

## JA'TEEL

### *Trapped!*

**H**ow could we have been so blind and stupid to allow that madman to trap us. Like rank amateurs, we trotted right into his clutches. We collectively ignored Corwyn's warning, blew off Arianne's sight. I clenched my fist around my bow. Show no fear. Never let that murdering bastard see what he most wanted: my terror.

I forced calm into my fluttering belly, took a deep breath and stared unflinching into Brutal's dead gaze. Beneath what looked like powder, I saw deep bruising around his eyes. His nose appeared twice its normal size and a sullen, red color. The remains of Wolf's fists, no doubt. Oh, Lady, why did he prove to be so bloody tough? For Brutal to have survived Wolf's panic-stricken attack when many others more robust would have died instantly was not fair. Damn it to hell, why didn't he just *die*?

The darkly shadowed horseman to Brutal's left stirred and drew in a deep breath.

"Greetings, cousin."

"Ja'Teel."

Brutal glanced curiously between the two. "You never told me you were cousins."

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Ja'Teel replied, urbane. "I thought I had. Rygel's mother and mine are sisters."

"More's the pity," Rygel sighed. "You can't choose your relatives."

"Indeed." Ja'Teel smirked.

Ja'Teel looked, to my eyes, hardly dangerous or deadly at all. Fairly tall, with long, well-muscled legs, I judged, slender yet athletic. Ordinary enough features, large hazel eyes with lengthy dark lashes, full lips that tended to pout met my inspection. The ghost of a harelip traced its way up to his thin sharp nose. Brown hair hung well past his shoulders, curling slightly at the ends. He wore a pale blue tunic and elaborate darker blue hose on his lithe dancer's body, a wide leather belt with only a dagger and a light sword for weapons graced his slender hips. A light cloak of dark green hung from his shoulders nearly to his spurs.

He saw me watching him, and a faint sneer curved his thick lips. "Love the feather," he said.

His tone irritated me to no end. I smiled a sweet, brainless smile and patted the feather in my hair. "Why, thank you, kind sir," I cooed. "I rather like it myself."

His sneer faltered.

"Not long before you betrayed your lawful lord and master," Ja'Teel continued, turning his attention back to Rygel. "I made myself known to His Holiness here."

With a gracious gesture, he indicated Theodoric, the High Priest of Usa'a'mah, on the opposite side of Brutal. "He, of course, granted me immediate employment. Thusly, I was on hand to heal His Most Gracious Majesty from this—"

His eyes flicked derisively toward Wolf. "—this animal's vicious and unprovoked attack."

"In what world could you ever hope to take my place?" Rygel asked, his tone mild and slightly curious.

"Too bad your skills aren't as great as your ego." Ja'Teel tittered. "All those silly healing lessons."

Tittered? My eyes rolled of their own accord, I swear.

"Had you attended a few of those silly healing lessons," Rygel commented dryly, waving a slender hand toward Brutal, "your new master wouldn't currently look like a dead raccoon."

I snickered. Brutal turned those mild, dead eyes on his new wizard. Ja'Teel visibly shrank into his cloak, his tongue protruding briefly to lick his lips.

"I do know some things, Rygel," Ja'Teel said stiffly.

"A green, first year apprentice could have done a better job. I reckon you should have studied harder."

Ja'Teel grinned. "I earned my post graduate in *other*, more interesting, places."

Rygel nodded. "I know. I'm familiar with the source of your scorpion tattoo."

I peered closer. Almost concealed within the shadow of his hair, a small black scorpion rested on his right cheekbone. Dark against his pale skin, it twitched as Ja'Teel smiled.

"When I heard the rumors, I honestly didn't think you were that stupid," Rygel continued.

"Not stupid." Ja'Teel smiled thinly. He tapped his brow. "Exceedingly smart."

"What does this mean?" Wolf asked, his tone curious.

Rygel flicked his fingers toward Ja'Teel as he turned to answer. "My cousin joined a black fraternity, my prince. The *aika'ru'braud*. It's a group that practices dark magic, forbidden arts, heinous rites of passage. It's long been banned and outlawed in Khassart. Its members are hunted down and killed whenever they are found.

"It's rumored they even found ways to circumvent the curse, the law against the killing by magic."

Ja'Teel snickered. "Yes, and it's ever so cool, don't you think? Here you are, locked into that stupid constraint while I can kill with impunity."

"What was your initiation, cousin?"

"I raped a pregnant woman," Ja'Teel replied with the calm tones of a man informing a friend of where a good meal could be found. "I cut her infant from her body while she screamed in agony, then burned it. I then forced the father to eat the ashes."

"Monster," I spat.

He looked injured. "I allowed the father to live."

"Two minutes," I hissed, my sudden fury had me seeing red and shaking like a mad bull. "Two minutes, alone with you, in a locked room. Give me that, I pray."

Ja'Teel shrugged. "She was a peasant. Hardly worth the trouble." He suddenly grinned. "Though she did wiggle about in a most interesting fashion."

Suddenly, the red rage left me, leaving me icy cold. Frozen. Empty. A hollow shell waiting to be filled with...what? I didn't know. Without quite knowing why, slowly, I lifted my finger, my arm straight from my shoulder, marking the shadowed wizard.

"Hear me, cursed magician," I said softly. "You will die bloody. You will die screaming. You will die before the winter is out."

"Is that so?" he asked, laughing, glancing aside to share the jest with Theodoric.

"You are thrice damned," I went on, his humor thawing the ice not at all. "I curse you to the furthest reaches of hell. The agony you caused others will be visited upon you a thousand fold. Your victims' pain ended when they perished. Yours shall never end, but will continue until the world is broken and made again. You are so cursed."

Kel'Ratan's firm grasp on my arm brought me back from the brink. I blinked, my vision clearing. His head turned toward me slightly, Wolf dropped me the ghost of a wink before facing Brutal again.

"Hear that, Ja'Teel?" Brutal chuckled. "You'll die before the winter is out."

"Ah, Your Majesty," Ja'Teel said, laughing. "'Tis but a rumor. You can never believe what you hear."

Slowly my icy rage leached from me. Without making it obvious, I inhaled a long slow breath, relaxing, inwardly regaining control of my runaway emotions. Kel'Ratan withdrew his assisting hand to sit straight in his saddle, his fierce blue eyes warm with approval.

Rygel gestured vaguely in the air before him. "A shield is all you could think of? You disappoint me. I'd hoped for more of a challenge."

"His Generous Majesty needs you alive," Ja'Teel replied, glancing about at his invisible handiwork. "Anything from this side can pass through. Your magic—" He shrugged indolently, and grinned. "You're powerless in there. You cannot walk through them, nor can you escape. Any spells you try will merely bounce back."

Rygel sighed, shaking his head. "Can you really be that stupid? You've always underestimated me."

"Please." Ja'Teel snickered. "Not even you can break this shield."

"Stupid is as stupid does," Wolf commented dryly.

I never could control my emotions. A snort of laughter bubbled through my nose and broke before I stopped it. Kel'Ratan chuckled. Ja'Teel froze in place, his knuckles white on his reins. Slowly, he turned toward me, his skin waxing pale and his hazel eyes wide and furious. Brutal, too, trembled with rage, spittle forming at the corners of his thinned, tight lips.

As I'd laughed first, Brutal targeted me with his venom.

"Our marriage is not off, bitch," he snarled. "After the ceremony, I'll chain you to my bed; I'll rape your skinny whore's body until you scream for mercy. After that, I'll toss you to my troops for their pleasure."

He gestured vaguely upward. I half-glanced up, noting the rooftops filled with purple-and-gold uniformed troops, pointing their crossbows down at us. Thirty, fifty, perhaps more I guessed. The warehouses to our left also sprouted armed and waiting soldiers, as I'm sure the street to our rear was also filled with mounted cavalry. All waited their liege lord's order to shoot.

"You'll not be laughing then, I'll warrant."

My blood boiled. Yet, I kept a sterner hold on my emotions than I had before and kept my expression one of mild interest. If they allowed their pride to be poked so easily, then we must, above all, keep poking. We might not kill the snake, but it didn't know where to bite if blinded by its own fury.

I half closed my eyes and feigned a deep yawn. I patted my lips politely, for after all I was a lady, and knew my social etiquette. "Pardon me, my lord, I don't intend rudeness. But I do declare its way past my bedtime. You were saying?"

Resuming our conversation, I regarded Brutal with the same benign and brainless but interested curiosity as before.

Brutal apparently had not exhausted his threats. "After my soldiers are finished with you, I'll kill you. Slowly. You'll beg for death, plead for death. Being a just and merciful lord, I'll grant it, after days and days of slicing your skin off little by little. Then I'll send a message to your father of your death of childbirth."

A thin smile split the spittle on his meager lips. "So sad. But, life goes on, eh? After your father's death, I'll inherit Kel'Halla's throne, as the heir apparent. Your father's wish for peace is his undoing. And I'll conquer Kel'Halla as my father had wished. But I'll succeed where he bitterly failed."

So that was his plan. Marry me, kill me, inherit my throne as my widowed husband. That's why he needed me alive so badly. For any marriage to be valid, the ceremony needs to be performed in front of witnesses. My death might then benefit him, for a messenger sent in nine months would inform my grieving sire of my death. By law, he would indeed become King of Kel'Halla.

It might even have worked, had I not sent warriors home to explain the situation. Any marriage contract my father had with Brutal would be invalid. Should Brutal succeed in marrying and killing me, he had no claims to the throne of my homeland. Kel'Halla would be safe from him. The next in line, my cousin, Kel'Ratan, would be the next King of Kel'Halla. Should we both die here, my father would find his heir among my numerous cousins.

Brutal took full note of my lack of concern. His smile widened. His dead brown eyes gazed at me with a strange, insane light in them. I suppressed a shiver, wondering how I could ever have seen any hope of an alliance in this madman.

"I'm so sorry," he began slowly, savoring his words. "The warriors you sent with the letters to your father...they didn't make it past my border."

Shock twisted its cruel knife in my gut. I felt rather than saw Kel'Ratan stir slightly, knew without knowing that rage filled him, also knew without knowing he was close to giving in to it. Brutal's smile, his words, were spoken to just me. It was as though Wolf, Rygel, Kel'Ratan, Corwyn, Tor, and Arianne had all ceased to exist, had vanished into the aether. He and I had eyes only for each other. None existed save he and I.

Relishing my anguish, his voice softened, his words enunciated clearly, so there would be no mistaking them. "After I took the women, I sent them to pleasure the troops in my barracks. They lasted several days, I'm told. They died screaming. They died cursing your name."

I met his evil gaze with my own, unable to hide my grief, my horror. A born liar, he could lie to an angel and be believed. Yet, I saw the truth in those gleeful depths. This was one time he told the absolute truth.

He murdered my friends.

In hoping to save their lives, I sent them to their deaths.

"Several of the men shared the same destiny as that horse who so upset me. You know the one. A few of the others I fed to the lions. I am grateful, you know, truly grateful. Your warriors came cheap, and spared me the cost of feeding the lions valuable slaves."

Tears filled my eyes as I thought of the loyal warriors who loved me, who obeyed me without question, who died horrible deaths because of me. I blinked them away just as quickly, knowing they rode the heavens with Nephrotiti, beyond all earthly pain or grief.

"You're lying," I replied calmly.

"Indeed."

"You won't rape me," I went on, my voice still soft. "You know you won't."

He smiled, no doubt thinking I would soon resort to threatening his own life. Taking a cue from Rygel the drama queen, I drew my next words out slowly, clearly.

"You can never rape anyone ever again."

I paused, gathering eyes I had no need to gather. My lip curled. "You'll never get it up."

Derisive laughter rang from all around me. While I cherished my insult to Theodoric, the High Priest's furious reaction had nothing on Brutal's. I thought for a moment, halleluiaah, he will die of apoplexy right here, right now, saving all of us a great deal of trouble. His pale skin turned a dull red, the color of old, dry bricks. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His breath wheezed in and out, reminding me of a bellows with a few cracks in it, the noxious odor crossing the shield and the distance with little trouble. Drawing his sword, he spurred his horse toward me.

Both Theodoric and Ja'Teel forced him to a halt. Kicking their mounts in front of his, their free hands up, they effectively cut off his attack. His black half-reared, but Brutal kept his seat with little difficulty.

"Majesty, no!" Theodoric called. "She's trying to goad you. Don't listen to her."

Before his horse crossed the barrier, Brutal reined in, his hand filled with his sword. He heeded his High Priest at the very last second. Perhaps he realized, as Theodoric did, that by attacking me he faced not just my arrow leveled at his nose, but a Bloody Wolf and a wizard whose talents didn't end with his magic. Thusly, he saved his own life.

Brutal slammed his sword into its sheath and yanked hard on his reins to back his horse. Blood sprang from the black stallion's mouth as it opened wide in agony. His pale finger raised to point, to mark, me.

"You are dead, my dear," Brutal said softly, coldly. "These fellows with you think with their muscles. Don't make the same mistake. You're nothing without them, and soon they'll be as dead as your beloved people."

I summoned the most careless, the most casual demeanor I could into my slightly furrowed brows, and concerned expression. Maximizing it fully, I looked down at myself, plucking the white robe away from my body, extending my arms to look down them both, one at a time. I looked back at Brutal, feigning deep confusion.

"Are you sure?" I asked, allowing puzzlement to creep into my tone. "I look alive to me."

Brutal smiled thinly. "Everyone's a comedian. Laugh it up, bitch. I'll still your humor soon enough."

I batted my eyelashes at him as my mind raced. What were Wolf and Rygel doing? Did they sit there on their horses admiring my repartees with that bloody Brutal?

*They hatched a plan.*

Whether by the bond of *ehlu'braud*, or some other means of communication, they threw together a plot that enabled us to escape this trap. I shouldn't have known this.

Yet, I did.

As though my thoughts poked him in the ribcage, Wolf stirred at last and spoke, his tone mild.

"Do you truly think you can frighten us with paltry threats, false King?"

Like an arrow striking the bull's-eye, I knew his lack of deference and choice of words could not hit home any harder. Brutal ruled his Federation through his own insecurity, used fear and terror to control the populace. He needed Wolf to fear him almost as much as he needed my terror. His pride hurt; that a mere slave dared insult him drove him almost to the brink.

He started, his eyes flattening to mere slits, his knuckles white on his wide leather reins. Aborted attack on me or not, shield or no shield, he drew his sword and would have spurred his horse at Wolf.

Wolf twirled his sword, an action so fast the blade whistled shrilly. Controlling Rufus with his knees, his left hand extended slowly toward Brutal as he persuaded the stallion to prance toward Brutal's flashy black. His fingers moved slowly in a 'come hither' gesture. I heard his nasty grin in his words: "Let's dance."

Brutal's eyes widened. His rush faltered. At the last instant, he recognized the stupidity of charging Wolf. He knew, as did we all, he'd not the fighting talent nor the experience to challenge the Bloody Wolf. He stood not a snowball's chance in hell of surviving such an attack. He'd die and quickly.

In a feigned show of reluctance, he allowed his High Priest to stop him, to turn him aside. As he had with me, he turned on Theodoric in a rage, as though he truly wanted to take Wolf on, head for head.

"Sensible decision," I said quietly. I chuckled derisively, deliberately antagonizing him. "Don't battle the Wolf. A stray cat might make a *really* humble meal of your remains."

"How dare you!" Theodoric screeched.

I flicked my glance toward the fat man. "Your new scars become you, sir." I pointed with my bow toward the cuts I had made in his face. "The ladies simply *adore* a battle-scarred warrior."

Inarticulate with rage, Theodoric's round, pudgy face turned nearly purple as he choked. His double chin wobbled as he trembled, his eyes bulged so far from their sockets I half-thought they'd tumble out and roll down his fat cheeks. This time, however, Brutal put a calming hand on Theodoric.

If looks could kill.... Unable to vent much more, Theodoric contented himself with venting his rage by spitting on the ground toward Mikk's hooves.

"Perhaps his Most Gracious Majesty will allow me his sloppy seconds," Theodoric rasped. "If he hasn't managed to tame that foul mouth of yours, I will."

"Of course you can have a taste of her," Brutal purred through the spittle, with an expansive gesture toward me. "I'll leave her alive enough...barely. She'll know it's you taking her."

I let my gaze travel up and down Theodoric's pudgy body, insultingly slow. "Well, now," I drawled. "I'd have to see the goods before I decide if you are man enough for me."

He drew his narrow rapier, bloodlust in his pale eyes, his heels thumping his bay's sides to charge. I lifted my bow before the bay reacted to the spur.

"By the by," I went on mildly, my arrow trained on his left eye. "Have they dropped yet...peewee?"

Theodoric's fury might yet have sent him forward, onto my waiting death. However, he, too, realized the well-armed warriors to either side of me weren't there because of their good looks. Should I perchance miss, he'd be cut into dogmeat before he could wield his blade accurately. He reined in, the gelding's mouth opening wide against the pain of the sharply curbed bit, almost falling on his haunches in his effort to cease his forward motion.

"Quiet!" Brutal bellowed.

Theodoric calmed instantly, relaxing his reins and shoving his sword back into its sheath. He eyed me coldly as his horse stood still, champing his bit and swishing his tail in equine anxiety. Ja'Teel glanced across at him, smirking, no doubt enjoying Theodoric's inability to keep his emotions under control as Brutal watched his High Priest with a sour expression.

After taking a deep breath, Brutal glanced past my shoulder to Corwyn.

“Drop your weapon and bring that little tart to me right now, Cephas,” he said, his voice tight, apparently unaware of Corwyn’s true name. “Prove your loyalty and I will forgive your treachery. You will be reinstated into your former position with me posthaste.”

I craned my neck to peer over my shoulder, curious to see what Corwyn’s reaction might be. I wasn’t much disappointed. Corwyn made a gesture not commonly seen in palaces, but Brutal clearly knew what it meant. In base terms, the gesture essentially told Brutal to do what Wolf always called the anatomically impossible. Once more, a snort of laughter broke free of its bounds and earned me another frozen glare of hatred from Brutal.

“I will have your laughing, lying tongue speared on my fork, bitch,” he snarled.

I could not help the temptation that swept over me: I repeated Corwyn’s gesture.

Before Brutal could erupt in an appropriate, spittle-spewing response, Wolf spoke.

“Your new pet doesn’t stand a chance against my brother,” Wolf said conversationally, as though we all stood about the garden, discussing politics and the weather with drinks in our hands.

In outrage, Ja’Teel puffed himself up. “Of the blood royal, I have the power—”

Instantly, the shield melted.

Like a heated tallow candle, it oozed slowly down the four walls that surrounded us. Where once it was invisible to my eyes, it now glowed a pale reddish orange like the late sunset’s clouds. Boiling, curling downward, dripping huge blots like melted wax to the cobbles, it slid ever so sedately down. I was starkly reminded of cheese curds I once flung against the wall as a child. This, as they did, slid down to puddle on the cobbles in a heap.

Ja’Teel gaped like a landed fish. Brutal jerked back as though the melted shield burned him. Theodoric alternated jerking his reins and spurring his horse, forcing the beast to jump about on stiffened legs.

“What was it you said, cuz?” Rygel asked politely, his eyes burning hotter than his magic. “Something about my powers?”

“Im—” Ja’Teel choked and tried again. “Impossible.”

“Ta ever so,” Rygel murmured.

Rygel retaliated with a sharp blast. Wind the force of ten hurricanes, narrowed within the confines of the street, blew the three horses off their hooves. They slipped and slid as though on ice, tripping, scrambling to maintain their footing, they slid backward as though a divine hand pushed them. The black stallion fell, whinnying his terror, and tossed Brutal flat onto his back. Over the howling gale, I distinctly heard his breath whoosh from his lungs.

Theodoric’s bay horse fell to his knees and slid across the cobblestones, bloodying his legs. Theodoric gripped his mane in his fists, his pudgy face the color of last night’s drinking binge and screamed. His tonsils looked as brown as his gelding, and far less appealing.

Ja’Teel’s yellow mare made the mistake of turning tail and running. The wind pushed the poor horse’s quarters up underneath her, her blonde tail whooshed up under her belly. Like a swift hand toppling a kitten, the horse fell back, crushing Ja’Teel beneath her weight.

Suddenly, a great shudder travelled through the buildings around us. I glanced away from the wind-blown idiots to see the soldiers on the rooftops rapidly disappear. In a cloud of dust and wood, the roofs above collapsed, taking down with them all the royal troops and their crossbows.

“Corwyn!” Wolf suddenly shouted. “Ride! Ride now!”

Brutal rose first, staggering to his feet under Rygel’s dying windstorm. Dust from the collapsed buildings blew in small whirlwinds and eddies as men stumbled from the

wreckage. Theodoric also gained his feet, groaning and cursing, fumbling to drag his blade from its housing. Staggering, he forced his portly body between us and Brutal.

Seeing his movement, I returned to myself and drew my bowstring to my ear. Chaos erupted around me, yet I had no eyes, no ears, for any sight or sound except the fat man before me.

*Judgment day.*

Its barbed steel head took him full between the eyes. The force of its blow snapped his head back on his neck and knocked him flat to his shoulders. Arms outstretched to either side, perhaps in supplication to his dark god, he quivered for a moment, then lay still and silent. His pale eyes, quickly glazing in death, stared sightlessly up at the dim stars, the slender shaft stuck proudly upright between them. A small ribbon of blood traced its way from the wound and pooled beneath his scarred cheek.

Brutal gaped at his High Priest's corpse in horror.

Rygel stirred into life, drawing his sword, his black half-rearing in response. Wolf twirled his blade again, making it sing, his big bay sidling sideways in a short, high-stepping prance. At my side, Kel'Ratan cursed under his breath. His sword at the ready, he emerged into my view, his bay snorting, ready for battle.

Corwyn on his ugly red roan flew past me, spurring hard, dragging the grey mare with her terrified passengers behind him. Arianne's hair blew back in the wind, Tor clinging like a limpet behind her. Through the dust and shadows they fled, Corwyn obeying his liege lord's command to keep his sister safe.

Out of the roiling dust and dark shadows, men boiled from the remains of the shattered buildings. Most had injuries, clutching broken arms or ribs or heads, howling or crying out in pain. Many others walked about, stunned, in a state of shock. Those I could ignore as little threat.

I could not, however, ignore the far too many troopers still on their feet and ready to fight. Crossbow bolts whizzed past. One flicked through my hair, another brushed past my nose. I saw Wolf's bay wheel to meet the charge of a half-dozen troops, a crossbow bolt stuck, still quivering, in his saddlebag. I lost sight of Brutal in the ensuing chaos, though Ja'Teel still lay where he fell. Dead or unconscious, I suspected, hoping for the former.

"Alive!" Brutal screamed, his voice rising above the din. "I want them alive!"

At their master's cry, the Federates changed tactics. They ceased launching crossbow bolts at us, and instead drew swords. A soldier in the trappings of a captain bellowed orders, forming his men into a tight ring around us. At his command, the Federates advanced, interlocking their shields, swords and spears held ready.

Sounding too much like his namesake for my comfort, Wolf snarled. His huge bay half-reared, ears flattened to his skull. A chill ran down my spine as Wolf kicked his stallion forward. The beast, already on his hind legs, lunged hard and fast, into the steel wall before him. Not even the Federation's finest could withstand the sheer brute strength of Wolf and stallion. The wall dissolved into a milling band of shouting, screaming men as sword and hooves went to work.

Kel'Ratan launched his stallion into the fray, his sword raised alongside Wolf's as they both cut and slashed, stabbing and hacking into the mass of troops before them. Rygel, too, entered the mix, wheeling his black to confront the Federates behind us. To my surprise, his sword whirled in a deadly arc, killing any who ventured too close to me. To me? I put the significance of this past me to concentrate on killing and staying alive.

I nocked arrow after arrow, sending them into the faces, throats, and heads of any Federate soldier I saw. All dropped, but many more ran forward to take their places. Quickly running out of arrows, I drew my sword. Spurring Mikk up beside Kel'Ratan, I slew a Federate who would have stabbed him in the back, killing another with a slash to his throat when he sought to pull me from my saddle.

I caught a glimpse of Brutal limping out of the whirling chaos, supported by two troopers. A tight knot of purple and gold soldiers formed a protective ring, dropping their bows and drawing swords. Should we turn on the High King, we'd be forced to fight through them.

Mikk, war-trained and battle-hardened, flattened his ears and kicked, slashed or bit any trooper who ventured near his deadly teeth and hooves. The Federates seemed at a loss as to how to deal with a horse trained to work as a weapon, and spent many useless moments dodging his kicks and strikes. As many fell to his teeth and hooves as my blade, and within moments, the enemy fell back, preparing to regroup.

Their regrouping gave me a chance to catch a glimpse of Wolf and Kel'Ratan, their horses' rumps turned toward each other. Their swords rose and fell, almost in unison as they each protected the other's vulnerable back. Beside me, Rygel's blade dripped red with blood and his black's legs and chest ran thick with it. The black may not have been any more battle-hardened than Wolf's bay, but the gelding knew danger when it threatened his rider and sought to retaliate in a most unequine fashion. Impressed in spite of myself, I watched as the black spun on his front end and kicked a retreating trooper out of his vicinity before dropping to all four hooves.

The brief respite allowed Rygel to drop the reins on his gelding's neck and pause, his eyes closed. I had no time to guess what he planned to do. An instant later, an enormous concussion ripped through the darkness, a flash of light brighter than ten suns lit the night sky.

The soldiers fell back, most falling to the ground, covering their ears, blood dripping redly from between their fingers. Rygel's magic, I noticed, while not killing his enemy, incapacitated them as efficiently as though he stabbed every one through their hearts in less than an instant. Bows dropped from limp hands, and arrows collapsed alongside soldiers. Swords fell to the stony cobbles with steely high-pitched metallic shrieks careening through the night air.

Immediately, I understood. Rygel couldn't concentrate on calling upon his powers if he was too busy defending himself. The best wizard that ever lived needed spare moments with which to work. The soldiers' need to regroup gave Rygel that moment.

Over the cries and moans, a stray crossbow bolt twanged through the darkness with the shrill whine of wind hissing through feathers. Someone let fly despite Rygel's blast of power, perhaps a soldier who aimed without intending to pull the trigger. Struck by Rygel's power blast, his hand clenched—

I caught a brief glimpse of it from the candle of my eyes, a streak darker than the darkness surrounding it.

It struck Kel'Ratan squarely in the chest.

I screamed.