# Jerriel of Erabir is a warrior king who was captured by his enemies when he was a teenager and made their slave. The enemy governor's daughter fell in love with him and helped him escape. He swore to come back with his father's army to avenge himself and to take her home to be his wife. Now, ten years later, he has conquered his enemy, city by city, and has taken brutal revenge on those who enslaved him. All that is left for him to do is find his Lady Valdis and live happily ever after.But Ashley Johnson is not Valdis. She is an older-than-average college student who used to write dreamy romances to while away her time in the treatment rooms at the cancer center. She never finished the story of Jerriel and Valdis, but now that she has somehow been dropped in the middle of the world she created when she was sixteen, she's going to find out how it ends.

# This Jerriel is nothing like the sweet teenager she made up. Can they each learn to love the true self of the other?

# Chapter One

I was so close*.* After way too many years I was almost done with school*.* I let out a breath and closed my laptop before looking across the table at my roommate who was also my best friend. “Maya, I am finally going to get my degree.”

The sound of the coffee grinder at the other end of the coffee shop almost drowned out my words, but Maya looked over the top of her own laptop and smiled. “Yeah, you are. It’s been a long, hard road, but you are almost there, and you’ve fought like heck for it. You deserve it.”

Tears stung my eyes. It *had* been a long, hard road. I hadn’t graduated from high school until I was nineteen, hadn’t started at the university until I was twenty, and now would be getting my BA at twenty-five. At the same age, Maya was working on her doctorate.

“I’m a little old to be getting my first degree.”

My best friend blew a raspberry. “Ashley, you’re not old. There’s a woman in one of my classes who must be pushing sixty. I think you are amazing. Consider what you went through. A lot of people would never have gotten this far.”

I glanced away, pretending to check out the coffee shop. I didn’t want to think about ‘what I went through’. Keeping up with my schoolwork after being diagnosed with ALL—Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia—at fifteen had been impossible. My normal had gone from giggling with Maya about nail polish, hairstyles, and boys to chemotherapy infusions, baldness, and bone crushing pain.

Maya pointed a finger at me, its perfectly rounded nail painted a glaring purple. “I know what you are thinking. But that is *done.* You are cured. Your hair is halfway down your back—it is gorgeous, by the way, you witch, so thick and glossy, like polished walnut—and you are about to have your B.A.”

I had to laugh. My hair was medium brown, boring brown, and I usually wore it in a high ponytail that brushed my back a few inches below my shoulders. All the weight I’d lost during my fight with leukemia was back. Sadly, it had all taken up residence in my midsection. I was just a little over five three, and my legs were long and slim compared to my poochy belly. My eyes were brown, too, but I liked to thing they were a pretty shade of brown, almost golden brown, with a slight tilt at the outer corners. They were the only beautiful thing about me. Maya, on the other hand, was a tall blonde with sky blue eyes and a slender, hourglass figure. She looked like a bimbo, but her mind was brilliant. She was getting a PhD in chemistry. I was pretty sure bimbos had no interest in being chemists. Only the fact that she was the best friend anyone could ever have prevented rabid jealousy from blackening my heart. At sixteen, when most girls spent an hour every morning getting their hair ready for school, Maya had shaved her beautiful blond hair off to give me moral support when my hair fell out in clumps from chemo. See? Best friend ever.

“Polished walnut?” I scoffed. “What am I? A sideboard?”

 Maya tilted her head consideringly. “No, more of a side table. A Victorian side table all elegant curves and shiny polished carvings. You know.”

Now I blew a raspberry. “Short and squat?”

Maya gave me a chiding look and closed her laptop. “Ready for that last final?”

“Yep.” I unplugged the laptop, wrapped the cord around it, and shoved it into my backpack. A couple of history textbooks followed. I slugged back the last of my coffee and stood up, pulling the bag over my arms and settling it on my shoulders. It was a familiar weight. “You walking back to campus?”

“Sure. I need to get back to the lab. I’ll walk with you as far as the fountain in the quadrangle.”

We left the coffee shop and walked the five blocks to campus. Spring in the Midwest was pretty. It sucked if you had allergies, but luckily, I didn’t. Lawns were green, the sky was blue, the air was warm and sweetly scented from flowering bushes and trees that lined the boulevards. I loved spring. I loved seeing the world come back to life after a long, cold winter. Our walk took us past a row of frat houses.

“Hmph. It is finals week, but the frat boys are on full display,” grumbled Maya. “And I do mean on *full* display.”

That was another of my favorite parts of spring. Mostly naked men on full display, as Maya put it, with sweat gleaming on their chests were one of the best things about spring. I tried to be discreet while ogling the young men playing touch football in their front yards. They wore only shorts and muscles shirts, and some wore no shirts at all. After spending years suffering in treatment rooms and hospital beds, I had some catching up to do when it came to men.

Of course, Maya noticed. She smirked. “You like the eye candy?”

I opened my eyes exaggeratedly wide. “Don’t you?”

Maya flicked a dismissive glance at the men. “I bet their IQs are smaller than the circumference of their thighs.”

“Ouch.”

“Besides, they’re too young.”

I sniffed. “I’m only looking.”

“But you like them young, don’t you? I remember that fanfic you used to write.”

I covered my face with one hand. “Honestly, do you have to bring that up? I was only a teenager. Of course, my heroes were young. Back then I thought twenty-five was middle aged.”

She laughed. “What? I’m just teasing. It was actually good. You always had the best stories on that fanfic site. Your imagination is incredible.”

It was my imagination that had helped me get through the long hours of chemo and hospital stays. I made up stories of warrior princes who loved their brides with a fierce tenderness and knights in shining armor who rescued captive princesses. It helped keep my mind in a better place.

“Really,” Maya insisted. “You made up entire worlds and cultures. Remember that one about the desert prince of Erabir who’d been captured and made a slave to his enemies the Thessians and how the daughter of the Thessian governor helped him escape? It was good. Wish you had finished it.”

That story line had been my very favorite, but I had never finished it because I’d gotten so sick, and then the bone marrow transplant had taken over my life. Then, when I was feeling better, I devoted myself to schoolwork. “Maybe I’ll get back to that someday.” Remembering how the teenaged desert prince forced into slavery to his enemies had sworn to love his rescuer forever made me smile. “I really did like Jerriel and Valdis.”

“Oh, yeah.” Maya fanned herself. “When the girl snuck Prince Jerriel out of town so he could get back home and she gave him her pearl necklace to remember her by? And he promised to come back and make her his princess? Swoon worthy. It only needed some hot sex to be perfect.”

I reached up to touch the teardrop pearl pendant on a gold chain around my neck. It had been a present from my mom and dad on my sixteenth birthday. I’d used it as a model of the one Valdis had given Jerriel in my story.

“Jerriel was only thirteen when he was captured and only fifteen when Valdis set him free,” I protested. “And they kissed good-bye.”

Maya flicked a dismissive finger. “You really ought to finish it. Make them older, like over eighteen. Then open the bedroom door and shine the spotlight on the bed.”

I cleared my throat. “Maybe Jerriel won’t be able to wait until they get to the bed.”

“Whoo-hoo! I like it!” Maya crowed. “Now you’re talking! You have to finish that story. You really are a good writer. It makes me wonder why you decided to go for a history degree instead of creative writing.”

“Because what kind of job would I get with that degree? Besides, a history degree is flexible. I am going on to get my master’s in library science.”

Maya tossed me a grin. “At least then you won’t be telling me about every siege in medieval history.”

I stuck my tongue out. “Siege warfare is fascinating. You loved every minute of listening to me practice for my senior thesis.”

Maya made a gagging sound. I laughed, too excited at the idea of being done with my undergraduate degree to be offended by her teasing.

We crossed into campus and walked along the concrete path that took us towards the Quadrangle near the north side of the center of campus. Ahead was the fountain, set in a sunken area dotted with benches filled with students taking a break between classes and finals.

I recognized the four girls sitting on the edge of the fountain because they were in some of my history classes. Shelley, Bree, Kim and Miriam were all involved in some medieval recreation group and always had interesting comments and questions in class. They were tossing coins into the fountain and laughing. School superstition said the fountain was magic and if you dropped a penny into it before a final you would have a better grade. I had studied hard and felt good about my knowledge, but I dug my wallet out of my backpack and found a couple of coins.

“Seriously?” huffed Maya, following me to the rim of the fountain.

“Shut up. What can it hurt?” I smiled at the four girls who shifted to make room for us at the fountain before sticking my chin out at Maya and pointing to the discreet plaque set into base of the fountain. “Besides, the money goes to Free Kids From Cancer. It’s a great charity.”

“Well, at least make a wish.”

“Fine, bossy lady.” I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on my face contrasting with the cool spray of water. “I wish for a good grade and a great future.”

“And love,” Maya interjected.

I gave my best friend a sidelong glare. “And I want to meet Prince Jerriel of Erabir and live happily ever after.”

I tossed the coins in and turned to Maya. “Happy?”

“You should have wished a Jerriel for me too.”

“You have a wallet. Make your own wish.” I hoisted my backpack further up my shoulder. “See you tonight?”

“Yeah, I’ll get ice cream and we’ll celebrate tonight. Good luck!”

“Thanks. See you later.”

I’d barely begun turning to go to my very last final exam when someone bumped into me so hard I fell. My elbow connected with the edge of the fountain in a sickening flash of pain. The sound of it hitting was a metallic clang, which made no sense. I heard Maya scream my name. But as I went sprawling onto the pavement everything flickered to black.

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“Ash? Ash! Ashley Marie Johnson, you wake up right now!”

Aside from the pain radiating from my elbow, the first thing I noticed was how cold the air was. The second thing was that the scent of flowering bushes was gone, replaced by a weird stench. I pushed myself off the pavement with my good arm with a groan. The pain radiating from my elbow made me cup my other hand around it. Crap! It wasn’t broken, was it?

“My final,” I moaned. “I’m going to be late.”

“What final?” Maya said in an odd voice. I had never heard that tone from her. Snark, happiness, excitement, sarcasm, and sadness, yes. But this flat numbness barely covering hysteria? Maya didn’t do hysteria. “We’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto,” she said and the flatness of her voice was rippled by a quaver.

I looked up at that. My heart stopped in utter shock. The fountain was gone. The fresh air and sunshine were gone. Maya crouched beside me on a packed earth surface between two brick walls spaced about four feet apart. The buildings were tall enough to block most of the sun. An alley? It was filthy. There was garbage strewn all about. When I swallowed it felt like a razorblade was stuck in my throat.

“Where are we?” I said wildly. “How did we get here? How long was I out?”

Maya’s lush mouth was set in a flat line. “We got here only a minute ago. It’s like the concrete at the fountain collapsed under us and we fell through to … here.” She waved a hand to indicate *here*. “Wherever this is. We landed out there.” Another hand wave indicated somewhere past the mouth of the alley. “Since I didn’t want to get my head cut off by one of those madmen with swords, I pulled you back here.”

Madmen. Swords? I stared at Maya, mouth open. The thundering noise I had barely noticed registered now. Horses’ hooves pounding on stone, women’s screams, men’s shouts, and the clang of metal on metal all mixed into a terrible cacophony that made no sense. I got to my knees to move closer to the mouth of the alley, and that’s when I noticed I wasn’t wearing my jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt. I was wearing a long dress, like something from medieval England. It was high necked and tight sleeved, made of ivory silk with green embroidery at the wrists. The skirt was voluminous. Maya was wearing a similar get up, but in light weight blue wool.

“What is this?” I moaned.

“No clue,” said Maya. “We had veils at one point too, but I left them out there.”

‘Out there’ was past the alley. It was too much to try to figure out right now*. One thing at a time,* I told myself. *First of all, figure out where you are.* I crawled a few feet, still holding my hurt elbow against my chest, toward the mouth of the alley. The ivory dress must have been beautiful once, but now it was trashed. Another thing to worry about later.

It was much brighter here at the edge of the building, and louder too. Men on horses cantered by with swords out, screaming war cries. Other men, on foot, either tried to defend themselves or flee. Either way, they were cut down. As I watched, one man had his head completely severed from his neck. The head, its short blond hair covered by blood, hit the pavement and bounced toward me.

It was like my brain stopped functioning. I lunged backward so fast I nearly fell over. The horseman who cut off the head watched it roll and saw me. A savage grin contorted his face as he raised his bloody sword and kicked his horse into a run, right at the alley.

Maya’s clutching hand yanked me to my feet. “Run!” she screamed.

I hoisted up my dirty skirt and ran as fast as I could the opposite way down the alley. That stupid dress did its best to trip me, but I powered through. The horseman was right behind us. The only thing that saved us was the narrowness of the alley, which barely allowed the horse to pass and did not give much room for the rider to swing his sword at us. Thank God he didn’t have a lance.

We burst out of the alley into another street. In front of us were another dozen men on horseback, all suddenly focused on us. Well, almost all. A couple were in the middle of assaulting a pair of screaming women who had their dresses pushed up to their waists. I slowed, panting and staring in shock. I had studied history for more than four years, learning about various wars. Rape and looting were part of war. I knew that. But I had never seen it, never had a front row seat to the atrocities.

This was more than I could take. I had gone insane. That was the only explanation for this. I must have cracked my head when I fell against the fountain and was now in the hospital having a nightmare. A really intense nightmare, in technicolor and with surround sound. With Maya holding me by my good wrist and my bad elbow holding my skirt against my waist, I couldn’t pinch myself. But I wanted to. I really, really wanted this to be a dream.

“Don’t stop! Run!” screamed Maya beside me.

“Run where?” I screamed back.

Retreat was impossible. We couldn’t go back to the alley. I swear I felt the horse’s breath on the back of my neck. The horseman behind us screamed a war cry practically in my ear. I turned to look up at him. Maya moved so we were back-to-back. I stood staring at the guy who had followed us down the alley, and she faced the others.

This was it. After years of fighting leukemia, I was going to die by having my head lopped off with a sword.

# Chapter Two

A man behind me shouted, “She has brown hair!”

The sword in the hand of the horseman I faced was raised for a killing blow. I cringed, closing my eyes as I waited for death. A long moment passed before I let my shoulders drop a bit and opened my eyes a crack. The sword was lowered, held across the horseman’s chest. His eyes were narrowed in a glare. I noticed for the first time that he wore eyeliner. No, I guess it would be kohl, like the ancient Egyptians had worn, but not with the extra-long line at the outer corners. I inwardly kicked myself. Why was I noticing that at a time like this?

“Fine,” he growled, put a booted heel into his horse’s side, and cantered away.

I pivoted to watch him go, and ended up beside Maya, transferring my stare to the other men. Some of them had dismounted and were closing in on us. All of them had their eyes outlined with black. It should have made them look ridiculous. It didn’t. One pointed to Maya.

“That one has yellow hair,” he said, and laughed. “Lie down and spread your legs, girl, and I’ll let you live.”

Maya grabbed my wrist again and we bolted back down the alley. It did no good, though. We hadn’t gone more than a couple of yards before the man caught Maya by the hair and threw her to the ground. Yanked off balance, I fell with her. The smack of my bad elbow against the hard ground jerked a scream out of me. I kicked at him desperately as he fumbled at the waistband of his pants. He pushed me away with careless strength and knelt over my friend. Maya crab-walked away from him on her elbows and heels. He caught her by an ankle and wrenched her back.

 A shadow fell over us. “Jarir!” another man barked. “Leave them alone. There are plenty of other women. These two should go to the holding pens.”

Maya’s attacker stilled with an ugly scowl. “The brown haired one can go. That’s what the King wants. But the blonde is fair game. Go away, Jadon.”

Jadon slapped the back of Jarir’s head. “They are together. Get out of here. Go find another blonde. You won’t have any trouble. There’s nothing but blond-haired women here.”

Jarir got up with a growl and stalked away, fastening his pants. Jadon watched him with a frown for a moment before turning back to us. I leaned away from the long, suntanned hand he extended to me. He grabbed my good arm and yanked me to my feet.

His face wasn’t exactly kind, but at least he wasn’t unbuttoning his pants when he barked, “Come with me.”

“Where?” Maya demanded.

“There is a place where you will be safe. I will take you there and make sure you are not molested.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him, but five or six other men had crowded around us in the narrow alley, so I didn’t think we had a choice. I shook his hand off and clutched Maya’s arm. She latched onto my good arm and lifted her chin at Jadon.

Jadon nodded to one of the men around us. “Nodir, you take the blonde on your horse. I’ll take the brown-haired woman.”

Getting on the horse was hard with a long skirt tangling my legs and my bad elbow shrieking in pain, but I managed to get settled behind Jadon. As we rode through the town I stared at the city, trying to figure out where we were. There were no cars, no traffic lights, no power lines, and no glass windows in the buildings. The buildings were made of timber, brick and plaster, and none was taller than two stories. The roads were packed earth or gravel. I craned my head around to see Maya, but all I could see was the very top of her head and a flutter of blue skirt behind the horseman.

I didn’t want to, but I made myself look at the people we passed. The men on horseback were leanly built, with long, dark hair worn in a ponytail at the nape of their necks or long single braids down their backs. They wore heavy cloth pants and tough looking leather armor over their bare chests and shoulders. Their lower arms were encased in metal studded leather greaves. Everyone else, mostly dead on the ground or moaning in pain from ghastly wounds, had blond hair. The men’s hair was short, and the women’s was long. Their clothing was similar to what I had seen in woodcuts and illustrations of medieval peasants. Men wore baggy trousers and tunics. Of course, it was hard to tell, really, considering how mangled they were. I assumed the blond people were the natives to this town and the horsemen were invaders.

If this wasn’t a dream—and the pain in my arm made me doubt it was—then had we travelled back in time? To when? And where? I scoured my memory, trying to match the setting and the clothing to a particular place or time. The dark-haired horsemen weren’t Asian, so not Genghis Khan and the Mongols. They didn’t wear facial hair, so maybe Native Americans? No. Indians hadn’t worn leather armor. They weren’t Vikings. The blond natives could be Scandinavian or maybe Germanic. Were the horsemen Ottomans invading Europe? No, they spoke English. Modern English, not Middle English.

None of this made any sense!

My poor brain hurt almost as badly as my elbow by the time we came to an open area. There was a wooden fenced ring in the middle of it, like a large horse corral. It was full of blond people, mostly men, but I saw a few women there, and they, surprisingly, had dark blond or light brown hair.

Jadon jabbed an elbow into me. I toppled out of the saddle and landed heavily on my good arm. A thud nearby and a choked off swear word from Maya told me she was on the ground too.

“Kadzmil!” shouted Jadon. “Two more prisoners for the King.”

I scrambled to my feet while a huge hulk of a man hurried up to us. His nose had been broken at some time in the past, but what made him ugly was his expression. He reached out and grabbed a hank of my hair.

“Brown,” he sneered. “Darkest brown I’ve seen in this cesspit of a town.”

His hair was inky black, and no longer than my own shoulder blade length locks. He pulled me closer by my hair. “We’ll see what the King wants with something like you.”

The pain in my scalp rivaled the pain in my elbow. “Let me go.”

He spat, narrowly missing my foot in its dainty silk shoe. The shoe, like the rest of me, was the worse for wear. He grabbed Maya by the arm and dragged both of us to a gate in the corral held open by a teenaged boy. “Get inside,” he snarled, and shoved us through the gate. Before I even fell to my knees, the gate slammed shut.

Maya hadn’t fallen. She leaned down and gently helped me to my feet. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I guess? I, um, I think so.”

Except I didn’t know where I was or why I was here, or what was happening. I looked around the corral. There must have been fifty people there, most staring at us. I noticed that their clothing had subtle differences. The cut and shapes of the tunics and trousers were the same, but the fabrics and decoration was different. Some were dressed in fine fabrics in bright hues with heavy embroidery around the cuffs, necklines and hems of their tunics, and others were dressed in plainer garb with no embroidery. I had seen this same thing in medieval and Renaissance paintings. A prince or duke would wear extravagant clothing made of satin, velvet or brocade heavily embellished with gold and gems, and the well to do merchants would wear similar clothing, but with less elaborate decoration, and even the peasants’ garb was similar, but made of coarser wool and linen and lacking the embroidery. Unlike at home, where a millionaire might wear the same jeans and T-shirt as a college student, these people here shouted their station in life by what they wore.

A middle-aged woman in a plain brown dress came to us. Her hair was dishwater blond, almost brown, wrapped around her head in a messy braid. Distress showed in her wrinkled forehead and her hands wringing her apron.

“Oh, Lady Valdis,” she moaned. “They’ve brought you here? This is terrible.”

*Valdis*? I shot a wild glance at Maya before turning back to the woman. “Do you know me?”

The woman’s face colored as she dropped a bobbing curtsey. “Oh, no, milady. Please forgive me if I am speaking out of turn. I’m only a baker’s wife. My husband’s bakery sometimes provided bread for your servants. So, you see, I know of you, of course.”

“You called me Lady Valdis?”

Her hands wrung her apron even tighter. “Yes, milady.”

“You think I’m Valdis?” I asked again, jerking a thumb toward my chest, needing to be absolutely sure.

“You are Lady Valdis Grimst, daughter of the Lieutenant Governor of New Thess.” The woman lowered her voice. “Are you trying to keep it a secret?”

My mouth dropped open. “What?”

“Like from your story?” Maya hissed.

“It’s a weird coincidence,” I hissed back, trying to subdue hysteria.

But was it? The horsemen could be the Erabiri army. But that was crazy. “Where are we exactly?” I asked the woman.

She gave me a confused look. “This is the lower green, where the farmers at the south end of town graze their cows. Those monsters set up this pen to keep us in like cattle.”

That explained the smell of manure. “No, I mean what town is this?”

Her look went from mildly confused to horrified. She stook a small step back. “This is Grimstaborg, milady.”

Had there been a town named Grimstabord in my story? Maybe, but I couldn’t remember it. “Not New Thess City?”

“No, milady. The capital is three days north by wagon.” The woman took another wary step back and bobbed another curtsey. “I’ll get back to my husband now. Emris needs me.”

She bolted, casting one quick glance over her shoulder at me. Great. She probably thought I was crazy. She might not be wrong.

A man dressed in fine clothes took her place. He was probably around forty years old. He bowed to me. “My lady, perhaps you do not remember me. Lord Ulsak Blenhiem, first minister of your father’s privy council. I am sorry to see you here.”

“Me, too,” I muttered.

My mind was stuck on the name Emris. Emris? Emris Baker was a character in my story. He had been Jerriel’s owner and had whipped the foreign slave-prince if he wasted any flour or didn’t sell all the bread. That was how Valdis had first met Jerriel. He had hauled a cart of bread to the governor’s mansion. The woman had said she was a baker’s wife. What a very odd coincidence.

Lord Ulsak—not a character from my story-- turned to Maya and bowed again, a little less deeply. “Miss Maya. Why did those savages bring you here?”

Maya didn’t seem to be wondering why the man knew her name. “Supposedly, there is a king that wants brown haired women. Does that make any sense to you?”

He shook his head. “Indeed, it does not.”

I asked, “What king is this? Is his name Jerriel?”

“No, madam.” The nobleman’s face showed a touch of the same wariness the baker’s wife had shown. “King Rodir rules the grasslands and mountains to the south and west of New Thess.”

“But what’s the name of the country?”

The line between Lord Ulsak’s pale brows deepened. “Erabir, my lady. Are you ill?” he added quickly.

Maya grabbed me by the shoulder. I felt tears well in my eyes. “I’m going to barf,” I told her helplessly.

“Hang in there,” she said bracingly. “This king must be Jerriel’s dad, right? What was his name?”

I tried to think. “I don’t think I gave him a name. Hey, um, Lord Ulsak, what do you know about this King Rodir? How old is he? How long has this war been going on? I mean, is it a war? Or was this just a surprise attack?”

“My lady, the savages have been conquering the colony for the past five years. Each year they have taken more and more towns and cities in the colony.” He spoke slowly, as if I was a kid who wasn’t too smart. “Surely you are aware of this.”

“New Thess is a colony of the Thessian Empire, right?” I said. “Why doesn’t the emperor send his army to defend the colony?”

Now the nobleman shook his head sadly. “The war over the succession has diverted most of the army. The Emperor cannot spare any troops to defend a distant colony. My lady, I know politics and wars aren’t suitable topics for ladies, but surely, even women are aware of what is going on in the world.”

“It’s been a difficult day,” I said. Biggest understatement ever. “I don’t know what is going on.”

“Of course, of course.” He looked around. “I wish I had a chair to offer you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Maya took hold of my upper arm with a maniacally bright smile. “We’re just going to go over there and lean against the rail in the shade.”

We pushed through the people in the corral. Most of them were injured, some were angry, and some seemed too dazed to care about anything. The shade cast by the single tree was already full of people, but Maya bullied her way through until we got to the rail fence.

“How is your elbow?” she asked.

I straightened it and bent it a few times. “Sore. But nothing is broken.”

Maya cautiously lifted it. “Your sleeve is too tight to roll up and get a good look, but I think it’s swollen.”

I could feel it. “Yeah. What are the chances of getting some ice for it?”

Maya gave me a look.

“Right.” I leaned against the rail. “Now what?”

Maya lifted helpless hands. “We wait?”

“I never should have wished to meet Jerriel,” I groaned.

Maya settled her back against the post beside me. “Well, it’s kind of exciting to actually get to live in one of your stories.”

I gave her incredulous eyes. “Exciting? People are dying! Being raped! And do you think being in this pen is good? Why are we here?”

She looked away. “All good points. But if this is New Thess and Erabir, then you can find Jerriel. Everyone thinks you are Valdis from your story, so Jerriel will take care of you. And you can take care of me.”

“If that is really what this is.” Panic clutched at my throat. “Are we sharing some weird dream? How do we get back home?”

Maya shook her head. “I don’t think it’s a dream, and I don’t know how to get back home. Find a wishing well and throw in some coins?”

I drew in a shuddering breath. “Do you really think that is what happened?”

“I can’t think what else it could be.” Her gaze wandered to the tree arching above us. “It’s fall,” she said with surprise.

The leaves on the tree were gold and orange. The cloudless sky was deep blue, but the air had a chill. “Great. I missed summer.” Panic climbed up my throat again. “This isn’t fair!”

Maya gave my shoulder a little shake. “Calm down. Just breathe. It’s going to be okay.”

I worked on breathing. Air in, air out. I was twenty-five, not five. Throwing myself to the ground and screaming wouldn’t change anything. Three men and a woman were talking nearby. To distract myself, I focused on their conversation.

“We should have surrendered,” the woman said bitterly. “Everyone knows what happened to Grenspan last summer. This Storm King offered them an alliance, just like he offered us. They didn’t take it, and now that whole town is ashes. We didn’t take his offer either, so what do you think will happen here?”

“Ilsa, hush. It wouldn’t be an alliance of equals. We would have had to pay annual tribute and give up hostages to those barbarians. We would be barely more than slaves, like Herzborg.”

“We’d be alive, at least,” the woman argued. “I heard not one building was burnt, no houses were looted, and no women were raped in Herzborg. They accepted the alliance, and they are living in peace to this day. We won’t be so lucky.”

“We couldn’t surrender,” another man protested. “We are Thessians.”

“We’re idiots,” the woman countered. “Or our governor and his council are. Every summer the Storm King and his army conquer towns and cities on their way north. They must have known Grimstaborg was next.”

Another man spoke defensively. “Rodir and his savages are no match for our garrison!”

The third man shook his head. “Ilsa is right. The Erabiri started this march to take the north five years ago, and they haven’t lost a single battle. Our garrison hasn’t seen action in years. They were unprepared for this attack. And we are paying the price.”

“Nonsense!” That was the first man, looking arrogant and sounding pompous. “The battle for this city isn’t over yet.”

“It is for us,” the woman said. “Do you truly think the Storm King will be defeated this time?”

She had dark blond hair, much like the baker’s wife. Not quite brown, but darker than most. I wondered why King Rodir wanted brown-haired women. I had brown hair. Valdis in the story had brown hair. Did that have something to do with it? Probably not. The men here were all blond as far as I could see. Some men appeared to be wealthy. Some looked like they could be merchants or craftsmen with enough income to buy nice clothes, if not quite as fancy as what Lord Ulsak wore. Others must be laborers or poor men. Their clothing was well worn and ragged. I wondered what all these people had in common?

Maya approached the little group. “Excuse me. Why do you call him the Storm King?”

“He’s a force of nature,” the woman responded. “He can’t be stopped any more than a thunderstorm can be stopped.”

“We will stop him,” the first man said stoutly. “Just wait.”

Maya looked from him to the half a dozen Erabiri who were walking around our enclosure. Guards, I realized with stupid surprise. I hadn’t even thought of escaping. Why would I? We were safe here, safer than we would be out in the city where women were being raped and men were being killed. Of course, the question of why we were here and what would happen to us made me feel less safe.

Maya gave the guy a pitying smile. “Right. Do you know that when I was being hauled through the city to this pen I didn’t see a single Thessian man in uniform? Not alive, anyway.”

He reddened and took a threatening step toward her. She tilted her chin up with a bored expression.

“Hey, hey.” It was the man who had agreed with the woman. “We’re all on the same side, here.”

Maya looked at him. “Why are we here, do you think?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, Lady Valdis is here probably because her father is the Lieutenant Governor. Lord Ulsak is the head of the council. They make sense, I guess. But I am just a secretary to Lorn Galseth at the Traders Guild. I have no idea why I am here.”

Lorn Galseth was a name I recognized. He was the in charge of the slave trade in New Thess City. Or he had been in my story.

He added grimly, “I guess we’ll find out eventually.”

But when? Night fell, and we were given no food or blankets. I was hungry and cold, my arm ached, and I was scared. Was I crazy to pin all my hopes on finding Jerriel? How old was he now? My stupid wish at the fountain had started all this. I didn’t know what was going to happen. If it wasn’t for Maya being with me, I would have been a basket case. Well, more of a basket case.

We curled up together for warmth on the trampled grass. “Maybe we’ll wake up tomorrow back home,” she suggested.

But in the morning, we woke up cold and stiff and hungry in the same corral, with a dozen Erabiri warriors screaming at us.

# Chapter Three

I jolted to my feet, groaning at the pain in my elbow. The sleeve was almost painfully tight around the swollen flesh of my arm. The early morning light gleamed weakly on the blond hair Maya shook back away from her face. We both looked blearily at the Erabiri who had opened the gate. One man, older than the others, stood on a nearby rock and shouted at us.

“Wake up, Thessian filth! I am Faldon, son of Ottil, and I speak in the voice of Rodir, King of Erabir. Your city has fallen to our hand. Your lord surrendered to us last night.”

One of the men we spoke with last night glanced at me and called back, “Where is Lord Grimst?”

Faldon, son of Ottil, sneered. “Don’t worry about him. You have enough to worry about for yourself.”

“Why?” the man asked but was drowned out when Faldon continued.

“All of you, form a line. One by one approach the gate.”

The Thessians muttered and murmured, apparently not moving fast enough for Faldon. He bellowed, “Move!”

More Erabiri men came into the corral, all wearing swords, but carrying whips in their hands. “Form a line,” one of those said. “Anyone who hangs back will get a lash. Move it!”

Maya and I exchanged a look and shuffled to join the back of the winding line. Not everyone moved quickly enough. One man screamed when the whip whistled through the air and cracked against his back.

“Shut up, filth,” the Erabir told him. “You can dole out lashes but not take one? Slaves are whipped, and if you are lucky, that is what you will be. Move!”

I clutched at Maya’s arm. “Slaves?” I gasped.

She patted my shoulder. “Hang in there. It’ll be okay. You just need to find Jerriel.”

“Right,” I muttered, scrutinizing every Erabiri I could see. Would I even recognize him? How long had it been since I—I mean, *Valdis*—had helped him escape? He had been fifteen then, and Valdis had been sixteen. If time moved the same here as it had in our world, then he would be twenty-five. But who knew if time moved at the same pace? And most of these men looked like they were in their twenties. We were pinning all our hope on the fact that Jerriel would recognize me and help us. But what if he didn’t? My heart pounded so hard at that thought that I worried I would puke. An even worse thought occurred to me. *What if Jerriel didn’t actually exist?*

The line shuffled slowly toward the open gate. As each person reached the gate the Erabiri posted there spoke to them, and then searched for something on a roll of paper he held. I craned my head to see what happened next. The Thessian was waved through the gate and joined a cluster of people guarded by more Erabiri.

Someone in the line asked one of the warriors what was happening. He used a very polite tone, so the warrior only snarled instead of using the whip.

“You’ll see the King. He will decide your fate.”

We gradually made our way up to the front of the line. “Name?” the Erabiri warrior demanded of me.

I hesitated. “Ashley Johnson.”

Maya corrected me. “Valdis Grimst.”

The warrior frowned suspiciously. “Which is it?”

I hoped this was the right thing to do. “Valdis,” I admitted cautiously.

He ran a finger down the writing on the papers in his hand. His finger stopped with a stabbing motion. He jerked his chin to the group of Thessians surrounded by Erabiri on his right. “Go there and wait.” He turned to my friend. “Name?”

“Maya Scholl.”

He looked at her tangled blond hair for a moment before perusing the paper in his hand. He turned the page over and read it again. “Not on the list,” he grunted before waving another man over. “Tarriel, take her to the evacuees.”

“Wait,” she said. “I want to stay with Ash—Valdis.”

“No, you don’t, sweetheart. You really don’t. You have a better chance with the ones the King is allowing to leave.”

“Maya?” I began, but the other man had grabbed her arm in a punishing grip and forced her away from me. “Maya!”

She struggled. “Let me go!”

Tarriel grabbed her by the throat and shook her. “You can go, or you can die.”

I tried to breathe. “Maya, don’t worry, I’ll find you later, okay? Once I talk to J—”

The first man shoved me. “Get over there with the others!”

I watched in horror as Maya was dragged away, kicking and screaming. I’d heard that phrase before, ‘kicking and screaming’, but this was literal. Another warrior came to me and raised his whip. I scurried toward the Thessians to the right of the gate.

I tried to watch Maya as she was taken away, but I couldn’t see her, and soon I couldn’t hear her either. Maya’s supportive presence had been the only reason I hadn’t freaked completely out. Now what would I do?

Maya would tell me to calm down. She’d ask, How do you walk a thousand miles? One step at a time. Okay, I could do this. First step: find Jerriel. Yes, I had to find Jerriel. I sidled cautiously up to one of the Erabiri guards. “Excuse me,” I said as politely as I could. “Some years ago I knew an Erabiri boy named Jerriel.”

He looked down at me out of hard, nearly black eyes outlined in kohl. I remember writing that Jerriel’s eyes looked like black ink except when he was in the sun, when his irises were barely perceptible as dark, dark brown. “That’s why you are here.”

“It is?” Relief made me wilt. Jerriel was real, and he was here. “Where is he?”

“You’ll see him soon enough.”

The dark amusement in his voice confused me. But the important thing was that I would soon see Jerriel. He would straighten this mess out and help me find Maya. Relief loosened the muscles in my shoulders.

Nearly two hours later, our unwieldy group was marched through the city.
Grimstaborg was oddly empty. Other than some corpses which we had to detour around we saw nobody except more Erabiri warriors who joined our party. I purposely avoided looking at the dead. I couldn’t do anything for them, and if I thought about them too much I would lose it. I was barely hanging onto my calm as it was.

An hour of walking in my thin silk shoes gave me blisters on my heels and bruises on my arches and brought us to a large rectangular stone building that looked like a cathedral. The doors halfway down the long side were large and ornately carved. There were colored glass windows nearer to the roof than the ground.

The guards directed us to the back and through a small door. It looked like a cathedral from the inside too. It was a large open room about forty or fifty yards long by twenty yards wide, with a high ceiling painted with what I thought might be gods and goddesses. The ceiling was supported by marble pillars. The floor was marble too, large squares of white marble alternating with dark red squares in a checkerboard pattern. There were no pews, so nothing interrupted the light from the windows making colored patterns on the floor. If I wasn’t so worried about Maya and myself, I would have thought it was pretty.

I tried to remember if I had written about Thessian religion but couldn’t recall anything. At the far end of the room was a dais, or low stage, like where an altar would be in a Christian church. At the front of the stage was a large, ornate chair. Maybe not a chair. It was more like a throne, like what a cardinal or bishop might sit in during mass at home. No one sat in the chair, but six Erabiri stood around it. The men and the chair were too far away for me to see them clearly, and the light from the windows was dim, so I couldn’t tell if one was Jerriel.

My hands tightened into fists. What if I couldn’t recognize him? I tried to remember how I’d described the character. Handsome of course. Large eyes of gleaming, liquid black under straight black brows. Black hair shaved in a slave’s stubble. A mouth with a curved lower lip that softened only for Valdis. Teeth white against the tanned skin of his face. Long legged and lean. He held himself proudly erect in spite of the bruises from the beatings he received from his master, Emris Baker. Except for the hair, that described just about every Erabiri man I’d seen.

More Erabiri came in through the large main doors halfway down the room, kitty-corner from the dais. They lined up in front of the dais, five on either side of the two steps that led up to the dais. They unsheathed their swords and held them vertically in front of their bodies. An honor guard? A moment later two more men entered. Both were tall and slender, wearing black pants and shirts and boots. Both wore swords at their hips. Their hair was long and black, twisted into heavy braids that hung down their backs, but one had wide silver streaks through the black braid, telling me he was older. The other’s braid fell past his waist like a thick black rope.

The older man must be King Rodir. Was the other one Jerriel? My heart rate picked up. How long would it take for a shaved head to grow thirty inches of hair? I squinted to see better, but the light was dim and they were too far away for me to tell. They walked together to the dais, mounted the two steps. Without looking at us clustered in the back of the church, the younger one sat in the chair. The older man stood close beside him.

Which was the king? The one in the chair turned in our direction and made a come here gesture. Two of our guards selected one of us, the secretary I’d spoken to last night, and escorted him to the stage. This took some time since it was half as long as a football field. It gave us plenty of time to worry about what would happen. I dug my fingernails into my thigh, wishing Maya was here. Where was she now? I needed to find her.

The guards made the secretary kneel on the marble floor in front of the chair, bowed, and walked back to us clustered together in the back of the room.

The man in the chair leaned forward and spoke to the secretary. I couldn’t hear what he said. They conversed for about a minute, then the secretary stood up and bowed. The older man on the stage said loudly, “Behold, the mercy of King Rodir of Erabir!”

 The secretary bowed again and went to the main doors and left. A little stir went through the other prisoners around me. Relief?

So, if the guy in the chair was the King, then the older man wasn’t Rodir. He was too old to be Jerriel, so where was Jerriel? Maybe one of the six that stood on the dais behind the throne? One looked young. Like, teenager young. Too young for Jerriel. The relief the other prisoners must have felt passed me by, leaving my stomach in one big knot.

Another prisoner was selected, this time Lord Ulsak. He marched up the marble floor with his head held arrogantly high. When he reached the stage, he didn’t bow or kneel until one of the guards kicked the back of his knee. Then he went sprawling on hands and knees. I almost giggled. Not because it was funny, but because hysteria threatened to take over.

The man in the chair—oh, heck, it was a throne, not a chair—leaned forward and spoke quietly. Lord Ulsak replied. I couldn’t see his face or hear his words, but the angle of his head was haughty. Not the kind of attitude I would take with the king who had just conquered my city.

The king stood up, drawing his sword. He went down one step. The sword gleamed silver as it swept down, then shone red when it came back up. I stared in numb incomprehension as Lord Ulsak’s head fell with a meaty thump.

I had to get out of here before I puked. A quick glance at the door we’d come through sent my heart plummeting to drown in my roiling stomach. The doorway was packed with Erabiri warriors, and another quick glance told me we were surrounded by more. It looked like there was at least one warrior for each Thessian. The other prisoners must have seen the same thing because I heard a low moan go through them. I made myself look back to the front.

The King was wiping his blade on a piece of cloth. He handed the dirty cloth to the teenager and sat again with the bare blade across his knees. Two Erabiri were carrying Lord Ulsak’s body out while another placed the head in a bag. Two of our guards separated one of us, a man I didn’t know, and herded him up to the stage. He dropped to his knees in front of the steps with his head bowed. He might have been trembling, but I couldn’t tell. I would have been shaking like a leaf. In fact, I *was* shaking like a leaf.

This time, the older man announced the king’s mercy and the man left by the main doors. Another was brought before him and had his head removed. It went on like that for a while. Some were released; more were beheaded.

I watched it all with the numbness of disbelief. This was a nightmare, not real. I needed Maya. I needed to find Jerriel. *I needed to wake up at home*, where I could tell Maya all about it and watch her shake her head over my overactive imagination.

The group of prisoners was smaller than it had been an hour ago. The king never looked toward us. He looked bored. Of course, maybe it was only the distance that made his face look unmoved.

That changed when Ilsa, the woman I met last night, was moved up to kneel before the stage. The king looked at her from his throne and his face showed some emotion that I couldn’t interpret.

“A woman?” he said, loudly enough for me to decipher his words. “I don’t make war on women.”

Ha, I thought. Tell that to the women who had been raped.

One of the prisoners’ guards bowed and spoke quietly to the king. A flash of something—Rage? Fear?—crossed the king’s face as he half-stood to stare at us. I was too far away to tell. He gestured violently toward us huddled in the back.

The older man bellowed. “All females come forward!”

I froze in place, really, *really* not wanting to get close to the king and his sword. The guards gave none of us women a choice. I found myself between the baker’s wife and a woman I didn’t know and the three of us walked reluctantly up the room to the stage. I kept my eyes down because I was afraid to look at the king. But that was where the puddles of drying blood were. One might think with all the time I’d spent in hospitals that I would know that blood had a scent. It was a thick, almost sweet, scent that made me want to gag. Or maybe that was the urine and bits of flesh mixed in the pools of blood on the marble. I tried to walk around the blood, but the guards forced us to walk right through it. My thin shoes were already in bad shape, and I barely controlled a shudder when the blood seeped through the worn-out soles and silk sides. When we got to the steps, I hit my knees before any of the guards could force me. The other women, including Ilsa, were also on their knees. Ilsa was crying softly. Terror made me focus on the black booted feet of the king. He had stood from his throne and come down one step. I took a deep breath. I wasn’t a sheep to go to the slaughter without a fight. Besides, I had to somehow scrounge up enough guts to ask about Jerriel. Maya needed me. I licked my lips, trying to force them to stop trembling, put my shoulders back, and looked up.

Way up. The king was young, maybe my own age, and handsome with fierce eyes under a slash of straight black brows staring straight at me. Those eyes, as black as the kohl that outlined them, sent a shudder down my spine. His cheekbones were high and his mouth looked almost too soft for his hard face. His black shirt was unlaced at the throat, showing a portion of his smooth chest. In the V of brown skin lay a teardrop pearl pendant suspended from a gold chain around his neck. My breath stopped as I blinked at the pendant. Unconsciously, my hand crept to my own pearl pendant, a perfect match to his. Of course, the necklace I had worn habitually since I was sixteen was gone, like my real clothes.

My head swam and only my outstretched hand kept my face from hitting the marble step in front of me.

“Jerriel?” I squeaked.