

## CHAPTER 4



# TYCHO

By midsummer, the grounds of Ironrose Castle are always vibrant. Watching from the window of Prince Rhen's strategy room, my eyes usually don't know where to settle. The vast gardens have exploded with color, and gold-and-red pennants flutter above every sentry stand. Sunlight gleams off the cream-colored bricks of the castle proper, too. Marble and polished brass in the outbuildings add glimmers and flashes of light when the clouds shift. When I was younger, everything here seemed magical.

That was before I learned how much harm magic had caused.

Somewhere below the window, women are gossiping as they go about their tasks, their voices high and lively like wind chimes. A broom rasps against the cobblestones. More distant, a man's laugh echoes across the grounds, followed by the high-pitched shrieks of delighted children.

Right now, none of that is a distraction. Instead, my focus is locked squarely on a building in the distance. Across the fields, smoke billows from the forge that sits near the Shield House.

*Jax.*

I imagine him crouched over some horse's hoof, his hammer swinging while his hair falls into his eyes—just like the day we met. My heart thumps, simply from the memory of it. He's so striking, and it's like he's not even *aware* of it. I remember when we first arrived here, how I found him walking along a path, his gleaming hair loose and unbound, his features carved in shadow. Sudden longing pulses right along with my heartbeat, and it's nearly enough to make me abandon my duties so I can gallop across the grounds to see him. It's been so long since I was *just Tycho* and he was *just Jax* and we could speak truths without the pressures of magic and royalty or the threat of treason and war weighing on us both. The sunlight carries a sense of contentment, and I'm desperate for fresh air and freedom.

Or, hell, maybe I'm just desperate to escape the tense agitation in this room.

Grey is sprawled in a chair, his heavy-lidded eyes aimed at the window as well, though his jaw is tight, and his gaze seems to be fixed on nothing.

"You've called your regiments home from Syhl Shallow, but you still haven't indicated whether we should station a small regiment at the border," Rhen is saying to his brother—though I'm not sure Grey is listening. "Currently, Syhl Shallow maintains the guard stations north of Willminton and Blind Hollow. General Ruoff has received word of minor skirmishes to the north *here*"—he taps at a map on the table, moving some figurines to represent soldier placements—"possibly related to your withdrawal of Emberish forces on the other side of the border. But without any military support in the area, we have no control over—"

He catches sight of Grey's absent expression and stops short. Silence swells in the room. One of those girls working down below the window bursts into giggles about something. A distant soldier shouts an order.

Grey doesn't move. He doesn't even appear to have noticed that Rhen stopped speaking.

"Your *Majesty*," Rhen snaps.

That gets a reaction—but barely. Grey glances his way, and his eyes narrow. "Stop it."

"I thought perhaps a reminder was in order."

"A reminder of what?" Grey's voice is rough, and he looks like he hasn't shaved in the two weeks since we got here. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was hung over.

Honestly, he might be. I wouldn't blame him. Malin and I used to sneak bottles of liquor after we were stripped of our duties and forced to stay in Syhl Shallow. This isn't the same—not by a long shot—but Grey had to leave his wife and child to protect a country that didn't even want him there. I'm sure he's feeling just as trapped, just as isolated.

Just as hopeless.

Hell, maybe he's drunk right now. I know I would be.

"A reminder that you are king," Rhen is saying evenly. "And you have a country to rule."

Grey's frown deepens, but he goes back to looking at nothing.

Prince Rhen's eye narrows. "*Grey—*"

"Fine!" the king snaps. "Send a regiment to guard the mountain pass. Whatever you want."

His tone is sharp enough that I inwardly flinch, but Rhen holds his gaze. "This is not a time to be cavalier—"

"You *just* told me to rule," Grey growls. "Now you're going to complain when I do it?"

Prince Rhen stares back at him, then sighs and makes a note on one of the papers arranged in front of him.

Every meeting has been like this. I wish I were somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

Well. Not *anywhere*.

I glance out the window again, reimagining Jax in the forge. This time, I wish myself into the vision. If I were there, I'd be tucking the hair out of his face while he hammered a hot shoe onto a hoof. I'd be listening to the quiet rumble of his voice as he murmured to an uneasy horse. Sudden longing swells in my chest.

But then the fantasy fractures. I imagine him frowning. Smacking my hand away. Jerking back, looking confused. Or, worse, scoffing.

All my emotion goes cold, and I look away from the window.

Because for all my longing, something between us has changed. Since the moment I returned from Syhl Shallow, everything has been different.

The worst part is that I'm not entirely sure what happened—though I'm fairly certain that whatever it is, it's my fault. I never should've been gone so long, and I should've realized it would alter things between us. But I spent so long trying to figure out a way to get back, expecting to find Jax desperate for my arrival. Instead, I arrived to discover that Jax was able to forge a path for himself here, learning the language and settling into his new role and making friends. He's always been a little defiant, a little cavalier, but while I was gone, that shifted into something new. Like confidence. Or conviction. Either way, the tense, apprehensive young man I met in Briarlock is gone.

I should be glad . . . and I am. I want him to be happy. I didn't *want* him to be longing and desperate and lonely.

But I suddenly feel like an outsider. Like I'm intruding. It's left me completely unmoored. Untethered.

And maybe a little jealous.

As I gaze out the window, the sun begins to sink toward the trees, making shadows lengthen. The dinner bells will ring soon, and Jax will be heading across the fields with his friends. He goes shooting almost every night, and I've been longing to join them since I got back.

*If I'd even be welcome.*

The instant I have the thought, I shove it away. It doesn't even matter. My own duties keep getting in the way regardless. I was in Hutchins Forge two days ago, I just got back from Little Cross this morning, and if Prince Rhen is arguing about Grey's reluctance to *rule*, I'm sure I'll be heading somewhere new tonight.

When we returned from Syhl Shallow, I stupidly thought I might get a brief reprieve from my duties.

Clearly, I thought wrong.

*"Tycho."*

I snap my head around. They're both looking at me now.

*Silver hell.* "Forgive me," I say.

Prince Rhen drags his hand across his jaw. "I asked if you've had any contact from the scraver Nakiis."

My ever-present frown deepens, and a shard of ice seems to lodge in my chest. The last time I heard from Nakiis, he was pinning me to the ground, refusing to allow me to assist the king. Xovaar had attacked, and Nakiis was worried he'd kill me, too.

When I convinced him to let me go, I hoped he'd follow. I hoped he'd *help*.

He didn't. And I haven't seen him since.

I've started to wonder if he's dead.

After the way he tried to stop me, there's a part of me that wouldn't quite mind.

"No," I say. "Nothing."

"Good," says Rhen. "Perhaps the scavengers have gone to ground."

I don't think we're that lucky. I remember how viciously Xovaar tried to kill Grey, how violently the other scavengers fought on the training fields at the Crystal Palace. When the battle was done, blood and bodies were everywhere.

"The scavengers believe that magesmiths stole their magic," I say.

“Xovaar wants it back—and the only way to get it is to kill us off. If the scavengers have gone to ground, they won’t stay there long.”

The prince makes another note on his paper, spending a long moment in consideration. His gaze flicks back to the maps spread across the table, and he leans forward, gesturing toward some northern cities. “We’re still hearing talk about the ‘monster’ returning to Emberfall. Perhaps the scavengers are stoking these fears to help drive out the magesmiths. You should ride north to Gaulter to inquire about treasonous notes from the Truthbringers—or scavenger attacks. Perhaps these skirmishes are related. They have a tourney there, yes? You could learn quite a bit.”

I have to keep myself from sighing. Gaulter is a two-and-a-half-day ride from here—and I didn’t exactly leave their tourney on good terms. I’m the one who broke their prized fighter—Nakiis—out of a cage.

But I’m not going to refuse a direct order. Not while the king is sitting there looking ready to set the world on fire. “Yes, Your Highness.”

At that, Grey actually looks up. “No. Gaulter is too far. If the scavengers do resurface, your magic will make you a target.”

“I’m a target right here. So are you.”

His frown deepens, and I wonder if the king is going to snap at me the way he just snapped at Rhen. Before he can, the prince says, “There’s no need to go alone. Take some soldiers. Or some guardsmen.” He pauses, his tone turning pointed. “We should not hide, Grey.”

The king’s expression looks like thunder, but he considers this. “Take Malin,” he finally says. “He’s trustworthy. Have him choose a few others, too.”

There was a time when traveling with Emberish soldiers would’ve choked my heart with tension, but Grey is right—and Malin has more than proven himself. After he helped save the king’s life, he earned a

new stripe on his sleeve—and a host of new responsibilities to go with it. I've hardly seen him since I got back, but we grew close in Syhl Shallow. If I have to leave again, I wouldn't mind his company.

But . . . *Jax*. Riding to Gaulter will mean an absence of nearly a week, if not longer. If I have to keep leaving, whatever has broken between us might never recover.

I wish Noah were here. I could desperately use his counsel. I wonder if he and Jake are returning with the army regiments from Syhl Shallow.

Not like it matters, if they're sending me away for a week.

Rhen follows my gaze, and he looks out the window toward the Shield House. "Perhaps you should take Jax, too."

My eyebrows shoot up, and my head snaps around.

Back at the beginning of the summer, Jax and I curled up in the hayloft on the night before I was ordered to depart. We were tangled in some blankets spread over the hay, his eyes gleaming in the starlight. His hands were so warm and his breath was so sweet and his heart seemed to beat in time with my own. I whispered against his skin that I would be back in a matter of days.

And then I disappeared for months.

My heart gives a kick as I consider this. It pains me to admit it, but just now, I don't even know if Jax would want to *go*.

I don't even know if I want him to.

When I say nothing, Rhen adds, "Jax has *also* proven himself trustworthy—and he's earned a chance to do more than swing a hammer in the forge. I don't think he's left the grounds since he joined the soldiers on that ill-fated trip to the creek."

When half a regiment of drunk soldiers were attacked by scavengers—and Jax was with them.

My jaw feels tight. When I tried to ask him about that, he brushed it off. I've heard a full report, however. Several soldiers were killed. The

rest of them were close. If Jax hadn't acted quickly, more would have died. *He* might have died. He has ragged scars across his chin from the attack.

Prince Rhen glances at the king, who says nothing. But Grey's eyes are on me now. I wonder what he's thinking.

I don't like that *this* is what pulled him out of his morose reverie. A familiar tension grips my spine, reminding me of the way we faced off on the training fields in Syhl Shallow. We spent months at odds, and while we've moved past it in some ways, I know it wouldn't take much for us to end up in the same place again.

Much like the weird tension between me and Jax, I don't quite know what to do with this either. Maybe he feels the same, because he doesn't say a word.

When we're *both* silent for an eternity, Rhen sighs. "Silver hell. Find Malin, Tycho. Give him our orders, and have him select two others. Take Jax—or not. The choice is yours. You can leave at first light."

Grey is still watching me. That tension refuses to let go. I don't know if he'd see Jax as an asset—or a distraction. Like so many other moments between us, this feels like a test. I don't want to fail.

When I say nothing, Grey's eyebrows rise just a hair, and then he inhales with the weight of a commanding officer about to give an order. I brace myself, expecting him to take the choice away from me, and there's a part of me that hopes he will—even though I'll probably resent him for it.

But all he says is, "I think you've been dismissed."

That hits me like a fist, but I was a soldier long enough to know how to keep a scowl off my face. I straighten, then give him a nod. "Yes, Your Majesty." I nod to Rhen as well. "Your Highness."

But as I move through the doorway, Grey's voice calls me back. "Tycho."

I stop and turn. For the first time all afternoon, his eyes are clear, and he truly seems to see me. “Be safe.”

It’s only two words, but both syllables carry the weight of unspoken emotion that’s different from before. It’s trust, it’s concern, it’s regard, it’s . . . *something*. A reminder that we might have been at odds, but we don’t have to be now.

So I nod again. “I will,” I say, and any edge has slipped out of my voice. “You too.”

And then I’m gone.



Months ago, I would have been galloping across the fields, desperate to bring these orders to the forge. When Prince Rhen first told me that Jax was invited to take residence here as a blacksmith, I could barely wait a single minute before I went to tell him.

But today, I let Mercy amble through the sunlit grass as I determine what to say.

*Jax, I’ve been ordered to leave. Rhen wants you to join us.*

That sounds like I don’t want him there—or like I’m only inviting him because I’ve been ordered to it. And Jax hates Rhen—he definitely won’t want to go if he knows the prince ordered it.

*Jax. I’m going to Gaulter. Would you . . . like to join me?*

That sounds like I’m inviting him to a lover’s tryst, not on a group mission to investigate treason.

I hate this.

*Jax. I miss you.*

I definitely can’t say that.

“Hey,” a voice calls from somewhere off to my left. “Tycho.”

I glance over to see a chestnut horse peeling away from a group of soldiers that look like they’re returning from patrol. As the rider

canters toward me, I blink in the evening sunlight and recognize Malin's compact frame and dark hair.

A smile forces its way onto my face, breaking through my exhausted tension. I lift a hand in greeting.

"Well, well, well," I say as he draws close. I peer at the new insignia on his shoulder and whistle low, through my teeth. "Look at those stripes."

"Shut up." But I can tell he's pleased.

"Remind me—are you a commander now?" I tease. "Wait. No. A *general*?"

"I'm going to knock you off the horse."

"That sure doesn't sound like something an officer would say."

He grins. "I'm going to get a recruit to knock you off the horse."

That makes me laugh. "How is it, *Captain*?"

"More work, but I can order Seph around now, so there's that."

Sephran—his best friend. Or at least he was before we went to Syhl Shallow. But I've noticed that Sephran and Jax grew close during our absence.

*Very* close.

The smile must fade from my face, because Mal's gaze narrows a bit, as if he's trying to figure me out. His voice, however, is neutral. "You're in new gear yourself." He nods at my armor.

"Yeah," I say, though my new livery doesn't bring the same joy as his new stripes. For years, I wore the black of Syhl Shallow, and my armor was trimmed in silver and green. The breastplate was emblazoned with the crests of both countries, indicating my allegiance to both. Grey's own armor was similar.

But three days after we returned, the king showed up in the arena with a new breastplate. Still black, but no green, no silver. One small crest over his heart, backed with the gold and red of Emberfall alone. I opened my mouth, but he held up a hand and said, "Go see the armorer. Yours is ready, too."

His tone was so gruff that I didn't say a word. Once I got my gear, I understood. Donning the new armor felt very final. As if the division between our countries is permanent.

"Where were you headed?" Malin says.

"To look for you, actually. We've been given new orders." I tell him what Rhen and Grey said, and the reason we're being sent to Gaulter. "He said for you to choose two soldiers to join us."

"He's worried about scavengers."

"He is." I hesitate, wondering how this will go over. "Prince Rhen told me to bring Jax, too."

Malin's eyebrows go up, but then he grins. "I'm sure you weren't complaining."

Weeks ago, that would've made me blush and stumble over my words. Right now, my smile vanishes.

A line appears across Malin's brow as he studies me like before. He's always been perceptive, and I sense I'm giving away too much. I wonder what he sees.

He finally speaks into my silence. "Well, if he's going, I'll pick Seph for sure. He's solid, and they get on well."

That doesn't help. Now I'm trying not to frown. Mal told me so many stories about Sephran that I thought we'd return from Syhl Shallow and we'd all become friends. He spoke with such fondness that I began to *long* for it.

But every time I see Sephran, his expression is unfriendly, his eyes ice cold as he regards me. He's *polite*, but it's a distant politeness, as if I've offended him somehow—which I can't figure out. Does he resent my position? I've encountered that before . . . though he seemed friendly enough when I first met him. The change is only since I returned to Ironrose. Could he be bothered by my friendship with Malin?

I have no idea what to say, but I have to say *something*, or my lengthy

silence is going to turn awkward. “Whoever you think is best,” I say flatly, though I have no idea if I really mean that. I press my heels into Mercy. “I’m heading for the forge to tell Jax next.”

Malin nods, then steers his horse to fall in step beside me. “I’ll join you.”

But as he does, Mercy slows, sensing my trepidation.

I give her another nudge, because I don’t want Malin to pick up on it. “No,” I say. I still have no idea how to extend this invitation. I definitely don’t want to do it with Malin at my back. That feels too official. “You should head for the barracks and make your other choice. Have them pack up and see to their unit commanders. The king intends for us to leave by first light.”

His eyebrows go up again, and I realize my tone has lost any hint of lighthearted banter. But Malin is a good soldier, and there’s a reason he earned a new stripe on his sleeve.

“Yes, sir,” he says sharply. Without another word, he gives me a salute, then whirls his horse to head south, toward the barracks.

Leaving me on my solitary path to the forge.