

SIXTH INTERLOGUE: CORNERED



Jason fought to free himself from the arm cutting off his air. Over the blood pounding in his ears, he heard voices from the room he had intended to enter. All the fight drained out of him, and he stood stock-still.

After a few seconds, his attacker relaxed, and he heard the floorboards creak. They had backed a few steps away. A familiar scent reached his nose. Cinnamon.

Jason half-turned to see a smug smirk on Aria's face. "I thought I told you if you wanted to come in back, you'd need a carnation?"

He gaped at her and then recalled the banter they had enjoyed hours earlier. "Of course, a red one," he replied. "I told you they're hard to come by around here."

"Well, we'll just say you owe two." She gestured for him to follow her.

Aria's hushed tone told him she didn't yet feel safe, and neither should he. Not that he did; his heart was still completing a thousand laps per minute around the inside of his

chest. Despite it, he couldn't resist protesting. "Hey now, why two?"

"One you promised and one for saving your skin just now," she said with a shrug, not bothering to look back at him as she led the way through what appeared to be a secret passage between the walls of the inn.

Jason shot furtive glances around and stepped into the awaiting corridor, hidden by a large painting. After pulling the artwork back into place, Aria grabbed a bit of flint and struck it to light a candelabra. When the light bloomed within the space, Jason's brows raised. Aria had let her dark tresses down and was no longer wearing attire fitting the world in which she lived. Her dress had been replaced by a more feminine version of her grandfather's tunic and slacks. Oddly, it seemed to suit her just as well in his eyes.

"Ahem?"

"Oh, sorry," Jason said, realizing he'd been staring. To cover it up, he added, "Thanks, by the way. I thought I was doing the rescuing." The way the light played off Aria's smooth curves and accentuated in shadows the fierceness of her green eyes, Jason had to wonder if she were some supernatural being as well. Perhaps an elf princess from the tales he had heard growing up.

"Hmph, Grandfather should know me better than that," she griped, though without an edge.

While Jason waffled between offering a pithy retort and sincere assurance of her grandfather's confidence, he noticed she was staring at him now, and not unappreciatively. "What?" he said, feeling his cheeks warm.

"You came back for me?" She was very close.

Having some experience in romance, Jason was pretty sure the correct thing to say was, "Of course." It could land him a much-welcomed kiss as a reward. But it wasn't strictly true, and

though he had made his way in the world for some time living as though half-truths were canon, he couldn't bring himself to use one now. "Yes and no. You're a big part of why I'm here."

The slight smile Aria had before deepened until it touched her eyes. "Good," she said, just above a whisper, maybe not intending for him to hear. Her fingers brushed the back of his hand, and she said more loudly, "Come on. Grandfather might not know me, but I know him, and he'll need us."

"Right." Images of the blur of fire that had been Cinaed wielding his sword made him skeptical of the old storyteller's need. "Where does this passage lead?"

Like her grandfather before her, Aria set off without looking to see if Jason followed along. Over her shoulder, she answered, "To a secret exit and a special alcove."

Before he could get any clarification, he ducked a low-hanging beam that he suddenly realized was in his way. He lost grip on Aria's hand and stumbled into a wall with a resounding thump.

Aria paused just long enough to turn and ask, "Really?" Amusement lightened her tone.

He muttered a comment about how dark and dusty the tight passage was and tried not to fumble anymore. Being so much taller than Aria didn't help, but even she had to duck and weave around the stiff timbers sticking at odd angles. How was she doing it so nimbly with so little light?

The answer, like all others, had to wait. A more pressing question was at hand. Aria had stopped and was reaching into a weathered old trunk etched with the letters *AB*. She opened it so slowly its rusty hinges barely squeaked.

"Hold this." She handed him the candelabra and dug into the dark recesses of the chest, producing a long cloth bundle which she laid beside her with the care of handling an infant.

She reached inside the trunk again and pulled out a large leather satchel.

She hoisted its weight with a grunt. “Here, you take this.”

Careful with the candelabra and the aged bag, he managed to sling it over his shoulder without setting the passage, bag, or himself on fire. He had a good foot and fifty pounds on her and it still didn’t seem any easier for him to lift. Not that he would say that to Aria. “Got it.”

She smiled as she retrieved her bundle. “Thank you, strongman. Now, we need to find my grandfather.”

“Probably off with the bearded lady.” He didn’t bother waiting for her reproving look before adding, “He went looking for you on the upper floors.”

“Bother. We’ll have to exit this passage, then. The door out is up ahead.”

Once more he was following her, save this time she was navigating the dark passages without the candelabra, but seemingly had no more difficulty than before. The ethereal character of the tunnel in the flickering light of the candles only intensified the otherworldliness of it all.

Aria rounded a corner and Jason followed, running straight into her. “Oof!”

“Sorry, I should’ve warned you. This is it.” Licking a thumb and forefinger, Aria extinguished each of the candles. The dark was suddenly so deep Jason could scarce make out her form in front of him. He felt her hand gently touch his.

How did she find my hand?

“When I open the door, we’ll be in the main hall. We need to get to grandfather as quietly as possible, okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered exaggeratedly.

If she appreciated his snark, he couldn’t tell. A sliver of light leaked into the passage as Aria pushed open a door in the

wall nearby. Once there was enough space to squeeze through, she gave a gentle tug on his hand to follow.

Were the circumstances different, he would've appreciated all this handholding far more. Her touch spread warmth through him like a completed circuit electricity. It felt, in a word, good.

The expanse of the main hall stretched out in front of them. Everything looked as it had earlier in the night, though the room did feel much larger without the crowd present. Overlooking the wide area with its long tables was a second level that ringed the main commons room of the inn. By his reckoning, it could easily pass for the mead hall of a long-past king.

Looking for the stairs up to the next floor, Jason saw one of the tapestries on the room's high walls was now torn. It depicted the lion or radiant lamb, the symbol of the *Palatini Lucis Aeternae*, on it. Aria must have noticed, too, because she stiffened.

The sound of a door slamming echoed from above. "Not in this one either," a gruff male voice intoned.

"Did you hear something?" asked a man who Jason could only imagine must be surly indeed.

"What, like more of your bellyaching?"

"No, it's you making enough ruckus to bring the whole town in, you lousy sot!"

There were sounds of a scuffle, and then a pair of shadows loomed out over the middle of the room. The men were shoving each other.

"Enough!" a third man boomed, the newly accompanying shadow still larger than the others. "With Fenris slain, the old man has to be here, and if not him, then certainly his wench granddaughter."

"I told Fenris he didn't need to replace the Councilman. A

constable would have done fine,” the less bawdy speaker replied.

“Fenris followed his orders, and you will, too, if you want to live,” the third man said, his voice so cold it sent a shiver down Jason’s spine. “Now check the other side and be quick about it. They have to be dead by sunrise.”

Jason looked down at Aria, eyes wide. He had tracked the movements of the shadows above and realized the men were steps from reaching a point where he and Aria could be spotted.

She nodded back to the still-open door into the room and mouthed, “Quick.”

And he was, so quick that the satchel over his shoulder swung around and slammed into the door panel with an echoing thud. Unlike his earlier clumsiness, this wasn’t likely to amuse Aria.

“What was that?” one of them called. Jason tried to back into the passage and pull Aria along, but it was too late. A figure flew through the air and landed with a startling smack onto the floor at the room’s center. The man was as burly as he’d sounded, but tilted at the waist, his head roving back and forth like a predatory animal sniffing out its prey. He stopped with a jerk, and his attention snapped to where Jason and Aria stood. Or, more precisely, to stare directly at Jason.

“Look what we have here, fellas,” he crowed. “Looks like things are easy-going after all.”

Somehow the way he swaggered over towards them made Jason freeze instead of run. He’d faced dangerous people before living on the streets, running and fighting as the situation suited him. This felt different. Like the scene in the alley earlier in the night.

The other two made the leap to join their compatriot. As the shadows hinted, the third was the largest of them. He wore

a rifle strapped over his back. The other two hung to his sides, letting him take point. “Well now,” he called out. “There’s half our quickish quarry. Where’s your grandfather, girly?” The man grinned wickedly, flashing disproportionately large teeth. His tone sounded more like a beast’s growl than a man’s clear voice. “Jason,” Aria whispered, tugging at his arm, “Run!”

The pair took off for the front door. Jason had always been fast, but he found Aria keeping pace with him as they wove between tables and benches to make a straight shot for the exit. Behind, there was a crashing sound as the two smaller men leaped off the walls on either side. To Jason’s horror, both men landed in front of them with inhuman speed and agility.

“Going somewhere, little lady?” one of them mewled.

“Wouldn’t want to let this rake take you to some tryst. That’ll be our pleasure.”

Jason’s throat tightened, and his heart pounded as the pair forced them backward, with their leader closing in from behind. He took Aria in his arms and angled himself between the foul lackeys. This wasn’t likely to be an average bout, and he wagered he could make a fight of it with one of them. Three meant they were out of luck.

Aria seethed within his hold. “Jason, let me go.”

“Better to let him shield you for the moment,” the leader of the group commented as he drew closer. Jason gagged as he caught a whiff of the foul odor. This stranger smelled like a crypt filled with unembalmed bodies and just unsealed after a hundred years. “You won’t like what comes next.”

“Not half as much as you will regret this intrusion,” Cinaed called from the rooms above. Jason spared a glance at him when all three of their attackers’ heads snapped up like wolves catching the scent of an approaching bear.

The old man made his way down the steps and around to the center of the room with remarkable calm. Jason couldn’t

help but notice his sword was already drawn and crackling with flame. In most circumstances, Jason wouldn't find an old man with a sword as intimidating as the rifle-toting thug, but the first two brutes retreated back to their leader. The trio gave Cinaed, and now Aria and Jason, a wide berth.

"You're bold for one with a foot already in the grave," the furthest away of the trio commented. "Lucky you didn't throw out your back coming down those stairs."

Cinaed ignored the bravado. "Aria, take Jason to our meeting place. I will handle this."

"Grandfather ..." Aria began to protest.

"Now, please," he insisted, his sharp eyes fixed on the largest of the trio, who seemed to shake with rage.

Dazed, Jason found himself being pulled away by Aria. The trio began to hunch, clothes shredding away. Coarse hair sprouted and thickened all over their bodies, and their eyes were lost in a milky haze.

"My colleagues ... are fools," the biggest one commented with a wild laugh punctuated by a violent shudder as he flashed impossibly big canine teeth. "But we both know they're enough to handle you alone. I'll enjoy bringing your carcass in tonight."

"The High King has seen me through dire straits. Just this evening, your friend Fenris made the same ill-advised boasts. If you yield now, you may yet escape his fate."

The answering growl was no longer human in any sense. Jason gaped as Aria jerked him out into the street. "We have to run!" she yelled.

He turned to follow just as the three monstrous creatures converged on Cinaed.

