

Captives of the Curse Bonus Chapter 2

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: Events described in Chapter Twenty-One

Calinnae

“Your Majesty.”

Calinnae drew his gaze away from the city before him to look over at the guard who had ridden up alongside him.

“Yes, Armistad?”

“Would you like me to ride ahead to prepare lodgings? Since Your Majesty is not expected?”

Cal restrained a sigh at the faint hint of disapproval in the man’s voice. Armistad was a good guard, and Cal quite liked the man, but it seemed that he shared the view of most of the guards in the contingent about the way this mission was being conducted. But Cal had explained his desire to reach Alezae without fanfare as many times as his patience could sustain, and he wasn’t going to get into it again.

“No, thank you, Armistad,” he said calmly. “We will secure lodgings after we have conducted our business.”

“Surely Your Majesty will wish to rest first?” protested Armistad, aghast. “Surely you won’t enter the city and immediately challenge this man?”

This time Cal sighed aloud, trying to remind himself that it was only natural for it to take time to earn respect in his new role. He just hoped that he didn’t have to wait for gray hairs to come before junior guards remembered that it wasn’t their place to question the king’s plans.

“That’s why we made camp last night instead of pushing on into the city,” he explained patiently. “I don’t want to rest.” He suddenly thought of the rider beside him, and hesitated, looking over. “That is, unless—”

“Of course I don’t want to rest,” said Elnora shortly. “I’ve been waiting years for this.”

Cal nodded then looked back at Armistad. “Please request Lord Leander to gather his men. Tell him we are ready.”

The man rode away, and Cal turned back to his betrothed. He regarded her in silence for a moment, before she turned to meet his eye.

“I’m fine, Cal, honestly.” She sounded impatient. “Stop looking at me like you think I’m about to break.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Yes you were, and you know it. I can tell you’re regretting letting me come.”

“I’m not,” he said quietly, and it was true.

But she wasn’t wrong about his reluctance to involve her in the confrontation that was about to take place. It was just that he had been even more unwilling to leave her in Kynton alone to face whatever nastiness the court would inevitably inflict on her in his absence.

“I just know that there are a lot of difficult memories for you here,” he pressed on, refusing to be deterred by her prickly attitude. “Last time we were here I didn’t have the right to protect you. Now that I do, I want to do it properly.”

Her expression softened. “I know, Cal. And I appreciate it. But I’m not afraid, and I’m not going to hide. I need to face this head on.”

“That’s what you said last time,” he said, unimpressed. “And it didn’t stop you from being abducted by slave traders.”

“Sure, but you came to my rescue,” she said flippantly, flashing him a grin. “Plus,” the grin changed to a smirk, “I think Bryant might find that it’s not so easy to get his way this time.”

“I think you might be right,” Cal agreed, trying to restrain the smug—and not very kingly—expression he felt rising on his face as he glanced back at the three squadrons of guards he’d brought with him.

His eyes caught on Leander, approaching at a trot with a dozen of his best men behind him. His kinsman’s characteristically serious expression pulled Calinnae’s thoughts back in line. He had to keep sight of the main objective in this mission. Bryant was just a means to an end. Well, a means to a couple of ends. He wouldn’t deny to himself that the desire to make the man pay for how he had treated Elnora was a substantial motivation in itself.

“Are your men ready, Leander?” he greeted the former forester.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Leander replied. Cal noted with approval that the men had all pulled their traveling cloaks close, covering their royal livery as instructed.

“Then let’s go.”

He met Elnora’s eyes again, and she gave a curt nod, pulling the hood of her own traveling cloak up over her golden hair. The group set out at a swift walk, leaving the rest of the squadrons behind.

As soon as they hit the main road into Alezae, Leander and his men spread out in all directions, disappearing into the crowd in an effort to blend in with the heavy traffic already coming and going. But Cal and Elnora stayed close to each other. Hopefully they would look like

nothing more than two travelers—albeit wealthy travelers to have their own horses—arriving in the bustling seaside trading city.

They entered the city from the north and made their way steadily southward. They didn't pause as they passed through the prosperous merchants' sector at the center of town. But as he looked around, Cal found himself distracted from their purpose, lost in memories of the last time they had come here. So much had changed since then, it was hard to believe he was the same person. For the most part those changes were for the better of course, but still...Jonan had been with him then.

He sighed in spite of himself. There was no use denying that he missed his best friend. So much that it felt like a physical ache sometimes. He knew that Jonan would have hated all the power plays that Cal and Elnora had found themselves inevitably caught up in the moment he assumed the throne. But it would certainly have been nice to have his friend at his side, for moral support if nothing else. And to make him laugh at himself when his new royal duties threatened to make him too serious for his eighteen years to sustain.

Jo would surely laugh at his sentimentality now if he could hear Cal's thoughts. And Cal had no doubt that Jonan would call him an old woman for his concern. But Cal couldn't help but worry. Four weeks Jonan had been gone, without any whisper of his whereabouts, or any assurance of his wellbeing. Not that he had expected Jo to send him updates. But it would have been nice to have had some vague idea of where his friend had gone. It was so like Jonan—and so ridiculous—to sneak off like a criminal instead of allowing Cal to send him off with the significant support he could now offer.

"Are you thinking about last time we were here?" Elnora's soft voice broke into his reverie.

He nodded.

"Wishing Jonan was with us now like he was then?"

"Yes."

"And, let me guess—you're wondering where he is and worrying about him."

He gave a reluctant laugh. "You know me too well, apparently."

She chuckled. "It's written on your face, and I've been hard at work learning how to read, remember?"

He didn't say anything, but his gaze rested on her face, warmth in his eyes. She had indeed been working hard, on many things. He wondered how she had the energy to eat some days. Reading, court etiquette, horseback riding, dancing, history. Even swordplay, despite the disapproval of some of the court.

He was impressed by all she had achieved and fiercely proud of how indisputably she was proving her intelligence and capacity. But he wished it didn't feel so much like she was trying to prove her worthiness to herself as much as to anyone else. Because proving it to everyone else was more than enough of a challenge. She didn't complain, but he still saw it. Everywhere she turned there was someone ready to criticize, to undermine her position.

Unbidden, his thoughts flew to the horrifying scene when it had been discovered that she didn't actually know how to read. He could still see the faces of some of the courtiers—you would think he had expressed a determination to marry the donkey that pulled the supply cart between gatehouses. He remembered how his blood had boiled with fury at their behavior, then run cold as his gaze had passed to Elnora. He had been a heartbeat from losing her—he had seen in her eyes that she was on the point of giving up on all of it, of slinking away as silently as Jonan had done.

But why was he thinking about that now? It had been weeks since then, and she was still at his side, where he had every intention of keeping her. And if he sometimes felt exhausted and found himself wishing that he didn't have to carry both himself and her, he always felt immediately guilty for expecting so much of her.

"I miss Jonan too, you know," Elnora said unexpectedly. "I know I'm not half as close to him as you are, but it would be nice to have another friend around the place."

Cal didn't miss the wistful note in her voice, and it tugged at his heart. She must feel some days like he was her only friend at the castle, and the worst of it was that his duties kept him so busy that he could hardly find a blasted minute to spend with her. Another reason he had been more than willing to agree when she insisted on coming on this trip.

"Would it though?" he asked humorously, trying to lighten the mood. "His big mouth would definitely have gotten all three of us into trouble a dozen times already. You know he'd never be able to swallow all the court nonsense as well as we have."

Elnora laughed, but it was a rueful sound. "Speak for yourself. I don't think I've swallowed it well at all. You should see the state of my pillow. Most nights I pummel it mercilessly for at least five minutes before even trying to go to sleep. It helps me resist the temptation to do it to the faces of the courtiers the next day."

Cal raised an eyebrow. "If we could just hurry up and get married then I would be able to see the state of your pillow on a regular basis."

"Cal!" she hissed, blushing adorably and casting a quick glance around to make sure none of their party were in hearing distance. He just grinned, unrepentant.

Their banter quickly died away as they left the merchants' sector and pushed further south, toward the unsavory dockside district. The streets became dirtier, the houses melted into hovels, and the general feel of the area went from orderly to dangerous at a surprisingly rapid rate.

The sight sobered Cal considerably—last time he had just wanted to get through Alezae unnoticed, but the state of the city was his problem now. Filip may not have cared that the children of this district grew up in fear, but Cal intended to see order in every city in his kingdom. Changes needed to be made, and targeting the slave trade was only the beginning.

As they approached the compound where Bryant's gang was based, Cal glanced surreptitiously around and was reassured by the sight of Leander, now on foot, loitering inconspicuously nearby. The older man gave Cal a barely perceptible nod, and Cal turned his eyes forward again, pulling to a stop in front of the compound's gate.

"Move along, stranger," said a young man lounging to the side of the entrance. He spoke to Cal, but his eyes lingered on their horses, which had been attracting attention ever since they left the wealthy part of town.

"Who are you to tell me where to go?" said Cal provocatively.

The man raised his eyebrows. "You want a broken head, friend?" he jeered. "Do you know whose territory you're in now?"

"I guess this is the king's territory same as anywhere else," returned Calinnae, and he felt Elnora shift slightly beside him.

The man's eyes slid across to her, even as he gave a derisive laugh at Cal's words.

"You guess wrong," he sneered. "Now get on, if you know what's good for you. It's no matter to me whether you value your life or not, but you must be a bigger fool than you look to bring your wench around here. Don't you know what happens to pretty girls like that in this part of town?"

"Does nothing happen to the ugly ones?" cut in Elnora conversationally.

The man grinned as he looked her up and down suggestively. "I guess you won't find out, anyway, sweetheart."

"Watch who you're calling sweetheart," snapped Cal before he could stop himself. He drew a deep breath—he had intended to stay calm until Bryant was in front of him.

"We want to see Bryant," he tried again, his tone short.

The man's grin instantly slid away as he looked sharply back at Cal. "It's like that, is it?"

"It is. We have business with him."

“And is he expecting you?” the man challenged.

Cal couldn't quite resist a smile. “No, I think our visit will come as quite a surprise actually.”

The man gave him another hard look, then turned abruptly and disappeared through the gate. Cal glanced over at Elnora, noting another of Leander's men behind her, leaning nonchalantly against a nearby building.

“Did you hear, Cal?” Elnora asked with an innocent air. “He thinks I'm pretty.”

Cal just shot her a look, unimpressed, and she barely restrained a chuckle as the man reappeared, two others in tow.

“Leave your weapon and your horses with my associates here, and I'll find out if Bryant will see you.”

“No,” said Cal calmly, and the man raised his eyebrows.

“What did you say?”

“I said no.” Cal's voice was just as level as before. “We'll leave the horses, but my sword remains with me.”

For a moment the man seemed taken aback, and even Cal could hear the note of authority in his voice that had not been there the last time he had come to Alezae. He regarded the gang members steadily, his eyes daring any one of them to attempt to take the weapon of his ancestor from him. Not that they had any idea it was a magic sword, of course.

“Then you can be on your way,” the man said at last, puffing up his chest. “You're not coming in here with a weapon.”

“I think I am, actually.”

“Do you now? Well *I* think—”

“Tell Bryant that Elnora is here,” Elnora broke in impatiently. “And wants to speak with him.”

The man hesitated for a moment, sizing them up with his eyes, then disappeared again. The other two gang members continued to hover, their demeanor aggressive. Cal ignored them, raising his eyebrows at Elnora.

She shrugged. “I think his curiosity will get the better of him.” She lowered her voice. “There are only two of us, after all.”

It seemed she was right. Before long their new friend was back, this time accompanied by a young woman. She looked carefully between them before giving a grunt.

“It *is* Elnora. Making yet another unexpected return, I see. Shouldn’t you be in the South Lands by now, breaking your back in some slave camp?” She squinted at Cal. “I recognize you, too. You were with her last time, along with your dark-haired friend.” She glanced at her companions. “They came through here a month or two ago. Just a couple of green travelers. I’ll take them to the boss.”

They relinquished their horses to the other gang members without comment. Cal didn’t miss the calculating gleam in the first youth’s eyes as he took in the quality of the creatures. He knew that Leander would prevent the gang from selling the mounts, as they obviously intended to do, but he hoped it wouldn’t come to that immediately, as it would force Cal’s group to reveal their hand too soon.

“The boss was pretty surprised when he heard you’d come back from exile yet again,” their new guide told Elnora as she led them through the compound. She paused outside the same building where they had confronted Bryant last time, gesturing for them to precede her through the doorway. She gave Elnora a pitying look, her tone superior. “Fools. I don’t know how you got free, but you should’ve stayed that way.”

Elnora said nothing, just held her head high as she walked into the building. Cal followed close behind her, scanning the room carefully. Good. There were only half a dozen men inside. And their expressions were amused and condescending. Even better.

“Elnora, my dear child.” Bryant’s voice was as sleek as Cal remembered. “It really is you. How unexpected.” His eyes slid across to Cal, and his expression became even more shrewd. “And one of your little friends has returned with you.”

“Well I didn’t quite get to say everything that was in my mind last time,” said Cal, keeping his tone light with an effort as he stepped forward.

“I do love the brazenness of the young,” said Bryant indulgently. He turned to Elnora again, looking her casually up and down, his eyes seeming to assess her costly gown. “My, my. It seems that expensive horses are not all you have acquired since you last left us, my dear, bedraggled and dirty and pathetic, in keeping with who you really are. Did you hope to impress me by coming here in all this finery? It won’t answer, sweetheart. I know exactly what type of street rat you are.”

Bryant’s eyes once again passed over Elnora’s slim form, his expression a little too appreciative. “Although I will admit it looks good on you. You would almost pass for nobility in that get up.”

Cal growled low in his throat, his hand straying to the hilt of his sword. He wasn’t sure what angered him more—Bryant’s words or the familiarity of his tone. He remembered the way

the older man had touched Elnora's hair last time. Plan or no plan, Cal would not be allowing him to lay a finger on her again.

His behavior drew the leader's attention back to him. "Do you have something you would like to say?" he asked politely, obviously enjoying Cal's anger.

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Cal, his voice growing tight. "You will not speak to her like that, and you will not look at her like she's a piece of property."

His confident words were met with guffaws from the onlookers. Bryant narrowed his eyes, and for a moment Cal thought the confrontation was imminent. But apparently the leader wasn't done toying with his guests yet.

"But I thought she *was* a piece of property," he said lightly. "I thought I sold her last time we met. But since she's still with us in our fair land, I suppose you and your friend were responsible after all for the, uh, misfortune that befell a certain trading ship."

A vivid image sprang into Cal's mind, orange flames dancing against inky black water, shouts ripping through the stillness of the night, the smell of ash clinging to his clothes...

"That's right," he said evenly. "We broke Elnora and the others out of the hold, then my friend set the ship on fire. Guess they didn't manage to deliver their cargo on time."

Bryant raised an eyebrow. He had clearly expected Cal to deny it. "I must admit, I'm impressed. I didn't think you had it in you." He looked between them again. "So having escaped the traders' scourge, you've come back for revenge against the villain who turned you over to them, I suppose."

"Something like that," said Calinnae, his expression grim. "Although I like to think it's justice rather than just revenge."

Bryant laughed, his cronies joining in sycophantically. "That's very high and mighty talk!" His gaze hovered on Cal's sword. "You're bold, I'll give you that, young man. But do you really hope to bring me to 'justice' as you call it?"

"Yes, I think so," returned Cal. "Or haven't you heard that there's a new king in Kynton?"

"Of course I've heard," said Bryant, his smile unwavering. "I think everyone in the country is aware."

"Then surely you know that the new king has made a decree that any Kyonan participating in buying or selling their countrymen will be considered guilty of treason," Elnora chimed in, apparently unable to resist taking a hand in the conversation.

"I have heard as much," said Bryant, his expression still indulgent as he looked at Elnora, whose face was unmistakably smug. "Is that your game? You will be disappointed, I think. It's

all very well, the bluster from this King Calinnae. But it's nothing more than an attempt to throw some weight around. He's been on the throne for what, four weeks? Mark my words, he'll have his hands full with problems closer to home for a long time yet before he turns his attention to any troubles with the South Lands."

"You seem to know his mind very well," said 'this King Calinnae', politely.

"Well, I flatter myself that I know a little more about politics than a couple of children off the streets," Bryant answered.

Cal thought he heard a distant shout outside. It was time to move things along. Leander had been adamant that he and his men weren't waiting any longer than ten minutes to follow the royal couple.

"As it happens," said Cal, "you're not the only one to feel that way." He drew his sword out of its sheath as he spoke, the movement slow and smooth. Instantly the men who had been lounging against the far wall pushed off from their places and started toward him, drawing their own weapons. Cal ignored them, pulling his blade up in front of him as he continued to speak, his eyes on Bryant.

"A lot of people thought that going after the slave trade wasn't a high enough priority so soon after the king's ascension. But he has a mind of his own, it turns out. And he thinks that wiping out the cursed stain of this heinous trade is the highest of all his priorities."

Bryant raised his eyebrows, taking in Cal's combative stance. He lifted a lazy hand, halting his approaching lackeys. He evidently didn't see his young challenger as a threat.

"Is he a friend of yours, that you can tell me what he thinks?" Bryant drawled.

"In a manner of speaking." Cal still spoke lightly, but his muscles were bunched with the tension he was holding in. Likewise, he could feel a similar strain emanating from Elnora.

Bryant laughed incredulously. "You must be mad to think I would be intimidated by such an empty claim. I suppose King Calinnae sent you to round me up, did he? He wanted to bring me in, and he thought you were just the man for the job?"

"Precisely," said Cal, pleased to have the matter so neatly explained. "You see, being new to the situation, the king needed somewhere to start. And unfortunately for you, your little attack on Elnora identified you as the only person in Alezae whom he could be confident has communication with the traders."

Bryant smirked. "Well, he can come talk to me anytime."

"Actually," said Cal, "I've had enough of talking." He lunged forward suddenly, making for Bryant.

The man stepped back with a nimble movement, his underlings jumping in to meet Cal's attack. Elnora cried out a warning, but Cal was more than ready for them. His sword flashed in and out, disarming one man and injuring another before Bryant seemed to even realize what was happening. It was amazing how quickly the sword had become a part of him. He had trained with it every day since his coronation, and he truly could no longer imagine himself without it. It felt like an old friend, rediscovered after a prolonged separation.

The gang members had clearly expected to overpower him without difficulty, and after the first injury, the others fell warily back a step, looking to their boss for direction.

"Come quietly, Bryant," said Calinnae. "No need for your followers to get hurt on your behalf."

"You think a little skill with a sword is going to be enough to get the better of me?" demanded Bryant, looking more angry than amused now. "You poor deluded boy, have you spent every day since I last saw you training with a sword, just so you could come back here to avenge her supposed wrongs?" He jerked his head toward Elnora as he spoke.

"You say that like it wouldn't be reason enough," said Cal, his breath still uneven from his recent fight. "But, no, it's not just her—it's for every vulnerable orphan you exploited with your false, self-serving offer of protection. It's for every Kyonan you handed over to those vile traders."

The last word came out as a growl as Cal surged forward again. This time Bryant had to jump back more hastily—and with less dignity—in order to remain out of his reach as the others again engaged Cal.

Out of the corner of his eye Cal saw Bryant gesture to one of his men. Spinning around, Cal saw the man heading for Elnora, where she had moved back out of the way of the fight. To Cal's alarm, she seemed to cower as her attacker approached her, her posture making her look small and vulnerable.

The man reached out for Elnora, not even bothering with his weapon, and Cal gave a cry. But before he could take more than a step in her direction, she had whipped out a small blade and plunged it into the leg of her attacker, who fell back with a yell. Cal smiled grimly as he turned his attention back to his own fight, where it was more urgently needed. He should have known Elnora would use her seeming vulnerability to her advantage. His eyes fell on Bryant, and his gaze hardened. No doubt *he* had taught her to do that.

There were only two men left between Cal and his quarry, and he had had enough of the distractions. With a flourish, he spun his sword in a full circle, feeling its power pulse through him with a hum as he struck out at the challengers. His blade only touched their weapons rather than the men themselves, but they still both flew backward through the air as power burst from

the sword. For a moment the scene was frozen, Bryant's astonished eyes on the forms on the ground at his feet. He looked up and met Cal's blazing look.

"Who *are* you?" he asked, the words seeming to come involuntarily.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" Elnora's voice was close behind Cal, and she was panting slightly from her own altercation.

Cal glanced back at her, and a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision told him that Bryant was taking advantage of his momentary distraction to pull out his own blade. Cal spun back around, and with a flick of his unnatural sword, he sent Bryant's weapon flying across the room. The older man stumbled back a step at the swift movement, tripping on the legs of one of his unconscious followers. He fell backward onto the ground, and Cal had his sword to the man's throat in a heartbeat. He could definitely hear the sound of fighting outside now.

Bryant didn't seem to have noticed it as his eyes darted frantically between the two figures standing over him. "You'll pay for this, both of you," he panted. "How dare you come in here and attack me?"

Elnora gave a humorless laugh. "You're not familiar with the view from down there, are you Bryant? Weren't you always telling us that new experiences were good for us, and the more painful, the more educational? I guess it's your turn to learn something. It's not very pleasant to find yourself at someone else's mercy, is it?"

"Why you ungrateful little cur," Bryant spat, enraged. "I made you what you are. You'd be dead if it weren't for me, you—" The flow of words suddenly ceased as Cal pressed his blade against Bryant's jugular.

"I believe," Cal growled, "that I already told you to speak respectfully when addressing your future queen."

"My—" Bryant's gaze passed between them, his forehead creased in confusion.

At this moment the door to the outside burst violently open, Leander hurtling through with his companions on his heels. Cal was pleased, but not surprised, to see his commander unhurt. Bryant's gang might be street-smart and tough, but they were not formally taught in the use of any weapon. Cal had fully expected his own well-trained royal guards to make short work of them.

"Is all well, Your Majesty?" asked Leander, the fact that he was puffing somehow not reducing the formality with which he habitually addressed his sovereign.

"Certainly," said Cal calmly, keeping the tip of his sword at Bryant's throat. "We're just having a pleasant conversation. Our host was about to tell us everything he knows about the activities of the traders."

Leander scanned the room as Cal spoke, and seemed to be satisfied with what he saw. His men had all filed in behind him, and they formed a protective semi circle around their king and his betrothed.

“In that case, don’t let me interrupt, Your Majesty.”

Bryant’s mouth was hanging open, dignity forgotten as he stared from Elnora’s face, to the royal livery of the guards surrounding them, to Cal standing above him, calm and commanding. Apparently the pieces had finally fallen into place. Cal restrained a smile with an effort. He had pictured this moment so many times over the last few weeks, and it was as satisfying as he had imagined it would be.

Bryant’s gaze lingered for another moment on Elnora, alarm building behind the shock.

“You’re remembering how you treated her, aren’t you?” said Cal softly. “You have my sympathy. It must be most unnerving to find that the defenseless have a powerful protector.”

He saw real fear in Bryant’s eyes, and for a brief moment felt a rush of savage enjoyment at the sight. But his own emotion made him recoil, and he looked away. He could get no pleasure from the spectacle before him. Fear, however well deserved, was an ugly thing, even dressed at its best.

“Tell me what you know of the traders,” he said, his tone turning businesslike. “I know you have a partnership with them now. When is their next ship expected in port?”

For a moment Bryant was silent, glaring defiantly back at his interrogator.

Cal sighed. “From what I know of you, Bryant, I doubt you’re willing to die heroically rather than betray someone else’s secrets. We may as well get to the point sooner, and with less unpleasantness all around.”

Bryant evidently felt he was right, because after another moment he growled out, “They’re already here. There’s a ship in the quay now, arrived late last night. They already picked up some cargo in some of the smaller coastal towns, and they’re filling the rest of the hold in Alezae. They plan to sail tonight.”

“Cargo?” repeated Cal sharply. “You mean Kyonan souls.”

Bryant just shrugged, his expression petulant.

“You will face formal charges for your involvement,” Cal began, stepping back and lowering his sword so that some of Leander’s men could take custody of the gang leader. Bryant’s eyes took on a calculating gleam as the guards moved to flank him.

“I could help you, Y-Your Majesty.” Cal didn’t miss the way he stumbled over the title, as if he was only forcing himself to use it with difficulty. “I know exactly how they operate, and—”

“Enough,” Cal cut him off, his voice cold. “Let me make the situation very clear. Things are changing. The last king may have seen fit to cooperate with criminals and slavers for his own gain, but I’m in charge now. And I will have nothing to do with anyone who could even consider selling his countrymen. You are a traitor and a snake, and I have no interest in any assistance from you.”

Bryant’s face darkened as Cal spoke, his features twisted in anger. “I see the rumors are all true,” he spat. “The rumors that our new *king*,” he jeered the word, “is a green child with more ideals than sense, who doesn’t know what’s good for him and will be lucky to last the year.”

Cal shrugged, indifferent to Bryant’s words. He would prove those doubters wrong, after all. But Elnora let out a hiss, clearly taking offense on his behalf. Bryant could obviously tell as much, too, and he turned to her with a nasty smile.

“And I see the other rumors are true as well—that this king brought a simple peasant wench with him who everyone but him can clearly see he’ll never be allowed to marry.” He clucked his tongue. “I would never have guessed it was you, Elnora. I’m honored, really. There’s a certain distinction in having all but raised the girl who’s going to ruin the new king before he’s even begun.”

Cal surged forward with a snarl, disregarding his sword and seizing Bryant by the throat.

“I should run you through right here,” he breathed, his voice trembling with anger. For a moment the two of them faced off, the tension in the room nearly unbearable. Then Cal stepped back, almost throwing Bryant from him. “But that’s not the way my kingdom is going to run.” He gestured to Leander with a jerk of the head. “Take him into custody and deliver him to the rest of the men. I want him traveling back to Kynton in chains before the day is out.”

Leander gave a nod of his own, and two of the guards hurried forward and began binding Bryant. Cal stepped away from them, his eyes on Elnora who was watching the process without any marked interest.

“Elnora,” he said hesitantly. “You know better than to listen to him, don’t you? He’s a liar, and he’s just trying to get under your skin.”

“I know,” said Elnora mechanically, but she still wouldn’t meet his eyes.

Cal wanted to say a great deal more, but it wasn’t the time or place. He returned his attention to Bryant, his gaze stormy. The snake might be bound for now, but he was still poisonous, curse him.

When they started to haul the prisoner from the room, Cal stopped the guard in charge. “When you reach the others, send a squadron to me here. And tell Armistad to arrange lodgings for a few nights. It’s going to take some time to resettle a ship’s worth of abducted kids.”

Leander waited until they had left the room before he spoke. “You want to go after the ship today, Your Majesty?”

Cal gave a curt nod. “Immediately. If the traders get wind of what’s happening, they might decide that half a load is better than none and set sail before we can get to them.”

Leander nodded, and immediately began to talk strategy. It was truly the best thing about the grim forester. He was unfailingly efficient and capable in carrying out Cal’s orders, even if he didn’t agree with them.

True to his word, Cal had them all en route to the docks as soon as the reinforcements arrived. The afternoon was advancing, and his stress increased with every minute they had to wait. He kept remembering the last time he and Jonan had taken on a trader vessel, and the expressions on the faces of the chained Kyonan youths in the ship’s hold haunted him.

If only Jo were here now—he had left in search of adventure, but dismantling the slave trade promised action enough for anyone, in Cal’s opinion. Maybe he should have specifically asked Jonan to help him with this issue. Surely the worthiness of the cause would have been worth sticking around for. But then, Jo hadn’t seemed to have quite as strong a reaction as Cal had to the discovery that the trade was once again flourishing.

Cal sighed. He supposed his friend just had some growing up to do before he could take even such a heavy matter as seriously as it deserved. As long as he managed to stay alive long enough to do so.

When they reached the dock, Cal dismissed all thoughts of Jonan, ready to focus on the task at hand. The trader ship was right where he had expected it to be, docked just outside the quay on the other side of the breakwater. He exchanged a glance with Elnora, her tight face reflecting the tension he felt. Did she also see the flicker of flames in front of her eyes, momentarily obscuring the solid, seaworthy vessel before them?

But Cal still found himself relaxing as soon as he had the ship in sight. They had them—there was no way the traders could set sail quickly enough to escape, even if they knew what was about to rain down on them. And this time Cal didn’t have to disguise himself and sneak on board. He would descend with the wrath of a king and, more importantly, the manpower to back it up.

Apparently this grim intention was clear to the traders as well, because a shout went up from the deck at sight of the approaching squadron, decked out in the livery of the royal guard. Cal’s group didn’t pick up its pace—there was no need to. In minutes they had passed the edge of the wharf, and reached the gangplank. Anger flared through Cal at the evidence of how openly the traders operated in Alezae. Another reminder of how complicit Filip had been in the despicable trade.

The sailors made a frenzied attempt to withdraw the gangplank, but it was futile. Leander surged forward to place himself on the walkway, and a number of his men followed suit, trapping it in place. Cal brought his horse to a stop on the wharf, alongside the ship.

“Where is your captain?” he called in a clear voice.

“Who’s asking?”

The speaker, a member of the ship’s crew, had a nasally voice, and a sneer on his face. Cal saw Leander twitch in irritation at the man’s disrespect, but his own voice remained level as he replied.

“I am.”

The man seemed about to respond again, but something in Cal’s face drew him up short. He scurried off, and a minute later, a broad-shouldered man in his middle age appeared on the deck, his expression hard and determined.

“Who are you that you come in force against a foreign vessel engaging in lawful trade?” the captain began, his voice haughty. “This aggression is an offense to my country, and my king will hear of it.”

“So you act on behalf of your king, do you?” Cal asked calmly. “That’s good to know.”

“I didn’t say that,” said the captain carefully.

“But you did say you were engaged in lawful trade,” Calinnae pushed on, his voice growing stern. “Tell me, what is your cargo?”

The man’s eyes swept over the squadron, dozens of grim-faced men seated on high-bred horses, their mounts fidgeting at the prolonged inaction.

“Spices from Thorania, and Balenan timber.”

“Perhaps you brought those things with you from the South Lands,” said Cal dryly. “But what is your return cargo?”

The man’s jaw worked for a moment. “Grain,” he said at last.

“Indeed?” Cal’s tone was polite. “Well, my men will need to inspect the cargo, of course, before it can leave port. New regulations, you understand.”

“No, I don’t understand,” blustered the captain, but at a nod from Cal, Leander had already boarded the ship and was making for the ladder into the hold.

“This is an outrage!” the captain protested as Leander brushed past him. “Who gives you the authority to board *my* ship?”

“I do,” said Cal calmly. “Since you are in *my* port.”

The captain began to scoff, but at that moment a muffled cheer was heard from below decks. Cal raised his eyebrows.

“Noisy grain you have on board, Captain.”

A moment later Leander reappeared on deck, his expression grim.

“About forty souls in the hold, Sire,” he said.

Cal turned to the captain. “You were saying?”

“My trade is lawful,” growled the Balenan. “The goods I brought from Balenol were provided to your king in exchange for workers. I tell you my trade is with the Kyonan crown, and you have no right to—”

“The Kyonan crown sits on a different head these days,” said Cal, a dangerous light in his eyes. “And your *trade* is no longer lawful in any part of this kingdom.”

“Says who?” demanded the captain. “The new king must honor the transactions made by his predecessor, and—”

“Don’t use words you don’t understand!” spat Cal. “I am well aware that Filip sold his own people in exchange for goods, but the new king will not *honor* any such travesty.”

Cal felt his fist clenching involuntarily as he remembered that discovery. It had not even been difficult to prove it—Filip had made little effort to keep his activities secret, and the matter was well recorded in the former king’s personal documents.

“If you say so,” chuckled the captain. “This king can explain that to—”

“I am the king, you fool,” snapped Cal, tired of the games. “And I don’t need to explain anything to anyone.”

“You?” The man’s mouth dropped open. “You are a child!”

“Then this will be all the more humiliating for you,” said Cal. Leaping off his horse, he surged up onto the ship, his sword in his hand and his men following behind him.

It was over in minutes. Only half the squadron made it onto the ship before there was no space, but it was more than enough. Most of the crew quickly surrendered, and Cal’s men restrained them efficiently. The captain was the last to give in, and when he did Cal had no compunction about having him bound like an animal.

“It does look humiliating,” Cal panted, staring grimly down at the man. “But I think we can do still better.” He looked up, searching for Leander. “Did they find any spare shackles?”

The commander nodded, his expression fierce. He gestured to one of his men who brought over a set of heavy iron manacles. At a sign from Cal, they were clamped onto the ankles of the captain, who spluttered a furious protest.

“How dare you! Balenol will not stand for this! We will annihilate your upstart little—”

“Gag him,” interrupted Cal coolly, losing interest in the man’s diatribe. One of the guards hastened to obey, the young king watching on with an impassive face.

“I will not attach chains to your shackles,” said Cal smoothly. “You see how merciful I am. You will be able to walk on your return journey, which is more than you would have done for my countrymen. But we will relieve you of all keys.”

“Sire.”

Cal looked up to see a guard addressing him. Behind the man, a steady stream of wide-eyed and disheveled Kyonan youths had begun to emerge from the hold. Cal saw Elnora move forward to receive and reassure them. Unlike all the other rescuers, she knew exactly what they were feeling right now.

“Yes?” he said to the guard.

“We found these,” the man said, and Cal frowned down at the object held out to him.

“What is it for?” he asked, never having seen such an item before.

“Branding, Sire. I believe they usually go over the marks with ink once they arrive in Balenol.” The man’s expression was dark.

For a moment Cal was silent as he caught up with the guard’s meaning.

“I see.” He turned back to the captain, his voice steady but his eyes wild. “You are a disgrace to mankind.”

He raised his voice, addressing the assorted groups covering the deck. “All those of you who have been freed from the hold, you are free to return to your homes if you wish. If you don’t come from Alezae, we will assist you to rejoin your families. If you have nowhere to go, you are welcome to travel to the capital under my protection. As to you two,” he turned to the two Kyonan deckhands who had been found below, his voice hardening. “You will be transported to Kynton to face charges of treason.”

“What about the Balenans?” asked Leander, saying the word like a curse. “Will you execute them?”

“No,” said Cal. “I will not.” He looked at the cowed crew, many of whom were openly relieved. “We will treat them the way they were going to treat their guests,” he continued,

watching with some satisfaction as the relief was replaced with apprehension. His eyes passed to the captain. “Starting with him.”

When the captain grasped his intention, he began to struggle wildly, but the royal guards restrained him without difficulty. He wasn’t the only one to attempt to escape, and some of the men even begged and pleaded for reprieve. But Cal remained unmoved, and he didn’t leave the ship until he had personally seen each Balenan crew member branded on their foreheads. The symbol itself was enough to counteract any softening he might have felt. Two links of a chain, intertwined—a vivid reminder of what these men were involved in.

Still, as justified as it may have been, it wasn’t a pleasant exercise. Once the task was complete, Cal found that weariness was tugging at the edges of his resolve. He decided he could afford to hand the remaining practicalities over to Leander. He looked around for Elnora, and saw her assisting in the processing of the freed Kyonans. She seemed to be attuned to him, however, and looked up almost as soon as his eyes were on her.

She gave a quick nod of understanding and worked her way to his side. He was glad that he didn’t have to explain to her, that she understood without him saying a word that he wanted to stick together. Of course there was no logical reason she couldn’t stay and continue to assist even if he went to rejoin the rest of their group.

But as foolish as it was, even though he knew the threat was fully contained, Cal couldn’t bring himself to leave her on the ship. The sight of her cowering in the hold of just such a vessel, bruised and chained, staring at him out of vacant eyes, was branded into his memory as clearly as the marks that now stood out angrily on the foreheads of the Balenan crew members.

Cal paused as they passed the captain, who was still bound and gagged, but was glaring death at the young king with unabated fury.

“You will sail with the tide tonight,” Cal commanded, “and you will never return.” He paused, giving the man an appraising look, then added coolly, “Apparently you don’t act on your king’s behalf, so I won’t trouble you with any official communications. But if you do happen to see him,” Cal’s eyes gleamed, “you can tell him that the market is closed. Permanently.”

Elnora waited until they were off the ship and preparing to remount their horses before she reached over and gave his hand a squeeze.

“Well done, Cal,” she said quietly. Her eyes blazed with pride, and it sent warmth through Cal’s tired body. He smiled, but Elnora’s expression quickly turned serious. “The court won’t like this, you know. They’ll say that it was too strong a statement, or that you should have consulted them first, or something else relentlessly negative.”

Cal grunted as he swung himself up onto his horse. “I know what they’ll say, but I don’t care.” He looked back at the ship, at the subdued traders and the emancipated Kyonans, at his own men handling the situation with capability. “For the first time since I was crowned, I feel like I’ve done a good day’s work.” He met her eyes again. “We’ve made a start.”

“Yes.” Her words were soft, but resolute. “We have.”

Cal turned his horse away from the ship. As always seemed to be the case now, his mind was humming with everything that still needed to be done before the day was out. But this time there was a thread of satisfaction weaving through his thoughts.

Yes, he had made a start, and he had every intention of continuing. For as long as it took.