

## THE EVENTS OF BOOK ONE

Seventeen-year-old Larken lives in a village visited by the fey every year. Her story begins on the day of the Choosing Ceremony, when the fey come to select a human girl to bring back with them, from which the girls never return. They need the girl for an unnamed “special task”, and in return, the fey reward both her family and the villagers. Larken’s friend Brigid was Chosen last year, and ever since Larken has dreamt of reuniting with her. The Prince of the Autumn Court, Finder, arrives, and chooses the butcher’s daughter instead.

Castor, a disgraced member of the Black Guard, soldiers who prevent humans from entering the faery realm, raves that the fey are killing the girls. Larken meets with Castor because she is worried about Brigid, and Castor convinces her that the fey use the girls for some nefarious purpose—and that a deal has been struck between human rulers and the fey allowing this to happen. Larken enters the faery realm hoping to save Brigid, the butcher’s girl, and discover the truth about the “special task.” She catches up with the butcher’s girl and the fey as they stumble into a pack of monsters. The butcher’s girl dies, but Larken saves Finder’s life. Finder explains that a life debt was created between them. Until he saves her life in return, they are

bound. Larken cannot return home, and if either of them dies or is harmed, the same will happen to the other. Finder explains that the faery king, the Starveling, demands a tithe every year from each of the faery courts: a human heart. Finder now has no tithe and the Starveling will punish Finder's court and Larken's people. Unable and unwilling to use Larken instead, Finder suggests to his faery companions and Larken that they work together to overthrow the Starveling. Larken begrudgingly agrees.

Dahey, Finder's companion and cousin, suggests seeking help from the Dark Priestesses, who tell them that the Starveling can be killed. Two of the three Priestesses attack, claiming they had orders to kill anyone who seeks to bring down the king. But the third Priestess gives Finder a magical knife and urges him to find the Guardian who will give the knife its power. Larken was bitten by one of the Priestesses and she falls ill to its poison. They seek help from a pack of female wolf shapeshifters known as the Warga. Afterwards, Larken and her companions reach the Guardian's domain. The Guardian demands that Finder speak an incantation when he kills the Starveling and claims that the words restore the knife to its full power. Finder is suspicious of the true meaning of the words, but fears he has no other option.

They cross through the Spring Court, battling threats lurking in a labyrinth and withstanding torture by Etain, Princess of the Spring Court. Although they escape, one of their companions, Madden, dies. They reach the Starveling. During the battle, Finder saves Larken and ends their life debt. He speaks the words demanded by the Guardian and kills the Starveling. After the Starveling falls, a memory curse is lifted from the court rulers. Finder remembers that the Guardian had been imprisoned by the Starveling, the Dark Priestesses and the court rulers long ago after wreaking havoc with a magical language he created. By using the knife, speaking the words and killing the Starveling, the Guardian is now free.

Finder urges Larken to return home while he and Dahey return to the Autumn Court. One of their companions, Saja, accompanies Larken. They encounter a group of Fomari who seem determined to trap them in the human realm. During the fight, Saja senses through the *dornán* bond that Finder is hurt. The Fomari claim that Dahey is now their master, and Saja and Larken piece together that Dahey has concocted a plan to take Finder's

place as ruler with the help of the Dark Priestesses and the Guardian. He commanded the Fomari that killed Finder's title and pushed Finder to seek the Guardian. Dahey plans on taking Finder back to the Autumn Court and imprisoning him for treason and to take his powers by force using the Guardian's magic. Larken and Saja return to the faery realm to save Finder.



PART I

---

**ALLIES AND ENEMIES**



## DAHEY

Airodion

*Two sides of the same coin*, people had always said about him and Finder. They looked more alike than their twin fathers. Yet as a boy, Dahey had longed to look more like his cousin. He would have given anything to have Finder's green eyes and dark auburn curls instead of his own brown gaze and light red hair. Everything Finder did, Dahey also wanted to do.

But they were not boys any longer.

Finder stood on a raised dais in the middle of the throne room. The Weeping Metal chains wrapped around his wrists and throat prevented him from moving—or using his powers. The skin beneath the metal was red and oozing. The white linen of his shirt was rumpled and dirty from days in the dungeon, and his red curls were matted with sweat and blood.

General Reddon shifted beside Dahey, where they sat with the rest of the council facing the dais. Dahey wasn't a member of the council, but they had invited him to participate in Finder's trial. Reddon's long black hair slipped

over his breastplate. He was young but levelheaded, and it hadn't surprised Dahey when he had been elected. He caught Dahey's gaze and inclined his head. Dahey and Reddon had trained together as swordsmen at the Autumn Court's military academy. Reddon's estate had fallen on hard times the previous year, and Dahey had offered to let him repay his debts to the crown by working as a swordmaster at the academy. Dahey had been close to Reddon ever since and knew the male was loyal to him.

Dahey gazed out at the crowd. The room was packed with hundreds of fey. They hovered between the double row of white marble columns running from the front of the room to the doors in the back. The columns were carved to look like massive tree trunks, their branches sweeping high into the domed ceiling. How many times had he and Finder played in this room as children, weaving between the columns, running their hands along the marble trunks—so lifelike they felt as rough as real tree bark? How many times had they laid beneath the branches, staring at leaves carved from stone and glass, light streaking through the orange and red hues?

General Pike droned on, going over the details of their journey, filling in the Autumn Court fey about the Starveling's death. Dahey's stomach was in knots, half from the trial's proceedings and half from the oath that pulled at his gut, demanding he return the knife to the Guardian.

The council had decided that he must give the knife of power to them. Anxiety had spiked through him at the thought of being separated from the knife, but he knew he would find a way to retrieve it, especially if the trial went as planned.

*Soon*, he told the oath.

Only a week had passed since Dahey had brought Finder to Shadeshelm. His gaze caught on the puckered wound marring the skin between Finder's collarbone and shoulder. The wound should have healed by now—after all, it wasn't meant to be a mortal wound—but the Weeping Metal hindered its progress. Dahey remembered pulling his sword from Finder's chest and his cousin's subsequent cry of pain.

*Finder never wanted to rule*, Dahey reminded himself firmly.

“...attacked by the Dark Priestesses. One of the three dark sisters gave



Finder a knife of great power and sent him to a being known as the Guardian.”

The Guardian had assured Dahey that once Finder spoke the words, the knife's power would overwhelm him, and that Finder's powers would come to Dahey. And it had almost worked—until the human girl, Larken, had brought Finder back.

Dahey drummed his fingers on the table. Larken. A glimmer of respect flared to life in his gut. He had grown to care for the human girl, but he would not allow her to stand in his way.

Dahey wanted—no, *needed*, to rule the Autumn Court. He deserved it more than anyone. Until he could figure out how to take Finder's powers, however, his only hope was to rule as regent in his stead.

“Finder used the Guardian's knife to murder our king,” Pike said.

A murmur rose from the crowd—they knew the Starveling was dead, but they hadn't heard the details of his demise until now.

Pike clasped Dahey's shoulder. “Dahey was right to bring this treasonous act to the council.”

Dahey nodded, ignoring Finder's glare from the dais.

“May I speak in my defense before you decide my fate?” Finder asked softly. Pike extended his hand, gesturing for Finder to continue.

“Do not pretend that the Starveling was some benevolent king,” Finder spat. “He never cared about the wellbeing of the Autumn Court. He only emerged from his den for the tithe—which was agonizing for all of the court rulers.”

“Why did you kill him?” Reddon asked.

“As Pike already explained, I was tied in a life debt—”

“Yes, we know about Larken,” Reddon waved a hand. “But even then, you could have gone to the Starveling and begged for his mercy.”

“He demanded that we bring him the hearts of innocent girls,” Finder growled. “Does he seem like a merciful being?”

“The sacrifice of so many young girls is... regrettable,” Reddon said, “but the tithe was a burden you should have been willing to bear for your court. We don't need a ruler who shrinks from his responsibilities. And there is a matter of Embryn Navallen's death.”

Dahey's breath caught. Embryn. Finder's dearest friend, who had died when they had tried to rise up against the Starveling once before. But she had been Dahey's friend, too. He remembered wisps of her dark hair, her crushed elderberry scent.

"Don't," Finder whispered.

"It is difficult to believe that this wasn't an act of revenge," Reddon finished. "A ploy that could have cost us all our lives."

Dahey smiled. His nerves melted away. His court was on his side.

"Enough. Let us vote," Pike said. "Those in favor of declaring Finder Fairburn unfit to rule—"

Every member of the council raised their hands. Shocked gasps rose from the crowd. The murmurs grew into a roar.

Pike stood. "Silence! For crimes of treason against his court and killing the Starveling, we declare Finder Fairburn unfit to rule. Finder, you will be imprisoned until your powers give us a new ruler. Dahey Fairburn will rule as regent in your stead."

Dahey closed his eyes, shutting out the look of rage that marred his cousin's face. But a smile still touched Dahey's lips. He was going to be regent. And once he figured out how to take Finder's powers, he would be king.

Despite it all, a tiny sigh of relief escaped him. There had been a chance the court would rule that Finder should be executed for his crimes. Dahey had never wanted to see his cousin dead; even when the knife had overpowered Finder, he had wanted his cousin to live. All he wanted were the powers.

"No," Finder snarled. "I'm the only one who knows the true history of the Guardian thanks to the breaking of the Starveling's memory curse. I will protect this court."

"Be quiet," Dahey snapped. His cousin had never cared about this court. Not like Dahey did.

"He's going to take the powers from me," Finder spat, jerking against the Weeping Metal chains.

More murmurs from the crowd. Dahey glanced around, his heart beating quicker in his chest.

"Impossible," Reddon snapped. Dahey's shoulders relaxed. "The magic chooses the ruler. You should know that more than anyone, seeing as how much you loathe ruling this court. We honor our rulers because the magic chooses them, and you have abused that privilege."

"Pray your powers leave you soon," Pike said. "We declared Osiron Fairburn unfit to rule, and soon after, the powers sought another. I suspect things will not be any different this time."

Dahey jerked at his father's name. He couldn't stop himself from searching for his face in the crowd, but his father wasn't there.

"I know how to use the powers. A new ruler will have to be trained," Finder said. "Dahey betrayed his *dornán* bond. Do you want a regent who would stoop so low to overthrow their prince?"

"Again, what you speak of is impossible," Pike snapped. "No one can break a *dornán* bond. Dahey already told us that you released him from his oath. And we will train any new ruler as we always have."

Dahey clenched his fists. It didn't matter that he needed to be trained. He would train day and night until he mastered the powers. It would be a joy to learn them. He would respect and use the magic, while Finder had only ever shunned it. His court needed a ruler who would use the powers to protect them, not someone who would hide them away.

"You need me," Finder said firmly.

"We need a ruler who wants to rule," Reddon said coldly.

The corner of Dahey's lip lifted.

Guards unlocked Finder's chains from the dais and began dragging him away. A pang of sadness struck Dahey's heart. His cousin would never be free of those chains again. Once Dahey took the magic, he would never allow Finder to go free, would never allow him to spread the word that Dahey had taken the powers by force, or go to the Guardian to try to get them back.

"Your greed will destroy this court," Finder snarled at Dahey.

"I'm going to save this court," Dahey said, smoothing his coat. "I've done everything for my people."

He knew he had to be strategic about how he took the magic. He couldn't let his court know it was possible to take a court ruler's powers,

HANNAH PARKER

especially when it would already look suspicious that the powers had chosen another member of his family. It was why he had spent so long gaining his court's loyalty. Dahey couldn't risk their anger if they knew he had taken the magic by force.

He walked out of the throne room.

It was time to fulfill his oath to the Guardian.

---

**KAISA**

## Ellevere

Kaisa gritted her teeth as her sword slammed against Hollis's blade. Luckily, the swords didn't make a sound due to the padded leather. They weren't allowed to be out past curfew without a pass, which, of course, they didn't have. The skin on her back twinged at the thought of the lashes they would get if they were found.

"Stop thinking about getting lashes," Hollis whacked her with his blade. "You never get them anyway."

Kaisa grinned. He was right—there had been many times when Kaisa had escaped punishment. She was at the top of all her classes. Her tutors adored her.

"The most skilled student they've seen in centuries," Jovanna called from where she sat cross-legged in the dirt, watching them spar. Kaisa's chambermate bared her teeth in a grin, and Kaisa smiled back. Jovanna might be her opposite in every way—pale skin to Kaisa's ebony, bone thin to Kaisa's soft curves, irresponsible to Kaisa's discipline, but she was one of her dearest friends.

The balmy night air brushed against Kaisa's sweat-soaked skin. Though

they were outside, sobs could be heard from the open window of the Cradle girls' dormitory behind them. The cries always began after the girls were locked in for the night. The sound echoed against the unforgiving brick and stone walls of the Institute.

Kaisa remembered what it had been like as a Cradle at five years old, just learning the ways of the Order of the Twins. She hadn't appreciated it then. She hadn't known how good she'd had it. A roof over her head, a warm bed to sleep in, an education... and above all, being able to work for her two powerful gods Aleea and Asphalion, and the four Popes who spoke their will. If it hadn't been for the Order and for the Popes' generosity, she would be starving on the streets. Many children were. The Institute did not take everyone. Only those with potential. Only those who were blessed by the Twins. Her heart glowed at the thought.

And while *she* might not receive lashes, she didn't want Jovanna and Hollis to be punished. "We need to leave. They'll be checking the dormitories soon," Kaisa said.

The Institute was strict about children maintaining their virtue until they were eighteen years of age. Opposite sexes were not allowed in each other's chambers after nightfall. When a child became a student at the Institute of the Order, their body and soul were given in servitude to the Twins.

"Please, Kai, just awhile longer," Hollis begged. "I'll have to apply to the Black Guard once I'm Anointed, and I haven't got the time to practice. Baid's been working me to the bone. I've barely got time to oil and sharpen everything he wants. I don't have time for training."

All the students of the Institute went through the same training, but Baid, the Weapons' Maker, had taken a special interest in Hollis when he was a Cradle.

"I've told you, not at night. I'm exhausted, and I've got a long day tomorrow—"

"Please," Hollis begged, his brown eyes turning a nauseating shade of pitiful. "This is the only time I've got. If Baid knew I was applying, he'd have my hide. He wants me to take his place as Weapons' Maker after I'm Anointed."

"You still haven't told him?" Kaisa groaned.

"You know I'm rubbish at confronting people." Hollis crossed his arms. "If you want someone to stir the pot, ask Jovanna."

He jerked his head at their domineering, hot-headed friend. The three of them had been as thick as thieves since their Cradle year. They did everything together, including reaching their Scholar year. Only a select few made it to their final year, the rest being left to perform other servant duties.

Jovanna grinned, cracking her knuckles. "Let me be the one to tell Baid," she pleaded. "I'd give anything to see the look on his face when he realizes his prize student wants to leave."

"I don't know how to tell him that Weapons' Maker will be below my station once I'm Anointed," Hollis said. "There's no point of me telling him until I pass the test."

"Entries aren't a secret, Hollis. If you don't tell him, he'll hear it from someone else first," Kaisa pointed out.

"Well then, I have to be good enough to pass this test in order to deal with any of that, don't I? So you'll stay?"

Kaisa looked at Jovanna, who shrugged. "Lashes are good for the soul, as they say. Well, good for my soul, I suppose."

Kaisa rolled her eyes but picked up her blade once more. She and Hollis exchanged a few more blows.

"Why do you want to join the Black Guard anyway?" Kaisa whined. "Everything you ever need is here in Barrensmere, including me and Jo."

The Institute, the school that trained children to become members of the Order, resided within the palace in the city of Barrensmere and had been Kaisa's home since she was five years old. The Order might be strict, but it had given her everything. A family of tutors and friends when her own parents had turned their backs on her.

"You know I want to protect Ellevere from the fey," Hollis said, swinging his sword again.

Kaisa shifted to block him. "But I don't want you to go to the North," Kaisa moaned. She didn't want Hollis to be locked away for years, learning the lore of the fey and put through grueling trials only to be shipped off to the North. Not when they could make a life here after they were Anointed.

Hollis swatted her thigh with his blade, breaking her out of her thoughts. “Ouch,” she hissed.

Hollis grinned. “Pay more attention.”

They continued sparring, Hollis outmaneuvering her with skill that was almost terrifying. He was good—too good at fighting to have his skills wasted once he was Anointed. He needed to be in the Black Guard.

After a few stinging blows from Hollis, most of which she was too tired to block or dodge, she collapsed on the ground, her chest heaving. Hollis flopped to the ground beside her. He tugged at the strap holding back his hair and let it fall in sweaty tendrils to his shoulders. His eyes were a bit too far apart to be handsome, the rest of his features too pinched, but she loved every bit of him as much as her own flesh and blood. Hollis had been her first friend in her Cradle year. He had a large family in town, but they had no time for him, no food for another mouth.

*“Mother!” Kaisa screamed as soldiers swathed in black and blood red fabric hauled Kaisa away. Silver coins falling into her mother’s hands, so many that they spilled onto the cobblestones.*

Kaisa shoved those thoughts away, ignoring the deep ache in her chest. Sold. She could never forget the true word for it. Their families had sold them.

Now they were each other’s family. The three of them.

“Are you nervous?” Hollis asked, wiping sweat from his neck.

“About what?” Kaisa replied, though she already knew what he referred to.

“About *what*,” Hollis mimicked, shoving her arm. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe about our Anointing? It’s only two days away.”

“I can’t think about it.” Kaisa scratched her nail in the dirt. The Anointing was the final test they took as Scholars. If they passed, they were inducted as full members of the Order, and they could apply for the highest-ranking jobs. Less than half of each Scholar class completed their Anointing, and the rest were carted off in the dead of night in disgrace, forced to perform servant’s duties at one of the Order’s many outpost colonies. “Thinking about it will interfere with my work.”

She was so close to achieving all she had ever dreamed. She worked



harder than any other student at the Institute. She was the most accomplished Scholar her tutors had ever seen.

Everyone in Ellevere worshipped the Twins, but only those who made it through the Institute were allowed to work within the Order. Boys who completed their lessons at the Institute became members of the Black Guard who guarded Ellevere from the fey, the Red Guard, who protected the Popes, or Teachers of the Faith, who could teach the ways of the Order. Girls became Sisters of the Order and taught at the Institute, or they could become members of the Black Guard if they were ruled barren. But Kaisa didn't want to become a Sister of the Order or a member of the Black Guard. No, Kaisa wanted to rise above them all and become a Pope's Page.

Her heart leapt at the thought. She would be the right hand of Pope Sersius, the ruler of Barrensmere. Higher in station than Sisters of the Order, Teachers of the Faith and even the Black and Red Guards, the Pope's Page was a revered position. And Kaisa wanted it more than anything.

"I wish I could master my mind like that," Jovanna muttered. "Order myself not to think about something."

*It doesn't work all the time,* Kaisa wanted to say. If it did, she wouldn't be plagued by her mother's face. Wouldn't see her delight reflected in her handfuls of silver coins as Kaisa was dragged away. She wouldn't be haunted by thoughts of the secretive Anointing ritual. Her stomach twisted.

"I'm going to prove it to them," she murmured, more to herself than Hollis and Jovanna. "I'm going to prove all of them wrong. That I can make it to my Anointing. That they were wrong to give me up."

"We were children, Kai," Hollis said softly. "It wasn't our fault they gave us up."

Kaisa rested her chin on her knees, wrapping her arms around her shins. Maybe—maybe if she had been a more obedient child, her parents wouldn't have given her up. A slow ache spread across her chest. She should have worked harder.

*Your fault,* a voice whispered in the back of her head.

Kaisa shoved her sadness down deep inside her. Thoughts like that would only distract her from her task.

“I’ve got to sleep,” Kaisa said, hoisting herself upright. She hauled Hollis and Jovanna up as well. “I’m covering Rachael’s shift tomorrow morning.”

Pride swept through her. Kaisa had worked hard to be promoted to care for the Pope, a task only the most devoted Scholars were allowed to do. But that wasn’t good enough for Kaisa. She needed to become his Page.

She and Jovanna rushed back to their room. A few Blights stopped Kaisa on the way back, asking her how to set up for the morning service. Kaisa explained it to them in detail, putting their minds at ease.

They finally made it back to their room. The brown walls were devoid of all warmth—the room only big enough to fit her and Jovanna’s beds. Kaisa pulled back the taupe curtain that shielded her mattress. She froze. On the quilt lay a small card inscribed with delicate script.

*Scholar Kaisa,  
Congratulations on your Anointing.  
May the Twins watch over you.  
- Pope Sersius*

Signed by the Pope himself. An honor she had never heard endowed upon any Scholar before. Kaisa fell to her knees, clasped her hands together and sent thanks to the Twins. In two days, she was going to be Anointed. She was going to be a true member of the Order. Not just some rat her parents had sold the first opportunity they’d had. No, the Twins had chosen her for something special. They had plucked her from the rabble and given her a choice: stay in the life she was born to or rise above.

Now she would rise.

---

**LARKEN**

## Airodion

Larken's teeth chattered more from nerves than the chill.

Saja's breath billowed before him; snow still caked in his beard. Blue tiles lined the frosted stone walls, making the room glow faintly. A throne sat upon a raised dais, a huge slab of sharp ice. It cut upwards in a diagonal slash, every shade of blue and white imaginable marbled within. The jagged tips looked like blades, and Larken knew without a doubt that if she were to place a finger on one of the edges it would draw blood.

But it was the queen sitting upon the throne who they had come to see.

She radiated such power that it rippled through the air, filling the space to the vaulted ceiling. A tall, spiked crown of ice rested on her head. Despite its obvious weight, she bore it effortlessly. She tilted her head, her short white hair almost blue from the light of the crown. She sat upright on the throne, her hands loose on the armrests of the chair. Her gown was skintight, glittering as though it was made up of hundreds of shards of ice.

It had taken them what felt like an eternity to reach the Winter Court capital city, White Keep. Larken despised the constant cold, but she couldn't deny the beauty of the city.

Their journey through the Winter Court had given them all the information they needed: that Finder had been declared unfit to rule and was imprisoned at Shadeshelm.

And Dahey ruled as regent in his stead.

Larken's fists clenched at her sides.

Saja believed that Finder was relatively safe—for now. But they knew Dahey would not rest until he had the powers and that he would seek the Guardian's council to find out how to take them. They just had to hope that Dahey had not taken them already.

Saja approached the dais, Larken quickening her steps to keep pace with his longer strides. She had been at the big warrior's side for weeks—refusing to let him out of her sight. He was all she had left—her parents were in Ballamor, Madden was dead, Finder was imprisoned and Dahey had betrayed them. Her heartbeat quickened at the thought of losing Saja, at the thought of being alone in Airodion. She bit the inside of her cheek.

*Focus*, she reminded herself. Their footsteps were quiet on the marble, making Larken feel incredibly small. It was like walking through a snow-covered forest when a hush was draped over the entire world.

“Queen Isra,” Saja bowed, and Larken hastily dropped into a curtsy.

Isra rose from her throne and approached them, sauntering down the steps.

“Saja Roak,” Isra said warmly. Larken blinked—she hadn't heard Saja's surname before. Hadn't known that the fey even used surnames. Saja smiled, clasping forearms with the Winter Court Queen. Isra was more beautiful up close; she had a round, pale face and high cheekbones. Angular eyebrows framed light blue eyes. Her hair was a striking stark white, shaved almost to the scalp on the sides but longer on top. Shards of ice glittered throughout her hair, making the strands gleam in the light.

Larken's gut twisted in anticipation. Saja had said that Finder and the queen were old friends—but how could he be so certain that Isra wouldn't betray them?

*We thought Dahey was our friend, too*, she thought bitterly. His betrayal was still lodged in her heart like a blade. She felt it with every pulsing beat.

Still, the queen was their most powerful potential ally. She had the

magic, resources and soldiers. They hoped that she would talk to Dahey and demand that he release Finder, and if that failed, lend them the soldiers they needed to free Finder by force.

Larken's heart sank. The plan had seemed so solid during their travels, but now, faced with the queen, Larken wondered if they had been fools to come here. Isra hadn't helped them in their battle against the Starveling, so why would she choose to help them now? But Larken had to cling to her last shred of hope.

"How does it feel to be a queen, my friend?" Saja asked.

"Damn good, I must say." Isra grinned. She looked as if she were about to say more, her eyes darkening, then she stopped herself, turning towards Larken instead. "Forgive me. My name is Isra, Queen of the Winter Court."

"I'm Larken McLeary. Erm, from Ballamor. In the human realm."

Isra took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Welcome to White Keep, Larken. Rumors have been flying through Airodion of late. That Finder has been put on trial for crimes against his court. They say his cousin Dahey has taken up the role as regent, and that he rules with a heavy heart."

"That's a lie," Larken spat. Isra's eyebrows rose. "Dahey planned this from the beginning. He always wanted to rule the Autumn Court."

"Larken, I understand your anger, but surely you know that even if Dahey wanted to be king, there is no way to guarantee that the powers would have passed to him. Why would he attempt to usurp Finder without the guarantee that he would become king in his stead?"

Larken bit the inside of her cheek. Isra knew about the Guardian's perverse language; surely, she could guess that it would be capable of such things.

"Finder has been put on trial unfairly," Saja said. "We've come to ask for your aide in freeing him."

Isra studied them. "He was put on trial for killing the Starveling. I have no idea why Finder would put his court at risk by staging a direct attack on our king."

*Tied to the stones, unable to move. Finder, exploding with power. The flames, burning her, burning everything as she screamed and tried to escape—*

Larken shook her head, ignoring the black spots swimming at the edges

of her vision. Something was wrong with her. She could barely breathe around a flame, and she had made Saja douse their evening fires as they had travelled to the Winter Court more than once just because the scent of the smoke made her gag violently. Even talking about the night they had fought the Starveling caused her breath to hitch, and the other day when she and Saja had discussed it, she had nearly fainted on the back of Saja's horse, Arobhinn.

*Finder will know some way to heal you, she told herself. He healed your body from the flame. He can also heal your mind. Once you get him back, all your fears will disappear,* Larken told herself.

"He had no choice." A muscle jumped in Saja's jaw.

Larken shifted. They hadn't come here to reveal the exact details of why Finder overthrew the Starveling, or how the Guardian's knife came into play. Isra could still turn them over to Dahey and forge an alliance with the new regent.

"A shift of power so quickly after the Starveling's demise is not much cause for question, nor do I disagree with the fact that Finder put his court at risk by attacking him. That being said, I do believe there is something strange happening in the Autumn Court, as well as in all of Airodion," Isra said carefully. "I wish to speak with you both at length about it, as well as my fellow court rulers, before making any decisions. Finder has been my friend for many years. Beyond that, I believe he is a good ruler. I have no remorse for the Starveling's demise, as his tithe was taxing on me. Still, to involve the Winter Court could put my people at risk. I will think on your words, and we will talk later—over our evening meal, perhaps. For now, you have had a long journey, and I would be most pleased if you would stay in White Keep as my guests."

Larken's heart leapt into her throat. No, they had come all this way—Isra had to help them. "Please, my queen," Larken tried to keep the raw desperation from her voice. "We know of no one else who can help us."

Their only other allies were the Warga—a clan of female shapeshifters that had helped them on their journey to find the Guardian—but they lived far to the northeast in the Wyld. Larken had already suggested that they ask the leader of the Warga clan, Remira, for help, but Saja had told her that the

wolf shifters held no sway in court politics and that their clan was too small to help them free Finder by force.

“I will not speak of this matter until later,” Isra said, a touch of ice coating her words.

Larken’s heart sank.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Larken,” Isra said as guards came in and ushered them from the throne room.

---

**DAHEY**

## Airodion

Dahey's legs moved of their own accord, marching him towards the being he had sworn his oath to. Surprise rippled over him when his oath led him to the Stone Circle.

*Well, if he thinks he can replace the Starveling, he'll realize how wrong he is,* Dahey thought to himself. Without the Starveling, the court rulers had no checks on their power. Dahey would not serve under another king.

Dahey pressed his lips together, his hand drifting to the bundle of cloth wrapped at his belt. He knew there was more to the weapon than the Guardian let on, else he would not want it back so desperately. Dahey hadn't dared to touch the naked blade. The power was tempting, yes, but he'd seen how easily Finder had been overcome. Dahey remembered the power Finder had commanded as he wielded the knife against the Starveling. How his cousin had exploded into a pillar of pure fire.

No, Dahey would not touch the blade. He had no desire to perish beneath the flame. He wanted to *command* the flame.

A chittering sound made the hair on the back of his neck rise. A creature emerged from the slender trees. It was white and hairless with sagging,



wrinkly skin. Spines protruded from its head and back. It opened its beak and emitted another chittering sound.

*Master has returned*, it said.

Dahey nodded stiffly at the Fomari. The Guardian had taught him how to make a deal with the creatures, and they had obeyed him, killing Finder's title girl and attempting to trap Saja and Larken at the bridge.

*You owe us what was promised*, the Fomari said. *Flesh*.

He had promised the creatures flesh, either human or fey. He had no faery flesh to give them—nor would he ever sacrifice members of his court to the Fomari, but the humans...the humans he didn't care about.

"The bridge is open," he said. "Take your kin to Ellevere and feast. But then our bargain is done." He had no desire to work with the foul creatures any longer.

The Fomari chattered happily. *As you command, Master*.

The Fomari disappeared into the trees, more shrieking calls echoing through the sickly forest. Dahey shoved down his guilt. They would surely go to Larken's village first, as it was closest to the bridge.

*You owed them what was promised*, he reminded himself. *It was human flesh or the flesh of your court, and you would never put your people at risk*.

Smoothing down his jacket, Dahey entered the Stone Circle. His mind jerked back to the last time he had seen the Guardian in the Wyld. Then, the sky had been dark with glamour. Then, Larken had been with them, and Saja.

And Madden.

Dahey's lip curled. How dare Finder take everything from him, put his *dornán* at risk? They had sworn to protect Finder, had tied their souls to him so they could feel when one of their companions was hurt or dead, and he had abused that power. It was Finder's fault that Madden was dead. Dahey swallowed around the ache in his throat. He didn't need Saja or Madden. He didn't need Finder. He didn't need anyone.

*The Autumn Court is about to enter a new age. And I shall be the one to lead it*.

Not his father. Not Finder. *Him*. Dahey would be the one to lead it to glory. His kin had never deserved the honor of being ruler of the Autumn Court. Neither of them had wanted it.

*Trees, burning with flame. His father screaming, hands lifted to the sky as it rained ash.*

*“Father, please!” Dahey cried. He had woken up in the nursery alone, choking on the smoke. He thought the world was ending, but his father was the source of the blaze.*

*His father turned to him, his features cold and hard as cut glass.*

*“Please,” Dahey whispered. “I’m scared.”*

*His father knelt, his robes pooling beneath him. He opened his arms, and Dahey ran to him, shivering in his father’s embrace. His father was cold, though the fire raged around them.*

*“I will make you strong,” his father whispered. “I will burn the fear itself from inside you.”*

*The cold that surrounded his father slowly ebbed, warming until his skin became hot to the touch. Dahey squirmed, but his father held him tight. Held him as the flames leapt from his skin, consuming Dahey with its touch. And then, all Dahey knew was blind agony as his father burned him.*

*Dahey screamed for his mother, screamed for Finder, but that night, as with so many others, no one had been there to save him.*

Dahey had seen what power did to a weak mind. Saw how it turned his father to madness, and Finder into a fool. But the fire hadn’t wanted his father—it had left once it realized how corrupt its vessel had become. It had chosen Finder instead, but it had chosen wrong. Finder feared the powers. Finder had constantly rebelled against his rule instead of treasuring it. If Dahey had gotten tangled in a life debt to a human as Finder had, he would have gone to the Starveling and begged for forgiveness. He would have died for his court if necessary.

But it had all worked out in Dahey’s favor. The Starveling was dead, and now Dahey would have no limits to his power.

Finder thought he had suffered because of his powers, but he didn’t know the true pain the flames could cause. Dahey did. He was the only one who understood. He was the only one who deserved and respected its power. He straightened his shoulders. Finder had rejected his power over fire and death, but Dahey would embrace it. Use it as Finder and his father never could—for the good of his court.

He didn't see the Guardian approach, but rather felt another presence join his. Dahey spun around.

"Little regent, come to see me at last."

Dahey frowned, trying not to let the title annoy him. He wondered briefly how the Guardian knew that he was regent. No matter. Likely, he had spies along with the rest.

The Guardian looked the same, his hood drawn low over his face, concealing his features. A voice that sounded like rocks sliding against each other. At least he was no longer cursed to speak in those wretched rhymes. The hairs on the back of Dahey's neck rose as did a fierce desire to discover what was under that hood.

"I will be king soon enough," Dahey said, aiming for what he hoped was a civil tone. He had no desire to fight with the Guardian. He simply wanted information, and then the Guardian could have his knife. He clenched his sweating palms. The oath demanded that he return the knife. Dahey could only beg for answers.

*No. A king does not beg. A king demands.*

"Have you come to fulfill our bargain?" The Guardian's hooded head tilted.

"Yes," Dahey replied smoothly, letting his hand rest on his scabbard. "Once you uphold your end of our agreement."

"Have I not given you everything you desire? You brought your cousin to his knees and dragged him away in chains. The Starveling is dead, and you rule the Autumn Court. Have I not done everything you've asked?"

"And yet, you just mentioned your own failure. You said the knife's magic would make Finder's powers choose me."

"I couldn't tell you everything, little regent. I didn't know if you would have the gall to go through with your plan. A need for answers ensured that you returned to me, even if your courage failed."

"You made me swear an oath," Dahey growled.

The Guardian chuckled. "Another precaution."

"Are you going to tell me or not?" Dahey seethed.

"There is a way to force the magic's hand," the Guardian said, "though it will not be pleasant. It has never been attempted by a faery before, but I am

curious to know the results. It could be the beginning of something extraordinary.”

“Tell me,” Dahey snapped before he could help himself.

“Return my knife.”

Dahey carefully untied the bundle from his belt. “And the powers can be forced without—” he swallowed. “Without Finder’s death?”

“Yes.” A smile touched the Guardian’s words.

Dahey’s heart began to pound. The language this being had created was unnatural. And it didn’t slip Dahey’s notice how easily the Guardian was offering up the information. Almost like he wanted Dahey to use it.

The second the Guardian lifted a finger against his court, Dahey would find a way to end him. But he needed the powers. He needed to be king. He had to protect his people, and this was the only way. He knew the Guardian believed he could manipulate him, but the Guardian had no idea who he was dealing with. Dahey knew how to stay one step ahead. Always.

He handed the bundle to the Guardian.

“Tell me what I have to do.”

---

## THE GUARDIAN

### Airodion

The Guardian spoke his language, relishing the way his tongue curled around the words, flying through the phrases. He carved with his knife, parting flesh and making it anew.

It was like stretching a muscle that had been cramped in place for centuries. The Starveling had twisted the Guardian's words into a rhyming curse as punishment so he couldn't speak his beloved language. The Starveling had feared the Guardian's language, hated how he had given power to those his father deemed lesser. He had revolted against his father once and had failed. The Starveling, Dark Priestesses and the court rulers had imprisoned him.

But he was free now. Not that his father was alive to see it. His father had scorned him since he was a babe. His father had only ever cared for power and had seen him as weak.

He would show his father power.

The Guardian looked up from his work, breathing in deeply. The scent of rot and decay greeted him. Sharp stones and gnarled shrubs littered the

ground. The trees were pale and sickly, their branches cold as ice. It was as if the earth had wanted to reject his father.

He had returned to his father's domain—the Stone Circle where the Starveling had called the tithe—to perform his work. Yes, he would take up his father's mantle of ruler, but he would become more than his father ever could have imagined.

The Guardian lifted his hands from his work. It had been a tree dryad once. Now it was something *more*. His language had transformed her into something great. Her face had flattened, her skin turning from molten tree bark to striped flesh. She raised her tattered wings.

The Furyons had all been killed in the second war. But now they would rise again. He would need flying beasts to spread his message.

The creature bowed. *Master.*

The Guardian smiled. In days of old, mind-speak was common between the ancients. He gave it as a gift to his creations.

*Soon, all creatures will be equal. No more power dynamics, as things were with my father,* he cooed to his new Furyon. His father had relished in the fact that he was the most powerful being in all of Airodion. Had seen everything and everyone as beneath him, even his own son. He had sucked power from the court rulers. The Starveling had controlled all under his rule, and punished all, even those who were obedient to him.

*No kings, no court rulers, only power. For everyone.*

The court rulers didn't concern him. Obsessed with their petty squabbles, they didn't have the strength to stand against him. Only when they combined their powers with the Starveling and the Dark Priestesses had they been able to imprison him.

A seedling of doubt crept into his mind. They could ally themselves with other creatures of old, beings who might have the strength to stand against him. The Guardian shook his head. No. He would go to his allies from the war first. The court rulers would fall in line, either by choice or by force. If they refused to join him, his army would sweep through and crush them. He had already turned his sights toward his first target. And once their court fell, the rest would submit.

He would free magic for all. Then none would have to suffer as he had. But he would keep just enough of the language to himself to ensure he was never imprisoned again.

The Guardian pulled a round, onyx stone from his robes.

His father's orb. Each of the court rulers had two orbs, one that could speak to their respective Pope and the other that could talk to the Starveling. Yet the Starveling possessed an orb that could communicate with any of the Popes and any of the court rulers simultaneously. The Guardian had already been in communication with the rulers of Ellevere and had told them about the Starveling's demise.

He placed his hand on the orb. "Have you accepted my offer?"

After a moment, a chorus of voices answered from the orb, all talking over one another. The Guardian swallowed his irritation. Yes, he would banish hierarchies, but the humans...they were far beneath him. Any who refused to join him would become fodder for his army.

"We need more time," one finally said. The Guardian recognized his voice—Pope Sersius.

"No waiting," the Guardian snapped. "I will have the human world as well—but until I can figure out how to heal the chasm, my Furyons will serve as my eyes and ears. Their presence will be...unpleasant. I suggest you use them as incentive for your people to join your army. Once you and your people join me, they will be safe. Until then, my Furyons will consume whomever they please."

He released the orb. He didn't need the Popes on his side—but if he was to take Ellevere it would make things easier. A second army, rallying the humans to his side so they didn't flock to the fey as they had during the first and second wars. He turned to his Furyon.

*Fly*, he commanded. And the beast took to the sky, wings pounding towards Ellevere.

He turned to the next dryad.

"Please," she begged, but he ignored her cries. He would build his army. Once he used his language on his creatures, they were completely devoted to him. His father had made the courts forget him, aside from the court

HANNAH PARKER

rulers, so he would have to spend precious time building his army. But soon, all of Airodion and Ellevere would know him by his true name:  
Ziegan.