



### **PRINCESS YULANA HAD A PROBLEM.**

Well, it was more like seven smaller issues combined into one much larger one, which was the matter of coordinating a rescue effort with the Bangtan Brothers.

And the problem was too much visibility.

From her vantage point on the edge of the town square, Yuli looked with amazement and dismay at the screaming hordes of people that chanted the members' names as the boys passed through the streets of Urghud. Just the week prior, a somber hush-along with the chill of winter-had settled over the northern capital in the days following the Warlord's funeral. White banners were still draped over the canopies of every storefront, flapping like ghosts in the ever-present wind, but a festive atmosphere had descended over the city ever since the Bangtan Brothers docked in Urghud's harbor.

It was going to make this rescue operation that much more difficult.

"By the Great Bear." Yuli scowled, observing a handful of youths fawning over the eldest, Bohyun, on the edge of the crowd. "They're just a bunch of *boys*."

Good-looking boys, she had to admit, even if their looks did nothing for her. Of them all, it was sly-eyed Taeri who was her favorite, because his slinking grace brought to mind the dancers of Zanhei's pleasure district. Although it was Sungho who played the feminine roles in their plays, Taeri reminded Yuli of the courtesan-poetess Huang Jiyi with his heavy-lidded eyes and pouty lips.

"They haven't been in Urghud in two years," said Uncle Mongke

beside her. "Why should the rest of the Morning Realms enjoy their talents while the north languishes unloved and forgotten?"

Yuli rolled her eyes. Several players and performers traveled through the northern capital on a regular basis throughout the year, although none had been quite so eagerly anticipated as the Bangtan Brothers. In the weeks leading up to their presence in the city, paper posters with their likenesses had been plastered on wooden walls all over the marketplace. They had always been popular, but now it seemed as though *everyone-everyone-knew* of them, and some even went so far as to exchange little tokens carved with the boys' names and iconography with one another in their own sort of black market.

"Focus," she said to the shaman. "We need to be in place when Junseo gives the signal."

She met the Bangtan leader's eyes across the square, where an enormous pyre had been built. Despite the chaos and consternation caused by the presence of the performance troupe in their midst, the crowd was rather subdued, and an uneasy air hung over the proceedings. It had been several years since the last public execution of a magician in Urghud, and the pile of kindling in the center was a stark reminder of the uncertain times through which they were all living. Rumors of abominations in the south, the undead to the west, and the Heralds of Glorious Justice on their front steps, bringing with them hundreds of refugees from the steppe villages and the possibility of civil war. Magic was returning to the Morning Realms, twenty years after the north thought it eradicated during the Just War.

And for the first time in two years, a magician had been found in their midst.

"Here." Uncle Mongke surreptitiously handed their niece a bright red hood, a few shades lighter than her distinctive ruddy hair. "Don't forget to put it on when the time comes."

"I won't." Yuli tucked the hood into her coat and rearranged the dull brown scarf covering her face and hair. "But it won't do us any good if no one's paying attention to me because of the Bangtan Brothers."

It appeared as though the northern chapter of the Guardians of Dawn had underestimated the Bangtan Brothers' popularity. Junseo

and the other boys had experience in smuggling magicians to safety in other parts of the empire, but no one had taken into account their growing fame when organizing this rescue mission. The plan was to hide a few of the members among the crowd until the right moment, when the prisoner was being led to the pyre, before setting off a series of distractions, during which Yuli-dressed in her bright red hood-would grab the victim and run. Junseo, Sungho, Taeri, and Yoochun would then put on and take off their own red hoods in the crowd to act as decoys, while Bohyun, Mihoon, and Alyosha would continue raising mayhem with magic.

A classic bit of misdirection, Sungho had said. One of the oldest tricks of the stage.

But the members weren't exactly going unnoticed, especially Bohyun, whose handsome face might have been his greatest asset onstage but was his greatest liability when trying to mingle.

Which brought Yuli back to her original problem: visibility.

"The Huntsmen have arrived!" a crier shouted, and the crowd's attention was momentarily diverted from the Bangtan Brothers to the cadre of riders galloping through Urghud's eastern gate. Yuli drew her scarf tighter about her face as the wolf-helmed rider at the head of the column bore down on the square-Maltak Ogodei, son of the Falconer and his father's proxy while the Kestrels held the imperial city against the encroaching force of the Heralds and their allies down south.

"Citizens!" Ogodei called from atop his restless mount. "Rejoice, for today we rid the north of a pernicious evil!"

Yuli rolled her eyes. The Huntsmen were little more than a rowdy rabble of raucous university students, more concerned with personal glory than with protecting the people from the threat of magic. In the Falconer's absence, Ogodei had taken up the Kestrels' charge to hunt down and pass judgment on anyone with even the most tenuous connection to treason, harassing and terrorizing the populace in the name of order and safety. Neither he nor any of the Huntsmen had ever faced down true evil-not a single abomination or revenant or even a member of the Heralds of Glorious Justice.

Until today.