

CHAPTER 1

Aragel woke with a start and sat up in his bed. The heavy oak door across the hall from his own slammed shut with such force, that his own door shook on its hinges in sympathetic response. Night's shadows enveloped the chamber, and he could vaguely make out the outline of his sparsely furnished room, a cedar clothes chest, a plain chair, and an old oak table. With reluctance, he pulled back the thick, maroon quilts covering him, and with hesitation, touched his bare feet to the cold floor. Pausing, he stood, feeling the cold sink into the arches of his feet and slide up the rest of his body. The fire in the hearth had long since extinguished, and nothing remained save for a few orange coals that offered little heat. Aragel picked up a gray silk dressing gown from the chair and hastily wrapped it around himself. Once his feet touched the rug underfoot, the chill retreated. Very distant, he could hear the sound of low, but frantic voices filter beneath his door. He furrowed his dark brow in puzzlement, then hurried to the door to see if his ear could lend better purchase to what was happening outside.

Prince Hermond had arrived the day before, and took the usually empty room across from Aragel's own. The Exavian prince visited more frequently now that his marriage to Princess Serena drew near. The low grumble of men's voices still

resounded faintly from the room across the hall. Aragel slipped his hand over the door's cold, brass latch and sprung it open with a click that seemed to echo endlessly through the hallway. He winced as if wincing could make opening the door quieter. The commotion in the adjacent room grew louder as he stepped from his room. Keeping himself hidden in the dank shadows of the pitch corridors, he listened carefully to the voices drifting luminously from the Exavian prince's chamber.

Prince Hermond had a visitor. That much was clear. Aragel could make out the prince's overly lilting accent more rightly than he could the other, but he did not recognize the affluent, and somewhat chiding speech of the man with whom Hermond spoke. A cold chill made its way up his spine, causing the soft dark hairs on the back of his neck to stand straight up. After adjusting his ear to the sounds, he could finally make out the words.

"It is simple, Prince Hermond," the unfamiliar voice toned, resolute and sure. "You wanted power and I have given you the means by which to gain it. Sherok is an easy attainment. Danaria and Carinth will not be as easy."

Aragel shoved his back into the wall as if to become one with it. Prince Hermond moved closer to the door, his voice sharper and clearer now.

"Darak is not the problem. What about young Prince Aragel? With Darak gone..." his words trailed off.

Aragel's eyes widened in horror and he could feel his hands, as if being controlled by some unseen force, pressing against the wall; chaffing against the rough stone.

"We cannot have him running about either, can we?" said the stranger without hesitation.

Prince Hermond remained silent for a moment. "Of course, Your Eminence," he finally said.

Aragel had heard enough. With his deepest fears realized and manifested, the young prince darted back to his room and grabbed the chair that sat near the window. Since Hermond's room had once been used for storage, the door opened outward instead of inward, so as quiet as he could manage, he brought the chair into the hallway and carefully

propped it against Prince Hermond's chamber door. He secured it beneath the doorknob, shoving it firmly in place so whoever was in there with Hermond could not get out. Once he was sure it would hold, he bolted down the hallway to the spiraling stairs leading to the main hall. As he hurried along, the dancing shadows from the torchlight jumped at him. Once again, he felt the hairs on his neck stand on end, but he did not chance a glance back. He kept himself focused upon reaching his destination - the king's quarters.

When he reached the heavy oak door ornate with ironwork, he knocked lightly. No guards greeted him as he hoped; nor had he seen any. The long halls remained tomb-like and empty. Likely, the guards were in other parts of the castle patrolling the more obscure corridors. That was the drawback to having a part time, voluntary military.

From the king's room, no response came.

Aragel opened the door and slipped inside, being careful to close the door firmly behind him. The foyer was dark, but a faint light from the sleeping chamber led Aragel past the dark outlines of the room's contents to the king's bedside. He took a deep breath and gently shook his uncle by the shoulder.

"Uncle Darak?"

The king mumbled something inaudible and rolled over to face Aragel, opening his weary gray eyes ever so slightly. "Aragel?" King Darak yawned and closed his eyes again.

"Please wake up. I've just heard something you should know about."

King Darak let out another yawn, lifted himself up, and leaned over to light the lantern on the bedside table. "What is it at this hour?" He seemed annoyed. Darak was a sturdy man. His many years revealed fine lines in his forehead. His deep gray eyes boasted years of wisdom and knowledge. A graying full beard covered the lower half of his face and his once thick, dark hair now stood streaked with gray, receding slightly.

"Prince Hermond has a visitor," Aragel said, then added quickly, "They're planning to kill us!"

The king's reaction was not what Aragel had hoped for, and certainly not what he expected. The king let out a laugh.

"That's nonsense, boy. You must have been dreaming."

"But Uncle, I was *not* dreaming. I was awake as I am now. I heard him talking to someone in his room, just now. I know I wasn't dreaming!" Aragel could not believe this.

"Aragel, I assure you it was nothing more than a dream. At this hour, no one in Sherok is lucid. If you're concerned, perhaps you should find one of the soldiers, take him with you, and knock on Hermond's door."

The king studied his nephew for a moment. Aragel shifted uncomfortably in his gaze wondering if Darak was noting their resemblance as he was. His hair was thick and dark, and fell to his shoulders. He bore the same sturdy stature, and broad shoulders. Just recently, fine hairs had begun to emerge from Aragel's chin and upper lip, though the king had not made mention of it, for which Aragel was thankful.

"And do what?" Aragel threw his hands up in disbelief. "Ask him to introduce us? I've barricaded them in the room with a chair."

King Darak sat up suddenly, startled. His face bore the look of a stern father, something Aragel had not seen in years. "You did what? With whom was he speaking?"

Aragel shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure. But the man had a distinct accent. One I've never heard before. Hermond called him *Your Eminence*, I fear for both our safety, uncle. I know I have no evidence yet, no proof. But we cannot risk the safety of Sherok. I think you and I should take several guards and go to the room!" The young prince began struggling for breath, wheezing.

"Fine. I'll agree to that." The king put a reassuring hand on his nephew's shoulder in attempt to calm him. When the wheezing subsided, Darak stood and reached for his clothes. "Wake commander Coriger and gather some soldiers. I'll be with you in a moment." He sighed and shook his head as Aragel left.

Commander Coriger and two guards stood patiently outside the king's chambers when Darak finally emerged. Aragel stood at the far end of the hallway with his head cocked attempting to hear any far off noises. Together, the men hurried

toward the southeast tower.

As they approached the stairwell, Hermond met them. He came from the direction of the courtyard. Hermond's long, pointed nose gave him away as Exavian. The blonde hair and crystal blue eyes, along with his pale flesh and thin bony build further set him apart from the muscular, tan skinned, dark haired residents of Sherok.

"What are all of you doing up at this hour?" Hermond's gaze darted suspiciously at the king, Aragel, and the armed men flanking them.

"We were just going to ask you that same question." Darak smiled at Hermond kindly, and then raised an eyebrow at Aragel. "Just getting in?"

Hermond paused a few stairs ahead of them. "I was checking on my mare. She seemed to be acting strangely earlier and I wanted to make sure she was not coming down with colic. So I walked her for more than an hour. Her bloodline makes her more susceptible to such ailments."

Aragel nodded with disbelief clear on his face. "She's fine then?"

Hermond started back up the stairs. "It seems so. Though I do have one of the stable boys watching after her while I try to get some sleep."

"We should probably come with you then. It has come to our attention there may be intruders in your room," King Darak told him.

The Exavian prince stopped again, and turned around, feigning surprise. "Intruders? Really?"

Aragel rolled his eyes. "I *heard* people talking in there," he said, his voice overly laden with caution.

Drawing his sword, Hermond, the soldiers and Commander Corigerg moved quickly up the stairwell with Aragel and King Darak lagging behind.

When they reached the door Aragel gasped in disbelief. The chair still stood wedged beneath the doorknob. Hermond pulled the chair away and opened the door, careful to stay behind it. The soldiers rushed in ahead of him. Inside, the room was dark and cold. Hermond lit a wall torch and the bedside

lantern as the soldiers made their way around the room, searching for the alleged intruders.

Hermond chuckled and scanned the room. "Hmm. Nothing is out of place. I think perhaps young Prince Aragel was having a dream."

"But *you* were in here with someone called *Your Eminence!*" Aragel protested. He narrowed his eyes and glared at the foreign prince.

"I was out with my mare most of the evening," Hermond said in what seemed gentle mockery.

"But I heard everything, your plot to kill my uncle and me. I know I wasn't asleep." Aragel drew a deep breath and searched Hermond's face for evidence of dishonesty.

"What?" Prince Hermond looked at Aragel confused. "You and your uncle are family to me. I would never do anything like that!" He put his hand on Aragel's shoulder, "You had a dream. Were I in your position I may have done the same thing. Sometimes dreams can seem very real."

King Darak took a deep breath. "Aragel, it is obvious no one has been in this room all night."

Aragel looked down at his feet in attempt to avert the eyes staring him down. Vanquished, he found his voice. "I suppose you're right. Maybe it was a dream. I'm sorry I woke everyone for nothing."

King Darak patted Hermond on the shoulder and bade him goodnight. He turned and left with the soldiers behind him. Commander Corigerg stayed behind a moment longer and gave Aragel a sympathetic look then glanced at Hermond with angry, dark eyes. He quickly turned his attention back to Aragel, "Would you like me to post some guards at your door, Prince Aragel?"

"No. After all, dreams can't hurt me, right?"

"No, I suppose not." Commander Corigerg's gaze fell on the open window, and then moved to the hearth where a faint glow of several small burning embers remained. Aragel had been following the commander's shift in attention and realized that the room did not seem as cold as it should have. With a sly backward glance in Hermond's direction, and a quick warning

glance at Aragel, the commander retreated from the foreign prince's chambers.

After Corigerger had gone, Aragel turned to Hermond. "Well good night, Hermond."

"Sleep well, Aragel," he said with a sly grin.

Aragel picked up his chair from the hallway and retreated to his own room, closing the door gently behind him. Once inside, he turned the lock then took the chair back to its spot by the window. He sat and drew his knees to his chest. He often used this chair for thinking. He knew what he heard. He had *not* been dreaming. Somehow, Hermond had managed to leave the room and replace the chair in the time it took Aragel to gather his uncle and the soldiers.

He decided he would not be too hasty and would wait for sunrise to talk to Commander Corigerger. Corigerger was the only commanding officer in the Sherokean military. He was much more suspicious about people than King Darak. The commander had given him a look that said, "I believe you," had he not? Or was that a dream too? Nonetheless, it was clear to him that his uncle had no intention of doing anything. Darak was fond of Hermond. Sometimes Aragel felt like his uncle paid more attention to Hermond than to him. Hermond had pulled the wool over the king's eyes. Or Darak simply did not trust Aragel's judgment of the Exavian prince. Either way, something had to be done.

As the sun rose in the east, a thick mass of fog withdrew to the ocean. For the first time in his life, Aragel was truly frightened.

He found himself drifting in and out of restless sleep as the sun lifted high into the morning sky. His dreams took him back to his childhood, to when he was four. At that age, he was a spice merchant's son living in the city of Kreen. His parents stood tall above him, placing amber-colored jars of spices on the highest shelves.

His mother's smooth, dark face and beautiful brown eyes looked down on him, soft and loving. "You put these spices on the lower shelf, Aragel," she said. She smiled at him, encouraging him to place the spices on the lower shelf.

Pride overwhelmed him. “All right Momma.” Carefully, four-year-old Aragel put the jars on the lower shelf making sure they were even and straight.

“What wonderful work you do!” She caught him in a hug.

Then the dream changed, moving forward two years. The images frightened him. Her pale face and deep sunken eyes stared out at him. Everything about her was lifeless. He woke, shivering and sweating, with his heart beating wildly in his chest. Both his parents died that year. The plague, Gloxorthia, the same illness that killed Queen Aubrey, killed them as well. Once their bodies had been buried deep in the ground, Darak had relatives put young Aragel in a carriage that brought him here, to Sherok, as King Darak’s ward.

Aragel shook the visions of death from his mind, breathed a sigh of relief and looked around. Uncle Darak had given him the tower room on his sixteenth birthday. He liked the small chamber. Smiling, he recalled the argument he and his cousin, Serena, had about it.

“But I need a sewing room, father!” She stomped one small, leather clad foot impatiently.

“Your chambers are large enough.” Darak’s calm, even tone was a trait Aragel admired. He never seemed to overreact to anything. Aragel often tried to mimic it, though he thought he failed miserably.

When the argument was over, Aragel won the room through gender as Darak reasoned the young Prince was almost a man and needed his privacy. For that privacy alone, Aragel was grateful. He endured many years of Serena’s mothering, even though she was a mere year older.

And now she was marrying the gat-toothed Exavian Prince, Hermond. An assassin. Across the hall in the visitor’s quarters, not a sound surfaced, and the tower rooms stood bathed in silence. The young prince’s gaze shifted to the door, searching the light seeping underneath for shadows passing by. Those shadows grew dimmer as the sun rose higher into the sky, reaching into his window in golden beams of light.

After Garik Darak, the king’s son, was assassinated, the

king prepared Aragel's training for his eventual rise to Sherok's throne. Someone had to be king, and Aragel's royal bloodline put him next in line for the monarchy. He lifted an eyebrow at the idea and chuckled to himself.

"I suppose I should get used to people wanting to kill me," he whispered aloud, allowing his gaze to fall on the fields far below him.

The horrible vision of his mother resurfaced, rearing its ugly head from the deep recesses of his memory. She gulped, sucking in air as she tried to take her last breaths. A deep rattle emerged from her chest... He shook the memory from his mind and tried to focus on something else.

He closed his eyes. Exhaustion overwhelmed him. Darak had lied about his only son's assassination. Aragel remembered it clearly now as if someone suddenly pulled back a black veil. Garik had *left*. He and Darak had an argument. Garik threw his responsibilities aside, abandoned his right to the throne, and ran away - without Darak's knowledge or permission. The last words he remembered his cousin speaking were, "I need more than a seaside farming community." Aragel had been very young when it happened, hiding in one of the empty stalls in the stable, watching his cousin stride off, leaving Commander Corigerg agape.

Becoming heir to the throne happened so suddenly. He was ten when he found out.

"You are going to be a king, boy! It is an opportunity few men have. You will be one of those privileged few."

Aragel remembered Darak's words. Ten-years-old and wide-eyed, he recalled his response. "Can I tell people what to do?"

Darak laughed and nodded. "Of course, but you cannot rule with a heavy hand, my boy. You must be sympathetic to the needs of your people, strong in negotiation, and firm, but yielding with your allies."

"I don't think I can do all of that."

"You will learn."

"How?"

Darak's gray eyes softened. "I will teach you."

Since then, Aragel often looked forward to the task. He loved Sherok, unlike his predecessor, and could not imagine living anywhere else. Sherok was his whole world now. Had he stayed in Kreen he would have been nothing more than a dead spice merchant's son. Now that he was older, he spent his days studying treaties and trade agreements. He was educated in courtly behaviors and well versed in the Danarian, Carinthian, Exavian, and the Arkeeronish languages. Up until now, his training for the monarchy had proceeded faultlessly.

Aragel opened his eyes suddenly and stared out the window, inhaling the cool, humid morning air. Mornings were so quiet. Sherok was a peace loving country. With its economy built solely on crop exportation and fish markets, they were a simple people void of opulent luxuries and finery.

Scrunching his nose in thought, he remembered last year's harvest. All of Sherok, even the aristocracy took to the fields to help bring in the crops. It was some of the hardest work he ever engaged in. But afterward, he and Darak spent a week partaking in the festivities. That alone made the hard work worthwhile. He had never felt such a strong sense of community among people of various social classes before.

In Sherok, the summers were warm and not too hot, while the winters remained mild. Year round, bouts of heavy rain crossed the continent making the climate ideal for producing large, bountiful crops. Sherok was, in fact, the largest exporter and provider of fresh fruits and vegetables in the West Ocean Mainlands.

There was one drawback as he saw it, however. The insects that flourished in Sherok were larger than on any other continent. Perhaps the worst economical drawback was in crop failure due to insect invasion, the nastiest of these being locusts that grew larger than a grown man's foot. With his eyes cast on a freshly plowed and seeded field in the distance, he felt his lips turn upward in a smile, remembering the first time he dined on battered, fried locusts and fire ants covered in a thick, sugar icing. He laughed to himself and felt his eyelids growing heavy.

All of these memories led to one simple thought. Sherok was his home and he was determined not to let anything happen

to it.

Aragel's mind finally settled on the situation at hand. He needed to have a plan, just in case. Because Sherok's military consisted of part time and volunteer soldiers, it would be necessary for Aragel to put together reinforcements to protect his country and his throne. Four years ago, Sherok signed a peace treaty with Danaria; home to the West Ocean Mainlands' largest armies. Even if Hermond had no intention of war, a reinforcement of Danarian soldiers to guard his family might foil the prince's ill intentions. But he decided to wait until he could talk to Commander Corigerger just in case the commander had a better idea.

Still huddled in the chair, drifting in and out of sleep, he heard a rustle in front of him, and he jumped as if suddenly recalling the events from the night before. He rubbed the residue of sleep from his eyes and stood. Near the large arched window stood a man dressed in black.

Aragel swallowed hard and cleared his throat, trying to find his voice, but the stranger spoke first.

"Hello Aragel," the man said in perfect Sherokean.

Aragel cleared his throat again and lowered his voice. A poor attempt to sound more menacing. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" he asked, noting that his voice quivered with the anxiety consuming him. His mind raced furiously. Had this been the same man he heard Prince Hermond speaking to only hours earlier? No, he decided quickly; the accent was wrong.

"You might say I'm an old friend of the family. It has been some time since I last saw you. You were a young child back then. Maybe six?" The man crinkled his brow as if studying what he saw.

"What do you think you're doing in here?" Aragel's eyes darted to the door. His mind raced back to the lecture Commander Corigerger was always giving him. "Assassin's are everywhere, boy," he had said. Aragel never really took the old warlord seriously - until now. Until last night. Sherok did not have enemies. It seemed Prince Hermond had not wasted time.

The man pulled down the hood of his cloak. His

Sherokean features took Aragel by surprise. His thin, lithe stature, high cheekbones and fine long dark hair mimicked Princess Serena's, while his angular jaw and gray eyes resembled those of King Darak. His chin boasted a thin beard, the result of having gone several days unshaven. In all plausibility, it seemed that he and the stranger before him could certainly be related. Unsure, Aragel paused. Was this a relative? Then a small thought crossed the young prince's mind. He pursed his lips. *Garik?* Aragel narrowed his eyes. If it was Garik, and King Darak discovered him, he would surely be tried for treason. After ten years, the king was still upset about Garik's unexpected disappearance. It was still a sensitive subject. One that few people dared to discuss with the king.

He considered grabbing his sword, but decided it would be better to wait and see what happened. To get to the sword he would have to dart past the stranger. It was too risky. Perhaps even hasty. He casually moved across the room closer to his sword, trying not to be too obvious, just in case the stranger was working for Hermond.

"I do not know you. You certainly don't act like a friend," Aragel said sharply. "Friends generally use the front door."

The man took a step toward him. "You do not remember me?" His Sherokean was faultless and laden with the dialect of Sherok's more aristocratic inhabitants.

Aragel remembered his training for situations like this. Now, in an actual instance, the training seemed impractical. "No. Besides, if I knew you I expect you would at least knock before entering a room. How do I know you are not here to kill me? Who are you, really?"

The man shook his head. "If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it already. What would you think if I told you I was someone from your distant past?" the man paused, searching Aragel's eyes for some sign of recognition. "I'm sorry to have startled you. I need to talk to you. It's important. I need to know about Prince Hermond's business here."

"You don't get it, do you? Get out! Even if you are someone from my past, why should I want anything to do with

you?" Aragel felt fear swell in the pit of his stomach. The reality of the night before slapped him hard across the face, and his knees quivered. He could hear muffled footsteps ascending the upper stairs from the hallway. He began wheezing.

The man held up his hands in retreat and glanced nervously toward the door. "I'll come back later when the castle quiets down, but you musn't tell anyone I was here."

Aragel gasped for a breath of air. "What do you mean not tell anyone? Out!"

The man turned back to the window and put one leather-clad foot on the ledge, "Promise me."

The lock rattled, clicked, and the door opened. Serena poked her head into the room with the castle's master key in her hand. "Aragel, why is this door locked?"

Serena was a petite, thin young woman. Her ebony hair fell well below her waist and her soft brown eyes, delicate features, and high cheekbones showed impeccable breeding. Many said she was the mirror image of the late Queen Aubrey.

He turned to Serena, startled. Attempting to calm his wheezing he closed his eyes and took several deep, measured breaths. "Do we have a visitor to the castle?" he finally asked her, pointing to the corner.

Serena lifted her eyebrows, puzzled. She gave him a worried look. "There is no one in this tower other than you and Prince Hermond. Please do not leave your door locked anymore. It worries me. Perhaps you should see the physician today. You have dark circles beneath your eyes."

Aragel turned to the corner. The man was gone.

"I didn't sleep well," he said, not having to feign sleepiness. He yawned. In reality, the yawn felt more like a sigh of relief rather than a reminder of a sleepless night.

"I think Commander Corigerg has done some damage to your pea-sized brain making you play soldier out in the sun all day. It's no wonder you've been having strange dreams and difficulty catching your breath. Now get yourself together and come down to eat," she admonished him in the stern, motherly voice Aragel most resented.

After Serena left, he looked around the room in

disbelief. Nothing seemed out of place. His bed, covered with rumpled quilts, lay untouched. The deep purple tapestry still hung flat against the cold wall. The maroon rugs on the floor had no stray dirt on them. Yet he knew he had seen the man, Garik; he had actually talked to him.

Maybe Serena was right. Listening to Commander Corigerg for hours beneath the glare of the sun was beginning to wear on him. His intrepid venture the night before could have also induced some kind of a hallucination. Nonetheless, he told himself he would talk to Commander Corigerg about Prince Hermond. He decided he would catch the commander after the midmorning meal, before he started his daily activities. He made his way down the corridor to the stairs. All the while, the haunting words, "Promise me," lingered in his mind like a bad dream.

Upon reaching the dining hall, Aragel found that everyone had arrived before him. Commander Corigerg sat to the left of the king, wearing a faded purple tunic and gray leggings, the same thing he wore to every meal. Commander Corigerg was a thick man. His muscular arms and sturdy legs boasted his many years as a weapons master and warrior. His once dark hair had turned almost completely white, and his skin was thick and tanned, weathered from exposure to the elements. His eyes were deep brown, almost black, and alluded to a fierce, yet reserved spirit.

Prince Hermond sat next to Serena with a half-cocked smile on his face. "Did you sleep well, Prince Aragel?"

Aragel remained calm even though he wanted to panic. "No, thank you. I kept waking up all night, which is why I've gone and under-slept half my day away." He sat down at the table and examined the room before him. A room he had seen every day for the last ten years. It seemed different today.

The large, cold room before him had always made him feel uncomfortable. The family escutcheons that hung on the walls bore the same deep shades of maroon and purple that colored his own room. The ceiling of the room vaulted high above them. Gray pillars stood at each of the four-corners along with an armed guard. "For safety, boy. It's common sense," the

commander had told him once. Aragel stifled a private snicker. Safety was so important that people were climbing into his window at mid-morning.

"Oh. I told the servants to keep you away from sugar. That could have something to do with your nightmares," Serena said with a quick, angelic smile. Hermond nodded in agreement to appease her. His eyes passed over Aragel with the stealth of a thief, plotting and cold.

"Good." Aragel noticed the genuine concern on Serena's face. He was not in the mood to listen to her theories.

Serena smiled again and before he could stop her, she called across the table to her father. "Father, perhaps we should have the physician look into Aragel's sleep problem. I'm somewhat concerned about his shortness of breath as well."

The king looked over to Aragel, who shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think it is anything serious, Serena. Perhaps we should let it be." The king paused long enough to take a sip of wine from a plain metal goblet. "Where are those servants? I expect the meal to be here by the time I sit down. I am a very busy man."

Serena shrugged meekly, stood, and went to the kitchen with her pink skirts trailing behind her. Aragel sat back in his chair and took a drink from the cup of water in front of him. It was warm and bitter. With a look of disgust, he set the cup back on the table. His mind descended into thought again.

I will tell the commander I would like to talk to him after the meal about a private matter, he thought. You cannot do that, his reason told him. The prince will suspect something. He will impose himself to accompany us. He is as scared as I am. He knows I know his plans. Aragel's thoughts of doom subsided when he heard his name.

"Maybe you should send Aragel to Cabalia. After all, the boy knows about the corn trade as much as anyone," the commander was saying.

Prince Hermond agreed. "He can come with me on my ship and we will drop him off."

Aragel could feel his eyes widen beyond his control. "Cabalia?" The mere thought of traveling anywhere with Prince

Hermond threw his stomach into dancing spirals. The nausea gripping his stomach began its ascension to his throat. He gulped.

"No. It's much too dangerous for him to be cavorting around the world," the king said, tugging thoughtfully at his gray streaked beard.

Aragel breathed a sigh of relief.

"But, Majesty, the boy needs to travel. He needs to see the world. How else do you expect him to become a man when he's never seen the outside world?" Prince Hermond's argument was laden with caution.

King Darak waved a hand in annoyance and shook his head. "No. It's unheard of. These foreign cities are crawling with assassins. I have no other heirs and therefore I cannot risk Aragel's safety. I will go myself."

"I suppose you're right. My ship could let you off. I have a shipment of goods, textiles actually, going to Cabalia. Perhaps I should stay here and assist Aragel in watching over things while you are away." Hermond narrowed his eyes.

Commander Corigerg sat back in the chair, his dark eyes darting wildly from the foreign prince to the king. "Perhaps I should go in your place, Majesty."

Prince Hermond feigned shock. "You do not trust Aragel, yourself and I to watch over things, commander?"

The commander took a drink from the cup in front of him. "Forgive me. It is not a matter of trust, Prince Hermond. I'm merely considering the king's convenience."

Aragel exchanged a brief knowing glance with the commander. Corigerg knew something was wrong, too. Even then, it was doubtful Corigerg would do anything without the king's approval.

"Commander Corigerg, I really need to talk to you after the meal," Aragel started. He had to bring it up now or the risk the chance that the commander would not have time later.

Commander Corigerg nodded. "Yes, Prince Aragel. That would be fine."

"What is it?" the King asked. By the way the king fidgeted with his cloth napkin, Aragel could tell he was still

perturbed with Hermond.

"It's about my..." he paused, "my archery lesson the other day." Aragel met his uncle's gaze with a half-hearted, brief smile.

Prince Hermond lifted his cup. "The last time a young man came to me with that it was about women!"

The king chuckled lightly.

Aragel lifted an eyebrow. "No."

"Don't be embarrassed, Aragel! Why don't you and I go riding though the vineyards this afternoon and discuss it, man to man." Hermond smiled and narrowed his eyes, turning to the commander. "Of course, I don't want to overstep you if you would prefer to talk to him, commander. I was just thinking it would give me a chance to get to know Aragel better. After all, we are soon to be related."

Darak nodded in concurrence. "I agree."

Aragel jumped from his seat, which sent a spoon crashing to the floor, startling everyone at the table. "But *that's not it*. I have to talk to Commander Coriger!" His eyes plead with his uncle.

Hermond was visibly unsettled now.

To save himself Aragel quickly came up with an excuse. "My arm has been giving me some trouble when I'm lining up on my target. My wrist hurts. I was thinking maybe I'm holding my bow wrong. Maybe I should start wrapping my wrist beneath the guard...or something." He paused, wanting to crawl beneath the table. To disappear. The excuse sounded so contrived he was sure it gave rise to suspicion.

"All right. After we eat you can go with the commander." King Darak shrugged and gave the commander a suspicious look. He knew it was not like Aragel to lose his demeanor so quickly. Whatever the issue, it was clear to all of them that Aragel had no intention of sharing it openly.

Serena returned to the room with the servants following her closely. They carried large platters filled with steaming meats, thick sliced cheese, and warm breads.

Aragel did not eat much. He choked down the meat and cheese with a few swallows of goat's milk and shot Serena a

warning glance with dark, overcast eyes. This, however, did not stop her. Again, the motherly smile appeared on her lips. She looked innocent with her long dark curls and flawless skin. But Aragel knew better.

"So, Aragel, did eating make you feel better? You were very tired when I came to get you."

"I'm fine. Would you please stop babying me?"

Serena's brown eyes widened in surprise, "You are terribly defensive and ill-tempered this morning."

Both the commander and the king turned their attention to Aragel, confused.

"Are you sure you're feeling well, my boy?" the commander asked. His weathered forehead crinkled with uncertainty.

"No, I mean yes," he said, then tried to explain. "No. I was simply humoring my cousin. It's nothing."

The king rose from his chair nodding. "You probably did not get enough sleep. I have affairs to deal with. I'll be in my study." He paused and turned to Hermond. "I trust you can find your way around the castle, Prince Hermond?"

Hermond, with a mouthful of food, lifted his glass and nodded.

"Good." With that, the king strode from the room.

Commander Coriger stood soon after with Aragel close at his heels, Hermond's curious gaze following them from the room. When they reached the commander's private quarters Aragel closed the door behind him after checking the corridor to make sure no one had followed.

"There is something going on and I don't like it," Coriger started. It seemed that talking so candidly made Coriger uncomfortable most of the time. But today it did not. He sat down in the maroon upholstered chair behind a plain pine desk and leaned toward Aragel waiting for a response.

"I know *what* I heard and I know *who* I heard. It was Prince Hermond. I don't know how he got out of that room without moving the chair. But he did, though I can't prove it. If my uncle won't do anything, I will. "

Commander Coriger reacted more readily than Aragel

expected. He stood, and wrung his hands. "I agree. A room that small would not have been as warm with an open window. There were remnants of burning coal in the fire. It does not add up. Your uncle likes Hermond. Darak has a kind heart and trusting ways. I've had word that Hermond is in trouble with other authorities. Though I must admit, I never anticipated he would have plans to assassinate the king, or you. While we cannot prove he is planning such treachery, we cannot take risks either."

Aragel sat down in the plain cross frame chair across from him. "If he kills my uncle and me..."

The commander's brown eyes went wide, increasing the appearance of the thick wrinkled folds in his forehead. "He becomes King of Sherok. But *that is not* going to happen."

It was a terrible revelation that neither of them wanted to believe. Coriger searched Aragel's eyes for a deeper understanding of the full ramifications of such an act.

"I'm concerned and afraid," Aragel said, finding solace in admitting his fear. "You know I would never tell you lies, don't you?"

Coriger nodded once. "I know you would not tell tales, Prince Aragel." He stopped, took a deep breath, then leaned forward, and looked Aragel straight in the eyes. "When you were a boy, do you remember when you broke the bridle? You were using it to hang from a low tree branch. You immediately brought it to me and admitted what you had done. Since then I have trusted everything you have ever told me to be truth. Tell me what happened again, from the beginning."

Aragel once again recounted the events from the night before. The commander listened intently. When Aragel finished the commander stood. "I do not think you were dreaming, Aragel. Assassins are everywhere, boy! Everywhere! And your uncle will not even consider the prince's possible ill intentions."

"There's more," Aragel told him. "This morning there was a man in my room. He spoke perfect Sherokean and claimed to be someone from my past. I thought he might be my cousin, Garik. The resemblance was striking. He wanted to ask me questions, but he never had a chance because Serena interrupted. She used her key to get in and he went out the window. I

considered he could have been someone working for Hermond, but I dismissed the idea because I recognized him. What should I do about *that*?"

Coriger gasped and sat back down in the chair, looking at the floor as if contemplating a response. The old man knew things. Things he would never tell the king; and things he did not intend on sharing with Aragel. Aragel sensed it. He could tell because the commander's eyes narrowed and he leaned in to Aragel, and lowered his voice. "I would not worry about that. Say nothing to no one about seeing him. Not your uncle, not Serena. If it was your cousin, which I think it may have been, perhaps he can help. It is Hermond you will need to be careful of. I would not put anything past Hermond."

"How can we know my cousin is not working for Hermond?" Aragel asked. He was confused, and sure the commander would have at least considered the possibility of his cousin being an assassin.

The commander bit his lip then shook his head. "No. Call it a gut feeling, my boy. If your cousin was working for Hermond, you and I would not be having this conversation. You would be dead already."

"All right." Aragel fought back the unsettled feeling in his stomach; shocked the commander was so sure of Garik's motives.

Quickly, the commander inscribed something on a piece of paper, folded it, and impressed it with his wax seal. "Here is what we will do. You are going to Danaria. I know nothing about this, do you understand? The less I know, the safer you will be. Take this letter to the warlord General Termark O'Schoitt. You will not return to Sherok with the legions he will send. You will stay in Danaria with the sorcerers, where you'll be safe."

"Legions? Sorcerers?" Aragel hesitated. He knew it would come down to this. Then another frightening thought emerged. "What if my uncle disowns me?"

Coriger gave the young prince a startled look. "Why would he disown you?"

"He disowned Garik for running away."

“You’re not running away. You are protecting your kingdom. Not deserting your future throne.”

Aragel sighed deeply, realizing Corigerger was probably right. Though legions seemed a little premature, and sorcerers? Sorcerers made Aragel nervous only because he had never met one. Nevertheless, he had heard plenty of tales. He took the letter from Corigerger and put it down the front of his tunic.

"I'll get ready and leave before sunrise." He stood to leave.

"Be careful, Aragel. Assassins are everywhere, boy." Suddenly the warning seemed more urgent. More realistic.

Aragel let out a deep breath. He did not know what he should worry about more. Hermond or his cousin. Or sorcerers. Or legions of Danarian soldiers. Things were getting complicated, and the fate of Sherok weighed heavy on his shoulders. Though he was apprehensive of the burden he was handed, Aragel hurried from the room, leaving the commander behind him. He retreated to his chambers for the remainder of the day in order to prepare for his journey. As long as Prince Hermond was in Sherok, no good would come of it.

CHAPTER 2

Shadon Longbowe followed Prince Hermond from the port at Menegala, to the Agorak Peninsula and finally to the main port at Sherok. He was tired, but he pressed on knowing the prince had a plan. While he was not sure what it was exactly, he knew it was something urgent, especially since the prince had embarked with three of his fastest war ships to the southern ocean. He had left the war ships further up the coast on the Danarian-Carinth continent. It was doubtful that King Darak, or any other Sherokean for that matter, were any the wiser since the prince had arrived on a well-disguised, Exavian merchant ship. However, Shadon knew something was amiss. He could sense it and he did not like it.

His concerns aside, he had his own reasons for following Prince Hermond here. Rumors out of Kreen insisted the prince had an illegal shipment of ale leaving Sherok en route to Morasta or Orana Tulk, where it would be distributed into the Danarian black market. That alone was job enough for Shadon, and Danaria paid him handsomely for spying. Danarian customs officials would catch the shipment and impose yet another heavy fine on the prince for violating international trade agreements.

Shadon gained passage to Sherok with the help of his friend, Captain Adarack Vogman, aboard an unassuming, small freighter ship called the *Narassa*. Careful to hide his own dark

Sherokean features beneath the cowl-hooded cloak he wore, he kept his head down when any Sherokean passed him too closely. Further still, when required to speak to a Sherokean, he mumbled with a thick Danarian accent to hide the perfect dialect of his natural Sherokean tongue. He was not welcome here.

A falling out with the king years earlier had him banished from the city indefinitely. Undoubtedly his description was well known, even now, years later. It was, perhaps, one of the most formidable events in recent Sherokean history next to the Kersian attack on the city, and the crop failure seven years prior to that. Nonetheless, he was set on the idea that, if he had reason to, he would warn the Sherokean monarchy even if it meant his life. Exavia, the coldest continent in the western world, would never have sent war ships unless they had plans to use them.

Now, he stood on the Narassa's deck, peering inland at the dark outline of the castle contemplating his next move. With nothing left to do, he bided his time - watching and waiting. After several hours, he stepped from the Sherokean dock where the *Narassa* was moored. Captain Adarack followed closely behind.

"I'll be in the tavern, just north of the castle," the captain was saying.

Shadon did not acknowledge the captain's comment. He was too busy thinking about his visit to his cousin earlier that morning.

"Would you prefer me to do it?" Adarack asked. "I can walk right into that castle, request an audience with the king, and come right out with it. Or perhaps I could talk to the boy. Hmm?"

Shadon turned to the dark haired man, his friend for more than ten years. "No. He looked scared, Adarack. He thought I was there to kill him, and almost accepted the fact. He didn't even fight it. No calling for guards, nothing. He knows something and I have a bad feeling about this. There is more going on here than we know."

"I have to wonder if this has something to do with Exavia's new alliance."

Shadon lifted an eyebrow. Exavians had a reputation for being underhanded when it came to trade negotiations and their choice of allies. "What alliance?"

"I thought you would be the first to know, surely..."

"No." Shadon's mind raced through all of the information he had recently acquired. None of it suggested any such alliance. "I did not know this."

"Exavia opened trade negotiations with Zul last month. I heard this from the captain of an Exavian merchant ship in Morasta a week ago. It seemed harmless enough, a peace treaty driven by the exchange of commodities. Though seeing Hermond here creates suspicion. Or perhaps I'm simply a paranoid old man." A tense grin appeared on the captain's normally sober face.

Shadon felt his stomach turn. He pulled his dark hair away from his face and tied it up with a strand of leather. "This is becoming more interesting with every moment, Adarack." Shadon rubbed his eyes. He could feel a headache coming on. His jaw tightened and the feeling in his gut turned sour. Adarack put a calloused, heavy hand on Shadon's bony shoulder. "You'd best be careful. I'll be here if you need me."

They walked through the fisherman's ports, toward the inner buildings of the small city. The weathered, broken down buildings that stood closely together on the narrow streets left Sherok uninviting for those used to cleaner, larger cities. The coastline stretched for leagues in either direction, in some areas rocky, while in others the water lapped up to smooth white sand beaches that backed up to tall, rocky cliffs.

Shadon stopped and looked around. Fishermen pulled large barrels of the day's catch from their ships and lined them along the docks. Large fishing nets were hung over the sides of their respective ships for the night, while others were hung on posts along the docks for repair. At dusk, many of the sailors headed toward the taverns and inns of the inner city.

Sherok was a peaceful kingdom, staying neutral to the rest of the world's affairs in most cases. Though the violent marauding of the Kersian's did not spread this far south, even the poorest farmer and mariner bore a weapon, just in case.

It had happened before. Shadon remembered. He was merely eight when three large ships full of Kersian legions came ashore and slaughtered more than half of Sherok's meager population. The castle had withheld the siege with a handful of soldiers and young Lord Aithian, who was visiting the king in the aftermath of Queen Aubrey's unexpected death from Gloxorthia. It was Lord Aithian, son of Luithian and keeper of the powers of water and serpent, who had saved Sherok that day. Shadon did not see the hierarch sorcerer invoke the hurricane that swept the Kersians into the ocean. Nor did he see the great serpent conjured from the depths of the sea killing those Kersians who traveled farther inland to avoid the wrath of the serpent god. Shadon had been below, in the castle's dungeons, where the king had sent him with his sister, and the servants for their own safety. Since then, all of Sherok's male inhabitants, lords and servants alike, were provided weapons and training, all compliments of the monarch as long as each agreed to fight for Sherok if the Kersian's ever came back.

Thus, the true voluntary military of Sherok came to be. Prior to the military, King Darak had employed a hundred men for castle and city security and had appointed the best of his fighting men, Grag Coriger, as their commander. As far as Shadon knew, the commander was still the appointed head of Sherok's understaffed military. It was this inactivity that he hoped would help him to retrieve information from the castle without consequence. The Sherokeans were not warriors and knew nothing of devising battle strategy or organizing defense efforts. They were farmers and fishermen. Nothing more. Shadon smiled, knowing he had the advantage over King Darak.

"I need to find some more equipment and get to work," he told Adarack.

The captain nodded. "You need to be at the tavern before the sun rises in the morning. I smell a hurricane." Adarack, bent down to rub his big toes on both feet through his black, knee-high boots. He gazed out to the ocean, noting the thick mass of black fog that crept inland, hovering over the frightfully calm water. The storm was leagues away yet. He licked a finger and held it up to test the current direction of the

air.

"How do you know?" It was merely another obstacle for Shadon. His concern showed itself in the deep worry lines at the corners of his eyes.

Adarack smiled with reassurance and stood. "I just know. I've been a ship's captain a long time, Shadon. Aside from that, my toes ache before a hurricane."

Shadon sighed deeply and shook his head. "Can we avoid it?"

"If we leave in the morning, early, we may be able to steer around it. At worst, we'll get the gale winds and high waters. If we stay here and it hits the northern side of the continent, this port will take heavy damage. My ship and cargo will parish. We have a better chance going around it and trying to miss it altogether," he explained.

Shadon nodded in understanding. "I'll be there if I can."

"Aya, I'll see you then." The men parted ways. Adarack headed to the tavern, and Shadon to the merchant's pavilion to obtain needed supplies.



The sight of the castle of Sherok brought back memories. They flooded into Shadon's mind like a swollen river impregnated with heavy rain. He slid his long, thin fingers through the length of his tied back black hair, unknotting the tangles. He headed around the city and to the south side of the castle, taking the long way, through several wheat fields. It was easy to remain unseen, ducking into the evening shadows between the rows of newly planted crop. The cry of locusts echoed out from the deepest reaches of the fields. He noted the damage the ravenous insects were doing to the seedlings already. If something was not done, many of the fields would be ruined before the harvest.

He wondered about Serena. He gave her up when he gave up his father. He had disowned them and they him, and now cursed himself for doing so. He had betrayed his family, and now needed to warn them. Or at least retrieve more

information. Oh how he hated this. It hurt to be so close to the castle and to be so unwelcome at the same time. Maybe he would run into Serena. He had almost revealed himself earlier, but she would not have understood. She was sure to be angry with him for abandoning her. She probably would not remember him anyway. She was only a small child when he left. He sighed as he closed in toward the high battlement walls of his childhood home. They loomed before him, thrusting high into the sky, its gray-taloned towers with banners of plum color, whipping in a soft breeze from the south inlet.

The tall tree, abundant with new leaves, stood high above the castle walls only several yards from the castle wall itself. It did not surprise him to see it still there after ten years. He had climbed it the evening before, and made himself a watchpost in the highest branches. He had spent most of the morning there as well. Again, he climbed the tree. Lithe and quick, he found himself adjacent Aragel's window in little time. From his earlier observance, he noted that the soldiers on duty passed every half hour on their patrol atop the battlement walls. As with the tree, it did not surprise him that a ground patrol passed only twice a day: once at daybreak and the second at the setting of the sun. The Sherokeons did not concern themselves with high security and tedious safety details such as the tree. Again, he mused at how trusting and peace loving they were.

He settled into his position and watched the soldiers with amusement. *They still haven't noticed my grappling hook and gray rope*, he thought. The rope was still and unmoving, painted gray as the castle walls, camouflaged well for its purpose. He would use it later, fleeing for his life if need be.

The daylight faded fast as the sun set against the pale pink skies in the west, casting orange ripples in its descent. The castle was dark except for the candles and torches lit to fight the oncoming darkness. Aragel's room glowed with the flicker of candlelight. The colors of the fields and flowers were soon lost to black night as the crickets began singing their haunting melodies to the moon. Shadon watched as the evening patrol rounded the corner of the castle on horseback. They rode the path beneath the tree and finally turned to the other side of the

castle. He relaxed then. And waited. Finally, Aragel's room fell dark, and Shadon could see nothing.

After a short time staring into the black window, Shadon decided to make his move. The wind picked up. He waited for the castle guards to make their way to the tower, high above him on the battlement walls, and then climbed down the tree once they had gone. He reached the rope and climbed, as quickly and quietly as his training allowed. Upon reaching the sill, he climbed into the window, slowing the swing of the rope only gradually with his hand. Much to his surprise, his cousin was awake, jamming a few final things into a leather satchel.

Aragel went to his swords and picked up a short sword from where it lay on the bed. He studied it as if trying to decide whether or not to take it. The grip of the weapon was covered in soft black leather, and the pommel and hilt were adorned with intricate engravings of dragons. The blade itself was made of fine steel and bore identical engravings.

The young prince smiled and put the sword into the scabbard on his belt. He looked around as if trying to remember if he had forgotten anything.

"Going somewhere?" Shadon asked from the corner by the window.

Aragel jumped and turned toward the voice. Shadon, dressed in black, emerged from the shadows.

"You again?"

"Yes. You forgot several things." Shadon ambled toward the chair.

"You shouldn't be in here." Aragel took a step backward and looked around nervously.

"The name's Shadon. You know, if you're going to sneak away, you'll need a grappling hook and about two hundred feet of rope."

"Your name is not Shadon."

"It is right now, as far as both of us are concerned."

"Fine. So what will I need the rope for?"

"To climb down the side of the tower." Shadon sat down in the chair and leaned back casually.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Why don't you tell me? You don't mean to imply that you really thought you could sneak out of here without being seen?"

"Maybe I could. What do you care? What are you doing here? Come to make amends? Why have you changed your name?"

"Whoa, slow down. To answer your first question, I'm just trying to be helpful. Idiocy aside, you're still family. Second question, my business is really not entirely your business just yet. Next, I think you know why I'm here. It certainly isn't to make amends. Lastly, my change in identity is none of your concern."

Aragel shook his head and rolled his eyes. "How did you get in here?"

"I told you. A grappling hook and rope. The guards don't patrol this side of the castle much, or have you noticed? I've been watching them for a few days. Now, I think the question is how are *you* going to get out? There are about twenty guards between here and the front gate. There are four patrolling the walls every half hour. I've been watching them from that large tree over there," he said, pointing out the window. He turned back to Aragel. "Only an idiot would leave that tree where it is, then again, the king has never been one for intelligence. How about you? I bet you don't have any money either."

"I have six shinder and two keldin." Aragel set his jaw, grinding his teeth. He kicked at the rug and bit his tongue. No one had ever spoken to him that way.

"Okay, so you're not as daft as I thought. It's a good thing stupidity is not hereditary. Eh? You know, I could let you use my rope to get down."

"What makes you think I'm running away?" Aragel sounded shocked. "Is arrogance your way of dealing with the painful emotions of being ostracized?"

Shadon's mind raced with the possible situations that would cause Aragel to leave. He narrowed his eyes. Shadon took the running away statement as an invitation to find out more, and decided to ignore the arrogance comment altogether.

"Did I say you were running away? You said it, not me."

Besides, do I look like an idiot? I ran away a few times when I was about your age." Shadon chuckled at the boy's slip of tongue.

"How do I know I can trust you?" Aragel whispered, glancing back at the door as if he half expected shadows to pass over the light seeping in from the crevice between the door and the floor. He picked up his satchel and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"Rule number one. Don't trust anyone, not even me." Shadon paused, then added cautiously, "And certainly not Prince Hermond." He studied Aragel's reaction, noticing the boy winced at the mention of the Exavian prince.

Again, Shadon climbed to the sill of the tall arched window. He knew then, that if Aragel was leaving because of Hermond, it had to be worse than he thought. Exavia in trade negotiations with Zul. *Kersian Sorcerers*, he thought.

"You know about Hermond?" Aragel asked. He searched the outline of Shadon's face for an answer.

"Why else would he leave three war ships ported just north of here? A welcoming committee? What's going on?" It seemed like a good time to ask.

"You're a spy!" Aragel cried triumphantly. "Commander Corigerg knew all along! So who are you working for?"

Shadon shook his head and held a finger up to his lips. "Shhh. We're wasting time talking about this here. Let's get out of here first and finish this conversation someplace else. If the king catches me here..."

Aragel nodded in agreement and followed with his pack. He looked out the window, down at the ground, then at the grappling hook with its long line of gray rope. He inhaled deeply, then swallowed hard. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea. If I can't trust you, why should I come with you?"

"Because you want to get out of here without being seen and I have the means. Besides, I have a feeling we are both going after the same thing. You'll be fine. Now give me the pack and tie your hair up with this piece of leather so it stays out of your face." Shadon was grateful for his current situation. He

would not have to drag information out of anyone unwillingly after all. At the same time, it also proved his suspicions were correct. Hermond was up to no good.

With some reluctance, Aragel gave Shadon the pack then took the piece of leather and tied back his shoulder-length hair.

"First we'll throw the pack down. Just clothes in here?" Shadon did not wait for an answer and threw the pack out the window.

Aragel nodded and watched the pack fall to the ground far below. "I, I don't know." he looked out the window again and gulped at the lump in his throat. It never occurred to him, until now, that he was afraid of heights.

"Too late. The pack is down there and you're up here. Explain that, with that nosey prince listening in to everything." Without waiting for a response, Shadon started down the rope.

Aragel leaned out the window. "How do I know you won't kill me when we get to the bottom? How do I know you're not working for *him*?" Aragel asked.

"I would have killed you already. I told you that yesterday. Remember?"

"But if I can't trust you..."

"Can we discuss this later? I'm hanging two hundred feet from the ground." Shadon rolled his eyes. *Great, the boy is afraid of falling, what's next? I knew this was too easy*, he thought.

Aragel took a deep breath and put one leg over the side of the window. Not wanting his uncle to disown him, he paused long enough to drop the note he had written. He anticipated Serena would find it, and hoped she would take it directly to his uncle without hesitation. He turned his attention back to the window when he heard Shadon's voice.

"Now grab hold of the rope and swing your other leg over."

With great reluctance, Aragel did as he was told. Finally, he found himself hanging off the rope. High above him he noticed the grappling hook secured on the sill of the storage room window just below the crown of the tower. He took a deep

breath and turned his head to ask Shadon what to do next.

"Don't look down! Put your feet on the wall, lean back, and climb down slowly one hand after the other," Shadon whispered. He hurried ahead hoping Aragel would not let go and fall on him.

Shadon noticed Aragel's breathing become more rapid as his face slowly faded pale. The boy's hands were sweaty, clutching the rope tightly between pale white knuckles.

Shadon reached the ground first, stood, and watched Aragel with amusement. Aragel had his eyes squeezed shut. "You go any farther you're going to plant your hind end into the ground." He chuckled.

Aragel opened his eyes and realized that he was almost sitting on the ground. The tower loomed high above them. Shadon leaned up against the tree, watching him with curious interest. Aragel stood and leaned over with his hands on his knees feeling his breath catch in his chest. The bile rose in his throat. He heaved, wiped the corners of his mouth, took another deep breath, and shook his head. Rubbing his hands on his pants, he wiped off the sweat.

"That wasn't so bad," Shadon said with a smile.

"It was nothing." Aragel brushed himself off and grabbed his pack. "Well thank you for helping me. I'll be on my way now."

"Wait! Do you know where you're going? Once the sun is up, someone will know you're gone. The soldiers will be combing the city for you. Besides, we had a deal. I help you if you give me information. What is Prince Hermond doing on this side of the world?"

Aragel stopped and looked at Shadon, then turned and started to walk away, down the dirt path that led through the fields, toward the city. *Assassins are everywhere, boy.*

"I have a proposition for you," Shadon yelled after him. He knew he was either going to have to talk fast or resort to taking his cousin by force.

Aragel spun around. "Will you be quiet? Someone will hear us!"

"Listen," Shadon whispered, "I have a friend, a ship

captain. He runs a merchant ship that will be going to Danaria. His ship leaves this morning, and you could be on it. Of course, you'll have to hide your identity, but you'll be out to sea before anyone has a chance to catch you. You *are* going to Danaria, right?"

"As a matter of fact I am, but even a spy wouldn't know that!" Aragel glared at him. "And you expect me to hide my identity. Like you? I'm not so sure you are my cousin. Any person related to me would not abandon his own birth-given name."

Shadon winced. "Fair enough. I probably deserved that. I just figured if *I* was leaving home because of Hermond, I *might* be going to Danaria for reinforcements. You now know Hermond has war ships up the coast, but you still haven't told me why he's here."

"He's marrying Serena. Do you know what that means? It means all he has to do is kill my uncle and me and Exavia inherits Sherok. Since you abandoned your responsibilities and left it to me, that is. Is that what you wanted to hear? Now I'm vulnerable, I've told you everything I know, so kill me." Aragel started to walk away again.

Shadon ran after him, grabbing his arm. "Look, I'm sorry you feel I'm a traitor. I'm sorry I left you with a responsibility you're obviously more suited to than I am. Or maybe you think I'm here to claim what was once mine? I assure you I do *not* want your job as heir to Sherok. I'm here because it's my job to watch criminals like Prince Hermond. So now I need to know – did you hear Hermond say he was going to eliminate you and the King?"

"Eliminate?" Aragel laughed at his cousin's formal choice of words. "Yes. Late last night when Hermond was talking to someone." Aragel pulled his arm away, but Shadon grabbed it again.

"Who? Who was he talking to?"

Aragel shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. If I knew, I would have said so. Someone called 'Your Eminence'. Now can I leave, please?"

Shadon paused and squeezed his eyes closed. The stakes

were high and the young prince was right. Going to Danaria for reinforcements was their only hope. "Let me take you to Danaria. I know people. The right people. Generals, warlords and high commanders in the horde. I have the means, but we have to go now."

Aragel contemplated the idea for a few moments remembering Corigerg's note, which was nestled safely in an inner pocket inside his tunic. Patting his chest he assured himself the note was still there. He finally concurred with a quick nod. "All right, but no surprises or I'll slit your throat." He stopped. "Do you know General O'Schoitt?"

Shadon smiled. "Yeah." He looked at what Aragel wore and took in a deep sigh. His clothes alone would attract too much attention. Shadon then looked at the pack and the sword. *Pack will pass, the sword will too, long as he keeps it sheathed.* "Give me your tunic quick."

Aragel took off the tunic with reluctance, and handed it to him. The note for the general... He started to panic, feeling his breath become faster and shallower.

Shadon rubbed the tunic into the dirt and handed it back to him. "Put it on. You would have attracted too much attention in something clean."

Taking the tunic, he felt for the note and breathed a sigh of relief. It was still there. He hastily put the tunic back on.

Together they crept away from the castle, down the dirt path and through the sparse trees. The strong smell of wet spring manure lingered in the humid air after them.