

CHAPTER 1

Rain hammered the roof, echoing down through the rafters to fill the otherwise-silent house with an endless muffled hiss. Two less-than-pleased night patrolmen dragged me into the common room and deposited me in a sodden heap at my father's feet. Their manners were markedly less gentle than usual, likely a result of the vigorous chase I'd led them on through the deluge outside. All three of us were soaked to the skin, the soot that had originally disguised me in the dark all but washed away.

"Took one of the cart horses this time, my lord," one of the cavalrymen reported.

"The sorrel again?"

"The black."

Father replied without words, both acknowledgement and disapproval wrapped into a single short grunt.

I looked up at him from my puddle on the polished hardwood floor, nothing but the *drip-drip-drip* of rain slipping from my tangle of sable hair to fill the sullen silence. There was no doubt in my mind that another solid lashing awaited me. Oh, I felt the sting of fear tugging hard at my chest, but I was young and proud and stubborn – gifts of my lineage, or so I've been told – so I hurled my insolent gaze up at him and refused to

blink first.

“This is your doing,” my mother scolded mildly from her place in the shadows behind him, slender arms crossed over her night robe and a scowl painted on her face. “I told you not to take her to the training fields.”

He didn’t reply, holding my stare with that deadpan look of disapproval, fully aware of my silent challenge.

“We should take her back to the city,” she added. “Find her a governess.”

“She’s a Lazerin. She belongs here.” His deep voice reverberated through the heavy beams far overhead.

In a swirl of dark silk, my mother turned to leave, waving a frustrated hand our way. “Then *check* her, Damien, or she’ll be the end of this House. She has too much of *you* in her.” With that, she was gone, retreating back up the stairs toward their quarters and leaving my father and I to our staring contest. After a long, silent battle, he yielded, heaving a sigh and rubbing at dark-ringed eyes.

“Samson.”

My small victory abruptly withered in my chest. Heavy footsteps approached and I couldn’t help but glance toward that all-too-familiar whip hand. Stiff-backed and stone-faced, the captain of our house guard posted up behind my right shoulder, his aging physique no less intimidating as it cast its burly shadow over me. His empty left sleeve was pinned up, as usual, the arm itself lost in battle during the War of Crowns long before I was born. By all accounts, he’d been a fierce and capable commander in his youth, but the King’s army has no use for a crippled captain. My father had taken pity on him, offering Samson a position with our House after his commission had been terminated at the end of the war.

Unfortunately, the old bastard was right-handed and took no pity on me.

“My lord?”

Father dropped his hand from his face, deep evergreen eyes fixing on mine once more. This time, it was resolve I saw in

them.

“How many times has the night patrol caught her?”

“This makes fifteen, my lord.”

“Disgraceful.”

“...Sir?”

“A Lazerin, outridden.”

Armor creaked as Samson tensed behind me, but my father’s loyal captain kept his thoughts to himself.

“I’ll not suffer this embarrassment any longer,” Father added with stern finality. “Take her to the stables in the morning. See that she learns to ride properly.”

“...Properly, my lord?”

Father tilted his head at me and raised his brows in silent query, inviting me to break my long, careful silence. The words practically leapt from my mouth.

“Like the cavalry!” I blurted. “Like the men do!”

He lifted his chin a fraction, unable to completely conceal the conspiratorial grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“Astride, then.” His eyes drifted to my pilfered trousers and vest, which were many sizes too large. “Though I think we’ll need to find you something a bit more suitable to wear.”

Samson met me in the courtyard the next morning, grim and clearly annoyed at his new assignment. I squared up before him, solemn as a soldier, and weathered his disapproving assessment with little more than a silent scowl. My new breeches and tunic, which fit me far better than the ones I’d stolen from the cook’s closet, seemed particularly offensive to him.

“Roll up yer sleeves,” he growled, grabbing at my thin arms and examining my soft hands. Dirt yet lingered beneath my nails from scrapping with the stable boys the day before. He muttered something rather unflattering about a lady’s place, but I held my tongue and he eventually released me to obey his command.

“Bloody ridiculous, the lot of it,” he grumbled under his breath. “This is no ladies’ outing, ye hear?”

I fought the urge to look at his empty left sleeve as I rolled up my own. “Yes, sir.”

He leveled a threatening glare at me and laid out his terms in succinct measures. “No whinin’. No cryin’. No poutin’. No backtalk. Any such nonsense and I’ll tan yer hide same as any lad.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ve earned as much a dozen times over already, by my measure. Switch is too soft for the likes of you. A proper thrashing’d put ye back in yer place.”

Those cold dark eyes glared down at me for a long moment, daring me to protest. When I offered nothing but a tight-lipped silence in response, he turned abruptly on his heel and started for the stables.

“Hop to, horse thief. Haven’t got all day.”

Those first two weeks, Samson taught me nearly everything imaginable about horses – everything *except* riding. I picked hooves, polished tack, and cleaned stalls. I hot-walked and lunged yearlings, and checked for swollen joints on a beige mare we had pastured after her prime breeding years. I sat with the farrier while he re-shoed one of our carriage horses. I hauled water and scrubbed troughs and spread armfuls of straw.

I had been around horses my whole, short life – it was my family’s livelihood – but I had never been required to do menial tasks reserved for servants and stable hands. Despite my young age, I knew one thing for certain: noble ladies do not pick stalls and polish saddles. Samson was taking advantage of my apprenticeship to humiliate me as much as possible. Though it burned my pride, I had enough sense to keep my mouth shut and obey without complaint. Eventually, he had to do as my father commanded. Until then, I wouldn’t give him any just cause to end my hard-won lessons.

The stable hands, including the young boys I knew well from our escapades about the house and grounds, tolerated my presence in their domain with a mix of amusement and sympathy. They dared not help me with any of my assigned

tasks, for fear of reprisal from Samson, but they offered small gestures of solidarity whenever my ruthless overlord wasn't looking.

At the start of the third week, I ambled into the courtyard for my daily lesson, yawning and wondering what fresh torment the commander had concocted for me that day. Instead of the usual bucket or pitchfork, his scowling visage waited with the beige palfrey in hand, fully tacked.

"Hurry up, girl," he growled, jerking his head at the mare's saddle.

I scrambled to obey, rushing for a nearby crate and dragging it out onto the cobblestones just as quickly as my small hands could manage. A harsh bark of laughter tore through the air, echoing off the stone around me.

"The bloody hells ye doin', horse thief?"

I froze, blinking at him in confusion. "You told me to mount, sir."

His smirk faded, face darkening. "Ye want a mounting box, ye can learn side-saddle like a *proper* lady."

"But it's too high," I protested feebly.

"Ye said ye wanted to ride like the cavalry. This is how it's done."

"But I'm not tall enough--"

"Ye sayin' ye changed yer mind?"

"No, but--"

"My *men* haul their *own* carcasses into the saddle."

"But sir--"

He dropped the reins and stormed toward me, kicking the crate back across the stones before bending over to stick his scarred ugly mug in my face. One thick finger jabbed at my chest hard enough to hurt. His gravelly voice came out low and vicious, cold eyes gleaming.

"Ye want to know why they don't let lasses into the cavalry? Because there ain't no creature with a sharper tongue than a woman, but when it comes to the doin', it's only a man follows through to the end. Yer father might let ye play at bein'

a lordling, but ye haven't the stones for aught else but a lady's lot."

I wanted to hit him. I imagined hitting him, squarely in the nose, so hard it would make his big, mean eyes water. I wanted to, but I didn't. With my blood boiling and eyes burning, I shoved past him and approached the mare now skittering across the cobblestones, spooked by the rush of angry voices and the clatter of the crate.

It took several minutes and a good amount of coaxing before she settled enough to let me near. At nine, I hadn't yet hit my main growth spurt of childhood, and my head barely grazed the middle of her flanks. The stirrup clanged against my chest, leaving me to despair at ever reaching the cursed thing without aid.

I tried, though. I tried for well over an hour. Samson quickly grew bored of watching me contort myself in one desperate attempt after another to lift my foot to that impossible height. I actually got my toes into the loop once, but the mare startled and sent me sprawling on my backside before I could heave myself up into the saddle.

"Call for me again when ye manage it," Samson scoffed, his heavy boot steps receding into the manor.

I didn't start crying until I was sure he was gone. Even as I wept in frustration, I kept at it. The mare shied at my repeated attempts and danced away from me until I finally resigned myself to a hopeless heap on the ground.

"I didn't think you'd ever give it up!"

I turned to see a boy, only a few years older than I, leaning against the stables with a half-eaten apple in his hand, his reddish-brown hair and sparsely freckled face marking him as one of the stablemaster's offspring. My jaw clenched, pride aching, and I wondered just how long he'd been standing there watching me make a fool of myself.

"Go away, James," I snarled at him, quickly wiping my face on my sleeve in a futile attempt to hide my tears.

"If you wanted to learn to ride, you might've just asked.

Erik and I woulda taught you.”

“I know how to ride,” I bit back. He raised a dubious brow at the sore pile of nine-year-old girl still wallowing on the cobblestones before him.

“This’d be an embroidery lesson, then?”

I bristled in all my youthful indignance, face flushing an alarming shade of red. “Shut up. Go away.”

“Would you like to see a trick?” he asked, ignoring my venom and gesturing to the skittish mare.

I continued glaring at him, too full of humiliated fury to reply. He waited a good long while for an answer, munching on another mouthful of apple before eventually giving up and shoving off the wall.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Carefree steps carried him across the stones with quiet confidence, every movement tracked by the beast before us. The mare eyed him suspiciously but held her ground as he extended the remnants of his apple in one palm.

“Easy now, old girl,” he murmured.

After a brief hesitation, she toed forward and pushed her muzzle to his hand, settling into him. I put an extra bit of effort into my unimpressed snort, just to be sure he heard it. Such tricks were child’s play, common tools to calm spooked horses. I didn’t need help calming her. I needed a way to get my foot into that damned stirrup.

James moved to the mare’s side, rubbing her neck in circles and crooning in a voice so calming that I felt my own breathing slow. Deft fingers adjusted the reins higher on her neck and pulled them gently downward with a hand near her bit. The other slid to her withers, one booted foot tapping at her front hoof. I watched in astonishment as the beige mare knelt awkwardly on her front knees, blowing out her nose in soft whinnies. He rubbed her again in encouragement and climbed carefully onto her back. With a pat to her neck and a few clicks of his tongue, she stood straight again, calm as ever.

“So,” he lilted, meeting my gaping stare with the same

smug grin inherent to every twelve-year-old boy. “Fancy an embroidery lesson?”

CHAPTER 2

FIVE YEARS LATER

Bit early in the season for yarrow,” I remarked, but Izikiel didn’t seem to hear me over the sound of his own humming. The old priest couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket with a perfectly-fitted and securely-fastened lid, but somehow it had never seemed to matter. His aimless melodies might not have any set pattern, but they were soft and pleasant in their own way, an expression of contentment that I found both charming and soothing.

Lost in the wandering song, he meandered through the field away from me, his pale green robes collecting a veritable carpet of tiny burrs around the hem. Shaking my head with a small smile, I cut the half-dozen clusters of white yarrow with my knife and tucked them into the basket on my arm. The first spring flowers had only just begun to bloom, hardy grasses long since staking their claim on the hillsides. A number of useful herbs would be coming into season soon, tucked between the heather and hidden in the nearby forest. I’d learned them all, over the past year, for all the good it would do me.

As though triggered by my sour thought, the discordant humming fell silent and I looked up to find Izikiel’s weathered face turned toward the sky, marking the sun’s height.

“We ought to start back,” he said. “They will be waiting.”

My heart sank a little, knowing this was the end.

I’d fought my parents tooth and nail over it, but now that our year together was all but done, I hated the thought of parting ways with the old man. As soon as I’d bled, my father had sent for him; not to teach me of women’s matters – I had my mother for that – but to pass on the sacred wisdom of our people, as all the generations that had come before. My time wandering the land with Izikiel had settled something in me, tempering a bit of my youthful fire into what I knew would serve me better in the years to come.

With a flash of that gentle smile, he swept past me in no real hurry, the skirts of my white shift snagging on some thistle as I rose to follow. The afternoon sun lit the rolling hills of Laezon in brilliant tones of green, the endless landscape broken into a patchwork quilt by long stretches of short stone walls and scattered with herds of cattle and sheep. The occasional smudge of a distant village or homestead dotted the expanse, the largest being the garrison fort and surrounding training fields to the north. The vast length of the Laezon forest loomed to the west, the orchards in the east slowly inching by on the horizon as we made our way back toward home.

All of it fated to someday be mine. Somehow, it felt far more like a burden than a blessing.

“Have you decided?” Izikiel asked after we’d been walking a while.

I bit my tongue, not wanting to spoil the tranquility of that bright spring afternoon with my sour thoughts. To commit to the priesthood was to forsake all ties to wealth and station, to surrender your family name and devote yourself fully to Adulil’s path. As much as I yearned to shrug off the yoke of responsibility and disappear into the wilds, I was my father’s sole heir and the future of my House. That choice, if it ever was one, had been made for me long ago.

“It is a great honor to walk the land, Elivya,” he added in response to my silence.

"I know," I finally murmured with all the sullenness of my fifteen years. "But you know what I am."

"A child of Adulil, same as every crofter and blacksmith and fisherman."

"A child of Lazerin," I corrected, clutching the basket on my arm. "The *last* child of Lazerin."

"There are others."

"Lesser."

"Lazerin, still."

I fell silent once more and he thankfully did not pursue the matter. We'd spent many long days rehashing this same discussion, talking one another in circles about faith and blood and family. Between learning the properties of plants and the rhythms of the land I was destined to one day govern, the subject of choice seemed to keep coming up. In truth, I *could* walk away. The ritual of Bronnadh was as much a contract with the parents as the child. If I decided at the conclusion of my year of instruction to answer the Mother's call and devote myself to wandering the world, they would have no grounds for protest. Yet in the end, I found myself always landing on the same conclusion: my duty was to my House, first and foremost. Choice was all but an illusion.

The manor was abuzz with activity when we returned in the late afternoon, servants and stable hands scurrying about the courtyard. Two laden wagons lingered before the massive double doors, a flurry of hands busily unloading casks of wine and ale for the celebratory feast that night. Three sprawling stories of moss-covered stone towered above, leaded glass windows glinting in the sun, casements thrown open to let in the fresh spring air. Extensive stables loomed opposite the house, a number of fine horses milling about the inner paddock and watching the bustle with big, curious eyes. Thick stone walls surrounded the whole of the estate, their broad shadow cooling me as we passed beneath them through the heavy iron gates.

"You've some time yet, if you wish for a bit of solitude."

I glanced sidelong to find Izikiel watching me, a world of understanding on his heavily-lined face.

"I should see my parents first."

"I'll inform them of our arrival." Gnarled hands reached out to take the basket from my arm. I surrendered it a bit reluctantly, accepting the small, worn book he offered in its place. "Go," he insisted, pressing my hands around the faded leather binding. "Decide."

Apart from a pair of scullery maids gathering herbs for the evening's feast, the garden stood empty. They exchanged a hushed murmur and quickly made themselves scarce, leaving me alone in the vast green space. Bursts of spring growth filled every bed, ringing the broad yard and flanking the central focus of the walled sanctuary at the rear of the house: a vast oak, impossibly tall and broad enough for eight grown men to link hands around its trunk. Branches meandered and twisted every direction, the thick canopy filled with distant whispers of birdsong.

As always, a buzzing calm settled over me at the sight of that ancient tree, soothing the uncertainty fluttering in my chest. Ignoring the nearby bench, I slumped down onto the soft grass and gazed up into the labyrinth of green.

"I don't suppose you've anything to say on the matter," I muttered to the tree. It never did, no matter how often I spoke to it. Still, there was a kind of peace in those one-sided conversations and I liked to imagine someone was listening, whether it be Adulil or the Mother or the generations of my ancestors buried beneath its roots.

With no reply forthcoming, I turned my attention to the worn book in my hands. I'd read it cover-to-cover at least a dozen times over the last year. Though the bulk of Izikiel's teachings came from his seemingly endless memory, the stories contained within those brittle pages were the foundation of all my people held sacred. Reverent fingers traced the faded symbols stamped upon the leather. Six sigils – a lyre, a staff, a compass, a stallion, a sword, and a quill – surrounded a seventh,

embossed a bit larger than the rest. Adulil's sunburst stared up at me from the center, delicate rays stretching out toward its loyal companions. At the bottom, almost as an afterthought, four words had been inscribed into the leather.

The Book of Days.

With a heavy exhale, I opened to a random page and began to read.

How long I lingered there, I'm not entirely sure, but the creak of the garden door eventually shook me from the depths of that contemplation. I knew the soft steps that approached, Izikiel's heavily callused feet and pale green robes rasping on the grass. My eyes remained fixed on the page I'd been studying for an immeasurable amount of time, on the words that had finally settled that interminable debate within.

Seven oaks, seven families. This land is born anew.

I shut the book gently, pressing the soft leather between my palms and casting my eyes up at the immense tree that towered overhead. Patient footsteps halted behind me.

"Are you ready, daughter mine?"

I stood with a sigh, resolved rather than resigned, and claimed that choice as my own.

"Aye," I replied with solemn conviction. "I'm ready."

I found James in the kitchens once I'd changed out of my ritual robes, coppery head easily spotted poking up several inches above the rest. His tall, lean frame dodged around the flurry of servants to pluck morsels of this and that from the nearly-completed dinner preparations. A flustered Shera was attempting to chase him from the vicinity with a fierce scowl and a rather heavy-looking frying pan.

"You can wait until supper like the rest of us!" she barked at him, smacking a tart out of his hand and giving the pan a threatening wave. Despite being near of an age to me, Shera did an exceptional impression of a cranky old crone.

“But I’m hungry!” he moaned, twisting his face into a pout quite unsuitable for a seventeen-year-old boy.

“You’ve stuffed a whole meal’s worth into your gob already!” Just then, she caught sight of me and turned her exasperated pleas my way. “Would you get him *out* of here?”

I snatched James’ arm as he endeavored to stuff a whole biscuit into his mouth at once, straining against my grip to achieve his goal before allowing himself to be dragged away. He flashed a crumb-ringed grin back at Shera before we disappeared into the hallway.

“Must you be so obnoxious?” I huffed, shoving him against the wall. He struggled to swallow the mountain of pastry in his mouth before gesturing to my rather ordinary green dress.

“How’d it go?”

“...Fine.”

“Family over faith, then?”

“Still here, aren’t I?”

He reached out to nudge the vine bindings at my wrists, warm brown eyes meeting mine. Though I’d removed the rest of the trappings of the ceremony, I hadn’t been able to bring myself to take them off.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he offered carefully.

“You know I can’t.”

“I don’t mean the ritual.”

I shrugged with feigned indifference, crossing my arms. “Wasn’t much of a choice, in the end.”

His silence told me I hadn’t convinced him, but he knew me well enough to leave it be.

“Well your parents must be thrilled,” he remarked instead, peering through his ruddy bangs at me. “And with the number of casks we unloaded this afternoon, supper ought to be quite the affair.” A roguish grin crept back across his face. “Speaking of which...”

I knew that look like the back of my hand.

“Ohhh no,” I drawled in preemptive refusal.

“Come on, hear me out.”

“No!”

“It’s been a *year*! Besides, this one’s foolproof.”

I raised my brows and huffed an incredulous laugh. “Like the flour-dusted chickens? Or that time with the sack of thistle?”

His face twisted in horror. “*No – gods –* those were both terrible!” I was inclined to agree. He stood a bit straighter against the wall, chin raising a proud fraction. “This is a work of *artistry*. Simple and elegant.”

I doubted that very much. Of the two of us, his schemes were nearly always the worst, often ending in utter disaster or getting us caught. We’d earned more than twice as many lashes as a result of his plotting versus mine. Still, he managed to talk me into it, as he always did. In truth, it was one of his less outlandish ideas and didn’t take much convincing. After the solemn dignity of the last year, not to mention my recent choice of duty over freedom, the child in me was itching for a bit of mischief.

So it was that, after a long and festive supper, I came to skulk in the shadows of the kitchen doorway with James hovering over my shoulder. We watched in breathless anticipation as Samson reclined in his seat with his usual sour scowl painted across his face.

We both tensed when he reached for the wine glass on the table before him, took a hearty draught, and proceeded to spew the entire mouthful across the breadth of the table. The sight of it sent us both into a fit, hands clamped over mouths to stifle our laughter as we ducked back into the shadows. The infuriated roar of my father’s captain echoed through the dining room, the constant din of chatter dulling in curiosity. We pressed ourselves into the dark corner, smothering our hysterics as best we could when a number of frightened servants scurried past, retreating to the safety of the kitchens.

Just as we made to follow and make our escape, an iron grip seized my ear. A choked yelp beside me suggested James had been similarly ensnared. Twisting, I caught sight of our

merciless captor in her tidy cotton dress and white apron. Her slight, middle-aged frame belied the crushing strength of those bony fingers, which kept us both firmly in hand as she glowered at us.

“Should’ve known,” Amita clucked, eyes blazing.

“Ow, Ma!” James howled in protest when she gave him an unnecessary tug. “Was just a bit of vinegar!”

She released him just long enough to smack him upside his bright-red head before snatching him by the ear once more.

“You can tell that to your father when he has you scrubbing troughs for the next week.” She turned that fierce matronly glare on me. “And *you*, miss, *you* ought to know better! Dishonoring your own Bronnadh feast with such nonsense.”

She made a disgusted sound and proceeded to haul us both into the dining room, delivering us to my parents with righteous aplomb. After a brief dressing-down from my father and no shortage of sharp looks from my mother and Samson both, we were ordered to spend the remainder of the evening serving our penance in the kitchens. We obeyed in sullen silence, knowing full-well that we’d gotten off easy, without even a single lash between us. Elbows-deep in tubs of soapy cookpots, James bumped me companionably from his post at my side. I glanced up to see that same old infectious grin creep across his lips.

“Worth it?”

I couldn’t help but smile, even as I shook my head and turned my attention back to the scouring brush in my hand.

“...Worth it.”

The next morning, I bid farewell to Izikiel in the fields outside the manor walls. My parents waited at the gate as my mentor and I waded out into the early morning fog, the icy dew soaking our feet and ankles. I was reminded, rather jarringly, of the day I’d met him in that very spot nearly a year ago. He’d appeared out of the same kind of still, gray morning, boney wrists and silvered hair entwined with vines. He’d greeted my parents as old friends and extended his hand to me with a smile.

Hello, young Lazerin. Would you like to take a walk with me?

Ah, gods, I was going to miss him.

At the sight of my eyes brimming with barely-contained tears, Izikiel tilted his head at me with a gentle smile.

“No need for grief, daughter mine. All things in life must come to an end.”

I stared at my feet and gave a noncommittal nod in reply. A knobbed knuckle nudged my chin, bringing my gaze back to his.

“Our paths will cross again, one day,” he assured. “Until then, follow the one you have chosen.”

Without another word, he pressed a kiss to my brow and vanished into the early morning mists. I stood there a long while, staring after him into the swirling gray, unable to deny the small pang of regret that surfaced in my chest. But to stay had been my choice, and I would not allow myself to resent it. At length, a heavy hand settled on my shoulder, warm and comforting.

“Come,” my father murmured. “I have a gift for you.”

In the courtyard, James’ father Stephan struggled to keep a beautiful dappled gray yearling in check. The beast shied at every movement, every sound, dancing angrily across the stones with nostrils flaring. Even at his young age, he towered over the stablemaster. Platter-sized hooves were trimmed with thick wisps of pale gray at the hocks, a broad chest and sturdy flanks rippling with muscle.

“A destrier?” I blurted in surprise, turning my bewildered gaze to my father. “For me?”

“A warmblood,” he corrected. “The pick of last year’s foaling for the Briare contract. He’s young yet, but Stephan’s boys will break him to the saddle soon enough.”

The clatter of anxious hooves on stone and a few muttered curses from the stablemaster drew my attention back to the scene before us. The yearling tossed its head in righteous fury, yanking at the lead.

“Once he’s gelded, he’ll be much more manageable.”

“No,” I replied quickly, watching the indignance in the beast’s dark eyes. “He is what he is. Leave him intact.”

I don’t know that my father would have argued the point, but I didn’t give him the chance. Leaving him and the crowd of curious spectators behind, I went to make my introductions.

Many thoughts raced through my head as I crossed those stones toward the silver tempest still rebelling against the hand holding him. Awe, uncertainty, gratitude, all muddled amidst a sense of *rightness*, as though the two of us had been bound long before either of us was even born. Fear, though, fear was not among them, even though I knew those hooves could crush bone.

“Leave him, please,” I murmured as I approached.

After a brief hesitation and a glance toward my father for permission, Stephan dropped the lead rope and retreated. The beast before me pawed at the stones, eyeing me warily and blowing out his nose in warning. I held my ground a few paces away, extending one palm to him. No apple, no oats, just me; an offering of self, without bribe or expectation. For long moments he just stared, sizing me up, nostrils flaring as his mistrust gradually waned. Finally, step by cautious step, he approached and pushed his muzzle into my hand to draw a deep, curious breath.

“Hello, proud boy,” I greeted with a smile, sliding one hand up his cheek. “You’ve a bit of fire in you.”

I took my time moving slowly about him, rubbing him down with my hands and speaking sweet nothings to him. Dark eyes watched me closely, but he tolerated my touch without much more fuss than an irritated flick of his skin.

“Told you,” I heard James mutter somewhere nearby, his undertone of pride breaking the long, tense silence. His father merely grunted in response.

“I still say the bay was the better choice,” his older brother Seth grumbled back. “Waste of a perfectly good palfrey, if you ask me.”

I didn't dare take my eyes from that dappled gray coat. No palfrey, this one, but not quite a warhorse either, as he lacked the overwhelming bulk of those thickly-muscled titans we bred specifically for House Montre's heavy cavalry. No, he was something in between, something apart, something more. He twitched beneath my hands, molten pride shivering through every sinew of his flesh. He was a mirror made of smoke and moonlight; my insides torn out, amplified a thousand-fold, and molded into being.

"He's perfect."

I heard, rather than saw, the satisfied smile in my father's voice. "He's yours."