

# CHAPTER ONE

Lorea slid her curved, double-edged knife into the back of the man's head. Starting at the base of his neck, her karambit curled up as she drove it hilt deep, making his death quick and painless. The solution on the crimson cloth she'd covered his nose and mouth with seconds earlier rendered him undoubtedly unconscious. No need to risk him waking before the job was done.

Blood soaked the cream-coloured pillow, and Lorea heaved off the opposite side of the bed before it touched her clothing. She sheathed her knife between her shoulder blades and tucked a loose strand of her black hair behind her ear. One thick braid down the middle to the small of her back, and thinner braids on either side that joined at the base of her neck should have kept it all out of her way. She sighed that it never seemed to hold. Now, the trick was to get back out of the room, the house, and the town undetected.

Lorea's deer skin boots had no real tread, just carved hides around her feet laced up to the knee in leather string over her fitted dark grey clothing. With silent steps she crossed the floor. She swung wide so the squeak in the one board she'd hit on the way in didn't make a sound. That one little creak had almost got her killed. It had woke the man in the bed and if she'd been any slower with the crarine berry solution, it would have been over for her. She was bulky despite being short, carrying extra weight in her thighs, waist, and arms, so Lorea relied on stealth. Her route inside the house had been tricky. Through the back door and across the stone floored kitchen, up the oak stairs and down the narrow, shadowed hall and into the bedroom, all without alerting the rest of the KingsGuard. The entire process had been slow, but she was no good at fighting, so remaining unseen was more important than speed.

Going out, however, was a different story. Lorea made it to the window and carefully slid the pane upwards. There was a crack on first movement. She froze and listened. Nothing. Good thing she hadn't tried to come in that way.

Even though spring equinox was only a lunar cycle away, the nights were still cold. She sat on the sill and kicked her feet over and out, dangling them from the second story window. The temperature had dropped several degrees since she'd entered the house and there was a skiff of snow that blanketed everything. She slipped out and twisted so she was facing back inside the plain room. While her left arm held her steady, the right closed the window as much as she dared. It didn't matter if they knew she'd gone out the window once they found the body. She just wanted to make sure she didn't create too much of a temperature drop inside, or a breeze that would waft the metallic smell of blood that had already hit her nose.

Lorea dared not look back at the bed. The blood would have saturated the sheets by now, but that wasn't what stopped her from looking. She didn't want to see his face again. The KingsGuard man was dead and that's all that mattered. She didn't allow herself to wonder if he had a family or other loved ones expecting him to return to the capital unharmed. He was a person, with a life, and she took it. Take out the leadership and she wouldn't have to kill them all. She'd

tried other, less murderous tactics. Others had too. They'd failed. And then they'd all given up trying. They hated what those filthy blackjackets did, but they stopped fighting back. So Lorea did what she knew would work. The only thing proven to get the KingsGuard to leave.

As with each leader she killed, she vowed never to look back, so released her arms from the sill and dropped down to the ground below.

Something popped on landing and Lorea crumpled to the ground. Pain from her left knee clouded her vision and it took all her self-control not to scream out. Instead, she rolled into the shadows, then back and forth taking several quick breaths, in, out, in, out. Her knee had come out – again – but not fully dislocated, so after a few moments of excruciating pain, she regained her wits and limped through the darkness to the nearest bush. She brushed off the snow and dirt and tucked a few more strands of onyx hair behind her ear. All was still quiet. Lorea forced her tiny round body to the next bush, then the next, further away from the house.

The commandeered house.

The KingsGuard had marched into Utica a moon phase ago, moved into whatever dwelling they felt most fitting this time, forcing its inhabitants to either cater to their needs or find lodging elsewhere. They made grand declarations about collecting additional taxes and goods, about each family surrendering one able member for KingsGuard recruitment, beat and berated anyone who objected, and instilled fear in whoever thought about resisting.

Lorea darted around the last bush and looked back for a long moment, massaging her throbbing knee before hitting the forest. The pain would subside and become a dull thrum soon enough, then it would just be the swelling she'd have to deal with while she made her way through the trees. Oak, birch, and maples filled in around the foothills near Utica, then shifted into pines and spruce as she'd make her way up the mountain to Udora, and home. The waxing crescent moon gave little light, but it wouldn't have mattered if there was none at all; she could find her way home from anywhere.

As she climbed, the sharp chill turned to an outright freeze. She heard the buzzing - the wards of Belwood - and shivered. The invisible wall was all that kept the fabled monsters contained within where they couldn't hurt anyone. Stepping through the wards was risky, so Lorea skirted along the side as long as possible. Only a little farther and she would find the cabin by the granite outcrop where she kept a small stash of supplies, and a warmer coat.

"Make me go all the way down here, *again*. Those filthy blackjackets better take the hint and clear out. I'm sick of this wretched walk," she muttered as she stomp-limped up the path. The pain was tolerable, back to its usual level. Now it was the swelling that slowed her down.

The man she'd killed was the second in this particular group. He'd reluctantly stepped into the leadership position after the first had met his end. But they could've left. They could have gone back to the despicable capital city of Brooklin and their tyrant king after the first leader died. They'd stayed. So, she'd had to kill... again.

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The pine cabin wasn't any bigger than the length of a bed and the width of the rock outcrop behind it that jutted out of the ground. Lorea and her brother had built it before he'd been 'recruited' to the KingsGuard. More like conscripted. If they thought it was less threatening to call it recruitment, they were wrong.

The cabin was just big enough for the two of them to each have a cot, with a small woodstove in between. She used Rimme's cot now as a catch-all. A few mouse-proof boxes of dried meat, pickles, and a waxed leather sack with a change of clothes all sat atop the grey quilts. But those weren't what she was after. Hanging on the peg at the foot of Rimme's cot was his wolfskin parka. She would sit in it just a few moments to warm up, then continue the rest of the way to Udora. It was much too big for her and still smelled faintly of the cedar tea Rimme was always hopelessly clumsy at drinking.

Lorea took a deep breath of the coat and thought of her brother. Rimme taught her everything he could, but their time together was too short. She'd been an annoying little tag along, but he taught her anyway. Until he'd been beaten and dragged away.

"I'm trying, Rimme," she said aloud. "I'm trying to protect them. As long as I'm alive, or until the recruitment stops, I'll defend the Northeast. It's not like anyone else is doing it." She hoped he would be proud of her for continuing his work.

The wolfskin parka did the trick and Lorea warmed up without needing to light a fire in the woodstove or layer on more clothing that would slow her down. Still, by the time she reached the main road at the edge of Udora, her hometown nestled between two moderate peaks of the mountain range, the stone houses with their thatched roofs still capped with snow, a trickle of smoke coming out the tops of the flimsy chimneys, Lorea was shaking uncontrollably. Her knee was swollen so badly it was hard to move, and a dull pain had returned with overuse, so she walked on her toe.

She stopped for a moment to massage just below her knee where the pain was the sharpest. A cold shiver trickled down her spine when she realized she stood in front of Charcoal House. It had belonged to Rimme's best friend Vick and his family. No one spoke of the people who used to live there anymore. It was only Charcoal House now.

One of the early raids, Vick's father and brothers tried to fight the KingsGuard. They'd gone at the blackjackets with spears and fists, demanding the recruitment stop, claiming the taxes were too much... and they'd died. The KingsGuard defeated them easily while the rest of Udora watched in horror.

Vick was still taken, the bodies disposed of, and the house was burned. No one tore it down. No one rebuilt it. It sat there as a reminder of what the recruitment really represented. For other Udorans, it was a symbol of what happens when they try to fight back. For Lorea, it was a symbol of what she was protecting her people from.

She rubbed her knee once more and kept walking. With any luck, the woodstove she'd loaded up before leaving her house would still be lit and she'd be able to simply stoke it and add another log, and no one – especially her father – would ever know she'd been gone.

The blue glimmer of twilight started to lift the shadows. She needed them to get to her house at the end of the tiny town undetected. If she looked behind her, out the valley to the east, she would be able to watch the sun poke up from the ocean horizon in the distance. But Lorea had no love for sunrises anymore. Instead, she rounded the last house before her own, and smacked face first into the chest of her best friend, Spicer.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Lorea? What are you doing?”

She had to think fast. Of all people, Spicer was the last one she thought she would run into wandering around town before sunrise. Anyone else, she could make up something about why she was out. Anyone else, and they wouldn't notice her choice of clothing, why she wasn't layered for insulation from the cold and covered in bulky furs. Anyone else certainly wouldn't notice the knives strapped to her back, ribcage, and thighs.

But Spicer had been her best friend for as long as she could remember. Now, as she stepped back and lifted her chin up, way up, to meet his big dark eyes under his prominent browbone and leather-hued face, if she wasn't really convincing, and mostly truthful, he would see right through her.

“I was down at the cabin.” Truth. “I just really miss Rimme.” Also truth. “And I fell asleep. I didn't mean to stay so long.” Lie.

Spicer squinted and cocked his head to the left. His midnight-black hair fluttered, a stray lock brushing across his jaw. Lorea held her face as neutral as possible. *Don't break eye contact first.*

“What?” she said, not blinking. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Spicer flared his wide-set nostrils, then sighed. “I'm sorry, Lor, I know you miss your brother. You'll have to learn to let go at some point. But, I understand.”

Just let go and move on. That's what everyone did with those taken. But Lorea couldn't do that. Not for Rimme.

Spicer shuffled on his feet, likely cold from standing still. “So... you haven't heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Another KingsGuard was killed. Axel was down the mountain doing some early morning pipe trading when the house they took over went crazy. He said people were screaming and shouting and a lot more frantic than the last one. The house was pretty secure. No idea how the

assassin got in. This makes two out of this lot. Axel is pretty sure they are going to pack up and leave. He said the KingsGuard were pretty shook.”

It hadn’t been that hard to sneak past their patrol. At least, not for Lorea. The shadows were her greatest advantage. Lorea must have just missed the commotion, though.

“When did Axel get here?” she asked. Thinking back, while it was true she walked much slower than anyone else in Udora, she still must have spent more time at the cabin than she thought. Maybe her lie was more truthful after all.

“Just now. He came to tell me and we’re heading down to see what happens next. I’m going to get Gil, and he’s grabbing Hansen... you want to come?”

Spicer gave Lorea a good once over. There was enough light now that he’d be able to see she wasn’t dressed for the weather. While he was head to toe grey-brown furs making his already enormous stature seem bigger, she was clearly not, desperately trying to hold back the convulsions her body wanted to use to warm up. Anything form fitting was strictly out of the question for Lorea except when she was hunting KingsGuard leaders, and *no one* ever saw her doing that.

Her heart raced.

She had to get out of this situation. Spicer’s big brown eyes settled on her knives. The black leather handles, straps, and sheaths mostly blended in with her clothing and the shadows, but the one tlingit knife with its tapered blade, narrow handle, and wide end she’d stolen from a merchant in Zephyr that was trying to swindle Axel, had a bit of emerald-coloured flecks and stood out.

Lorea needed to think fast. “Yeah, I’ll come with you, I just need to change. I’ll meet you guys at the road.” She slid past Spicer’s broad frame and scurried around the corner, attempting to mask her limp. She didn’t look back until she was about to open the door to her little ramshackle house and when she did, Spicer was nowhere to be seen. She closed the spruce door behind her quietly and exhaled.

The last thing she wanted to do was go back to Utica. She’d been up most of the night, she was cold and tired, and her knee throbbed. Plus, if Spicer decided to ask any more questions, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to convince him of any more lies.

If he’d believed anything already.

Still, if she did want to make sure the KingsGuard were gone, being in the safety of her boys would be the best place for her. Gil, Spicer, Axel, and Hansen were her only real friends and even if someone *had* spotted her leaving Utica earlier, those four would never let anything happen to her. Spicer and Axel were muscled and huge. Gil was quick and reactive. Hansen was diplomatic. Just about every situation Lorea could think of, one of them could get her out.

She silently slipped across the main living room and made her way up to her bedroom without turning on any lights. If there was anywhere she could move around without being detected, swollen knee or not, it was here. Every creaky board, every loose plank, every lop-sided stair she knew from memory.

Once in her room, she slid out of her weapons and clothes, wrapped her now giant knee, and layered herself up in her baggy cottons and linens. She finished her outfit with her thick leather-tread, elk-hide boots and her parka.

Her fitted clothes would be safe, folded tidily on the end of her bed, but the knives were a different story. She shouldn't even have so many with the price of metal what it was in Zephyr. Rimme had gifted her four small throwing knives. He wouldn't tell her where he got them, but she suspected by the way they were each shaped similar yet with their own unique flaws he'd used what he could at the glass-kiln-and-forge to make them himself. She had a special attachment to each one. The knives on her left were curved a little differently to accommodate her weaker hand, while the ones on the right had a little more weight. The metal on the blades themselves swirled around in intricate patterns. The rest of the knives in her leather strapping, she'd stolen. If anyone, especially her father, knew their worth, they'd take them from her in a heartbeat. Lorea carefully put the knives into a trunk at the bottom of her bed, locked it, tucked the key into one of the pockets on the outside of her boot, then fastened it closed.

Back downstairs, she scribbled "ŬtiCa" on the chalk board beside the back kitchen door leading to Mitch's herb shed, hoping he would understand. She stoked the fire, added a few logs, and just as silently as she came in, slipped back out.

When she got to the place where the mountain road meets the grey flagstone and gravel streets of Udora, still buried under significant snow, there were more than just the boys waiting. Word spread about another killing and a throng of Udoran adolescents were milling around. No one stood still, it was too cold not to keep the blood circulating, but no one was going anywhere either.

The frozen snow squeaked beneath more than two dozen pairs of feet as Lorea approached. Most of them didn't acknowledge her arrival, ignoring her as she walked around the group or tossing her an unwelcome glare. Finally, she found a familiar voice near the community chimney and went to stand beside Alma. The big, round, outdoor fireplace was unlit. It usually burned in the evenings when people were around to feed it, but given it was too early for most people to be up, it sat cold.

Alma was easy to pick out, standing in a group of other girls, all a few inches taller than her small, fine-boned frame. They were all complaining quietly about being there. There was a faint aroma of pipe in the air, the sage and tobacco especially noticeable, but Lorea didn't see anyone outright smoking.

"I can't believe I'm doing this. It's becoming a regular thing, these KingsGuards being killed. Why do they want to go see it *again*," said one girl.

"I think they are hoping to get a glimpse of the dead body. They're so gross like that," said another.

"It's risky really. The KingsGuard are here to take our supplies and recruit candidates, there's no reason they couldn't just round up the lot of us and drag us back to the capital with them."

That was her worst fear. Another raid, KingsGuard flooding Udora, ransacking every house, every shop, taking anything they wanted in the name of the king. At summer solstice it would be four solar cycles ago Rimme was one of the spoils of the raid, not that anyone was supposed to count such things. The plundering and raping – that level of savagery thankfully never repeated itself. Many Udorans still bore the scars of that raid. It's when they stopped fighting back. She blinked and returned to the conversation.

"I think some of them are kind of attractive, really. That one woman with the really high cheek bones and pointed chin? She's always walking around swinging those hips. I'd do her," another girl, with deep auburn hair giggled.

"Helly, you would do anyone that smiled at you, and everyone knows it!"

Helly had a bit of a reputation. She shrugged and Lorea knew exactly what she was going to say.

"Well, around here, what else is there to do?"

Lorea smiled. Helly might be the most vocal about it, but none of the adolescents could argue, herself included. What else *was* there to do all winter when they weren't scrounging up food and firewood? Drink mead, smoke pipe, and...

Alma nudged Lorea with her elbow and flashed her a half smile. She'd finally noticed her standing with the group. Her big round eyes and thick dark lashes fluttered. "Hey Lor, you're up before mid day? Weird. You're coming see the blackjackets turn tail and leave too?"

Lorea shrugged. "I suppose. Unless we're just standing around all morning. What are we waiting for?"

"I think we're just waiting on Spicer. This was kind of his thing after all."

Spicer was a gifted leader. Rimme always said living so close to the enchantments of Belwood affected everyone differently. Spicer's gift was leadership. It just radiated off him.

Lorea scanned the crowd. A few more adolescents had joined the group. Hansen and Axel stood by a boulder beside the creek. There were little mountain streams that ran through Udora, most of them manually lined with stones to keep them from becoming unruly. Several places had little waterfalls, and Hansen, dressed in thick black clothing and bear furs, his shoulder length black hair wisping in the breeze, stood on the flagstone that bridged over the streams at one of the drops. They were in conversation with each other and didn't look her way.

No sign of Gil or Spicer, but she considered starting down the road anyway. She was shorter than most of the others by a good amount, which meant she naturally moved a lot slower, even without a sore knee. Utica was a long walk, but Lorea seemed to always push it to double the average if left to her own pace. She relied on the slow and steady approach, and preferred stealth over speed.

"Let's get going, motherfuckers!"

"Yeeeeeeooooooooowwww!"



The group of adolescents backed up, parting down the middle and shoving Lorea to the back. Through the bodies and furs, two flashes of black, brown, and grey flew by. The groans and murmurs told her it was Gil and Revlo, but she pushed her way to the front anyway.

She poked her head into the clearing just as Gil dropped out of sight down the hill, and Revlo launched himself into the air, a brown toboggan beneath, ready to catch him. He scrunched his legs up underneath himself and landed feet first on the toboggan, the tow string in his right hand, his left out behind him and over his head.

*So typical.* Lorea laughed, shook her head, and turned the other direction to see Spicer walking toward the group. He had such a presence about him. He walked with his head high, large strides, and an air of confidence that commanded respect. His dark brows almost always knit in the middle, and his full lips naturally downturned in the corners contrasting his high cheekbones. He was everything Lorea wasn't.

"Well, you heard them, let's go." He said with a smile, and the crowd filled back in and started down the road.

"Why do you let Gil do such stupid things?" Lorea asked, falling in step beside Spicer, slightly behind him where she felt most comfortable.

"I'm not his mom. And you know how he gets when he's with Revlo. That guy bugs me, but I don't tell Gil who he can spend his time with. I think they've been up all night."

Lorea sighed but didn't push it.

"Hey, Alma," Spicer leaned over and gave Alma a quick kiss. She linked her arm into the crook of his elbow on his other side as they continued to walk. A small stab of jealousy hit Lorea. Not because she wanted to be with either of them herself, but because she envied the closeness they had.

"You got quite the turnout today," Alma said. "It's not even breakfast, I'm surprised anyone still cares about dead blackjackets. Even Lorea is up!"

Spicer gave Lorea a glance out of the corner of his eye, but she just kept walking. She'd been sleeping late recently, making it look like a bad habit so she could sleep for real after nights she'd have to stalk or kill a KingsGuard leader. Everyone made fun of her for it, but she didn't care. At least they were all still here in the first place. Besides, it also gave her time at night to practice throwing her knives without anyone noticing.

"Yeah, I think this time will just about do it. This group of KingsGuard didn't seem as tough as the last ones, I'm surprised they stuck around after the first death. They're all so brainwashed to obey. I can't believe they found someone to step up a second time, the way they fall apart without a leader. They gotta be done with us by now. I'm hoping to get a few penlings back that they took from my pa for *taxes* when he was in Utica buying leeks the other day. If they are scared enough, I'm sure I can snatch a bag or two," Spicer said.

So that's why there were so many adolescents ready to go down the mountain. Lorea's father hadn't left Udora for several days, so she was pretty sure nothing of theirs was taken. She wouldn't loot today. She'd done enough.

“Hey, Lorea, you’re coming too?” Axel and Hansen joined the trio from behind and Axel scooped Lorea up into his giant, muscled arms and gave her a big hug before dropping her back to the road. Her sore knee sent a stabbing pain up her leg on impact, but she bit the inside of her cheek instead of letting on she was hurt. Besides, there was nothing better than a bear hug from Axel, so she flashed him a smile and kept walking.

Axel was a little rounder than Spicer, especially in the face, and about half an inch shorter, but both had big brown eyes, dusky skin, high cheeks, and jaw-length black hair with just a hint of wave. But where Spicer was chatty and personable and the kind of guy people looked to for leadership, Axel was soft spoken and shy, and most of the time seemed like he wasn’t sure he wanted to be there.

The group of five quickly fell toward the back of the crowd. Lorea was walking slow, the others too polite to leave her behind. At first sight of Gil and his toboggan though, Hansen jogged ahead to help him tie it to a tree. There wasn’t enough snow on the road anymore, and the frozen rocks and gravel would soon turn half-thawed, and then mostly thawed light brown dirt before they reached Utica. The skiff of snow from the previous night would probably melt off with the clear sunrise. Gil likely didn’t want to have to drag the toboggan back up very far either, if he bothered to come back for it at all.

“It’s okay if you want to go up ahead too,” Lorea said to no one in particular. Spicer no doubt wanted to have an ear on the conversations, and Alma would go with him just because. Axel watched Hansen jog off, so she assumed he’d wanted to do the same.

“It’s okay, we know you’re slow as pine sap, Lor,” Spicer said with a laugh, but picked up his pace just a little anyway. Holding Alma’s hand, she followed suit. By the time everyone made it to Utica, Lorea was walking alone, a good twenty paces behind, her knee about ready to make her black out, and she was out of breath.

## CHAPTER THREE

The town was buzzing, but not the good kind she'd expected as they prepared for the equinox celebrations. It turned into a clear spring morning by the time they'd got down the mountain, but there was an ominous energy.

Lorea felt it. In the Utications eyes that would normally scowl at a large group of 'uncivilized' Udoran adolescents, instead were stiff in their movements and tense in their words. Even the birds, who should have been singing mating calls to the point of irritation were subdued.

"What happened?" she whispered to Alma, who'd waited for her to catch up once they reached the first street of shops.

"You'd think if the blackjackets high tailed it out of here they'd be relieved." Alma kicked a stone on the road and two people who stood outside the linen shop startled.

The adolescents dispersed down various streets and into buildings. The long main street was the centre of a grid that made up the downtown of Utica. There were two smaller streets parallel on either side, and half a dozen alleys connecting them. To the east was a wide, lazy river. To the west, a smattering of houses before the bigger farms and cultivated fields. The buildings were mostly a light brown hue of timber, stone, and clay, with tall, thatched roofs, in an assortment of sizes. The main road came to a T-intersection at the end, where the largest building, the Grand Hall, housed the decision makers of Utica.

As Lorea and Alma made their way down, they saw a small crowd in the courtyard in front of the Grand Hall, where the wooden statue of the tyrant King Gorge was surrounded by a stone platform with stairs for public announcements. A mix of Utications, some of the adult Udorans Lorea knew, and once they were close enough to make out details, a few of the scrubby salt-stained miners of Epsom that seemed to look as confused as Lorea felt, were gathered.

"What's going on?" Alma asked Spicer, who was standing at the edge of the crowd.

"Not sure yet. Sounds like the blackjackets are gone though." Spicer stretched himself taller by lifting his chin to look over the crowd and balancing on the balls of his feet.

Lorea ducked low and squeezed herself under arms and between spectators until she was able to get a look at what, or who was in the centre.

Her stomach churned.

It was the mayor.

Dead.

He was in a seated position, his legs straight out front, arms limp at his sides, and his head fallen to the left, nearly severed from his shoulders. It happened long enough ago that the gawkers' shock wore off and they were now in a stupor over what to do next. The dead body didn't bother Lorea so much as the wooden crate beside him with blood smeared into letters. Someone beside her pointed at it and whispered, "A head for a head".

This was her fault. She'd caused this. There was always risk of retaliation, but they'd never killed anyone as important as the mayor. Death wasn't really part of their purpose in the Northeast. They needed people alive - albeit sometimes barely - to recruit them. Guess her luck ran out. With eyes squeezed shut, Lorea backed up, bumping into people. Some shoved her left or right, some grumbled profanities, but she didn't open her eyes until she was far enough back not to see the hollow glazed-over orbs of the mayor boring into her.

Knowing.

Accusing.

When she finally cleared the crowd and opened her eyes, Alma and Spicer were staring at her.

"Well?" Alma asked.

"The mayor is dead."

Spicer lunged forward into the crowd, pushing people out of the way to see for himself. Alma just stood there with her delicate mouth open. Did they suspect it was Lorea's fault?

No.

Every time something happened to the locals Lorea blamed herself. She should have been faster, should have targeted someone else, should have ... but she had to stop. Rimme never let her feel guilt for what they did, and she had to remind herself of that now. If she didn't do it, the KingsGuard would have taken away one able member of every family, never to return. They would have come up the mountain and done the same in Udora. Who knows how many other towns across Espanico already lost their young and strong to the tyrant king? How many of the KingsGuard that arrived were once innocents taken from their homes and forced to serve the king with no compensation? It was not her fault the mayor was dead. It was King Gorge's.

Lorea clenched her jaw.

"You think they did that in retaliation?" Alma whispered.

"Yes."

"How could they?"

“Well, we killed two of theirs. I guess we should be lucky it was only one of ours.”

Alma recovered from the shock and resolve washed across her face. “That mayor was too spineless to stand up for the Northeast anyway. Such a pathetic ‘yes man’, I don’t feel sorry for him at all.”

Spicer returned, his face a little green. “I need a drink.”

The three of them walked in silence to the *Wet Whistle*. Inside, they found Axel and Hansen sitting at a table near the back wall with a sick-looking Gil. The building didn’t have a lot of windows, and the lanterns always burned low, the dim light made every table seem private and secluded. There were thick hardwood tables and chairs; some round, some rectangle, some near walls, others out in the middle of the floor. A long bar ran across the left side of the room, with various bottles of alcohol lined up on the inset wall. Lorea hadn’t drank most of what was back there, all of it costing a lot more penlings than she would ever have. The trio sat down with only a nod from the current occupants.

“You saw?” Lorea asked, gently placing her fingers on Gil’s forearm. He’d leaned over and rest his head on his arms when they sat. He nodded without lifting it, dark brown hair sticking out end as though he’d run his hands through it numerous times.

“Your largest bottle of mead, and six cups, please,” Axel ordered when someone came to the table.

“That one’s not old enough,” the server said, thumbing at Lorea. She exhaled. Not again.

“She’s near an adult the same as the rest of us, and I can assure you she’d drink you under the table if you challenged her. She’s not a child. Please just get us the mead.” Hansen was always so polite. He was the shortest of the boys, with a longer face like Gil. He had kind, soft features, and was always the first to smile in tense situations.

Lorea had squashed romantic feelings for Hansen on and off since everyone hit puberty. No relationships with her boys, she promised Rimme. Not that they had interest in her anyway, least of all Hansen. He could have anyone he chose in Udora and he’d never choose her.

Lorea looked up at the server and raised an eyebrow. At this point, she almost hoped he’d take the challenge so she could drink herself numb. Instead, he took a good long stare, then shrugged and walked away, muttering something about *Udoran filth*.

“When will they ever stop thinking they are better than us?” It wasn’t so much a question from Alma as a resignation. The answer was, never. They all knew that.

“You going to be okay, Gil? You’ve seen dead animals lots of times. We’re hunters. This isn’t *that* much different.”

Gil lifted his head and looked straight at Lorea sitting across from him, his thin eyes narrowing more. Her stomach churned. “Did you see it? His head was barely attached. There were bones sticking up through the mess of flesh and blood. Animals are food. This? This was a statement.”

Lorea swallowed hard. “Well, at least the KingsGuard are gone.”

“They’ll be back, Lor. Are you really that stupid? They always send more. I don’t know what that jackass King *Hor-Hey* needs so many recruits for, but the lost taxes alone are enough to piss him off pretty good. Those bastards will be back.” The venom Gil used to spit out the Kings name sent a shiver down Lorea’s back. Around the Northeast, he was usually only referred to as the tyrant king.

The mead came with six glasses and Axel poured it out. He passed the empty bottle back to their server and ordered another. Mead was cheap and plentiful and while the stuff they sold Udorans in taverns down here was watered down compared to what they kept up the mountain, it would eventually give a nice euphoric feeling. Lorea was first to down her cup, followed by Axel.

Gil was right. The KingsGuard would be back. Again and again, to what end?

“Why don’t the Uticatians fight back?” Lorea mused more to herself than anyone else. “They’re so prepared to hand over everything they have and say goodbye to their family. They know as well as we do, anyone *recruited* to the KingsGuard never comes home. Recruitment is as good as dying. They fight *us* on a regular basis, why not the blackjackets?” Lorea didn’t want to kill anymore soldiers. But as she looked around the table at her five friends, she couldn’t imagine losing them like she did Rimme.

“Uh, they tried that, remember?” Gil answered. “It didn’t work out very well, Lorea, you know that as much as anyone.” He knew it too. His sister hadn’t been taken the day Rimme was, but she was another example of what happened to people who fought back.

“I’m sorry,” Lorea whispered to Gil. It was people like Clair that reminded Lorea why she did what she did. And Lorea felt no more remorse over her choices.

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The next six bottles of mead went down too quickly and if Lorea didn’t stand up and get the blood flowing, she’d regret it. Her knee was just about seized right up and needed to move, though the drink eased the pain. She’d been tired before starting down the mountain, and the honey wine didn’t help with her mental clarity. She’d paced herself just right, while the others were affected more by the same amount. All of their speech started to slur and their eyes were a little glassy. Hansen hadn’t been kidding when he said she could drink them all under the table.

Gil recovered from seeing the dead mayor and was over at another table talking too loudly to some of the other Udorans. Most of the adolescents that came down the mountain with them ended up at the *Wet Whistle* anyway. The more ‘dignified’, *Brandy Bear*, would never let them in the door. She stood and stretched, tested her weight-bearing capacity on her leg, and started over to join him, but the unwelcoming stares from the table made her change her mind and keep walking past.

She stepped out the front door and leaned against the stone and clay wall. The sun had moved well across the sky. It was past lunch. She thought about her father at home, wondered if he’d kept the fire going. It was crisp and cool now, but in Udora it would still be below freezing. Mitch was one of the few gifted apothecaries of Udora, and sometimes being around so many

herbs and concoctions made him absent-minded. Whether the others were ready to go home or not, Lorea decided she'd start back up the mountain after the next bottle was finished.

While she soaked up the fresh air, she listened to the conversations out on the street. Talk was mostly about who might replace the mayor, what they would do with the body, who might be killing the KingsGuard... the last one held Lorea's attention.

"You can call me an Epsom miner if I'm wrong, but I'm telling you, it's those mountain folk. How did they know to come down this morning? How do they always seem to know? This isn't their town, and yet there are always a few of them hanging around. And they're always up to no good. They bring their pipe and spices and set *our* respectable kids down the wrong path. Just look at the bunch in the *Wet Whistle*! They don't even send their young to school! The whole lot of them are nothing but trouble, and now they've brought trouble to Utica with these assassinations."

"When the ships come, they will deal with the Udorans. Zephyr and Utica will join the revolution, but we've made it clear, Udora offers nothing they want."

She wasn't quite close enough to hear, but did they say revolution? And ships?

"You aren't still on about that are you? It's just a rumour! No one is out there. The only ships anyone in Zephyr have seen are merchants and fishermen. You need to stop this. Between the Udorans and the KingsGuard, that's enough on our plates. We need to deal with the *Mountain Morons* ourselves!"

The one that seemed to control the narrative, a man nearly as tall as Axel and Spicer but more muscled from a winter with moderately more access to food, used big hand gestures as he spoke, and was getting himself more worked up with each word. The other men surrounded him, and Lorea could barely make out who they were talking to. The mead made her vision just a little blurry but saw the short dark auburn hair. It looked like it was Klein; a man Gil had started enough skirmishes with in the past Lorea knew to avoid.

"Well, let's go get some answers then, shall we?" Klein said, and the mass of them, probably ten in total, started towards her. Lorea darted back inside, grabbed Gil by the sleeve and hauled him back to her table not bothering to mask her limp.

"Time to go. Out the back. Now."

She was too late.

Alma's doe-eyes shifted to the entrance and grew wider. Lorea's day was about to get a lot worse.