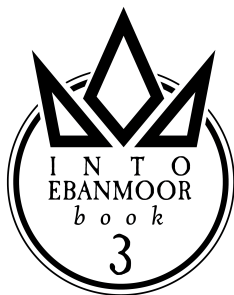


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Rising Loyalties

LOGAN LESHANE



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First edition

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Contents

The Voice.....	11
Switch.....	20
The Girl with Many Names.....	32
Scrapper.....	43
Ellie.....	54
Dev and Clair.....	64
The Binding.....	79
Birthright.....	97
Chess.....	105
The Inauguration.....	118
The Canal.....	130
Corx.....	149
Downly Townly.....	164
Hargon’s Princess.....	174
Unexpected Visitor.....	185
Broken Promise.....	197
The Medallion.....	206
Lord Schall.....	213
The Lord of Bravians.....	230
Secrets.....	238
The King’s Council.....	250
Polybius Square.....	266
The Unraveling.....	278
The Daughter of Kings.....	291
Shady Intentions.....	304
Conspiracy.....	318
The Yellow Feather.....	329
Severed bond.....	341
Appendix A: Definition of Corx Slang.....	358
Appendix B: Corx Cartography.....	360



The Voice

Use your senses.

Jordi shuddered. He didn't want to. His hands were clamped around his head, body rocking back and forth on his heels. The voice echoed from deep within his mind, gentle but commanding.

You need to calm down. Deep breath. In...

His chest expanded as he slowly drew air in through his nose.

Hold...

Jordi closed his eyes and focused on the tightness of his lungs. He pushed away the automatic response in his brain that told him to release the breath sooner, to suck in oxygen so fast he would return to hyperventilating.

Not yet... keep holding.

The demand within him grew stronger. Jordi pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, determined not to give in.

And... out. Slowly! The voice was urgent, then, with effort, became soothing again.

Slowly...

Jordi imagined a straw between his lips, allowing the air to escape in a steady, controlled flow. He felt a bit light-headed.

Good. Again. In...

Jordi practiced the breathing exercise once more, feeling his heart rate begin to slow, the muscles in his chest start to relax. His eyes remained closed.

Very good. Now: use your senses. You can do this.

I can't. I'm-

You can. You just need to focus. Focus, Jordi! Start with something simple. What can you feel?

Jordi uncurled his body tentatively. *It's cold. I'm in an underground cave. There's liquid on my face and hands but it's not water. It feels slippery, like oil. I'm so scared-*

It's okay to be scared. Keep going. Sound. Can you hear anything?

Shaking, he slid his injured hands down the sides of his face, exposing his ears. Immediately Jordi became aware of his own raspy breaths, the uneven gasps exposing how very close he was to succumbing to panic again. He gulped, consciously quieting his breathing in order to listen for any sounds more pertinent to the situation.

Can you hear anything?

I hear... Jordi frowned, concentrating. *It's...* He wasn't sure *what* he was hearing. It was close, almost directly underneath him, in fact. A persistent, muffled noise. Kind of liquid-y, like the squishing of wet shoes.

They were desperate, terrified sounds.

Jordi instinctively covered his ears again, too horrified to listen anymore. The voice became urgent.

He's running out of time, Jordi. You need to focus.

No! No, I can't! Jordi tasted bile as it crawled up his throat towards his mouth. He badly needed to vomit. The voice was unrelenting and insistent.

Stop it! You need to pull yourself together, Jordi. Can you see?

The question startled him. For the briefest moment, Jordi wondered if the Voice was his enemy. The Devoted used this term to describe their ability to hide in plain sight. Almost immediately, though, Jordi dismissed the idea. The Voice was his ally. It was trying to guide him. He reached out frantically.

Help me!

I am helping you, the Voice reassured.

You need to do as I tell you. Open your eyes, Jordi Brown.

His lips began to tremble. *I can't.*

You must.

Please...

OBEY ME!!

Jordi's eyelids flew open, his entire body jerking into an upright position. In a single instant, he saw everything that surrounded him, all the things that had sent him fleeing to the most secluded part of his mind in the first place. Nothing had changed.

The nightmare remained.

The underground cavern was lit by torches hung sporadically in brackets on the rough stone walls, their yellow glow casting eerie shadows around the room. Scattered about were the bodies of the Devoted, killed by the assassin they themselves hired, Blodletta of Corx. She stood before him now, black robes soaked in the blood of the slain, more of

the dark-colored liquid dripping from her sleeves and gathering in pools at her feet. Her attack had been brutal and decisive. Not once had she hesitated as she violently ended the lives of those around her. Blodletta killed without thought or remorse.

Now, however, she stood motionless. Jordi was defenseless against her yet she stayed her hand. There was a clatter of metal against stone as her weapon fell to the floor. The assassin lifted her bloodied hands to push back the dark cowl hiding her face. Jordi stared at her in open-mouthed amazement. He knew this girl.

She was Gatekeeper.

His mysterious rescuer from the Void. Her hazel eyes saw him but the emotionless gaze was without recognition. She looked at him only briefly. Just a flicker of acknowledgment. Then Gatekeeper's attention focused on the body next to Jordi and her features stretched in horror.

Devlin Roysley, Son of Bravians, lay next to Jordi's crouched form. The paralyzed soldier was fully conscious. He was also suffocating. Jael Calinbern, the triad monarch of ancient times, had made good her revenge. She swore to end the life of her treacherous pupil and she had successfully made a toxin to do so.

He's dying, Jordi.

The Voice sounded desperately sad.

Gatekeeper threw herself to the ground next to Dev's motionless form, casting off the bulky, blood-soaked robe. She ignored Jordi completely.

"What do I do?!" The assassin placed her hands on Dev's chest, shaking him. "Tell me what to do!"

She cannot help him. Only you can.

How? Jordi knelt beside the frantic girl. She continued to shake the soldier ineffectually. Jordi hesitated, unsure of what to do. Touching Dev's wrist, he realized the Bravian had no pulse. His heart and lungs were paralyzed. A rising sense of dread was building up within Jordi. The soldier couldn't have much more time.

Save him, Jordi.

"How?!" he shouted into the air, frustrated. His eyes met Dev's fixed gaze and he recoiled, horrified. Jordi saw the terror and despair that mirrored his own panicked emotions. It was exactly how Robin had looked when he, too, succumbed to the toxin's deadly paralyzing effect. Robin had stared into Jordi's eyes right up until the moment Jackson slit his throat, ending his life.

Can you see?

Jordi groaned loudly. It may as well have been *him* who was paralyzed, for all the help he was. Perhaps Clark Roysley had had such thoughts as well, right before Blodletta killed him with a single cut of her knife.

Can you see?

Jordi frowned suddenly.

Jackson.

Blodletta.

Both assassins. Both hired to kill.

Can you see?!

The realization struck him like a lightning bolt. Jordi jumped to his feet, hands rising to his head in shock and disbelief.

The toxin didn't kill them.

The toxin didn't kill them!!

“Move!” Jordi screamed, shoving Gatekeeper off of Dev. She obeyed, scrambling back and standing with her hands clutched together. Jordi brought his face close to that of his friend.

“Dev, listen to me!” Jordi tried to keep his words from tumbling over one another. “You can fight this! Jael knew the toxin wouldn’t be strong enough to kill, so she hired assassins to finish the job!” He prayed the Bravian could hear him. “Focus on the toxin, Dev! Use CHAS to fight it!”

Gatekeeper fell to her knees and cradled the Bravian’s head in her lap. Her features tightened into a resolute frown.

“You can do this, soldier boy!” she commanded pleadingly. “I know you can do this!”

Jordi’s hand was on Dev’s chest, and even through his bandages his injured palm suddenly detected the strong thump of the Bravian’s heart as it gave a single, determined contraction. Relief surged through Jordi as it was followed by a second beat. Then a third. His eyes filled with tears and he nodded at Gatekeeper. The girl exhaled, looking at Dev’s face excitedly.

The Son of Bravians blinked.

“Thank you!” Jordi shouted to no one in particular. He grinned at Dev in anticipation, waiting for the soldier to breathe.

He didn’t.

Gatekeeper frowned. “Why won’t he breathe? What’s wrong?”

Dev made a gurgling sound deep within his throat. He blinked again but otherwise remained still. Jordi cursed under his breath and gave Dev a frustrated shake. As if in response, the Bravian’s right hand twitched slightly. His index finger began tapping against his paralyzed torso. Jordi thought it might be an involuntary tic.

“He’s suffocating!” Gatekeeper exclaimed, her voice rising to a wail. “Do something!”

“What, exactly?!” Jordi demanded heatedly. His eyes moved over the Bravian’s body but Dev was motionless save for the repetitive tic of his finger. Jordi stared at it blankly, trying to block out the awful sounds the soldier was making. Every time his hand moved, the silver ring on Dev’s finger caught the light.

Jordi and Gatekeeper made the connection at the same moment.

They both grabbed for it but Jordi’s hands were too bulky with gauze to complete the task. Gatekeeper was quicker anyway. She pulled the ring off and twisted the setting. A micro-syringe sprang up. The little assassin jabbed it into the side of Dev’s neck without the slightest hesitation.

The effect was instant. Dev’s mouth wrenched open as he sucked in air with a huge gasp. His chest heaved violently, lungs expanding to take in as much oxygen as his body could get. Jordi and Gatekeeper gave him space as the Bravian rolled onto his side, coughing and choking. He was facing away from them when he began to retch, clawing at the ground and groaning in pain. They watched their stricken friend helplessly. Whatever was in that syringe was hurting Dev tremendously.

He is coming.

The hair on the back of Jordi’s neck stood on end. The Voice was alarmed.

He is coming.

Who?

Death. Destruction. Doom.

Gatekeeper knelt beside Dev, massaging his shoulders soothingly. The soldier continued to writhe and twist on the ground, moaning. There was distress in her hazel eyes.

He is coming.

“Who?!” Jordi shouted, spinning to look around the empty room. “Who is coming?!”

The Dark Prince. He is coming. He will awaken.

“Dev?” Gatekeeper recoiled fearfully, staring at him. “Dev, what’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer her. His condition had begun to improve at last, the cries of pain fading into silence. The Son of Bravians rose shakily to his hands and knees. His head was bent towards the ground, obscuring his face. Jordi could hear Dev breathing, the sound raspy and irregular as the soldier struggled to get to his feet. Gatekeeper reached for him. He snarled. Jordi saw the color drain from her face as she backed away, terrified. She bumped into the wall of the cave, trapped. When she spoke, her voice was little more than a whimper.

“Please stop, Dev. You’re scaring me.”

The Son of Bravians attacked her with a suddenness that left Jordi breathless. Gatekeeper had just enough time to throw her hands up defensively before the soldier grabbed her and flung her violently across the room. She hit the far wall with the horrifying sound of bones breaking against granite. Jordi cried out as Gatekeeper dropped to the cavern floor. She groaned weakly, blood already beginning to seep from a deep wound on her shoulder.

Jordi let out a shocked gasp. He had never seen Dev like this before.

“Why did you do that?!” he shouted angrily at the soldier’s back.

Dev turned towards the sound, a terrifying growl emerging from deep within his throat. Jordi’s blood turned to ice.

His friend was unrecognizable. Dev’s features were twisted into an expression of intense rage. His eyes burned with hatred, the irises shimmering a bright yellow.

The Voice in Jordi’s head was a soundless scream.

The Dark Prince has awoken. He is Death. He is Destruction. He is Doom.

“He is Feral,” Jordi muttered, swallowing hard.