

## PROLOGUE



The sound of steel-heeled boots clicking on polished stone echoed down the corridor as the prince strode towards the throne room. Twenty-four guards stood steadfast at each of the twenty-four stone pillars lining the hallway. Each of the men snapped to attention as he passed, their chainmail jingling like the bells hung out at Winter Solstice . The prince scowled as an unkempt soldier tried to adjust his poorly wrapped turban mid-salute. Had he been in less of a hurry, Feridar might have had the guard flogged for this, but he had no time to waste. He marched towards the large set of doors at the end of the hallway. The massive beams of oak were riddled with iron studs in intricate designs and were held to the castle's stone walls with iron hinges nearly as long as a horse. The

prince surged forward, his leather gloves creaking as he flexed and unflexed his hands in anxious annoyance.

The two guards standing on either side of the doorway straightened uncomfortably; one of them grasped the thick iron ring bolted to one of the doors. He heaved against the weight of the oak beams, and the prince strode into the throne room without breaking his pace. The door slammed shut with an cavernous boom echoing down the hallway behind him.

“Father!” he shouted, marching into the circular room with vaulted ceilings of carved granite. He made his way to the steps of the black-marble dais, his spurs continuing to jingle and echo through the room with each step. The stone gave the hall an almost dungeon-like appearance, save where the fast-fading light of sunset crept through the stained glass windows. When the Sharadhen Court was in session, this room would be filled with nearly three hundred governors of the various provinces ruled in the kingdom, but now it sat barren and brooding.

Feridar took the steps of the dais two at a time to join his father, the king, emperor, and Great Shahir of the Shauds. His father turned from his place at the table that stood beside his gilded throne. On the opposite side of the table from his father stood three middle-aged men dressed in the white robes and wearing brass helmets of the Shaud’s mighty army.

“Feridar, welcome,” the Shahir muttered, his tone as dry as desert sand. “We’ve been expecting you.”

He returned his attention to the table as Feridar reached the top of the staircase. The Shahir wore a turban and robes of silk bound by a golden sash. His russet eyes surveyed the prince

with contempt from beneath his scarlet turban, but he motioned for him to approach the table, his many gold rings clicking against each other.

“What is this about?” the prince snapped, ripping off the leather gloves and slapping them on the table. “I was in the middle of prepping for the tournament when your monkeys pulled me off the training field.”

“So sorry to interrupt, Your Highness, but there is men’s work to be done,” one of the officers snipped. The Shahir turned his glare from the prince to the aide-de-camp.

“General Valhaura, you are not addressing your stable hand in this room. That is my son, and Prince Feridar will be granted every honor and courtesy you would owe me. Am I clear?”

“Apologies, Your Eminence, for my subordinate’s misguided words,” the second general, General Ducast, said smoothly, giving a sly, knowing look at Valhaura. “After all these months, the good general seems to have left his courtesy in the Wild.”

The Shahir ignored him, choosing to look instead at the many parchments spread in front of him. Feridar looked down at the table to see a large map of the continent of Eirensгарth. It was a sorry looking collection of scribbled rivers, mountains, and cities. The only real details showed the Shauden Empire as it currently stood, stretching from their coastal capital of Telesan to the five outpost castles on their western borders. Beyond that, there were only a few scrawled territory names along the tributaries of the Great River. The nearly impregnable Ohlmar mountains bordered the northwest

quadrant of the map, and within those mountains, a vast pocket of forest was labeled, simply, “The Wild.”

“A trip well worth the time and insolence, Your Majesty, I assure you,” the third officer, General Haife, piped up. The stocky man’s jet black beard quivered with the tremble in his voice. “As I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“What of it, General? All you did was cut a road from Aschin to Franghal. Or do you need me to win that campaign for you too?” The prince smirked, looking to the farthest western outpost on the map. The small black dot represented six years of hard frontier fighting, but it was the shining achievement in the young prince’s short military career. Aschin was his crown jewel, among over a dozen forts that dotted the empire’s borderland holdings. A similar small dot to the northwest of the fortress was scribbled in iron gall ink, marking the latest acquisition, thanks to a long six-month campaign. On the outside, Franghall was only a simple mining village at the rim of the Ohlmars. Although Feridar knew his father’s interests in the mines lay deeper than diamonds, Franghal did give the empire another source of revenue to fund further campaigns across the continent.

“Not at all, My Prince,” Ducast muttered. “There is now a clear road to the northlands cut through the mountain forests.”

“Wonderful,” the prince said dryly. “And you couldn’t send me a written report for that?”

“My son, it is not significant because of what they did,” the Shahir said coyly. “It is significant because of what they found.”

The king pulled something small and metallic out of the pocket of his royal robes and tossed it onto the table. The prince felt a sudden prick in his chest, like a hot knife had been slipped between his ribs and was searing the bottom of his heart. Feridar stared down at a large gold signet ring that landed in the middle of the map and an image of a face flashed through his mind; a face he hadn't seen in almost twenty years. The circlet was carved to look like a coiled serpent, with the head resting atop Feridar's own heraldic crest. An anger he had been caging for almost two decades came rushing back, coursing through his veins like liquid fire. His temples throbbed like the echoing drumbeat of his now racing pulse. His knuckles cracked against the table where he'd been leaning on them; an identical ring on his own finger pressed deep into his skin. Feridar snapped his gaze to General Valhaura, his cold brown eyes flashing.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, maintaining his composure with great effort.

"We took it off a travelling merchant our pickets detained four months ago," General Valhaura said, annoyance seeping into his words. "As soon we finished construction on the road, we pulled three divisions out and headed straight back to Telesan."

"You fools!" the prince screamed, sweeping his arms across the table and scattering maps towards the three generals in a shower of parchment. The Shahir didn't move, his sly expression betraying what might have been perceived as a hint of amusement. The generals were shocked at this venomous detonation of rage.

“One thousand apologies, Your Highness,” the bearded general blubbered. “We came as soon as it was prudent to do so!”

“Your prudence is a poor excuse for incompetence, General Haife!” the prince bellowed, the thunder of his voice echoing off the smooth marble arches that made up the massive throne room. “Now, by the gods, he could be anywhere, and you lost what could have been a warm trail!”

“He has been gone for over seventeen years, my lord,” General Valhaura snapped, indignant. “No trail would have been hot or even warm had we dropped everything and left our post to chase after some no-account bastard who made off with your--”

He looked like he was about to say more, but General Valhaura’s face quite suddenly went from red to a sickly shade of white. He stuttered, trying to speak, but the words were failing to come together comprehensively. He grasped the table for support as he choked on his own tongue, straining to get breath into his lungs. The other generals leaped back from the table, expressions of confusion and horror on their faces. Feridar’s eyes whipped back to his father; a cruel sneer curled the emperor’s thin lip. His left hand rested on his side while his wrist twisted in a circular motion, fingers clenching and relaxing in a smooth rhythm. General Valhaura turned a deep shade of purple; his eyes were bloodshot and panicked.

“General Valhaura,” the Shahir hissed through clenched teeth. “How dare you address my heir in such a manner. It would appear the Wild has made a wild dog of you.” He clicked his tongue with mocking disapproval, then shoved his

hand high with a quick thrust. General Valhaura shot backwards and upwards as if moved by an invisible puppeteer. The Shahir bent his ringed fingers like talons gripping prey. Valhaura kicked and thrashed, gasping for breath and trying to scream.

“I thought I had been quite clear, General,” the Shahir bellowed, his eyes flashing as he raised Valhaura even higher, almost to the top of the vaulted ceiling, “and unfortunately, I hate repeating myself!”

General Valhaura forced out a violent scream as the Shahir clenched his fist. The other men could hear the sounds of bone cracking as the general crumpled like he was being crushed in a vise. His helmet slid off his grey-streaked hair and fell to the floor below with a deafening clang. The Shahir ripped his fist back and thrust it forward, sending the general’s broken body hurling towards one of the windows to the far left of the throne room. The old soldier shouted in agony as his body went smashing through the glass and fell a hundred feet to the ground below.

Generals Haife and Ducast cringed as the sound of an armor hitting the stone courtyard echoed into the room seconds later. They stared in disbelief at the Shahir, wide-eyed with pure terror. Feridar smirked. It was no secret to the prince that his father disdained the very sight of him, but these men were still less than noblemen, let alone equals to the royal family. The Shahir was not one to let such blatant disregard for status go by unchecked.

“Now,” the Shahir heaved, straightening his crimson turban and stooping to pick up the signet ring from where it

had landed during Feridar's outburst. "Does anyone have anything constructive to add to the discussion?"

Both generals gulped.

"I do hope that isn't a no, gentlemen."

"With your permission, Sire," Ducast said in a quivering voice, picking up the map off the floor with shaking hands. He spread it out on the table before them, the parchment sticking slightly to his now sweaty palms. "We picked up the trader here."

Ducast pointed to a spot not too far west of Franghal, in the dense forest lands labeled "the Wild." Feridar snarled.

"You found him on the edge of the Wild and somehow that is helpful? There's hundreds of miles in that barbaric forest. Surely that isn't all you're bring us to work with?"

"H-h-he said a chieftain traded him for a supply of linen and parchment for his wife," Haife stammered, glancing a fearful look at his king. "The merchant said th-th-that was about a year ago, but he swore he got it while visiting a village in the northlands o-o-of the Wild!"

"Did you happen to find out what this chieftain looked like?"

"Eh...well, not exactly...no, Your Highness," Haife muttered. The Shahir raised an eyebrow at the commander.

"Wait! My lord, he didn't say what the chieftain looked like but he did say he was missing a finger!" Ducast assured.

The Shahir's other eyebrow went up. "A missing finger, you say?"

"Indeed."

“How interesting,” the Shahir muttered, fidgeting with the signet ring on his own hand with his thumb. “And did you think to fulfill the other part of your mission, general?”

“Yes, Great Shahir.”

Haife looked to Ducast, who took a small bag from a clip on his belt, handing it to Feridar. The prince opened the pouch and pulled out a small glass vial. He held it up to the last remaining light of the sun fast sinking in the eastern sky over the edge of the Great Sea. Small clumps of brown, heavy earth jittered about inside as he shook the vial. The word “Franghal” was scribbled on a brown paper label glued to the glass.

“Well done, General,” the Shahir praised, rubbing his hands together in delight. “I think we have what we need now to proceed with an effective strategy.”

“Yes, my Shahir,” both generals said in unison, bowing.

“Well, we have quite a bit of work to do, then,” the king said, ascending the marble steps to his throne. The ruler’s chair sat tall and wide, its stone seat carved from black marble and covered from top to bottom in flowing arabesque palmettes inlaid with gold. A pile of elegant purple pillows embroidered with gold and silver threads cushioned the cold stone. The old king sat down, poised like one of his queen’s cats. “Go. Assemble your divisions and prepare General Valhaura’s former command. Be ready to move out in three days.”

“Yes, my Shahir,” they both said again in chorus. The pair snapped to attention, bowed, and exited the throne room without another word. As soon as the door shut, Feridar whirled to face his father’s throne.

“His wife?” Feridar bellowed. “So they did both escape alive!”

“It would appear so, my son,” the Shahir said, eyeing the signet ring the generals had brought him.

“Then what are we waiting for!? Let me go drive him to his knees and bring him back!”

“The divisions must be rested and re-equipped,” the Shahir sighed, waving his hand.

“But we’re wasting—”

“We waste nothing, you impulsive little urchin,” the Shahir snapped, taking the prince aback momentarily. Feridar glared at his father, knowing full well there was no love lost between them.

“A chieftain is not a lifestyle indicative of a man still on the run,” the king said, stroking his beard. “Ala’haran must feel quite untouchable if he’s settled down in the Wild. And if he’s missing his finger...”

The Shahir held the ring in his palm and pondered over it. He closed his eyes and concentrated, his forehead furrowed in deep meditation. Slowly, the ring lifted out of his palm, spinning in midair as the Shahir summoned all his energy into mumbling unintelligible incantations.

As he spoke, the wind kicked up through the shattered window, blowing out the torches. The blue twilight darkness enveloped them as the ring began to glow bright red, hovering inches from the Shahir’s hand. The ring sprang down the dais and hit the floor of the throne room without a single bounce. Wisps of red smoke shot out of the signet and swirled around the room, beginning to take shapes. The fog formed a tall,

broad-shouldered man with long braided hair. A wild beard under high cheekbones defined his jawline. Feridar balled his fists at his sides when he recognized the man he hated more than any other being on this earth.

A second shape began to form beside him, and another till an entire scene was laid out before them in crimson smoke. The Shahir continued muttering incantations as he surveyed the scene, taking in every detail, including the three female forms that took shape beside the man. The taller of the three held his hand; the other two stood beside the first. A village made of the crimson mist surrounded them. Behind the entire scene stood two peaks of a mountain range, the two moons of the world fast rising from between them.

“So, Ala’haran. A family? Isn’t that sweet.” The Shahir looked intently on the scene and stroked his narrow beard.

Feridar glared at the figures with a hatred burning hot as a dragon’s blood. “He’s got to still have it,” he hissed.

The Shahir laughed sharply, and the entire scene fell to the floor, dissipating in a fog of smoky red mist that left them standing in the cold blue of an unlit throne room.

“Indeed. So the only question left is: are you ready to take your revenge?”

Feridar could have cracked a walnut in his jaw.

“Don’t patronize me, Father,” the prince growled. “This isn’t about me. It’s never been about me. The moment you have the final page of the book back in your hands, you will have forgotten all about me and Ala’haran.”

“And yet you’ll march Valhaura’s former division into the Wild without hesitation,” the Shahir said with a wicked smile.

“Ala’haran is in a village in the southern edge of the Ohlmar mountains. Look for where the moons rise from between two tall peaks. There you will find your revenge waiting for you.”

“Then I’m off to win you yet another victory, my lord,” Feridar muttered, bowing slightly. Without another word, the prince turned and stomped back out of the throne room. He strode past a line of newly-adjusted turbans as he marched down the hallway and made for his chambers.

The path to the east wing of the palace took him down winding corridors and through open chambers where members of court stood about discussing the politics and gossip of the empire. As he passed, they ceased their whisperings and bent low to the ground, muttering platitudes. He paid them no mind; as he stomped towards the staircase that led to his chambers, a swelling of triumph began to bloom in his chest. Not even his father’s enduring disdain for his existence and his accomplishments could weigh him down. At last, after over eighteen years of fruitless searching, he had Ala’haran within his grasp.

The prince took the winding tower steps two at a time, his heels scuffing in the dust as he leapt up the granite staircase. He burst through the gilded door and into the domed chamber he occasionally called his home when he wasn’t campaigning or taking residence in his castle at Aschin. Feridar now had an excuse to leave behind a king who had no use for him and a father who held no love for him.

Feridar opened his campaign chest and threw in maps, charts, and other such things from his writing desk. A

collection of servants scuttled in behind him, their bald and tattooed heads bowed as they entered.

“How may we serve you, Prince?” a mousy female voice chirped. Feridar gestured to the giant closet where ranks of armor, clothes, and boots stood at attention.

“Gather my belongings and have them put in a royal wagon.”

“Shall we pack the blue or yellow marquee for the tournament?” the young woman peeped.

“Neither. Pack my campaign armor. Not the tournament set.”

“You’re not attending the tournament, sire?” another slave asked. This man was old enough to be Feridar’s grandfather; his white mustache trailed towards the ground.

“No, Malacath,” the prince smiled. “I’m heading back to Aschin. I know where Ala’haran is now.”

The slave’s eyes widened as he ushered the other servants to continue packing the prince’s valuables. He scuttled over to Feridar’s side and bent his head low as his voice became a whisper.

“My lord, can it be so? And does...the creature...does she still live? How can this be?”

“Ala’haran appears to have cut off his brand, so until now we had no idea where to begin tracking him, ” the prince growled. “But both he and the creature still live. And now that I know where, I will make them both suffer for their crimes against the empire.”

“Their crimes against the empire? Or against you, my lord?”

The prince snarled at the old man, who kept his eyes downcast.

“If you had not bounced me on your knee as a boy, Malacath, I would have you thrown from that balcony,” the prince growled. Malacath nodded his head.

“Understood, sire,” the old slave muttered, backing away in submission. Feridar snatched up his sword belt and clipped the scimitar to the embossed leather. He crossed over to the veranda on the far side of the room.

The cool breeze of the sea swept through the balcony overlooking the great harbor of Telhesan. The sun had already disappeared beyond the eastern sky. The two moons, Tavian and Suntra, rose high in the west and cast two shimmering orbs across the surface of the vast ocean. The tower faced northeast, the circular city sprawling out before him. The desert sands to the north glowed a creamy blue in the light from the moons.

Most of the Shauden people took great pride in their city; the Jewel of the Empire. But Feridar chose instead to cross the balcony and gaze down at the palace courtyard. He could see the men scurrying about the barracks and stables, packing the carts and loading up the horses for the long journey ahead. Feridar relished in that sight more than a thousand moons casting light upon the sea. The frontier was where he belonged; the battlefield was his home, not Telesan.

If he had believed the gods had any real power, now would have been an ideal time to pray. Feridar believed in one thing: the might of his own saber, limited only by his own ambition. He smirked as he saw the columns of men being formed and set before the quartermaster’s from each battalion for roll-call

and equipment checks. The pagans in the Wild wouldn't stand a chance, even if the "Creator" they worshipped was real. No deity could stand up against such an army; the last two hundred years of Shauden dominance were a testament to that.

"Fool," Feridar muttered, twisting his own signet ring around the smallest finger on his left hand. He pulled it off and glanced at the scarred tissue beneath where the ring sat. Ala'haran had been smart to cut off his brand. Luckily the renegade hadn't known the ring did more than brand its wearer; it could also recall scenes from where it had been. It was a lucky break for the prince, and he trusted it would be a fatal one for his adversary.

The prince returned his ring to his finger and passed through his room to head downstairs once again. His long strides carried him to the kitchens which led out to the royal stables in the rear palace courtyard. As he exited the kitchen doors, he almost ran into a young man only a few years younger than himself, who was dragging an even younger male back into the castle by the collar of a beautifully tailored shirt.

"Watch it!" Feridar barked as the first young man bumped into his chest.

"Feridar, where you off to? It's late!" The offender laughed, taking a giant bite out of an apple as he leaned against the doorway, blocking Feridar's path. He was only a few inches shorter than Feridar, dressed in a simple linen shirt and buff breeches tucked into a pair of immaculate riding boots, which were now speckled with dust. His tousled black hair and close cut beard gave an interesting contrast to the youthful nature of his face. His brown eyes searched Feridar's face.

“Move, Tybahaz,” Feridar growled. “Don’t you have better things to do like charm another milkmaid?”

“She was a scullery maid, big brother,” Tybahaz corrected. “And if you had seen the princess Father tried to pass off on me with that envoy from the Carellian Islands, you would have run for the scullery as well!”

“Quite,” Feridar muttered. He glanced from Tybahaz to the boy his half-brother was dragging by the collar, and his glare deepened.

“What is wrong with Jaiden?”

“Just caught him doodling behind the livery,” Tybahaz laughed, giving the teenager a ruffle of the hair. “Skipped out on his fencing lessons this evening again, so Master Alsaibeh sent me looking for him.”

Feridar grabbed the teenager by the scruff of his neck and pushed him back outside and against the palace’s coral-colored granite wall. The lad kept his eyes shut tight, refusing to look at his older half-brother.

“You call yourself the son of the Shahir!?” Feridar snapped, throwing the younger prince to the ground. Jaiden stumbled backwards, a notebook he’d been carrying hit the dusty ground and papers scattered everywhere. Feridar picked up a few of the charcoal sketches depicting horses and soldiers. Though he could not deny the sketches were accomplished, his anger and frustration at his youngest half-brother would not let him consider complementing the seventeen-year-old.

“You are a Prince of the Shauds!” he spat, crumpling the papers in his fist. “You were born to ride horses into battle, not sit on your shanks and draw them!”

“I was just—”

“You were just ignoring your obligations and playing like a little school girl!” Feridar shouted, throwing the wad of crumpled papers into the dirt. They blew away like tumbleweeds in the desert. The younger prince looked up at his brother with fear in his blue eyes.

“Get up,” Feridar commanded. The boy scrambled to his feet, his gaze downcast and hidden in a shaggy mess of light brown hair.

“Get to the armory and maybe give some heed to the teachings of Master Alsaibeh. How can I trust you to carry a sword for me in battle one day if I can’t even trust that you’ll be where you’re supposed to be?”

He held up the charcoal pencil that had fallen out of the notebook and pushed it against Jaiden’s nose.

“You can’t win a battle with one of these.”

Feridar drew his scimitar and placed it to the boy prince’s throat.

“You have to know how to use one of these.”

The crown prince shoved Jaiden back through the door into Tybahaz’s arms. Tybahaz looked annoyed but said nothing as he brushed the dirt off Jaiden’s back and pushed him into the kitchen.

“Where is Ghaze?” Feridar demanded. Tybahaz shrugged.

“Probably in the library like he always is.”

“Send him to the livery,” Feridar demanded. Tybahaz rolled his eyes at being ordered about like a house slave, but nodded as he stepped back inside the palace kitchens. Feridar sniffed indignantly and made his way past the far side of the

courtyard to the livery. He dismissed the two stable boys with a gruff wave of his hand as he entered the columned archway that led into the stables built into the courtyard wall.

The livery had over fifty large stalls and three separate tack rooms for use by the royal family. In his youth, this was one of the few places Feridar genuinely loved to be in Telesan. The smell of the beasts mingled with the scent of sweet, freshly-cut hay the slaves hauled in daily. The leather in the tack rooms reminded him of the countless tournaments he'd fought in his brief twenty-eight years. With each victory, his glory and ego grew, yet for all his trophies and victory banners, his father still looked at him like a second-choice son and heir.

Feridar walked over to the stall of his favorite war horse. The beast stood eighteen hands high, with a silky charcoal-grey coat fading into black feathering on large, heavy hooves. His mane was the same dark ebony color as his feathering, braided the full length of his hefty neck. He was a barbarian breed. The southern horses were one of the few things the prince did not despise about the lesser peasant kingdoms they had conquered over the last decade.

“What say you, Calif?” the prince said softly, offering the great war horse a sack of oats. The horses in the next two stalls whinnied in jealousy, but Calif paid them no mind as he buried his bulbous muzzle into the treat. The prince smiled for a moment. He began brushing his steed with deft strokes along the back of his high withers and down past the creature's loin. The minutes rolled by, and Feridar lost himself in the smooth, uncomplicated motions of the task at hand, the flickering lantern light teasing the shadows in the marble stall.

The sound of a throat being cleared pulled Feridar from his meditation. He looked up to see another young man closer to his age standing in the doorway of the stables. He had a shaved head tattooed with snakes and dragons intertwining in knotted patterns, his dark eyebrows hiding deep set brown eyes. The man was wearing the loose-fitting robes of a cleric with a pair of expensive magnified reading spectacles perched atop his thin nose. He was shorter than Feridar by almost a full hand's width, but he had a sharp, keen look about him that was enough to intimidate the brawniest of officers in the Army, regular and irregular alike.

"You asked to see me?" the young man queried in a higher-pitched voice than one might expect, yet every word was measured and precise.

"Yes, Ghaze. I need to ask you about the Branding Spells," Feridar grunted, pulling the loose hair from Calif's brush and tossing it on the floor.

"A favor for information." Ghaze demanded. Feridar almost smiled as he tossed a thick wool blanket on Calif's back. Out of all four of his brothers, Ghaze was his only full brother and the only one he did not loathe. As the second eldest of the Shahir's palace-born princes, Ghaze was as intellectual as Feridar was militant. He had studied the dark arts and barbarian's magic almost as well as his father, and had read almost every book in the vast library of the palace.

"Name it," Feridar said, pulling his travel saddle out of the tack room and setting it atop the saddle blanket.

"To be determined. But don't worry, it won't be above your mental faculties."

The crowned prince snorted in disgust.

“Fine. A favor. When I get back.”

“Back?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow for the Wild.”

“So soon? I hadn’t heard of any impending campaigns at court.”

“It just came up,” Feridar muttered.

“Has our father calculated the cost of a second campaign in the season? Fall is already underway, the troops will be needing to settle into winter quarters and the treasury can only handle—”

“We’ve got Ala’haran,” blurted out Feridar, cinching the saddle belt tight. Calif stomped, irritated, and Ghaze’s jaw dropped.

“Ala’haran is alive?”

“For the moment.”

“I see. And your question about Branding Spells?”

“Yes. I need to know if it’s possible to rid yourself of one.”

Ghaze leaned against the stable wall and folded his arms, rubbing his stubbled chin thoughtfully.

“In theory. It would take some strong concealment magic most likely.”

“What about removing the actual physical brand?”

“You mean like a surgery?”

“I mean, if I cut off this finger,” Feridar snapped, pulling the signet ring off his little finger and showing the scarred tissue the ring had branded him with all those years ago. “Will father still be able to see visions of me?”

“Probably not,” Ghaze speculated. “Why?”

“I think Ala’haran cut off his finger to avoid being tracked,” Feridar muttered.

“That would definitely help. Too bad Father didn’t brand him somewhere he couldn’t cut off.”

“Is there any other way of tracking him through the ring now that it is in our possession? Father was able to get vague placement with some sort of ‘Last Sight’ spell, but I need to be more precise than that.”

“Not that I know of. Without the brand he’s still a ghost in the Wild,” Ghaze said, face contorted in concentration.

“No. Not a ghost,” Feridar said, mounting Calif and wheeling the war horse around in the stable’s hallway twice. It felt good to be back in the saddle. “Ghosts can’t bleed. And I fully intend to make that a priority.”

“Well then, best of luck to you, my Prince,” the younger prince said, nodding courteously to Feridar. “Try not to make too much of a mess?”

Feridar laughed cruelly and spurred Calif into a full gallop out of the livery. He charged through the courtyard on his way to meet with his generals, the two moons lighting his pathway from their perch the night sky. He had a hunt to conduct, and the sly fox would not slip past him. Not this time. It would be a long night, but for Feridar, the fun had just begun.

THE  
BROTHERHOOD

