

One

Elde the Jester was not laughing.

He was a man who prided himself on his ability to see the humor in all things—indeed, it was his vocation, his calling, the very soul of his profession. Yet, for the life of him, try though he might, he could not find the slightest reason to smile.

The pulsing mix of conversation and argument going on at the six banquet tables around him was enough to try even *his* considerable patience. Glancing across the room at the king, he wondered how Dylwyn was managing to keep from throwing every last guest out into the deepening night.

The man is a diplomat, he thought. And that is what is called for here.

“Come now, Your Highness,” said Filgrith, the largest and most powerful of the five barons of Glittereye, washing down a mouthful of bread with a sloshing goblet of rich, red wine. “Surely you’ll admit that we are entitled to a great deal more than the Elves have given us in the past. Now is the time to stop our talking and *act*.”

“Entitled is a strong word, Filgrith,” Dylwyn replied, placing his own goblet gently on the table in an effort to distance himself from the poorly mannered baron who had become his chief rival. “The Elves are a noble and ancient race, honest nearly to a fault and not given to acts of greed. Our forebears spent too many years at war with them for us to risk our treaties by asking for too much.”

“Sire,” came a measured voice from the far end of the table. It was Baron Vellom of the West. “As is often the case, I do believe my colleague’s empty stomach has caused his mouth to stretch a bit too wide.” Choosing not to acknowledge Filgrith’s stuff-mouthed grunt of agreement, Vellom added, “Perhaps after the main course has arrived and been consumed we might all be of a clearer mind to discuss these important issues.”

“All matters of this undue delay in our dinner aside, he makes a fair enough point,” a third voice interjected.

“You have something to add, Baron Colar?” Dylwyn asked. “Other than a complaint about my hospitality?”

Careful, Sire, Elde thought. *You’re supposed to be the reasoned one.*

“I do indeed,” Colar answered, standing. “At no time in our meetings have you shown any inclination toward changing our position at the bargaining table. The Elves will be arriving in a few days and we’re no closer to a new set of contracts than we were a week ago. The Eastern forests under my care have produced a grade of timber to rival that of the southern forests of the Elves themselves. Surely you don’t expect me to take the same low price for our superior millwork that I have in the past?” Then, turning to Elde when he could see no change in the stony expression of the king, he asked, “Perhaps your esteemed advisor could share his thoughts on the subject. You have been unusually quiet the past two days, Jester Elde. What is it you are thinking?”

If only I were allowed to say, Elde thought, managing to suppress a grin. *It would certainly take your minds off the meal.*

“Yes, indeed, Elde,” Dylwyn said, to his surprise. “What are your thoughts about what the barons have said?”

“Well,” Elde began, clearing his throat to suppress the truth that was hovering so dangerously close to his tongue. “It seems to me that this past week has shown that the rivalries and disagreements between the baronies can be put aside for the greater good of Glittereye. And that is encouraging to see.” Smiling as he looked each man in the eyes, he tried to read their thoughts. “I have chosen to sit quietly and listen to your concerns and suggestions both here in the Festival Hall and in the Council Room, and have considered each with a great deal of attention.”

“*And?*” Colar asked.

Not one to be intimidated or to rush his counsel, Elde waited a moment before answering, despite the look of annoyance on Colar’s face. “Although I agree that the baronies, at your capable direction, are prospering, and your output and quality are unsurpassed in the history of

the kingdom, I do not think it should necessarily follow that this prosperity be used to take advantage of such important allies as the Elves.”

“Well stated,” King Dylwyn said, raising his glass to indicate a toast. “To Jester Elde, descendent of Alde the First, Fair and Wise counselor that he was. As he brought an end to the wars between the clans and helped to forge this kingdom and the positions we all hold within it, so has Elde encouraged us all to prevent pulling asunder what has been so carefully woven together thru decades of well-earned trust.”

Much to Elde’s surprise, not a single goblet was kept from touching a lip as the king drank deeply from his. Adding further to his sense of relief was the fact that two of the barons, Ciloto and Tooras, were even nodding in agreement with the king’s kind words.

Of the feelings of the other three barons, Elde was far less sure, although he could sense in their differing degrees of negative emotion an underlying tension at work in the hall that belied any attempt at merriment or joviality.

The rest of the evening would be more unpleasant than it had been thus far.

The disagreement was nothing new—there had always been grumbling by the barons and lesser nobles, especially at the time of the yearly trade conferences, but this year felt different. There was a rudeness and intolerance radiating from the noble class that Elde had either never noticed or which had steadily increased on pace with the barons’ profits and the lengths of their belts to a level that could no longer be ignored.

Trusting his developed powers of observation above all else, he was strongly inclined toward the latter.

It was this very rudeness that had made the evening so difficult for Elde, even before the outspoken barons had put him on the spot and forced him to speak his mind before he was ready to do so. The barked commands and crude jokes aimed at the servant class had brought into sharp relief just how great the disparity had become between those few who held power and wealth and the many, many more who did not.

It was a realization that made Elde feel more than a little helpless and, in truth, embarrassed, for he too had profited from his lineage. Although a Jester did not hold rights to land or positions of real power outside the castle's walls, he and those like him had managed to distance themselves from the class of acrobats and bell-and-motley performers that was referred to with no small disdain as *clowns*.

He had studied with the castle tutors and court historians almost to the same extent as the king, reading the great authors and studying problems of government and diplomacy that those in the lower classes could not even begin to understand. He had studied music, art, and horsemanship.

His life had been lived in the sure arms of education and high culture.

And yet he felt himself no better at this moment than the clowns.

“What are you thinking, Jester?”

Baron Tooras, the oldest of the five barons, and not surprisingly, the most reasonable, was staring intently at Elde from over the rim of his goblet. “You look as though you’ve just been the recipient of a disturbing revelation.”

“I have,” Elde replied, finding it easy to confide in the overseer of the southern forests, “though I feel somewhat better for it.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“I have just been noting the quality of dress and jeweled adornment on the other barons and their families, and the way they have chosen to treat those who serve us here tonight. They have nothing at all to complain about, and yet that’s all I’ve heard from them.”

“They do not realize how fortunate they are to have been born into the noble class,” Tooras answered. “And yet you can hardly blame them. They and their fathers have risen to power in a time when most of the hard work and hopefully the violence are behind us. My father filled my ears with stories of the Unity Wars, Elde, whether I wanted to hear them or not. Hundreds of years of petty chieftains fighting amongst themselves and with the Elves nearly

ruined the Centerlands and made all of us slaves. These men have grown soft and greedy in the coddling arms of comfort and peace. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Perhaps more so than you think," Elde replied, "though you are a man wise beyond your years."

"That is almost an impossibility," Tooras said with a laugh that stretched the deep lines of his face. "And though you honor me with your flattery, I know that I am an old fool who is himself too comfortable to speak out against the wishes of my fellows. I tell you, Elde, if I had a son I would turn the whole of my lands and title over to him and retire to my forest cabin. We're supposed to serve the less fortunate, and here they are serving us." He motioned to a serving girl hovering nervously over Elde's shoulder.

"What is it, Marie?" Elde asked impatiently, curious as he was to hear more of Tooras' words.

"Oh, yes, well, pardon me, Master Elde, but your goblet is not full."

Elde flinched slightly as several drops of wine splashed his hand as the serving girl hurriedly filled his cup.

"Pardon me again, sir," the girl said, stooping to wipe his hand.

"It's fine," Elde answered, lifting his napkin and giving the girl a reassuring look. "I am sure you have plenty else to do."

"I should say she does!" Filgrith replied with a sneer. "I have finished my fruit and cheese and am waiting most impatiently for the main course!"

Elde concentrated on maintaining his supportive look for Marie, who appeared as though she were physically wounded by the callous baron's words.

Besides, it kept him from saying something to the baron he might later regret.

"Do not fret, Baron Filgrith," the head cook replied, approaching the table and bowing low before the round and red-faced man. "The main course has arrived!"

Arrived indeed, Elde thought, watching a procession of no less than fifteen servant girls, including Cook's own daughter, struggle beneath the weight of identical covered platters,

stationing themselves around the six long, oaken tables arranged in a rectangle in the center of the hall.

“Don’t just stand there,” Filgrith croaked, several fleshy chunks of peach falling from his mouth to rest like slaughtered chicks on his brocaded shirt. “Uncover those platters and be on your way! I am about to pass out from a lack of sustenance!”

What happened next would forever live on in the annals of the castle. Perhaps not in the formal histories, but in the stories told by the castle servants to pass the time near winter fires.

“Your majesty and his honored guests,” Cook said nervously, veering sharply from his usual tone of quiet, capable self-confidence. “On behalf of the kitchen staff, I offer for your enjoyment the evening’s delights.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Filgrith bellowed, bringing a smattering of agreements and applause from those around him. “Give me that platter and move out of the way,” he said, pushing aside a timid serving girl. “My dear,” he said, turning to his wife as he lifted the cover, “you shall be the first to sample the Cook’s fine fare.”

Her reply, in the form of a blood-chilling scream, stopped the room cold.

As his eyes fell upon the half-exposed platter, Elde saw why.

Where there should have been a roast, or game bird, or other steaming and carefully garnished delicacy, there was instead a rotted animal’s head gazing out at the guests, the dead sockets of its eyeholes making silent and sobering mockery of the evening’s proceedings.

A swelling chorus of screams, yells, and vicious outbursts of revulsion and disgust quickly broke the silence, as platters were uncovered around the hall. Elde watched with helpless frustration as the chaos built to a deafening, cacophonous pitch as a swell of guests and the servants who were avoiding them moved toward the walls and away from the rotting heads.

“It wasn’t us!” Cook protested, grabbing his wife in one burly arm and his daughter in the other. “It was Chicken made us do it. Chicken and Rabbit as I live and breath!”

Elde felt his fists clenching in anger despite his best efforts to will them otherwise.

This had his thirteen-year-old son’s name written all over it.

Alde had found trouble.

Again.

Scanning the room for a glimpse of his child, who was no doubt hiding in the shadows somewhere nearby having a good laugh, Elde felt the considerable weight of a fellow diner sag against him as she fainted and slipped to the floor. Glancing down at the evening-gowned bulk, he recognized Baron Filgrith's wife, certainly the worst of all possible scenarios.

"Guards!" he shouted over the growing din of screams and pleas for calm. "Help this woman, for all that's good."

"Elde," King Dylwyn called from the head of the table, "who would do such an ugly, disruptive thing?"

"I am not quite sure, Your Highness," he said, stepping lithely aside as two men attempted to revive the baroness with a goblet of cold water. "But give me half an hour and I am sure I'll find out."

"Very well, then," the third ruler of Glittereye answered. "Do what you must. I will try to calm things here."

Ten minutes later, after searching every hallway and alcove between the Festival Hall and their chambers, Elde found Alde hiding beneath a pile of discarded linens outside his bedroom. Wordlessly pointing to a chair by the fire, the Jester severely eyed his son, waiting for him to take a seat and offer his explanation.

As if any could possibly do.

After what seemed like an eternity, the slight-framed teenager stood up and began to walk to the judgment seat. "Father, really, it was—"

"A joke?" Elde interrupted, quickly sensing where this was headed. "Silly, harmless, really just a lark? I know well enough your feelings on the matter. It never changes, Alde. I tell you, I have grown weary of having this conversation with you. I have had it."

Taking in a deep draught of air as he allowed the dagger of his anger to penetrate Alde's thick skull, Elde ran his finger across the furrow in his brow. It had grown more visible in the past months, as had the amount of grey at his temples.

"Father, please, if you just—"

"What, Alde? Hear you out? Take your side? I would like nothing better than to see your point of view, because I am beginning to think your sole purpose behind these *pranks* is to degrade in your lifetime all of the achievements our family has managed over ten generations as jesters in Glittereye, and that is something I cannot allow."

Alde shook his head in protest. "That's a bit unfair, don't you think?"

"You know the importance of the seasonal trade conferences," Elde continued, foregoing a direct response. "Why would you set out to deliberately embarrass the king and our family in front of the barons?"

Employing his never-fail look of complete and utter innocence, Alde said, "Father. It wasn't deliberate. It wasn't personal, and it wasn't about ruining the family name. It was just a joke."

"No, Alde. That's where you're wrong. A joke is coating the kindling in oil so the kitchen maids get a scare. A joke, albeit a dangerous one, is hiding a knight's shield an hour before he stands review. Frightening the head cook and his wife into doing what they did at the trade banquet, however, is... Why did you do it?"

Alde, who normally had an answer to such questions, found himself suddenly at a loss. He had not expected his father to ask that particular question so soon. There was usually more talk of the family history, expectations, the debt they owed the king, and other matters of guilt. His father's directness had caught him completely unready, and indeed, quite *unable* to give an answer.

At least, not one that would save him from a lengthy talk.

Or worse.

Father is good at his profession, he thought.

“Alde,” Elde said, his tone clearly conveying his lack of patience for any more stalling. “I want an answer.”

“I did it—just to get a rise out of them,” Alde blurted out, surprised at how truthful his words actually were. “Stir things up, you know? Nudge them off their perches a bit. If you haven’t noticed, there was a clear view into many an upturned nose this week. Nasty sight, too.”

Elde felt himself being pulled in by his son’s crude but accurate assessment and impulse to act on it, but he caught himself.

Barely.

“I *have* noticed. But sending the entire banquet hall into a fit of hysteria is no nudge, Alde. You have no sense of scale. You go too far. Besides, you are practically a child. It’s not your place.”

“No one else is doing anything about it,” Alde answered. “And as to my going too far, isn’t that the point of honing the Jester’s wit? To use your cunning and intellect to get anyone—the barons, the staff, even the king’s own cook—to do what you want him to, no matter the odd hurt feeling or bent rule?”

The expression on his father’s face made him immediately regret his answer.

Anger he could have worked with, but this?

“What have I not done?” Elde asked, his face flattening into a mask of sadness. “How have I allowed you to so badly misjudge the purpose of our work? To break it down into such ugly and unjust parts? You of all people—you who were named for the first of our line—how could you take the complexities of our position and use them for sport? Is that how Alde the First brought the warring tribes together? Is that how the Unity Wars were won, with children’s tricks and an attitude like everyone and everything is fair game? You cannot possibly be so dense.”

“Why does it always come back to my name?” Alde asked, sliding off the chair onto the floor. “Don’t you think I know the responsibility that comes with it? Every day I wake up with it echoing in my head. I’ve gotten so I can’t stand the sound of my name! At every special event, it rings in my ears—‘Alde the Virtuous and Compassionate, who journeyed from beyond the Ambir

Mountains in the midst of war to visit the labor camps, curing the ill and soothing the souls of the weak and imprisoned.’ ‘Alde the Devout and Peaceful, who gave drink to the wounded during battle, no matter whose flag their blood was shed beside.’ ‘Alde the Terrifically Stupendous, who presided over the first clan council, who became the first of the line of jesters aligned with those who would one day bind together into the Five Baronies of Glittereye.’ ‘Alde the—“

“Stop it!”

Elde’s tone was enough to stop a charging boar.

Alde had made his point.

Now to press the advantage and mend the fence.

“You have done well with me, Father,” Alde said after a time. “I know what my name and your position mean to the kingdom. Maybe I am not the one to carry them on. Maybe you’ll have another child—a better son—and he can take my name and I will take another and all will be well.”

“Such a thing is less than likely, Alde,” Elde said. “And I think you know as much. As a matter of fact, I think you fancy yourself just as clever as ‘Alde the Terrifically Stupendous,’ which is a double inaccuracy I haven’t the time or patience to debate with you now. Besides, no one is asking that you be as great a man as he was—I do not expect that from myself—but in your desire to be your own person, you seem determined to reduce yourself to nothing more than a *clown*. It won’t take much more than the kind of thing you’ve been doing lately, I can tell you that.”

“I don’t understand the harm in making people laugh,” Alde said, genuine curiosity knitting his brow and softening his tone. Then, the change of subject that would buy him some badly needed time. “I think the lesser jesters serve a purpose equally as important as ours. Is being a clown really that bad?”

“Of course not,” Elde answered, for the moment willing to indulge his son’s question.

There’d be time enough for punishment and stern words.

“The division of the jesters began without intention, as most things do,” Elde began, effortlessly falling into his role as chief historian for their kind. “You’ve heard all of this, Alde—how word of Alde the First’s accomplishments spread across the Centerlands and how, once the rebuilding had begun, the skills of the early jesters were needed by those overseeing the reorganization of what would, through many men’s toil, become Glittereye. After so much violence and hatred, the people wanted their hearts lightened—they wanted to laugh as much as they had cried, so they hired men like Alde the First to advise and entertain them. But the demand was greater than there were capable men to fill it, so the more witless and graceless among us used comedy and costume to cover their lack of skill.”

“*We* wear the motley,” Alde interjected, never being one to hold his tongue until a lesson was complete.

“Yes we do,” Elde answered gently. “But not in the same way. They attached bells and horns to their motley to announce their arrival as they entered a town. Children would run out to meet them, urging these clowns, as they called them, to fall over invisible obstacles and otherwise debase themselves for the few coins they could coerce from the crowds. These were not learned men in the service of a household or idea but roving acrobats in it for the price. Is that what you want to be, Alde? Just a common street performer, wandering from town to town, doing pratfalls for meager coin?”

“Some days, I want *exactly* that,” Alde said, resignedly crossing his arms and legs, “and some days I don’t. But I know I can’t live up. It’s a big responsibility, going through life with the same name as the hero who ended the clan wars. Why couldn’t I have been named for someone less heroic? Or maybe not named after anyone at all. It could be the king made a mistake. Or maybe he didn’t want to take the time to name me something original.”

“The naming of a friend’s child is no burden,” Elde said, the trembling in his hands signaling his frustration. “It is an honor, and the symbolic first act in the commitment to help raise the child. And the Deities know your mother and I need all the help we can get.”

“Your displeasure with me has no boundary tonight,” Alde said, turning away from his father and grabbing a scrap of parchment from the floor, which he proceeded to tear into thin strips.

“Nor your defiance,” Elde shot back. “You speak of what you do not know and then play the wounded dog when you are called on it. You have no idea the hours King Dylwyn spent in the Hall of Books and Ancestries, pouring over volumes to find a name that suited you. He was secure in his choice. I cannot say the same for you.” Elde sat beside his son. “Our ancestor did not set out to do memorable things. No great man ever does. I think that is a point you miss. A hero, my son, is a man who sets out to do *some* thing, and, because he follows his heart, it turns out to be the *right* thing. Where is your heart in all of this?”

“I don’t know,” Alde said, letting the last strip of parchment fall onto the floor. “Does that mean I don’t have a good heart?”

“Only you can judge,” Elde answered, placing a comforting hand on his son’s arm. “Now, tell me again just why it is you did what you did. The king is expecting an explanation and I am already long overdue at the banquet hall.”

Alde thought back to the moment he had conceived of his plan, just four nights earlier.

“Well,” he said, his eyes glinting with remembrance of the plot. “It seemed to me that many of the nobles—especially the barons and Filgrith in particular, were filling themselves awfully full of meat—they were hardly leaving grizzle enough on the bones for the dogs. All the while Cook and his wife were lording over the kitchen staff, ‘More birds! Send out the hunters for more meat! Look lively girls, leave no plate empty!’ Think of it, Father—those poor girls slaving away. And dozens of hunters, out in the dark hours, away from their families and all the while great platters of rabbit and quail are being emptied with scarcely a ‘Thank you’ or ‘Appreciate the effort.’”

Elde held up his hand. “I appreciate your concern for the kitchen staff and the hunters,” he said, “which leaves little question as to the goodness of your heart. And, as I said, I was having some of the same thoughts this evening.”

Once again Elde felt unsettled at the knowledge that his son, rebellious as he was, had been more in tune to the injustices of the miniature society of the castle than he.

But he'd be damned if he would let Alde know that just yet.

"Never mind your pity for the servant class—I fail to see how it accounts for what happened next."

"I felt it was best to show the nobles just how lucky they were to have good meat to eat, and in such abundance. After all, Father, it is you who always says, 'You don't appreciate the candle—

—until you are in the dark,'" Elde finished, the barest hint of a smile on his lips. "Glad to know you listen."

"Always."

As fast as it had appeared, the smile faded. "So how is it that you showed them the light?"

"Finally," Alde said, up on his feet and feeling as though he might just make Elde understand, "we come to the...ahem...meat of the matter. It was so simple. After the second night's feasting, I snuck into the kitchen and borrowed a few leftover items from the castoff pile."

Alde could see by the growing look of consternation on his father's face that the battle was far from won.

How did he lose him again so quickly?

"These castoffs you refer to," Elde asked, "they were the chicken and rabbit Cook was babbling about, weren't they?"

"Yes they were. A steer's head would have been more dramatic but never would have fit on a mop handle, so I made do as best I could."

Elde was not amused.

"Continue please."

"As I said, it was a simple enough thing. Using the castoffs," he gave his father a sidelong glance—he looked no *more* upset and that was something, "I spent the next three nights at the bed-chamber window of Cook and his wife, allowing Chicken and Rabbit to expound on

the evils of meat consumption. I have to admit, it was only my intention to convince them not to serve meat tonight, but then a strange and wonderful thing happened.”

“I question your choice of words,” Elde said without enthusiasm, “but I am listening.”

“Fair enough. Last night, in the midst of Chicken’s misty-eyed speech about the coming fate of his wife and children, I slipped on a loose brick below the windowsill, which sent Chicken’s head rolling vigorously toward Cook’s wife, as though she were the very target of its journey. She sprang from the bed, screaming. I hadn’t the slightest notion what to do, so I improvised.

‘Good lady, do not be frightened!’ I said as Chicken might. ‘The indignity of rolling across your dirty, dusty floor can be no worse than the fate my own precious daughter will face at the end of your cursed cleaver on the morn. Repent and know some peace.’

“Cook’s wife was quite beside herself. She became all teary and hysterical and sat upon her bedding to talk with the head. ‘Forgive me, dear Chicken,’ she said with a sigh. ‘I have a daughter of my own and I see your reason for anger and the need for my repentance.’ Then she stood and, clutching the head to her bosom, vowed to teach the barons a lesson they would not soon forget. From then on, it was really out of my hands. Literally.” Alde stopped for a moment, secure in the apparent genius of how it had ultimately played out.

“So now you’re trying to tell me it wasn’t your fault?” Elde asked incredulously.

“How was I to know what she meant?” Alde countered. “I was as surprised as anyone when the Baroness started to scream and all those lids started coming off. The servant class is a superstitious lot. Perhaps the clergy should spend less time in their fancy chapels with the rich and more time educating the misguided poor.”

Elde shook his head. “Perhaps you should refrain from giving them *reason* to be superstitious. I am still getting the sense from you that this was all just harmless fun. How can that be?”

“Come on, Father,” Alde answered, spreading his hands in a gesture of disbelief at Elde’s reticence. “You have to admit that all those fainting and screaming ladies made quite the sight, can’t you?”

Alde felt himself being pulled to the ground by his father’s immense hand. “The sight of fainting ladies is amusing to you is it? Perhaps if you had Filgrith’s wife sliding down your arm you wouldn’t find it so amusing. Or perhaps you’d find it more so!

“Your tutors and those in the castle who have not fallen prey to your pranks have nothing but praise for you. You have proceeded well in your training. Your knowledge of history, language and science is unsurpassed among your peers and you have shown great promise in the Jester’s Arts. But you use these gifts for ill gains and that is where you displease me. You can choose to ignore your promise and bemoan the legacy of your name—there is apparently very little I can do about that. But your problem is not your lineage, Alde. It is your lack of insight into your own actions. It’s a child’s naiveté that completely lacks any shred of charm or imagination.”

“Now it is I who do not understand,” Alde answered, his mouth curling into a pronounced pout. “I already told you why I did it—to teach the barons a lesson in gratitude. It just got out of hand, that’s all. Why can’t you just let me be!”

“Because your memory is as selective as the application of your studies,” Elde replied. “Didn’t you just tell me you did it to see if you could use what you have learned—what you think you have seen me do—in order to manipulate Cook and his wife? That excuse didn’t move me so now it’s back to teaching the barons a lesson. It’s no matter, because you failed at both. You’re right, it did get out of hand. A Jester must understand the possible results of his actions. That is how he proves his wit and intelligence. You only proved yourself immature and managed to embarrass the king and me in front of the barons. Can’t you see that I need their respect? Are you so angry that you would make me seem an incompetent fool who cannot handle his spoiled teenage son?”

“Now it is you who speak of what you do not know,” Alde said, not caring that his tone and words were crossing a line he had never before dared to even approach. “Do you not see me

watching you for countless hours while you work? I've always looked forward to the nights I'm allowed to sit in a corner of the throne room as you play to visiting dignitaries. I'm amazed at the way you can be all things to all people, as the situation demands—base and learned, kingly or subservient, all chosen to suit the moment. You play the lute better than the Royal Minstrels, and you have no idea the pride I have felt singing and playing beside you when I have been allowed. I respect you more than you know, and if I have denied you knowledge of that by my actions, then I am truly sorry. Perhaps if you used some of that same diplomacy with me, things would be different.”

“Perhaps,” Elde answered. “If you could give me more reason to *be* diplomatic.”

Alde paused for a moment, not wanting to give in too easily. “That seems fair.”

Elde ran his hand through Alde's thick tangles of coal black hair. “I expected no less,” he said softly. “But just to be sure, I forbid you to enter the kitchen without my permission.”

“But I have friends there, Father!” Alde protested. “You know how much I like Cook's children and the kitchen maids are always so happy to see me.”

“That is not my concern,” Elde said.

“I don't understand. You have never punished me like this before. I thought we were finally beginning to understand one another. I'm sure that the barons are right now gorging themselves on meat—not as much as usual, perhaps, but they certainly won't starve.”

“Once again,” Elde said, his voice growing in anger not so much at his son but his own inability to handle the role of disciplinarian when needed most, “you go off on these *missions* of yours, professing to do this or that, all the while passing it off as just another joke that everyone should laugh at. The fact is, Alde, you are not funny!”

Alde felt his cheeks begin to flush and his eyes rapidly begin to blink, as though his father had reached out with lightning speed and slapped him. He turned away as hot tears began to fall.

“Not funny, father?” Alde asked, wiping the tears roughly away with his dirty sleeve, leaving a streak like war paint across his reddening cheeks. “It *was* funny. If you had been there

to see Cook's wife huddling under the linens as those heads bobbed up and down in the window! And Cook wouldn't actually have gone through with it if he didn't see at least a little sense in what I had proposed. I'm sure once I've had a chance to talk with him he won't even be upset."

"You always rely on that, don't you?" Elde asked. "A few words of apology sprinkled with generous portions of your fake charm and everything is made well. Just like the time your teacher caught you doing impressions of him in the Great Hall. I could tell the old man was hurt, but he didn't have the heart to make you feel bad, so he accepted your sheepish grin with grace. The fact that you have managed to charm the entire kitchen staff, Cook included, is all the more reason for you to stay away from them. These are important times, Alde. The Elven trade council arrives in three days. Everyone has enough on their minds without wondering when you'll decide to play another joke."

"Fine," Alde said, still stung at his father's low opinion of his prank. "I will spend tomorrow in the stables. Ralin's day is free."

"Alde," his father replied, renewed sternness in this voice. "Ralin is just two weeks away from his review for the squirehood. He doesn't need to be led astray by you."

"I've learned my lesson," Alde answered. "No more kitchen for me. And from now on, before I do anything, I will think it carefully through. I promise. Can I go?"

Elde, feeling his shoulders relax slightly for the first time that evening, said, "Very well. And think before you act. You'll save us all a lot of grief. Now pick up these scraps of parchment and go to bed!"

"Yes, father," Alde said, adding after a moment, "What are you going to tell the king?"

"I'll think of something. You're to stay in your bed for the remainder of the evening, am I being clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Believe me, I've thought it through a hundred times—it's perfect!"

Ralin peered out from behind the large pile of hay he had volunteered to distribute to the horses before going to bed. “Perfect for whom? You have no worries right now, Alde. Your future is assured. No offense, but when your father dies, you will be the Jester of Glittereye, whether you want to be or not. Whether you are any *good* or not.”

“That’s the second time tonight someone I like has insulted me,” Alde said. “And I was actually thinking of *pitching in*.”

“Clever,” Ralin said, lofting a forkful of hay over a stall door toward an expectant mare. “I wasn’t insulting you—you’ll be a terrific jester, especially when it comes to displays of wit. But you don’t have to worry where your life will take you, what you will have to do if you can’t do what you want. So you don’t take anything seriously.”

“Why should I? You said it yourself—no matter what I do, whom I annoy, or what my teachers think of me, I’m going to be the next Jester of Glittereye. There’s no stopping the inevitable. Alde the Second will take his place in history and try his very best not to mess it up.”

“You know,” Ralin said with a pronounced roll of the eyes, “if you would shovel this hay the way you just shoveled that sob story, I’d be in bed within the hour. Like you’re *already* supposed to be.”

“I am, so to speak.” The mischievous smile on Alde’s handsome face was one Ralin had become frustratingly familiar with.

It meant someone was being fooled.

His friend had no shame.

“Tell me something,” Alde asked, lifting a few strands of hay on the end of his pitchfork and immediately depositing them on the tips of Ralin’s boots. “Are you ever tempted to tell Sir Laurel or my father when you know I’m up to no good? You know, to gain merit points or however it works with you mini-knights?”

“Now it’s my turn to be insulted,” Ralin said, brushing the hay from his otherwise spotless boots and taking a seat on an overturned bucket. “I am not so intent on becoming a knight that I would betray the secrets of a friend.”

“That’s good to know,” Alde said, thrusting his pitchfork in the hay and lofting a large pile into an adjacent stall. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, “I have a burlap sack stuffed with clothes that I have roughly shaped like me. I put it under my covers when the need arises.”

“And I take it the need arose tonight?”

“Well, yes,” Alde answered, continuing his effort to help his friend by stabbing another forkful of hay. “I think making the kitchen off limits is punishment enough, though my father disagrees, so Alde the Third, Sack Man of the Five Baronies, lets us both win. Besides, mother is off visiting her cousin and father and the king will be up all night discussing the trade conference. I have no worries.”

“I’m concerned about Alde,” King Dylwyn said with a frown. “His antics have gotten well out of hand as of late. Filgrith was quite beside himself, to say nothing of his wife.”

I give him credit, Elde thought. He waited until all our other business was done.

I thought I might be spared.

“I can assure you, Sire, this time Alde won’t let us down.” It took all of Elde’s considerable skill to match the confidence of his words with his tone and gaze.

Apparently, it worked.

“Very well,” Dylwyn replied. “I know children can be a handful. My Anastasia is not yet thirteen and she is already so rebellious. Always out riding with the boys, and she gives the etiquette maids nothing but grief.” Shaking his head, he gave a reassuring smile to his old friend. “We are some pair, eh? Fighting to establish a lasting kingdom amid growing dissension and our own children run roughshod over our rules.”

“I fear you have done a far better job than I.”

“Nonsense. He has great promise, Elde, and we have all broken rules on occasion. It just concerns me when his pranks begin to involve the barons. I do not need to look foolish in front of them. Their collective opinion of me is sufficiently low as it is.”

Elde nodded his head in reluctant agreement. “There is little doubt that these are unsteady times in Glittereye, Sire, but no more so than your father and grandfather faced. I have every faith that good sense and your capable rule will prevail.”

“If they do, I will have you to thank.”

It was a point of pride with Elde that the king was so cognizant of his contributions. He carried out his duties with a fervor matched only barely by the most devoted knights and nobles in the king’s service. He had spent many sleepless nights by Dylwyn’s side, sorting out the fragile kingdom’s politics and appeasing her ever-growing population. Perhaps it was Elde’s ability to see Dylwyn as a vulnerable man capable of mistakes and weaknesses that led the king to hold his jester in higher stead than his station might seem worthy of in the eyes of others.

“You have always served me well, Elde. Your ancestors would be proud. I could wish nothing more for Glittereye than to have the capable men of your line forever by the side of her kings.”

“You mean despite my son’s recent behavior?” Elde asked in a voice Dylwyn had to strain to hear.

“I chose his name well, my friend. He will not disappoint us. I’m sure of it. Now,” the king said, leaning in close and placing his hand on his advisor’s arm, “there is something else which troubles you.”

Taking a deep breath, Elde decided the king had enough to worry about without him sharing his thoughts on the disparities between the classes.

“I am just tired. There is much to do before the Elves arrive.”

Sensing Elde’s reluctance to disclose his true feelings and respecting the choice as being other than needlessly secretive, Dylwyn did not press. “You have done well thus far. I am sure the trade meetings will proceed without further incident.”

“Your confidence in me, and my son, is appreciated, as always, my King,” Elde said, adding with renewed conviction, “and there is no need to worry about tomorrow—I have already

spoken with Alde about it and he understands the importance of our meetings. It will seem as though he is not even here.”

“Given the troubled state of things, I think it would be best if I wasn’t even here tomorrow,” Alde said with a look of concern Ralin almost believed was genuine.

Almost.

Alde had gone to the well too many times with that one.

“Come off it. You’re the *cause* of the latest uproar, so don’t give me the phony speech about wanting to help. You just aren’t happy unless you’re breaking someone’s rules. If I were you, I’d be grateful to be born into the family I was and do my best not to cause trouble.”

Alde could hardly believe what he was hearing. “You should talk,” he said with a laugh. “My father may be advisor to the king, but he has no land, and no real power. Your father, on the other hand, is baron of the wealthiest district in the kingdom. Some even say that the barons are the ones with *all* the power. So, what do you do? You give it all up to become a knight.”

“It’s all I really want.”

“Maybe so, but you act as though it is knighthood or the ambir mines. If you don’t become a knight—don’t give me that look, I’m sure you will—but for argument’s sake if you don’t, I can’t see how supervising the oil fields and glass factories in your father’s care would be so bad. There are well-made leather gauntlets that will keep your hands soft enough to please the lines of ladies outside your castle door.”

When the usual laugh or punch in the arm didn’t come, Alde threw in a disarming smile for good measure.

When even that was met with icy silence, he began to worry.

“What wrong with you, Ralin?” Alde asked. “That’s the place where you usually knock me down or make fun of my juvenile thought patterns. Say something already.”

Ralin replied by letting out a frustrated yell and driving his pitchfork into the hay pile until half its shaft was buried. When even that didn't help, he slammed his boot into a nearby table, sending bridles and brushes cascading to the floor.

"Easy, Ralin," Alde urged, running his hand along the nape of a nervous-looking stallion. "Your little song and dance of hateful frustration is upsetting the horses."

"Sorry," Ralin answered, though his voice retained its edge. "But I don't want to work in the oil fields. I hate everything about them—the smells, the heat, the holes they leave in the ground. What I want to do is lead a border patrol to the Ambir Mountains. I want to ride with the Elves who protect the forests of Everrain and the Black Light. How could I go back to the boredom of home and the tyranny of my father after what I've experienced here? Leaving would kill me. That's why I'm here every night after all the other pages go to bed, why I volunteer for every lousy duty, and why I'll be here first every morning."

"Don't you think I and everyone else within five miles of the castle know that?" Alde said, placing his hand on his friend's.

It was shaking from anger.

"I remember when you first came here seven years ago. You were a paunchy little kid, and no one believed you would last a week as a page. When my father told me you were to be put in the service of Sir Laurel, captain of the king's guard and perennial Champion of the Field, I nearly wet my britches with laughter."

"If you're trying to cheer me, you're doing a lousy job."

Alde smiled. "I am doing no such thing. I am just annoyed that you and Father find me so incredibly unfunny tonight."

"What Alde did was completely hysterical, Mother. Did you see Lady Tamra? If her gown were any tighter it would have split in two as she fell to the floor. Now *that* would have given the barons something to talk about!"

“Anastasia, that’s enough,” Queen Cecile said, glad her daughter could not see her smile in the mirror as she stood behind her. “You are supposed to be a lady yourself—and a future queen.”

“I get so tired of that,” Anastasia answered, pulling out the braid her mother had just completed and blowing her bangs from her forehead. “I went to see Father today—he was busy, as always, so I sat and listened to the barons bark their demands at him. They haven’t a clue what their people need—they talk on and on about land rights and quotas and all they really want is power. I want to grab them by the hair and pull.”

She said this while grabbing two handfuls of her own.

“Come now,” Cecile said, gently taking her daughter’s hands and holding them tight. “It is us women who are required to be the civilized ones. You must always remember that, Anastasia. We have other, more peaceful weapons at our disposal.”

“Alde certainly came up with a new one tonight,” Anastasia said with no tempered amount of awe at her friend’s latest scheme. “I look forward to his counsel when I am queen. Things will be different, Mother. Be sure of that.”

“Watch how much delight and encouragement you show for Alde’s games,” Cecile cautioned. “He may be witty and charming like his father, but he has a lot of growing up to do. As do you, future queen. You still have much to learn from your father.”

“What about Father?” Anastasia asked. “Why doesn’t he put the barons in their place?”

“It is far more complicated than you can imagine,” Cecile replied. “As peaceful a man as your father is, I am sure there are times when he looks at his sword hanging on the wall and wishes he could use it on the lot of them. But he is king, and the barons do share some decision-making privileges. His grandfather was adamant about that, though I cannot see why. It’s caused nothing but trouble.”

Sensing by the look on her daughter’s face that she had revealed too many of her private thoughts, Cecile began to gather up the discarded ribbons that had not long ago been in Anastasia’s hair.

“You don’t like the way they treat father any more than I do, do you, Mother?” Anastasia asked with enthusiasm, pleasantly surprised at Cecile’s frankness.

“Of course not,” Cecile answered. “And I do what I can to help. Do not think that only Elde and Sir Laurel can stop a war or protect the king from himself.”

“How much can you do, Mother? You said it yourself—we are only women. What power do they allow us to have? You can make yourself seem so humble around the noblemen, even though you are of higher station. I cannot. If being a princess means always curtsying and saying ‘Oh Dear’ and ‘Oh my’ I cannot do it.”

“Such drama,” Cecile said with a laugh. “You really should try the court pageants Anastasia. Your head is filled with such ideas!”

“Seriously, Mother,” Anastasia said, taking off her gown to reveal the riding breeches she nearly always wore beneath it. “How is it that being a lady is no different than being a squire?”

“Is that how you see us?” Cecile asked, picking the gown off the floor and laying it across the bed. “Let me tell you a story that might change your mind. When your great-grandfather was king, a strange, mysterious man came to the castle and filled Paquom’s head with ideas. It was his wife, Silveth—”

“Whom this castle is named for,” Anastasia said, as if her mother needed reminding.

“Whom this castle is named for,” Cecile repeated, knowing what a source of pride it was for her daughter, “had the Hall of Books and Ancestries built, quite shrewdly, so that this troublesome stranger would have a place to spend his time, and the king soon returned to his duties, probably thinking it was all his idea.” Then, with a gleaming eye, she added, “But do not mention that to your father.”

“Mother,” Anastasia said with a giggle, “that is a wonderful story. Perhaps I’ll try to be more like great-grandmother. More sneaky...”

“*Subtle*, dear,” Cecile corrected. “We ladies prefer to call it subtle. Now come here.” When Anastasia was nestled in her lap, Cecile continued. “You are a strong and independent young lady, Anastasia, and I dare say you will one day give the men around you more than they

can handle. But there is a time for gentility. It is when I lay beside your father at night that I best exercise my influence. When he is away from his armies and advisors, when he is no longer king and only my husband, that is when I can help him, because there I am not the queen of this land but of his heart.”

“So it’s not at the council table that the biggest decisions are made?” Anastasia asked.

“No. And certainly not at the dinner table, either, around the likes of that overstuffed Lady Tamra!”

“Everyone says the only reason I was made a page to Sir Laurel was because of who my father is.”

It had taken some time, but Alde had finally gotten Ralin to the heart of the matter.

I’m learning Father, he thought.

And you wanted me in bed.

Alde shook his head. “You know that’s not true. You’re more than worthy enough to serve beneath the Captainguard, or any other knight. Like you say, you’re here first, you leave last. The other pages are just jealous.”

“Perhaps. But they’re right,” Ralin said, turning away to offer a piece of carrot to the mare in the stall beside him. “It *was* because of my father. But I’ll become a squire and a knight because of who *I* am.” He kept his face toward the stall. It was bad enough Alde could hear the tears in his voice. He didn’t want him to see them.

“You’ve just been under a lot of pressure, that’s all.”

For the past month, the stables and the Great Hall had been abuzz with the activities of the pages who were nearing their time of review. Those who were made squires would continue their regular labors, while beginning more intensive study in the matters of weaponry, horsemanship, and military science. Although they had hardly known an idle moment in seven years, the boys were working especially hard, taking on additional tasks with some of the other knights on the selection committee. The principal knight the page served would have the most

weight in the decision, but it was important for the boys to be seen at their best by as many of the judges as possible. Ralin had taken on the most of anyone, and he hoped all the sacrifice would bear out.

“So what about my plan?” Alde asked, changing the subject for both their sakes. “Are you coming with me or not?”

“I don’t know,” Ralin replied, pulling his pitchfork from the pile and continuing his work. “It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. Sounds like a lot of trouble for nothing.”

“My lack of sense seems to be the prevailing subject of the evening,” Alde answered, dropping his pitchfork and hoisting himself up on a crossbeam. Swinging his legs over the beam, he fell back until he was hanging upside-down in front of Ralin. “You need a diversion. Look at yourself, impaling the hay, scaring the horses. You’re all wound up about the selection for squirehood. But you needn’t be—you’re the talk of the Great Hall.”

Ralin looked up from his work, so their noses were almost touching. “Really?”

“Really,” Alde said, swinging himself into a sitting position atop the beam. “It’s hard not to notice when a knight says something nice about someone without using the words *I* or *me*.” Seeing Ralin grin at this bit of truth, Alde continued. “The only reason Sir Laurel wouldn’t promote you to squire is to keep from having to continue your training—he’s been Champion of the Field for years and he’s probably worried that you’ll unseat him one day.”

When Ralin’s grin became a full-blown smile, Alde alit from the beam. “So, I take it my point is made?”

Alde did love the game.

“Just because your plans don’t make sense doesn’t mean you don’t,” Ralin said, clapping his hand on Alde’s back.

“Still need convincing as to the soundness of my plan, eh?” Alde asked, taking Ralin’s pitchfork and balancing it on his nose. “Follow me,” he said, tracking the pitchfork with his eyes and making his way blindly toward the exit. “Let me show you why it makes perfect sense.”

Once outside, Alde removed the fork from the tip of his nose and thrust it toward the sky. “There are the Night Guardians,” Alde said, pointing to the two moons that blazed above. “As you can see, one is full and the other nearly so. My teacher Talorous says that the different sizes of the moons and their different paths across the sky means that they are rarely full at the same time. Tomorrow, near dusk, that very thing will happen. Don’t you think we ought to see that?”

“We can see it,” Ralin answered. “From right here.”

“No, no,” Alde said, annoyed. “There are too many torches by the castle—it really diminishes their beauty. Away from here, near the river, that is the place to see such a splendid sight. And they’ll only grow brighter as we ride home for supper.”

Ralin had to admit to himself that Alde’s idea did have some allure. He had earned his time off and a trip to the forest might be just the thing to help clear his mind for the next two weeks of trials and the selections for squirehood.

“Still,” he said aloud, “pages are not permitted to take horses from the stables. If Sir Laurel or my father were to find out...”

“How could they?” Alde pressed, sensing his friend was close to acquiescence. “My father told me they’ll all be busy with the trade conferences tomorrow. It’s why you have the day to yourself, isn’t it? Come on, we could do some fishing and hunting. I know where Talorous keeps his boat—we could take it out on the river.”

Alde made a host of good points, which was nothing new. This was far from the first time he had come to Ralin with some scheme or other for which he needed some assistance. More often than not, Ralin would give in—and pay the price.

“You always do this, Alde,” he said, seeking his resistance in the memories of the punishments he had received in the past. “You always make it sound so inviting and then we are *both* in hot water.”

“I always get us out, don’t I?” Alde answered.

There was something about him that made Alde impervious to real trouble. No matter what he did or whom he offended, no matter how severe the possible repercussions seemed to be,

he always found his way out without so much as a revocation of privileges. At least up until the events of the past several hours, which had come to Ralin in drips and drabs as the other squires returned from the castle to complete their day's work after short visits with their parents.

Given his current circumstances, Ralin doubted Alde's charm would be the potent talisman he had used it for in the past.

"Sorry, my friend," Ralin began, his mind made up. "You're already in enough trouble, and I don't need any at all. I'll have to pass on this one."

"Pass on what, Oilboy?" said a voice from the dark.

Garamin. Ralin's night, pleasant enough to this point, had just taken a turn toward sour.

"Pass on taking your spot as top squire in the ranks," Alde interjected, placing the end of his pitchfork beneath Garamin's chin. "At least for the first few weeks after his selection."

"Go back to your juggling," Garamin said with a scowl, pushing the pitchfork away. "You don't belong here with the future men of the kingdom. What's the matter, Ralin, can't find any of our kind who want to be around a Pleaser like you? 'Did I do a good job, Sir Laurel? Don't I work extra hard, Sir Laurel?' Here's the news, Oilboy—shoveling hay doesn't make you a knight—strength does, and you are coming up short." To illustrate his point, Garamin pushed Ralin backwards into the stable entrance.

Catching his balance before he fell, Ralin shot the bully a fierce look, although he didn't move to retaliate. Garamin was a year older and a full head taller than he and Alde, and had just begun his first year as squire. Getting into a fight with him would do them no good, even if they won. Besides, Garamin had a nasty temper and a reputation for not playing fair, a strategy reinforced by Sir Pallin, the knight he served.

Seeing that Ralin had no intention of making a play, Alde stepped forward. "You know, Garamin," he said, showing no signs of being intimidated, "you should have been here earlier. Ralin and I were discussing the pitfalls of being a baron's son. It seems to have made you kind of mean. You seem to be suffering from a fear of failure cleverly concealed by the façade of a brainless bully."

Alde said this with such a straight face that Ralin had no idea just what Garamin's reaction might be. The squire never acted like he cared that Baron Colar, his father, oversaw the artisans and craftsmen of the eastern forest. So why would Alde—

“I mean, you seem a bit threatened by Ralin, which I don't quite get. He's smaller, younger, and weaker—as you so bravely demonstrated—so it must be that his father is wealthier and his barony more respected. Or could it be that Pallin has never bested Laurel on the field? Is that it? Because you are so tall and powerful and obviously superior that I can't find any other reason for you to pick on Ralin, or a clown like me.”

Garamin stood in silence for a long time, bedazzlement draping his face. Sensing that Alde had won, Ralin began to truly appreciate why the king was rarely seen without his chief advisor.

“Go—juggle,” Garamin offered weakly when he knew he had to speak. Then, turning to Ralin, who was the easier target of the two, he added, “I'll see you soon Oilboy, *if* you make the cut, which I doubt.”

This last dig was offered so unconfidently that Ralin couldn't help but laugh as Garamin stormed off.

“We'll miss you, Garamin,” Alde said with a wave. “Make sure you duck in those low hallways.” Then, to Ralin, he added, “Those stones wouldn't stand a chance against that massive forehead of his.”

“Let it go, Alde,” Ralin said, taking Alde's pitchfork from him and attacking the hay with renewed vigor.

“I know that tone,” Alde said. “It's pure defeat. Don't even tell me you believe all that nonsense he says about you? You have got to quit taking everyone's opinion so seriously.”

“I'm tired of him,” Ralin answered, putting his fork half-heartedly into the pile and sinking to the floor beside it.

“Garamin’s a bully,” Alde said, plopping down beside him and offering a hunk of bread he had swiped during the pandemonium in the Festival Hall. “All muscle, no intellect. Did you see how easily I confused him?”

“I’m not talking about Garamin,” Ralin answered, declining the bread. “It’s my father. Garamin sounds just like him. Perhaps it’s time to show them that I am capable of more than just cleaning horse stalls. When was the last time you hunted?”

Laughing, Alde jumped to his feet. “You mean you’ll go? You’ll go—that’s great! I’ll meet you here at first light.”

“No,” Ralin said. “In the kitchen, before dawn. We’ll need provisions.”

“Fine. Except, can we make it just *outside* the kitchen? I’m supposed to be behaving.”