

## CHAPTER ONE

Bitter cold stung my cheeks and transformed my breath into vapor. The snow squeaked under my boots as I walked along our caravan of wagons and carriages in search of survivors. Corpses; so far I had found nothing but corpses. I spotted a column of steam rising from one of our fallen men. I rushed to his side only to discover with much chagrin that the white cloud of steam wasn't coming from his mouth... but from his opened gut. I touched his neck—no pulse. This one was dead too.

“Aiii! What kind of frozen, bandit-infested hell is this?” I cursed aloud in frustration and anger. This was the seventh attack by brigands we'd suffered since we'd set foot in Sorvinka. The elite soldiers who had escorted us from Telfar had long been decimated. We were now reduced to using Eva's Farrellian eunuch guards as our last defense—the eunuchs were a *parting gift* from her aunt, Princess Livia. At first, I did not fancy having them around. Now... well, now was a different story.

I cast an uneasy glance at our dead guards. Their numbers were dwindling fast. At this rate we'd soon be left without defense.

I looked at the frozen, barren landscape. I hadn't been long in Sorvinka, and already I hated this country. Although I knew it was Eva's home, I couldn't understand why she wanted so badly to return to this frigid, inhospitable land. How could one miss this miserable place? *She misses her family, not this ice-locked, sunless country*, I told myself. I understood her desire to rejoin them, yet I wished we had stayed in Telfar, my homeland; warm, beautiful, and safe Telfar. I let out a long sigh and then continued my search for survivors. Even though I was still sweaty and warm from having fought in a

battle, I tightened my kaftan around my body knowing that in a moment I would be shivering from the cold in this gray morning air.

“Aaah... Your Highness.” The lament came from my left. I turned toward it.

Clutching his bloody side, Ely, one of Eva’s eunuch guards, was trying to stand. I rushed to his aid and grabbed him just as he was about to fall forward.

His eyes widened. “Your Highness, behind you!”

I spun around. First, I saw the brigand coming at me; then I saw his blade aimed straight at my chest. With my own sword sheathed and my arm circling Ely’s convulsing body, there was no way I could block his blow. The man was already on me.

Gritting my teeth, I braced myself for its impact. But just as his blade was about to plunge into my flesh, the brigand was rammed sideways by one of Eva’s guards. With two efficient swipes of his sword, the tall eunuch easily dispatched the assailant. I didn’t question the identity of my rescuer for an instant; it was young Milo. I recognized him immediately, not only by his unique swordplay—which was without flourish and done with an economy of movement—but also by his wispy blond hair. All the other eunuch guards had the bright red hair most common to Farrellians; while Milo’s only had the slightest touch of copper. If one looked closely, one could spot freckles of the same hues dusting the bridge of his nose.

This was the second time Milo had saved my life; although I was glad to be alive, a small part of me disliked being indebted to the young eunuch. I didn’t like being indebted to anyone for that matter. Still, I knew these were unreasonable, if not irrational, feelings, and that I should be thankful for the young eunuch’s presence with us and for his swordsman’s skill, especially now that we had so few guards left.

Hiding my discomfort at having been saved again, like a damsel in peril, I commended Milo for his bravery. “Well done, young man. I wish we had more guards as talented with the sword as you... well, I wish we had more guards, period.” To my relief, three more surviving guards came round the caravan and joined us.

Relinquishing Ely to the care of the other guards, I made my way to Milo’s side.

Looking proud of himself, Milo bowed to me. With his lean athletic body and long limbs, Milo reminded me of a young colt, a bit clumsy yet very powerful, an unusual look for a eunuch... and a deceiving one too. And when one added his square jaw, aquiline nose, and overall masculine facial features to the mix, all that was left to betray his physical condition as a eunuch were his light airy voice and smooth, beardless cheeks.

“How many guards survived? Do you know?” I asked.

“Seven, counting myself, my lord. Three are gravely wounded though. Those men won’t be able to fight if we’re attacked again.”

I aimed my sight to the gibbet still visible on the horizon. “Sorvinka is known as the land of the thousand gibbets. If you ask me, they would do well to double that amount. I haven’t seen that many ruffians in all my life.” I shook my head. “This country will be the death of us.”

“Yes, my lord,” Milo said, while stomping his feet and beating his side for warmth.

“And if the brigands don’t get us, the cold will.”

I looked at the shivering Farrellian. Milo was on the skinny side for a eunuch. Without this protective layer of fat, he tended to get cold quickly.

I patted his shoulder. “You fought well today, Milo.”

“As did you, my lord,” he replied with a bow. When he straightened, I saw that he was beaming with pride. “I am pleased to have served Princess Eva as well as expected and, more so, not to have disappointed you.” Milo paused, as if unsure if he should continue.

I gave him a nod of encouragement.

“I know that many... no, actually, most people don’t consider us eunuchs as... true men, capable of doing true men’s actions. I... I am overjoyed to have been able to prove myself to you, Prince Amir.” On this Milo bowed at the waist.

His show of gratitude made me uncomfortable, and I was glad when Eva poked her head out of her carriage.

“Amir! Amir!” she called. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Please stay inside the carriage. It’s safer there. We’ll join you in a moment.”

I turned to Milo. “You’ll take Ely’s place beside Eva.”

“It will be my honor.”

Rubbing my short beard, I inspected the young eunuch’s clothes. His costume, a red and white mock copy of the Farrellian military uniform, was torn and stained with blood.

“Do you have a spare?”

“This *is* my spare.”

“Come with me,” I said, “I think I have something that might fit you.”

I made my way to the wagon containing my belongings. When I opened the back door, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a polished bronze mirror propped against a chest, and flinched. I didn’t recognize myself; for a brief moment, I thought I was looking at a ruffian. All I could see were piercing brown eyes and sharp cheekbones. Then I recognized my flawless profile with its perfect straight nose—the trademark of my

family, the Ban—yes, that was me all right. I didn't look my best. I had lost my turban in the battle, and my short, thick black hair was all tussled. Also my beard was clipped too close to the skin for my taste, looking more like a shadow than a true beard.

*Eva likes it this way*, I told myself as a consolation. It was a pain to maintain however. After a quick search in my garment trunk, I found a loose beige tunic and a dark green kaftan with sleeves ample enough to cover Milo's long limbs. Although he was clearly sad to part with his mock uniform—I had noted how proudly the young eunuch wore the garments—he took the clothing I offered him with good grace.

Leaving the eunuch to change, I made my way to Eva's carriage. I wasn't surprised to see that Eva was outside. She never followed orders... especially mine. She was staring at the horizon, her black mink cape hanging loosely over her blue velvet dress, as if its addition had been an afterthought. For some reason, she seemed unaffected by the ambient cold. Petite and finely built, Eva had golden curls, warm brown eyes, and a peachy complexion. Despite her ethereal look, my beautiful ice princess was not a delicate creature. In the course of this trip, I had discovered that Eva was as robust as a peasant girl and as headstrong as a mule. I found this new knowledge a little disconcerting, yet I let none of my feelings show.

"You should've stayed inside the carriage," I said in a tone of reproof. "It's not safe for you outside."

"Hush!" she whispered, and then closing her eyes she took a deep breath. I watched a content smile stretch her lips. "Hmmm," she made, as if she could taste the air. "I love the smell of spring in the air."

“Spring!” I stared at the snowy landscape with its naked, dead-looking trees, then at the depressing gray sky. “If this is spring, I dare not imagine what winter is like.”

Eva burst into laughter. “You would love it,” she said amidst billowy clouds of vapor breath. “You complain, but I know you would love it.”

I smiled, but quite frankly, I doubted I would ever get used to this miserable cold, let alone enjoy it. Setting my gaze on the road ahead of us, I said, “I hope we can reach your father’s castle before nightfall. I fear we may not survive another attack.”

“Oh stop worrying. We’re almost there. In a few hours we will be warming ourselves in my father’s court.” Eva’s attention slowly glided to the yellow-covered wagon behind us. “Maybe then I will finally get to see all those mysterious gifts you’ve brought.” Her nose wrinkled a bit, a sign that she was annoyed. “I don’t understand why you have to be so secretive about them.”

“What! And spoil the surprise?”

Eva rolled her eyes. “Fine!” This settled, a brilliant smile lit up her entire face, and she squeezed my hand. “Oh, Amir, I can’t wait for you to meet Father.”

My stomach clenched painfully—as it always did at the mention of my forthcoming meeting with her father.

“Amir, what’s wrong? Why is this dreadful look on your face?”

I shook my head. “I fear... (Sigh). What if your father doesn’t see me as a good enough prospect for you and denies me your hand? What if your father dislikes me on sight?”

“You worry too much, Amir. It’s your biggest flaw, you know. You are very endearing, my prince. Why would my father dislike you?”

“I don’t know. Your Aunt Livia despises me... well, let’s be honest, she hates me. She never forgave me for refusing the Telfarian crown and making her son, Erik, the Sultan. She wanted him to be the next Sorvinkian King, not the ruler of a small country. I’m surprised your aunt hasn’t exacted her revenge on me yet, she certainly threatened me that she would often enough.”

Eva gave me a patient look. “Amir, my aunt does not wish you ill.”

“Perhaps. But you can’t deny that she distrusts me. That’s why she surrounded you with eunuch guards, so they’d keep you safe... from me. We’ve been traveling together for months, and this is the first moment we have been truly alone since we left Telfar. Those guards were never meant to be a *gift* as she said. They were meant to be a barrier.”

Displaying a charming pout, Eva ran a finger along my jaw. “Aren’t you happy that she did so? As I see it, if it wasn’t for my guards, we wouldn’t be alive now.” Eva’s carefree expression morphed into a somber one. She gazed at the grim surroundings, her brow furrowed in concern. “Something has changed. When I last traveled these roads, Sorvinka wasn’t the dangerous place it is now. I don’t understand what happened to my country. It worries me, Amir.”

Throwing her arms around my waist, Eva rested her head against my shoulder. “Let’s leave this spot. Leave now. Let’s not waste another moment here. I’m dying to see my family.”

“Yes. Anything you want, my love,” I said, bending down to kiss her.

“Huh-huh,” Milo cleared his throat behind me. “My lord.”

I turned and was shocked by how a change of clothes could transform someone. Milo looked like a totally different man. The dark green kaftan accentuated the color of his

eyes, which were soft green; it also made him seem blonder and gave his shoulders a more squared appearance. As it was right now, Milo could have passed for a young nobleman.

“We are ready to leave, my lord.”

“Then we should,” I replied.

Eva applauded with enthusiasm. “I cannot wait to see Father.”

“Yes... me too.” I smiled at her. Deep down, however, I was petrified by fear, and given the choice I would have rather faced a horde of brigands than her father. *Enough*, I told myself. *The king has no reason to dislike me. Just don't give him one and everything will go well.*

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I stared at the tall, fortified walls surrounding the castle. *Why won't they open the gate? Don't they understand me? It cannot be my accent. My Sorvinkian is almost perfect.*

“OPEN!” I shouted one more time. “I am Prince Amir of Telfar. I accompany Princess Eva, the king's daughter. OPEN THE GATE!”

The gate remained closed. I turned my gray mare around and rode back to our caravan. I had reached its first carriage when I heard orders being yelled behind the wall. I looked back at the castle and saw armed men lining up behind the fortification and, *oh dear*, bows being drawn. I felt my stomach drop. I couldn't believe it; they were going to shoot at us. Before I could order Eva's Farrellian guards to take cover, a volley of arrows flew in their directions, piercing their chests and necks.

As the guards fell dying on the ground, the carriage door flew open and Milo appeared in its frame. “My lord, what's happening?”

“The king’s castle has been taken by enemies; I see no other reason for this attack. Stay inside with Eva. Keep her safe. You hear me, Milo.”

“Yes, my lord,” he said, and shut the carriage door.

Pulling my sword, I pushed my horse toward the front of our caravan. Before I could get there, the castle’s gate opened with the loud clicking sound of well-oiled chains, and a small army of soldiers rushed out. Within moments, the entire caravan was surrounded.

“Drop your weapon,” called one of the soldiers.

“NO!”

To my surprise, the soldier seemed unsure of what to do. “Obey.”

I shook my head.

“Make way,” a voice ordered from the back of the troop.

The row of soldiers circling me parted and four knights riding black warhorses approached. Clad in shining armor and black leather, they looked impressive. All four were tall and solidly built, like most Sorvinkians, but the knight riding in front was particularly imposing. He was a good head taller than everyone else.

Ordering the other knights to stay behind, he brought his horse a short distance from mine and stared at me through the slit in his gilded helm. He had vibrant blue eyes, I noted. “In the name of the King, relinquish your weapon,” he boomed, his deep voice amplified by his helm.

I stared at the imperial crest embossed on his armor, divided in three sections it depicted a rose beside a black eagle over a bear. Then I looked at the soldiers. They wore the blue uniform of the Sorvinkian army, and they too carried the imperial banner. I was confused. “In the name of which king?”

“King Erik the Fair. Ruler of Sorvinka.”

“I don’t believe you. King Erik would never allow my men to be slaughtered in such a way. This is the action of a vulgar bandit.”

“You tell me so,” he said while pulling off his helm. Gray-streaked blond hair fell about his shoulders. I looked at the strong line of his square jaw, at his straight nose, and his blue eyes. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind, this was King Erik. I recognized his rugged looks from paintings I had seen of him. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Prince Amir, your arrogance is quite shocking to me,” said the king. “Not satisfied to surround my daughter with Farrellians—Sorvinka’s most deadly enemies—and bring them to my doorstep, you have the impudence to call me a vulgar bandit. Kings have been vexed at far less.”

I felt my face blanching. “Farrellian enemies? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you dare blame your actions on ignorance. The fact that Farrell and Sorvinka are at war is well known. News of it had been sent to my sister, Princess Livia, months ago.”

“Princess Livia knew of this! But... she...”

The king’s eyes narrowed. “Prince Amir, do not try blaming my sister for this either,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

I looked at the dead eunuch guards. Princess Livia had handpicked them for their looks, had had special uniforms made for them so their nationality would be unmistakable.

*Princess Livia had gotten her revenge after all*, I thought. I could see no way out of this precarious position... except one. I bowed my head. “My most sincere apologies, Your Majesty. The fault is entirely mine.”

Apparently appeased by my apologies, the king nodded. He gestured for the knight on his right to approach. The knight moved beside the king while removing his helm. In a clunk of metal hitting metal, the king slapped his gloved hand on the knight's armored shoulder. "This is my nephew, Lars Anderson, Duke of Kasaniov. I'm sure my daughter mentioned him to you."

I bowed my head at Lars. I had certainly heard of him, Eva's cousin—*twice removed*; she always insisted on that detail, as though this made him less of a relative—and the presumed heir to the throne. Fair of skin and of hair, Lars was a robust young man of my age. His eyes were pale blue, his chin pointy, and he had a slightly upturned nose. Despite the constant grimace of disgust twisting his face, as if something stinky was stuck under that upturned nose of his, he wasn't ugly. For some reason, I had expected him to be.

Loud shouts coming from the back of the caravan made me turn. To my utter consternation, I saw that the king's soldiers had invaded the last carriage where our three wounded eunuch guards were housed. When the soldiers began pulling the wounded guards out, I knew that if I didn't intervene they would be killed. As I attempted to help them, Lars drove his warhorse in front of my mare, blocking my path.

"Stay put, young prince," warned the king.

Feeling powerless and outraged, I could only watch as two of our guards perished at the hands of the soldiers. But when I saw Ely being thrown to the ground, I couldn't stay quiet anymore. "Your Majesty," I pleaded, "he's Eva's most loyal guard. He served her well. Please, Your Majesty, this man poses no threat to you."

Unmoved by my plea, the king nodded to the soldiers surrounding Ely, and, at once, they pierced the wounded guard's body with their lances. When it was all over, and Ely had expelled his last breath, the king turned toward me and said, "Now this man *truly* poses no threat to me."

Biting my tongue, I squeezed my eyes shut. Poor Ely, he didn't deserve this fate. At that instant, my thoughts turned to Milo, who was still inside the carriage with Eva. He too was doomed... then again, maybe not. I turned to the king. "Will you permit me to fetch your daughter?"

The king nodded.

Within moments, I was off my horse and entering the carriage. I was met by Milo's blade and nearly got my throat slit. "Careful!" I said.

"Oh, my prince, you are safe," he breathed in relief, lowering his blade from my neck.

"Sheathe your sword, Milo." I ordered.

"What?" Milo looked at me as if he thought I had lost my mind.

"Amir, explain yourself," Eva said. "Tell me what's happening."

"There is no time." Then turning to Milo, I blurted, "If you want to live, you will do everything I say, starting by sheathing that blade and unloading my luggage. As for you, Eva, your father awaits you outside."

For a woman encumbered by three layers of petticoats, Eva dashed outside with amazing speed. Milo shot me a sideways look. Right then I knew he wouldn't obey my orders. As a eunuch guard, Milo's loyalty was to Eva, not to me, and it would remain so until he saw her safely under the king's protection. Before I could stop him he was out behind her.

“Oh lord!” I said, and followed in their steps. Sure enough, once outside I found Milo with his back against the carriage and three lance tips pointed to his neck.

“Father!” Eva exclaimed. “What are these manners?”

“Eva, go inside,” the king said.

“No! Not until I know what is happening here.”

The captain of the soldiers approached Eva and whispered something in her ear. Her face turned as pale as snow, and if not for the firm grip the captain had on her waist, I believe she would have collapsed on the ground.

“Bring her inside, quickly,” ordered the king.

Suddenly docile, Eva let herself be carried away without protest.

Having lost my only ally, I turned to the king. “Majesty, that one is my valet. Please, tell your men to lower their lances. He’s harmless. Look at him, he’s not Farrellian.”

Lars dismounted from his horse, marched straight to Milo, and inspected him from head to toe. “I don’t know. He looks half-Farrellian to me. That’s enough to merit death.”

With a hand on the grip of my sword, I stepped forth.

Milo swiftly raised his hand to stop me; his eyes I noted were filled by a mixture of fear and determination. “No, my lord, do not risk yourself for me,” he said in his light airy voice.

Upon hearing Milo’s voice, Lars’s head tilted, his eyes narrowed, and his lips curled into a feral smile. And without further notice, he leaned forth and abruptly plunged his hand into Milo’s crotch. “Aagh!” Lars exclaimed, leaping back in disgust. “I knew it! This one’s a gelding. How revolting!”

I looked at the king. His face displayed no emotion, yet I thought I saw a hint of disapproval in his eyes. "I thought eunuchs were only used for guarding the harem, and to serve women," the king said.

"No," I immediately rectified. "White eunuchs serve the Sultan... and princes as... as personal valets. None are better."

"And what tasks are these personal valets supposed to perform?"

"Hmm... hmm. They attend to one's grooming needs, baths, daily washing. They help one dress."

Lars let out a loud cackling laugh, while the other men present were more discreet and just chuckled behind their hands.

The king however remained dead serious. After a brief glance at Milo, he turned his attention to me. "Prince Amir, in Sorvinka, men dress themselves. But as you seem incapable of accomplishing this task by yourself, I will permit you to keep your servant. Because you are a guest in my castle, I am obliged to respect your customs, no matter how strange they may appear to us."

"Your Majesty is too kind," I said, bowing quickly to hide the redness of my cheeks.

"Don't thank me yet, I'm not done. One thing must be clear, Prince Amir. Maybe in Telfar a prince can have his servants fight his battles for him, but in Sorvinka servants aren't allowed to carry swords. And as long as you are a guest in my castle, you will live by my rules. Here you'll have to fend for yourself, young prince."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With obvious pleasure, Lars swiftly disarmed Milo. Then he slammed the sword on his armored knee several times, in an attempt to break it, I presumed. His efforts were useless

—the sword was made of Telfarian steel, hence of too good a quality to be broken this way. Frustrated by his failure to destroy Milo’s weapon, Lars shoved the sword into the hands of the nearest soldier.

The king shook his head, then turned his horse around and rode toward the castle. Once he reached the gate, he pivoted in his saddle and shouted, “Oh yes, I forgot. Welcome to Sorvinka, Prince Amir.”

I looked at Milo, who was rubbing the sore spots on his neck where the lance tips had dug into his flesh. I looked at the corpses surrounding the caravan, then finally at the stern, hostile face of the king. In my opinion, this was the coldest welcome I had ever received in all my life.