

One

"I have to go after him, Isabel...he's my brother."

– Prince Ean val Lorian, at the Castle of Tyr'kharta

Ean stood in Tyr'kharta's shattered hall staring out into the night. A cloudbank had drawn a drape across the moon, casting the river and surrounding mountains into enveloping darkness. The night's icy air burned in his lungs, smoking with every exhale, the remnant coals of his fury. Somewhere in that icebound night, his brother was getting away.

Confusion had resonated through the castle after Sebastian's explosion, and now the sounds of startled and angry men formed a constant backdrop to Ean's own enraged heartbeat. Three of Isabel's men had gone to distract and misdirect, buying them precious moments for discussion.

There was no time to talk, yet time must be made. So Ean had carved it from the spaces between every breath, using the third strand of *elae* to lengthen each moment to its near snapping point while he told Isabel all. The working came to him when necessity demanded it—when Isabel demanded it. Incredible that less than a day had passed since he'd stood in Niyadbakir bristling at his inability to recall what should've been second-nature. Now he'd regained pieces of that skill, but he felt no more whole for having them, knowing that his eldest brother suffered beneath a web of torturous compulsion.

A few steps away, Isabel now conferred with Dorn, the first of four men she'd reclaimed from the clutches of death and dishonor to aid her and Ean instead. The prince barely heard their conversation over the roaring of his blood. He wanted nothing more than to follow his brother, to find him and deliver him from the horrifying evils that wracked his consciousness. Yet his friends—Rhys, Brody, Cayal, men who had served him loyally and bravely—remained in dire peril, hostage to Dore Madden's vengeance.

Ean had never felt so cleaved between duty and desire, nor faced a path so splintered. He'd returned from T'khendar to rescue Rhys and his men but found a lost brother instead. To seek the one now meant abandoning the other, and his honor with it.

Ean gritted his teeth and stared into the night, wondering how fast he would have to run to catch Sebastian, and if he might recall a pattern to speed his way. A hounding sense of wrongness twisted in his gut, urging him to action, yet...which action?

"Ean." Isabel moved back to him and laid a hand on his arm. "We can delay no longer. You must choose."

He spun her an agonized glare. "You know my mind. I would choose my brother."

"Then your brother we shall follow."

Ean gritted his teeth and turned back to the night. "And abandon my men."

She exhaled a sigh. "Sometimes our only guiding star lies towards the choice we will least regret."

Her words drew knives through his heart. The worst part was that Rhys—with a loyal soldier's simplicity—would likely forgive him for what could only be considered a

despicable betrayal. Ean had to hope that he could somehow save both his brother and his men, for he would never forgive himself otherwise.

Isabel's man, Lem, stepped breathlessly between the hall's shattered doors. "My lady—they come."

Isabel shook her head, her lips pressed to a thin line. "The horizon narrows, Ean. Soon there will be but one path, and not the one of your choosing."

Ean clenched his jaw. He knew already that he'd chosen to follow Sebastian, yet still he struggled with the guilt of taking that first step away from Rhys, knowing other steps would follow. Finally, he ground out, "My brother heads north."

Isabel turned her blindfolded eyes to Dorn. "The fastest route to our horses?"

"This way, milady."

She tugged on Ean's arm, and he forced himself to follow.

Through the darkened halls of Tyr'kharta they rushed then. Dorn, Baz, Lem and Poul showed their new color as they fought against men they'd once stood beside in battle. Isabel claimed to have restored their honor when she'd restored the four men to life, and the prince sensed no guile in them, only dedication. Still, he eerily remembered the looks on their bearded faces when he'd first cut them down as he and Isabel had fought their way into the fortress. Now those same men were guiding them out.

The castle sprawled like a crab hugging a hill. Ean barely remembered the path they'd followed coming in, for he'd been singularly focused, drawn towards his brother and that destined moment of recognition and reunion. Then he and Isabel had moved swiftly in silence. Now the corridors resounded with an ear-jarring alarm and the sounds of running men.

Dorn knew the castle well, however, and he had a talent for evasion; they made good time, miraculously avoiding the enemy groups hastening by. Then, just shy of an intersection, Isabel stopped abruptly and reached for his arm, holding him back.

Ean stopped and turned with sudden misgiving, trusting her perceptions over his own. "What is it?"

"Something has changed." She twisted her Merdanti staff between her hands, her brow furrowed. "The paths have shifted. Some have branched, others narrowed." She gave him a significant look.

And a host of armed men came rushing around the corner.

The black-haired man in the lead wore scale armor, dull and dark, that seemed to absorb the light, and his brown eyes held a certain unsavory gleam. As the host of men behind him slowed to match his pace, he looked Ean's party over.

"Who have we here?" When his gaze landed on Ean, his face split in a predatory smile. "No, *no*—it can't be!" he exchanged a grin with a bearded man beside him. "Here I thought we'd be facing a chase and lo but we run right into our quarry! *Ean val Lorian*," he swept one hand before him in a mocking bow, "the pleasure is mine."

"Looks just like his brother," noted the bearded man. His sneering tone set Ean immediately on edge.

A broom formed of the fifth could easily have scattered them, but Ean sensed Isabel's hesitation through their bond, and it confused him as to what he should do. "And you are?" he inquired tightly, buying her time—*but time for what?*

"Raliax." The Saldarian settled the flat of his blade against his shoulder, cupped the hilt in his hands and stood with feet parted. "Fortune works in mysterious ways." He

gave Ean an insolent smile. “I handed your brother Trell over to meet his fate just days ago, and it appears you’ve already had your reunion with dear elder Sebastian.”

For these insults alone, Ean might’ve snapped the man’s neck like a twig. He was of a mind to do that very thing when Isabel put a hand on his arm. “Wait,” she murmured. “The paths...” Her fingers tightened around his arm.

Unseen, only sensed, myriad paths converged.

Raliax said, “Dore will be so—”

In the same instant Isabel whispered, “*Dore Madden...*”

At the exact moment that a white-haired man strode around the corner.

Isabel’s blindfolded gaze locked upon him, and she went utterly, completely still. Even her mind became silent. To Ean, it felt as if for a breath of eternity the earth itself stopped turning—all motion in that instant simply ceased while Isabel van Gelderan set her sights on the cadaverous man gaping at her in abject horror.

Then the world started again with a jarring sense of vertigo, and the white-haired man spun and bolted away, leaving a wake of palpable terror.

Isabel sprinted after him.

Ean and all the others stood stunned, still partly caught out of time, but Ean’s eyes followed Isabel down the hall, and he watched her morphing...*shifting*...as she ran. Color and light blurred, and for an instant she wasn’t Isabel but something...more.

Then Ean’s eyes focused again, and Isabel no longer wore her dress but the fighting blacks of the *drachwyr*. She moved like the wind.

Abruptly Ean shook off his stupor and made to rush after her, but Raliax stepped in his path. “Not so fast, Your Highness. You and I have unfinished business.”

Any other time, Ean would’ve happily risen to the Saldarian’s challenge—his remarks about Sebastian and Trell certainly warranted vengeance—but in that moment, Ean’s beloved was in veritable flight after a man whose face had set off alarms throughout Ean’s entire consciousness, and with every second of delay, Sebastian moved a step further towards escape. Thus, Ean knew only an exacting impatience.

He made a fist of the fifth and swept it across the corridor. Armed men flew into the wall and tumbled in a clatter of mail, limbs and exclamations—all but Raliax, who stood there smirking.

“Intriguing stuff, Merdanti.” He cast a smug look down at his dull black armor. “They make more than swords out of it, you know. Just absorbs all sorts of magic.”

With a growl, Ean lifted his blade and rushed him.

Raliax raised his sword as he leveled Ean a taunting grin in return, certain of his superiority. Just when their blades were about to meet, Ean ducked and spun, twirling inside Raliax’s guard. With an upwards sweep, he sliced his blade across the man’s armor. It parted like milk. Likewise the flesh of his chest beneath.

Raliax staggered back with a shocked gasp.

Ean stared coldly at him as he collapsed to his knees. “There’s Merdanti,” the prince murmured, “and then there’s *Merdanti*.” He spun his Kingdom Blade, reforged by the zanthy’s hand, and sheathed it forcefully. Then he rushed after Isabel.

A pattern of the second aided his speed, and he drew upon the first strand to power his legs as he sprinted down the long corridors following the thread of Isabel’s essence, which forever called to him. But his mind was feeling the effects of the long

night. No wielder could work *elae* continuously without rest, and he'd been drawing upon the life force since walking into Tyr'kharta.

Ahead, a facade of columns supporting a familiar cornice and bas-relief frieze demarked what could only be a node chamber. Rushing beneath the opening, Ean came to a sudden halt against a wall of energy like a gale force wind—and the *currents!* A torrential vortex swirled around Isabel and Dore.

As Ean watched, Isabel twirled and swung her staff, sculpting the *cortata*; yet not men but patterns were the targets of her spinning fury, the latter being thrown unceasingly by Dore. The domed chamber seemed full of smoke, so soot-blackened had the currents become with the charred vestiges of patterns formed and wielded and blasted away.

Ean gaped at the skill with which Dore conjured and threw patterns, like a dealer spinning out a deck of cards, but viciously, fighting for his life with each pattern slung.

Many patterns Isabel deflected with her staff. Others she torched with a thin beam of the fourth, and still more she let fly to wither into cobwebs as their force drained away. Ean knew she couldn't see the patterns as he saw them, yet she unerringly knew where to move her staff to deflect or destroy them, or how to maneuver her body to ignore them, and not a one caught her unawares.

In contrast to Dore's frantic and desperate conjuring—which often as not sent a pattern off half-finished and already fraying at the edges—Isabel cast her patterns in return with swift and sure perfection, intricately formed in the flick of a thought, almost as if she'd derived them innately—as if she was an Adept of every strand instead of a wielder of all. Ean saw, too, that Isabel's patterns were meant to trap and contain, while Dore's aimed to destroy.

Ean watched Isabel throw a lasso of the fourth. Dore dodged and it passed within a breath of his nose. He flung a fiery bolt of the fifth in desperate return, which Isabel easily deflected with her staff. The bolt blasted a hole in the stone floor, while Isabel's lasso caught on a statue of a lion and ripped it from its base. The marble lion flew through the air—both wielders ducked as it flew past their heads—to shatter against a column across the room in a violent spray of stone and dust that only added to the storm-clouds that the currents had become, black as thunderheads and writhing with power.

Dore's face was a mask of desperate rage. He conjured a series of lightning bolts, a blending of the second and the fifth, and fired them off in rapid succession, trying to drive Isabel back, towards Ean. She spun her staff in the zanthyr's figure-eight form, and the energy either vanished into the staff's Merdanti depths or sizzled out of existence at the breath of its touch. Losing not an inch of ground, Isabel moved closer.

Dore radiated a palpable fear, while Isabel's determination charged the air with power. Ean felt it building in the cold void of her mind where she formed and released her patterns; he tasted it on the currents of her every exhale.

Dore and Isabel were so focused on annihilating each other in their own way that neither appeared to notice Ean's arrival. The prince hesitated to interfere, yet he could feel Sebastian getting further away with every beat of his heart. Soon he would be out of reach of Ean's tracing pattern altogether and lost to him—possibly forever.

Ean had many times been warned never to use the fifth in combat, lest he draw Balance against him—never mind that Dore was doing this very thing—yet the prince

knew that if he could call upon his own innate gifts, he could end their battle there and then.

Ean called the fifth and stepped into the room.

Isabel felt him and spun in alarm. “Ean!”

But Ean had already gone one step too far.

The pattern had been woven of the thinnest gossamer tracing, yet so broadly as to span the entire rear of the room—he was in it before he ever saw it.

His vision blurred and darkened, and he stumbled. He hardly felt himself fall to his knees, or heard his sword clatter against the stones. His thoughts no longer belonged to him; they belonged to the pattern.

The Labyrinth had him.



Isabel spun her staff and deflected the pattern Dore had just thrown at Ean—the vindictive man would ever take advantage of any weakness in an adversary. Her staff’s enchanted stone absorbed the pattern’s power and distilled it, dispelled it. She turned her gaze back to Dore radiating immense displeasure.

To her outwardly veiled eyes, the dim, subterranean chamber yet appeared a luminous world of bronze and gold, its walls and foundation reflecting the second and fifth strands in vibrant color. The silver-pale air shimmered endlessly with the iridescent fourth strand, while swirling funnels shone with the first-strand’s roseate hue.

Björn saw the currents, Ean saw patterns, Isabel saw *elae* itself.

Against this background, Dore Madden stood out as a blight, while his patterns thrown towards her appeared as similar stains, tiny vortices unto themselves, hauling and twisting the lifeforce into unconscionable aberrations. She watched as Dore forced the lifeforce into a new design, his next toxic concoction, stirring the strands together and darkening them with his intent.

Inwardly, she sighed.

Dore Madden was her biggest mistake, her only real regret in all the long centuries of her life. She’d made grueling sacrifices, shed tears for dear friends lost and for the countless innocents claimed on the field of play, but none had bled her so deeply as this one miscalculation. Until she righted the imbalance of their mutual history, she would wear the barbed mantle of this failure as a cilice around her soul.

Dore released his pattern, but in the last moment he threw the second strand behind it to boost its force, pulling upon the kinetic energy of the realm to intensify and speed the impelling. She had to jump to deflect it. Long legs propelled her sideways, and she planted her staff to deflect the bulk of the force just an inch from where Ean lay unconscious.

Even as the killing pattern dissipated around her in a sharp tingle of energy, Isabel cast a net at Dore. He threw himself backwards and spidered away beneath it, but its edges sliced him—she’d made them sharp, so he would feel the sting of her displeasure as he cowered—and thin rivulets of blood sprouted across his face and neck. He seared the net out of the air with the fourth—to her eyes a sizzle of brilliance, but a charred residue traveled away on the currents.

Isabel's tolerance finally reached its end. She'd given Dore his chance, but she didn't possess the *drachwyr's* patience for toying with prey.

A single thought raised an impenetrable shield around Ean's form. A wave of her staff cleansed the currents of Dore's noxious residue. Then she turned her blindfolded gaze on Dore himself.

He saw this and scrambled back and away, a crab fleeing the incoming tide.

Isabel looked into the space of Dore's mind and saw the scoria of a being feeding on the energies of hate and harm; she saw how *elae* avoided him—he had to *summon* it forth, for the negative charge of his consciousness repelled the lifeforce now.

Once, she'd hesitated to claim Dore's life.

No longer.

Isabel called the fifth, and the currents swelled towards her. She twirled her staff like a baton overhead—with so much of the fifth coursing through the talisman, the solid stone weapon felt as light as a twig. She opened her mind to frame her intent—

“I wouldn't do that!” Dore's voice introduced discord into *elae's* rushing song, a new and jarring wavelength.

Isabel spun her staff overhead, less a lasso than a building cyclone, and pinned Dore with her invisible gaze. No doubt he'd deduced the purpose of her working from the way the currents swelled to await her will. Already visions of intent stacked within her consciousness, eager for release.

Dore took a tentative step backwards. “I have him, you see. Do you see?” He licked his lips and stared at her with a wild, sharp gaze. “You see much, even blindfolded. But do you see this?” He took another step away from her, one step closer to the node.

She fanned her consciousness around the room. She did see it then. A gossamer thread extended from Dore's labyrinth—from Ean—back to the wielder. He had hold of the pattern, and what he could do with that simple thread...

Her staff stilled in her hand. She lowered her arm.

Dore's black eyes gleamed. “He's him, isn't he?” He licked his lips and nodded towards Ean's crumpled form as he took another step in retreat. His gaze hid in the shadows of his brow the way his soul cowered in the desiccated husk of his body, but Isabel felt the glee he now radiated. “Arion. He's Arion Returned—of course he is, you needn't admit it.”

Isabel set her staff down in front of her and interwove her fingers around the smooth stone. In her mind, she prepared the knife to sever the thread Dore still held. She'd no doubt he meant to step across the node and pull the thread along with him, no matter what mercy he bargained. It would rip the labyrinth out of Ean's mind and take his sanity with it.

“Don't try to stop me!” Dore licked his lips, the flicker of a pink tongue across pale flesh. Two steps more and he'd be across the node. “Stay away!” He held up his hand and shook the ethereal thread he held in warning. Then he took that final step.

Isabel cut the thread and simultaneously threw one of her own. She murmured darkly, “Run, Dore Madden.”

Dore vanished across the node.

Işak'getirmek stumbled awkwardly through the frostbitten night. His bad leg throbbed a continual reprimand, while his mind had become a ravaged field, thick with the chaff of unraveling patterns. These blew against Dore's compulsive spells and churned into bristly muck. Thinking at all was painful. Işak wanted only to rest, or better yet to lie down and die, but desperation drove him forth—for most of all, he wanted to distance himself from Ean.

Snowflakes floated soundlessly down, disturbed from their rest in the treetops by his rough passing. Deeper snow slowed his progress, and an icy, contemptuous wind stole what breath the steep mountain left to him, but he felt little of these torments, for no worldly chill could approximate the cold radiating out of the raw reaches of his soul.

He knew the truth now.

No more suspicions, suppositions, only certainty: Dore Madden had known his identity from the moment he'd claimed him in N'ghorra—had claimed him *because* of his family name, adding insult to the pernicious injury of imprisonment for the inexcusable wrong of royal birth.

Claiming him as his bright new toy, Dore had twisted and contorted Işak's mind with compulsion, beaten his will to a pulp, and batted any memory of his true identity behind patterns of concealment. Finally, in his most heinous act of degradation, he'd set Işak against his own brother, the final test of his subjugation, a task meant to consume the last vestiges of Işak's honor.

But Işak had failed that test.

And he continued to fail it. This might've been his only consolation as he drove himself through the night fleeing his youngest brother—who had amazingly, *incredibly*, become a wielder possibly more powerful than Dore.

But he couldn't flee the flood of memories swarming his mind.

Dore's iron doors of concealment had been opened, and now Işak struggled to stay afloat amid the deluge of memory—everything he was and much that had been done to break him came flooding back on a tide of understanding. Even before N'ghorra, Viernan hal'Jaitar had begun the process of stripping away his honor, there in the hollow chambers beneath Tal'Shira. Işak shuddered now to remember those days, darker moments even than his penitence in the salt mines.

They'd all tried to break him—Radov, hal'Jaitar, the butchers of N'ghorra, Dore Madden—yet none of them had truly accomplished the deed. But what did honor matter when Dore still imprisoned his mind? All Ean had accomplished was to prolong an inevitable end, for Dore had bound him body and soul.

Işak knew the moment Dore arrived at Tyr'kharta, for the wielder's unwelcome heat suddenly filled his mind, as palpable as opening a curtain to the strong midday sun. Of course Dore would've known his wards around Tyr'kharta had been breached. Of course he would've come. And the moment he arrived, he would've known Işak had failed. Soon he would come in search of him.

Işak ran now as much from Ean as from Dore.

That he ran at all testified to Ean's having accomplished *something* with his unworking. He was climbing awkwardly up a cliff face, using the sparse trees to aid him, when he felt Dore's sudden fury flare through the bond. His muscles spasmed, his bad leg

collapsed beneath him, and he lost his hold upon the tree. He fell backwards through the night with wind and darkness an ill support. Then he hit.

Snow erupted around him, and he sank deeply into the drift. Buried rock scraped one leg, bringing new fire, and the compulsion he'd been holding off with naught but the force of his will set back in with a vengeance, making him violently ill.

Even had he the will to move then, İřak couldn't have managed it. His feet were wedged too deeply in, and his leg was soon a throbbing agony. Perhaps he could've worked a pattern to free himself, but to what purpose? Dore was already coming for him.

İřak exhaled a shuddering breath and lay shivering in the damp snow, staring up into the heavens. The stars swirled dizzily above him.

He wasn't sure what was worse: the strange half-life of amnesia that he'd lived in since Dore had plucked him from the salt mines, recalling nothing of himself, only that something important had been lost; or remembering the fullness of his life with vivid clarity and knowing everything they had taken from him.

Amnesia almost seemed a more compassionate path.

He heard Dore approaching long before the wielder arrived, for the man made the noise of an infernal beast and cursed profligately about the inconvenience. İřak admitted there was no easy way to get to where he lay beneath the mountain's rough edge, no node to transport Dore in comfort and warmth. Odd that he hadn't sent Ralix to claim him, but İřak supposed that would've delayed his punishment, and Dore felt punishment must be meted immediately after the transgression, as if a man possessed the same incontinent memory as a miscreant dog.

By the time Dore finally reached him, İřak could no longer feel either of his legs, and the queasiness in his stomach had been honed into a sharp ache. Dore stopped above him, and İřak saw in the moonlight that the wielder had undergone some kind of battle, for his clothes were singed and his flesh crossed with lines of blood. He hadn't imagined it possible to make the man look more like the walking dead.

The night had held many surprises so far.

Malice glinted in Dore's black eyes as he stared down at İřak. He licked blood and spittle from his lips. "I see that I must teach you more strenuously to understand the cost of failure."

And he proceeded to do that very thing.