

THE KING'S QUESTIONER

— NIKKI KATZ —

Swoon READS

New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*To Katelyn, my firstborn,
who has the uncanny ability to read my mind.*

CHAPTER

1

Taking a breath to steel his nerves, Kalen turned the key. The door opened on silent hinges to reveal the hazy scene. A woman stood in the middle of the room. She seemed larger than life, towering like a giant scylee bird over the little girl in front of her. Her features were exaggerated, her mouth open wide as obscenities poured forth. The words hung jagged in the air, ugly and crimson. The girl cowered and tucked into herself. Dirty, blond strands of hair curtained her face. The woman stretched taller; her hands curled into fists, and her knuckles enlarged to twice their size. Sobs shook the girl's tiny frame. The woman's arm drew back. The fist swung forward, striking the girl on her cheek. Her head swung to the side, and her hair parted to reveal massive eyes. They were round and fringed in spider lashes like the dolls sold in the market shops.

The girl screamed. A cobalt ribbon slipped from between her lips to twist and weave through her hair. Tears settled dewlike on her lashes. The woman froze. Her arm dropped to her side. Her knuckles shrank to normal. Her stature collapsed. She turned away, head falling and arms crossing across her stomach as she bent over.

A fog curled in from the edges of the room, dense and cold, to shroud the two figures. Kalen shoved the door closed, turned the key, and removed it.

He opened his eyes. A wave of nausea swept over him, and he fought to stay upright. His forehead felt hammered with a thousand nails.

“She’s innocent,” he said. *Of the accused crime anyway.*

He yanked his fingers from the woman’s wrist and stepped away. She wouldn’t know what he had seen in her mind, but she knew he’d seen something. She swallowed hard, unable to look him in the eye. Most people couldn’t, and, honestly, Kalen was okay with that.

“What do you mean ‘she’s innocent’? This woman is our best lead.” Ryndel, the King’s Law, was entrusted with matters of crime and punishment in the kingdom of Mureau. He paced forward from a dark recess of the small interrogation room, not happy that Kalen had failed to find what he’d been looking for. The flickerfly lamps set in the wall cast a light that cut his features in half, and his wiry, black hair stuck out in all directions. His emerald brocade jacket was open to reveal the unspotted white shirt underneath. He never got close enough to the prisoners to get dirty.

Kalen cracked his neck side to side and withdrew his

gloves from the interior pocket of his vest. “Do we need to repeat this conversation every time?”

Ryndel only wanted to hear the word *guilty*. Innocent meant more work, and the King’s Law frowned upon anything that kept him from being drinking buddies with the king. That did, however, mean steady pay for Kalen—with all the false accusations Ryndel brought him as soon as he had even the hint of a new lead—so Kalen wasn’t one to complain.

“I’m never quite sure you’re telling the truth,” Ryndel said.

“No, you can’t be.” Kalen met the man’s watery green eyes and pulled on one glove. “But you know my abilities.” He leaned in, bare fingers of his other hand a hairbreadth away from Ryndel’s arm.

Ryndel scooted away.

It hadn’t been easy for Kalen to prove his talent. Even he hadn’t understood it at first, when, as a child, he’d caught glimpses of thought the second he touched someone’s skin. He thought he was going a bit mad. But once he understood his ability, it wasn’t the memories that drew his attention—it was the secrets. Secrets locked and hidden away so people wouldn’t suffer from constant reminders.

When he entered a mind, he found pathways. Sometimes trails in a forest. Perhaps hallways in a home or distributaries from a river. Memories were structured in a variety of ways, but there were always arteries and branches, and at the end, hidden down dark hallways, in twisted mazes, or behind false walls, lay the secrets. The darker a secret, the harder to find. And the harder to unlock. He tugged at the

key that hung on a leather cord around his neck, a mirror to the one he used when exploring someone's memories. His fingers stroked its length once before tucking it beneath his shirt. The cool metal soothed his hot skin.

Ryndel knew firsthand about Kalen's powers. The King's Law had been a test subject when Kalen was a youth and had to prove the ability to the king, who was himself unwilling to expose his mind to someone who could unlock its secrets. In fact, the king always kept Kalen at a distance of several yards and mandated that the young man never remove his gloves in his presence.

The Law was not the only person at court to distrust Kalen for his magick, but Ryndel had little to worry about. His secrets were mundane. A love of mulled wine and an unhealthy obsession with a young duchess. Not exactly appropriate but hardly anything treasonous.

A steward rushed forward with a mug of tea. Kalen accepted it with a nod and gulped it. The headaches had worsened over the past year, and on days when Ryndel kept him busy, sometimes the only relief came when he was actually inside a prisoner's mind. The tea also helped to ease the pressure in his forehead enough for him to unclench his jaw.

"I told you I didn't do nothin'." Marcella spat the words from behind him.

"I wouldn't say *nothing*," Kalen said.

"I didn't do no stealin'." Her voice softened.

"That is correct." Kalen finished the tea and set the mug down on a narrow shelf against the wall. "You did not steal a

letter from the king's courier." Of course she hadn't. Ryndel was intelligent, but not when it came to matters that should be handled by the guardsmen. This woman was of a stocky build, a heavy breather. There was no chance she could have snuck up on the courier, who was most likely on horseback the entire time, to steal correspondence as it was brought into town.

"Who did?" Ryndel asked.

"Damned if I know. And she doesn't, either." Kalen hooked his thumb in Marcella's direction.

"Can I get goin' now?" the woman whined. "I have a daughter who needs me—"

Kalen's head whipped around, and her words stopped. He glared at her as Ryndel waved a hand in dismissal. The steward led her to the door, and she scurried through without a backward glance.

Kalen's gloved fingers rubbed at his temples.

"What's so important about this letter?"

"It's none of your business."

Kalen sighed. "Perhaps not. But you do know that if you find the culprit and use me to prove it, I will learn the contents of the letter in the process."

Ryndel frowned and rubbed at his chin, as if the thought hadn't quite occurred to him. Kalen knew most of the kingdom's secrets. Whether he wanted to or not. His talent made him equally as much of a target as an asset. His family could attest to that.

"Have a good day, gentlemen." Kalen handed the steward the empty cup and raced into the hall to catch up with

Marcella. She was slowly making her way up the stairs when he moved next to her and leaned in. “Was that your daughter you tormented?”

“I don’t know what yer speakin’ of,” she said.

“It won’t happen again.” Silence fell. A sticky, stifling sort of silence, like she didn’t know if she was supposed to respond. “Repeat the words.”

A pained whisper. “It won’t happen again.”

“I will find out if you harm her again.” He paused to let his words sink in. “Consider this your one and only warning before I have you thrown in prison for a much more punishable offense.”

“You couldn’t.”

“Try me. Or ask around. It’s not that difficult to blame someone for a crime when there’s nobody to refute my allegation other than the accused.” He let the truth weigh her down. “If you were a juror, who would you believe? Me or you?”

Her shoulders sank.

“You shouldn’t find it that hard.” Kalen stood. “Only keep your hands to yourself and your voice to a motherlike volume. You may come to find the girl loves you.”

Although most likely not.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Kalen stood in the middle of the courtyard, a sword gripped between his gloved hands as he worked his way through the meditative steps of Hakunan. The concentration on movement always settled

his nerves and relieved the residual aches in his head after a questioning.

Eyes closed, Kalen crouched, keeping his weight centered over his feet. With a slow and steady movement, he brought the sword above his head to point at the sky and then lowered it to the ground in front of him, acknowledging both the gods and his ancestors. From there the sword swung up to the right and behind his head, down to the left and up again. He spun and danced, the sword a mere extension of his arms and a tool to center his focus. His breaths settled into a deep rhythm of inhale and exhale. His mind cleared of thoughts of revenge and anger. He was simply present.

Time passed in a void. Kalen had begun the final sequence when he felt the barest shift in the air at his side. He jumped back. His eyes opened, the glare of the sun a slice of pain through his forehead.

He caught a glint of metal and a blur of sapphire in his peripheral vision.

Cirrus.

And then the young man stood before him, still and stoic and just out of reach of Kalen's sword. They were of the exact same height, and Cirrus's brown eyes glared into his.

"Good reflexes." Cirrus winced as he spoke, as if the words pained him. They probably did. The compliment was the first Cirrus had thrown in his direction in years.

Kalen nodded in thanks.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your playtime." Cirrus's gaze fell to Kalen's sword, now clutched awkwardly at his side. "You can continue. I'm sure you could use the extra practice."

Kalen's jaw tightened. "I think I'm done for the day."

The false sense of calm blanketing Kalen mere moments before was now gone. He lowered the sword and dug the weapon's tip into the dirt before leaning against it. His entire body felt heavy and sore. He ran his gloved hand through his hair and fought the urge to yawn. He refused to show Cirrus even the smallest weakness.

"Haven't seen you around much." Cirrus spun his own sword like it was weightless.

"You, either." Not that Kalen made much of an effort to see Cirrus, or anyone really. He pretty much relegated himself to his room between questionings.

"I've been busy touring the countryside. Fresh air does wonders."

"Yes, if only my work here wasn't so very important."

Cirrus glared at him.

Kalen knew Cirrus hated his ability, even if the king seemed to appreciate its usefulness. "Well, I best be going."

Cirrus's eyebrow rose. "Off to town for a little female distraction?"

"That sounds like a great plan." Kalen turned around to walk toward the weapon rack. Nobody ever turned their back on Cirrus without permission. Nobody but an ex-childhood friend anyway.

Kalen knew it would irk Cirrus, and he hated that they always seemed to return to immature behavior and juvenile slights, ruining one's meditation and making insinuations. Although he guessed it could have been worse. Cirrus could have still hated him. Kalen thought most of the time he did.

When his magick had first manifested, the king had

brought Kalen's family into the fold of the royal court. It was meant to look like an honor, but Kalen soon realized it was actually to keep him close and at the king's mercy. Two young boys in the castle, he and Cirrus had bonded over their mutual love of climbing trees and skirmishes with wooden swords. They'd schooled together and shared secrets, including Kalen's concerns about how to control his ability. He feared losing himself in someone's mind.

Cirrus had invited Kalen to practice on him, in the hopes Kalen could learn how best to use his magick, so one afternoon the boys sat in a clearing, Kalen's hand resting on Cirrus's arm. A storm hovered, and the air felt heavy with humidity. They were both tired and had taken a break from play. Kalen raced through Cirrus's mind, knowing most of the memories as his own—they had shared so many of them. But this time he pushed farther, faster, and he spotted something he'd never seen before. Not necessarily new, but hidden, on the fringe of Cirrus's thoughts.

Clouded in darkness.

A door.

And locks.

Kalen stepped closer, his fingers brushing over the metal of the lock faces. One was a shiny silver color with a large plate. Swirls and floral designs were etched into the surface, tightening around the center. The second was diamond shaped and of a matte finish. The final lock was round and plain in design but fabricated of a black onyx stone. He didn't understand how it was attached to the door. The design was seamless.

And he didn't know how to access it.

He retreated from Cirrus's mind and told him what he'd seen. Cirrus shoved Kalen away and jumped to his feet. "You're lying. You didn't see anything."

His tone and words were angry, but Kalen recognized the look that flashed through his eyes. He was afraid.

After that, Cirrus distanced himself from his friend. He took to insulting Kalen and calling him a freak. Kalen never mentioned to anyone what he had seen, but he began to find locks in other people's minds. His own powers manifested in a mental key, exact in shape and size to the one he wore around his neck, the key to his chambers, the only place he felt safe. He learned how to unlock the doors and find the secrets hidden deep behind them.

And he always wondered what memory Cirrus kept locked away, what secret had cost them their friendship.

THE SUN HUNG just above the upper lip of the courtyard walls on its descent toward the horizon as Kalen placed the sword into its slot on the rack and made his way over to the wall and the trough of fresh water. He dipped in a tin cup and lifted the cool liquid to his mouth. After several gulps, Kalen tilted his head forward and poured the remainder onto his hair, letting the cool water soothe his scalp. He shook his head once, droplets flying, and tossed the cup in the bucket on the side.

He allowed himself one glance back at Cirrus as he paced across the courtyard toward the large door leading into the main wing of the castle. Cirrus had moved to the sparring ring, where he now stood facing Terrack, the head

guardsman. Terrack towered over him, his massive frame making Cirrus look like a woodling. Kalen shook his head at the sight, wondering if the king had chosen Terrack for this task because of his skill or because he was the only one who would agree to spar with Cirrus, who was the prince, after all.

CHAPTER

2

Kalen rifled through the obscene amount of clothing that filled his wardrobe to find something a little less sweaty and cleaner scented to wear. And that's what he chose. The wardrobe held a vast array of brightly colored shirts and vests in rich fabrics and patterns, all gifts from the king and meant to be worn for the many royal events that Kalen tried to avoid, but even so, the space was mostly filled with black garments. Another pair of black breeches with a black undershirt and tight-fitting vest.

He removed a pair of older boots off a shelf that held many of the same style in various states of wear. A low dresser held his gloves, and from it he removed a clean pair made of supple leather. He snagged an overcoat and returned to his bedchamber. The massive bed took up much of the room, the covers pulled neatly to the pile of pillows,

not because any attendant or servants made his bed each morning, but rather because Kalen didn't sleep there. The makeshift pallet near the door worked well enough. It kept him grounded, and he never wanted to let his guard down again. His parents had taught him a difficult lesson, and although he'd come to understand their decision to flee in the years that had passed since they'd abandoned him, the lesson was one he would never allow to be repeated.

Never get too comfortable.

A glance out the window showed the sun had slid farther over the horizon, shading the sky's canvas a darker spill of blue, and Kalen caught a star winking at him. He had just enough time to stop at the kitchen to grab a bite to eat before heading into town.

Kalen exited his room and shut the door behind him. He used the key around his neck to turn the lock, squared his shoulders, and headed down the stairs. Minutes later he walked through the great hall, outside, and across a small courtyard into the kitchens. They were offset from the main buildings in case a fire started in one of the dozens of ovens.

The building was frantic with people hurrying this way and that, arms laden with bags of flour or pots filled with soup or trays piled with pastries. Kalen stayed close to the outer wall and worked his way along the edge. He rarely ate with the royal family or their honored guests, whatever lords happened to be vying for attention that week.

He stopped near the hearth and slopped a large ladle of stew from an oversize pot into a bowl. Cradling it close to his chest, he stepped into the pantry and grabbed a hardened roll. Away from the kitchen chaos, he leaned against

the wall and dug into the food. The roll served as a spoon, and he scooped vegetables and buttery chunks of meat into his mouth. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until he'd licked the bowl clean and his stomach ceased clenching.

He dropped the dishes with all the other dirty ones in an overflowing barrel and slipped out. Within minutes he was outside the castle walls altogether. He followed the main path away from the gates and immediately wove through the side streets to dodge the marketplace at the center of town. It would be mostly cleared out at this hour, with only a few remaining vendors packing up their goods and townspeople haggling for a last-minute deal, but Kalen avoided it anyway.

He walked along the avenues, twisting back and around at seemingly random intervals. A spy himself, Kalen knew the king employed many others, and this time he preferred to keep his whereabouts unknown. While always on the lookout for information, he would rather have an hour or two to relax, and this time not have to use his magick.

Kalen kept to the shadows, even though it would have been cleaner to avoid the refuse collecting in the alleyways. A sharp left and he stood in front of his favorite place of solace.

The Milked Goat.

He still thought it was a ridiculous name for an establishment, but, like every other night, when he pushed through the doors, he was greeted with the noise and sour scent of a crowd. The low ceiling didn't help either of those, nor did the fire roaring in the hearth against the back stone wall. A fiddler held court in the corner, and a few girls lifted their skirts to twirl on a makeshift dance floor in front of him. A

table had been set up for cards in the back of the room, and a group crowded the counter where Reap—the tavern keeper nicknamed for the tattoo rippling up his forearm—was making his signature drink.

He cracked several eggs into a pitcher and whisked them together, showing off his massive biceps to the girls who seemed intent on staring. Pouring in rum and molasses, Reap continued to beat at the mixture. He added in a seemingly random amount of beer and then paced to the hearth. A fire poker rested in the flames. Reap grabbed the handle and lifted it up over his head so as not to maim anyone with it. He plunged it into the pitcher and stirred quickly, creating a frothy drink that steamed and sizzled. He tossed the cooling poker to the side and poured the concoction into the already waiting mugs lining the counter. Patrons scooped them up, clinking them together in cheers before chugging the drink.

Kalen stepped to the end of the counter and tipped his head in acknowledgment.

“Usual?” Reap asked as he used a stained, damp towel to mop up the alcohol that had spilled as he poured. Kalen glanced around, looking for a clean one to throw him, but there were none to be found.

He waited as Reap reached for a mug under the bar and poured boiling water over tea leaves. Kalen never drowned his sorrows in anything stronger than caffeine. Alcohol left him too susceptible to letting his guard—and his gloves—down. Cirrus, on the other hand, would have joined in with the rest of the patrons to gulp a mug of Reap’s mixture.

Kalen took a gulp of the tea, threw Reap a coin, and made his way to the card table. He collapsed into the lone

vacant chair and traced his gloved finger along the familiar crack running down the curved wooden arm.

He hated gambling but loved anything that served to sharpen his mind. Kalen could focus on both the game and the conversations going on around him, tucking away details, like love letters to dissect later. It was a great way to gather information. Not exactly sanctioned by the king, but if Kalen used his knowledge of the kingdom's happenings while in someone's memories, he could complete the questioning much quicker and get out of their minds.

"Keepin' busy?" Damien, the young fisherman sitting to his right, asked.

"Same as always." After pushing a pile of coins to the dealer, Kalen was dealt a hand. "How's it going at the docks?"

"Good. Brought in at least three barrels o' crawfish this afternoon."

Kalen glanced quickly at his own hand. A pair of knaves and a run of three clovers. He continued chatting with Damien while he watched the other players discard and receive new ones. One of the regular players rubbed at his chin, a tell that Kalen knew meant he had a good hand. Play reached Kalen, and he immediately tossed the clovers on the table and requested three new cards.

"I swear, ya don't even pay attention to what yer doin'," Damien said with a shake of his head. He folded his cards and stretched his arms so his hands laced behind his head. "There was some interestin' activity today."

Kalen nodded encouragement. This information was what kept him returning to the Milked Goat.

“A new ship came in. I woulda guessed it was a pirate ship, what with the black hull and black sails, but the constable came down ta greet ’em and take ’em somewhere private.”

Black sails. *Antioegen*. Antioege was the port city of the kingdom of Ehren, situated just north of their own. He wondered why the ship was in port. It wasn’t part of the normal trading cycle, as the moon was nearing full and the winds were not cooperative.

As Kalen pondered this bit of information, he picked up his new cards and added them to his hand. He slid them apart just enough to see he’d been dealt another knave and two minstrels. He tossed a coin into the middle of the table to increase the bet. Two players folded, but the fifth, an older gentleman sitting on Kalen’s left, called Kalen’s bet and raised him. Kalen bit back a sigh, knowing the man was about to lose. He matched the bet, and the dealer signaled for the gentleman to show his cards. Two pair. Kalen flipped over his own cards to reveal the full ship.

The gentleman pursed his lips in defeat. “You win some and lose some. Good game.” He pushed away from the table, and a waif of a girl slid into the vacant seat. Her hooded cloak mostly covered her shock of silver hair, and her equally silver eyes turned to Kalen.

Luna.

She blinked lazily at him, and her lips tugged into a half smile.

Kalen couldn’t help but smile in return, but then clamped his lips shut. He was supposed to be angry with her. A week ago he’d asked her to be his lookout, and she had disappeared.

This was the first time he'd seen her since, and he had questions to ask. Why she'd left. Where she'd gone.

The dealer passed out another round of cards, and Kalen drew his close. Not a good hand, but he didn't care. He slid four of the cards away, keeping only the wizard of clover.

Luna asked for only one new card, and play moved around the table until it reached Damien. He appeared intent on staying in the hand, his tongue caught between his front teeth as he debated which cards to surrender.

"How many ships were there in all?" Kalen asked him.

"Damien finally dropped two cards to the table. "Just the one. Came in kind of late."

Kalen mulled this as he was dealt two more wizards for three of a kind.

But wait.

He glared at Luna and cleared his throat. She raised her silver eyebrows as she rearranged the cards in her hand. The long sleeves of her cloak billowed out at the wrists, offering a glimpse of the tattoos that he knew traced up her arms and down her torso. Twisting loops of chains and rose stems, covered in thorns. They circled her neck and waist, too.

"Give it back," he said out of the side of his mouth.

"Give what back?"

"My wizard."

Luna was a thief, and a good one at that. He hadn't even realized she'd swapped out his card with a squire.

"I have no idea what you mean." She fluttered long eyelashes in his direction and pushed several coins toward the center as she raised the bet.

A yawn stretched the mouth of the player at her side.

Monet was an aristocrat in his midthirties, known to spend his inheritance on gambling, women, and ridiculously expensive clothing . . . not necessarily in that order. He shoved a stack of coins to the center, raising Luna's bet.

When play returned to Damien, he folded his hand. Kalen was quick to follow suit, tossing his cards on the table. Luna was about to run the table, and he didn't need to add his coins to her winnings, not that it much mattered. Her gaze flitted from her cards to the coins and back again until Monet slapped his palm to the table in annoyance. Finally, she pushed all her money to the center. "All in."

"Oh come on," Monet said. "I'm not falling for that." He pushed another stack in to match her.

Luna grinned and flipped her cards. A flush of clovers, wizard high.

Monet growled as he turned over a straight. "You're cheating again."

"Who, me?" Luna feigned innocence while the coins disappeared into her sleeves. She rose from the table. "I'd say I'm sorry to have to limit your time with Jezebel this evening." She tossed the last coin to the dealer. "But I'd be lying."

She strode toward the exit but stopped midway and turned to look over her shoulder. "By the way, that hat is ridiculous."

Monet stroked the scyree bird feather stretching away from the brim and glared at her. Kalen gathered his coins and followed her out. It wasn't difficult to catch her, considering her stride was probably half of his, but the second he was within reach, his gloved hand gripped her shoulder. Luna

had a way of disappearing into the shadows, and he didn't want to lose her.

"You could have been a little more subtle," he said, when she stopped and turned to him.

"He's weak. Besides, he wouldn't do anything that puts him in poor favor with my mother . . ." Her eyes widened at something behind him, and Kalen spun around. Monet had stormed out of the Milked Goat and now walked in their direction.

"Return it to me." He nearly spat the words as he held out a hand, palm facing up, toward Luna.

"Return what, exactly?" She widened her deceptively innocent silver eyes and stared at Monet.

"My. Pocket. Watch. Return. It. Now." His hand shook with fury. He lunged forward, but before he reached Luna, Kalen had whipped off a glove.

"Be careful." Kalen wiggled his fingers. "I'm sure you have some secrets you don't want spread around town."

Monet's eyes narrowed to slits, but he stepped quickly away. "Keep your hands to yourself, freak."

"I suggest you do the same."

"She took something from me." Monet glanced quickly to Luna and then back to Kalen, not risking taking his eyes off the questioner. "It's a family heirloom. Give it back."

"Fine." Luna reached into her cloak and pulled out a golden watch strung on a thin chain. She tossed it to him. "I figured it was no use to you since you always run over on time at the brothel."

He cradled the watch and tucked it into the interior

pocket of his coat before readjusting his hat and walking toward the tavern.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Kalen turned to face Luna. “I wish you wouldn’t do that.” He shoved his fingers into the glove.

“Kalen, you don’t always have to come to my defense.”

She was right, but still. She was his friend. “Why did you let yourself get caught?”

She snorted. “I’m pretty sure I would have been home already if you hadn’t stopped me to give me a warning.”

“I stopped you because we need to talk.”

The clock tower began its toll, ending with a single chime.

“It’s late, and I need to get back.” What was late for the rest of the city was early for her mother’s business.

“We still need to talk,” Kalen said.

“You know where to find me.” Luna tossed a grin over her shoulder as she walked away. A second later she was gone.

CHAPTER

3

A loud knock woke Kalen the next morning.
“You dressed?” Terrack’s voice rang through the door.

“Does it matter? The door is locked.”

Kalen stretched and rose from the pallet before walking over to open the door. Terrack blocked the hallway with his bulk, and his mouth moved like a horse’s as he chewed on a piece of bark. “Actually, I just wondered if you had a girl in there.”

“Have I ever had a girl in here?”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Terrack smirked.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company so early in the day?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

Kalen steeled himself for yet another headache. “Give me a minute.”

He shut the door and splashed water on his face from the basin. He quickly changed and grabbed a pair of gloves before returning to the hallway. Terrack hadn’t moved. Kalen shut the door, turned the key in the lock, and followed the large man down the hall.

“Who is it?” Kalen asked.

“Ship captain,” said Terrack. “Arrived yesterday.”

The Antioegen ships Damien mentioned.

Kalen’s worry over his impending headaches disappeared. This would be interesting. Much more interesting than a woman falsely accused of stealing correspondence.

They wound down the curved staircase into the darkness of the cellar. Rough stone walls caught at the sleeves of his coat, as if clawing him into the depths. The cool air was thick with moisture that gathered at the back of his neck. They reached the cellar floor, and Terrack turned in a different direction than the one leading to Kalen’s normal interrogation room. Kalen’s chest heaved with a silent sigh. This way were the holding cells.

Kalen despised having to go into the mind of someone shackled by chains.

They approached the two cells, heavy doors facing each other from across the narrow hallway. The slits in one door allowed flickers of dusty light to dance into the hall. Terrack pushed that one open, and Kalen got his first glimpse of the prisoner.

The captain was tall, in his midthirties perhaps, with

sun-weathered skin. Limp, long hair fell into his eyes, one of which was nearly swollen shut. He stood upright, his arms hanging at his sides. His wrists were wrapped in metal cuffs threaded with a heavy chain linked to the wall behind him through a ring just above his head. His breaths came fast and shallow, like he couldn't fully inhale. Kalen imagined that underneath the captain's jacket and all those gold buttons were whip marks or bruising . . . or both.

"Why is he in chains?"

"The Law's orders. He put up a good fight when he arrived."

The prisoner attempted a laugh but winced as soon as his chest expanded. The sound was more of a wounded cough.

Footsteps echoed in from the hall behind them, and the King's Law swept into the room. His black cloak swirled and settled around him, flashes of the green silk interior visible as he threw back his shoulders.

"Good. You're here." Ryndel nodded at Kalen. "I think we're ready to get started."

Ryndel grabbed one of two stools tucked into the corner and placed it behind the prisoner. He kicked forward, knocking the captain's legs from behind so they buckled and he fell back against the hard seat. His arms lifted awkwardly as the chairs held firm, making him look like a wounded marionette. Ryndel leaned in. "I would suggest you behave yourself."

Kalen waited until Ryndel had returned to his side. "What am I looking for?" he asked.

"The ship was carrying valuable cargo. It's no longer on board, but Captain Belrose here denies ever seeing it. I want to know what happened."

Silence filled the room.

“Well?” Ryndel raised his hands in impatience. “What are you waiting for? Get started.”

“What exactly is the cargo?” Kalen hated the vagueness of these requests.

“I’d rather not disclose further information. You’ll know it if you see it. Let’s leave it at that.”

Kalen sighed and removed his gloves. He stuffed them into the interior pocket of his vest and turned to Terrack. “I’m going to need tea. Double brewed.” Terrack called into the hall for a steward.

Kalen stepped forward until he was toe-to-toe with the captain. “I’m going to touch your hand. It won’t hurt, but please remain still. Otherwise they’ll make this a lot less comfortable.”

Belrose stared at the wall behind Kalen’s head.

Kalen grabbed the other stool and sat on its edge. He leaned forward, stretching his bare fingers and thumb to encircle the captain’s wrist, above the manacle. Before he could dive into the man’s mind, Belrose thrashed and broke the connection. Kalen stood abruptly, the stool rocking once before it fell on its side.

“He warned you.” Terrack grabbed the chain and hauled the captain to his feet. He kicked the stool to the side and then yanked on one end of the chain so the slack tightened and the links slid through the manacles. Belrose was forced to shuffle backward until he stood flat against the wall. Terrack continued to pull, wrapping the chain around his hand and elbow in a looping motion. Belrose’s wrists were now pulled together and his arms stretched above his head. Terrack didn’t stop until the captain was nearly on tiptoe, his back arched.

Belrose didn't bother to flinch.

Terrack pushed one of the links onto a hook in the wall to lock the chain in position before pulling the coiled links from his arm. He squatted and grabbed two additional manacles lying open on the floor. He attached them to Belrose's ankles with a second set of chains and stood.

"He's all yours."

Kalen righted his stool and dragged it over to the captain. He sat and eyed the strip of skin exposed between Belrose's shirt and the waist of his trousers. It was much more intimate than the wrists, but Kalen couldn't remain standing the entire time. This would have to do.

With a deep breath, Kalen touched Belrose's waist and spiraled into the captain's thoughts.

He walked along a cliff that butted up against the edge of a stormy sea. Lightning-fast flashes of memories glimmered. A few locked chests rested along the path, presumably holding some of the captain's recent secrets. If there were missing cargo, Belrose would have most likely locked the thought away.

Kalen removed the key from around his neck. He squatted on the rocky ground and inserted it into one of the chests. His mind shifted the shape of the key's metal blade and bits to fit the grooves and nuances of the lock. He sensed the ward spacing, the heights and angles, and made adjustments accordingly.

With a click, he threw open the chest, and the secret swelled around him.

He stood on a deck so clean it nearly shone. As in all the memories Kalen unlocked, the colors were heightened, every detail exaggerated. Belrose stood at the helm, concern

drawing lines in his forehead as he noticed his normally jolly crew now slinging indigo ribbons of anger at one another. The master gunner and one of the sailors began to shove each other across the deck. Suddenly a knife appeared in the master gunner's hand. He lashed forward, the movement slowing in the memory. Moonlight glanced off the knife, the weapon a comet of white light as it inched forward and sliced through the other sailor's shirt and across his abdomen. Blood sprayed in a thin line. The attacker dropped his knife and, with the blade spinning on the deck, grabbed his bleeding comrade and tossed him over the rail. A scream of orange terror and a splash.

Time sped up again. Belrose shouted to drop anchor and lower a boat overboard. While his crew searched for the fallen sailor, Belrose and his first mate were able to secure the master gunner and bring him belowdecks. The only locked door on the ship opened into a claustrophobic room, barren save for a small wooden chest sitting on the floor.

The master gunner thrashed against the rope now binding his wrists. Orange and black traced his screams. "Get me away from it! Get me away!"

His feet dug into the floorboards, and he threw his head backward, trying to hit Belrose in the face. The captain and his first mate shoved the master gunner in farther, raced out of the room, and locked the door behind them.

They were unable to find the sailor thrown overboard, and the night grew progressively worse. More scuffles and arguments, completely out of character for a crew that had sailed together for years.

"It's whatever is in that chest." The first mate approached

Belrose, his words a gray strand of apprehension. “We’ll never make it to Mureau at this rate.”

Belrose paced his small quarters, a knuckle caught between his teeth as he mumbled to himself. “We need to get it overboard. Do I dare drop it in the sea? No, I need to find somewhere to bury it.” The ribbon of words, green and crimson, wrapped around him like chains, tightening until he could hardly speak. He directed the first mate off course, to a deserted island. As soon as they were close enough to land, Belrose and his first mate retrieved the chest and dropped it into the tender. Belrose himself rowed the cargo ashore. He carried it up past the high-water mark and found an outcrop. He moved some of the rocks aside and dug a large enough hole in the sand to hide the chest.

He couldn’t flee the area fast enough.

As soon as Belrose reboarded his ship, everyone returned into their rhythms. Belrose visited the windowless room. The master gunner had calmed. Now horror-struck by his actions, he asked for a trial and the worst possible punishment: death. Belrose said he would address the crime when they returned to Antioege, but he knew a part of the fault lay with the cargo. In the meantime, they needed to restock their ship in Mureau.

The edges of the secret dimmed, and the scene ended.



EACH BEAM FROM the flickerfly lantern pierced the skin of Kalen’s forehead with long needles.

“Where is it?” Ryndel’s breath was hot against the back of his neck.

“Give the boy a minute.” Terrack urged Ryndel away until the steward had given Kalen the tea.

Kalen gulped at the hot drink, wanting nothing more than to sleep and forget the pain. He donned his gloves and stood.

“There was a chest on board.”

The captain sucked in a breath. “How could you see—”

“Where is it?” Ryndel interrupted. He looked from Belrose to Kalen, waiting for one of them to answer.

The captain pursed his lips together, and his glare turned sharper than the knife blade Kalen had just glimpsed in his memory.

“On an island,” Kalen said. He held up his hand to silence Ryndel. “But he did what was necessary. The captain had no choice but to remove the cargo in order to save his crew.”

Ryndel tugged at the sleeves of his shirt and frowned.

“I recommend clemency.” Kalen passed the empty mug of tea to the steward. “I also recommend a thank-you to the captain. We don’t want the contents anywhere near our kingdom.”

Ryndel paced a tight square around the room, his boots clipping a steady tune that rattled Kalen’s head. He stopped abruptly. “You’re right. I’ll have Terrack clean up the prisoner and return him to his ship. You’re free to go.”

Kalen had expected Ryndel to ask for more information, but he seemed distracted with other things.

It wasn’t the first time Kalen was left to deal with the remnants of someone else’s memories.

CHAPTER

4

It was late afternoon, the sun casting long shadows across the landscape, when Kalen left the castle and headed along the back roads to a property on the edge of town. He stood, leaning against the wooden fence and staring at the columns lining the front of the residence. The paint had faded, but it still presented a formidable expression, awnings like heavy eyelids over aged eyes and a gaping mouth of massive double doors. Kalen felt the weight of them against his shoulder as if he had walked through them only yesterday.

But it had been six years.

Suddenly he heard his name being shouted. Terrack rode up on horseback. “The king needs you.”

Kalen took a deep breath. Questioning requests usually came from Ryndel, but on occasion the king required

Kalen's services for nonroyal matters. He didn't look forward to whatever the king had in store.

The next words, however, were a surprise.

"The prince collapsed and has yet to awaken."

He extended a hand to help Kalen up onto the horse behind him.

They galloped away, and Kalen gave one more sweeping glance at the yard before it faded into the distance.

He wondered if Mathew remembered Kalen chasing him up the winding staircases or exploring the backyard maze where they tried to catch flickerflies.

He wondered if his younger brother remembered him at all, or if his parents had wiped the family free of the stain of his magick.

Terrack muttered to himself. "I didn't mean to hit him that hard. He attacked me out of nowhere. We were no longer sparring, I tell you. I had to protect my life."

"What does the king want with me? Did he ask Jenna for help?" Kalen glanced at Terrack. As the king had done with Kalen, he had a way of snagging the few *sorciers* in the kingdom and bringing them into his fold. That way, he kept a pulse on their abilities while keeping them under control. There were currently eight *sorciers* in Mureau, and their abilities covered a wide range of magick: the ability to find water sources, read emotions, manipulate dreams, manipulate others' movements, communicate with the dead, attract things—and Kalen's own talent.

Jenna was several years older than Kalen, and her ability was diagnosing ailments via touch. She could trace her

way through the body and recommend a course of action, although she couldn't do much to heal.

"She found nothing, nor did the other *sorciers* or the physician. The prince hasn't so much as blinked. I think the king is hoping you can access his mind and see what's going on."

Of course Kalen was the last resort . . . the king kept Kalen's abilities at arm's length, so it made sense to keep them away from his son as well.

They continued on in silence until they reached the black iron gates leading to the castle grounds. The click of hooves echoed off the stone courtyard before they stopped near a waiting stable boy. As soon as they dismounted, Terrack handed the reins over and motioned for Kalen to follow close behind him.

Terrack and Kalen paced through the massive main entrance, past the myriad columns, up the ornate staircase, and down a long hallway lined with portraits of the royal family and their ancestors. Plush carpets flattened under Kalen's boots, and strings of bulbs, each filled with a dozen flickerflies, pulsed overhead.

Finally, Terrack pushed open an engraved door and urged Kalen in. "I'm not invited," he said.

"Why?"

"I'm still at fault here. We'll see if the king forgives me."

Kalen stepped forward and found himself in the king's own quarters. The king jumped up from a chair near the hearth. His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair was bunched at his scalp where he appeared to have gripped and yanked at it. The king was relatively young, and Cirrus was his only child. The queen had died when Cirrus was a toddler, so

it was only the two of them. Distress wafted off him like a sour cologne.

Or perhaps that was mulled wine.

“Please, Kalen, you must help.”

Kalen nodded, although his stomach clenched. He wasn’t a healer. “I’ll do my best.”

The king pointed Kalen toward the bedchamber. Cirrus lay sprawled on top of a rich maroon coverlet stretching across a raised four-poster bed. He was still dressed in his breeches and boots. His shirt had been unbuttoned, leaving his chest bare, and the physician bent over him, tapping on his ribs with some sort of hammered instrument.

“Make room,” the king said, the words polite yet firm.

The physician stepped away, and Kalen neared the bed. He slid out of his cloak and draped it over the footboard before he sat on the edge of the mattress at the prince’s side. He quickly removed his gloves and tucked them in his pocket.

“I can’t promise anything.” Kalen looked at the king. His palm hovered over Cirrus’s chest near his collarbone as he debated the sanity of delving into the prince’s mind. If Cirrus died—whether it happened now or in the next weeks—Kalen could be blamed. While he wouldn’t mind not having to serve as the King’s Questioner, he didn’t know that he’d like to spend the rest of his life in a tower cell. Or eternity without a head.

“I won’t hold you liable.” The king seemed to read his mind.

A promise easily dismissed. Still, Kalen closed his eyes, lowered his hand to the prince’s skin, and was swept under.

His world spun, disconcerting as ever. After doing this

gods knew how many times, Kalen thought he'd be used to it by now.

He took a moment to orient himself, but he was already familiar with the open structure of Cirrus's mind. Not much had changed in the arrangement of the prince's memories since he'd been a child. There were certainly more doors and locks, secrets Cirrus had formed over the years, but on the extreme edge of the horizon, clouded beneath a shroud of darkness, Kalen could still make out the heavily locked door.

Kalen settled in the open space and looked around, determined to see if there had been any injury to Cirrus's mind. He spent a minute observing, not exactly sure what to look for. Perhaps a disturbance or fading thoughts, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary or faulty. He'd once been in the mind of someone suffering from mental illness, and it had looked like a spiderweb. Memories sticky and stretched, woven into other memories and thoughts. It had made him dizzy, and he'd removed himself from that mind immediately.

Kalen knew he should do the same now—pull away and reassure the king, but he was drawn to the dark, clouded door like a moth to flame. He walked closer, the key searing against his chest. He pulled the cord up and over his head, and his fingers worried at the metal.

The locks were still familiar in their arrangement and shapes, as they'd been a constant subject of Kalen's dreams—nightmares for a while—ever since Cirrus had abruptly severed their friendship.

His fingers traced the top lock, and he inserted the key.

The locks in someone's mind weren't like locks in the

outside world. Kalen's key had to trace the wards, often reshaping midturn. Wards of the mind were uneven and inconstant, requiring focus and concentration.

The key finally made it through to Cirrus's memory. A satisfying click and the bolt slid clear from the wall. Kalen took a breath and removed the key, turning his focus to the second lock. The cloud thickened around him, the temperature cooling and the tendrils thickening to a soupy texture.

It took longer to open the second than the first, but soon enough Kalen had unbolted that one as well. The third took the longest, time seeming both to stop and stretch endlessly as the atmosphere turned even gloomier and darker. The wards were infinitesimal in width and shifted constantly, forming a bending wave in nearly all directions. The key kept catching, and he was ready to exit Cirrus's mind when the lock finally gave way.

Kalen stretched the cord and dropped the key back over his neck. He gripped the knob and shoved open the door, tripping into a world of chaos.

A darkened room, sconces flickering along the wall. Long shadows thrown everywhere. A wailing newborn. A young boy crouched in the corner. A woman laid out on the bed, her eyes cold and her skin the pasty color of death. Another woman standing in the middle of the room. And a much younger version of the king, distraught beside her.

"I want her out of my sight." The king's voice was strangled, the words a dark sash of plum wrapping his throat. He pointed at the newborn. "I want her gone from my kingdom."

The boy wrapped his arms around his knees, his reddish

hair and freckles more prominent against the white of his skin as he fought against a sob.

“That goes against every vision I’ve seen, my lord,” the woman said. Her words were the stark white of truth, as white as the long gown draped over her thin frame. She tugged at the fabric and wound it between her fingers.

“I don’t care about your visions. She killed my wife.” The king’s voice cracked. “She killed the queen. She’s lucky I don’t have her decapitated today.”

The prophet rested a soft hand on his shoulder. “She’s a baby. She’s your daughter.”

He wrenched away. “She is nothing to me.”

Her hand fell to her side. “She couldn’t control herself.”

The king glared at the prophet, his words biting and full of venom. “You came here *today* to tell me not to send her away. You could have come to me *yesterday* and told me of the vision, so I could have prevented the entire thing. I should have *you* killed.”

The prophet stared at the king until he turned away. “My sight doesn’t work in that manner, and you know that. I only had the vision as the queen gasped her last breath. It was clear. If you send the princess away, she will be the death of us all.”

“I don’t believe you. I don’t believe it. I’ll send her far enough away that nobody can find her. She’ll never know her true heritage, so what does it matter?” The king spun around and began to pace the length of the room.

The boy inched upward, his back wedged into the corner. Slowly, with bated breath, he snuck closer to the bed. His hand brushed the queen’s hand.

“That’s not the way it works,” the prophet said again.

“The vision shows destruction of the kingdom, an occurrence directly related to her banishment.”

The boy slipped from the queen over to the bassinet. He peered inside at the baby girl, at her startling blue eyes. Enormous tears built in the corner of them and trailed down her face to splash on the blanket beneath her head. Her arms extended, as if reaching for him, and she started to wail, an indigo noose that wrapped around the prince’s throat. He gasped, hands fluttering to his neck.

The king raced over and spun the boy around. “Cirrus, are you okay?”

The boy’s eyes bugged wide, and he fought to breathe against the sobs racking his chest. He crossed his arms tight as he fought to take a breath.

“Look. She’s doing it to him, too. She’ll kill us all if she stays here.” The king’s voice rose, and he spun to the prophet. “Leave us alone so I can make plans.”

Resigned, the prophet walked toward the door. “What of the boy?”

“What of him?”

“He’s heard the truth. He may speak of it.”

The king dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand. “I’ll have the memory removed. It will be better for him never to have known he had a—”

KALEN’S MIND WRENCHED from the memory as his body was flung off the bed. Cirrus bolted upright, his eyes wide and nostrils flaring.

“What are you doing?” In his voice was a mixture of

hatred, awe, and uncertainty. Jaw clenched, he choked out the words. “What *were* you doing.”

Kalen sank to the carpet, and his head fell forward, nearly to his knees. His hands gripped his hair, trying to pull the pain out through his scalp. Nails pounded into every pore. The room spun around him in a lazy circle, and it took him a moment to realize that he had failed to relock Cirrus’s memory.

He groaned and reached out his hand for the mug he knew Terrack would have requested for him. The herbs began to take effect, and then the reality of the memory slammed into his mind with even more force than the pain.

He stood, the tea still grasped in his hands, and moved away from the bed until his back was against the wall, much like the young prince had been in the memory. The king had stepped forward to sit next to Cirrus and bombard him with questions, drilling him on what had happened out in the courtyard with Terrack, was it the guard’s fault and should he be punished, was Cirrus in pain anywhere, did he need something to eat or drink.

Cirrus said not a word, only stared straight ahead into the middle of the room.

The king motioned for the physician to return to Cirrus’s side. The older man reached over to rest his fingers on Cirrus’s wrist to check his pulse and leaned in, face-to-face, to examine his pupils.

Panic tightened Kalen’s chest. Had leaving the memory unlocked done something permanent to Cirrus’s mind? He feared he had damaged the prince and wondered if there was a way to repair it. He pushed away from the wall, ready to touch Cirrus again and delve back into his thoughts.

But Cirrus squeezed past the physician and stood. “I’m fine. I’m tired and hungry. I’d like to eat and go to my chambers.” He nodded at the king and the physician in turn. “Thank you for your concern.”

And he walked away, leaving everyone staring after him.