It meant something to Jord when he became Captain, a small piece of polish that Jord kept to himself. Jord was a good fighter, he was loyal to his Prince, but that didn't add up to a captaincy. Captains were the sons of aristocrats—even if the Prince's Guard was a little different, drawn from the dregs.

He almost fumbled the badge when it was tossed to him. 'I like my orders obeyed quickly, and you've just seen what will happen if you don't come when I call you.' The Prince glanced at Govart, bleeding in the dirt.

Indeed: watching the Prince skewer Govart had instilled a dumbfounded obedience in the new troops, and put a shocked look on the face of the Akielon slave. Everyone stood around uselessly while Govart was ejected from the camp.

Then they had to make up a day's ride in half the time. Jord shouted at the men to decamp, shouted at them again to mount up, dragged Lorens onto a horse himself, and ordered Orlant to toss a pail of water on Andry, who had slept through everything. The troop finally started to move, and he had to call on the Prince's Guard, over and over again, to stop stragglers and keep the rest of the mercenaries in formation.

'Take four men and get the tail of this squadron back on the road,' said Jord.

Orlant grinned. 'Their tail? Want me to—'

'No,' said Jord, who had known Orlant a long time.

By the time they reached camp, the Regent's men had recovered enough from their shock to grow mulish about orders. Most of them knew very little about soldiering. All Govart had required of them was that they stay out of his way. Jord had his hands full: the mounts weren't penned properly, there were hoarse shouts from under a collapsed tent, and there was a constant stream of expletives against the Prince—that cold, blond son of a bitch, that high and mighty prick made of ice.

When night fell and torches flamed along lines of straight(ish) tents, Jord found himself alone on the edges of the camp near the trees.

Out here he could hear the rustling of the leaves, louder than the sounds of the camp, where fires and sentry torches were bright spots against the darker shadowy shapes of the canvas tents. The quiet ranks were deceptive, since the Regent's mercenaries

would spend the next few weeks looking for any excuse to cause trouble.

Jord took out the flecked, dinted Captain's badge and looked down at it.

The Regent had sent them to the border to fail. The task of captaining these mercenaries was not one any man would volunteer for. Even for an experienced captain, holding discipline together among this rabble, against attacks from eight different sides, was impossible.

The Prince had known the scale of the task when he had tossed Jord this badge. Jord thought about that.

And, passing his thumb over the dinted starburst in the solitary clearing, he smiled.

A twig snapped to his left.

He quickly wrapped up the badge, flushing a little at being caught in a moment of private pride.

'Captain,' said Aimeric.

'Soldier.' Too conscious of his new title, spoken in Aimeric's aristocratic accent.

'I hope it's not too forward of me. I followed you out here. I wanted to say congratulations. You deserve it. That is . . . I think you're the best man here.'

Jord let out an amused snort. 'Thank you, soldier.'

'Did I say something wrong?'

'First time an aristocrat's tried to impress me.'

A familiar look flew onto Aimeric's fine-boned face, but he didn't drop his gaze. At nineteen, Aimeric was exactly the kind of highborn that usually made it in the Guard, a fourth son, destined for officership.

'I meant what I said. I respect you.' His young cheeks were high with colour. 'I want to do well here.'

'Doing well here's simple. You don't have to polish my buttons. Just work hard.'

'Yes, Captain.' Flushed. Turning.

'And soldier?'

Aimeric turned back. The bruising on his face was mottled in the moonlight. Since he had arrived, he had been the victim of fights. The Regent's mercenaries had targeted him, and any clashes were bound to have Aimeric at their centre, getting knocked around.

'What happened to Govart this morning wasn't your fault. The Prince made his own choice there.'

'Yes, Captain,' said Aimeric, his eyes in the moonlight for a moment oddly wide.

Like most of the Guard, Jord served Laurent because of Auguste.

He remembered what it was like to try to impress someone: Auguste was a memory of gold that never faded; a bright star to guide by, cut down before his time. Jord had been younger in those days, with enough skill to get hired as a guard on merchant trains. Auguste had seen him fight from a distance, and had pointed him out to the Captain of the regular militia. Or so the Captain had told Jord later—a recommendation from a Prince. It was something Jord never forgot. Working in the capital, Jord had seen the Prince's Guard from the outside—had seen it at its height, handpicked, the best of the nobility, riding through the palace gates, their starbursts shining gold on their livery.

And he had watched it fade and dwindle in the years after Prince Auguste's death. The young nobles who had flocked to the Prince's starburst banner abandoned it to follow the Regent. The Regent's faction was the place to gain advancement; and the new heir—Laurent—was thirteen and had no influence, and no interest in military matters whatsoever. The blue and gold flags were taken down, the starburst banners rolled up and put away.

For two years, the symbol of the Crown Prince never flew. It was replaced by the red banners of the Regency, until it was hard to remember that there had ever been a time when the ordered ranks of men in the palace had worn stars on their chests.

Rubbing down armour in the regular barracks, Jord was interrupted by a set of sharp footsteps in heeled riding boots—and in walked a boy with the sort of profile that could kick a man out of his chair, blond hair and slightly narrowed eyes the colour of—

'Your Highness.' Scrabbling up.

'Everyone else my brother recommended to the palace left to serve my uncle. Why haven't you?'

The Prince was fifteen, midway through his growth spurt, his face no longer childish.

His voice newly broken, a tenor.

Jord said, ‘The Regent only took the best.’

‘If my brother noticed you, you are the best.’ The blue eyes on him were steady. ‘I want you for my Prince’s Guard.’

‘Your Highness, I’m no one to—’

‘And if you follow me, the best is what I will demand of you. Will I get it?’

The Prince looked up at him. Jord felt every speck of dirt on his own face, the unevenly sewn tear on his sleeve, every worn buckle on his armour—even as he heard himself say, ‘Yes.’

Arriving with the rest of the men that the Prince had assembled, he saw his pride at the Prince’s request for what it was: foolishness. They were a collection of scraps, like you’d throw to a dog. He snorted when the others had to drag Huet out of bed, and dunk Rochert in a trough to sober him up. He remembered Orlant, a big man who’d been tossed out of the capital’s militia two years before.

Then he saw what Huet could do with a bow, and how Rochert could handle a knife. Rochert stayed sober, Orlant sat with him through the shakes, and after, Jord found himself in the barracks sharing stew in a tin plate. ‘Didn’t think you’d be any good, not with what you look like,’ Orlant said to him. ‘No offense.’

Six months later, Jord followed the Prince into a private indoor training arena, obeying the imperious command: ‘Fight me.’

He drew his sword, then swung it, not seriously. He didn’t want to clip the heir. Who knew what happened to a guard who gave a Prince a fat lip?

‘Thought you weren’t a fighter,’ Jord said, levering himself up from the sawdust several minutes later. Eventually he remembered, ‘Your Highness.’

‘I’ve been practicing.’

That was five years ago. He’d never expected his Prince, now twenty, to look him in the eyes and say, ‘You’re my Captain.’ The Prince’s clasp on his arm was firm, his gaze now level with Jord’s own.

It was the closest Jord had ever been to the boy who was a young man now. Except for the times that the Prince had put him in the dirt in the training arena, then offered a hand to haul him back up.

‘What did you say to him?’ said Orlant, and nudged his chin in the direction of Aimeric. Enervated and limp, eyes lifeless, he was slumped on the dirt, back to a tree trunk. He had pushed himself until he could barely stand in drills designed to exhaust men more hardened than Aimeric.

‘Nothing,’ said Jord.

Work hard. Grudgingly, he admired it. Aimeric worked, finishing his day half collapsed, spent his night cleaning armour and supplies, and was first up ready to face the drills in the morning. He shirked nothing, was uncomplaining, and took orders from men below him in birth—which in this company was everyone.

‘They sent an aristocrat to fight in the Prince’s Guard?’ Huet had said when Aimeric had joined up, staring at Aimeric like a clod stares at a flower. It was Jord who had said, ‘Leave it.’ The Prince wanted Aimeric here, so Aimeric was here. Whatever mad ideas the Prince had, you went along with it.

Aimeric had found his way over to where Jord was sitting by the fire, two nights after coming to congratulate him on the captaincy. ‘I’ve finished with the horses, I could take on any tasks that need to be done, if—’

‘Sit.’ Jord took one look at him. Aimeric sat. Awkwardly. He took the mug of cheap wine Huet handed him. He said almost nothing. It became a habit, more often than not, Aimeric finding his way over to sit near Jord by the fire at the end of each day. Jord was uneasy around him at first, the young aristocrat who was quiet while the other men were loud.

They didn’t talk much, with a gulf of class and culture between them. Sometimes Aimeric asked him questions, and Jord found himself talking. Jord looked out for Aimeric where he could. Aimeric made mistakes, but never the same mistake twice. I want to do well here. When Jord gave advice, Aimeric listened, seriously, and sometimes kept working into the night, practicing long after the others were asleep.

It helped, the improvement noticeable, thanks to Aimeric’s dogged persistence. Probably, Jord thought, it was the persistence that the Prince had seen in Aimeric, recognising the potential of his stubborn streak. Aimeric’s stance was steadier, his riding seat better, and he could take a blow now without falling over—at least some of the time.

The rest of the time, he looked as if he would fall over if a plume feather hit him; if he managed ever to stand up in the first place.

‘You better fuck him before he sprains something,’ said Orlant.

They realised quickly that the Prince had re-formed the Prince's Guard without asking his uncle.

It was the sensation of the court: the boy Prince riding around with a band of thugs; inviting them into the palace; having them enter his private quarters as his personal guard. Commoners wearing the Prince's star? The Regent didn't like it. The Council didn't like it. Most of all, the Regent's Guard didn't like it. The Regent's Guard were aristocrats. The Prince's Guard were low born: scum, vermin, undeserving, demeaning the starburst insignia. This, in the same refined accent that Aimeric said Captain, the young aristocrat Chauvin spat at Jord in the courtyard, in front of everyone.

Jord snorted, and made to push past him. These fights with the Regent's Guard had started almost immediately. There were fights over equipment. There were fights over territory. There were fights if the Prince's Guard breathed, and the Regent's Guard didn't like it.

The inner courtyard, full of people and banners, was also full of grins, as onlookers from both factions gathered, and the shouts and goads came not only from the courtyard but from the open galleries above and steps leading to the wall. Jord's shoulder hit Chauvin's as he passed, continuing to the north range, leaving Chauvin behind him.

The sound of metal cut through the courtyard. Jord barely had time to turn, draw and defend in a fast, desperate flurry, as Chauvin attacked.

It was fast, but Jord had lived off his blade his whole life. He was good. He was better than Chauvin, and after a first clash of swords he sent Chauvin stumbling backwards, disarmed, almost tripping in the training yard dirt.

And that was when the grins started to fall off the faces of the onlookers, an awful silence opening up. Chauvin was staring at Orlant, red-faced and humiliated. 'You'll hang,' said Chauvin. 'You'll hang. You're no one. I'm kin to a councillor.'

Orlant said, 'Get the Prince.'

The Prince outranked Chauvin, that was likely all Orlant could think. Jord was pulled out of the courtyard by the Regent's Guard, and found himself in a cell of meagre dimensions. He sat, his back to the wall, his arms folded over his knees. He could see the passageway outside his cell and the stairs beyond that, where light dimmed from afternoon to night. He couldn't see anything else, not guards or the faces of any he knew, not prisoners or friends. He felt as he was: cut off, alone, powerless.

He woke to a lone figure standing before the bars of the cell, a boy who had come here

by himself and now stood searching Jord's face, as Jord pushed himself up, awkwardly.

'Did you draw first?'

'No,' said Jord.

'Then I'll take care of it.'

Jord stared at him. At fifteen, the Prince was still only three-quarters grown, with no hint of a beard coming. His words were serious.

In the morning, Jord was released from the cell, and the men of the Prince's Guard were crowding around him in the barracks. He was given a stool and a wine cup and everyone was talking over everyone, jostling to tell their own version of the story.

Jord got it in snatches: It was the Prince's word against Chauvin's. Chauvin was furious. The Prince had vouched for Jord personally. The whole Council had gathered and the Prince had used fancy words, and at the end of it the Regent had said, My sweet nephew. We'll trust your account. With one condition. If anything like this happens again, the Prince's Guard will be disbanded.

Downing hard drink that night, Jord said to Orlant, 'I'm not stupid. They're going to use this to take down the Prince's Guard.'

To take them all down, Prince and Guard alike. Orlant didn't say that. 'Did I ever tell you how I got thrown out of the capital militia the first time?'

Jord shook his head.

'I called an aristocrat a piece of shit.'

'What did the Prince say about that?'

'He said he agreed.'

Jord let out a breath of amusement. 'What did he really say?'

'He said if I put a single foot out of line in his Guard he'd throw me into the stocks.'

'That sounds more like him,' said Jord.

'He is a coldblooded son of a bitch,' Orlant said, proudly.

'He's green,' said Jord, frowning, because the Prince had left himself vulnerable, and

was too young to know it. He argued for you, was the thought, but he was a boy who didn't know better than to stick his neck out. The Regent's Guard were powerful and their enmity was in earnest. If Jord thought about the formation of the Prince's Guard, it was a boy's unthinking whim; they were a collection of rough discards who would never amount to anything.

'Only a fool would give you and me a second chance,' said Orlant.

It wasn't that Jord didn't know Aimeric was looking at him. He did. It was Aimeric looking at him that got him looking at Aimeric.

In a troop of men who looked like a cliff face and Orlant who looked like a cave in, Aimeric was somewhere to put his eyes when he sat with the men around the campfire at the end of the day, a dented tin mug of wine in his hands.

He liked Aimeric's stubborn chin. He liked his flop of curls that fit poorly into a helmet. He liked the way that when he looked over, Aimeric was looking back. It was a nice daydream, even if his imagination blanked on the specifics, seeing that Aimeric was an aristocrat.

His experience with aristocrats was that they would say to him things like, Stand to attention, soldier, or, Put those saddlebags down there. He did not know why an aristocrat would turn an eye to a lowborn guard captain, even briefly. Aimeric was so highborn he would have his own paid pet in Fortaine, some kind of pampered youth to play at table with him during the day and warm his bed at night.

Well, all the long looks in the world wouldn't matter when they were all going to be dead at the end of a rockslide, or a bandit attack.

The only reason that they would survive was because of the yellow haired fiend who had them from sun-up to sundown carrying out the drills that had even the most hardened men dropping, exhausted, to the dirt, too tired to even curse the Prince who had put them there.

Aimeric was coming towards him.

The log next to Jord was empty. Aimeric sat down on it. The campfire in front of them sent up smoke and orange light. Jord passed over his flask; Aimeric coughed when it held spirits and not water. Probably he coughed due to the quality of the spirits, not the strength. Aimeric rubbed his mouth and tried to pass the flask back.

'Thought you could use it,' Jord said.

'I'll do better,' said Aimeric, after a long moment. 'I'll do better, until it's good

enough.’

Jord looked at the tired set of Aimeric’s shoulders, the smudges under his eyes, and his curls, flattened and turned into sweat licks by a helmet. Aimeric’s fingers had tightened around the flask, and if at any time he’d had the soft, manicured hands of an aristocrat, now they were callused from weeks of drills, dirt from a hard day’s work underneath his chipped nails.

On the other side of the camp, the Prince was dismounting effortlessly, untouched by the day’s exertions, his haughty, posture unaffected. He didn’t even seem to have dust on his boots—typical.

Jord said, ‘Not what you expected?’

It didn’t seem like Aimeric was going to answer, at first. ‘I thought I was going to get a position at court.’

‘So why join the Guard?’

‘Because if the Regent and the Prince are feuding, you ally yourself with the man who’ll win, then hedge your bets by sending your disposable son to fight with the other.’

Aimeric flushed. It was the first thing that he had said to Jord that wasn’t deferential, or a compliment. ‘I’m sorry. That wasn’t—’

‘You’re not disposable.’ Jord said, ‘You work harder than any man here. The Prince wants you in this troop.’

‘It’s not the Prince I’m trying to impress.’

There was a silence, as those words stretched out. The fire popped and sparked, and the night around them seemed to draw closer.

‘I want you in this troop,’ said Jord.

‘And out of it?’

‘You’re Councillor Guion’s son.’

‘I don’t care about rank.’ said Aimeric.

‘You should.’

‘Why? Do you?’ said Aimeric.

‘I’m your Captain,’ said Jord.

‘So you’re the one who outranks me.’

‘Knock it off,’ said Jord, but with a smile as he took back the flask and took his own swig.

‘I think about you,’ Aimeric said.

Jord coughed the spirits. He felt something spill in the air between them, and the way his pulse sped up made him feel foolish. Aimeric wasn’t flustered talking like that with a lowborn guard captain—wasn’t tongue tied or awkward the way Jord suddenly felt.

‘Do you think of me even a little?’ said Aimeric. ‘Or are you like the Prince?’

He indicated with his stubborn chin at the Prince, whose blond head identifiable across the camp even in the dim light. Jord was too conscious of him, and of the men in the camp around them, as if what was passing between himself and Aimeric was private, yet at the same time, as if it must be obvious to onlookers; witnessed by everyone.

If Aimeric were a stablehand, Jord would have tumbled him, but Aimeric was closer in rank to a king than to Jord. Aimeric had power and influence far above Jord’s station. Aristocrats didn’t dally with lowborn guard captains, or if they did, it was an unpredictable whim. Turning an aristocrat down—that was bad enough. Taking an aristocrat into the sheets was worse. Councillor Guion wouldn’t let a man like Jord sit at his table, let alone bed his son.

He looked at Aimeric’s aristocratic face, his full lips, the irrepressible curl on his forehead, that he wanted to reach out and tuck away.

‘You know I think well of you,’ Jord said. He felt his cheeks heating.

‘“Well of me”,’ said Aimeric.

‘Even the Prince is a man,’ said Jord.

‘You’re the only one who thinks that,’ said Aimeric. ‘He’s a statue. He doesn’t feel anything.’

Jord looked back at the Prince. It was true that he was a martinet. It had been a day of unsparing orders, coupled with the Prince’s bloodless lack of sympathy for those who

could not match the pace he set.

Jord heard himself say, ‘I’ve fought under him since he was fifteen.’

‘So you didn’t have a choice either.’

As a rule, Jord kept to himself what he thought of his betters. He knew that to Aimeric the Prince’s Guard was a demotion: that Aimeric was alone; that he had no one of his own rank to mix with. A councillor’s son might easily have become a boyhood companion to the Prince. But this Prince was a friendless son of a bitch. Rebuffed by the Prince, Aimeric was relegated to the company of lowborn soldiers. He probably sought out their Captain because Jord was the closest thing in the troop to a man of his own rank.

He wouldn’t understand what an honour it was for a man of Jord’s birth to be offered a chance to wear a Prince’s star, let alone to ascend to a captaincy.

‘He’s my King,’ Jord said.

They all remembered it—weeks of swallowing insults, ignoring acts of sabotage, letting the Regent’s Guard run roughshod over them. The Regent’s Guard damaged their equipment. They said nothing. The Regent’s Guard sabotaged their weaponry. They made no complaint. Orlant held Huet back when Chauvin pissed in his bed.

Riding now with the Regent’s mercenaries was nothing to those first few weeks, when stifling restrictions had driven the Prince’s Guard out of the training halls and the courtyard, and insults and humiliations had piled one on the other. There had been nothing to do but take it. For the sake of the Guard, they had to take it. The Prince had staked his reputation on one of their own; they would do right by him.

It had come to a head three weeks after Chauvin had attacked him. Jord found himself standing outside the guard barracks, with six of the Prince’s Guard, alongside Councillor Audin, Chauvin and a squadron of men with flaming torches.

Jord’s stomach dropped when he saw that the rooms they were surrounding belonged to Orlant. Because this time Chauvin’s triumphant claim was that one of the Prince’s Guard was in bed with a pet—a woman.

He thought of Joie the washerwoman, who teased Orlant in the mornings, or Elie from the kitchens who once gave Orlant the end of a loaf of fresh baked bread. It wasn’t going to be a pet in there with Orlant. What pet would risk a life of jewels and comfort for Orlant’s ox face?

It would be someone of their own class, and she would be thrown out along with

Orlant. If Orlant was lucky, he would get the lash. If it really was a noblewoman's pet, he would be executed. Either way, the Prince's Guard would not survive it. Orlant was finished and so was the Guard—that was the crowing look in Chauvin's eyes.

The soldiers took position. Jord had just enough time to register the battering beam—the hard looks of the soldiers, the swing—before the door was broken open.

For a moment, everyone stared.

Behind the splintered door, the barracks were small. There was nowhere to take cover or dive behind a partition. Everything was on display: There was Orlant, more naked that Jord ever wanted to see him, and certainly there was someone with him wearing a lady pet's hat. But it wasn't a lady pet. It was Huet.

'Hey!' said Huet.

'This isn't scandalous at all,' said Audin, with the slight frown of someone whose time has been wasted.

'This is the second time the Regent's Guard has falsely accused my men,' said the Prince to the Council.

He said it mildly. It took a moment for the implications of that mild tone to make themselves understood in the Council chamber where they had all been dragged in to report. Chauvin said, 'It was a simple mistake—'

'Two simple mistakes,' said the Prince.

He sat on the dais on the right side of his uncle, a boyish figure with a face that made it seem impossible that he was anything but innocent, hair like sunshine, eyes like the sky, his voice still mild, like his mild regard of Chauvin, who looked instinctively towards his benefactor.

'Councillor—'

'Cousin, you have dragged the family name into your squabbles,' said Audin, frowning at him. 'The Council isn't here to solve petty disputes.'

The other Councillors nodded, shifted, murmured their assent. All five of them were older men, and the oldest, Herode, said, 'We should revisit our discussion of the Prince's Guard.'

Released into the hall, Jord handed Orlant the spare shirt he had snagged up in his rooms, wordlessly.

‘I’m not fucking Huet,’ said Orlant. ‘He just turned up. Wearing that.’

‘The Prince said everyone would be wearing one,’ said Huet, frowning.

‘At least you’re wearing something,’ Orlant told him, shrugging into the shirt.

‘The Prince sent you to Orlant’s rooms,’ said Jord, ‘wearing that?’

The next morning, the Prince’s Guard gathered in the courtyard in full livery, buckles shining, boots polished. The news had spread like wildfire: Chauvin had been sent back to Marches in disgrace, and the Council had lifted the threat of disbandment from the Prince’s Guard. They were fully reinstated; the Council had decreed the Regent’s Guard would no longer interfere with them.

Jord saw the Prince enter the courtyard and go still when he saw them, gathered in readiness for him in ordered lines. For a moment there was no sound but for the movement of the starburst banners in the breeze.

Then the Prince spoke. ‘Your celebration is premature. I have full authority over you now, and I do not intend to be lenient. I will work you harder than you’ve ever been worked. I expect my Prince’s Guard to be the best.’

He paused on the line in front of Jord, and their eyes met.

‘Huet has nice ankles,’ said Jord.

‘I told you I’d take care of it,’ said the Prince.

The Prince’s command tent was an oblong of cream canvas with a fluttering blue triangle on top and an entryway that was roped open, to let men come and go throughout the day, with reports, with news, ushering in messengers or supplies. Before Jord entered, he saw inside.

There were two heads bent together over the map, one dark-haired, the other blond.

The Prince was alone in the tent with the Akielon who served him. The Akielon was murmuring something, his manner easy, in command of the strategy. The Prince nodded, absorbed. His eyes followed the Akielon’s finger as it traced a line over the map.

Jord had never seen him like this, in comfortable, intimate conversation. The Prince did not cultivate companions; had not done so as a boy, did not do so as a young man. Jord felt as if he was intruding on something private; he was startled by their quiet

focus, how close they stood together, their shoulders almost touching.

‘Your Highness,’ Jord said, like clearing his throat.

They looked up simultaneously.

The two faces were different, but had identical expressions—curious at a minor interruption—as the Prince said, ‘Captain. Report.’

Equipment and supplies were holding steady. Drills were going well. Jord had disciplined one of the Regent’s mercenaries for some remarks. He detailed the discipline. He didn’t repeat the remarks. The Prince, whose anatomy and preferences the remarks had described at great length, said, ‘That’s a prudent retelling. All right. I count the lack of wholesale slaughter a success.’

‘Your Highness,’ said Jord.

Their presence lingered in the tent long after they had gone.

The Akielon had listened to the reports too—as though he were the one receiving them. There had been a warm look in his dark eyes that spoke of a man who could find simple enjoyment in a complicated position. The Prince seemed to allow it, a form of familiarity that he rejected from others.

Jord looked down at the map.

It was a mess of unfamiliar symbols, a geopolitical shorthand that he didn’t know how to read. Half of them were heraldic sigils he had never seen in his life, others were dots and dash marks that meant nothing to him. He knew his letters, knew his way around a regular map, but this was beyond him.

He was a guard captain. He knew how to run drills. He knew how to administer supplies. He knew how to set up watches, formations and blockades, protect an outpost, or a small train in the mountains.

But this was large-scale tactical warfare. It required a depth of knowledge—generalship, strategy and command that took years to acquire. The Akielon had it. The Prince was learning it, able to absorb complex theoretical concepts and leap in an instant to new ideas.

They were planning here for something that he did not understand, and Jord felt as though he glimpsed, just for a moment, a world that was too big for him.

‘Captain,’ said Aimeric.

Jord looked up. Aimeric lost none of his aristocratic bearing even in simple soldiering clothes. The sun had set, and men had come to light the torches at the tent entrance, just as men had been in and out of the tent all day, bringing this or that to the attention of the Prince. The light framed Aimeric, whose turn it was to enter, where Jord was alone.

‘I could take you through it. If you like.’

Jord flushed. Aimeric wasn’t looking at the war map, but it was clear what he meant.

‘You helped me,’ said Aimeric, ‘when I got here.’

Behind Aimeric, the open entry framed the dark shapes of the evening camp, and the dwindling noise from outside, as most of the men bedded down for the night.

Aimeric came to stand where the Prince had just stood. Jord supposed it was second nature to Aimeric, a part of his upbringing to read the heraldic sigils, the unfamiliar markers and symbols used for ownership of territory.

Jord felt like an impostor. This wasn’t his world, but if war was coming, he wanted to be on the right side of it, and to do what he could. He stepped up to the map.

Aimeric, it turned out, was good at explaining things, and he talked through the basics of the map. Jord was self conscious at first, and so was Aimeric a little, but the inked lines began to make sense, and it was a good feeling, to know that he was coming to understand. Finally quiet fell, and they were done.

‘Thank you,’ Jord said. That wasn’t enough. He told the truth, quietly, awkwardly. ‘This Captaincy means a lot to me.’

The air between them shifted. Aimeric’s gaze dropped to his mouth. The kiss happened with Aimeric’s eyes very dark, Jord’s hand on his neck. He felt the sweet, instant yielding of Aimeric’s mouth. Aimeric’s whole body gave over to the kiss. Jord drew him close, kissed him just the way he’d imagined, long and deep, and when he drew back, Aimeric’s cheeks were flushed and his eyes were dark and wide.

Jord’s mind swirled with foolishness, the sort of things he’d not thought up words to say.

‘Let me,’ said Aimeric, before he could. ‘I’m good at it.’

Aimeric’s hands were fumbling at the lacing at Jord’s crotch. The entry to the tent was still open. It was too fast, too sudden, the feel of that single kiss still dizzily on Jord’s

lips.

Jord put his hands on Aimeric's and pulled back so that they were staring at each other, Aimeric confused and hot cheeked. 'I don't understand. I thought you—'

'I do—I—if you'd have me, I'd invite you to my tent,' Jord said, his voice roughened, uncertain even as he said it if this was something Aimeric expected or even wanted. 'I'm not—a man worthy of your birth. I'll not be what you're used to. But I meant it when I said that I think well of you.'

Aimeric was staring at him. Jord felt so out of place, standing among the rich silks of a Prince's tent. Aimeric was an aristocrat; but there was a way in which he was also simply himself, the young man Jord admired for his stubborn work ethic, who was just as out of place, in his own way, as any of them.

'Yes— yes all right, if you— yes.' Aimeric stepped back, his breathing a little quickened, unsteady. He looked at the dark entryway of the tent, then back at Jord. 'You go first. I'll follow after. Don't worry. I won't let anyone see me. I'm discreet.' He smiled.

Aimeric moved to wait in the tent by the map, while Jord took his first steps outside, where it was dark but lit with bright torches, lights that he would follow.

Out here, the camp was a collection of mismatched halves, mercenaries and Prince's Guard, camped together, too small, he thought, to do much damage in a fight, but each tent housed a man ready to do what he could. It was an unlikely partnership, but hope sprang in what could be done together, and not alone. He felt the kiss on his lips again, its newness, its promise, and in that moment he was part of something, a beginning, the night like lights and the border, ahead of him.