“I demand a single cell. And protection.”

Malik’s face fell. “Oh, gee, sorry. This just bites rocks, bro. Treasonous ex-Atani aren’t allowed special privileges. Treat them like the criminals they are, the King says.”

“Shit.”

“How’s by those souvenirs? A piece of your hide will fund an inmate’s bad habits for a month.”

I groaned.

“Those bad boys’ll take weeks to kill you.” Malik’s soft voice held more malice than a bared sword. “Choose that, or –”

“Or?” I hated myself for it, but I leaped toward the temptation he offered. “Or what?”

“Reclaim your place and your soul by joining with me,” he said. “Help me bring the Princess home.”

Bitterness rose like the bad mead in my belly. “Oh, sure,” I tried to scoff. “Trade one sentence of death for the other. You know damn well what’ll happen to me.”

Malik’s brows drew down as though he pondered the implications. “Oh. All your brothers who remember Dalziel.”

“Bastard,” I hissed. “You know they’ll kill me.”

“You’ll be under my protection.”

“No offense, Malik. But that’s as effective of a linen cloth against a sword’s strike.”

His dark eyes met mine. “Take it or leave it.”

“Malik, where’d that cruel streak spring from? I’ve never seen it’s like before.”

Cold oozed from his every pore. “Choose, or I’ll choose for you.”

I sighed, swinging from his fingers like a bat at roost. I wrapped my wings about me as best I could, stilling my shivers. “If I’m to die,” I answered softly, “better I die at the hatred of my own kind than the torments of my enemies. I was yours before. I am yours after. I’m still yours, for whatever life remains to me.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear. Positive and encouraging. You’re a true Atan, Vanyar. Perhaps you’ll redeem your honor on this mission.”

“Honor is a walk on slippery river rocks,” I replied, my tone as cold as I could make it. “Too treacherous for words.”

Casually, he flicked his fist. His motion tossed me up to land, talons-first, on his bare shoulder. His manacles vanished, leaving me free to fly, change forms or do as I pleased. Instead, I furred my sore wings, a tiny falcon perched beside his face, gripping his skin with my sharp talons without cutting him. “You’re a bastard, Malik.”

His deep-set eye met mine the instant he quirked his upper lip. “And then some,” he answered softly.

Striking a gallop, with me stuck to his shoulder with wings half-spread for balance, Malik’s hooves sparked lights from the cobbles. Behind his flowing tail galloped his Centaur unit, two by two, the sound of their hooves like thunder in the almost silent streets. What few folk roamed at this early hour scuttled hastily out of his path, their curses swallowed. Wagons drawn by horses, mules and a few laden

oxen trundled aside, their drivers yanking on long reins. Attendant mercs on rearing horses spurred their mounts out of the way, gloved hands kept well-away from sword hilts.

I glanced behind. The mounted cavalry parted in twain and flanked the galloping Centaurs, the King's banner snapping in the wind. Behind it flew the Atani flag: the grinning Death's Head skull. Charging across the quarter's wide industrious center, Malik plowed through matrons and shopkeepers alike. Shouted curses hadn't time to fill his ears as his hard hooves forced peasants, workers, thieves, whores, or convenient aristocrats aside or risk being trampled by an annoyed Centaur commander and his Atans.

His wild hair cloaked me, enveloping me like a burial shroud. I didn't try to toss it aside, nor did Malik, though the comparison gave me the heebie-jeebies. Had I the guts, I'd force Malik to send me to Braigh'Mhar, find peace within a sort-of honorable death. Like the coward I was, I sat on his shoulder as he took me into a future I didn't want. I longed to fly free, flee, as I ran away before. But my past would ever follow like a hungry pup, always there, never satisfied. *I'd take their places if I could.* I said it, and meant it. I couldn't and they're still dead. Perhaps my death might salvage the mess I made. Bring peace at last to all those involved.

Face your enemies.

Sure, I thought. Easier said than done.