Chapter One

The forlorn cry of a hawk echoed above grandfather pines entrenched in snow. Kyriel Sathkin paused, one hand on his mount’s reins as he listened to the fading cry.

Pine needles danced in the breeze, the hawk cried again, but exterior sounds meant nothing besides the silence in Kyriel’s mind. Where was his brother’s voice? That almost continuous voice, which rarely left Kyriel in peace. What did Darvid plan this time that drew him away from his usual torment?

 He could see no shadows lurking among the trees planning terror. That did not mean Darvid wasn’t there.

In front of Kyriel rode his sister, Citilas. Behind, out of sight, rode the rest of the Court of Vorengart, out for a hunt in the first day warm enough to do so after a long winter. The baying of hounds reached him, distant laughter, the vibration of hooves. Kyriel wondered what had delayed them and his guard.

 “Kyriel?”

 Citilas raised a gloved hand, casting her ger falcon aloft. The bird winged swift as a dart across a cloudless sky, high above the frost-rimed trees.

 Of all Kyriel’s family, Citilas was the only one he’d dared to love or trust. The idea that Darvid might be hiding nearby worried him.

 “Why do you make it so hard for anyone to get close to you, Kyriel? You will be crowned soon enough. You have to speak more with your courtiers. What is troubling you? You’ve been quiet all morning. Smile, for spirits sake!”

 Smile? When was the last time he’d laughed? Bitterness surfaced. Words sprung to his lips and then died unspoken, for how could he admit to anyone that what drove him was a voice in his head? He couldn’t, not without sounding mad. He’d tried once to tell his father. He’d been beaten for lying. He’d tried to tell his nurse. She had laughed at him and told him to stop telling stories. He’d tried to kill his brother. He’d tried to kill himself.

He’d listened to that voice until he wasn’t sure if the words were his or Darvid’s. He’d tried to push them out and suffered such agony that blood came from his ears and he’d blacked out.

The voice rarely stopped. Rarely. So that when it did he panicked from the loss. If he couldn’t already hear the court behind them, he would have turned back already.

Because Darvid murdered anyone who got close to him, and the insidious voice within Kyriel’s mind made him doubt. Neither could he prove that Darvid had done such deeds. He was far too clever. Darvid charmed where Kyriel kept silent; people always believed Darvid to be innocent.

 He forced his mouth to curve upward as icy wind whistled down from the mountain. “I smile.” He gestured to his surroundings. “The hounds a-baying, the sun a-shining, what could possibly trouble me?”

 Citilas frowned, dark lashes shadowing her cheeks. A small scar pinched the side of her mouth, an argument with a kitten when she was child. Was it wrong to adore a sister so much?

He remembered too vividly the bloated corpse of his page, grey and cold as it was pulled from the lake below Vorengart Castle; the lodge fire that had killed their other sister and parents; the hound, tarred and set alight to die in agony. No proof. He had never been able to prove that Darvid had done it, and, more often than not, the accusing stares turned his way, not toward Darvid.

 Hooves crunched on dying leaves from the birches mixed between the pines. Death had always been an option, so had running away.

 Citilas’s falcon plummeted between two ancient pines. Kyriel and Citilas urged their horses forward, following. Kyriel glanced back. Somehow they’d lost his guards. He nearly pulled up his horse but these moments of privacy were so rare. So rare to be alone with anyone, that he ignored the prickles of warning.

 “I can tell when you’re lying, too,” Citilas said as she pulled up her mount. The iced wind bloomed roses in her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled. “My husband doesn’t believe you are so cold either.”

 He allowed a real smile. Yes, he knew Feron liked him. Citilas’s mountain of a husband had always been steadfast. What would it be like to love someone like that? Not to have to fight him every day of your life? Not to have to share your dreams?

 Citilas lifted her arm as the falcon returned, a brightly-hued pergia bird between its talons. Citilas took the limp creature, gave the falcon a morsel, and dropped the bird into a sack hanging from her saddle’s pommel. The falcon settled on the perch before her, ruffling its feathers as it found its balance.

 “We should wait for my guards,” Kyriel said.

 “A prince may do as he pleases.”

If only that were so. If it were, then he would have killed Darvid long ago. Even a prince must obey some rules. Melancholy did not usually tempt him so, but the day made him wonder if he should just walk away, even when in his heart he knew he would never leave Vorengart to Darvid’s mercy.

A cry from Citilas brought him out of dangerous reverie. At first he thought she played a game as her mount took off between the trees, but then her horse bucked and she fell forward over the saddle’s pommel. The falcon took flight with a screech of alarm. Kyriel reached her side, leaning over to grab at her horse’s reins. Her horse squealed and bucked again.

A knife protruded from Citilas’s throat; the blade deep enough to remain buried. Cold iced Kyriel’s veins.

 Eye’s ringed white, panic drove the horse forward. Kyriel reached, and as he stretched, he saw a figure among the trees. He faltered, fingers missing the leathers as he recognized Darvid. His brother’s laughter filled his mind.

 Kyriel gathered his reins and crashed after Citilas’s horse, the image of his brother’s face imprinted on his mind. Trees passed in a blur before his eyes, his concentration fixed on Citilas’s bolting horse. Branches slapped his face, the narrow paths between trees conspiring to keep him from her side. Tree roots threatened to break his horse’s legs.

 He cried Citilas’s name, leaning low against his horse’s neck, fear sending urgency down the reins to push it faster. Froth flecked his face from his mount’s mouth, hot flesh burned into his cheek.

Closer he gained, and caught the reins. He leaped from his mount and gentled the other horse until he could lower his sister to the ground. Frantic, he listened for a heartbeat.

“No,” he whispered when no pulse jumped beneath his fingers. *Why didn’t I turn back? Why? I knew, but just for once…*“No.” He wiped blood from the side of her mouth with a thumb, willing her to awaken. Her head lolled in his arms. “No.” He howled, holding her close, rocking in mindless grief, repeating her name over and over, trying to make a lie of what he held. Silence fell as he sobbed into her hair. He could smell her perfume.

 Citilas’s falcon returned to perch on the saddle, jesses trailing. Her mount snorted then stilled. Kyriel stared at the falcon through glazed eyes as it cocked its head to one side, beady black eyes assessing before it took flight, startled by something.

 Grief and rage warred within him. The image of Darvid’s smiling face, the laughter in his mind. With infinite gentleness, Kyriel laid Citilas down on a bed of leaves and climbed to his feet. Violence filled him then, intent. He dashed tears from his eyes and grasped the hilt of his sword; drew it, with every intention of using it on his twin brother. He stood over Citilas as though he would protect her even in death, when the rest of the hunt arrived.

 Shocked faces surrounded him. A courtier bent down and retrieved the knife. Carved into the amethyst pommel were Kyriel’s initials, but even without that they would know it was his. Amethyst was his heartstone. Accusation, horror filled faces smiling only minutes ago. Had it only be minutes? He wanted to kill them; to tell them to take their foul gazes and thoughts elsewhere, to open their eyes to what his brother was capable of.

Only Feron mattered. Kyriel’s grip tightened on his sword as Citilas’s husband knelt beside his wife, tenderly moving her hair aside. Voice hoarse with grief, the big man demanded, “What happened?”

 Kyriel’s throat closed on words. Pointless words. He could hear Darvid’s laughter in his head, echoing, echoing.

 “Your Highness!”

 Fury roiled. So much, so much he’d kept inside. No more. If it meant his death, no more would he suffer Darvid’s intrusion. Vorengart would just have to find itself a new heir.

 “Spirits help you, Kyriel Sathkin, if this is your doing, witness I’ll take my sword to you, Prince of Vorengart or not!” Feron cried. “Kyriel, why? She loved you!”

 “And that’s why she died. Don’t you understand?” he cried back, the words torn from his throat. “I didn’t do it, Feron.”

 Feron’s grief cut harsher than any knife and would haunt him near as much as Citilas’ death, but so would Darvid’s laughter. Kyriel strode to his horse, denying that his body shook. He didn’t want to leave Citilas, but Feron already carried her in his arms as though Kyriel had no further right to touch her. He hesitated, almost turning to speak to Feron again, but knew it would do no good. Instead, he turned to his guards.

 “There is a killer in this forest. Don’t return until you have found him. I am going back to where the knife was thrown, circle around from there.”

 Feron climbed to his feet, Citilas in his arms. “Halt!” the big man cried. “Look no further for the wielder of the knife, for he stands before us.”

 Kyriel froze, his hand still on his sword. He stared at Feron in disbelief and said quietly, “I have sovereign right over my subjects, and I tell you it was not me.”

 “Prove it,” Feron demanded.

 That would take time. Kyriel glanced at the people surrounding Feron. Kyriel’s own guards held their swords ready, prepared to defend their prince, but no one moved or spoke. He didn’t want to spark off a confrontation between his own people. He said, quieter now, “I can’t right now, any more than you can prove that I did. Yet you said yourself that she loved me. Why would I kill her, Feron? You of all people know me better than that.”

 “I thought I did,” Feron spat, his voice thick with grief, “but perhaps your brother is right. You destroy anyone who gets close to you. Am I next?”

 So Darvid’s whispers had got to Feron, too. Hurt, Kyriel tried to hold his gaze. He knew Feron would fight. This wasn’t the place to argue, not with any of them torn by grief.

 “Let us return to Vorengart and discuss it there.”

 “Let us not.”

 Kyriel spun around to face that voice. Darvid walked into the glade. All eyes turned to Kyriel’s twin brother.

 In his cream silks, Darvid stood framed against the backdrop of pines, the fading sun gleaming off his jewels as he said, “There is no illusive killer among the trees. We all know it. Kyriel, it sorrows me to accuse my own brother and prince, but what choice do you leave me--any of us? We have all seen the results of your madness--the hound, your pageboy, our parents and beloved sister, and now, poor Citilas whose love for you has ended in tragedy. I’ve tried to tell people, but who would believe the man who is destined to rule them capable of such heinous acts? Yet this time is different. There was a witness to your crime. I saw you throw that knife.”

 “You lie! I saw *you*, Darvid, hiding among the trees.”

 “How could you when I have only just arrived? Ask our half-brother, Stevian, who I was with. He will tell you I only left the castle a little while ago.”

 “Enough of this!” Feron cried. “With my wife not yet cold this is sacrilege.”

 “Yes, it is,” Kyriel said, his voice tight. “Let us settle this. Fight me, Darvid. Prove your innocence by the sword.”

 “I have no need. People do not doubt *my* word.”

 “Then we will take this back to Vorengart and have Mage Stevian prove the truth of the matter.”

 So saying, Kyriel mounted his horse, his guards surrounding him as they made their way back to Vorengart Castle.

 The whole journey Kyriel didn’t take his eyes from Darvid. His brother rode beside Feron, offering his condolences, reaching out to touch the bowed shoulders with sympathy. Death was too kind for Darvid, but above Kyriel’s anger lay his grief for Citilas. He no longer cared what happened to him, only that Darvid should be stopped.

 It was his fault. Too long had he let Darvid rule him. Perhaps the courtiers were right to accuse him of Citilas’s death, because in a way he had allowed to happen. A childish fear of his brother remained within him, one he’d never been able to overcome. Coward was not a strong enough word for what Kyriel was, he knew that now, too late.

 “If Darvid lies and I am telling the truth then Citilas’ death goes unavenged,” he said to Feron’s back.

 Feron stiffened but he did not answer. Darvid slowed his horse until they were level. He lifted a hand as though he would strike Kyriel across his face.

 “You have said enough without distressing Feron further.”

The Captain of Kyriel’s guards tensed but Kyriel shook his head, no.

 “I haven’t said nearly enough, brother. You’ve worked so long and hard to perpetuate the lies. What rankled most, Darvid? That you were born second, or that no one loved you?”

 Darvid’s expression tightened, but he said, “I don’t remember our father beating me.”

 “No, he paid you no attention at all. Was that the problem, Darvid? Being beaten for your crimes at least got me father’s notice.”

 “Fool! I felt every stroke of the cane.”

 Startled by that admission, Kyriel paused. “So, what if they kill me? Do you die too?”

 “I might just have to take that risk,” Darvid snapped and caught back up with Feron.

 The lake beneath Vorengart Castle came into view as the forest thinned, its turquoise beauty usually a joy. Now the rippling water only seemed to accentuate his grief, the tears he kept inside. Kyriel stared up at the castle set high on its rocky mount. The castle that would soon be his to rule over.

 Stark against a blue sky, the grey-rock monolith should have welcomed him. Instead its battlements seemed as much prison as friend.

 At the mountain’s feet, they entered the crystal gate. The circular plinth took ten men and horses at a time. One man leaned over and activated the crystal set on one wall. The crystal set within his palm recognized him and opened the gate so that for moments they were surrounded by lambent light. In seconds they arrived on a matching plinth on the edge of Vorengart courtyard and the light faded from around them. Kyriel dismounted. People stared as they crossed the courtyard. No one could avoid the feeling of tension emanating from them all.

Kyriel took two of his guards with him, dismissing the rest as they descended a curving flight of stone stairs and through an archway to Stevian’s caverns below.

 Stevian would find the truth from his crystals. The crystal mage arrived from the furthest cavern, walking between rows of crystals collected over millennia by generations of mages. They sang as he passed, their voices harmonizing in joy. His half-brother appeared pale, uncertain, while Darvid spoke quietly to him. Once, Stevian glanced at Kyriel and then away. Uncertainty changed to anger as Darvid continued speaking. Stevian had been Citilas’s half-brother, too.

 Another man arrived in the cavern. Lord Rotheskian, regent, a man of quiet authority. Kyriel breathed a sigh as he came to stand before him.

 “I have spoken with Earl Feron,” Rotheskian said and laid the amethyst knife on a circular, velvet-covered table. “Before I ask Mage Stevian to scry the stones, would you tell me what happened, Your Highness?”

 He did, as unemotionally as he could. It was difficult, but princes did not weep before their courtiers. Rotheskian listened without interrupting and then turned to Darvid.

 “You say you witnessed his highness throw this knife, Prince Darvid?”

 “I couldn’t say, in all fairness, it was that particular knife, but yes, I saw Prince Kyriel throw a knife.”

 Rotheskian studied Darvid’s face. The Lord’s face grew grim. “Mage Stevian, you can discover the truth from the amethyst in the knife’s hilt?”

 “Yes.”

 “Then do so please.”

 Kyriel spread his feet further apart, trying to relax his muscles. Stevian prepared himself, the amethyst pommel glowed and an answering light came into Stevian’s eyes. It seemed eternity before Stevian’s eyes cleared and he released the knife.

 “Well?” Rotheskian asked.

 Stevian remained silent contemplating his words before he looked to the Regent. “Prince Darvid speaks the truth. The echoes of violence remain within the stone. Doubly clear because amethyst is Prince Kyriel’s heartstone.”

 Stunned, for a moment Kyriel stood speechless, and then, in bewilderment, “Stevian, why would you lie?”

 His half-brother looked up. “The stone does not lie.”

 “Then you are mistaken. What has Darvid promised you, for believe me it will end in your ruin.”

 “Silence!” Rotheskian snapped. “Mage Stevian’s reputation is inviolate, you know this. You know the oaths of veracity all mages must undergo.”

 “Then he has broken them. *I did not kill Citilas*!”

 “It has been proved otherwise. Even a prince must answer for murder. I will convene your councilors to decide your fate. Your guards will step back.”

 Violence hung in the air as Kyriel’s guards hesitated, hands on weapons, but Rotheskian held the voice of authority and Stevian’s vows were sacrosanct. Two of the castle guards stepped forward. They held chains in their hands. Kyriel stared at them in horror. If he chose to fight too many would die in the close confines of the cavern. He contemplated it breathing hard and then nodded to his guards, unwilling to cause bloodshed. With obvious reluctance they stepped back, bowing to Rotheskian’s authority and the law.

 Kyriel’s mind whirled. The truth had to come out if he believed in Vorengart’s laws. Why had Stevian lied? He had, hadn’t he?

#

 Iron links rattled as Kyriel drew up his legs and rested one cheek against his knees. The sound of the chains sent tremors through his body. He could not afford to give into grief.

 *Citilas, sister, I am so sorry*.

 He closed his eyes to inadequate words, refusing tears. *No, don’t weep; plan your revenge on the real murderer.* *Brother, I will string you up by your entrails and leave you to rot in the Spirit’s darkest pit for what you have done*.

 Kyriel saw his sister’s death all over again; a panicked horse crashing through undergrowth, its rider boneless as a rag doll. He raced his own mount to snatch at trailing reins. The knife buried in his sister’s throat had already performed its task. The blood he attempted to wipe away had already ceased pumping. He held the scream inside, the denial as he rocked her in his arms.

“I am not mad,” he whispered to the walls.

“*Are you sure about that*?”

A rat scurried across the dimly-lit cell, eyes glinting in the light from a single crystal globe. It wasn’t the rat who spoke inside Kyriel’s mind but the voice he had lived with from childhood.

“I’m not listening,” Kyriel said.

“*So you run away, as you’ve always run away from the truth. For once in your life face up to what you are, Kyriel*.”

And what is that--a madman incapable of knowing what he did, or a brother driven insane? The rat paused in one corner next to slime-coated walls and cleaned its whiskers.

“*You won’t escape me by watching vermin*.”

No? Think of anything else. Difficult when a woman’s face haunted your mind. Her ice-blue eyes, the scar next to her mouth, the way she teased Kyriel as a child. The way she defended him from his brother, Darvid, when no one else would listen. That’s why she’d died.

“*Feeling guilty, brother*?”

“For what? It wasn’t me who killed her, Darvid.”

“*You wound me. Why would I want Citilas dead*?”

“Why did you want our parents dead? My pageboy? My hound? Citilas was our sister!”

The rat disappeared. Life might be simple as a rat, when all you had to worry about was finding food and water and avoiding the rat-dogs.

“*If you have any sanity left at all, think, Kyriel. If I did those crimes, why haven’t I been brought to justice*?”

“That works two ways, brother.”

“*Does it? You are Heir apparent to Vorengart. Princes can do things mere mortals cannot*.”

“If it were so, why not this time?”

“*Stevian cannot lie, you know that. His vows mean he cannot*.”

“So what hold do you have on him?”

Laughter before Darvid sobered, pity filling every word as he said, “*Poor sad, Kyriel. Poor, mad, Kyriel. You have to face it, brother, for all our sakes you must face what you are.*”

The voice vanished as it always did. Shivering, Kyriel drew his knees tighter against his chest. Darvid was so good at this. Kyriel almost believed him; almost convinced himself he was guilty. But then, for twenty-odd years he had doubted every action, thought, and his sanity.

#

The hall of justice echoed with low voices as soldiers brought Kyriel from his cell. Rotenfauld sat in Kyriel’s usual place at the middle of a long pine table set on a raised dais. To Rotenfauld’s right sat Darvid, to his left, Stevian, Kyriel’s half-brother and mage, and either side of them, six members of the Royal Council--earls, barons and lords of Vorengart, men whom a day ago had sought Kyriel’s judgment and advice.

Brought to stand below them in the center of the hall, Kyriel waited, face set as silence fell. Guards stood at the great arched doorway and either side of him. As they would for any common criminal.

Kyriel listened as Rotenfauld read the charges, and knew by the Councilor’s tone and words that whatever he might say the Council had already decided his fate. He’d listened often enough to Rotenfauld’s pronouncements in this very hall, had admired often enough the justice in Rotenfauld’s words. Today, Kyriel was the supplicant and for the first time he understood the terror of standing in this hall.

Above Kyriel, a large, clear Dow crystal wand loomed with menace. The seven-sided crystal hung point down over Kyriel’s head. The symbolism of inner truth. Legend said the crystal could tell truth from lie and would glow with inner power. He wished it would now as Darvid recounted the events leading to Citilas’ death. Tears threatened to spill down Kyriel’s cheeks. He withdrew his gaze from the wand, listening to the lies. Were they lies? What if this was why the Dow didn’t react, because Darvid did speak truth? *Is Darvid right? Am I truly mad?*

“From Mage Stevian’s reading of the amethyst stone in the knife’s pommel, Prince Kyriel’s personal dagger, we know it was thrown from a man on horseback. A man riding on Her Highness’s left.”

“I was behind her!” Kyriel spat. “How could I possibly have thrown at such an angle?”

“That is your word against Prince Darvid’s and Mage Stevian’s, and we have been shown the truth from the amethyst,” Rotenfauld said.

“And I have said that Mage Stevian lies. For what reason I cannot fathom, but I say again, I did not kill my sister. I challenge Mage Stevian to prove it. Does not the crystal of truth hang over my head?”

Rotenfauld hesitated, and as he did so, the wand began to glow with inner light. The hall fell silent as all present stared upward. A boom resonated through the castle, and then another until the whole place vibrated with its power.

Stevian like the rest watched the crystal. “The spirits have spoken,” he said in his quiet voice. “There is no doubt of Prince Kyriel’s guilt.”

Again, everything rested on Stevian’s words. His interpretation of what the crystal said. Kyriel closed his eyes, trying to feel the truth from the down crystal. He knew Stevian lied. He knew.

Darvid cleared his throat. “As has been noted before, Mage Stevian has no need to prove himself. It is the law of this country, indeed this world that a mage’s words are inviolate and may not be contested no matter who protests. Prince or pauper. This is our law.

“But no matter that, there are witnesses who saw you and her Highness ride forward and you were by her side. Why did you leave the safety of your guards?”

How he stood upright, Kyriel no longer knew. Denial filled him and yet all around him they accepted the dow’s voice and Stevian’s words. It was lies, all lies, had to be, and yet the crystal of truth should not lie. Shaken to his core he fisted both hands and told what he knew of the truth, even if no one listened. “Her falcon had taken wing, we were following. There was no subterfuge in our actions.”

“Yet you did not alert your guards.”

No, because he’d wanted some rare privacy but they would question that as well.

“Your clothes were spattered with her blood, you held the knife in your hands. What more proof do we need?”

“I lifted her from her horse, tried to stem the blood.”

“That is not what the amethyst tells us. Your heartstone. A stone so closely bonded to you it can lie no more than Mage Stevian or the dow crystal.”

What had the stone truly seen? He and Darvid were twins. Could it have mistaken them? Kyriel stared at his brother who spoke of throwing trajectories and speed, so that each word only added layers to the deception.

Kyriel looked at Rotenfauld. A man who had been close to him since he’d been a child. “Why are you so ready to dismiss my words as lies? Have I been such a bad prince, Rotenfauld?”

Was that doubt on Rotenfauld’s face? Or sorrow?

“No, you have not, but when we can no longer trust our prince, steps must be taken. You know the law as well I, Kyriel Sathkin. How many times have we stood together and listened to the crystals’ voices?”

“You are taking my brother’s words over mine.” *And Stevian says nothing more. Why not?*

“Shall we also bring up other unproven events?” Earl Dejare asked.

Kyriel turned to look at him. This man had always vied for more power in court, but he had a point. A spark from a hearth supposedly brings a whole hunting lodge to ashes with Kyriel’s parents still inside. A pageboy slips on mud and drowns. A hound burns to death covered in tar. If there was guilt from Kyriel it wasn’t for performing the acts but for not preventing them.

“Do so. Ask what you will.”

“But that is unnecessary,” Darvid said. “Whatever the truth of past crimes, it is Citilas’s death you must answer for, and no matter your pleading, the truth has been proven and your sentence already decided.”

“Without proper trial! Where is my defense?”

Rotenfauld stood. “How can there be a trial when it is our prince who we sentence?” Rotenfauld asked heavily. “You were the foremost voice of justice in Vorengart and you have broken our trust. No one, after seeing the evidence, would defend you--do you think I did not follow the proper forms? Speak no more, your fate has been decided.”

Kyriel drew in a deep breath. “My innocence will be proven as you suffer Darvid’s rule....” He broke off as pain assaulted his mind. He looked across at Darvid. His brother’s face remained unreadable. As needles of pain jabbed into his skull, Kyriel lifted his chin. He’d always fought his brother’s invasion into his mind, and perhaps this time his desperation was stronger.

 Darvid grimaced as Kyriel attempted to send the pain back. Darvid gripped the table before him, knuckles white. “Stop him. He is trying to kill me,” he ground out.

Faces turned toward Kyriel.

A guard hit him in the kidney and Kyriel fell to his knees. Through pulsing waves of excruciating pain he struggled to his feet and croaked, “You are fools, all of you. Can you not see what he is doing?” he gasped. “He lies and schemes and twists everything his own way. It is him trying to kill me not the other way around, but like every other crime I’ve been accused of there is no proof. Spirits help you all.”

His fate would not be death, although it might as well be. It would be exile to another world. A world selected by the *maelaia,* the lines of invisible power that ran beneath and beyond the worlds and powered the crystals. The spirits Kyriel’s people worshipped.

#

Kyriel was taken down to Stevian’s cavern beneath Vorengart Castle. A pyramid now sat on a circular table. Although Kyriel had vowed not to utter another word he looked at Stevian and said, “If you do not believe me now, I beg you to read the stones and find the truth of this and my alleged past crimes. They are not mine, Stevian.”

Stevian refused to answer him, but Kyriel saw Rotenfauld turn and looked at him. The councilor opened his mouth as though to say something and then closed it again. The guards released Kyriel’s hand but remained close enough for him to smell their sweat. As he rubbed circulation back into his wrists, he glanced at the guard’s impassive faces. He knew them both and their families, yet the blankness of their expressions and refusal to meet his eyes told him they would not help him.

Stevian murmured an invocation. The pyramid glowed. Kyriel pulled his gaze back to the carved crystal. It stood two hands high, made of three different types of crystal--a powerful meld whose combination created enormous power. A thrill of fear ran through him. Not many people saw such things, they were leftovers from when his kind crossed to other worlds, until their use was forbidden. These crystals were only bought out on special occasions. Kyriel didn’t like being special.

For the first time, Stevian spoke. “Reach out and touch the pyramid’s peak.”

There were ten men within the cavern, mute witness to his humiliation. The odds of Kyriel escaping were ridiculous. He spun and snatched a dagger from the nearest guard. They drew their swords in response.

“Kyriel!” Rotenfauld cried. “Don’t try it.”

Rotenfauld’s voice distracted him even as countered a guard’s attempt to disarm him.

*Fool. Desist. I will have my way. Drop the knife, Kyriel. Drop it, I say*! Darvid’s voice thundered into his mind.

Kyriel shook his head. A blow from the flat of a sword numbed his fingers. The knife fell to the cavern floor, the sound magnified by the chamber.

Still he fought. Kyriel refused to face the pyramid, and attempted to parry the blows that fell on gut and kidneys with a stoicism born of desperation. Only a knock to his skull sent him reeling against a stone wall and enabled them to take fast hold of his limbs. Another blow to Kyriel’s gut doubled him over. The air left his lungs.

“Enough!” Rotenfauld cried.

The guards dragged him before the glowing pyramid, where Stevian waited calmly, as if he had already known the outcome. Perhaps he had.

Kyriel refused to help.

Darvid forced Kyriel’s hand toward the pyramid.

Still Kyriel resisted, the veins on his hand and arm blue with tension.

“As part of your punishment,” Rotenfauld said, “the council has sentenced you to be sent randomly along the *maelaia.* You will also be bereft of any memories of Vorengart so that you can never return.”

Shocked, Kyriel stared at Rotenfauld.

Then his fingers touched the pyramid.

Kyriel fell, sucked into a maelstrom. With a cry he tried to withdraw, but the crystal’s greedy influence pulled him further. Kyriel fought a terrifying rush of vertigo as his body dashed along a dizzying path through a storm of lights, while discordant sounds battered at his mind. Like a nightmare of falling over a cliff edge, he fell so fast, so furiously he expected death. When everything stopped his body still wanted to race.

*Where?*

Head pounding, Kyriel climbed to his feet. When his head stopped spinning, he stared.

*This is not possible*. The pyramid surrounded him. He recognized the tri-colored crystal. But the pyramid had only been two hands high. What had Stevian done? This was no other world. He placed his fingertips on one smooth wall and then pressed his nose up against the rock. He shielded his eyes to see Stevian and Darvid still within the cavern. Everyone else had gone.

“Stevian!” Kyriel cried.

Silence.

Kyriel’s heart hammered. “Stevian!”

Silence. Kyriel kicked one of the walls. He sat down cross-legged in the center of the pyramid’s base. Standing up made him claustrophobic. His head touched the peak. What would happen if the air ran out? Or were crystals porous enough to let air through? But, no, Stevian was supposed to send him somewhere. What if he didn’t? What if that was a lie, too and he left him here to die?

Instinct screamed at him to get out. He hated small spaces. He climbed to his feet, trying again to peer through the pyramid’s translucent walls, the crystal’s cut sides partitioning his vision into facets.

Why would Stevian believe Darvid and not him? Kyriel asked himself again if he was truly mad, if he deserved this punishment. Was the voice in his mind truly Darvid’s or a figment of his imagination? Perhaps they should just have killed him.

Stevian walked over to a book and turned the pages. He picked up a marker and laid it down to keep the page open as he brought the book to the table.

Just as Kyriel had done with his dagger the day before. He hadn’t even taken it hunting with him. *Not* his imagination. He remembered the action clearly now. Was the dagger which had killed Citilas even his, or one made to look like it? Could he have proved that even if it was?

He climbed to his feet and tried to thump the pyramid’s walls but he was too close to their slanted sides. *I won’t panic*. He couldn’t breathe properly. His pulse drummed at his temples, beating in his ears. Sweat soaked his shirt. *I must act*!

Something broke inside him. He roared and clawed at the walls with useless hands, kicking until exhaustion made him fall. He watched garnet beads of blood drip from his hands onto the smooth floor, anything rather than think more about where he was trapped. He couldn’t pull enough air to his aching lungs. *I will go mad if Stevian drags this out any longer.*

His fingers curled into fists and light flooded in rainbows through the clear quartz peak while Stevian activated globes within the cavern. The mage’s approach slashed the brilliant colors to shadows. Kyriel shrank away as the mage placed a hand on the pyramid’s tip. He felt as helpless as child’s toy when everything went dark, and just as small. Heart racing, he waited.

A pulse, a vibration, sang though the crystal. Kyriel steadied himself, feet braced apart, taking deep breaths of precious air in an attempt to calm himself.

Vibration increased, the crystal walls began to glow, building and building towards radiant climax. He couldn’t watch anymore.

His senses, only moments ago locked in vacuum became assaulted with contrasts of sound. Brilliant light blinded him, an eerie music grew to a crescendo of pain, and beneath it all a great heart beat loud enough to deafen a world. He felt a tugging, or perhaps a calling, a rushing through his veins. He stood his ground, fighting for some kind of control, anything. It made no difference. The tugging grew more persistent, intensifying until his body stretched, bone attenuated to the point of dissolution.

He reached toward the amethyst calm of his heartstone, a last resort, trying to ground himself within its song. He heard an answer to his call, a tone clear as glass. He concentrated all his will in that direction, even as his body dissolved.

Chapter Two

Amethyst calmed and relaxed, it was a blood cleanser; it gave one spiritual and psychic awakening, and enhanced the right brain activity. Alyssa Ryan wondered how she was supposed to get that from a shiny stone. She didn’t feel relaxed. In fact all she felt was an inner mischievousness that had nothing to do with crystals, but the delicious, childish feeling of doing something she really shouldn’t and getting away with it.

Three foot high amethyst geodes weren’t cheap. Alyssa didn’t care. Daddy’s money had paid for them. As it had paid for this cottage and everything else she’d decided to fill it with. She had considered not taking her inheritance at all, but why not? She figured she’d earned it.

 Dear daddy had died of a heart attack six months ago. Pity it hadn’t been sooner, but you couldn’t have everything.

 Determined to put the past behind her, Alyssa bought what she’d always dreamed of, a cottage in the country, a few acres, a horse and two Irish wolfhounds. Yes, daddy had been stinking rich. A house in London, a viable business, both sold, not to mention his investments, meant Alyssa never had to work in her life if she didn’t want to.

 What she had was everyone’s dreams, although she bet her lacy frilled cotton socks no one else would want to live through what she had to gain it.

 That was the past rearing its ugly head on a stormy night, along with a headache that refused to go away and bringing far too many reminders of things best forgotten.

 The girl in the shop in Glastonbury had assured her that the amethysts would help Alyssa’s migraines. Help her to relax, to let go the past.

 Yeah. Right. That’s why she had a boomer right now.

 Mind you. One was also supposed to believe in such things and not shallowly buy them simply because they looked ‘pretty’.

 Very pretty. Alyssa adored the colors; the way the crystals graduated from deep purple right down to clear quartz in the center of the geodes. She loved the contrast of their curving shapes and the sharp points.

 She was probably too cynical to accept that they held real power to heal. Faith was something in which she was sadly lacking.

 A crack of thunder outside and she wrapped her arms around herself. The storm had been crashing away for a while now. A typical autumnal storm atop the Somerset moors, full of pyrotechnics and rain worthy of Noah’s flood. The lights dimmed and dipped, sprang to life again, and then failed completely.

 Nothing new there. Happened all the time. Uncle Harold had told her that buying a cottage outside the small village of Priddy might be a mistake. Alyssa hadn’t listened. Candles already waited on the mantelpiece. Alyssa lit a couple.

 Uncle Harold may well have been right even if she did hate to admit it. Three months down the road the roses had died in more ways than one. The stark loneliness of the moors which had suited her in the beginning now began to feel isolated. She wasn’t completely alone, not with the two goofballs who laced her sofa with fur. How they managed to squeeze their rangy bodies onto the sofa at all remained a constant mystery. They looked like a living brindle fur rug of tangled paws and casual intimacy. Daddy would have hated them, and letting them on the chair? Woo, no. Faolan stretched his paws with a satisfying shudder and let out a doggy sigh, then rested his muzzle on Bridie’s flank.

 Another crack of thunder and the flicker of lightning pulled her attention back to the storm. Wind battered away like irate banshees, rattling the slate roof tiles and poking its fingers into every nook, cranny, and badly-set window of the old cottage. Lightning made gargoyles of innocent ceramics, creating evil shadows where none should exist.

 Alyssa only cared that her roof held and the trees in the yard didn’t fall down or fall on the cottage or the stable running parallel to the house. She worried about Wallace outside alone in his stable. She’d battened down the stable doors hours ago but still she worried. Maybe in a bit she’d go out and check on the horse, if the wind didn’t lift her up and blow her away.

 She adored both hounds and the horse but they weren’t enough. She needed to get out, get a job, even if she didn’t need one, just to meet people. To be ordinary. That might help with the dreams as well.

 Alyssa sat on the one corner of the sofa the hounds didn’t occupy. Faolan lifted his head so she caressed his velvety ears. She dreamed about the same place every night. And the same man. The dreams didn’t fade like normal dreams but remained vivid, right down to color, smell, and the taste of food. She remembered the soft touch of Darvid’s lips, the scent of his breath, and the hard muscles of his thighs.

 They always began with a view of an impossible castle high upon the slopes of a mountain.

 A single peak rose dark against a deep blue sky, the mountain’s lower elevations clad in trees, its upper, crowned in stark gray rock. Snow shimmered upon other peaks distant behind it, and at the mountain’s feet danced a rippling emerald lake. Upon the lake rested an island reached by a causeway. Smoke drifted among the trees, hinting at houses. Beyond that, forest cloaked the land, and she couldn’t see what lay farther, but nothing mattered in the dreams. It was safe within those confines. She could fall in love, be a different, confident person, who might make love by a lakeshore and dance with princes. Real life was so much more sordid.

 She rose and went to the fireplace, hunkering down before it, feeding new logs to the flames. A crack loud as a pistol shot had her leaping to her feet, heart thudding. She hurried to one multi-pained window and peered through the curtains. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she could see the old oak by the five-bar gate shedding its final leaves in a mad cotillion. Its branches swayed and bent under the onslaught of the wind, lifting and rising like giant supplicating hands. She bit her lip, thinking of Wallace again.

 Around the fireplace she placed a guard and blew out all the candles but one solid pillar set safely behind glass on the mantel.

 A single, pure note sounded through the cottage. Faolan and Bridie scrambled from the sofa and came to her side as she froze by the mantelpiece. Light began to glow, amethyst light, coming from the geodes. It grew stronger until two beams blended together in the center of her living room. Twisting strands of purple, gold, and white spun like projections from a movie camera. Another note sounded, then another, until musical rills filled the room with orchestral sound.

 Faolan and Bridie howled as though compelled to join the concert. Alyssa gripped their collars, not sure whether to be terrified or fascinated as each note sung through her blood.

 Then the sound and lights stopped, like someone had turned a switch somewhere. Silence and dark replaced sound and light; the candle over the mantel gone out, the fire now a mere orange glow.

 A shadow lay on the floor in the center of the room.

 Mouth dry, knees shaking, Alyssa released Bridie, groping by a chair for her flashlight, not taking her eyes off the outline that hadn’t been there before. She clicked on the flashlight. The solid beam showed her a body on the floor.

 The instinct to run was huge. She did, taking the hounds with her. She grabbed a coat from the hall, threw the dogs in her Volvo Estate and reversed out the garage, got to the gate, drove forward, and the car hit an obstacle with a horrid thunk. For a moment Alyssa just sat there clinging to the wheel, then she unglued her fingers and got out. Now she knew what the crack had been. Half a tree lay across her driveway.

 Fine. She’d just drive slowly and push it out of her way. She tried and failed. She got out again in the slashing rain, tied a rope around a thick limb and reversed. The vehicle stalled and refused to restart.

 Defeated she stared through the windscreen. Her options were to tramp around in the dark, in a storm, and walk roughly five miles to the nearest farm. Or go back inside and confront whoever had invaded her living room floor.

 Driven out of her own house.

 No. She had two dogs and a shotgun.

 Dammit. All her life she’d been afraid. This place—this cottage—was meant to change that. She refused her fear, climbed out the car, called the hounds, and went back inside. She tried the phone first. Dead. Of course it was, and she didn’t have a cell, had never seen the need for one when she had few friends. A landline had always been enough.

 Alyssa got the key to the gun cabinet. The guns weren’t even hers but her uncle’s, although she knew how to use one. She loaded two shells leaving the safety on for the time being.

 No sound came from the living room. Oh God, what if whoever-it-was was dead? A dead body on her carpet. Was that worse than a live, unpredictable one?

 Grasping the shotgun in one hand, hounds either side of her, Alyssa opened the door. The body was still there. Faolan let out a deep woof that un-riveted her feet where they’d stuck to the floor. She let the hound go forward, watched as he investigated. The hound came back, pushed at her hand as though to say, come on, it’s okay. *I don’t want to*, she wanted to wail.

 Four shaking steps took her to the body. Alyssa played the flashlight over the lean form. The man looked unconscious, his hands outflung, the last glow from an amethyst ring fading in the trembling light. Alyssa glanced at the now silent geodes, at the hounds waiting expectantly for her to act, and then back at the man. If not for the hounds she might think she dreamed.

 Wavering light picked out the contours of his face. Dark hair wisped untidily from a single braid. The last time she’d seen him he’d been dressed in satin and brocade. This time, he wore dark brown leathers.

 Alyssa took a deep breath. Tentatively she reached out a shaking hand to touch, to prove the reality. He opened his eyes. She drew in a sharp breath and froze as his eyes glowed with lambent amethyst light, but he closed his eyes again and she let her hand fall to her side.

 Phoning the police was out. She backed away and left the room, went to the kitchen where a wall rack held a collection of coats and ropes. She came back with one of Wallace’s halter ropes, with every intention of tying the man up. His hands were swollen, the fingertips bloody and ragged, as though he’d clawed his way out of somewhere. She hesitated but then tied his wrists anyway.

 Alyssa bit her lip. Strange men weren’t on her wish list. Gorgeous men in dreams were one thing. In reality none had ever been kind to her, except Uncle Harold. Why else did she live in an isolated cottage in the middle of nowhere?

 But she recognized this man. She’d dreamed about him every night for the past month.