

Of Fire and Stars by Audrey Coulthurst

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

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DEDICATION *For the members of the Austin Java Writing Company*— Thank you for lighting the fire under my **ass** that made this book possible. You will always be among the brightest stars in my universe.

“My lady, please don’t cause a scene. I know you’re upset about the horse, but we can sort it out tomorrow. And you’ll have your choice of horses in Sonnenborne after we wed,” Lord Kriantz said. “I don’t want a desert horse. I want my horse,” I said. “This will soothe your nerves, my lady,” he said, and pressed a glass of wine into my hand and stepped over to take my other arm. “Let’s talk about this later.” “There isn’t going to be a later,” I said. “I’ve changed my mind. I won’t marry you. Call it off.” I shook free of him and stalked toward my brother, who was deep in conversation with the Count of Nax. Thandi saw me coming and turned his back. If he wanted to play it that way, I could join his game. I pitched the full glass of wine at him. Wine and glass shards exploded over his feet, bringing the conversation to a sudden halt. “What in the Six **Hells!**” Thandi jumped back, glass crunching beneath the soles of his boots. The crowd hushed around us, faces aghast. I smiled. “Your Majesty,” I began. “In case you forgot, I’m your sister, not some brood- mare you can send off on a trading string. If selling my horse is your idea of a pun- ishment, you can shove your plans up your royal **ass**. This is over. I’m done with war, I’m done with Lord Kriantz, and I am especially done with you.” I stared him down, every muscle in my body taut. “If you’d done what was asked of you from the beginning, we wouldn’t be here now, Amaranthine,” he said, his voice level. “Is that so? I happen to believe that everyone is a player in this game. I’m not taking responsibility for your failures. So if you want to wage war on a kingdom that you have no evidence actually did anything, enjoy that. I’m leaving. You can dig your grave by yourself.” I turned on my heel and shoved through the crowd. They quickly parted before me—all but one.

“This isn’t a game! You’re the one ignoring important evidence in favor of sit- ting on your **ass**, mumbling unsubstantiated expla- nations with the rest of those morons on the Directorate!”

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Nils tensed at the slang word for liegemen, and I put a steadying hand on his arm. “Those magic-lovers ain’t that hard to catch,” a woman said. “They all have that same slippery look about ’em. And white paint on their hands.” “Hear, hear!” someone else said, and swung his mug of ale through the air, splattering half the others at the table. “Caught one walking down my street just yesterday,” the bearded man said. “He tried to scare me off with a handful of sparks. Made sure he’ll think twice about doing that again.” The whole group chuckled in an unfriendly way that made me edge closer to Nils. The woman next to me whirled toward the bearded man and drew a serrated knife from her belt. “I’ve been looking for you,” she growled, and plunged the knife through his hand. The man shrieked like an animal. Not only was his hand was pinioned to the grimy bar, but the flesh around the blade began to smoke as the knife grew white-hot. I stared, frozen in horror. Sure, I’d heard of magic, but I’d never seen it used like this before. “Magic-loving bitch!” someone shouted. The fundamentalists overturned their table, but the woman apparently had allies throughout the room who leaped up to meet them. Fists flew. I stumbled back into Nils, fear making my stomach drop. “You killed my husband, and I hope you burn in the Sixth Hell,” the woman said to the man she’d stabbed. She turned toward me and I caught a glimpse of bloodshot eyes and short, sandy hair before Nils yanked me from the fray and out a side door into a filthy alley. I dashed for the road, dismayed that we’d chosen not to ride. Horses like ours would have likely been stolen from the hitching rail outside the Pelham before our drinks were even served, but having them would have made for a faster escape.

“Well, you’re the first person here to acknowledge that,” I muttered. Gratitude welled up—stupid, foolish gratitude that she recognized something so important. It felt good to be seen. “Can you do this? Please? I know you don’t owe me anything, but this might help catch the bastards who killed Cas and tried to kill my father.” I couldn’t decide what to do. I wanted to help because it was my duty to My-naria, and because she was asking me to use the skills I’d been so frustrated that Thandi and the Directorate had not yet taken advantage of. She was also handing me the perfect excuse to research my own magic. But it was a risky thing she asked of me. Too risky. “I care about my family,” she continued. “They may be

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dim-witted sometimes, but they're still my family. And this is my kingdom. And I won't have some **bitch** queen tormenting us from afar and playing with us like pawns." "Well, what do you know about the blade?" I asked, curious in spite of my fear. "Before Captain Ryka took it from me, I noticed there wasn't any crest on it. The metal was very bright, maybe even silver. It had a white pommel nut—does that seem Zumordan to you?" "I don't know. Their pennants are white, but that isn't enough evidence to accuse them of attempted assassination," I said. "Captain Ryka mentioned their crest but didn't say anything about the pennants. See, you already know things that might help," Amaranthine said. "Don't you think researching magic could be problematic?" I asked. "There isn't likely to be much information here, and given that magic use is treason—" "It's a little risky, yes," she admitted. "But if it helps us figure out who is behind this, I don't care. Some things I've seen in town make me unsure whether magic itself is the problem. It's whoever is using it against my family." I still hesitated, but a spark of hope came alive in my chest. She didn't hate magic users unquestioningly. Maybe she wouldn't despise me if she knew the truth. And helping her would allow me to look into my own abilities.

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I CAME TO WITH THE RHYTHM OF HOOFBEATS pounding into my head. Gritty floorboards pressed against my cheek, boots barely visible in front of me in the near dark. I tried to reach for the bench above me with numb hands, only to find my wrists snugly bound. All I could do was roll onto my back. Above me, Lord Kriantz looked on with an implacable expression. “Ah, you’re awake,” he said. “The journey to Sonnenborne will be more comfortable that way.” “You bastard,” I whispered. He’d

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killed Nils. I tried to channel my pain into anger, into something that I could use. I kicked out with my bound feet, hoping to burst open the carriage door, but one of his two men put his blade to my shins.

My body trembled with the force of my rage and sorrow, my head throbbing. Denna had seen everything so much more clearly than me. I should have trusted her. I should have stayed by her side even if it broke my heart. "I hoped it wouldn't come to this," he said. He spoke with no malice, only the eerie calm of someone with an objective and no regard for anything standing in his way. "What do you even want from me?" I fought my bindings in frustration, wishing I could sit up and have the conversation with him eye to eye. We were supposed to be equals. We had been, until I'd compromised his plan. The soldier sitting alongside him raised an eyebrow and a blade, but Lord Kri- antz waved him off. I posed no threat in my state. "Well, it's not exactly you that I want, though I would have been happy for us to have a partnership. Thandi underestimates you, I think. Perhaps in time you will agree with me that an alliance between our kingdoms is for the best in spite of the means."

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“You’re joking.” If having her help me get the knife back was a bad idea, taking her into the city where she could be injured, kidnapped, or killed was a thousand times worse. Getting drunk and swimming naked in the horse pasture pond in broad daylight had less potential for disaster. “Not in the slightest.” “But why?” “If I’m to be queen someday, I should see the city from the perspective of its people. I should try to understand them so that I may rule more wisely.” Her reasoning sounded questionable to me. But damn it all, I needed to find out who had tried to kill my father. “It’s not safe. What if someone recognizes you?” “How could they?” she countered. “I haven’t left the palace grounds since Cas-miel’s death. We didn’t do a cresthaven tour or even a formal introduction due to the safety concerns. There’s no way the king would let me out of here.” “Which also makes it even more difficult to sneak you out.” “We’ll come up with a disguise of some sort. Please? I’ll do anything you want,” she begged. “Let me think about it,” I said. “There’s no time to think about it,” she said. “This is the first lead we have. It should be pursued right away.” She was right. But sneaking her into town was a terrible idea. Still, I was a tiny bit intrigued by the challenge of getting her outside the walls. “All right. We can talk through the details after your riding lesson this afternoon. I have to get back to my rooms for a fitting.” I made a face. “Yes!” She clasped her hands together and bounced on her toes with a brilliant smile. “So, um, how was your day?” I finally asked. “Oh, you know, the usual. Got drunk on cheap ale down in Lyrra. Growled at a few children. Kicked a few puppies.” She pulled off her hat, letting her braid tumble down her back. “You did not!” I giggled. “Well, it’s about a quarter true,” she said, her eyes sparkling with merriment. “I did spend the day down in the cresthaven, and Nils and I did go to one of the more unsavory pubs we frequent, since we haven’t had much luck at the Deaf Dog. Though I’m not sure how much longer we can keep going to the Pelham. The streets feel dangerous now.” “Tell me what the Pelham is like,” I said. It honestly didn’t matter, but the sound of her musical voice was so welcome to my ears that I could have listened to her read the treasury inventory of all four Northern Kingdoms. Happily. We sat side by side on my chaise. “It’s dark,” she said. “The kind of place where you don’t want to eat anything you drop on the table. And pretty much everyone in there looks like they’d take the food

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right off your plate if you don't keep an eye on 'em. The ale is cheap but goes down easy. Most of the serving girls are missing a few teeth and don't look like they've ever found use for a hairbrush." "Mmm," I said. I plucked a sprig of arborvitae from the sleeve of her black shirt and twirled it between my fingers. As I tossed it into the fire, my magic rose unbid- den to incinerate it right before it hit the flames. I sat back quickly, but Mare didn't seem to notice. "What's troubling is that information is harder to come by now. In spite of so many Recusants having been rounded up, they seem to keep appearing, and the violence against them keeps increasing. They've left what used to be their meeting place, and no one has any leads.

We mounted up and headed into the hills behind the castle. The air couldn't seem to decide if it wanted to be still or in motion, and every few minutes a cool gust blew raindrops off the trees into our hair. I sat tall in the saddle, still so proud to have my first horse after years of riding naughty ponies. Cinnamon wasn't a warhorse and I hadn't trained him myself, but he was a beautiful roan palfrey with floating gaits. Nothing gave me more satisfaction than being able to look down on my little brother and his pony from these new heights, or telling him to back off be- cause Cinnamon had the temperament of an angry drunk when it came to other horses. We rode under the budding trees down a barely visible trail to a secret gate. Mother had told me my father and brother had secrets too, but I couldn't imagine theirs were nearly as exciting. Did they leave the castle? Had they tasted the sum- mer corn at Cataphract Square, blackened and coated in cheese and spices? Had they earned a hundred coins as musicians or played quat with friendly strangers in the pubs? Did they know where Mother and I went, or that we went at all? The hidden gate opened onto a narrow cobbled lane that Mother and I followed into the city. Drops of water clung to every spring leaf and every tight bud, the sun making them glitter like a thousand tiny mirrors. Deep in the merchants' district, we rode into a small, quiet courtyard hidden from the bustling streets and busy shops. Planters bursting with greenery surrounded us on all sides, giving it the feeling of a garden in spite of the bricks under our feet and the buildings on all sides. We tied our horses in the simple run-in stalls, loosening their girths and tossing some hay into their shared manger. "Let's go." My mother beckoned me into a servants' tunnel and through a se- cret door. Inside, we changed our clothes—

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me into a plain peasant dress with flowers stitched untidily along the hem, and my mother into short breeches and a tunic with sleeves gathered to the elbows.

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She shook her head. “You know how it is down here. There’s always **shit** to shovel.” “Keep it off your boots!” he said with a laugh, and touched her shoulder fondly. On our way back to the castle, I mumbled a prayer to the wind god, hoping that studying Directorate business would help me forget my utter ineptitude in the saddle. Casmiel’s study was even lovelier than I expected. Bookcases lined the walls on either side of his desk, with greenery interspersed among the multicolored spines of the volumes. A small set of the wind god’s chimes jingled softly in one of the windows, and the crystals hanging below the clappers cast shards of light all through the room. “Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to a circle of heavy leather chairs. He sat across from me once I had selected my own, a strategic position designed to put us on even footing for the conversation to come. In spite of his blithe nature, I could tell that Casmiel should never be underestimated. “Thank you,” I said as he handed me a tall glass of pale tea served over crushed ice with a sprig of mint sticking out of the top. It smelled herbal and vibrant, green as spring. “How do you feel things are going so far?” he asked. “All right. The riding lessons will be challenging.” Or rather, my instructor would. “The breakfasts have been nice, but the conversations have mostly been about parties and fashion. I’d love to learn more about issues important to the crown as well.” “The other nobles may try to distract you with tea parties and frippery,” Casmiel said. “You will have to earn your place here. Show my brother, Thandi, and the Directorate that your voice is to be trusted. Queen Mirianna was more than a figurehead and an entertainer. She was the conscience of the king. His anchor. May she rest with the Six.” He made a fist and placed it over his heart.

Every shadow seemed to reach for me with dark fingers, and I shuddered as I passed the outline of a white circle on the side of a building, barely visible in the dim lamplight. I crept through backyards until I found what I’d hoped for—an ornate metal trellis that climbed all the way to the top of a house. I latched on before I could lose my nerve. The tang of iron and the green scent of crushed cypress leaves tingled in my nose as I scaled the trellis, the metal biting into my hands. My arms ached by the time I reached the roof. I pressed myself flat against the stone tiles and crawled carefully to the peak for a better view. A cohort of at least a hundred liegemen stood at attention in front of the main gates of the castle. Onlookers

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hung back closer to the city streets, wary of the steel that glinted in the liegemen's hands. Far below me, pinpoints of light sparked in the darkness as sets of vigil candles were lit. Each grouping of six candles drew a small cluster of people. Fools. Vigils provided nothing but bruised knees. Praying to the Six wouldn't bring back the dead. Having lost my mother, I knew that better than anyone. The wide swath of open ground between the city folk and the liegemen scared me. A royal death alone wasn't reason to keep mourners at such a distance. Foul play must have been involved in whatever had befallen my family.

Alone and un-armed outside the castle walls, I'd be an appealing second target. Then again, trying to sneak past that many liegemen was just as likely to end in death. All my options lay somewhere between shit and manure. I made my way back down the trellis, relieved when my boots finally hit solid ground. A slightly discordant hymn drifted through the streets as I hurried toward a side entrance to the castle wall. Unsurprisingly, the way was blocked. Four liegemen stood guard over the lone door, torchlight filtering between the iron bars behind them. I let the shadows of the buildings swallow me as I sneaked closer to the entrance. Street traffic was so light and intermittent it couldn't be used as cover. Perhaps I could sneak in with a delivery. Or if I could get close enough to— "Heya!" A pair of hands grabbed me from behind, shoving me out into the light.

Chain mail jingled as the liegeman walked past. It was time. The whole plan hinged on us making it to the door of the captain's ready room and managing to break in during the brief period when the guard was around the corner. I stepped out from behind the armor. "Heya!" the liegeman shouted, turning with his halberd at the ready. Shit. The liegeman chuckled as I emerged into the dim lamplight—one of the least friendly sounds I'd ever heard. "What are you doing here, *Your Highness*?" he asked, dropping his guard. "Slumming for some fresh liegeman meat?" He waved his halberd suggestively. It figured that I'd run into Jox—the only liegeman cocky and stupid enough to talk down to a member of the royal family. One day I'd get him dismissed in a way that ensured he wouldn't bother anyone else. "Yes, Jox. Obviously. That's why I'm here. Because I can't stop thinking about you." I paced past him, trying to lure him farther away from Denna. I hoped she had the common sense to take advantage of the opportunity and run. We could re-group and get the knife another time. "Maybe you're smarter than the rumors say,"

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Jox said, completely missing my sarcasm. “Though those trousers make you look like one of us. You should try skirts sometime. They’re easier for a man to get into.” “Sartorial advice from a liegeman,” I said. “Now I’ve heard it all.” “Let me show you what a real man is,” Jox said. “I’ll be off my shift in a quarter of a sunlength, but I could leave a few minutes early.” His predatory gaze made me wish I had a better weapon than the bent hairpin clutched between my fingers. Gods, I hoped Denna had escaped. I risked a glance over Jox’s shoulder and barely held back an entire rainbow of curses. Behind him, Denna inched her way along the wall, heading for the door of the captain’s ready room. If she made the slightest noise, he’d turn and catch her. I did the only thing I could think of— leaned back into the nearest suit of rusted armor and knocked the whole thing to

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“I figured. Come on in.” I beckoned him into my receiving room, relishing the fact that my father would fall over dead if he knew. Having men in and out of my chambers at odd times of the night was an infraction that even Cas couldn’t have overlooked, and Nils and I had been making a habit of it for ages. The liegemen at the door exchanged nods with Nils, an acknowledgment of all the blackmail material they had on one another. Our secret was safe with them. Once we were inside, Nils stepped forward and enfolded me in a tight hug. I let myself get lost in it for a minute, his familiar embrace easing the endless stab of grief. “I’m so glad to see you,” I said. Long shadows danced throughout my receiving room, cast by the vigil candles my maid had lit in the window for Cas. “How was the Directorate?” he asked softly. “A disaster. They couldn’t even settle on a plan for the investigation.” Idiots. I summarized the meeting for him, adding some profanity-laced commentary. Nils sighed. “Why am I not surprised?” “I still can’t believe he’s gone,” I said. As angry as I was with the Directorate, the weight of Cas’s loss was stronger. “I’m so sorry, Mare. He was a good man,” Nils said. “Any theories on who did it?” “No. And what bothers me even more is that I can’t figure out *why*.” I studied his warm brown eyes as if they might hold an answer. “Not even one? You’re usually the queen of conspiracy theories.” “The only person out there who even smells like trouble is the queen of Zumorda, and she’s been reigning quietly for years without showing any sign of interest in us. The ambassador from Sonnenborne seems eager to collaborate, and he has enough tribes under his banner that he might as well be king of that godsforsaken desert. With Sonnenborne and Havemont as allies, we have Zumorda surrounded on its northern, western, and southern borders.

Denna laughed. “I’m glad you’re with me instead.” She tightened her arms. “Me too,” I said, lifting a gloved hand to squeeze her arm in return. Strangely enough, I was even a little bit glad to be doing something important for my kingdom. After years of being pushed to the sidelines by my father, who had only expected me to marry and run an estate somewhere, I’d managed to convince my brother to send me, the least diplomatic person in our kingdom, to lay the groundwork for an alliance. If we couldn’t get Zumorda to work with us, war breaking out with Sonnenborne on our southern borders was

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all but inevitable. Somehow I had to convince the Zumordan queen that Sonnenborne posed a threat to both our kingdoms. They'd assassinated my father and uncle, using magical means to throw suspicion on Zumorda. If I could just open a dialogue with the queen, then Thandi could send in the real ambassadors and I'd be free to focus on helping Denna find someone to educate her about how to use the magic she'd been hiding all her life. Getting it under control was our only hope of being able to have a normal life together, especially if we wanted to live in Mynaria, where those with magic were often punished or exiled. Even if my brother's reign helped make magic use more acceptable, attitudes would be slow to change. Still, I questioned whether I was up to the task of engaging foreign queens and nobles. My rank as princess made me worthy of the assignment, but my background wasn't exactly in diplomacy—it was in training horses, sneaking out of the castle to spy in the city, and drinking cheap ale in seedy pubs. Moreover, Mynarians hardly ever went to Zumorda. The kingdom was full of magic users with the very powers we'd condemned—Affinities for fire, air, earth, water, and gods knew what else. “We should be getting close to Duvey now,” Denna said. “The trees are thinning, and the border guards seemed to think we'd reach it by sundown.” “The trees aren't just thinning—they look like they're mostly dead,” I observed. Skeletons of evergreens stood everywhere amidst the live trees.

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I frowned. That had not been part of the terms of the alliance. Most magic users were from the eastern kingdom of Zumorda. They had no temples of their own, as they did not believe in the Six Gods—only the power of magic—but they considered the High Adytum a place of pilgrimage for their middle-of-summer rituals. In Havemont, the Zumordans and other magic users had always come and gone in peace. “Defacing buildings with their symbol or burning them down outright is plenty of cause for concern, if you ask me,” Hilara said. “It’s to be expected from a bunch of magic-loving traitors,” the king growled, mopping bits of caviar from his mustache. “We’ll purge them from both kingdoms in time.” The metal of my fork grew so hot in my hand that I dropped it on the table. I was shocked. No one had ever told me that my marriage meant magic users were unwelcome not only in Mynaria, but in my homeland as well. If an official ban came to pass, strife would undoubtedly follow. “Protecting our citizens comes first, of course,” Casmiel said. “But we must proceed carefully in accordance with the law to keep people happy with the leadership. We wouldn’t want to compromise the fondness your people have for you, Your Majesty.” “Of course not,” the king said, mollified by Casmiel’s reasoning. “But if the Recusants are responsible for violence in the city, we should round them up and punish them now before they become a bigger problem,” Thandilimon said. “We can’t have them threatening the safety of the kingdom.” “The antimagic fundamentalists are responsible for most of the outright violence,” said Captain Ryka. Her tone suggested she was the sort of person with little patience for anything but facts. “This all would have been avoided if we had set up an alliance with Zumorda by now,” Hilara said, clearly enjoying the quarrel she’d stirred up. “We can’t ally with a kingdom run by heretics.” The king waved his knife to emphasize his words.

“Clearly the best response to something you don’t understand is to attack it,” Amaranthine said, her sarcasm sharp enough to cut. I clutched my hands tightly around my cool glass, desperate to hold in my magic and not to reveal any anger or fear. The king and the Directorate clearly not only hated magic users, but also planned to persecute them based on the consummation of the alliance. I had to try to smooth things over until I could find out more. “Perhaps there is another way to placate these Recusants and prevent further violence?” I offered. “Few of them would make it to the High Adytum in their life-

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times. Perhaps it's a matter of finding them a new place of worship locally." Casmiel nodded thoughtfully. "But they're apostates," Thandilimon said. "The crown can't risk looking like we support a group of heretic magic users." "Of course not," I agreed. "It's crucial to find a solution that satisfies both sides and lessens the backlash from the fundamentalists. Perhaps it would help to learn more about what each group wants?" "True," Thandilimon said. "It couldn't hurt to gather more information." Hilara frowned, no doubt irritated that she couldn't find fault with my suggestion. "Princess Dennaleia has a good point," Casmiel said. "It hasn't been easy to track down the Recusants, though. No one is eager to trade information pertaining to magic." Amaranthine looked at Casmiel keenly then. "Maybe if my afternoons were free, I'd be able to help—" "You have lessons to teach," the king cut her off. "This is the last I want to hear of you trying to get out of it." I winced as she slumped back in her chair. We barely knew each other and she already hated me. I had to change that. If I couldn't win over another princess, it would be preposterous to consider myself worthy of a queen's crown.

She pulled up the rope and closed my shutters, and then we stared at each other for a moment that stretched out until I knew my cheeks burned as scarlet as the red silk covers on my bed. "So, um, how was your day?" I finally asked. "Oh, you know, the usual. Got drunk on cheap ale down in Lyrra. Growled at a few children. Kicked a few puppies." She pulled off her hat, letting her braid tumble down her back. "You did not!" I giggled. "Well, it's about a quarter true," she said, her eyes sparkling with merriment. "I did spend the day down in the cresthaven, and Nils and I did go to one of the more unsavory pubs we frequent, since we haven't had much luck at the Deaf Dog. Though I'm not sure how much longer we can keep going to the Pelham. The streets feel dangerous now." "Tell me what the Pelham is like," I said. It honestly didn't matter, but the sound of her musical voice was so welcome to my ears that I could have listened to her read the treasury inventory of all four Northern Kingdoms. Happily. We sat side by side on my chaise. "It's dark," she said. "The kind of place where you don't want to eat anything you drop on the table. And pretty much everyone in there looks like they'd take the food right off your plate if you don't keep an eye on 'em. The ale is cheap but goes down easy. Most of the serving girls are missing a few teeth and don't look like they've ever found use for a hairbrush." "Mmm,"

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I said. I plucked a sprig of arborvitae from the sleeve of her black shirt and twirled it between my fingers. As I tossed it into the fire, my magic rose unbid- den to incinerate it right before it hit the flames. I sat back quickly, but Mare didn't seem to notice. "What's troubling is that information is harder to come by now. In spite of so many Recusants having been rounded up, they seem to keep appearing, and the violence against them keeps increasing. They've left what used to be their meeting place, and no one has any leads.

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My father lifted his glass and tapped his fork against it in six ringing tones. “I would like to give thanks to the Six Gods for the safe arrival of our guest, Princess Dennaleia of Havemont, and for the bounty of the feast we have enjoyed in her honor. We welcome her to our kingdom and look forward to riding with her by our side. May the Six bless the crown and those who serve.” As the hall rang with blessings, I raised my glass and took a small sip of wine, studying the princess. Her glass aloft and head held high, she showed no sign of her earlier trauma. The flickering light of a wall sconce warmed her pale skin. Long, loose curls draped over her back, almost black against the burgundy evening dress that swept below her shoulder blades. I briefly entertained the idea of making her clean stalls, relishing the thought of what manure would do to the hemline of a gown like that. Her ignorance about horses might have been amusing if she weren’t now my problem. I downed the rest of my cup and poured myself a refill. “How do you like the wine tonight?” the man beside me said. His white doublet was of an unusual cut and he wore a thin gold band on the fifth finger of his left hand. He had to be the ambassador from Sonnenborne—the closest thing that kingdom had to a ruler since he’d managed to unite several of its nomadic tribes under his banner. Though he had arrived a moon or two ago, I had not spoken to him before. “It’s fine,” I replied, taking another hearty swig. What he didn’t know was that I’d been taught to **drink** at the common alehouses in town. I was in little danger of being swayed by any charm he possessed, even with the help of alcohol. “The new princess is lovely, is she not?” “Of course.” I smirked. “More a princess than I’ll ever be.” “You know that’s not true, Princess Amaranthine.” He spoke with kindness, not knowing how irritating I found his choice of words. “I hate that name,” I muttered.

MY SCHEDULE FINALLY LINED UP WITH NILS’S A FEW weeks after Cas’s funeral, so we escaped the castle and headed for the Pelham. There wasn’t much time between Dennaleia’s afternoon lesson and a stupid music performance later in the evening, but it was better than nothing. The city had changed since my last time out. Merchants kept their windows shuttered, and strangers on the street avoided eye contact. Every other building seemed to be tagged with the white circle of the Recusants. Some had black slash- es through them—the mark of the fundamentalists who opposed them. Upon arrival at the pub, we shoved our way into a secluded booth away from the cluttered tables near the bar, hoping to avoid any

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fighters. I slapped a coin down on the table that a mostly toothless barmaid soon replaced with two battered mugs of ale. Nils made a face after his first sip. “This stuff tastes like horse piss, as always.” “I don’t want to know how you came up with the basis for that comparison,” I said. The ale didn’t taste that bad—it had an uncomplicated zing to it that was perfect for a blazing-hot summer day, and the Pelham had a deep enough cellar that it was served remarkably cold. “So what’s the plan?” Nils asked. “Watch.

Wait. Drink your damn pint,” I said. Hopefully some answers would come our way if we kept our ears open, but mostly I was glad to be out. Between paranoid courtiers and extra guards everywhere, I’d had enough of the incessant itch of eyes on my back. “And what do you plan to do with the information we glean? Have you thought any more about talking to your father or brother?” I shook my head. “Only if I discover something compelling enough.” “This is about more than Cas, Mare. It’s a chance to get leverage with them that might help you later.” He nudged my foot under the table.

I knew it was all part of the plan, but the man still made me nervous. Maybe people on the street wouldn’t recognize me, but surely a spy might. I gulped more of my drink, hoping to calm my nerves. “What type of weaponry do you seek?” the informant asked. “Blades,” Mare said. “Zumordan. Or custom, if you can’t manage that.” He placed his fingers on the edge of the table, and Mare and Nils exchanged a glance. “The food is good,” Nils said. “For custom blades, try Morland at the Cataphract Square Market. He’s the best in the business—even the captain of the Mynarian Guard goes to him.” The informant hesitated, almost as if he was reluctant to part with the rest of his information. “Go to the Aerie at the Blitz for things related to the dragon. You’ll find the entrance marked with a bluebird, and the pass code is ‘etheria.’ It will only work once, and only today. Don’t test those limits.” We nodded our understanding, and the informant departed. Pass codes and dragons and the Blitz—the Mynarian black market. What had I gotten myself into? I put back the rest of my beer to quell my fears. “So Captain Ryka makes a habit of ordering custom blades,” I noted. “Clearly she had nothing to do with what happened to Casmiel . . . but could she somehow be involved with the attempt on the king?” Mare considered the idea. “She was one of the quickest to blame Zumorda for the attacks in that first Directorate meeting.” Nils frowned. “Captain Ryka has served our kingdom reliably for years. What would she gain

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by framing Zumorda and weakening the crown?” “I don’t know, but you have to admit security has been awfully easy to get around, even with the reserves pulled in,” I said. Nils snorted. “That’s because half those idiots can hardly hold a sword.” “What about Hilara?” I asked. “She seems . . . friendly with the Zumordans. Could they be conspiring?” Nils and Mare both frowned.

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“Yes, Your Highness.” The senior liegeman gestured for the others to lower their swords and begin escorting everyone to safety. The room slowly emptied of people, some hurrying away as quickly as the liegemen would take them, and others lingering to crane their necks at the **smoking** body on the floor. “Your Highness, are you all right?” A liegeman reached down to help me to my feet and then pulled Alisendi to hers. Even with his assistance I could barely trust my quivering legs. The liegeman brought us out to stand beside Thandi, who gripped the cut on his arm, his jaw set against the pain. Amaranthine stood on the other side of him, not looking particularly bothered by the blood seeping through the ripped shoulder of her dress. “What in the Sixth Hell just happened?” Thandi asked. “You got yourself sliced up,” Amaranthine answered. “Let me see it.” She reached for Thandi’s arm. “No. The healers can deal with it.” He jerked his arm away. “Or you could let me do it so you don’t bleed out before they get here,” she snapped. She pried his fingers from the wound, and he winced as she yanked the fabric away from the cut. “Ouch!” “It’s not that bad.” She tore a piece of trim off the sleeve of her gown and tied it tightly around his arm above the wound. As soon as she was done, Thandi pulled his arm back, cradling it protectively. Amaranthine shot him a disgusted look. I was merely relieved that they were both in one piece. Thank the Six I hadn’t lit one of them up instead. If any harm had come to them or Alisendi because of me, I might as well have gone to the Great Temple and turned myself in to the priests as a heretic and let them do with me what they saw fit. “Lord Kriantz!” Amaranthine shouted down the hallway. “Yes, Your Highness?” The baron strode toward us, turning away from the two liegemen to whom he’d been speaking. “Your knife,” Amaranthine said. “Is that an enchanted blade?”

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“How in the Six Hells is that even possible?” I interrupted. The idea of a noble who didn’t know how to ride was as ridiculous as a stable hand not knowing how to push a wheelbarrow. Cas rubbed his temple. “I visited Havemont about ten years ago. The roads up to Spire City are barely fit for goats, much less horses. They would’ve had to ship her halfway to Mynaria for lessons. Even the carriage that brought her here had to meet her entourage at a town in the foothills. It probably made more sense to wait, but she’ll have to be trained in time for the wedding.” The girl finally looked up, her eyes an unexpected shade of pale green. “I should get some basic instruction as soon as possible,” she said with surprising resolve, given that she seemed to be cursed where horses were concerned. “That’s a splendid idea.” Cas smiled at her and then gave me a pointed look. I shook my head and set my jaw. The last thing I wanted was to teach a rank beginner who would constantly be under the watch of my brother and father. “Give her to Theeds. He can put her with the liegemen trainees,” I said. “That’s not an option. She has only a few moons before the wedding, and you know damn well that putting her in with a mixed class above her level isn’t going to teach her anything. Besides, there’s no better instructor than you.” I ignored Cas’s flattery. The earnest tone he used with the more recalcitrant members of the Directorate wasn’t going to work on me. “Not a chance.” “Riding with the liegemen is probably fine,” Dennaleia said. She looked about as enthusiastic about the lessons as I felt about being saddled with her. “Surely you know what’s best—” I ignored her attempt at diplomacy and spoke directly to Cas. “You can figure it out.” I stalked out of the tack room, but Cas caught me by my sleeve outside the door. “Mare, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to do this,” he said in a low voice. I jerked my arm away.

“Think how pleased your father will be that you’re doing something to help the princess.” “I don’t have time to fix up every delicate flower who wanders through the barn with an idiot for a guide,” I said. Cas let my insult roll off him like rain hitting waxed leather and fixed me with a grave look. “You need a different way to occupy your afternoons until the alliance is settled.” A jolt went through me. He was breaking our agreement. On afternoons when I wasn’t occupied with the horses, I often sneaked out of the castle. Cas overlooked my excursions and didn’t tell my father in exchange for the useful information I sometimes brought him. “People will be coming from all over the Northern Kingdoms to witness

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your brother's wedding. Not all of them will be happy about it," Cas said. "The city will not be as safe as it once was." He must have known I didn't always stick to the best parts of town or sources he approved of. **Damn** him and his spies. "Teaching Dennaleia to ride is important," he continued. "She needs to seem like one of us as soon as possible. Her people may believe in our gods, but that does not undo all the years they've turned a blind eye to the Zumordans using Havemont to gain access to our kingdom." "That's not my problem," I said. "It is now. Don't give me reason to tell your father what you've been up to." "Fine," I said, furious. He left me no other option. "Just keep her out of here until I teach her which end of a horse will bite her." Fuming, I stalked back to Flick-er's stall. "Mare—" Cas called out, but there was nothing else for him to say. I should have felt guiltier for being so rude—he sympathized with my point of view more than my father or brother, and even advocated for my interests from time to time. Still, he would never understand what it felt like when what little freedom I had was taken from me.

Denna came down dressed in a shade of green that matched her eyes and smiled when she saw me. All I managed in response was an expression that probably made me look like I'd taken a hoof to the teeth. "Are you okay?" she asked, regarding me with worry. "Other than wanting to slap half the Directorate with a hitching rail, I'm fine," I said. "Do you want to talk about it?" "No." I scowled at the door to the barn. "Where are those thrice-**damned** grooms?" They finally appeared, leading Flicker and a dark horse behind him. "Isn't that the horse that bit me?" Denna asked, shrinking back a little. "Yes, that's Shadow." The time had finally come to put her on the horse she'd be riding for her wedding. She was more than ready. Shadow was dark where Flicker was light, and delicate rather than built for battle. Her sleek coat shone in the afternoon sun, her mane and tail jet black and her coat the rich brown of dark chocolate. Her head was fine boned, and she had a long forelock the grooms had swept to the side out of her expressive eyes. "Is she going to bite me again?" Denna sidled closer to me. "No. She probably thought you had a treat that first day," I said. I pulled a worn black cachet from the tangle around my wrist and showed it to Denna. "Shadow was my first training project. You have nothing to worry about. She'll take care of you." "All right." She put her hand on my arm, sending a jolt up to my shoulder.

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“I trust you.” I softened with her touch, hating myself for it. Denna had become a source of comfort—someone I relied on. That was never a good thing. Reliance on people created weaknesses for others to exploit.

Are you all right?” Nils turned to me with concern in his eyes. “Kind of tired. I’d better go,” I said. “I’ll walk you part of the way.” I didn’t have the heart to object, so I waved good-bye to the other players and my brother, though I didn’t meet his eyes. I knew what I would see there. Confidence. Arrogance. A future of certainty before him, married to the girl I loved. “What is wrong with you?” Nils asked, putting his arm around me. “You came in there high as a kite and now you look like you want to vomit or punch something. Maybe both.” “I do,” I growled, and shrugged his arm off. “So . . . do you want to elaborate on that?” “My brother is such an arrogant ass. Doesn’t appreciate a damn thing he has.” “I assume you’re not talking about all this.” Nils gestured to our surroundings. “I’m talking about Denna. It’s like she’s an object, another thing he gets to have because he’s going to be king someday.” Nils cocked his head to the side but didn’t speak. “She’s worth so much more than that, but he doesn’t see it. There’s so much she can do for this kingdom, and no one is giving her any opportunity.” My vehemence grew the longer I went on. “I’m not sure that’s exactly what he was saying,” Nils said. “I mean, it *is* an arranged marriage. A political alliance. You’re lucky if you so much as get along with a person you’re stuck marrying, from what I understand. And he seems to appreciate her intelligence and think she’ll make a good queen.” “I have to get out of here,” I said. “Maybe I should ask my father for some of the unclaimed territory up north. Go start a horse-training business.” “In the middle of nowhere? That should go well.” “I don’t want to watch the life of one of my closest friends be slowly ruined.” The explanation was less than half-assed. Her kisses still burned on my skin. “Why are you so upset about this? I know you’ve been spending a lot of time with her lately, but—”

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Don't tell her I was here," Dennaleia and I said at the same time. Nils laughed. "Your secrets are safe with me." "I don't want Ryka questioning me," I said. She'd want to know how we'd made this discovery, and I couldn't have her find out how narrowly we'd escaped the brawl at the Pelham. "Some of the noblewomen invited me to a tea and embroidery session, but I told them I didn't feel well so that I could come down here instead," Dennaleia admitted sheepishly. "And Thandilimon told me not to worry about things involving the Directorate. . . ." Maybe I'd underestimated her. "You won't get a hard time from me about breaking the rules." I shrugged. "But there's one more thing I don't understand. If the Recusants are being beaten in town—murdered even—why would they leave traces that would implicate them in Casmiel's death?" It didn't add up. No assassin was stupid enough to leave a mark. Why would a small rebel group like the Recusants risk persecution by the crown? "It makes me wonder if someone else is involved," Dennaleia said. "Or another kingdom," I said grimly. Perhaps Zumorda was rising after all. acidic taste coated my tongue as the assassin struck at Lord Kriantz, who barely dodged the blow in time. I adjusted my position to shield Alisendi. If only one of us made it out alive, it had to be her. The burn of magic rose in my chest. I clamped down on it and prayed for the fire god's mercy and the strength to keep it under control. The assassin attacked again, his blade biting into Thandi's arm. A cry escaped my lips as Thandi gritted his teeth and pulled the arm in close to his side. Amaranthine retaliated, kicking at the assassin's legs, but he dodged and lunged again for the king. Lord Kriantz used his forearm to shove the assassin's blow aside with the swift grace of a snake. Behind the king, an oil lamp exploded, showering everyone with glass and sparks. My control was slipping. "Do something!" Alisendi whispered. The assassin struck at Amaranthine, catching her shoulder with his blade, and her yelp of pain brought another unstoppable rush of magic. As little as she seemed to like me, the idea that a person as bold as her could be taken down in a closed room without a fair fight filled me with white-hot anger. The magic exploded out of my control. The assassin ignited from the inside out just as a short blade shot out of Lord Kriantz's sleeve and embedded itself in the man's throat. His body swelled and bloated until gore erupted from beneath his cracked and blackened skin, viscera catching fire as soon as they hit air. As flame consumed him, the power drained out of me in a rush, leaving me weak. I huddled against

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Alisendi's side. White-faced and trembling, she held me close. "What in the—" Amaranthine stumbled back from the burning body as Lord Kriantz swooped in to smother the remaining flames with a wall tapestry. I gagged as the smell of burning flesh and carpet stung my eyes and throat. Footsteps scuffled in the hallway as the doors were finally unbarred. Liegemen burst into the room, naked steel in their hands. "Fetch the captain of the guard immediately," the king roared.

Lord Kriantz nodded but didn't speak. "Why did you help me, anyway?" I asked. "Alliances are not only built from the top down, my lady," he said. "And I am as interested in the source of these attacks as you are. A threat to Mynaria could be a threat to Sonnenborne. I'm eager to ensure that both our kingdoms remain safe." "Well, if the Directorate won't find out where this thing came from, then I will," I said, scowling at the blade in my hand. Brushing the blood grooves with anxious fingers, I flipped the knife over. It shone brightly even in dim light. "I have no doubt you will," Lord Kriantz said. "I should be off. Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you." "Thank you, Lord Kriantz," I said. "Good night, Mare. Stay safe." He bowed and exited the room. I appreciated someone who knew not to overstay his welcome. I set the knife down on my vanity and paced over to my couch. The cut on my shoulder stung when I probed it with my fingers. The torn fabric of my dress had stuck to it. I grimaced as I pulled the ripped material away, but the wound was shallow. I rang for my maid, Sara. It wasn't the first time I'd come home cut up from something or other, and it was better not to waste the healers' time with something she could handle. Summoning Nils held more appeal, but he was on duty. A knock sounded on my door. "Come in, Sara," I called from the bedroom. But instead of my maid, Captain Ryka appeared in the doorway with four of her Elite liegemen. "I trust you know what happened to the assassin's weapon," she said, her gaze steely.

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THE MORNING FOLLOWING THE ASSASSINATION attempt found me in the royal library. Noblewomen clustered around me, their bright dresses whispering over the soft carpets. Thandi had suggested I socialize with the other highborn girls at court before my sister left. In light of recent events, she had elected to return to Havemont as soon as enough liegemen could be spared to escort her. In the meantime, I had to suffer the frustration and boredom of listening to the other girls carry on about nonsense when there were many deeper concerns at hand. Underscoring the importance of developing closer relationships at court, a letter from my mother had arrived early that morning. After a few words of sympathy over Casmiel's demise, the rest of her message was devoted to the importance of the alliance and my duty to see that our two kingdoms rose to meet this new and uncertain enemy as one. It closed with a reminder to spend my precious days wisely and to devote my time equally among the Six. I knew what that truly meant—that I needed to keep my hands out of the fire, so to speak. I thought I'd kept my gift from her all those years after she'd caught me in the hearth. If she knew something I did not, she should have told me before formal letters had become our only way to communicate. She should have told me how to stop it before I killed a man. But for now I still had to do as she wished and be the leader and ambassador my people required. Trapped amidst the other girls as they vied for position by my side, I struggled to catch a glimpse of the books we passed while still keeping an ear on the conversation. "Did you hear that the Count of Nax is going to marry that provincial woman from the east?" the blond girl on my left asked. "No!" Annetta of Ciralis covered her mouth in shock. "But she's so strange. Practically Zumordan. What if living so close to the border has tainted her with magic?" My father says she's doing it to throw suspicion off their family. He thinks they're supporters of the Recusants," a voice added from the back of the group. How they could gossip about weddings in light of Casmiel's death and the assassination attempt made little sense. I chose not to comment, instead turning my head to admire the king's book collection. Dim light filtered through tiny windows near the top of the vaulted ceiling, casting a cool glow over the tall bookcases. The depth and breadth of the Mynarian library were consistent with its place at the center of the Northern Kingdoms. Shelves towered over us on either side, sections marked with intricate wooden signs painstakingly carved by master

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craftsmen. Inhaling deeply, I reveled in the familiar smell of ink and parchment. The cluster of girls stopped in the poetry section, eager to choose poems for the reading in a few nights' time. They giggled as they pulled books from the shelves, skimming for suggestive lines they hoped would win the attention of the men or women courting them. At least my sister managed to hold back. I was fairly certain she knew all the dirtiest poems by heart, but she wisely comported herself with dignity. "What do you think of this one, Your Highness?" The pushy blonde shoved a book under my nose. I smiled politely and took it from her. "Callue is always a classic choice," I said, returning the book to her. A burst of shoving ensued as every other girl tried to get her hands on another volume of Cal-lue. My sister rolled her eyes and mouthed "Horomir," and I covered my smile with a hand. Vili Horomir penned the naughtiest poems in the Northern Kingdoms, generally filled with terrifying euphemisms for parts of the male physique. If the girls wanted suggestive poems, they ought to have consulted my sister instead of me.

"You don't have to stay on your feet," Thandi said to me. "Endalan, would you please accompany Princess Dennaleia to her seat?" I would have rather lain down in the middle of the ring and let the horses prance over my bones than spend any time in his company, but I had no choice. "Of course, Your Majesty." Lord Kriantz took my arm, only a hint of displeasure on his face that he wasn't to participate with the horses. While his close relationship with Thandi had already bought him a new level of credence, only the royal family and their horse masters had any say over the culling. Lord Kriantz seated me beside my mother in a row of wooden chairs on a stone platform alongside the arena, a canopy stretched above our heads to block out the sun. He settled me in the most ornate chair, encircled me with the embroidered woolen blanket from the back, and took his seat on my other side. I immediately turned to my mother, filled with a thousand questions. "I am grateful to see you, Mother, but why are you here?" I asked, speaking as softly as I could. "When Alisendi returned from her visit, she told me about the **assassination** attempt on the king," she replied. "I was concerned, and your father and I thought it wise not to announce my visit in order to avoid becoming a target myself." The subtext was clear as day. Ali had told her my gift was out of control. "What about the letter?" That was the most positive correspondence I had sent her, and the first time I had expressed confidence in my future in Mynaria—all

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because of Mare and Ellaeni. Things had seemed more solid than ever at that point, unlike now, when nearly everything had fallen to ruins. My mother lowered her voice even farther. “Casmiel’s death was concerning. Your struggles to adjust, perhaps to be expected. But developing relationships with Princess Amaranthine, who does not participate with the Directorate, and a coastal girl with little political power, and the intensity of your concern over Amaranthine’s opinion of you—”

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PROFANITY APPROXIMATE COUNT (and other sensitive words)

Bitch - 2

Damn – 13

Bastard - 4

Ass – 6

God – 73

Jackass – 1

Shit – 5

Hell - 30

RED FLAG

Assassin – 37

Assination - 11

Drunk – 3

Drinking – 16

Smoking – 1

Violence – 4

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools