

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 ruffled 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,

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.