

Chapter 7

Distractions

The newly proclaimed Emperor of Taleem jumped from his dragon, and General Mortiz frowned. This was not how he had anticipated his day would go. Yesterday he had come to Carag in the hopes of following a lead that Lady Wylinth was in fact still alive. Someone, who very much looked like the Princess, was travelling the southern cities and he intended to find out who this someone was.

From his reports the royal family had been murdered on their way to the wedding between the Princess and Lord Trellin. So why would someone impersonate the Princess if she were dead?

I don't know that she's dead for certain, Mortiz reminded himself. Her body was missing from the wreckage and all that could be determined was that she was not there at the time of the King and Queen's death. *Either she died on her own out in the wilderness, or she died by the hands of the same bandits once they tracked her down.*

It wasn't a pleasant thought, but his men had scoured the entire area and had found no trace of the girl. But like a ghost sent from Sundrstrom's palace, her name was cropping up in the unlikely of places. Rumors of a girl nearly matching Lady Wylinth's appearance and travelling with a mountain man, had come from the village Tam, which wasn't that far from where the attack had happened.

Mortiz ground his teeth. *If it wasn't for Lord—Emperor Trellin's soldiers I might have more answers on that.*

They had become increasingly bolder in their attempts to seize control of the Marbrenth Kingdom. With that same rumor of the Lady being spotted in the Tam Village, there had also been a report of Trollox soldiers making their way into Marbrenth lands, claiming it under the rulership of Emperor Trellin.

General Mortiz's frown deepened as the self-proclaimed Emperor disappeared into the entrance of the Scarak Towers.

"What do you want, Trellin?" Mortiz whispered. "What game are you playing at?"

Half of Trellin's troops stayed beside the dragon, while the rest followed their Emperor into the building. They were to all meet above the library of Scarak in the official meeting rooms of the city.

"Quite the impression it leaves," Antrielle said, standing beside Mortiz. Lord Antrielle was City Lord of Carag and resided in the other Scarak Tower with his wife and children.. "I wonder if he's come for our surrender?"

Mortiz snorted. "Surrender? Of course he has. What he wants is a peaceful transition."

"And will he get one?" Antrielle asked, his almost white eyebrows threatening to disappear under a head of white hair. "Will Regent Mortiz surrender all of King Amlikar's lands to him?"

Mortiz's frown pressed itself out into a firm line. Would he do that? Could he turn over the kingdom as the agreement between Trellin and Amlikar had stated? Mortiz had promised his wife that upon Wylinth's marriage he would retire from King Amlikar's service and serve as a city lord and advisor to the king. He liked the idea of trying to make that same deal with Trellin,

but something twisted in his gut at the thought, and he knew there was no way Trellin wouldn't use him as an advisor for war.

"I see," Lord Antrielle said after seeing the look on the General's face. "I don't blame you, old friend. I wouldn't savor the idea of starting a war without a proper King either. Perhaps he will avoid conquest by force if we merely hand ourselves over?"

Mortiz shook his head. Lord Antrielle knew some of the details about the wedding between Wylinth and Trellin, but none of the City Lords of Marbrenth knew the full details of that deal. If they had known that there was going to be a war either way, then they may have never agreed to the alliance King Amlikar had proposed to have with Trellin.

And there are those rumors about Princess Wylinth. He'd have to do some more research into those before they spread too far. If word got out that the oldest child of Amlikar was alive, even if it was a rumor, would cause more trouble than even Mortiz had seen in his lifetime. *I'll stall Trellin today, find what he wants, and then look into this matter more.*

He couldn't afford to be distracted now.

"My Lords?" a guard asked softly.

Mortiz groaned. "What is it son?"

"We found three citizens wondering through the areas we've restricted access to for your meeting."

Mortiz waited for the man to continue for the question, but none was forth coming. "Well spit it out man. I don't have the time, or the patience, to deal with this today."

The guard nodded apologetically and continued. “We would have just thrown them out like you ordered, but they’re asking to speak with the man in charge. Something about vital information about the Princess Wylinth.”

“Who did you say these people were, Midal?” Lord Antrielle asked.

“They appear to be common citizens,” the guard Midal answered. “One is clearly a Smith—or wants to be—from the cut of his beard, and the other is a mountain man carrying a staff. Oh, and there’s a boy as well.”

General Mortiz was leaning forward now, his mind catching hold of an idea. “A mountain man you say?”

“Yes, General.”

Mortiz rubbed his chin. *This has to be more than a coincidence.*

“Bring them in, quick,” he barked to Midal.

Midal bowed and hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

“Really, Mortiz?” Lord Antrielle asked, giving him a quizzical look. “You’re really going to do this before meeting with Emperor Trellin?”

“They’ve piqued my curiosity,” he said, striding across the room filled with antiques. “It won’t take me long, just keep Trellin busy until I return.” Before heading up the stairs he told one of the guards in the room to direct Midal with the detained citizens.

“Don’t take too long will you?” Lord Antrielle said, sitting down and picking up a book to read. “I’m not sure how interested the Emperor will be of hearing how my daughters are learning to speak Valibumn.”

General Mortiz paused, the title of the book *Lord Antrielle* catching his attention. Chuckling at the fitting title he climbed the stairs. *Truths of Hyrare. If there's any truth to what these men have to say I'll start the war with Trellin myself.*

He wasn't sure what made him think it, but he hoped deep down that the Princess was indeed alive. If she was then it meant that in some small way, a little of her father and mother still lived on, and that there was someone to take leadership of the kingdom.

Then I could rest with Rosia and Miri, he thought, a smile coming to his lips as he thought of his wife and daughter.

The wait wasn't long before the two men and boy were brought it to the room above the antique chamber. Truth be told it was going to be the room showing off the crown jewel of the city. A gold gauntlet, embroidered with silver and the symbol of Hyrare emblazoned on the back of the hand piece in the rare rose gold metal. The thing was completely worthless of course. Gold, even though it was beautiful to adorn things, was a horrible bit of metal to use for protection. And the stories of it having magical properties had already been proven false time and again. It was a byproduct of an age long past when the first king of Marbrenth wore it into battle.

It was while General Mortiz was admiring the decoration that the guard Midal brought the citizens in, and he was surprised at how calm they were. There was the boy of course, who seemed just as rough on the edges as the Smith, both of whom had eyes only for the gauntlet.

Mortiz snorted. Smiths.

The mountain man, however, was another story. His eyes remained locked with Mortiz's once they met, and there was a depth to them that the General had only seen in the most seasoned of his men. The man stood like a statue that Mortiz couldn't have moved even if he tried.

What have you seen? What have you suffered to get you this far? He stroked his beard a few times before coming to stand before them.

“You say you have news for me,” Mortiz said, his gaze never straying from the mountain man. “Tell me what you have and why I should believe you.”

The mountain man raised an eyebrow. “No formalities? Exchange of names?”

Mortiz waived a hand. “I don’t have time for formalities. I’m meeting with Emperor Trellin in a few minutes, and I can’t stand the silly things anyway.”

“Then what should we call you?”

“You can call me General, or Lord, Mortiz. Now, what news do you have for me?”

“That Lady Wylinth is alive,” the man said, “and you may call me Garm.”

“Alright... Garm,” Mortiz said, stepping away and circling the gauntlet. “Why would I believe you?”

The man, Garm, opened his mouth, and for a second Mortiz thought he saw something break behind his eyes. Whatever it was, it quickly disappeared.

“I have been her travelling companion for a little over a month now,” he said, as if that were explanation enough.

“And I am the Sun God here to proclaim the next champion to the Golden Gauntlet,” Mortiz said with a sneer. “I don’t have time to play your silly games. Does Trellin want a war? Is that why he sent you here just before he arrived, to throw me off and declare war on our kingdoms because of a rumor that Princess Wylinth is travelling the countryside with a mountain man?”

The group became quiet, and the boy and Smith no longer had eyes just for the gauntlet. They almost seemed to cower under his voice, except for Garm. He stood tall and his eyes tracked Mortiz's movements, calculating behind a wall of silence.

"Why are you three really here?" he asked.

The boy opened his mouth to answer, but at a nudge from the Smith he shut it again.

"I've told you already, we're here to tell you that the Princess is alive and is just outside the city," Garm said, his face remaining stoic.

I'm not going to get any answers here, not real ones any way. Mortiz looked the group over, unsure if he wanted to question them more or throw them in the dungeon for wasting his time. "I'll deal with you three after I've dealt with *Emperor* Trellin."

Walking up to the guard Midal, he said, "Keep these three up here. I'll return for them when the meeting has concluded."

Taking a final glance back, he made sure that there was no way his three guests would be able to escape. While although the windows let in light, they were too high up to really be of any significant use. Midal kept post at the top of the stairs and Mortiz would send another guard to keep track of them too.

But for some reason he had a pit in the middle of his stomach, the one he would get when he knew he was making the wrong decision. Frowning, he let them be.

“Come on Muldrix,” Wylinth pleaded, feeling like she needed to fall on her knees to persuade the dragon he had been so stubborn. “You know that Garm would be okay with helping them out. Especially if it will help them get out faster.”

“No! I told him I’d stay here. Away from the city where I’ll be safe,” he said with a growl.

Wylinth could tell she was starting to get under his scales. Ever since they had seen the dragon fly overhead and the small group of soldiers following, she had been trying to convince Muldrix that they needed to help Garm, and the others, get away with a distraction. “I know that he wants you to be safe—he wants us both to be safe,” she said, changing her tone and resting a hand on his shoulder, hoping her new tactics would throw the dragon off. “But could you really live with the thought that we did nothing as they were captured and kept away? Would you allow them to even hold Garm and the others captive if you could do something to stop them?”

She watched as Muldrix’s silver gray eyes grew hard. She had him!

“Let’s go together,” she said, hoping to push him over the edge even more. “Let’s fly over the city, away from the people, but close enough that I can call out to distract them.”

“I know the towers they will be in,” Muldrix added, his head swiveling to face the city. “I can circle them enough to draw their attention.”

“And with the dragon having landed, its rider will need time to run down before they can even take off to catch up to us,” Wylinth said, grinning. “We can do this Muldrix. I know that you promised him you’d stay away, but that was before the Trollox soldiers came with their rider and his dragon. If we have chance of getting away for *all* of us, then we need to do this to give the others time to get out.”

“Alright, I’ll do it,” Muldrix snarled as smoke began to ooze out of his mouth and nostrils. “Let’s hope they can’t follow us.”

Wylinth’s grin broadened into a smile, and she hopped onto Muldrix’s back.

“It’s a good thing you don’t weigh much more than Foster, otherwise this would be nearly impossible to do.”

Wylinth ignored the comment as Muldrix spread his wings and bolted down the road, flapping until they were in the air and above the tree line.

“What are we going to do?” Hariter whispered fiercely to Garm.

“I don’t know,” Garm whispered back, biting off each word.

They were still in the room with the Golden Gauntlet and had been able to covertly learn that it was that very item the staff had been leading them to. However, with the guard watching all of them closely, all they had been able to do was get the staff to light up. They didn’t know what else they could do without causing a huge fight that would wind them up in prison rather than back to Muldrix and Wylinth.

“We need some kind of distraction,” Hariter said, ignoring Garm’s reply and pressing on. “Something we can use to get away.”

“And did you see the book?” Foster added enthusiastically. “*Truths of Hyrare*... if only we could get it too.”

Garm walked away, his whirl of emotions raged inside and made it hard to focus on anything.

Except for Muldrix and Wylinth.

Concern for their safety bubbled up from the pit of his stomach, pushing out all other thoughts of what they needed to grab or where they needed to go. *Please be safe. Please stay away*, he pressed in his mind, hoping that somehow, those two were alright.

Out in the distance he could see a green dot rise above the tree line.

General Mortiz stood beside a table where Lord Antrielle had been reading from his book, fingering his short sword at his belt as they waited for Emperor Trellin to make his appearance.

“I understand his reasoning behind making us wait, but you don’t think he could have at least sped things up a bit?” Lord Antrielle mumbled. “I mean, per the arrangement he is already entitled to our Kingdom.”

“I would prefer not to meet the man.” He had heard stories of what Trellin was like, and it made him wish he had his battle axe with him instead of this sword.

“General,” Lord Antrielle reprimanded in a mocking voice. “I am astounded you would say such a thing. The chance to meet an emperor is not an everyday occurrence.”

The sound of his teeth grinding kept Mortiz from lashing out on the City Lord. “Stop playing games, Antrielle. I know perfectly well that you are not excited to meet him either.”

Lord Antrielle eyed him carefully and then replied. “True, and yet I know why Amlikar really decided to let his daughter marry the conquering, Lord Trellin.”

“And what reason is that?” Mortiz did his best to keep his composure, but he worried Antrielle wasn’t bluffing.

But before Lord Antrielle could answer, a Trollox soldier walked up the steps and loudly proclaimed Emperor Trellin’s arrival.

Trellin was tall and gangly, which was only made more poignant by the flowing robe he barely fit over his shoulders, and he looked to be more of a youth than the proclaimed Emperor of Trollox. But Mortiz was wrapped by the young man’s eyes. A brilliant green that held an inner ring of red that startled Mortiz enough that he let go of Antrielle’s comment to focus on the current problem.

Mortiz bowed but did not let the man out of his sight as they all sat together at the table.

“Welcome, Emperor Trellin,” he said as he caught the guards filing into the room out of the corner of his eye. “Shall we begin?”

The Emperor didn’t reply immediately. Instead he reached forward and picked up Lord Antrielle’s book, inspecting its pages. “Why is it,” he said, not looking either of them in the eye, “that upon my arrival to this kingdom you still fly the banner of your late king and sovereign? Did we not make a deal that should anything happen to the Princess or myself we would be named heirs of the others kingdom?”

“That is correct,” General Mortiz said in a firm tone. “However, that was only to fall to you if something had happened to young Brego, King Amlikar’s second child.”

Mortiz could have sworn he saw the hint of a smile on the man's face as Trellin put the book down. "And it is my understanding that not only did something happen to Brego, but to all of the royal family. Which, by the contract signed by your king, makes my claim to your throne valid."

Mortiz gritted his teeth as he strove to keep his outburst within. There was no way that Trellin knew about the hired assassination King Amlikar had on him, and yet Mortiz saw Trellin's smug look, and something inside told him this man had planned for his own. *I may surrender the kingdom, Antrielle, Mortiz thought. But that does not mean I can't give our new emperor some grief taking it from us.*

"I have read the *marriage* proposal you signed, Lord Trellin," Mortiz said as Trellin frowned at the use of his old title. "And you are right. Except I have reports that Lady Wylinth's body was missing at the scene of the attack. As such, I cannot hand over the throne until I have insured that all of the royal family have been murdered or killed. Until then, she is the rightful heir."

Any chance of a smile faded from Trellin's lips, and he leaned forward with his jaw clenched.

"She is dead, *Regent* Mortiz," Trellin nearly growled. "Their throne is mine, and I will have it when I want it."

Mortiz held firm against the onslaught from the man's glare.

"Am I to understand then, that those rumors of Lady Wylinth roaming the countryside may in fact be true?" Lord Antrielle said, interrupting their staring contest.

“Of course not,” Trellin spat at Antrielle as his left eye twitched. “It is nothing more than rumors of a people wishing for their Princesses return.”

Mortiz smiled mischievously. “But my Lord, this is a happy occasion. If Lady Wylinth is alive then the wedding can continue as planned.”

Trellin turned his demonic gaze back to him, and Lord Antrielle gave him a confused look.

“If she is alive then I—”

“Hey Trellin!”

Mortiz jumped from his chair and ran to the nearest window as a bright green dragon flew past, carrying on its back the Princess. She did not have her hair done up as he was accustomed to seeing, instead it was down and billowing in the wind behind her and she was wearing animal fur instead of her royal gown. *But by the light, it is her*, he thought with a sigh of relief, knowing that he could recognize that face anywhere. *That Garm fellow was right.*

“Lovely day for a spring flight together? Care to come join me?” she taunted as the dragon swerved and sailed away on the breeze.

“By the gods, she *is* alive,” Lord Antrielle said, standing beside General Mortiz. “This is amazing.”

“Indeed, it is.” Mortiz turned around to find that Trellin had not moved from his spot at the table. His hand covering Antrielle’s book twitched as his eyes seemed to burn with fire. “It is a pity you didn’t hand over the kingdom sooner. I wanted to avoid all-out war.”

Mortiz pulled out his sword and took a stance as Lord Antrielle’s men did the same. However, there were eleven Trollox men—including Trellin—to their five.

“I knew I should’ve worn my battle axe,” he mumbled as the Princess yelled profanities from outside, still apparently circling the tower. Mortiz waited, his muscles tense as Trellin’s men slowly drew their own weapons.

“Coming through!”

Mortiz froze as the guard, Midal, came rushing down the stairs with their three “guests,” brandishing his sword as he began banging the helmets adorned on Trellin’s men. The man, Garm, did the same with his staff as he carved a path to the next set of stairs down.

Trellin gritted his teeth and walked over to Garm as if to stop him and received a sharp thwack to his head with the piece of wood. There was a short scuffle as the three “guests” hurried on down the stairs and Midal covered their trail as he held his sword at the ready.

Mortiz smiled. The surprise attack had caught Trellin’s men off guard and unprepared to face the assault as Lord Antrielle’s three other men assisted, taking out nearly half their force with injuries too severe to keep fighting. Mortiz walked up to a groaning Trellin as he was rubbing his head and pointed the tip of his sword at the self-proclaimed emperor.

“It seems we are at an impasse, my *lord*. I suggest you take your men and leave, otherwise I will have to assist all of you out of her Highness’s kingdom.”

“It is not hers,” Trellin hissed. “It is *mine*, and mine alone!”

Mortiz didn’t reply. Instead, he nodded towards the stairs and allowed Trellin’s men to help him as the city guards and Midal back away from the stairs to let them through.

“This isn’t the last of it, *general*,” Trellin spat as they picked him up to his feet. “None of you have any idea what you are dealing with.”

“Whatever the case may be, I think you’ll find that Carag City will be ready for your murderous hide,” Lord Antrielle said, stepping up to Trellin a little dagger in his hand. “And let me share with you what we do to those who cross our city.” He swiped his blade on Trellin’s exposed arm and the young man gasped.

“You’ll pay for that,” Trellin fumed, spittle flying from his lips.

“I’m sure I will,” Lord Antrielle said as Trellin’s guards hurried their lord down the stairs, then added in a softer voice, “but I’m also sure that poison will get to you first.”

“You poisoned him?” Mortiz asked, his eyes straying to the blade.

“Nothing deadly,” Lord Antrielle said dismissively. “Merely enough to make him think he is dying for a few hours before the pain subsides.”

A scream from below reached their ears and Lord Antrielle gave Mortiz a soft smile. The lord turned and looked at the mess that had come from the fight. “Now where did my book go?”

Mortiz shook his head. Walking to the edge of the room, he watched as the Princess flew away on the green dragon. *What are you doing Princess?*

Mortiz thought for a moment as sounds of Lord Antrielle fretting came from behind.

“Lord Antrielle, I need a messenger sent to the capitol as fast as possible,” Mortiz said, turning to face the man again. “I need to get word out to the other lords that we are not handing over the Kingdom to Lord Trellin and that the Lady Wylinth is alive and safe. I also need the fastest horse you have available?”

“My fastest horse? Are you intending to go after her?” Lord Antrielle said, taking a seat and placing his feet on the empty table.

“I do.”

“Well good for you. But before you go and commandeer one of my horses would you mind helping me find my book? I seem to have misplaced it in the struggle of everything.”

“Uh, about your book, my Lord,” the guard Midal said, looking sheepish.

“Come now, Midal. If you’ve got something to say, then spit it out.”

“I... I saw one of the men grab it as they were leaving,” Midal said, his cheeks growing red. “One of the... uh, guests I was watching upstairs, that is. He shouted something about returning it to the library once he was finished with it.”

“We’ll I guess even thieves can be proper at times too,” Lord Antrielle said; however, his legs fell to the floor and Mortiz got the impression his cheerful attitude had dissipated a little. “Seems like you’re off the hook for the search General.”

“There is something else,” Midal added, his face going an even deeper shade of red than Mortiz had thought possible. Lord Antrielle’s face soured so much that Mortiz chuckled to himself.

“And...” Lord Antrielle snapped. “Spit it out Midal.”

“They also took the Golden Gauntlet,” the guard said, flinching slightly at his Lord’s words.

Lord Antrielle mouth burst into a string of profanities as Mortiz worked to calm him down before he did something he would regret. Midal explained that Garm and the others had told him of their affiliation with the Princess, and that she confirmed it herself before shouting into the windows as a distraction. With the Princesses permission he had let Garm bag the Gauntlet before heading for the stairs.

“The man’s staff was glowing, sir,” Midal said, his voice pleading.

“You did the right thing in assisting her Highness,” Mortiz said, laying a hand on Midal’s shoulder.

“The right thing? General, this action, even if it was under the Princesses request, is completely out of line,” Lord Antrielle fumed as he paced around the room. “That artifact is a sacred relic of the Kingdom left in my family's care. I can’t just abandon it. And what am I supposed to showcase in that room tonight? It was to be the grand piece for people to ogle and bask in awe of. Now I’ll have lost grace in our people's eyes for losing such a treasure.”

“The royal family will pay for the piece,” Mortiz said, heading towards the stairs now he was sure Antrielle wasn’t going to dismiss Midal as a guard for doing his duty. “Since it seems the Princess stands in need of it, funds will be sent to help recover the loss you will experience from its absence. As for the people knowing... you should have your smiths craft a piece similar enough that no one will know the difference.”

“Fine, fine,” Lord and what is our plan now, General?” Lord Antrielle asked, standing up and following him to the stairs. “What is to become of Marbrenth?”

Mortiz stopped by a window next to the stairs his eyes gazing out past the city walls. “We protect Lady Wylinth’s throne, and her people from Trellin’s attacks. He wants to conquer the three kingdoms of Andolin, so it is our job to stop him here.”

“And what are you going to do about the Princess? We can’t just let her roam the wilderness?”

Mortiz raised an eyebrow and said, “Then you better get me that fast horse.”