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KILLIAN

Killian dusted sand across the report, taking care not to smear the ink of what was already lackluster penmanship.

Not that it mattered.

The correspondence was nearly identical to what he'd sent the week prior. And the week prior to that. All quiet on the wall. No sign of Derin scouts. No defections. Nothing but monotony—broken by the not-so-occasional game of cards—expected in the weeks to come.

It always took a concerted effort *not* to include the last part.

This was the first command where Killian had been left entirely to his own devices, and it was about gods-damned time. He was nineteen and had been training his entire life to inherit command of the Royal Army, never mind that he'd been marked by the god of war himself. Killian was born to lead soldiers into battle, and yet every time an opportunity arose, his father found some excuse for him to remain taking orders from someone else.

For three years, that someone else had been High Lady Darena Falorn. It had only been when she'd sent Killian back to the capital carrying a letter stating he was as ready as he'd ever be that his father conceded on the matter. Killian had all of the space of a day to dream about glory before word arrived that the captain of the border wall's garrison had toppled off the very piece of architecture he was supposed to be defending, resulting in an opening in his position. It was, in Killian's mind, a bad bit of luck all around.

The wall blocking the pass between Derin and Mudamora hadn't seen worse than a skirmish in generations and, in his opinion (as well as that of everyone else in the kingdom),

never would. The jagged peaks of the Liratora Mountains and the grace of the Six ensured that while Derin and its Seventh-worshipping inhabitants were a problem, they weren't his problem. He'd have seen more conflict guarding the entrance to a palace privy.

Killian softened a stick of wax over a candle and was in the process of smearing it across the fold of another letter when a horn blast echoed through the room, startling him.

"The Seventh take you," he muttered, glaring at the uneven glob of indigo as his good manners briefly warred with his indolence. The latter triumphed, and he pressed his signet ring against the wax, leaving behind the imprint of the galloping horse of House Calorian, less its tail.

The horn echoed a second time.

One blast of the horn meant *something* had been sighted in the pass. But two meant *someone*.

Derin scouts were occasionally seen, but not at this time of year when the snow was as deep as a man was tall. More likely, one of his men had spirited a bottle onto his watch and was seeing shapes in the swirl of snowflakes. Either way, Killian couldn't ignore it.

The horn called again.

Killian's heart slammed against his ribs and he grabbed his sword, not bothering with a cloak as he ran toward the door, the bells already ringing a call to arms.

Three blasts meant only one thing, and it was the reason the wall had been built in the first place.

Ancient and austere, the garrison fortress was built with blocks of grey stone with only arrow slits for windows, the narrow halls lit with smoking candles that cast dancing shadows on the naked floor as Killian raced down three flights of stairs, the cold air slapping him in the face as he stepped outside.

His boots sank in the muddy snow as he strode through the courtyard, noting the twang of bowstrings from above, the clatter of boots as men raced up the narrow stairs that switch-

backed their way to the top of the wall. At the gate, his friend and lieutenant, Bercola, stood head and shoulders higher than the soldiers flanking her. All eyes were on what lay beyond the tunnel barred by twin portcullises, the opening of which was shadowed by high wooden scaffolding holding repair materials.

At the sound of his steps, Bercola turned, the giantess giving a grim shake of her head. "It's asking to speak to you."

It.

Killian moved through his men, his eyes drawn through the gates to the woman beyond, snowy peaks rising behind her. She was distant enough to sidestep the arrow shots with ease, her movements too swift to be wholly human. At the sight of him, she extracted a white scrap of fabric from a pocket and held it up in the air.

"Archers, hold." Killian sheathed his sword and accepted a spyglass from Bercola. "And silence all that racket."

"But Captain," one of his men protested. "She's one of the . . ."

"I know what she is." Marked by the Seventh god, the Corrupter. As deadly as a dozen armed men and twice as clever. Her kind were to be killed on sight, but this was the first time he'd seen one up close, and Killian was . . . *curious*.

"Good morning," he shouted, ignoring the exclamations of the soldiers around him. "I'd invite you in for a drink, but I'm afraid I wasn't furnished with a key to the gatehouse."

"Is that the only thing stopping you, Lord Calorian?" she called back.

Killian's jaw tightened. It was no secret he was in command, but still disconcerting to have his name on the lips of one of the corrupted. "Perhaps a certain sense of self-preservation." He raised the spyglass to his eye in time to see a smile work its way onto her face. She was lovely in the way of a poisonous flower: better from a distance.

"Likewise," she said. "You've a reputation, my lord, and I'm afraid accepting that drink might have consequences."

It was a reputation that he hadn't earned, but Killian had long since come to realize that denying it only made people

more likely to believe the rumors. "*Consequences* isn't the word most people use." He stepped out of the company of his men and walked closer. "Privileges, pleasures, delights . . ."

"God-marked lunatic," someone muttered from behind him, but Killian ignored the comment. Dangerous as she was, the woman was at least fifty paces away and on the far side of a wall twelve feet thick—what harm was there in speaking to her?

"If only hubris translated into skill," she replied, half-turning her head, seemingly listening for something.

Killian caught Bercola's eye, but the giantess shook her head. No sign of anyone else in the pass. "There is only one sure way to find out," he called back.

The corrupted tucked the white fabric into her pocket. "We've no time for this. You need to let me through." She cast another glance over her shoulder and scanned the pass, snow-shoes sinking into the powder. "They're coming. There isn't much time."

Uneasy murmurs ran through the ranks, but the spyglass in Killian's hand revealed nothing but snow, rocks, and the occasional tree.

"You must think me mad," he said, resting his elbows on the thick steel bars, through with banter. "I know what you are and what you can do. And frankly, these gates haven't been opened in decades. I'm not sure if they can be." He glanced at his men. "Anyone?"

His men laughed, but there was a nervous edge to it.

"I have no intention of harming you or your men," she said. "Just the opposite—I want to help. I want to stop *her*. But I need you to help me first." Another nervous glance over her shoulder and she took two steps closer to the gate.

"Stay back," Killian shouted, sensing his archers wavering and not wanting an arrow loosed just yet.

"Please." There was more than desperation in her voice; there was fear. And it was driving her closer. "Rufina has ten

thousand men with her, and that is a mere fraction of her host."

Who in the bloody underworld was Rufina?

"No closer." His heart hammered in his chest, the endless darkness of her eyes making him want to pull his sword. Or run. "I've given you fair warning."

"I know her plans." The corrupted was walking toward them now, movements smooth and predatory. "Let me through the gates and I can help you stop her."

"Why would one of the corrupted want to help *me* of all people?"

"Because if she's victorious, I'll never be free of this curse."

She was only thirty feet away. Killian's gut told him to hear her out, but logic said otherwise. His hand went to the pommel of his sword. "I don't trust you. I know what you're capable of."

Twenty feet. "I might be a monster," she said. "But I'm not a liar."

Fifteen. She was corrupted, and the King's command was to kill them on sight. But to do so didn't *feel* right. "Stop."

She kept coming. And Killian had his orders.

"Shoot!"

He saw the six shafts protruding from her chest almost before he heard the bows twang. Surprise blossomed across her face, and she stumbled forward, each step punctuated by another bowshot.

Her eyes fixed on his. "I am not a liar," she whispered, then fell face first into the snow.

No one spoke. Not a word.

You should've heard her out.

Killian's voice rasped as he said, "Get me on the other side of the wall."

You've made a mistake.

"But sir, she's—"

Something is wrong.

"Dead." *Because of him.* "Now open the gods-damned gates."

They stared at him, unmoving. Every one of them were veteran soldiers. Most had seen war countless times. Against Gendorn and Anukastre. Some, with darker skin like his own, had likely fought in the Giant Wars, which had taken place when Killian was still toddling around with a toysword. But that woman, that *thing* lying bleeding in the snow, terrified them. "Get me a rope."

Something was coming.

Text taken from advance uncorrected proof.

