ERIN M. EVANS
BRIMSTONE ANGELS
LESSER EVILS
Lorcan ought to have counted himself lucky. Bound from knees to chest in a chain devil’s restraints, dragged across the hungry nightmare landscape of the Sixth Layer of the Hells—still, the half-devil son of Fallen Invadiah was not dead.

He was not dead, and he would soon be locked away in his sister’s newly claimed domain, far from their vengeful mother’s weakened reach, far from the notice of the archdevils, and farthest of all from those mortals who knew better than to let Lorcan slip the noose, after what had happened in Neverwinter. Lucky, indeed.

But that luck only counted for these few breaths.

All my life, he thought, watching the skull palace of Osseia recede as the chain devil hauled him toward the fingerbone towers, leaving a trail of raw, oozing ground in their wake. All my life avoiding the hierarchy and this is how they catch me. Beshaba shit in my eyes.

The goddess of ill luck could count herself proud of this mess: the only reason he was alive was that he had been caught in the tangled interplay of the Lord of the Sixth, Glasya, and her father, Asmodeus, king of the Hells and the risen god of evil. Their schemes and counter-schemes made a knotted net that trapped devils in every layer. Lorcan had long made an art of staying out of the cutthroat hierarchy they created. And now he was square in the middle of it.

Do be careful, little Lorcan.

Glasya’s words as he’d been hauled out of the court moments earlier pounded in his thoughts like a heavy hammer. She might, for
all appearances, have given his freedom to his sister Sairché, a reward for all her help in twisting the collapsing pieces of Glasya’s schemes in Neverwinter into a suitable place. But wherever Sairché locked him away, Glasya owned Lorcan.

*Your sister may be persuasive, but you and I know your warlock kept things in check.*

Which meant Glasya owned Farideh too, he thought.

Osseia’s empty sockets watched him until the chain devil hauled him into the farthest fingerbone tower, as if waiting for Lorcan to make the next move.

There were erinyes in the tiny room at the tip of the tower—his half sisters, Cissa and Aricia—and more chains. Bad, bad, bad, he thought. The chain devil’s appendages withdrew, dumping Lorcan unceremoniously onto the marrow-slicked floor.

“Already?” he cried. Ruby-eyed Cissa seized him by the joint of his wing and yanked him forward. He cursed. “Were you crouching in Sairché’s shadow all this time?”

Aricia hooked the chain onto the nearest bone spur. “The time her lordship held the lot of you was enough to tell where the plane tilts.”

“If Baby Sister wants to play at commander,” Cissa said, shoving him to his knees and turning him around, “we’ll wait it out.”

“Who knows?” Aricia said, as he struggled. She smiled around a broken fang. “Maybe she’ll take out a few of the *pradixikai* when she goes. Make some room for the rest of us.”

“Watch your tongue,” a new voice growled. Lorcan lifted his head. In the lacuna of the doorway stood his mad sister, Bibracte. Still armored and splattered in the gore of Neverwinter’s denizens, the maddest member of the elite *pradixikai* made the lesser erinyes grow still with caution.

Bibracte stepped aside to admit Sairché—the half-devil daughter of Fallen Invadiah and master of her holdings. The erinyes might have towered over her cambion half sister, might have crushed Sairché as easily as a dry leaf instead of following Glasya’s orders. But she guarded over Sairché as if Sairché had never been anything but commander of the *pradixikai*. Bibracte gave him a vicious grin.

Bad, bad, bad, Lorcan thought.

*Lesser Evils*
Red-skinned Sairché stood with her wings curled around her. She’d had the good sense not to deck herself in Invadiah’s treasures at least, only a pair of bracers—silver, to match the tracery of tattoos that laced her bare scalp and the needle-sharp eyelashes she affected.

“Well, aren’t you prepared,” he said, as if there weren’t terrible things in store for him. As if he didn’t know exactly what Sairché wanted. “I didn’t realize you were so steeped in the hierarchy, to know Asmodeus’s mind before he speaks it.”

Sairché smirked. “Idiot. No one was ever going to lay the blame on you when they could lay it on Mother.”

“You’ve made an enemy of Invadiah, and I’m the idiot?” Cissa pressed down on his wing joint and he let out a gasp of pain.

“Careful, Lorcan,” Sairché said. “One might think you were growing a spine.”

“Much as one might think you were getting soft.”

Lorcan’s memory didn’t go back far enough to recall a time before Sairché, before knowing that his sister was never going to be an ally, even if she might suffer just as much under the erinyes’ notice. *That* Sairché would not have wasted so much of her time needling him.

“A pity for you I’m not,” she said.

“Really? I suspect you’re the one to pity.”

Sairché laughed. “How adorable! Is that something you picked up, grubbing around on Toril? I’ve won, brother dear. Pity my wickedness all you like, it doesn’t matter.”

“What on every plane do you take me for?” he said. “I’ve no pity for your means. You’ve achieved more than any of us could have imagined, particularly while under Invadiah’s thumb. You—a cambion—have control of the pradixikai and a good portion of Malbolge’s erinyes. You have all of Invadiah’s treasures—not the least of which is being the archduchess’s ear. Truly, no one would have thought you could rise so high.”

Sairché narrowed her eyes. “Many thanks.”

He smiled despite himself. “But you cannot ‘win’ at the hierarchy, and you know that. Now they’re all watching you, looking for the weak point that will bring you down again.” He looked up at Aricia and Cissa. “Found it yet?”
Neither erinyes had taken her eyes off Bibracte. She grinned at her half sisters and cracked her knuckles.

“Not now,” Sairché snapped. She scowled at Lorcan. “So I let her kill them and leave you with much better odds? You do think I’m an idiot.” To Aricia and Cissa, “Pin his wings.”

Cissa held his wings together. The cold iron spike ripped through the membranes, one after the other—*pop, pop*—so fast, Lorcan couldn’t cry out before it was already done. Aricia slid a loop over the ends of the bolt and twisted. A rush of magic ran down Lorcan’s bones, like a flow of lava. They let him up, his wings pulling against the pin as he tried to find his balance.

“Now,” Sairché said. “Are you going to cooperate? Or do I let Cissa and Aricia prove their loyalty?”

Long years of survival instinct made his wings flex against the iron bar—*flee, flee, flee*. But even if he could remove the bolt, even if his wings weren’t torn and bloodied, he’d have nowhere to run. He no longer had a portal out of the Hells. He had no allies. Malbolge was growing every day. The *pradixikai* would find him and tear him to shreds. He made himself still, pressed the urge to run down deep.

“That depends on what you want.”

Sairché’s stare didn’t waver. “The Kakistos heir. What else?”

Lorcan held her gaze and smiled, even though his heart was in his throat. Even though he was imagining another set of eyes—one silver, one gold. Another voice whispering, *Run. Come with us. They’ll kill you.*

“Now why,” he drawled, “would you want her?”

Sairché watched him, unblinking, but Lorcan was certain after long years of practice that there was nothing to see. “I don’t like loose ends.”

“What end is she to you? She’s *my* warlock.”

“And Rohini’s doom. I don’t need to repeat the *pradixikai*’s reports for you—you were there, after all. A warlock, I don’t care about. A Brimstone Angel, I care a little for. A Brimstone Angel who throws off a succubus’s domination and runs her through with so little effort? That I—and plenty of other devils—would be much more interested in.” Sairché smirked. “And then there’s the fact that she’s yours, as you say.”

He didn’t so much as blink, but he was overtaken by the memory of the slender tiefling warlock standing entranced before
Rohini, motionless in the middle of the battle of aberration and devil, moments from death. Lorcan in the air high above, waiting for her to die—there was nothing he could do . . .

And then the charm snapping, almost audible, and Farideh releasing a burst of magic, a slash of blood spraying from Rohini’s burned face as Farideh lashed out with the heavy rod. Relief he would never, ever, voice starting his heart again.

“Was it Zela who came up with that nonsense?” he asked. “You’ve met Farideh—Hells, you dragged her around that crater of a city for half a day trying to woo her away. Do you really think she could have resisted someone like Rohini? Struck her down? The girl couldn’t corrupt a lord in a whore’s parlor.”

“She did well enough resisting me,” Sairché said.

Lorcan snorted, recalling the vicious, calculating succubus Rohini who’d nearly brought Neverwinter—and Glasya—to ruin. Sairché was certainly formidable, and Farideh had done well to ignore Sairché’s entreaties and promises. But Rohini had been a gem of another water—a foe far beyond Sairché’s skills.

Sairché wasn’t entirely wrong. No, Farideh hadn’t been the one to kill Rohini. So far as Lorcan knew, the succubus wasn’t even dead. And quick as Farideh might be to strike out, she’d never have lasted a moment trying to fight Rohini like a rogue in the street had other forces not been in play.

But it couldn’t be denied: that domination would have held firm on any of his other warlocks. And Sairché knew that much by now. Sairché, and possibly half the Hells.

“All you have to do,” Sairché said, “is renounce the pact. Give her up.”

The night after he’d made her pact, he’d gone back to Toril to find Farideh, weeping beside a campfire in the foothills beyond the sty of a village she’d been hiding in all her years. It had been simple to claim her and simpler still to steer her with sweet words and sure hands—she was a girl who wanted what she couldn’t have and he was the sort of devil to gift her with it.

But then she was also the sort of girl to stand in his arms and ask, first of all, if this would hurt him. She was not a proper warlock or a proper Brimstone Angel.
Do be careful, little Lorcan.

“Who are you collecting for?” he asked. “Not Glasya—”

“Where is she, Lorcan?”

Tell Sairché, he thought, and risk Glasya’s fury—whatever Sairché wanted Farideh for, it wasn’t for the archduchess’s secretive plans. Keep quiet and risk Sairché’s fury—an anger that would lead to much quicker retributions.

Keep quiet, he thought, and you might keep her a little longer.

“I might be able to get you another one.”

“Liar,” Sairché said. Her wings closed tight against her delicate frame. “All four of the Kakistos heirs are claimed. Besides, yours is the one I need. Where is she?”

Quicker retributions, Lorcan thought, all too aware of the blackened chains. But Sairché’s irritation with him was all genuine—she needed Farideh for some reason. And, for now, she thought she needed Lorcan. Until that changed she wouldn’t kill him. If he gave up Farideh, he gave up his only bargaining chip.

Does it hurt? Farideh had asked. I’ll be fine, he’d told her.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” he said, grinning at his sister.

Sairché narrowed her eyes. “Cissa, Aricia: chain him up and give him an idea.” She didn’t break her gaze as they hauled him to his feet and backward toward the suppurating wall. “But don’t be too eager proving your loyalty. The others will want a turn.”
CHAPTER ONE

WATERDEEP

28 KYTHORN, THE YEAR OF THE DARK CIRCLE (1478 DR)

First there were three,” a woman’s voice says, and it shakes Farideh’s bones like a bell pealing over her head. The red glow of poisonous clouds isn’t enough to illuminate her, shrouded in the shadows of broken Neverwinter. “And then you found the fourth. What a shame you kept her.”

The cambion pinned to the wall cannot answer—the hellwasps have smashed his teeth and torn out his tongue. He is screaming, wordless, and so is Farideh.

“The fifth one is mine,” the woman’s voice says over the din, and she says it to Farideh. From the shadows, Farideh’s sister, garbed in the armor of erinyes, steps out, her eyes flashing gold and her grin someone else’s. “The fifth Brimstone Angel.”

Farideh opened her eyes to a night pallid with rain clouds and the reflected light of the City of Splendors, to a forest she hardly recalled, her mind overflowing with the echoes of a dreamland Hells, of broken Neverwinter, and horrors she thought she might never forget.

Every nerve of her body was taut as a tripwire, every vein carrying fire to her limbs. Farideh squeezed her eyes shut against the twisting memory and tilted her head so her horns pressed into the ground and made her head ache where they anchored to her brow. You’re awake, she thought. It was a dream. Havi’s safe. Havi’s safe.

Still ill at ease, Farideh sat up and regarded her twin sister’s sleeping form on the other side of the fire. Havi’s safe, she told herself again. No one could have said, as peaceful as the tiefling girl slept,
that she’d been possessed by a devil and nearly sacrificed to the god of evil a tenday prior.

She’s the one who ought to be having nightmares, Farideh thought. Not me.

The woman’s voice starts laughing when they catch him. Lorcan screams and the blood starts flowing.

Farideh cannot run, she cannot wake. She casts blast after blast at the hellwasps the voice in the shadows sends, but they are legion. They break his wings and his fingers. She casts and casts, but the wasps ignore her flames. They pluck out Lorcan’s eyes, smash his teeth. Blood—blacker than the night—pours down his face, over his red skin. He is screaming and so is she.

“First there were three,” the woman’s voice sings. “And then you found the fourth.”

None of that’s happened, she told herself, staring up at the tips of the evergreens stretching up toward the grayish sky. The clouds didn’t turn red, didn’t boil with hellwasps, didn’t boom with the terrible voice she’d imagined for Lorcan’s liege-lady. All her imagination.

Please let it be my imagination, she thought.

High above, a pine cone dangled at the tip of a ragged branch. Farideh pointed two fingers at it. “Assulam.”

Energy welled through her frame and streaked out her outstretched arm. A pop, and pinecone fragments rained down on their campsite. Farideh relaxed a little—if the spell worked, then Lorcan was still alive and channeling the powers of the Hells to her through her warlock pact and the brand that marked it.

Or perhaps she didn’t know how the pact worked at all. As much as she’d found Lorcan kept her in the dark, either might be true. She shut her eyes again, and slipped a hand up her sleeve to trace the raised skin of her warlock brand.

. . . the wasps come when the erinyes scream and shatter into a dozen of the enormous insects; wasps with cunning eyes and swords for arms. The air is full of swords and monsters. Lorcan grabs her arm and shoves her back—Run, darling, he cries, run fast and run far—

The wasps swoop down and pierce his shoulders, pin his wings to the crumbling walls.

The woman starts laughing. Lorcan screams and the blood starts flowing.
“Here.”

Farideh sat up, drawing the powers of the Hells up in her surprise, but it was just Tam who kneeled beside her bedroll, holding a steaming tin cup. She eyed the priest of Selûne a moment, ready for him to transform into a devil or a cultist or something worse.

“It’s just tea,” he said gently. “It will help you sleep.”

She shook her head. “I have to take watch next.”

“I’ll spell you,” he said, pressing the cup into her hands. The steam that wafted off the liquid’s surface smelled floral and bitter . . .

*Draw the rune, Lorcan says. She looks up at him, his wicked smile, his black, black eyes. The horns that mimic hers and the skin, red as hot irons. Say laesurach.*

The word burns her mouth, a surge of Hellish powers courses up through the soles of her feet, thrilling every limb, and sets her tongue ablaze. It pours out the rod, out the cloudy quartz crystal at its point, as she traces the shape of the Infernal rune. The ground opens under the erinyes hooves, a lake of lava, a fountain of magma. The mouth of a volcano that devours the devil women, swallows them whole.

*The erinyes scream and they shatter into wasps . . .*

She gulped the tea, trying to wash the phantom taste of the burning erinyes from her mouth. It was scalding hot and as bitter as it smelled, and it only made the image of Lorcan having his tongue torn out echo through her thoughts. Tam raised his eyebrows.

“We don’t burn easily,” she reminded him quietly. “That goes for tea too.”

“I forget,” he apologized. “My experience with tieflings has been . . . largely academic.”

She turned the mug in her hands. “You had it ready,” she noted.

“You’re not the only one having trouble sleeping.” He returned to his spot beside the fire, which still burned high, and the clutter of belongings strewn beside him—curling sheets of parchment, a stylus and ink, his haversack spilling all manner of bottles and pouches, and a great, fat tome.

Farideh frowned and moved to sit beside the fire as well. “I don’t mean to be rude,” she said after a moment, “but you can’t keep much
of a watch this close to the light. And while you write your . . .” She glanced at the sheets. *Netherese scouts sighted, expect larger numbers in surrounding wood . . . “Letters,” she decided.

The corner of Tam’s mouth, crooked by a small scar, twitched into a smile. “I would have said ‘sermons.’”

Farideh flushed. The Selûnite priest didn’t seem like a spy, but neither did he seem all that much like a priest. The spiked chain he carried was fit for someone far more barbaric, and his gentle, paternal demeanor lay at odds with the sure and secretive nature he displayed at times. He knew, she was sure, that she knew he was not only a priest, but it didn’t seem to matter. When he spoke, she couldn’t shake the sensation that he was secretly laughing at her.

She looked over at the bulk of Mehen, her dragonborn foster father, sleeping solidly just out of the fire’s light, closest to the bounty they escorted to Waterdeep. If Mehen of all people trusted the priest, then surely she ought to too.

“I laid a circle,” Tam said, shuffling the curling parchments beside him into a neater pile. “Setting a watch is largely a formality with that. Finish your tea.”

Farideh sipped the brew, eyeing the faint shimmer of runes that crept over the forest floor in an arc twenty feet wide. Tam’s haversack lay open and an array of bottled powders, inks, and incenses lay on the ground beside a thick book—the remnants of the ritual that had made the circle.

“Does it keep us in?” she asked. “Or keep things out?”

“This one keeps things out. Anything fiendish, in particular.” She blushed a little harder. If Tam would have preferred she not know he was a spy, Farideh would rather he still assumed she was not a warlock.

Tam settled back, his knees folded in a fashion Farideh wouldn’t have expected a man his age to find comfortable. The Planes knew Mehen couldn’t manage, and the human had years on him.

“Will you tell me what you’re dreaming of?” he asked.

. . . the erinyes are a thunderstorm, unstoppable and rolling toward them out of nothing. Their hooves crack the cobbles, shatter the rune. Their crowns of horns threaten to spear the moon. Their swords are fire. Their swords are hungry . . .
Lorcan ignores them, leans close, his mouth on the edge of her ear. He runs the tips of his fingers up her spine—Draw the rune, he says, say laesurach.

Farideh shifted. “I don’t think you’ll appreciate it.”

“It’s Neverwinter, isn’t it?” When she looked away, he added. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s common, you know, a madness that chases after ordeals and upsets.”

“I don’t have the battle-shock,” she said tersely. “That wasn’t my first combat.”

Tam shrugged. “No. But will you tell me the other times you crossed swords with someone, or something, were as bad?”

Farideh didn’t answer. She’d killed the erinyes at her very feet with the eruption of lava. She’d watched an army of them march on Neverwinter. She’d seen Lorcan captured by hellwasps. She’d found Havilar possessed by a devil and ready to kill her—the same devil who’d sent Mehen, under a charm, to kill her. She knew there were devils looking for her—and looking for Havilar, as soon as Lorcan stopped keeping her a secret.

You wanted this, Lorcan says, pulling her closer. She looks down at her hands, at the rune-carved rod that’s suddenly there. She did. She does. She raises her arm as she had so long ago in the crumbled village, lets Lorcan’s burning hands mold her fingers—smaller two wrapped around the implement, longer two extended, thumb curled over—and draws her hand down to point directly at the rune he had drawn in the frost and lichen that coats the street.

Draw the rune, darling, he says, say laesurach.

In the shadows, something watches. When she tries to catch it, the darkness just stares back, a great dark eye that fills every nook, every alley.

You cannot run, the woman’s voice. All the planes are looking for you. The erinyes’ hooves crack the cobbles and shatter the rune back into the frost . . .

“When I was your age,” Tam said, “maybe a little older, I ran with a band of adventurers. Six of us, thick as thieves. One summer, we were headed down into the wilds of Akanûl, looking for a ruin we’d heard rumors of—a Chondathan palace. It took us into the path of a Netherese scouting party.
“They killed every one of my friends,” he said as mildly as such a thing could be said. “I fell to an arrow in the initial attack and rolled into a briar, out of sight. But I watched the shadar-kai draw my comrades’ deaths out to gain every thrill they could. The shade that commanded the party picking through our gear as if at the market, while my friends screamed and screamed, and died. The clerics of the Lady of Loss standing over it all, just watching. I lay there, with only the Moonmaiden for company, until they’d gone on their way and I could crawl out and find my way back to a town.” He kept watching the fire. “I thought I’d seen a lot of things, but that . . . you can imagine.”

“I’m sorry,” Farideh said after a moment.

“I dreamed of it for months,” he said. “Nearly a year. Still do, sometimes, especially when my days are running rough. You choose a certain kind of life—or it chooses you—and eventually you’ll run into your Shadovar. Your Neverwinter.” He prodded the fire, sending a swirl of embers into the smoke. “The tea will help. Buries the dreams for a bit.”

“Thank you for that,” she said. “But I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Tam sighed softly. “Do you know how long you’ll stay in Waterdeep?”

“Hours, if that. Mehen knows of a portal to Cormyr. He’ll want to take her through as soon as possible.” And there is no time soon enough, she thought. Constancia Crownsilver, the fugitive knight of Torm they’d been tracking when they entered Neverwinter, had been difficult every day of their return trip, sneering and snapping and cruel at times.

“Will Brin go?” Tam asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I wouldn’t, if I were him.” The young man who’d joined their unlikely party had turned out to be the cousin of their bounty and was wrapped up in a political tangle that had sent him on the run. She’d be sad if they parted ways—in all their days wandering the world, she and Havilar hadn’t made friends as easily as they had with the Cormyrean boy—but he’d fled Cormyr and Constancia for reasons he was still being tight-lipped about.

Farideh yawned, fatigue suddenly swallowing her like an overlarge cloak she couldn’t struggle out of. Tam gave her another crooked smile.
“Go to sleep,” he suggested. “I’ll give your father more of the tea.”
“I told you,” she said, “it isn’t the battle-shock. I’m not fainting over my first blood.”
“Even if you’ve stood against a hundred foes and slain a thousand dragons,” he said, “you’ve stood and watched people you love suffer and risk death and be turned against you. That will take time to settle itself.” He hesitated. “And, I gather, you lost . . . someone you called a friend.”

*She looks up at Lorcan, his wicked smile, his black, black eyes. The horns that mimic hers and his skin, red as hot irons.*

*The cambion holds out a hand, beckons her nearer. Cobblestones sprout from the hard-pack under her feet, and even though the ground crunches with the frost of a winter night—the night he showed her the spell that unleashed the vent of flames—the air thickens and warms. The air is Neverwinter’s and a battle is coming.*

*You wanted this, he says, and she does.*

Farideh finished the cup of tea. “He’s not lost yet,” she said firmly, even if the echoes of the archdevil’s laughter mocked her certainty.

The day they reached Waterdeep, Brin had still not settled things with Constancia.

When Brin had fled the Citadel of Torm, he hadn’t had much of a plan—just get as far as possible before anyone noticed and leave as little a trail as he could. But despite making it halfway across the continent of Faerûn, despite dyeing his hair and lying about his name and taking every precaution he could think of, his cousin, Constancia, had caught up with him and the odd friends he’d made in the bounty hunters chasing her down.

He watched Mehen leading Constancia’s big charger, Squall, down the cobbled road, his cousin riding, but carefully shackled. They needn’t have bothered, he knew. Constancia wouldn’t compound the embarrassment of having a bounty on her head like a common fleeing criminal.
Havilar dropped back to walk beside him as they passed into the city. “Have you been to Waterdeep before?”

He nodded. “Once. I was here a few days before I found the caravan to Neverwinter.”

“Is Suzail like this?” she asked. “Or nicer?”

“Different,” he said, as they passed by a gargantuan statue, frozen mid-stride, its ankles plastered with a variety of handbills. “Suzail’s Cormyrean. Waterdeep’s . . . a little of everything. I like it better.” He smiled. “But maybe that’s just because it’s different from what I know.”

She slipped her arm through his in that disconcerting way she had, too comfortable for him to make sense of what it meant. “I wish you could show us what’s different. I wish we were staying longer.”

He stopped walking and she stepped out of his arm. “What do you mean? How long are you staying?”

She shrugged. “An hour? Maybe a few? Mehen just wants to sell the horse, get some supplies and head straight for the portalkeeper.”

“You’re taking the new portal? Are you in such a hurry to get to Cormyr?”

Havilar shifted uneasily. “Your cousin . . . is not the most pleasant bounty.”

“She has good points,” Brin said stiffly.

“Maybe if she likes you.” Havilar jerked her head up the street at Constancia, who was giving them both a glare that might once have shamed Brin into punishing himself. He scowled back.

“That makes less difference than you think.”

“She does not like us,” Havilar added. “Anyway, it won’t take long this way. Maybe you can show us around Suzail instead.”

“Maybe,” he said. But his stomach was clenching tight as he said it. He didn’t want to go back to Cormyr. He couldn’t go back to Cormyr.

“Come on,” Havilar said, slipping her arm through his again. “Let’s catch up.”

They found a stable willing to buy Squall, albeit for a tragic sum. The great gray charger bucked and stamped when they took his rider, as if he knew Constancia wouldn’t be returning for him. Havilar and Mehen helped the stable boy master the reins and get a hood over
Squall so they could lead him into the yard. Constancia’s dark eyes burned into Brin.

“I wish we didn’t have to,” Farideh murmured beside him. “I didn’t think you could break a horse’s heart.”

“Would that have stopped you, devil child?” Constancia asked. Farideh’s mouth went tight, and the faint banners of a shadowy protection curled out around her frame.

“What would you have them do?” Tam asked. “The portal is expensive, and I doubt its keepers want his hooves cracking their fine floors.”

“Better they take me home the way I came.”

“Better you avoided the bounty in the first place,” Tam answered. Brin felt a flush of shame rush over him: Constancia’s bounty came from his disobedience. If he hadn’t run, she wouldn’t have pursued, and his Aunt Helindra wouldn’t have assumed Constancia’d had a hand in his disappearance.

“What will you do?” Tam asked him.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Brin said, irritably. “It’s like you’re in my head.”

The priest chuckled. “Apologies. You just have the look of a man deciding something unpleasant.”

Farideh turned to regard them both. “You aren’t coming to Cormyr, are you?”

“You stop it too,” Brin admonished. “I haven’t... I don’t know.” Constancia was watching him warily. “I’d hate it if I never saw you two again.”

“But you ran for a reason,” Farideh finished.

“I ran for very good reasons,” he agreed, still watching Constancia.

Across the city, the enormous clock they called the Timehands began to chime the hour. Tam swore. “Day just burns by. I need to get to my rooms before midday. If you do stay,” he said to Brin, “I’ll be at the Blind Falcon Inn, just north of Dock Ward.” He paused. “But ask the innkeeper for ‘Yahyn.’ ”

Mehen returned then with Havilar, and Tam said his good-byes. The rest of them headed across Sea Ward to the portal that led to the other side of the continent.
“Farideh thinks he’s some sort of secret mercenary,” Havilar told Brin as they parted ways with Tam. “He doesn’t seem like a priest.”

“No,” Brin agreed, with a last glance at the Harper agent as he disappeared into the street traffic. “Not just a priest, anyway.”

“Neither do you, though.”

“I told you,” he said irritably. “I’m not a priest.” The very idea would have a true holy champion of Torm laughing in a thoroughly undignified way. Only Torm himself could say why Brin of all people could manage to heal in His name—occasionally—despite failing so utterly in training to serve the god of duty.

Havilar snickered. “I know. I’m teasing.” She looked away, up the road. “You’re not a priest,” she said, and this time there was no doubting she was serious. “You’re ‘His Grace.’”

Brin didn’t respond. Of all the things he didn’t want to have to speak—an apology for Constancia, a request for passage back to Suzail, a good-bye to the twins, a good-bye to Havilar—why Constancia had called him “His Grace” was still right at the top of the list.

They reached the portal all too soon, a narrow, gray stone building with enormous wooden doors. Brin’s stomach dropped as—one arm still hooked through Havilar’s—he was pulled into the entryway.

“Hells and broken planes,” Mehen sighed, seeing the masses of people ahead of them in the hall beyond. “Girls, go stand in line, while I get our papers in order. Brin”—the dragonborn’s cold, yellow eyes pinned him in place—“hang on to her shackles.”

“Bye, Brin,” Farideh said, squeezing his arm.

“You’re coming, right?” Havilar asked, releasing him.

“I might . . . ,” he said, taking hold of Constancia’s chains.

“Good!” Havilar said, and she passed into the larger hall with her twin. Mehen stepped aside and set his haversack on a bench carved into the wall below a fresco of Suzail at dawn, pulling out permits and bounty sheets. Brin swallowed against the knot forming in his throat. This was all happening too fast.

And still he had not made his peace with Constancia.

“I never meant for them to blame you for my leaving,” Brin said softly so only she could hear. “Honest.”

“At least there is that,” she said in clipped tones. She tossed her head, shaking the blunt bob of her dark hair out of her face. “Thank
Torm. I should like to die here and now, if you turned out to be cruel and stupid as well as disrespectful of your duty.”

Brin looked away. “This is a different sort of duty.”
“A coward’s duty, perhaps,” Constancia said.

Coward—the truth of it stung. He’d run instead of telling the Crownsilvers he wasn’t what they wanted him to be—an eager heir for the Crownsilvers’ share of the royal line. He’d run rather than face his Aunt Helindra down. He’d left Constancia to take the blame and never warned her it was coming. He’d met the twins because they’d had to save him from orcs, and when Havilar was captured by cultists in Neverwinter, he hadn’t been able to do a thing. Brin was certainly a coward.

“What were you thinking, Aubrin?” she said. “Do you have any idea how terrified I was to find you missing?”
“I left a note,” Brin said lamely.
“And what good did you think a note would be against Aunt Helindra’s ire?”
“I’m sorry,” he tried again. “I couldn’t stay and face it all.”
“You will have to face it all,” she said. “Do you think this is something that will just go away? You could flee to Abeir and you’d still owe your duty to the family.”

Constancia meant the tangled tree of Crownsilvers, the aunts and uncles and cousins and greybeards who spread through the courts of Suzail and the markets beyond, with his great-aunt Helindra carefully watering and pruning them. To those varied branches of Crownsilvers, Brin was sure he mattered as much as a shipment of lumber or an invitation from the Clerk of Protocol to visit after the most recent festival—precious, critical to Helindra’s orders, but only so long as he played his part. Only Constancia—a second cousin on his father’s side, who Helindra had made Brin’s guardian when his father died, and Brin had been spirited away to the Citadel of Torm—really counted in Brin’s mind as “family.” Constancia who’d been kind to him, in her own way, and defended him when he faltered before Helindra, and never made him feel as if he were something she’d been stuck with. Not even at the beginning, when he’d been a lonesome and terrified child, and she, a squire pulled out of training to be his guardian.
“This is to help the family,” Brin said. “Aunt Helindra hasn’t considered—”

“I guarantee you that she has considered everything.”

She probably had. Helindra Crownsilver had probably considered Brin from every possibly viewpoint, every angle . . . and deemed the chaos a hitherto unknown lord would bring to Suzail a necessary evil. He wanted to stop it all before he ended up like his father, shot full of arrows by rival families before Brin could so much as hold a shield—all for suddenly becoming the Crownsilvers’ best claim to the throne.

Brin had heard often enough how Cormyr was civilized beyond such pettiness, how every lord stood behind their king. On the face of it, it might have been true . . . but that said not a word for those who stood behind the lords. Even if no one was so treacherous as to assassinate the king outright—and Brin had his doubts about that—there was nothing simpler than killing the lords who stood between one and the throne. Just in case. Just for influence.

“I think you ought to do a little more considering,” Constancia said. “For example, stop thinking of Helindra’s ambition and start thinking about Cormyr’s needs. You are a bright young man with a fair future—you might control the Crownsilvers’ fortunes someday, and someday soon, Cormyr may have need of it.”

“Stop talking like a nursery story,” Brin said. “What do you think I’m going to do? Free a magic sword and lead armies against Shade when nothing else will save us?”

Constancia was quiet a moment. “To be truthful? Yes. Something like that, with a little less scorn.” She regarded him solemnly. “Before I left, the word was that two of the Purple Dragons’ palisade forts in the Marshes of Tun had been razed, slain down to a soul.”

‘Destroyer of the Marauding Bullywugs.’ It does have a ring to it.”

“Monsters don’t wipe out seasoned soldiers that way,” Constancia snapped. “And not twice over. Not with bodies left behind. There may be no evidence to mark Shade’s fault, but it doesn’t take the likes of Vangerdahast to see who makes gains by erasing the defenses along the border.”
No matter where you came from, there was something, someone out in the world or under the bed that frightened you as a child. The dark shapes that lurked on the edge of the world, the ones you knew were real because even adults feared them—because the adults had grown up fearing them. On the edges of the Sea of Fallen Stars, it was the aboleths and their servitors, reaching out from the Far Realm to spread madness and destruction. Near the Underchasm it might be the drow raiders. North, far north, children might worry that the orcish kingdom of Many-Arrows might assault their village one day, without warning.

In Cormyr, Brin had grown up with the fear of Netheril deep down in the marrow of his bones. From the City of Shade, the twelve princes ruled the growing kingdom of Netheril, pressing its borders right up to Cormyr’s frontier. Any day might bring the advance that pressed into Cormyrean territory. Any year might be the one that brought Shade to Suzail. The borders stood, the war wizards kept watch, the military trained, and still, everyone knew, it might not be enough. The Shadovar might ooze out of the dark corners of the city, slipping across the planes to overwhelm Cormyr.

It nearly shook his resolve, but no—Shade wasn’t a danger enough to risk everything. “Lead armies yourself, then. You’d make a better general than I would. Squall would make a better general than I would.”

Constancia sighed. “If this is about that girl—”

“What girl?”

“Please. I saw you and her on the road here.” Constancia shook her head. “I told them it was a poor plan to keep you isolated that way. Better to learn ‘the way of kings’ with suitable maids, than to wait and have you swoon over the first girl you meet in the world.”

“It’s not about Havilar,” Brin said firmly.

“Don’t let it be,” Constancia said. “You can’t marry some feral tiefling.”

“Who said anything about marriage?” He’d known Havilar all of a few tendays, and maybe . . . maybe he was fond of her. He thought she might be fond of him. Fond enough he started to suspect she was teasing him. But even if she were serious, he wouldn’t think of marrying her. He didn’t think of marrying anyone, if he could help it.
Constancia added, “You get a bastard on her, and it might well be worse.”

“Oh holy gods!” Brin cried, certain his face would burst if he blushed any harder. “That’s enough. Don’t talk about her like that, and don’t give me any more advice I don’t need.”

Constancia chuckled. “It wouldn’t be embarrassing if it weren’t a little true, now would it? I’m only saying what you need to hear.”

“No,” Brin said. “You’re saying what you think will make me come home. I had good reasons for leaving, and good reasons for not going back. Right now, no one outside the Citadel knows I exist, and everything’s fine. Everyone’s as safe as they can be. As soon as Aunt Helindra tells the whole world she’s reordering the line of succession, that’s going to change.”

Constancia heaved a great sigh. “You’re not going to die.”

“No, but you might!” Brin said, his voice rising. “Did you think of that? Did you think that you might be the first person someone who wanted control of me would assassinate?”

He was suddenly aware of many eyes watching the pair of them. Mehen cleared his throat, and Brin colored. “I’ll give you a moment more,” the dragonborn said, turning back to his things. “Only do it quietly.”

Constancia chuckled in a good-natured way, and Brin recalled they hadn’t always fought, she hadn’t always pressed him to please Aunt Helindra. Once upon a time, Constancia had held him while he cried for his father. She’d even taken the flute his father had carved and carried from out of the midden pile, so Brin could carry it as well.

“I’ll be fine, you know,” she said. “And so will you. You’ve painted yourself this horrible scenario where you have to save us from ourselves, but you forget the Crownsilvers have been lords of Cormyr for twelve hundred years. They will survive, and so will you and I because of that. But only if we do our duty.”

“I’m more than just a Crownsilver,” he said. “And so are you.”

Constancia shook her head sadly. “You’ll come around to it one day, Aubrin. It’s fine to spend your youth pretending you’re beholden to no one but yourself, a lone rider on the road of life. But one day you’ll realize that you’re never really alone. You’re a part of something greater. You’re a Crownsilver, and you shall always be so.”
“All right,” Mehen said. “It’s best we were on our way.” Brin took a step back from Constancia, whose gray eyes narrowed.

“I . . . ,” he started. He swallowed. “Mehen, it was good to have met you.”

The dragonborn nodded stiffly. “So you’re staying behind?” he said. “Probably best.” The hard stare made Brin wonder if he’d given Mehen just as bad an impression about Havilar as he had Constancia. Mehen took hold of Constancia’s shackles. Constancia pulled away, bent forward so she was close to Brin’s ear.

“There’s a coinlender in the city, Tannannath and Frynch,” she said quickly. “You ask for the Broken Marble safehold. Write the runes A C O atop each other when they ask, and the answer is ‘He made the right choice’—although if you need me to tell you that when it comes to it, I’ll box your ears. There’s plenty to keep you fed and sheltered until you change your mind."

“Constancia—” he started.

“And take some of that coin and buy Squall back,” Constancia ordered. “You can ride him home. He’ll carry you.”

“I’m not coming home.”

“Let’s go,” Mehen said, muscling her toward the doors that led to the hall of the portal.

Brin thought of chasing after him, but the thought of saying good-bye to any of them was more than he could bear. Especially Havilar.

You’ll see them again, he told himself. It’s not such a big world. He watched Mehen’s back as he disappeared into the crowded hallway. You don’t have to say good-bye.

Coward, Brin thought.