

**THE LAST
FALCON**

BOOK 1 OF THE CAEL STONE

— COLLEEN RUTTAN —

CHAPTER 1

“Don’t let them catch you, Erynn.”

Erynn had no idea how much time had passed. She sat quietly in the dim light of the cave, her arms folded over her chest and her forehead on her knees. Too scared to move in case she made a sound that drew the soldiers. She had climbed up the narrow tunnel as far as she could go, until she was sure they couldn’t reach her, and now the rocks pressed in close all around her, their hard coolness making her shiver and their musty dampness filling her lungs until it seemed she couldn’t breathe.

She had heard sounds before nightfall—voices and the footsteps of soldiers searching for her—and a few more when light eventually trickled back up the cave. Then exhaustion caught up with her, and she had drifted in and out of sleep for what seemed like hours. Something crawling over the back of her head finally woke her, reminding her that she didn’t think she could handle another night in the cave. But she still couldn’t bring herself to move. It wasn’t just the soldiers. She was afraid of what else might be waiting for her outside.

Then a twig snapped.

“Erynn?” came a man’s voice.

Erynn raised her head. At first she thought maybe she was hearing things—her father’s voice again—but then she glanced down at the mouth of the cave and saw the shadow of someone outside.

“The soldiers are gone,” the man said. “It is quite safe to come out.”

Erynn wondered if this was a trick. He didn’t sound like one of the men—he actually sounded much older—but they could have heard her father say her name and she wasn’t about to be fooled.

“Erynn?” he repeated a few moments later. “I assure you I mean you no harm. Just want to help if I can.”

Erynn didn’t know what to do. She still didn’t think he sounded like one of the soldiers. In fact, there was something about his voice that almost seemed familiar, like a voice she could trust. But she remained wary. She couldn’t let them catch her. Not after what they did. She sat in silence a while longer, wondering if at some point he would leave. Then something skittered across her foot and she barely stifled a scream. Now she couldn’t help it. She had to get out of that cave.

“Who—who are you?” she called out, her voice sounding somewhat hollow amongst the rocks.

“Just a friend. Soren, if you would prefer a name. I heard the trouble with the dragon and thought someone might need help. I would have come sooner, but I am not as young as I used to be and needed to wait until the soldiers had gone.”

“How do you know my name?”

A hand reached into the cave and set down a thick stack of parchments, all wrapped in an old leather case and bound with a strap.

“I found these in the wagon. I thought they might have been searching for someone, and when I saw this, with the

name on it, I took a look myself. I noticed your tracks and they led me here. You write well, Erynn. Although, I must say, if you are still hoping to see elves in Galia, you will probably be disappointed. I have seen more than a few over the years, but they do tend to prefer warmer climates. You are more likely to see dwarves in these hills, even though we are still some miles from the mountains.”

Erynn started down the rocks, suddenly more annoyed that some stranger was rifling through her journal than afraid he meant to harm her. “Are my quill and ink still there?”

“Yes, but those fine-looking horses are gone. They even took the two hitched to the wagon.”

Erynn came as close to the cave opening as she dared and snatched up her journal. Then she moved back out of reach in case he tried to grab her. She could see more of his cloak now, and a pair of old and wrinkled hands. “They weren’t our horses. They belonged to King Wryden.”

“King Wryden? Of Alyria?” The man sounded surprised.

“My father bought them for him in Cold Lake five days ago. For his breeding stock.”

“Why would the King of Alyria send someone all the way to Galia to buy horses?”

Erynn had asked her father the same question before his last trip to Galia two years ago. Her mother was already starting to show signs of the illness that would eventually take her life and Erynn hadn’t wanted him to go. “Because they’re the best horses in all of Valentia. And my father has a friend here. He’s bought horses from him before.”

“Unfortunately, it seems those soldiers must have agreed.”

Erynn closed her eyes, remembering the look on their leader’s face: the fair-haired man with the limp and the jagged scars—one under his right eye that ran halfway down his cheek and the other on his chin. Her father had pleaded with

him to just take the horses and leave, but the man's eyes were hard and cold. It was when he dismounted and ordered them down from the wagon, slowly drawing his sword as he limped toward them, that her father had told her to run. Part of her now wished she had; that she hadn't stopped and turned back.

"Was it just the two of you?" the man asked.

Erynn rubbed a hand across her face, trying to wipe away that last searing image. The one that had haunted her all through the night: a flash of silver and her father collapsing to the ground. And in the background that horrible scream. "No. My friend's brother came with us. But he's gone. He left us in Cold Lake."

"I see. And do you know where he is now?"

"No. On his way to Ethlon. I don't know."

"Have you traveled with your father before?"

"A few times. But this was the first out of Alyria."

The man was quiet. Then he bent over, bones creaking, and peered inside the cave. He was older than Erynn had imagined, perhaps in his late sixties, with a grey beard and green eyes.

"I am terribly sorry about your father, Erynn," he said.

Erynn felt her throat go tight, and simply nodded and looked away.

Soren hesitated. "I wrapped him in one of the blankets from the wagon, but he needs a proper burial. Before the animals come. Do you think you can help me? I would rather not ask, but I doubt I can manage alone. And it would be best if we hurry. In case those soldiers return."

Erynn wasn't sure why they would bother. It was the horses they wanted and now they had them. But the old man's comment had her worried. Going back to that road was the last thing she wanted to do, but she couldn't bear the thought of any animals touching her father. So she clutched the

journal to her chest, hoping again that she could trust him, and crawled the rest of the way out of the cave. It was difficult to stand at first, her entire body stiff and sore, but Soren waited patiently, and when she was ready, led her back through the trees.

The walk took longer than she had expected—so much so that she soon grew amazed that she had even found the caves. All she remembered was running through the trees, half-blinded by tears and panic, with an odd buzzing in her ears and the low branches stinging as they slapped her face and grabbed at her hair. She scanned the gaps between them now, watching for soldiers, and even looked up at the sky—half-expecting the golden dragon to swoop down at them. But everything seemed still and quiet; the air cool.

“Krystalix is gone, too,” the old man said.

“You saw him?” Erynn asked, not realizing he was watching her.

“I did, but only briefly as he flew past.”

“Do you live nearby?”

“Not far. I was actually out for a walk when I saw him.”

Erynn heard the dragon’s scream in her mind again, a sound unlike any she had ever heard before. He had dropped out of the sky like a golden bolt of lightning—at almost the very same instant her father hit the ground—and had snatched one of the soldiers from his saddle and torn him in half right in front of her. Her father used to tell her stories about the dragons, stories that up until yesterday she had always loved, but they were nothing like seeing one for real. “I’ve never seen him before. Just in some drawings and paintings. A few books.”

“Not many do see the dragons these days. Not like they used to anyway. Which is a shame. He tends to stay in Alyria, up in the mountains like most of them do, but I have seen

him around here before.”

“My father said it was rare for dragons to attack people. Unprovoked, anyway.”

“Yes, I would say that is true.”

“Then I don’t understand why he attacked. Those soldiers weren’t bothering him.”

“I am sure he had his reasons, difficult as it is to understand them now. Perhaps he was trying to help you.”

Erynn wanted to tell him that if the dragon wished to help, he should have arrived a few seconds sooner. But she couldn’t bring herself to say the words. She was having a hard enough time keeping a handle on herself and was scared of what might happen if she did.

Ahead of her, Soren stopped. They had reached the road.

“How old are you, Erynn?” he asked, his voice quiet.

“Fourteen.”

He sighed. “Far too young to have witnessed such violence.”

At least a half-dozen men lay dead on the road, their bodies bloodied and ripped apart by the dragon. Standing amongst them, looking very much alone, was her father’s wagon, the two old geldings that had pulled it now gone and their clothes and other belongings scattered nearby. Her father still lay in the same spot she saw him collapse, but was now wrapped in a dark blanket. The same dark blanket he had slept under every night of their trip.

Tears rose to Erynn’s eyes.

“Can you find a good place while I fetch the spade?” Soren asked. “I noticed one in the wagon.”

Erynn nodded, but seconds passed before she finally turned away. She searched along the roadside until she found a suitable spot to bury her father—a fairly open and sunny place between the trees—and when Soren returned they each

took turns with the spade. Then, when they were ready, they carried her father's body across the road and lowered him into the grave, still wrapped in the blanket.

"Rest now, Erynn," the old man said. "I can finish."

He motioned for the spade, but Erynn shook her head. This was her father and she would finish. She covered his body with dirt, then gathered stones from around the road and stacked them carefully over the grave. When she was satisfied that he was safe, she went to the wagon to grab her pack and what few things of value were left besides her journal: the quill and ink set her father had given her a few years before, some papers on the purchase of the horses, a bit of left over food, and a change of clothes.

Soren remained seated by the grave the entire time, watching her.

"He's not one of them," she said when she finally returned and sat down next to him. "The man who killed him."

Soren gazed at the bodies still lying in the road. "You know for sure?"

Erynn nodded. She had checked every one of those bodies while gathering stones. The fair-haired man with the limp and the jagged scars wasn't among them. He had survived.

"Well, I am sure life will catch up with him sooner or later," Soren said. "Always does with men like him."

Erynn wished she could find comfort in that. But she didn't. She wanted her father's killer to pay for what he did, and she wanted him to pay now. Not years from now in some stupid fight or battle somewhere. But he was a nameless soldier in a kingdom with thousands like him and she was just a girl. A servant. Not even from Galia. She would have felt some measure of justice if the dragon had killed him, but he hadn't and now it seemed she would never have it.

Soren pulled himself up and brushed the dirt from his

cloak. “We should go. If we can make our way through these woods to the Ring Road, we can probably find someone headed to Alyria. Someone who can give you a ride to the castle.”

“The castle?” Erynn said.

“You must go see the king, Erynn. Tell him what happened. Those were his horses, after all.”

Erynn didn’t like the sound of that. King Wryden was bound to be more upset about the loss of his horses than her father. “I think I’d rather stay here. I have nothing to go back there for now anyway.”

“You have no family left in Alyria?”

Erynn shook her head. “My mother died last summer. She got sick.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Erynn. But it is still important you return. What about your friend?”

Erynn looked up. “My friend?”

“Does she know her brother went to Ethlon?”

For a moment, Erynn was confused. Then she realized that she hadn’t thought about Adena. Her friend was back home in Alyria—all alone now that her parents were gone—and completely unaware that Jared had left. Erynn and her father hadn’t even known he was leaving until the night before they departed Cold Lake. Jared had come to them late that night, telling them that he had heard men down in the bar talking about his father and how he was supposedly living at the castle in Ethlon. Jared was convinced his mother was with him and was determined to go find them. Erynn’s father had tried talking him out of it, worried that it was too dangerous in Ethlon, and that even though Jared had grown quite skilled with a sword, he was still only seventeen. But Jared wouldn’t listen. Erynn had even tried asking him not to leave herself, but when it came to Jared—tall Jared with the dark hair and

deep brown eyes—she always had trouble finding the words. She wondered now what might have happened if he had stayed. If it would have made a difference.

She pushed herself up and reached for her pack. Adena had been her best friend for over five years, even though her father was one of the most senior knights in all of Alyria and Erynn's merely a servant. She couldn't leave her alone.

"No, she doesn't know about her brother," she said. "I do need to go back."

Soren nodded, seeming pleased, and turned for the road.

Erynn stared one last time at her father's grave, wondering if she would ever see it again. If she would even remember this place. Then, without thinking, she reached down and picked up a small black stone lying near the edge—a smooth stone almost perfectly oval in shape. She squeezed it tight, vowing to herself and her father that one day she would find the fair-haired man with the limp and the jagged scars. Then she slipped the stone in her pack and started after the old man.

"How did you end up on this road, by the way?" Soren asked. "The Ring Road goes through Cold Lake. It would have been the fastest route back to Alyria."

Erynn felt a lump rise in her throat, then gestured briefly at some trees farther on down the road. "We were on the Ring Road, but then we saw some smoke that way and thought someone might need help. A lot of smoke. That's where we were headed when we ran into those soldiers."

A slightly troubled look passed over the old man's face. "Yes, I saw the smoke, too. I was actually headed that way myself when I saw Krystalix. I think it was coming from Berridge, a town just across the border in Brye. Not far from here."

Erynn realized then that she could still smell the smoke,

although it was faint now and she definitely couldn't see it. Tears came to her eyes, but she quickly brushed them away. She was the one who had convinced her father to leave the Ring Road. To come this way. She had always had a bit of a sensitive nose for smoke, and had often smelled it during their trip long before either he or Jared did. But this time the smell was nearly overpowering, and had even brought with it the strangest feeling that someone needed help. A feeling that had nagged at her until she finally couldn't stand it anymore and had convinced her father to change course.

"My birth parents died in a fire in Brye," she said. "And now I'm orphaned again because of one."

Soren paused to look at her, then continued walking. "Life does work in mysterious ways sometimes."

"Do you think it had something to do with Krystalix? The smoke, I mean? Maybe he attacked someone else?"

"It would be odd behavior for a dragon. But considering what he did to the men who stole your horses..." His voice trailed off and he stopped, his eyes fixed on the ground ahead of him. "And what might this be?"

He bent over to pick something up, and when he straightened Erynn noticed a letter tube in his hand. Attached to the tube was the slightly bloodied leg of a bird. Another image flashed through her mind; an image she hadn't even remembered until now—a falcon with dark blue wings soaring up into the sky, only to be snapped up by the golden jaws of the dragon. "They had a falcon. One of the soldiers released it after Krystalix attacked, but he ate it."

"Indeed," Soren said, detaching the tube and tossing the leg away. "Strange they would have had a falconer. Might be useful to see what the letter says." He handed it to her.

Erynn hesitated, not sure if it was right, or even wise, to read someone else's correspondence—let alone a person so

violent. But Soren didn't seem worried, and in fact seemed to be waiting for her to open the tube and read it to him.

"Why do you think it's strange?" she asked, picking off the wax seal.

"Because falconry is still a fairly rare talent. Or at least communication-wise, that is. Someone who can make the birds understand where the letter is supposed to go, and get it there quickly. Men—and women—like that can be hard to find, so they are not usually sent out on routine errands or patrols. Too great a chance you might lose one."

"Jared's good at falconry," Erynn said. "He's my friend's brother. The one who went to Ethlon. He wanted to be a falconer, but his father wasn't happy about it. Said he wanted Jared to be a knight like him."

"Yes, it is also not a very appreciated talent. Not until you need to send a letter, anyway."

Erynn had removed the seal and was now working the tiny cork out of the tube. "You think those soldiers were up to something?"

"They were obviously reporting to someone. And most likely someone at the castle." An ominous tone had crept into his voice.

"Queen Naedra?" Erynn asked.

"Perhaps. And given what trouble she has been up to lately, the contents of that letter might prove useful."

Erynn didn't see how knowing what the Queen of Galia was up to could be of any use to her, but he was still waiting for her to read him the letter so she pushed the thought aside. She shook the small roll of parchment out of the tube, opened it, and read the few words scratched across it out loud. "*Task accomplished. Did not locate book. Returning to castle. S.*"

Soren raised a brow. "Book? I wonder what that means." He thought about this for a few moments, then motioned to

the letter. “What do you suppose we should do with it?”

“Me?” Erynn said. “You found it.”

“Seems like it should be yours. Given what happened here, and who it likely belonged to.”

Erynn read the letter again, her gaze lingering on the initial at the bottom. “I guess I could give it to King Wryden, when I tell him about the horses. Maybe he could send it to Gareth. That’s his son, or the elder one, anyway. He’s been over in Ridan the last couple of years, helping them in their fight against Galia.”

Soren frowned. “I was not aware Alyria had joined the war.”

“We haven’t,” Erynn replied, trying to remember what her father had told her. “Or at least not yet. Gareth only went as an advisor or something. That’s actually why my friend’s brother went to Ethlon. Their father was one of the men Gareth took with him, but there were rumors last year that he had deserted. Their mother left Alyria several months ago, and they haven’t heard from her since. They think she went to Ethlon to find him.”

“Well, hopefully Gareth finds success in Ridan,” Soren said. “And your friend, Jared, in Ethlon. It would not be good for Valentia if yet another kingdom fell to Naedra’s armies. The west is still relatively safe, despite the most unfortunate circumstances you and your father ran into, but if Ridan falls, I fear that will change.” For a moment he seemed troubled again. Then his face cleared and he turned back to the road. “But enough talk of that now. We need to find the Ring Road and get you back to Alyria.”

CHAPTER 2

Erynn moved quickly up the winding tower stairs, her fingers closed tightly over the letter tube. Two years had passed since she crawled out of that cave in Galia, but every trip up these stairs was the same. So certain the cool stone walls were closing in around her. So certain she could barely breathe. She tried not to think about them, and to just stay focused on what she still needed to do. Just as she had tried every other time she had to make that long climb up the tallest tower in Caraden Castle. But it was impossible. Within seconds she was back in that cave again, trapped in the musty darkness with the ants and the spiders, and terrified of what might be waiting for her outside.

The falconry at the top of the tower was quieter than she had expected. A dozen short posts stood on the far side of the room, the floor beneath them littered with droppings and enough tiny grey feathers to stuff a small pillow. But instead of a dozen falcons staring back at her, this time there was only one. It was perched by the eastern window, its dark eyes following her the second she entered the room.

“Another letter from the king?” Faris Hatcher asked. The king’s falconer was standing by his desk, a tall, almost gaunt-

looking man with long black hair tied back from his face. He glanced briefly at Erynn—and the two guards by the stairs—before returning his attention to a stack of small letters in his hand.

Erynn walked toward him and held out the tube, well aware the guards were watching her. “His Grace wants it sent right away.”

Faris reached out somewhat reluctantly and plucked the tube from her hand. “Let me guess...to Gareth?”

Erynn simply nodded, amazed he had even bothered to ask. Other than his old friend, Lord Brison, Gareth was pretty much the only person with whom King Wryden still corresponded. His younger son, Holden, had gradually taken over his letter-writing duties in the past few years, until he now handled almost everything, and Erynn had spent much of the last two assisting with whatever remained, the king’s fingers so stiff with age that he had trouble holding a quill. She had seemed an unusual choice for such responsibility, one that had certainly drawn attention around the castle when he brought her to live there after her return from Galia, but she was hardly in a position to refuse.

Faris sat down at his desk, setting the tube in front of him. “This is his third letter to Gareth in the last two weeks. His Grace is certainly keeping you busy.”

Erynn shrugged. “He’s worried the others haven’t reached him.”

Faris smiled, but didn’t seem pleased. “Well, you can assure him it’s not the falcons. Ours are among the best in western Valentia. And I’ve been doing this for twenty years, without a single letter lost.”

“He’s not blaming anyone. It’s just been months since he’s heard anything. Even any news of the war.”

Faris returned his attention to the letters he was reading

when she arrived. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation."

Erynn went to the far window and glanced out at the lake and forest west of the castle, both an almost dizzying distance below due to the combined height of the tower and high outcropping of rock on which the castle sat. Judging by the position of the sun, it was later than she had thought. She turned and walked back toward Faris. "You don't think the lack of news is strange?"

The falconer kept his head down, eyes on the letters. "No, I suspect the war is keeping Gareth busy."

"I think His Grace is worried that Galia has won. And that Gareth is dead."

If Faris shared the king's concern, he certainly didn't show it. "If the war was over, we'd have heard. If not from Gareth, then someone else. It would hardly be a secret."

Erynn knew he was right, but still couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Gareth had been in Ridan for over four years now, much longer than even he had anticipated, but he had always been regular in his letters and there had been no word now in well over two months. The king was so worried it was starting to affect his health, and given that Erynn already had few friends in the castle due to her close relationship with the king—not to mention what had happened in Galia—that worried her. Holden didn't seem concerned, but it was fairly common knowledge that he and his older brother had never really gotten along, so that wasn't unexpected.

Erynn stared at Faris, waiting for him to take the tube to the falcon so he could send the king's letter and she could be on her way. But he was still flipping through those other letters and didn't appear to be in a hurry. Behind her, one of the guards cleared his throat, as if trying to signal that she should leave, but she ignored him. They had been a fixture

there for over six months now, ever since Holden passed his new law banning unauthorized falconry, but for some reason their presence still bothered her.

“Was there something else?” Faris asked.

“Something else?” Erynn replied.

“Something more you needed? I do have work to attend to.”

His tone reminded Erynn that it wasn’t just the guards that bothered her about the falconry lately. Faris had also been acting odd. “His Grace wanted it sent right away.”

“Yes, I heard you. And it shall be, Erynn. There is no need to wait.”

“He told me not to leave until you’d sent it.”

Faris looked up. “Why would he ask you to do that?”

Erynn hardly thought it appropriate for him to question the king’s orders, but didn’t want to argue. She wanted to leave. Mirella was sure to have noticed her long absence from the kitchen by now, and the headservant never missed a chance to punish her—even when it wasn’t her fault. “He’s worried about his son. You know how he is. He just wants to know the letter’s been sent.”

Faris didn’t even blink. “I’ve been his falconer for thirteen years, Erynn. If he had an issue with my work, I’m sure he would have raised it.”

Erynn didn’t know why he was getting so upset. She had seen him send letters before. Not recently, since the king no longer sent very many. But she had. “I’m just following—”

“Aren’t you expected in the kitchen? It must be busy this close to meal time, and I don’t imagine Mirella will be happy if you’re late.”

Erynn felt the heat rise to her face. “I can’t leave. I told you—”

“And I’ve assured you it will be sent.”

Erynn folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not lying. Why can’t you do it now? You have a falcon.” She waved a hand at the bird, and it immediately rose up and briefly stretched out and flapped its wings—as if it knew what they were talking about and was eager to get started.

“Because I’m the falconer and I’ll decide when it leaves. His Grace may have chosen you to write and deliver his letters, Erynn, but he chose me to send them. You’ve done your job. Now it’s time to go.”

Erynn was stunned. She had often heard this tone from other servants around the castle, but this was the first time she had heard it from him. Not understanding why the king had chosen her as his scribe, they seemed convinced something else was going on—like maybe she was really his illegitimate daughter and the whole story of her birth parents dying in a fire in Brye was a lie. She heard them whispering about it all the time, but didn’t believe it—because she had actually gathered up the courage to ask the king one day and he had said so. Now it just made her mad. “Shall I tell him you said that?”

The falconer’s face grew red. “I have but one falcon, and it just returned from a long flight. It needs to rest before it can go out again. Especially to Ridan.”

Erynn blinked. “How long of a rest?”

Faris waved a hand. “A couple of hours. Maybe more.”

Erynn gazed over at the falcon again, sure she had never heard of a rest requirement before. “It doesn’t look tired.”

“And you’re not a falconer, are you? It’s a seven-day flight to Ridan. Well over a thousand miles. If a falcon isn’t properly rested, it might not make it there at all. Or in very good time. So I’m sure the king won’t mind waiting.”

Erynn wasn’t a falconer, but she did know a little about falconry and had a feeling he was lying. She wished Jared was

around so she could ask him, but no one had seen or heard from Adena's brother since he had left her and her father in Cold Lake. And she hadn't seen Sheldon Birch around the market in months. He was an old friend of her father's, not to mention the king's falconer before Faris, and would definitely know if he was lying.

"Did the falcon bring any news from Ridan?" she asked, suspecting now that she would have to come back, but curious if there was any news in case the king sent for her in the meantime.

"That's not your business."

"But you said it just returned from a long flight. That must mean the east?"

"I have work to do, Erynn."

"Are you expecting any other falcons soon?"

Faris sighed. "Not for a few hours at least."

Erynn suddenly found this odd, and noticed again how different the room seemed. How quiet. "Where are the rest of your falcons? You usually have several."

"Out delivering letters. That's what falcons do."

"But if they're out delivering letters, surely that means some have arrived? Haven't any been for the king?"

Faris rubbed at his forehead. "Erynn, I really don't understand the point of all these questions. Aren't you just making yourself more late?"

"But don't you know? Don't you see the letters when they come in?"

Faris slammed a hand down on the desk. "Enough!" He pointed to the stairs. "Leave now or I'll ask one of these gentlemen to escort you."

Both of the guards stepped forward, one actually looking quite pleased at the thought of removing her from the falconry.

Erynn reached for the king's letter, but Faris blocked her with his arm.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I want it back. I'll return later, when the falcon's rested. Or when you have another."

Faris lowered his hand over the tube. "I hardly think it's appropriate for you to be running around with the king's letter in your pocket. Besides, it'll get there faster if I just send it when I can."

"But I have to—"

"Leave!" Faris pointed with his other hand to the stairs. "Now."

The guards started toward her.

Erynn turned to go, still unable to believe this was happening, but she hadn't gone more than a few steps when someone came running up the stairs.

"Faris!" a man's voice cried out. "Faris!"

The falconer muttered something under his breath, then rose and walked past Erynn to the stairs. Seconds later, his young assistant, Clay Waverly, appeared. His face was red and glistening with sweat, as if he had not just run up the tower stairs, but all the way from the main gate.

"Yes, what is it?" Faris snapped.

"They're here," Clay gasped. "In the courtyard."

For a moment, Faris looked speechless. "Now? At the castle?"

Clay nodded. "Do you know what it means? Why they've come?"

Erynn found something in his voice unsettling, and the guards must have as well because they had also stopped. She stepped forward. "Who's here? Do we have visitors?"

Clay flinched, not seeing her behind Faris.

The falconer spun around, his eyes flashing, and pointed

to the stairs. “Leave!”

The guards started toward her again, but Erynn ducked out of their reach and fled down the stairs. She heard Clay whisper something to Faris, something that sounded like an apology, but didn’t hear a response. And didn’t care. She would go find out for herself who had come to the castle, and then she would head to the kitchen. And when the king sent for her later and asked if she had watched his letter leave—which she knew he would—she was going to tell him everything.

She barely noticed the close stone walls on the way down the tower, and when she reached the bottom, she hurried down a series of long corridors and stairs to the main balcony overlooking the courtyard. Two guards were outside the king’s study across the hall, signaling he was still inside, but they were busy talking and didn’t pay any attention as she ran by. Three other servants were already outside, all women, and as soon as they saw her they started whispering. Erynn was too curious to care and simply moved past them to the ledge.

The first thing she noticed was the strange silence in the air, followed by the shock and confusion on the faces of those who had gathered all around the inner ward to watch. Alyrian soldiers stood still and expressionless in two long lines three men deep on opposite sides of the courtyard, and what looked like all fifty of Caraden Castle’s resident knights in a similar stance around the stairs. In the two years Erynn had lived at the castle, and even in the previous nine she had lived down in the village, she had never seen such a display of Alyria’s military strength. It almost took her breath away.

Then she saw the visitors—and gasped.

Two dozen had arrived in all, their large black horses still breathing hard and lathered in sweat. Most remained in their saddles, but several had dismounted and were now gathering

near the stairs. Four wagons stood among them, and at the back, a lone rider held aloft a staff bearing their banner—the head of a roaring black dragon on a sea of red.

The mark of Galia.

Erynn felt the strength drain from her legs, and reached out to steady herself on the ledge. Galians in Alyria? But how?

Then it hit her: the king's fears must have come true. The war in Ridan was over. Gareth was dead.

A numbness came over her, and for what seemed like a long time she just stood there, not sure what to do—or even what to think. Then her gaze passed back over the crowd and she saw a sight that struck her cold.

One of the Galians, a man with light-colored hair, was moving towards the stairs. She could tell right away he was their leader. She could see it in the way he dressed, the way he held his head, the way the other men parted in front of him. But that wasn't what caught her attention. It was the way he walked: with a limp favoring his right leg. And even from the balcony she could make out the jagged scars: one under his right eye that ran halfway down his cheek, and the other on his chin.

He was the man who killed her father.