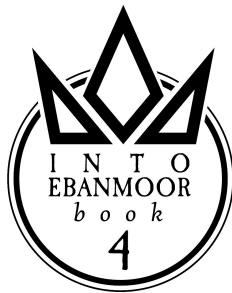


Unlawful Alliances

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Desperate Measures

Jordi stood by the window with his hands behind his back, looking out. This used to be his favorite room. Lady Clair's study was everything one could ever want in a library: sunny, warm, secluded, and crammed with books from floor to ceiling. It was the room Jordi had spent the most time in during his adventure in Ebanmoor. Not that he had been here long. To the contrary, Jordi had only arrived in this strange place a few short weeks ago.

This room, however, was already rich with memories. Intimate chats, cozy evenings curled up with a book, scrumptious meals with his friends. Jordi smiled quietly, remembering. It was in Lady Clair's study he had felt the safest.

His smile faded. There were bad memories, too. The attack of the Feral, Briggs and his unwanted advances towards the princess. Fitz.

Bloody Fitz.

The Hilvanleigh siblings could not have been more different from each other, but they shared one thing in common: they were both incredibly clever. Lady Clair had a thirst for knowledge, often foregoing food and sleep in favor of exploring Hargon's rich history. The Daughter of Kings was steadfast in her determination to learn from the past so that she could give this land's citizens a brighter future. Clair was neither impulsive nor timid, cold-hearted nor soft. Hargon's princess was genuine in her affection for the city and everyone in it.

Fitz was equally as intelligent but his motives were far more sinister. The spiteful heir to the throne was jealous of his sister for her ability to draw support effortlessly. Fitz had been overjoyed when he successfully broke the bond between Clair and Captain Devlin Roysley, the hot-headed, impetuous Son of Bravians.

Jordi was still reeling from the shock. Never in a million years did he think Dev would betray them for the likes of Fitz. The two men hated one another, no question, but for the moment, their ambitions aligned. The crown prince wanted access to the potential wealth of *Tes Ligas*, the ancient training ground of the *Bloodfyre* Bravians. Dev had the expertise to embark on such a venture. His desperation to reach the island was based on the startling realization that Ellie Valmond, bloodline Bravian and his own cousin, may be alive and trapped there.

He understood his friend's pain. He would do anything to bring his brother back. Jeffry's death was an accident; a horrible mix of human error and unforeseen circumstance. Their fingers had brushed as Jeffry fell backwards onto the road, his mouth stretched open in an exclamation of surprise. He hadn't actually made a sound, Jordi realized, thinking about it. After all this time, he never remembered that fact until now. He wondered if eternity would be long enough to cease the endless string of revelations that never let him rest.

Jeffry died without making a sound.

Jordi could not recall a time he felt so empty inside. He had believed that nothing could be as painful as Jeffry's death. How could *any* loss compare to that of his twin brother? Part of Jordi died that day, a piece torn from his flesh and bone that left a gaping, unmendable wound. The overwhelming sense of grief, the aching desire for

his brother that could never be relieved— these were things Jordi thought could not be matched. Surely no other personal loss could compare.

Dev's decision today came close.

It wasn't just the pain of losing his friend. It was knowing Dev willfully turned his back on them. That knowledge felt like a knife buried deep in Jordi's chest. It hurt so bad he could hardly breathe.

Dev had chosen to abandon them. Chose to betray them. The soldier preferred to chase after a ghost rather than remain with the living, breathing people right in front of him. The people who loved him; who desperately wanted him to stay.

The pain was almost too much for Jordi to bear.

Shadow appeared by his side, his soft whine distracting Jordi from his thoughts. The dog was aware of his turmoil and wanted to comfort him. Jordi smiled sadly, running his fingers through the giant animal's thick coat. Faithful Shadow.

He heard Chess enter the room. The burly man cleared his throat.

"We need to get going. It's dangerous to travel in the mountains after dark."

Jordi nodded. He looked around the study, taking in all its details one last time. He didn't believe he would be coming back here. At least not for a long while. Fitz succeeded in driving them out of his city. To stay when the cold-blooded prince was in power was simply not safe. Clair's brother perceived them as a threat. A threat he would be more than happy to squash. Jordi knew Fitz would never stop trying to destroy them and no measures were beneath him. The crown prince of Hargon was heartlessly cruel.

"Where's the princess?" Chess asked, looking around. Jordi motioned towards the closed door of Clair's bedroom.

“Finishing up packing,” he responded. “I’ll go get her.”

His knock went unanswered. Jordi tried the knob and found that it turned easily beneath his touch. Poking his head around the door, he called to the princess softly.

“Are you ready, Clair? Chess says we have to go now.”

The Daughter of Kings was not in her bedroom. Jordi saw the slim form of the princess through the hazy sheen of curtains that separated her room from the balcony. Clair’s back was turned to him. She stood motionless, looking out at the stunning landscape with her hands by her sides. Jordi could read defeat in her drooped shoulders, grief in the limpness of her hands.

“It’s over, Jordi. We’ve lost.”

Those were the final words Clair had spoken to him before leaving the throne room. Her green eyes had been filled with anguish. She gave the Son of Bravians one final, pleading look before walking from the room, devastated.

Jordi noticed that the princess had changed her clothing. Usually Clair wore soft, flowing gowns in a variety of pastel colors. She had exchanged these for a more travel-friendly ensemble of pants and shirt. Jordi had never seen her wear clothes like these before. They reminded him more of the durable, practical uniforms of the Bravians than the visually pleasing outfits she customarily wore. The pants were black and made of hardy material designed for strenuous activity. A warm, button-up flannel was tucked into her trousers. These were held up by a sturdy belt. Ellie Valmond’s Bravian blade was attached to her thigh.

Jordi wondered what kind of journey they were going on. Lady Clair’s wardrobe suggested she

intended to embark on some seriously hard-core adventure.

“Clair?” Jordi called gently, startling her from her thoughts. She turned to look at him as he joined her on the balcony. “Chess is ready for us.”

The princess’ gaze moved back towards the faraway mountains.

“I’m not coming with you, Jordi.”

His heart dropped into his stomach.

“What do you mean?” he demanded. Clair’s features hardened with resolution.

“I can’t let Fitz take the Amberspitch,” she said. “Once it is placed in the Iron Arch it cannot be retrieved. You and I both know the chances of the machine working are slim to none. I have to stop them from wasting it. The Amberspitch that you brought from your world is all we have left in the Four Lands. Dev and Chess rely on it. Fitz must not be allowed to use it for a ludicrous scheme that is bound to fail.”

Jordi agreed with everything the princess said but he was unsure what she intended to do about it. Their situation seemed pretty hopeless.

“How will you stop them?” he asked skeptically. “You won’t be able to talk them out of it, Clair. We already tried.”

“I know,” she responded quietly. Her eyes moved over the snow-capped peaks on the horizon. “They cannot be reasoned with. We have exhausted all legal options, which is why I’ll be doing this alone. I can’t ask for assistance in breaking the law.”

Jordi’s breath caught in his throat.

“What do you intend to do?”

Lady Clair looked at him, mouth drawn into a determined line. “I’m going to steal it from the vault. It’s the only way to keep it safe.”

“Are you crazy?!” Jordi exclaimed, gobsmacked. “How in the world are you going to do that? Dev will never let you *near* that vault! He probably won’t even let you in the academy!”

“When we were looking for Clark’s medallion,” the princess explained, “Dev mentioned the vault specifically. He inadvertently revealed something to me. There’s something I know about the vault that he doesn’t.”

Jordi stared. “And that is?”

Lady Clair almost smiled. “There’s another way in.”

A chill breeze swept over them, coming straight off the top of the mountains. Jordi shivered violently.

“I don’t like this,” he told her gravely. “It’s too dangerous, Clair! Even if you manage to get the Amberspitch, what can you do with it? Hiding it won’t work. Dev will use his freaky mind-reading skills to figure out where it is! Fitz would probably torture you for it! Either one of them would be willing to cross the line to follow through with their plan.”

The princess gripped Jordi’s arm reassuringly. “I am aware of all of this, dear friend. I assure you, I will act as discreetly as I can. If I work quickly, they won’t immediately know the Amberspitch has been taken, and once they find out, they will follow you and Chess into the mountains. That buys me a lot of time.”

“To go where?!” Jordi was not placated. “Where in the Four Lands could you possibly go, Clair, that they can’t find you and bring you back?!”

“My father,” the Daughter of Kings said firmly. “I will bring it to my father, and then it will be out of Fitz’ control. The King will never support his absurd plan and that will be the end of the matter!”

Jordi hesitated, trying to produce more obstacles. It wasn't a terrible idea.

"How... how will you get to your father?" he asked feebly, gesturing. "Isn't he really far away? Won't you have to cross enemy lines just to get to him?"

Lady Clair smiled, amused by Jordi's attempts to dissuade her.

"I never said it would be easy," she said, her pretty face flushed with emotion. "It is my only option, however. I swore an oath to my father's council that I would not abandon them in this, our darkest hour. I will do everything in my power to protect this city and the interests of the King, regardless of difficulty."

And legality, Jordi thought anxiously. As much as he hated Fitz and Dev using the Amberspitch on a fool's errand, he hated Clair's idea more. The very thought of her wandering alone in the Northland sent a chill down his spine. He looked at her suspiciously.

"You were never planning on going to the mountains, were you?"

Clair shook her head.

"No."

That explained why the princess hadn't fought harder in the throne room. Jordi had been surprised at how quickly Clair had given up.

He sighed. So much for going somewhere safe.

"I'm coming with you," he told her firmly.

Clair laughed, astonished. "Absolutely not!"

"You can't stop me!" Jordi snapped at her. "If you try, I'll blab all your plans to everyone! You'll be beat before you even start!"

"Jordi, it's illegal!" The princess lowered her voice as she said the last word, as if just *saying* it repulsed her. "If I am caught I could be put to death!"

“Great!” he retorted sarcastically. “When do we go?”

“I need you to act as my decoy,” Clair said, speaking in a persuasive tone. “That is enough help!”

Jordi shrugged. “I guess Chess is going to have a long, lonely trip, because I’m not going with him.”

“The blazes are the two of you arguing over?!” Chess demanded, marching onto the balcony. From the look on his face, Jordi could tell the retired soldier had heard at least some of their conversation. “What do you mean you’re not coming?! You want to stay with Fitz and his knuckle-headed sidekick?”

Jordi wasn’t sure if Chess was referring to Briggs, or *Dev*.

“Not exactly,” Clair said gently. She filled the barrel-chested man in on her plan. Chess listened with rising alarm.

“Have ye lost yer mind!?” he thundered, reverting to a foreign accent he tended to use when particularly upset about something. “I’ll not be allowing ye to do it, let’s get that right!”

The princess drew herself up proudly.

“How will you stop me?” she demanded. “You are no longer a Bravian. I don’t have to obey your orders. If you tell anyone, I’ll be arrested and probably executed, so I know you won’t do that. Also,” Clair continued, ignoring the man’s splutter of objections, “I need you to take Jordi somewhere safe. I promised to protect him, and I intend to follow through!”

“Crap sake!” Jordi exclaimed, rolling his eyes. “Get off your high horse, princess! We’re not about to let you do this alone, so stop wasting everyone’s time!”

“Wait...” Chess frowned anxiously. “That’s not-”

“You’re going to need us, Clair,” Jordi said, cutting his friend off. “A battle-hardened soldier like Chess will keep you safe in the Northland, and my charm and intellect will help us avoid suspicion.”

The princess suppressed a laugh. She gave Jordi a reproachful yet affectionate look.

“I cannot ask you to do this,” Clair warned.

“You don’t have to,” Jordi responded. They turned to Chess. The retired soldier studied them silently, his eyes filled with dread.

“We’re doing this,” he muttered to himself in disbelief. “May the ancients protect us, we’re doing this.”