THE KING'S ORACLE

A SHORT STORY PREQUEL



SHERRY TORGENT

CHAPTER 1



The desk candle sputtered and cast a flickering shadow across the parchment. Zara placed the feather pen in Rodolf's trembling hand and closed his fingers around it. The room was quiet except for the crackle of the fire in the hearth. Was it possible for a room to smell of death? Rodolf radiated a sourness that caught in her throat, and she knew she'd be burying her king husband before the morning dawned.

His chin nearly touched his chest from the weight of his sickness. The eyes that were once as brilliant as a turquoise sky were gray and cloudy. The tip of his pen rattled against the edges of the ink jar as he tried to maintain a steady hand.

"Let me fetch a scribe, Rodolf," she said, touching him gently on the shoulder.

"No, Zara. My last oracle must be in my own hand."

"Then I will help keep your hand steady."

Zara fetched the small chair kept by the bedside for the night nurse and sat beside her king.

She took his wrist and guided the quill to the ink, then to the paper.

Before he began, he looked over at her, his brow knit in concern. "I'm sorry for what will come."

"Write," she said. For she knew it must be done.

His hand moved across the paper, her steadying arm with it. She read silently as he wrote.

I am Rodolf, King of Ferran, and this is my final oracle for a time that is yet to come.

Her heart raced with anticipation. As his words came, her grip tightened. A sickening bile rose in her throat as she whispered the next words.

My death will bring war—a fight for the throne.

CHAPTER 2



Alrenia stood outside her father's room, pacing. Her attempts to heal him with her gift had failed. She'd felt his sickness with her hands. It was gnawing away at him like a worm from the inside out, and there was nothing more she could do for him. The time of healing was over. The hour was near.

Haladon turned the corner. His sword tapped against his hip as he strode toward her. His dark hair hung in loose waves around his ears. He was a strong capable soldier, barely a few years older than herself, but there was a strain in his eyes—a nervousness in his steps.

I must have the castle guards' loyalty if I'm to be queen.

"My Lady," he said with a quick bow.

She pulled back her shoulders and held her head a little higher. She waited until he made eye contact, then held his gaze for a moment longer than she should have.

His face flushed. She sent a rush of color to her own face using her healing powers.

His jaw twitched.

She let the moment hang in the air like an unspoken sonnet of love.

He shuffled his feet and looked as though he might close the distance between them.

That's it, Haladon. See hope for something more between us.

She abhorred using her looks, but the kingdom of Ferran was at stake, and no weapon was beneath her. Haladon must be hers completely. Satisfied that the connection she'd worked so hard to build between them was still there, she returned to business.

"Has my brother arrived yet?" she asked.

Haladon cleared the tension from his throat. "Ulu was spotted riding ahead of his men. He'll be here within the hour."

"He spends months away at a time fighting his mercenary wars and expects he can just show up and become king? I'm the one who has learned what our people want, what they need."

"You have done well with the noble landowners," Haladon said. "Many have agreed to recognize you as queen."

"Yes, and it's going to cost me."

"It was necessary," he said. "For Ferran."

She narrowed her eyes and studied his face for pretense. There was none there. His words were sincere.

"If there is to be a fight, it will start here," she said. "How many men within the city will be loyal to me?"

"You have the sword of five-hundred, my Lady."

A Fire burned in her throat. "I need a thousand, at least!"

Haladon looked away. "Many have fought alongside your brother."

She grabbed her skirt and whipped around, pacing once again. "And many have died at his side. Surely there are families that have suffered great losses from his warring."

"Indeed."

"Then find them, Haladon, and secure their loyalty. I don't care if they're wielding pitchforks and axes."

"As you wish." He headed back down the hall, his steps slow and tentative.

I've been too harsh. I can't have him doubt his decision to back me.

"Haladon! Wait."

She ran to his side and forced tears to her eyes. "I couldn't do this without you." She kissed his cheek, letting her lips rest there.

He dared to touch her arm, then hurried to do her bidding.

She wiped the fake tears from her face.

CHAPTER 3



"Where is he?" Ulu asked, giving the king's steward the reins to his horse.

"In his room with your mother. They've sent the nurse away."

"And Alrenia?"

"I'm not certain, My Lord. Shall I stable your horse?"

Ulu nodded then entered the grand hall. He'd seen his king father's death amid the battlefield, right after he'd plunged his sword through a man's gut. The soldier's face had transformed into his father's face and spoken to him.

I'm dying, Ulu. Come home.

Never had he experienced such a strange prophecy with his gift. But the words were enough for him to leave the battlefield and return home with his men. Their warring neighbor would have to fight its own battles for now.

Ulu ran up the steps to the second floor with an air of caution. Alrenia had been advocating for the throne for years, but Rodolf had been insistent that his only son inherit the throne of Ferran. The passing of the crown to a son had been the way of Ferran's ancestors for centuries, even though

other countries gave their crowns to the firstborn, regardless of gender. Alrenia would plead her cause as firstborn to the very end.

Ulu had no doubt that his father would pass on the gold ring of Ferran and seal Ulu's kingship with a kiss. The gold ring had been engraved with the Ferran crest—facing profiles of a wolf and eagle. The wolf represented the strength of Ferran, and the eagle, a symbol of independence and prosperity. He touched his necklace of wolf teeth hanging around his neck and pointed to the heavens. Today, he would become king.

At the top of the stairs, he rushed down the hall to his father's quarters. His mother, Zara, was standing by Rodolf's door, crying into a handkerchief. He took her gently by the arm.

"Am I too late?" he asked, fearing the worst.

She shook her head. "There's still time," she said with a sniff. "But not much."

His mother was a healer like his sister, Alrenia, but she had stopped healing years ago. He could see the toil of past healings in the deep wrinkles around her eyes—wrinkles of someone twice her age.

She looked at him with regret. "I should have tried to heal your father."

"Stop," he said. "It would have killed you. You know this. The healings have taken enough of your life—your time of healing is over."

She nodded and smiled weakly, fingering the white handkerchief in her hand.

"I'm sure Alrenia did what she could for him," he added. "We both know that sometimes even the healing is not enough."

"Knowing the truth is not the same as accepting it," Zara said softly.

He kissed her on the cheek then reached for the door. She lay a hand on his arm. "Alrenia is with him."

He gritted his teeth. His mother was naïve when it came to Alrenia and what she was capable of. His twin sister would take the throne if she could manage it. Firstborn or not, Rodolf had promised Ulu the crown.

He pushed through the door.

CHAPTER 4



Alrenia approached her father's bedside. His breathing was labored and wet. His head lay on a single pillow. He was covered except for his arms which lay on top of his bedding. She was surprised to see that his eyes were open. He was staring at the canopy above him in a kind of hazy wakefulness. The fire snapped and popped, and her father's lungs responded in like.

She took his veined hand into hers. She'd always worshipped her father—had fought for his affections and favor. But he'd treated her like a delicate piece of jewelry that needed to be handled with care. It was Ulu that he took hunting, fishing, and finally into battle. Yet, she loved her father, still.

"Father," she said quietly.

He shifted his eyes to her without moving his head and smiled. "You've come at last."

"Yes, Father. I'm here," she said, squeezing his hand.

"You will rule Ferran with a fair hand just as I've always done. Promise me."

Alrenia's heart raced. Did she dare hope? Was her father giving up his antiquated ways and giving Alrenia her birthright?

"Of course, father. I will rule with honor." Her heart leaped with joy.

He returned his gaze to the canopy and licked his brittle lips.

"There will be trouble, Ulu."

Alrenia recoiled her hand. *He thinks I'm, Ulu?*

"Father—"

"Alrenia wants me to follow the law of other countries and make her queen because she was firstborn."

Anger rose to her face and coursed through her veins. She'd hoped in his final hour that her father would do the right thing and give her the throne. All the love she felt for him faded into the background. It didn't matter that she and Ulu were twins. Alrenia was still firstborn. If Rodolf wouldn't give her the crown, she'd take it.

"Don't worry father," Alrenia said flatly. "I will be the victor."

"That's my good son."

"The ring, father."

"Yes, yes." He turned his head to her this time. She could see the love he had for Ulu in his eyes. Bitterness churned in her stomach.

Rodolf held up his right arm. "Take the ring," he said, "I give you the kingdom of Ferran."

She stared at the gold ring, remembering all the times she'd held her father's hand in hers and traced the wolf and eagle with her tiny fingers. He had told her she'd be like the eagle one day and soar above Ferran. It was a story he'd made up to make her smile, only now, she'd make it a reality.

For the briefest moment, she hesitated to take the ring.

But the next words that came from her father's lips sealed Ferran's fate.

"My beloved son, how I wished I had lived to see you marry and have fine grandchildren for me."

She reached out and removed the ring from her father's finger and slipped it on her right index finger.

Rodolf beamed up at her. "Come," he said, reaching out his arms. "Let us seal your rule with a kiss."

She leaned over and placed her cheek next to her father's lips.

"I'm sorry for what's to come, Ulu. May peace follow," he whispered.

She heard the door to the chambers opened as her father kissed her cheek and breathed his last breath.

Alrenia took a step back and straightened the folds of her dress.

It was done.

She turned to find her mother and Ulu standing in the doorway.

Ulu rushed to their father's side, Zara on his heels.

"Father!" Ulu yelled, shaking Rodolf by the shoulders.

Zara looked longingly at her dead husband. "Rodolf…"

Ulu spun around and glared at Alrenia, his face red with fury.

"He has made me queen," she said matter-of-factly. She held out her hand with the ring.

"Liar!" Ulu shouted. "You took the ring."

Zara turned, her eyes widening upon seeing the king's ring on Alrenia's finger.

"What have you done?"

"You've both witnessed the kiss. You're bound to uphold— "

"Silence!" Ulu screamed.

Alrenia jumped at the severity of her brother's voice. Her lip quivered with anger, and she fought to restrain herself.

He will not take this from me.

Ulu pointed at her. "You've tricked him somehow. The crown was meant to be mine."

"He changed his mind," she said. "You weren't here. I was."

Ulu turned to their mother and spoke softly. "Mother. You know what his wishes were. Tell her to give me the ring."

Zara shook her head in dismay. "I cannot. Rodolf has sealed his choice with a kiss."

"Mother!" Ulu pleaded. "She has stolen the crown from me. You know she has!"

Tears fell down Zara's face and for a brief moment, Alrenia's resolve wavered.

"It's finished," Zara whispered.

Ulu opened his mouth to protest. Zara raised a weary hand to stop him. "It matters not," she said. "For the king has written a last oracle."

Alrenia and Ulu exchanged surprised looks.

"What does it say?" Ulu asked.

Zara looked at her feet. "There will be a war between the wolf and the eagle."

Alrenia's heart pounded. She'd hoped to avoid a fight for the throne.

"There doesn't need to be war, brother," she said quickly.

Ulu looked at her with disgust and laughed. "You're right. There doesn't need to be a war between us. Give me the ring, and we'll forget this ever happened." He held out his hand.

Zara grabbed Ulu's arm and dug in her fingers. "You will submit to your sister!"

Ulu's face reddened as he glared at Alrenia. "I will not. I *can* not!"

Zara released him and backed away into the shadows. "Then God help us."

Ulu glanced at Rodolf lifeless body, then back to Alrenia. "You have dishonored our father. A thief now rules Ferran."

He pushed past Alrenia, bumping into her shoulder, and headed for the door.

CHAPTER 5



Zara held the parchment in her hand and reread Roldolf's last oracle. As she'd watched him labor to write, she prayed that it was the sickness that bred such words. But the oracle had begun to fulfill itself as soon as Rodolf took his last breath. Nothing would subvert its vile purpose. It would serve its poison as a viper for generations to come. Hope now lay beyond her and her children. Redemption would come past her grave. All she could do now was prepare a token of favor for those who would have enough faith to find Isidor—the land promised in the king's oracle.

There was a knock on her door and a hasty entrance.

The king's steward bowed. "Your majesty."

The words pierced her broken heart. "As you know, I'm no longer queen."

"Yes, My Lady."

The king not dead an hour. How quickly I have fallen from grace.

She held out the king's oracle. "Have a scribe write this

word for word on ten parchments. Distribute them to all the noble landowners immediately."

He hesitated. An unasked question lingered in his eyes.

He wonders if this parchment is some kind of plan to challenge Alrenia's claim to the throne. Oh, what a bitter pill to swallow—widow of a king.

"It's the king's last oracle," she added.

The steward's shoulders relaxed. He stepped forward and received Rodolf's words. "As you wish, My Lady."

"Return the one written in the king's hand to me when it's done."

He bowed and left.

Zara placed a hand on her desk to steady herself. She searched inside herself for courage she did not have, but yet she must do what needed to be done.

Her maid entered with a basket of linens to change the bed she'd not slept in.

Zara held up a hand. "That won't be necessary. Please see that three wagons and a carriage are prepared. I'm going to stay with my sister in Raritania while I'm in mourning."

The maid curtsied and left the room.

Grief and fatigue pulled at her resolve but only for a moment. She hastily packed her bags, hoping her children would not see through the lie she would now tell. She would preserve a remnant of her husband's treasure so that one day when the two rings of Ferran united once again, they'd be able to rebuild the great cities that were soon to fall. The treasure would be her parting gift to a land that had given her so much. The riches would stay hidden in the west until their appointed time. She would not live to see the new Ferran. All she could do now is weep for her children. For after today, she'd never see them again.

CHAPTER 6



Six months later

"Something's brewing," Niko said.

Niko was Ulu's older distant cousin—a tough, battle-scarred soldier who had served under his father and now served as Ulu's lieutenant.

Ulu looked up. It was only noon, but the sky was dark as dusk. The heavens rumbled, and the dark clouds rolled like a smoldering cauldron.

"A storm's coming," Ulu said. But the threatening clouds imparted an omen of something more.

"We can take the castle," Niko said. "The stronger siege ladders are ready. We hold all of the western cities and most in the north.

"Alrenia still holds the east and southern cities," Ulu reminded him.

"If we take the castle and kill the queen, it won't matter,"

Niko said. "Those still loyal to Alrenia will bow to whoever wears the ring and sits on the throne."

Ulu rubbed his bristled chin. Niko was right. Alrenia would have to die so that there would be no further dispute. Was that why he was delaying another attack on the castle?

What kind of man kills his own sister?

But even as he had the thought, he knew it must be done. She'd given him no choice. The throne was not hers to take.

"The men grow restless," Niko added.

"I know."

"Then let's breach the walls. Haladon might have his best warriors on the inside, but we will outnumber them this time."

Ulu's men had already attempted two breaches. Alrenia's counterattacks had been swift and effective. Men had died on both sides. But Niko had recalled men from the west, and now the numbers were on their side.

"Rally the men. We take the castle today," Ulu said.

Niko grinned and shook Ulu by the shoulder. "The sons of Ulu will prevail, My Lord. You will be crowned king on this very day."

Niko ran off to prepare for battle, and the sky rumbled with distant thunder.

CHAPTER 7



Alrenia was dressed for battle. The dresses and delicate shoes of a princess were a thing of the past. Supporters from within the city had sent word that Ulu had brought in more men from the west. But the castle's fortifications were unyielding, and Ulu would face a staggering challenge. Yet he was more resourceful than Haladon gave him credit for. Ulu couldn't be underestimated.

With her sword at her side, he climbed to the top of the ramparts and found Haladon with a handful of officers looking out over the city.

"Any word?" she asked.

"Your Majesty, Ulu is gathering his men," Haladon said.

Alrenia looked at the darkening sky. "You think they will attack in this weather?" It's not something she'd do, which is exactly why Ulu would.

"We believe so."

She nodded.

"He's got the numbers this time," Haladon added.

Alrenia bristled. "Gentlemen. Would you us a moment?"

The men drew off one by one to the end of the battlement.

Haladon's demeanor stiffened.

She glared at him. "Are you suggesting a surrender, Haladon?"

"If only to preserve your life."

The comment pierced her ego. She was no delicate lady, and she wouldn't be handled as such.

The fire of indignation burned in her throat. "I would fall on my sword to preserve Ferran. Yet you question my—"

"Alrenia," he said, his expression softening.

Her face flushed. "How dare you refer to me in such a way!"

She'd flirted too much, given him hope where there was none. Now she was paying the price.

"I am your queen!"

Haladon lowered his eyes. "Yes, Your Majesty. I apologize."

She realized then that she hated Haladon and his smug principles of gallantry. If she had not needed him, she would have gutted him right then and there. Where were the men of substance? Men of courage and unrelenting savagery?

As her anger subsided, she tempered her words.

"Our time has not yet come, Haladon. Until then, we are master and servant." The words tasted like acid on her tongue.

Haladon lifted his eyes. She could see his hope for something between them rekindled, and it soured in her stomach.

He bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Prepare the men for battle. I will fight by your side, Haladon. Together we will defeat the wolf."

Haladon saluted. "Today the eagle will be triumphant and the throne secure for all time."

Alrenia closed her eyes and inhaled the adulation. It ran like an unquenched desire through her soul.

The sky rumbled, and a light rain began to fall.

CHAPTER 8



The stone walls were high, and the ditches around the ramparts were deep. Men would die today. Many men. But that was the price of war—the price of Ferran. Until the ground was soaked with the blood of men, victory would elude them. It was always the blood that purchased a victory.

Ulu had sent an offer to negotiate Alrenia's surrender. Initially, she accepted, but as he watched her men gather on the ramparts, he knew she was using his goodwill to buy more time to organize her defenses.

He had Niko summon his best men. There would be no concessions today. The shield walls would form, and Ulu would send all his men to breach the castle walls.

"We'll take the center," Ulu told his fiercest fighters.

"Spears and long blades only," Niko added. "You'll need a long reach when you're going over the wall."

Ulu could feel the tension among them. The first two assaults on the castle walls had failed. Ulu watched as his army sharpened blades and whispered prayers. There was no turning back.

Niko rallied the rest of the men, and they formed their battle lines.

The bowmen lined up behind the men who would climb the siege ladders. The attack would begin with a barrage of stinging arrows. Then, almost as a harbinger of things to come, it began to rain. Water would weaken the strings of the bows.

The sky became darker as the rain pelted against their helmets.

Alrenia and her men lined the ramparts, clanging their swords against their shields. Ulu raised his sword just as the sky lit up with lightning. The ground rumbled with the sky's fury.

"Sons of Ulu!" he shouted from the front. "Show no mercy!"

His army locked their shields. A clap of thunder crashed so loudly, some of the men flinched. A lightning strike hit inside the castle walls, and suddenly Ulu was lost in a vision.

Each drop of rain hung in the air. Fire fell in slivers from the heavens. Men, women, and children ran in fear as the flames destroyed and engulfed their homes. His heart pounded in his ears as those fleeing caught fire and screamed in agony.

"Ulu!"

He woke from the vision.

"Keep moving!" Niko shouted over the rain.

Everything inside Ulu urged him to pull back, but he was swept up in the force of blades and shields.

They marched through a haze of rain and mud. Men shouted their war cries, mustering courage—their shields together tight and impenetrable as they moved united in purpose.

Another round of thunder shook the ground. The rain poured with unforgiving intensity.

As they drew close to the ditches, his bowmen sent up

arrows from behind his shield wall. His men splashed into the ditch with their shields held over their heads. The siege ladders slammed against the stone walls. Arrows and spears from above thumped like hail into their shields. Ulu stumbled on a felled spear and caught himself on a ladder.

They climbed.

Ulu moved by instinct now, unaware of anyone but himself. The arrows and spears kept coming. The thud of wounded men falling into the ditch below sounded behind him. He clenched his teeth and pulled himself up the ladder, rung by rung.

He could hear another rush of men hit the water-filled ditch—felt their weight on the ladder below him. A peal of thunder crashed and vibrated through his teeth.

Alrenia's men yelled insults as the first wave of Ulu's men crossed over the wall. An ax immediately struck his shield. Then a sword grazed his helmet, and he fell back against a parapet as another swarm of his men breached the wall and joined in the fight. The rain, mixed with the blood of fallen men, churned at his feet.

Ulu caught a glimpse of Alrenia fighting with gritted teeth, not ten feet away. She plunged her sword into one of his men and screamed. For a brief moment, their eyes meet, then smoke from a fire that had alighted inside the castle walls drew a veil between them. He pushed toward Alrenia, fighting his way through man after man, through blinding rain. Blade against blade. Kingdom against kingdom. Brother against sister.

Haladon fought next to Alrenia, baring his teeth at his opponents.

Ulu rushed toward Alrenia. Haladon slashed his blade across the neck of one of Ulu's men then stepped in front of Alrenia and lunged. Ulu blocked with his shield and screamed Alrenia's name, but his voice was lost in the storm.

Haladon pressed Ulu, strike after counter strike until Ulu's feet wavered beneath him, and he fell into a pool of watery blood. Someone pulled him clear and helped him to stand. *Niko.*

The rampart was teeming with dead and dying men. Then suddenly, it stopped raining, and thick darkness covered them. All light ceased as if he'd been struck blind. At first, he thought he was experiencing another vision. The world was silent. Then a distant pinprick of light sparked above him and grew in intensity until it became a giant blazing ball of fire headed right for the city. All the men around him glowed with its light. Their faces were frozen in horror as the mass of fire burst into millions of fire slivers that hailed down on the city. Ulu stood in shock. Everything the flames hit caught fire.

Chaos ensued as men on both sides of the fight scrambled for cover. He blinked against the fiery destruction even as blood dripped from his blade. This was not a vision. It was a nightmare.

CHAPTER 9



"We have to leave the city, Your Majesty," Haladon said.

They had taken refuge in the castle, but parts of the building were burning, and it wouldn't be long before all was lost.

They both put on cloaks and pulled on the hoods. Though the battle had ended, there was still the danger of being recognized.

Haladon took her hand and led her down dark passages under the castle that she didn't even know existed. For once, she was grateful for his loyal resolve.

But where would they go? To her mother in the west? To her loyal cities in the east? The thoughts swam through her head even as she and Haladon climbed from the underground into the aftermath of the fiery apocalypse.

The city was scorched, black, and still burning. Fiery ash floated from the sky and landed like snowflakes at their feet. Thousands of trees burned in the distance, and the air was thick with smoke. For a moment Alrenia couldn't move. Burned corpses were scattered everywhere. The people who

were still alive were hastily packing wagons and leaving with what they could salvage.

"Everything is gone," she said, barely above a whisper. Her cloak blew in the hot wind.

There will be no glory here today.

"Where will we go?" she asked.

"You have friends in the south," Haladon said. "Perhaps they've escaped the worst."

"The tree people?" She'd heard of them, of course. They were a small group that had pledged their loyalty to her, but they lived in the trees of the southern forest and mostly kept to themselves.

"If it hasn't burned, the southern forest will be the perfect refuge. No one will think to look for you there."

She knew he was right. It was a good plan. At least for now, until she could rebuild her kingdom. She looked at her ring. Her father's ring. She would fashion a new one—one with an eagle that would show the eagle's rule over Ferran.

I am queen. I will triumph yet.

"I've sent men to see how far the destruction has spread," Haladon said.

But as far as the eye could see was darkness and ash. She held little hope for an untouched refuge.

Alrenia nodded. "We'll go south."

Haladon steered her around the smoldering dead as they made their way through the city. Had the destruction been in her father's last oracle? Her mother had left with the oracle the day her father had died, and Alrenia hadn't seen or heard from her since.

When they got to the outskirts of the city, two men with soot-covered faces passed them by. She shielded her face with her hood. But as soon as they passed, one of them called to her.

"Alrenia?"

She froze. She knew the voice.

Ulu.

She turned around slowly and remove her hood. She placed a hand on the hilt of her sword. Haladon drew his blade.

Ulu held up his hands. His lieutenant, Niko, drew his sword.

For a minute, they just stared at each other.

"Will we fight for ashes, brother?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Then I wish you Godspeed," she said, turning.

"Alrenia."

She turned back.

"Where will you go?"

There was real concern in his eyes. Brotherly concern.

"I wish you no harm," he said.

"Nor do I you." She fought the sadness rising in her throat.

Ulu took a step toward her, but it was too late for peace between them.

"Good-bye, Ulu." She spun on her heels and walked with Haladon out of the city.

They walked in silence for a long while after that, avoiding areas that were still burning. Ash continued to fall like early winter snow, except there was no beauty in it, just wrongness. The fabric of her world had been torn. A terror lurked inside her that she'd never be able to stitch it back together. Haladon didn't try to comfort or reassure her, and for that she was grateful. She didn't have time for sentiment. Despite the destruction around them, she would do whatever it took to rebuild her kingdom.

"Haladon," she said, breaking the silence.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She stopped and pulled back her hood, noticing for the

first time that her hands were black. "I must ensure my throne for the time to come."

"I'll be right at your side," he said with a slight bow.

"Will you?"

He frowned. "Of course, you know my loyalty is to you."

She looked down at her hands and took a deep breath.

"Your Majesty, if you're questioning—"

There was eager desperation in his voice.

"I'm not questioning your loyalty," she clarified.

He rubbed a hand across his face, smearing the soot.

"Will you…" she began.

I can do this. I must.

She looked him directly in the eyes. "I need to have children right away."

His eyes knit in confusion. He looked to his left and right as if she had a husband stashed away somewhere.

"Haladon, don't be so dense," she scoffed. "I have no heart for formalities."

He studied her face for a moment, then his eyes widened with understanding.

"You're the only one I can trust," she added more tenderly.

"Alrenia," he said in a whisper.

"We will be married as soon as we reach the southern forest," she said.

His face flushed.

She wished she could offer him more than a marriage of convenience**.** He deserved requited love, but the kingdom was at stake, and she would do what she had to do to ensure the throne for future generations.

She waited while he absorbed what she was asking of him.

Finally, he stepped forward and lifted her filthy hand to his gray lips. She immediately closed her eyes and delved into his heart with her gift.

Yes. It's all here. Adoration. Devotion. Love.

He will give me daughters.

She opened her eyes, and they stood amongst the black landscape staring at each other—silently committing themselves to each other for the sake of Ferran.

He touched her cheek with tender affection, then took her hand, and they continued their long journey to the southern forest.

CHAPTER 10



I am Rodolf, King of Ferran, and this is my final oracle for a time that is yet to come. My death will bring war—a fight for the throne. There will be a great battle between the eagle and the wolf. But the Destroyer will come and rain down fire from the heavens, poisoning our land. Divided by war and calamity, and struggling to survive in the face of dwindling resources, the people of the eagle will flee to the safety of the trees, while the people of the wolf roam at their feet. Yet there is one hope—the promise of a new land hidden from prideful eyes. The Iron Gate to Isidor lies hidden within the White Mountains. Heed this oracle, for the time of its fulfillment will be short. Yet, he who will go forward with his whole heart will obtain what he seeks. Only do not be of two minds, for the two rings of Ferran are the key to your salvation.

CONTINUE READING...

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