

An intruder. An impressive one at that. This is the third tallest tower of the castle, and certainly the most visible. A magic user, and a powerful one. My safest recourse is to let him feel secure in his victory for a time and then surprise him. I readjust my grip on my sword, the dampness of my palms and fingers making me long for the gloves I left so stupidly on the bed. Another creak, and the shutter closes again. My breath burns in my chest and my limbs tighten, ready. Come on, then, I coax. Take a look around.

He does, slowly, cautiously. Prudent. The stump-drag of his gait suggests an injury. Even better. I'd have the advantage of him. Riley is right, I realize, fighting a wry smile. I miss this too much.

I should be shouting for the guard. This burglar would be short work for the sort of people I have at my disposal. But he will be even shorter work for me. A touch closer. That's it.

He pauses. I wonder if he sees me. I can just catch the bottoms of his boots through the slats in the door, and he takes a few more paces, then stops in front of my wardrobe. My opportunity to surprise him is running out. I take a breath, grip my sword again, and kick open the door, sending him flying backward.

The impact shatters the latticework of the door. Splinters fly around us as I plant the heel of my boot onto his shoulder where he lays prone. He's a seafolk boy—just barely a man, likely about my age. Handsome, or would be if he wasn't deadly skinny and staring straight through me balefully. He flips a piece of his smooth black hair from his eye in order to do this more successfully. I blink in surprise. "So you're not old," is the only thing I can think to say as I place the point of my sword to his neck.

With a tremendous amount of force, he propels himself from the floor and practically floats back to his feet. I jump backwards just in time to avoid being shoved back by the magic. So he is powerful. And cocky. "Hardly."

I glance to his boots. His left foot leans forward slightly. "Leg injury, then. Left leg."

He starts, but recovers quickly. He flings out a hand, and the door bars itself. "That's enough talking from you."

"Not an assassin," I muse. "You would have tried to kill me already."

"If I wanted to, you'd be dead already," he growls.

"I'd have to disagree." I raise my sword again. He is apparently unarmed, but still dangerous. His blue-gray eyes are wild and dark, his shoulders hunched forward. He is furious with me. I don't recall his face. He has the gaunt look of a Legion footsoldier. Probably killed someone he knew. Sorry, fish boy, but that is generally how war works if one wishes to survive. "Is it blackmail, then?"

"Shut up."

He looks around the room like an animal cornered. Oh, this is a hastily thought through sort of thing. Definitely revenge. I could end it now with a simple swing of the sword, but something has me curious. I want to know what would make a man in his condition scale a tower like this one. He is strong despite his gauntness, but I can see the fatigue in him. "Kidnapping," I venture.

"Would you—?"

I lower my sword, the slightest of smiles beginning in my mind and on my face. Up until this moment, all he's seemed is hateful and ill-prepared, but now—now I've got him scared, because I'm right. "Oh, well, in that case, let's be off, shall we?"