

— IRON WIND —

CLOCKWORK LIES

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CALGARY

CHAPTER ONE

DARK SKIES FORMED an ominous backdrop to the bright silk pavilions and balloons of Mareaux's Festival of Flight. The cool breeze smelled like pending rain.

"I don't like the looks of this," Taya muttered, her eyes fixed on the sky. The breeze ruffled her short auburn hair. Back home in Ondinium, skies this gray would keep an icarus alert and ready to land at the first roll of thunder.

The man walking next to her, one sleeve-hidden hand on her forearm, said nothing. Even when he wasn't required to remain mute under heavy robes and a glass-lensed ivory mask, the Demican lieutenant was a man of few words. Even if he *had* argued for an hour before reluctantly agreeing to this morning's ruse.

But, as Cristof had explained over a glass of bismuth powder, he couldn't possibly maintain his ambassadorial dignity while dangling 1,000 feet in the air with an acute case of food poisoning. Which was why the disgruntled lictor was covered like an exalted while the real exalted hid in Ondinium's pavilion, soothing his roiling stomach with ginger tea and dry toast.

Taya cast another look at the ominous clouds. The Festival was intended to honor and impress Ondinium's ambassador, which meant that she couldn't wear her wings without suggesting, undiplomatically if accurately, that she mistrusted the nation of Mareaux's flight capacity.

Their destination was the queen's personal aerostat, its 55-yard-long silk envelope dyed deep purple— the same hue as the pinot noir wine that was Mareaux's most popular export. A complex network of pale cordage which draped over the dirigible's envelope fastened it to the wicker gondola, which had been painted light

blue with gilt highlights. Ondinium's peacetime flag, a speckle of silver stars against a field of black, fluttered next to Mareaux's gold-and-purple banner.

Giant steel cylinders surrounding the dirigible contained, Taya had been informed by her husband's enthusiastic lecture, a rare and expensive buoyant gas. The large hose emerging from one of the cylinders' tops was being fed by crewmembers into an opening within the aerostat's envelope.

Taya thought trusting her life to fabric, wicker, and gas was insane. She'd rather put her faith in well-forged ondium and her own strength and reflexes.

Amcathra squeezed her arm, alerting her that Queen Iancais was approaching. The queen was comfortably plump and round-faced, with cheerful blue eyes and flyaway red hair that kept slipping out of the fancy royal hairstyles in which it was pinned. She was in her fifties, a widow of two years who was being courted by one of Alzana's ambassadors but appeared in no hurry to remarry as her three children came of age. Taya liked the queen but hoped she remained single; Iancais's marriage to an Alzanan would be a diplomatic fiasco for Ondinium.

Taya sank into a deep curtsy as the queen approached. Next to her, Amcathra remained stock-still in his borrowed ivory mask and long, heavy layers of jewel- and embroidery-encrusted robes.

The queen curtsied to him.

"Good morning, Exalted," she said. She offered Taya a friendly smile. "Icarus."

"Good morning, Your Highness," Taya replied, in Mareaux. "I hope this day finds you well."

"Likewise. You look lovely, Taya. What a charming gown! Whenever you wear one of our styles, your Mareaux ancestry shines through."

"Thank you." Taya's paternal grandparents came from Mareaux, and her inherited auburn hair and fair skin had been a source of great discontent throughout her life. She'd always wanted the black hair and copper skin of a purebred Ondinium. "We were wondering if the festival would still be held. The weather doesn't seem promising."

"My pilot assures me that we'll be safe, although perhaps we will need to move our post-flight picnic indoors," the queen said, addressing Taya's companion, as was proper. "I would be loathe to cancel the flight, Exalted. I know how much you've been looking forward to it."

"The exalted has spoken of little else," Taya said, honestly. She didn't add it had been with more trepidation than enthusiasm. Cristof was fascinated by the *technology* of dirigible flight. He wasn't, however, enthralled by the *experience*.

"Then I'm sure you'll want to meet our pilot," the queen said, still addressing Cristof's blank ivory mask while gesturing to the air crew who stood around them. In moments, a newcomer joined the party. "Exalted Forlore, allow me to introduce Professor Cora Dautry, who is in charge of our flight today."

Dautry's eyes moving uneasily from Taya to the masked figure by her side. Like most women in Mareaux, she wore a dress, although Taya noted with envy that it was plain and utilitarian, with a skirt hemmed high enough to permit easy walking. She wondered if Jayce would be willing to hem her skirts a little higher.

The professor curtseyed even more awkwardly than Taya.

"Professor Dautry will be accompanying you back to Ondinium as part of our exchange agreement," the queen said. "She's taken balloons and dirigibles up over two hundred times for the Mareaux Royal University and has been my personal pilot for two years. We're fortunate to be in her capable hands today."

The professor colored and curtseyed again, muttering something inaudible. She reminded Taya of Cristof, who also fell short when it came to the social graces.

"We're pleased to meet you," Taya said, as warmly as she could. "I hope you'll allow us to ask questions while we're in flight. The exalted has read as much as he can about dirigibles, but of course books are no replacement for experience."

"I will be happy to answer your questions," the professor replied in accented Ondinan. "I hope you will answer mine, too. I am very curious about icarus flight, and little has been written about it."

"There isn't much to say. The principles are the same as bird flight. It's nothing as advanced as this." Taya gestured toward the small, well-insulated steam engine tucked in the back of the gondola. Cristof had told her that it drove the propellers.

"But there's nothing published about ondium," Dautry insisted. "Perhaps if we understood more about it..."

"I'm sure there must be a paper written about it somewhere," Taya said, vaguely. If there were, Professor Dautry would never read it. Ondinium was infamous for keeping its scientific findings secret, although it eagerly welcomed reports about technologies

developed in other countries. "I'm afraid I don't understand its physics; I just use it."

"I have read a few speculative papers," Dautry said. "The most provocative theory is that it's aethereally transmissive."

"Ah..." Taya wished Cristof were with her. To her surprise, Amcathra lightly squeezed her arm. He didn't know an exalted's tap code, but... "That's quite possible."

Since when did the lictor know anything about physics? Or was he just signaling her to get a move on?

"Perhaps you will have a chance to exchange thoughts on the matter with Exalted Forlore during your trip to Ondinium," Queen Iancais said, checking the tiny golden pocket watch that had been Cristof's gift to their host.

"Excuse me, your highness," Dautry said quickly, in Mareaux. "Of course. Your highness. Exalted." She curtsied and hurried off.

Distant thunder rumbled. The clouds were moving closer.

"I'm afraid it's the rainy season," the queen said, glancing upward. "Our storms move south from the Corundiell Sea. It must be snowing in Ondinium already."

"I'm sure it is. Enjoying Mareaux's long, warm autumn has been a pleasant change for us," Taya replied. "It will be difficult to return to cold weather."

"What a pity the exalted can't stay through the winter."

"Unfortunately, the High Council insists he return."

"Of course." The queen knew as well as Taya that the decaturus would never let their only exalted ambassador out of the country for more than a few weeks at a time. "Given the weather, I'm afraid this will be a short flight. Perhaps we will can arrange a longer, private flight when the weather is better. I'm sure the exalted would prefer to go aloft in greater seclusion and comfort."

Meaning, without his mask and robes.

"He would enjoy that, if time and the weather permit," Taya lied. With luck, the queen's offer of a second flight was as politely meaningless as her offer to let them remain through the winter.

"Your highness?" Dautry unlocked the small door to the gondola. "If you're ready, we should leave now." She glanced up at the sky, smoothing a strand of hair behind one ear. "The storm is moving in quickly."

Taya took a few minutes to ensure that her robed and masked companion was comfortable, his heavily embroidered and jeweled sleeves and hem tucked in where they wouldn't interfere with

Dautry's piloting. The long wicker gondola could barely contain all four of them, so filled was it with boxes and bundles.

"Experimental equipment," the queen explained with an amused, apologetic smile. "I allow the professor to pursue her research when we're not using the vehicle for a pleasure flight."

Taya made a mental note of the labels. Cristof and the High Council would be interested in their contents, even if they meant nothing to her.

Trumpets rang across the field and the rest of the ambassadors entered the other nine aerostats. The crowds in the field thinned, leaving the ground crews to continue their work.

The queen, Taya, her disguised companion, and the professor stood close while the small steam engine started chugging and the ground crew cast off lines. Taya maneuvered herself between Lieutenant Amcathra and the others to protect him from accidental discovery. He was taller and broader than Cristof, although the stiff formal robes did much to hide his physique and the exalted's ornately coiffed black wig covered his light blond hair.

"Are you looking forward to being in the air again, Icarus?" asked the queen.

"I always enjoy flying. But I don't understand how something as insubstantial as a gas can lift all this weight."

"It's miraculous, isn't it?" Iancais steadied herself as the gondola lurched and the aerostat ascended.

Taya leaned over the edge of the gondola to watch the ground recede.

"I'm surprised Mareaux doesn't use dirigibles for transportation or trade. A vehicle like this would have a lot of practical uses."

Dautry cleared her throat.

"Miss Icarus, if you would please stay inside the gondola..."

"Oh, sorry. Please, call me Taya." She'd finally given up trying to explain that she wasn't "Miss Icarus." Mareaux's naming conventions were different from Ondinium's; not only did they assume her caste title was her last name, they also failed to realize that she and Cristof were married, since she wasn't "Mrs. Forlore." They'd assigned Cristof and Taya separate rooms, although at least they were in the same suite.

The floating aerostats were a cheerful sight, their bright flags and colors glimmering against the dark sky. Someone on the vehicle flying the Samaran flag waved at them, and Taya waved back.

Her companion shifted, squeezing her arm again. Taya dragged her attention away from their surroundings.

"Are dirigibles useful for transportation?" she asked, repeating her earlier question.

"Not really." The queen's tone was amused. She knew why Taya was asking. "They can't carry much weight, especially over a distance. At the moment, they're most useful to us as observation posts during sporting events and field exercises."

Taya nodded. So, Mareaux was prepared to admit that the vehicles had some military utility, although not as much as the High Council had feared. The decatars would be glad to hear that. They didn't care for any challenge to Ondinium's control of the skies.

"How high have you flown?" she asked Professor Dautry. The pilot was relaxed as she kept an eye on her instruments.

"I've personally gone up to ten thousand feet." She tapped a brass barometer that had been affixed to one of the sides of the gondola, next to a compass, a thermometer, and several instruments Taya didn't recognize.

"Did you get nauseous?" Altitude sickness was a problem for the daredevil icarii who sought to break the record for highest flight.

"No, but I didn't stay up very long. We have to be very careful, with gas." Dautry gestured at the long, cylindrical envelope over their heads. "Several pilots have died in explosions while trying to establish new height records."

Explosions? Taya swallowed. Nobody had warned her about *explosions*. She struggled to remember the other questions she was supposed to ask.

"Have you... uh, have you succeeded in flying against air currents?"

The professor rocked her hand back and forth. "With some effort, yes. Not when the wind is strong. It's the weight problem again. Ondinium manufactures the smallest and most efficient steam engines in the world, but if they're powerful enough to fight strong winds, they're too heavy for an aerostat."

"Couldn't you build a bigger envelope?"

"Then we'd have different problems, such as fuel consumption and envelope folding." Dautry shrugged. "Perhaps the problem will be resolved with Alzana's new electromagnetic engines. I hear they've already had some success using them on their aereonave."

Amcathra shifted. Taya didn't know what *electromagnetic* or *aeronave* meant, but if they alarmed the lictor, they would alarm the Council. Any time the Alzanans invented something new, it alarmed the Council.

"Designing a more efficient aerostat is one of the projects Professor Dautry hopes to address with your Great Engine," the queen interjected.

"I'm sure Ondinium will be eager to assist," Taya said, wondering if the Council would ever let an improved dirigible get off the drawing board.

Wind gusted, jerking the vehicle to one side. Dautry turned her attention back to their progress with an oath that didn't seem quite appropriate to use around a queen.

Next to Taya, Lieutenant Amcathra laid a gloved hand on the edge of the basket. The long ends of his silk sleeve dangled over the edge.

Around them, the other aerostats began falling out of their neatly arranged order as they compensated for the wind.

"What's wrong?" the queen asked.

"There's..." Dautry started to answer when the gondola tilted. Taya instinctively leaned back to counterbalance it. "Damn!"

The gondola lurched again and Taya heard the sickening sound of fabric ripping. Everyone looked up as one of the dirigible's fins plummeted past them, scattering bits of debris behind it.

Dautry struggled with the steering controls.

Amcathra started to say something and Taya elbowed him in the ribs.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"Accident," their pilot snapped. "I'll take us down."

"Well, it seems we won't fly as far as we'd hoped," the queen said, her voice strained. "You have nothing to worry about, Exalted. Professor Dautry is an expert pilot."

"Is there anything I can do?" Taya asked.

Dautry didn't answer, concentrating on her steering controls.

Feeling helpless, Taya leaned over the gondola's edge again. The gusty winds were carrying them out of the palace grounds toward Echelles. Thunder rumbled.

"We need to get down before the lightning gets closer," she said, then mentally chided herself for stating the obvious. Dautry ignored her. The queen smoothed her skirts.

"There may not be any lightning at all, if—" Queen Iancais began. A distant flicker made her swallow the rest of her words. "Professor, please bring us down as quickly and as safely as you can."

The winds were driving the dirigible west. Taya watched, every muscle taut with anxiety, as Dautry fought to compensate for the crippled steering mechanism. The professor wasn't battling the wind so much as attempting to ride it to the ground. Taya wanted to shout at her to go faster, but she grit her teeth and stayed silent.

Thunder cracked, sounding closer. The storm had turned the early dawn back to dusk. They were over the outskirts of the city now, well above its peaked roofs. Beyond Echelles' city walls curled a dull gray line of water, the Pomander River, a distributary from the Corundiel Sea. The river was paralleled by the iron rails of the Grand Mareaux Railway, which stretched south to the coast and north to Mareaux-Ondinium Terminal.

Amcathra grasped her arm. She looked at him, shaking her head. He gestured with a silk-draped hand toward Queen Iancais' feet.

"Your Highness..." Taya said, confused. She wasn't sure what he wanted.

The queen laid a hand on Taya's arm. "I assure you that there's nothing to—"

At last Taya spotted the wisp of smoke rising from the box on the gondola floor. "Fire!"

Professor Dautry swore, glancing away from her instruments. The queen gasped and tried to move as a thin line of flame licked around the lid of the box. She bumped into the professor.

Taya darted forward and grabbed the box. Metal bands around its sides scorched her palms. She yelped, yanking her hands away.

The box tumbled, its lid falling off. Flames licked the gondola's painted wicker floor. Taya started forward as the queen exclaimed about her skirts. Taya looked down. The lace trim on her petticoats was on fire.

Then Amcathra elbowed her aside, grabbing the box with his silk-gloved hands. He turned and heaved it overboard, heedless of his robe's hem dragging through the flames.

Another gust of wind rocked the dirigible, carrying a spray of drizzling rain. Taya crouched and beat on the edges of her skirts with her blistering hands.

"Make sure the fire is out!" Dautry shouted, struggling to control the aerostat.

"I beg your pardon, Exalted," the queen muttered, stamping the hem of Amcathra's robe with one finely tooled leather shoe.

Taya swept the hem aside to make sure the rest of the fire had been put out. Then, with a glance at the queen, she carefully rearranged the layers of fabric to hide Amcathra's heavy boots. They weren't exactly the jeweled silk slippers of an exalted; Amcathra's feet were larger than Cristof's.

"What happened?" she asked, trying to stand and losing her footing. Both Queen Iancais and Lieutenant Amcathra reached out to steady her as the dirigible lurched again in the strengthening winds. Raindrops pelted her face as she glared at Amcathra.

"I don't know," the queen said, sounding angry, "but I promise to find out."

The other aerostats were out of sight behind them. The queen's dirigible made its descent alone in the darkness, pelted by rain. At last Dautry warned them to brace themselves. The gondola scraped and bounced across the ground. Something struck it, and the cylindrical envelope slowly, regally, toppled over, dragging them all through the mud and brambles.



A wet half-hour passed before the queen's soldiers found them trudging wearily out of the muddy orchard. Consternation followed when it became clear that neither Taya nor "the exalted" knew how to ride a horse.

"We don't use horses much at home," Taya said, embarrassed. Almost all of the countries around Ondinium prided themselves on their cavalry, but Ondinium had long since replaced horse transportation with wireferries, trains, and icarii. A few horses were still used to pull carriages, carts, and plows, but riding in a saddle was all but a lost art.

After some discussion, the queen was escorted back to the palace while a nearby farmer's wagon was retrieved for the ambassador and Taya, who asked to be taken back to the festival field.

"Are you sure you don't want to go straight to the palace?" the soldier driving them asked. "We can send a rider to your people to let them know you're safe."

Taya shook her head. Cristof would be waiting in the pavilion; the plan had been that he'd put on his robes again as soon

as the flight was over, in case protocol required him to unmask during the feast. Even if it had been canceled, her husband could hardly ride back to the palace with a naked face. Even with a fake lictor's castemark, he might be recognized by one of the other ambassadors.

"Please, if you don't mind," she insisted.

The soldier shrugged, rolling his eyes at his companion as he turned back to the wagon. There were some advantages to having a national reputation for strange behavior, Taya thought.

They reached the airfield an hour and a half after their flight had departed. The other dirigibles had already landed and were in various states of being dismantled. A swarm of laborers descended upon them, filling the wagon with cargo as soon as Taya and the false ambassador slid off. Taya held on to Lieutenant Amcathra's arm, assuring everyone that the exalted was well, until their lictors found them and marched them across muddy carpets to Ondinium's dripping silk pavilion.

As soon as its draperies were drawn shut, Cristof threw his arms around her, lifting her off her feet in his worried embrace.

"What happened? Are you all right?" His gray eyes fastened on her bandaged hands. "Did you get cut?"

"Just some blisters." She stood on her toes to kiss him, feeling a ridiculous sense of relief. Her husband was wearing a borrowed, ill-fitting lictor's uniform and looked every inch an Ondinium exalted pretending to be something he wasn't. "Somebody sabotaged the aerostat. Lieutenant Amcathra saved us."

"Sabotage?" Cristof turned, one hand resting on her back. "Janos, what happened?"

The lictor frowned as his two men lifted away the ivory mask and unpinned the wig. He shook his long sleeves back and ran his hands briskly over his face and crew-cut blond hair.

"I am grateful you were born to wear such garments, and not me, Exalted."

"That makes one of us." Cristof slid his hand off Taya's back and stepped forward. "Here, let me help."

"If you expect me to object to the impropriety, you are mistaken." The lieutenant held out his arms, allowing his men, Taya, and Cristof to begin the lengthy process of releasing him from his sodden layers.

"Jayce isn't going to be happy about this," Taya predicted, draping one of the muddy robes over a chair next to the brazier.

Jayce could work miracles with a needle and thread, but saving these garments would take the Lady's own help.

"Jayce isn't happy about anything," Cristof countered, helping the lieutenant out of his second under-robe and handing it over. "Are those scorch marks?"

"Somebody put an incendiary device on the dirigible," Amcathra said. "I smelled vitriol while I was throwing it overboard."

"An incendiary—" Cristof turned to Taya, grabbing her wrist and turning it over. "These are *burn* blisters?"

"I grabbed it with my bare hands," she admitted. "The metal was hotter than I expected."

"Let me see." He started to unknot the bandages, and she pulled her hand away.

"You can look at my hands when we're back in the palace."

"How bad is it?" he demanded, his grey eyes shadowed with concern.

"They're just blisters." She changed the subject. "Come on, you need to get dressed. The queen will want to talk to you about the sabotage."

"The exalted should appear shaken and outraged," Amcathra instructed, slipping out of his third and final robe and standing in nothing but his uniform trousers and boots. Taya wondered how he could stand the chill. Maybe all that blond hair on his chest and arms kept him warm. The snarling bear's head tattooed on his upper arm seemed an appropriate symbol for the hirsute Demican.

"I *am* shaken and outraged. If I'd known the flight was going to be dangerous, I wouldn't have asked you two to go."

"You couldn't have known," Taya reassured him. "How are you feeling? You look better."

"Well, I'm no longer using two chamberpots at the same time. I suppose that's an improvement."

"I don't understand how you can get so sick eating the same food as the rest of us."

"The exalted possesses the refined constitution that accompanies a thousand fortuitous rebirths," Amcathra observed.

"Don't be snide, Janos," Cristof countered. "Impersonating an exalted is an executable offense."

"As is impersonating a lictor, Exalted."

"Both of you, be quiet," Taya interrupted. "Lieutenant, would you please brief my husband before he talks to the queen? I'll get him dressed."

"In wet, muddy robes," Cristof muttered, tucking his glasses into a pocket and holding out his arms. "I can hardly wait."

"Yes, it *is* pleasant to put on a dry uniform." Amcathra reached for the white shirt and black uniform jacket waiting for him as Cristof gave him a dark look.

By the time the exalted was covered by robes, mask, and wig, the rain was dripping through the pavilion roof so thoroughly that the fabric's presence hardly seemed to make any difference. The queen had sent two carriages for them. Amcathra, Taya, and Cristof took the first, and their two lictors followed in the second.

Cristof reached forward to close the curtains, but Taya stopped him.

"Let yourself be seen," she suggested. "To show you're still alive."

"Yes, it will be much easier for a frustrated assassin to shoot you if he can see where you're sitting," Amcathra added, agreeably.

Taya scowled, then leaned forward and yanked the carriage curtains shut.

"You're awful," she accused. Next to her, Cristof fumbled off his ivory mask.

"So is making me wear this when I don't have to." He wiped his face with one wet sleeve, smearing his fake lictor's stripe. "Do you really think it was an assassination attempt, Janos?"

"Yes."

"But why?" Taya pulled a damp handkerchief out of her rain-ruined reticule. "This isn't an *important* diplomatic mission."

"But it is the first time in nearly two centuries that an exalted in good standing has left Ondinium."

"Not that good a standing," Cristof interjected as Taya rubbed at the black smear on his sleeve.

"Nevertheless, your presence may be a temptation to political factions who disagree with Ondinium's policies. That is why I am accompanying this mission."

"I *asked* you to accompany this mission."

"Your request was serendipitous, as the Council had already ordered me to go."

"I see. If that's the case, I think you should stand in for me more often. I'd be much safer that way. And more comfortable, too."

"Regrettably, impersonating an exalted is an executable offense."

"Lieutenant, did the Council *warn* you that somebody might try to kill Cris?" Taya pressed, giving up on the stained sleeve and wiping the rest of the paint off Cristof's face, instead.

"All official envoys from Ondinium are considered to be at risk when they travel to foreign countries. Ondinium has many enemies. An exalted would be an especially attractive victim for an assassin or kidnapper." Amcathra met Cristof's eyes. "Fortunately, the Council considers you to be one of the more expendable members of your caste. Your loss would be a political embarrassment, but it would not cripple the nation."

"Lieutenant!"

"It's all right, Taya. That was my understanding from the very beginning of this ridiculous charade." Cristof gave her one of his rare, crooked smiles, tugging the handkerchief from her fingers to finish cleaning his face by himself. "If I were a *respectable* exalted, the Council would never have let me leave the city."

"That doesn't make it any better." She scowled and leaned back, plucking with annoyance at her soaking skirts and petticoats. Her bandaged palms hurt. "And you don't have to sound so smug about it, either, Lieutenant."

"I have no intention of allowing your husband to be assassinated. I have seen how much trouble you cause when you investigate murders."

"But why a fire?" Cristof asked, forestalling her retort. "Why *not* a bullet to the head or a bomb in a carriage? They would be much more reliable."

"But more obvious," Taya suggested, unwillingly drawn into his speculation. "Apparently aerostats explode all the time."

"Not all the time," he corrected her. "Only nine percent of aerostat excursions have ended in injury or death in the last ten years. Icarii have a much higher accident rate, statistically speaking."

"But we seldom explode."

"Perhaps the attack was not intended to kill," Amcathra intervened. "Perhaps it was only a warning."

"Which brings us back to this being a relatively unimportant mission," Taya said. She paused and looked from one to the other with a trace of suspicion. "This *is* an unimportant mission, isn't it?"

Cristof leaned over in a rustle of robes to give her an ameliorating kiss. He'd become much better at it since their marriage.

"Yes," he promised. "I'm supposed to report on the status of Mareaux's dirigibles, but everyone knows that. Janos?"

"The same. I am also to report on your behavior during this mission."

"Naturally. Anything else?"

"I have no other clandestine mission to accomplish in Mareaux. Icarus?"

"Me? I'm just here to keep the two of you from starting a war."

"It seems your mission has just become more challenging."

The carriage rattled to a halt and Taya helped her husband back into his mask.

"This isn't going to cause a war, is it?" she asked. Cristof muttered something that was muffled by his mask.

"That will depend on who started the fire," Lieutenant Amcathra replied.

Ambassadors and courtiers milled around the palace's marble entranceway, turning to watch as they stepped inside. A few nodded and murmured greetings, uncomfortable around a peer whose body and face were kept hidden in public. Lord Gaio and Lady Fosca Mazzoletti, the brother-and-sister ambassadors from Alzana, pushed their way forward. They looked dry and well-groomed, in contrast to most of the other guests who'd been on the aerostats. They must have changed their clothes as soon as they'd returned to the palace, Taya thought, disgruntled.

"Oh, Exalted, I'm so glad to see you safe," Lady Fosca exclaimed, hurrying forward and laying a slender, well-manicured hand on Cristof's arm. "We were absolutely horrified when your dirigible broke apart!"

Taya bristled. *Nobody* touched an exalted without his or her permission. Cristof's fingers, hidden by his long sleeve, tapped a message on her arm: *Polite*.

"The exalted appreciates your concern," she said, straining to keep her tone level.

Lady Fosca undoubtedly knew about the taboo. She simply enjoyed showing her disdain for Ondinium's traditions.

"And you, Icarus? What happened to your hands?" Lord Gaio asked with a sympathy that Taya suspected he didn't feel. Before she could answer, he'd taken her free hand and cradled it in his own. "Were you injured?"

"Just some blisters, thank you, Your Excellency." She tugged her hand away. Touching an icarus wasn't taboo, but she didn't like Lord Gaio, who was none too subtly courting the queen. If he wanted his suit to succeed, she thought, he should stop flirting with every other woman in the palace.

"Is it true that somebody set fire to your balloon?" Lady Fosca asked, gazing at Cristof's blank mask with a show of sympathy. Cristof's fingers danced on Taya's arm, spelling out a word: *dirigible*.

"There was a fire on the queen's *dirigible*," Taya corrected.

"Its cause will be investigated," Lieutenant Amcathra added, his voice flat.

"I should certainly hope so," Lord Gaio observed. "And you should punish the negligent pilot. The exalted could have died."

"The risk of death was minimal. Perhaps the person who started the fire was under the impression that Mareaux uses the same inflammable gas as Alzana," Lieutenant Amcathra replied. His blue eyes were cold. The other courtiers fell silent, listening.

"Or perhaps the fire was a well-contained but pointed warning to Mareaux not to pursue its aerostat research," Lord Gaio countered.

"Such as might be given by a nation unsuccessfully competing with Mareaux in aerostat development," Amcathra suggested.

"Or a nation that prefers to maintain its ancient monopoly over flight."

"I'm sure the queen's investigation will provide some answers," Taya said, alarmed. "If you will excuse us, Your Excellencies, the exalted would like to change out of his wet robes."

"Of course." Lady Fosca patted Cristof's arm one last time. "I hope we'll see you at dinner, since the picnic was canceled."

"I'm sure you will," Taya said, stepping forward. The Alzanans reluctantly moved aside, allowing them to continue.

In the ambassadorial suite, a crackling fire had been lit and an invitation to join the queen for a private lunch sat on the mantelpiece.

"Thank the Lady!" Taya helped her husband take off his mask. "I'm going to ask the staff to prepare us some baths before lunchtime."

Amcathra gave Cristof a smart palm-to-the-forehead bow. "I will be back soon, Exalted."

"Where are you going?" Cristof demanded, shaking back his sleeves and pulling on his glasses.

"I intend to search for the box we threw overboard."

"Do you think you'll find proof that it's Alzanan?"

"I doubt we shall be so fortunate."



Cristof waited in another room until the servants had brought in the copper tubs, hot water, bathing lotions, and towels. At last Taya unpinned his wig with her fingertips and set it on its stand.

"Ada will have to repair it when we get back," she said, looking at its sad tangle of hair and jewels. "But maybe Jayce can do something to fix it up in the meantime."

"Later." Cristof hugged her from behind, resting his chin in the crook of her neck. "Let's get you out of those wet skirts, my love."

She grinned, putting a hand over his. He gently took her wrist and turned it, moving around from behind her.

"But first, I want to see what's under these bandages. You flinch every time you move your hands." He guided her to a couch and unwrapped the strips of fabric. "I wish I'd brought more household staff, so you wouldn't have to do all my robing and disrobing."

"As if I'd let anybody else undress you!"

"Don't you trust me?"

"I trust *you*." She caressed the wave-shaped caste tattoo on his cheek with the back of her free hand. "But I'm sure any number of foreign spies are ready to seduce Ondinium's secrets out of you."

"Oh, good, an ambassadorial perquisite at last."

Taya raised an eyebrow. "You get plenty of ambassadorial perquisites. Your own suite, all the Mareaux wine you can drink—"

"Do you suppose it would be a faux pas to tell the queen that I prefer beer?"

"Without a doubt." She winced as he pulled away the last of the bandage. "I hope you've been drinking *some* of her wine."

"I choke down a glass every night, and then I toss a few more glasses' worth out the window. I hope I don't kill the roses."

"You'll set back diplomacy a hundred years if the queen finds out."

Cristof pushed his silver-rimmed glasses up to his forehead as he studied her hand. Then he pulled the glasses back over his eyes and unwrapped her other hand.

"I don't think these burns will do more than blister," he said, "but the swelling will make it difficult for you to move your hands for a few days."

"Can't we pop the blisters?"

"Our family physician told us never to pop a blister, back when we were boys," he said, tilting her hand up. "Of course we did it anyway."

We. Taya gazed at him, feeling a familiar pang. Even though Cristof's brother had been outcaste and expelled from Ondinium, he still talked about Alister with affection.

"I'll ask the palace physician what to do," she promised.

"Good." Cristof turned her hand over and kissed the back. "In the meantime, my duty is clear."

"What?"

"I'll need to wash and dress you while you keep your hands dry."

"Is that so?" She cocked her head, pretending she hadn't felt a leap of anticipation at his words. "I thought we'd agreed to respect Mareaux propriety."

"Attempted assassination negates my obligations to Mareaux propriety." He nudged her around and began unfastening the delicate buttons on the back of her dress. "Besides, I need the practice."

"At what?"

"At undressing attractive women. I wouldn't want to embarrass my country when those spies show up."

Taya reached around to punch him in the arm, but not hard enough to make him stop.