

Chapter 1

The Hunt

He struggled to stand in the deep snow, his legs and feet numb from the cold. Cursing, he roughly pulled his horse to its feet. It too slipped and staggered in the deep drift, with muscles shivering with fatigue and fear. The big bay had fallen hard, dumping him headfirst.

"Sorry boy," the dark-haired young man said gently patting the stallion's neck. "You're as tired as me."

Hunching his shoulders, he settled the great sword slung across his back more comfortably. He pulled the hood of his cloak back up, shivering as some snow found its way down his neck, and turned his back to the wind that was driving the icy sleet and snow like burning needles into them both. As he surveyed the snow-covered landscape before them, it buffeted him, blowing his heavy cloak tight to his frame exposed as they were on the small hill.

He could feel Solitude's muscles shivering beneath his hand. He had to find shelter and soon. Both of them were at their limits. Suddenly the bay jerked at the reins, and a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold ran up his spine. He heard the great hounds raise their voices in full cry, clear and sharp in the distance. They had picked up his scent again.

Aldric's heart sank to the pit of his stomach, the fear, and terror running colder than any winter storm. Just beyond the foot of the hill, he could see the bridge and the road that ran to Kalthoth Castle. Even there he might not find safety.

"This is it," he said feeling the last remnants of strength draining away. "There is nowhere." He sagged against the saddle looking across the fast-flowing river to the deep woods on the far shore. The hounds' howls sounded clear through the forest still some distance away. Aldric shut his eyes; head cradled on his arm; shivers racked his body.

"Can't ford the river to lose the scent...you'd not make it Solly." He muttered low to his horse. "Though death by drowning would be better than... Solly's head snapped up, "...drowning! Yes, Solly, yes! It might just work."

Dragging up the sinking remnants of strength, Aldric plunged down the slope hauling his weary horse after him.

"Come on boy not much further."

Reaching the bottom of the hill, he swung up into the saddle and urged the horse to a ragged trot. As they jogged toward the road, Aldric twisted halfway around pulling what he needed from his saddlebag. He stuffed the items in his jerkin and finally unclasped his cloak and wound it around his arm.

At the road, Aldric turned Solly toward Kalmoth and urged the tired stallion to a canter. Bracing himself as they neared the middle of the bridge, he offered a silent prayer and leapt for the railing. The battle trained horse skidded to a stop feeling his rider part company.

Aldric found himself clinging to the railing on the outside, feet dangling over the swift river. With a sly half grin, he snagged the cloak on the railing. With a few curses and a bit more squirming Aldric shimmied down one of the bridges supports to a small crevice under the planks of the bridge.

With any luck, he thought, Solly will bolt when the hounds get closer, and his uncle's men will believe he had fallen into the river. Wiggling to get more secure in his corner, Aldric grinned blessing Will D'Bries for this idea.

It was hard to believe that it had been less than three years ago when he and Will had hidden here. Hiding from Will's father, the Duke of Kalmoth after the two of them had ruined a planned hunt for his Uncle Henry, Regent of Calmora.

"Now for the finishing touch," he muttered pulling his sword out.

He flung it point first hard at the far bank. Aldric's grin widen as it stuck with its hilt hanging out over the water.

It was a bit of a struggle and he slipped twice, scrambling for hand holds; but he got his father's great sword out and into his own scabbard and the jeweled and gilt scabbard over his head. At last securely braced once again, Aldric looked at the richly ornamented leather draped over his hand.

"Better this than you, Dirk," he muttered and with a sigh tossed it into the river below him.

He silently watched it spin away in the currents.

Cursing loudly, Samuel whipped his horse to the top of the hill where the huntsman had halted the hounds and stood waiting for the rest of them to catch up.

"Why are you stopping?" he yelled at the man, as the hounds milled around on their long leashes.

"He fell here, Lord Samuel. He can't be far ahead."

The huntsman pointed to the road and bridge partially obscured in the snow. It had started to fall thicker making it even harder to see the track.

"You were right My Lord. He. He is making for Kalmoth."

"Damn the boy, but," Samuel grinned," if we can track him clearly to Kalmoth Castle, "he stopped and turned to consider Aldric's tracks, "Looks like he led the horse down."

"Yes, M' Lord," he said as he pulled his cloak around him, "Both nearly dead on their feet I think."

He looked up at the Lord Chancellor and shivered at the cruel cold smile on his face, and froze to icy stillness at Samuel's next words. The Lord Chancellor was paying him well; he had no taste for this hunt. One did not refuse this cruel man, but the thought of the quarry chased left a bitter, sour taste in your mouth.

"We'll have the little bastard soon huntsman. Loose the hounds."

As he slowly pulled free the leashes, offered a prayer to the Lord begging for forgiveness. He watched the great beasts bound down the hill, braying loudly, hot on the Prince's trail.

The young Prince who was barely eighteen had led this troop of men on a merry chase from Calmora Castle to this spot. The lad had been on the run for over a week Samuel's men had told him when he was hired him at the town of Whatley by Lord Samuel.

Samuel gave a shout and kicked his horse to plunge down the hill followed by his men.

Standing for a second, he had a sick feeling in his stomach, and then he swung up astride the horse one of the men had handed him to follow his hounds.

The sound of the hounds changed. Their howls reaching a higher pitch. He has loosed them, Aldric thought feeling very little like the Crown Prince of Calmora, just very scared. He shut his eyes and jammed his gloved fist in his mouth to keep his teeth from chattering. No sound and no movement, he repeated to himself silently and tried to remember when he had last been warm or had a hot meal. Warmth, Dirk, think of warmth, he let his mind drift back.

"Come here Dirk, I've a present for you," Eldon yelled.

Aldric took the stairs two at a time followed by Will D'Bries. Eldon watched with an amused expression as the two small boys jumped down the stairs.

"What is it father?" Aldric cried launching himself from three steps up into his father's arms.

Clutching Aldric to him, inhaling the small boy scent he said, "Come with me, you too Will." Eldon walked briskly out of the door toward the stables.

"A pony!" Aldric squirmed out of Eldon's arms and raced ahead.

Crashing through the door, Aldric skittered to a stop only to have Will run smack into him, knocking them both to the ground

James D'Bries, Duke of Kalmoth, chuckled at the tangle of small bodies at his feet. "You sure there are only two here, Sire?" his smoky, gray blue eyes sparkling with amusement under his always errant sandy brown hair.

Eldon joined his laughter, "Yes only two." He reached down pulling the two of them to their feet, "Come lads," he led them to stand in front of two stalls.

Inside were two of Eldon's prize mares. At their sides almost identical bay colts.

"Amazing," Henry said leaning on the opposite side of the stalls.

Eldon looked up at his younger brother, the Duke of Halsted. They looked much alike, dark hair, dark eyes, tall and powerfully built. Where Eldon radiated warmth, Henry's dark looks made people wary.

"I know, Henry. They are out of the same stallion but it is surprising to have them look so much alike."

"They are beautiful, father," Aldric whispered as he stared at the foals.

"Aye, one is for you, Dirk; and one for Will," Eldon rested a hand on each of the boy's shoulders.

"Sire?" Will turned an amazed look up at his King.

"It only makes sense. I have two colts and two boys, who are all but inseparable. They're presents for your eighth birthdays," he smiled at them.

Looking up briefly at his father, Aldric felt a warm glow spread throughout his body. His eyes sparkling snapped back to the foals.

Aldric could feel the warmth of the memory, and then it vanished in a flash. Replaced by cold fear as he heard the hounds and horses scrambling to the road. Just as all the light in his world had vanished a week after his eighth birthday when his father had died in a hunting accident, leaving his Uncle Henry Regent of Calmora for the last ten years.

Solitude the bay colt that had been his father's last gift, whinnied in fear, hooves clattering on the planks as the hounds reached the edge of the bridge. Aldric could hear the huntsman calling the hounds off.

Why doesn't Solly run? Aldric thought listening to the men above.

"His horse!" one of the guards called out, "and his cloak, My Lord."

Samuel took the cloak from the guard. He edged his horse to the side of the bridge.

"Looks like he fell off. The horse's reins were caught on the rail. And his cloak?"

"Yes," the guard leant over the rail, "Maybe over? He tried to use the reins or cloak to get back up. No sign of him, My Lord. The river's flowing fast even as cold as it is."

The huntsman watched as Samuel wrapped the cloak around his arm, fingering the thick dark green wool. He peered up at the dark cloud filled sky and pulled his cloak tighter against the sleet.

Bloody damn," Samuel muttered low.

"Lord Samuel," a guard dismounted in a scramble and leaned over the down streamside of the bridge, "Look, My Lord."

He pointed to a dark object stuck in the far bank, hanging over the river.

"You two," Samuel waved at the men, "go check that out." He grumbled to himself as the two men linked hands and one pulled the item free.

"It's a sword, My Lord."

"Which?" a tingle of anticipation lit Samuel's voice.

Scrambling back up on the bridge, the elder guard handed it to Samuel.

"The Prince's, My Lord. I'd know it anywhere."

"Then the bloody little fool still has the royal sword." Samuel growled tossing it back to the guard. "Keep it. We cannot search now. We will go onto Kalmoth Castle and search in the morning. When this blasted storm has passed. Bring his horse."

He whirled his horse on its hunches and galloped off down the road toward the deep woods and Kalmoth Castle.

Aldric fought the urge to hold his breath and forced himself to take slow quiet breaths. He listened to the exchange and when the last hoof beats had faded into the distance, he let out a deep sigh. They had fallen for it! Aldric thought.

He looked down from his perch and suddenly realized he would have to change his escape route from this spot.

When he and Will had done this, it had been summer and they had simply dropped into the river, swum downstream, and scrambled up the river bank. That would not work now. His scramble up the bank would be a flag and he would be soaked and frozen in minutes.

He pulled himself over the edge and back on to the bridge. Hands on his knees, muscles shaking with the effort, he smiled crookedly at the muddle of tracks where the troop had milled about on the bridge.

"They'll not find my tracks mixed with theirs, and they'll think the dogs have my scent from the cloak," he said aloud.

His smile grew as he began jogging down the road towards Kalmoth Castle. The sleet and snow finally starting to taper off, but the bitter wind still cut through the night. It dropped as he passed into the shelter of the forest, but Aldric knew he had to keep moving.

He could feel the accumulated fatigue of the last twelve or fourteen days dragging at him; but his smile still grew. He might just live after all.

James D'Bries leaned back in his high back chair stretching out his legs. Through half-shut eyes, he watched his three sons sitting across from him in front of the fireplace. Michael, his eldest and William, his youngest sat heads bent intent on a game of Finn. Stephen straddled the chair he had dragged over and was offering comments and conflicting advice to both. James smirked at the sight and blessed his good fortune at having three sons grown to manhood.

He considered their very different personalities, as different as their looks. Michael who shared his sandy brown hair and gray blue eyes, was serious, somber, a good leader and solider. Just what was needed in the next Duke of Kalmoth? Now twenty-four, James felt good about sending him to act as Castellan of Myriden Castle in the spring.

Stephen, twenty-two, quiet and reserved, shy with most people. He had announced a month ago that when Michael left, he wanted to join the brothers at the Lord's Temple deep in Kalmoth's Forest.

James gave an absent shrug. It was Stephen's choice. Slender with pale silver blonde hair and pale blue eyes, Stephen almost did not look like a D'Bries.

He chuckled as Stephen leaned forward to poke Will in the arm, his long silver hair shimmering in the fire light. He was the scholar; study and the temple were the right place for him.

He turned his attention to his youngest son. Then there is Will, he thought with a shake of his head. Eighteen, wild, brash, a rouge, Will feared little. He was one of the best swordsmen in the Kingdom and knew it.

James shook his head again; the lad had shown up a little over a year ago with lovely Kananurian lass and boldly introduced her as his wife. James had thought Jenny was going to ... Lord knows what to their golden-haired blue-eyed boy.

But Selena had turned out to be a sweet child. No! Not a child, a woman James amended his thoughts. He glanced up the stairs to where he knew Selena was settling his first grandson in bed.

Named Michael for his uncle, he was just six months old, and had his grandmother Jenny wrapped around his tiny finger. A charmer, just like his father, James mused settling back with his mug of ale to enjoy the warmth of his home.

Aldric slid to a stop, staring at the armed man astride the war horse in the middle of the road not fifteen feet away from the bend in the road he'd just come around. He glanced furtively around but there was nowhere to run.

A sly grin spread across the guards' face as he recognized Aldric.

Well he just could not let the man gallop off after Samuel. With a matching grin, Aldric drew his father's sword and charged the astounded man.

The guard barely got his sword out and shield up before Aldric reached him. He brought his sword down angled at Aldric's bare head, only to have his stroke neatly parried.

Aldric did not waste time with niceties of form; he quickly sliced through the reins and skipped out of range of the horse's hooves. Ducking to avoid the next blow, he grimaced as he hamstrung the horse. He hated to do it, but he had to get the man off.

The warhorse screamed in pain and staggering fell to its knees. The guard agilely rolled to the ground and came up, shield gone but sword at the ready to face Aldric.

It was his final misfortune. To hold the opinion that he was facing an average inexperience young guard and not the swordsman he was. As he struck out at Aldric, he found his sword deftly knocked away and himself face to face with the young Prince and the King's great sword through his heart.

"You might have been mine," Aldric said sadly as he pulled the sword free and the guard collapsed to die at his feet, "Lord forgive you."

Aldric strode to the thrashing horse and quickly sliced its throat to end its misery, only then did he look around at the scene.

"How in blazes do I hide this?" he muttered aloud. "Samuel will know for sure it was me." Aldric eyed the deep forest on either side of the road with a narrow look.

The boy tried to announce something, but was roughly shoved aside and sent sprawling to the floor by a large man in a dark red cloak who was followed by two others.

James looked up at the door as one of the pages entered.

The four D'Bries were on their feet, hands on the hilts of their daggers in seconds.

"Is this how the King's Chancellor is welcomed?" the man growled as he shoved his hood back. Unclasping the cloak, he threw it on top of the boy, he had shoved.

"It is how those who charge into my castle, manhandling my people that are met," James snapped waving a hand towards the boy now scrambling to his feet. "What business do you have in Kalmoth, Samuel?" He did not relax his stance, or release his hold on the hilt of his dagger.

"Tell your fool hardy and rash child to put away his toy sword, D'Bries." Samuel waved with a dismissive gesture at Will who stood his sword out and ready at his side.

James smirked as he nodded at Will. None of them wore their swords in the castle, but it was just like Will to have his somewhere near at hand.

"As for my business." Samuel sank into the chair across from James, "It is the Regent's. I hunt a thief."

"A thief?" Michael relaxed visibly and sat back down.

Stephen slowly righted his chair, straddled it, and with a wary look watched the Lord Chancellor.

Just as slowly, Will sheathed his sword, walked to his father, and sank to sit cross-legged at his feet, balancing the sword on his knees.

James watched his sons arrange themselves, and sat lounging back in his chair, his left hand lightly brushing Will's golden locks.

"A thief? Samuel. What has this man supposed to have stolen that you are charged with hunting him?"

"Barely a man, just eighteen," he stretched out his legs and waved at his men to sit." He is charged with theft from the King's treasury and killing two of the King's guard. He fled before he could be brought before the Lord Regent."

"And who is this eighteen-year-old lad that has eluded you?" James asked his tone flat but a cold sinking feeling filled him.

A vile smile curled at the corners of Samuel's mouth. "Aldric." The name came out with a sour sound.

James felt Will tense where he rested against his leg. His left hand clenched a fistful of Will's hair, and with the barest of tugs held him still.

"The Prince? Surely, whatever he took from the treasury would not be considered theft? It is his after all." James found he had to fight to keep his voice flat and bare of emotion and he dared not look at his other two sons.

Samuel did not answer; his vile smile just grew wider.

"Why wasn't he crowned on his eighteenth birthday, My Lord Samuel?" Stephen asked in his calm voice that carried not a glimmer of feeling.

Samuel frowned, letting his gaze shift among the four men.

James watched as Samuel considered each of them in turn. He knew the Lord Chancellor well enough to guess at the man's thoughts. None of his guesses were particularly comforting.

As one of the most powerful Dukes in the Kingdom, he had been one of King Eldon's closest friends. While he had never challenged Henry's decisions during the regency, neither had he been an enthusiastic supporter.

The Lord Chancellor's look changed as it passed over each of D'Bries sons, serious consideration of Michael, quick dismissal of Stephen, finally settling with a narrow look on William.

James had no trouble reading Samuel now. Here was trouble, Will was Aldric's best friend; and James was very sure that Will was returning the narrow look with eyes dark with anger.

Samuel gave a small smirk and addressed his answer to Will." Lord Henry felt the Prince immature for his age." he paused," the coronation was delayed until next spring, but," The smirk faded, replaced by a look of mock concern. "Well it seems the Lord Regent was right after this...this..."

"Just what did Aldric do?" Will bit out.

James could see Will's fingers curl and tense on the scabbard he held. The ragged edges of control clear in his voice. James tightened his hold on his son's errant mop of gold.

"When Lord Henry told Prince Aldric of the delay, je threw a tantrum. A spoiled childish tantrum." Samuel shook his head.

James cocked his head. Aldric! A tantrum? Hardly, he had more likely coldly accepted his uncle's words and plotted to do what?

"Foolish lad," Samuel continued, "made himself ill, had to be confined. I fear his illness and the fever have affected his mind."

Aldric ill? James covered his mouth and coughed gruffly into his hand to cover the roar of laughter he could feel building. Of all the reactions he could have!

"Ill? Fevered?" Stephen murmured seemingly to himself, one of his oddly dark brows arched up beneath his pale hair, "Aldric?"

"True seems unlike him," Samuel continued to shake his head.

Fake concern if I have ever seen it, James thought.

"Two weeks ago, he broke into the treasury took the royal sword and fled Calmora Castle, killing two guards and wounding another. I've tracked him here to Kalmoth Forest," Samuel finished with a querying note.

James let his displeasure show clearly for the first time, and with a final tug on Will's hair lent forward, elbows on knees.

"To Kalmoth Forest? Where? And why call it theft? I mean it is his father's sword!"

"We're sure it was the Prince. I feel as you do evidently Duke James.," his tone fairly oozed with false intent, "This is all a tragedy of errors. Lord Henry and I only want to find the Prince and bring him back safe to Calmora Castle so the brothers can look after his healing."

Yeah! And lock him up as mad no doubt, James frowned at him. "Where in Kalmoth?"

"At the bridge we found his horse. It almost looks like he jumped or fell from the bridge."

At his knee, Will stiffened, but did not say a word. Damn and damn, James thought. I wish I had Stephen's sense and knew what Will's feeling and thinking."

"Jumped or fell?" Stephen crinkled his brows.

"Yes, his cloak was hanging over the rail, his horse's reins caught, and his sword was stuck in the bank. There didn't appear to be any tracks leaving the river."

"Hard to tell at night, My Lord Samuel!" Michael said with a puzzled tone.

"True, I plan to return there. We will be leaving tomorrow morning to look."

"James! How rude of you!"

James smiled as he turned at his wife's shout. Jenny stood at the foot of the stairs, Selena a step or two behind.

"My dear Duchess," Samuel stood swiftly changing to a syrupy sweet courtier tone.

"My Lord," Jenny walked briskly toward him hands extended. Her deep red velvet gown swirled around his legs as she reached him. "James, how just like you," she tossed over her shoulder at him, "To keep a guest jabbering instead of seeing to his comfort."

"Lord Samuel was just telling us the reason."

"Yes, yes..." she smiled sweetly at Samuel as he took her hands and kissed first one and then the other.

Samuel opened his mouth to say something, but she did not give him a chance.

"I'm sure whatever your mission is, it will keep to morning. Thank the Lord. Young Thomas our page had the sense to inform me of your arrival. Your rooms, My Lord, are ready, hot baths and food. Rest and sleep are what you need. My dear man! Your hands are frozen. Thomas." she waved a hand to the page standing on the stairs and launched off into another volley of chatter at the bemused Lord Chancellor.

James struggled not to laugh as he watched his lovely, charming, and ever-cunning wife quickly hustle the clearly befuddled Samuel out of the hall.

Up the stairs, he went with his men, his protests falling on a pair of very lovely but very deaf ears. Jenny just said yes to Samuel until he went into blubbering, not giving him a chance to get a word in.

How long she had stood on the stairs, James had no idea; but from her quick removal of Samuel long enough to sense trouble coming.

As Jenny waved brightly back to them with Samuel's retreating, James asked, "Selena, how much did you hear?" He turned to look at her and found her standing in front of Will, his arms wrapped protectively around her.

"Enough, Father, to know whatever he plans is not good for Kalthoth or Calmora."

She was as tall as Will and slender as a reed. Light brown hair streaked with gold was braided with dark brown velvet ribbons that matched her gown. Selena glanced up at the stairs and the vanishing Samuel, her startling green eyes cold and calculating.

"He is lying, Father. I don't need Stephen's sense to know that," she added.

"I agree." Will grumbled.

"Not here," James said and turned back to Jenny as she walked down the stairs "Well?"

"I suggest we retire to our study? He is out of the way. Now, really James?"

James smiled and counted his blessings. "Ah Jen, what would I do.," he folded her into his arms. His beautiful Jenny, her bright gold hair now streaked with silver; but three boys could do that. Her eyes were still as clear a blue as the summer sky and still saw his every mood.

"You'd have gotten yourself killed long ago my love," she tugged at his mustache; "He will be leaving tomorrow. We should make sure he is fed, rested and that is both his men and horses."

"He has Hounds I would think." Michael added.

Jen looked at one of the pages, "Make sure his hounds are cared for as well."

Aldric crouched on a branch of a tree, high above the forest floor. He looked back toward the road; there were no marks in the drifts of snow to mark his passage. All those years of tramping through these woods were paying off.

"Thank you again Will," he murmured.

Aldric settled as comfortably as he could and pulled the dead guard's cloak around him. He fished out the man's rations from the saddlebag now slung over his shoulder and began to eat, reviewing the scene on the road. Making sure, he had not missed anything.

He could just see the guard sprawled on his back, clothes torn and ripped as if hastily searched, boots and sword gone. The horse's tack was missing as well. The ground around them a muddled mess of tracks, and bloodied snow.

Aldric glanced around at the trees where he had hidden the missing articles and where he soon would be traveling through the branches. Kalmoth was an ancient forest. The branches of the great trees, he and Will had found, intertwined providing a pathway in the sky.

"Now, Will it's up to you my friend, to remember and guess where I'm headed." He took a final swig of the brandied wine his uncle issued to his guards, and nodded satisfied his efforts

were the best he could do. Aldric stood up and then began slowly making his way along the branches. Moving carefully from tree to tree, always heading deeper into the forest. Heading to the temple of the Lord, deep at its heart.

"Well Stephen, what can you tell us?" James asked.

They were in his study next to his sleeping chambers. The tall narrow windows were set with glass, and frosted with the snow and ice from the storm. Stephen stood at one of the windows, hands braced on the sill looking out into the dark night.

The others sat around the large heavy carved oak table that dominated the room. Straight high back chairs were relieved of their severity by the thick cushions Jenny had placed on them. Above the fireplace hung the banner of the D'Bries with the Black Leopard intricately embroidered on the heavy red velvet.

James watched Stephen shaking his head as he answered.

"Selena's right father. He is lying. He wants Aldric dead, and he's sure it's what Henry wants too."

"Stephen! You can't know that!" Michael snapped jumping to his feet.

Stephen slowly turned around to face his family, "All I said Cala is that is what he believes, and Henry wants. He doesn't like you father, not at all. Or Will either."

"I don't need your sense to tell me that Stephen." James sat forward and set his elbows on the table resting his chin on his linked hands, "Sit down Michael. Go on Stephen."

"Aldric did what he said, or at least Samuel believes it to be true. There was no falseness there."

"Where then?" Will fidgeted as he leaned on the edge of the table.

"In saying Dirk threw a tantrum and was ill. If he finds Dirk alive," Stephen paused and closed his eyes, "He really doesn't want to find him alive. But if he does," His eyes snapped open, "Aldric will be dead before they get to Calmora Castle."

"Where is he, Steph? I know he' is alive," Will gave a small smile and drew one leg up to clasp it about the knee. "I think I can guess, but tell us."

Stephen shook his head, "I can read Samuel. He is here close by, but Will, I don't know if I can find Dirk,"

Will hopped down and walked to stand in front of his brother.

"Use me. Find him through me Stephen."

Stephen smiled and placed his hands on to Will's shoulders. He closed his eyes, head tipped back, his long silver blond hair swayed and shimmered in the firelight along with the silver blue of his tunic.

James watched amazed as always as his second son used his unusual gift. No one outside of the family knew of Stephen's ability.

"The Talent" as his mother had called it, skipped around in the D'Bries family. Always its recipient was born with pale silver blond hair and light blue eyes.

"The Lord's sign of his blessing." Another of his mother's sayings. How Stephen did what he did, James had no idea; but he was never wrong.

"You're right Will," Stephen's voice soft," but there is death in Kalmoth's Woods tonight"

"Aldric?" Michael breathed.

"No, one of Samuel's men, I think," Stephen frowned and then grinned. "I think Dirk's been busy." He opened his eyes and released Will.

"Well?" Will gave him a shove.

"I sense he is on the way to the temple and leaves no tracks for Samuel to follow. A man is dead on the road," he looked over at his father," and it looks like an attack by bandits, father."

"No tracks?" Michael stared at Stephen, "What in blazes do you mean?"

"The trees!" Will smacked his thigh, "He's using the path through the branches!"

"Yes," Stephen shook his head, "So that's how you did it. Never could figure out how you two got there so fast without my seeing you on the forest paths."

"Didn't you..."

"No, it wouldn't have been fair for me to use my talent."

James grinned at the exchange and shook his head.

"Reminisce another time," Michael jumped back up, "So now what? Aldric is on the way to the temple, alive and well! We have a dead King's guard on our forest road! And the Lord Chancellor is out for Dirk's blood."

"Cala is right," Jenny interrupted," and maybe it is more than just Aldric's blood? Stephen?"

"Not intentionally, but if either Will or you got in his way, father..."Michael said.

"Then I will not, and..." James, tipped his head down in thought, "not Cala or you, hmm? He's not concerned about you two?"

Stephen hung his head, "No. Me, he thinks a weak piece of fluff he can easily dispose of. Cala, he thinks he can woo you to his and Henry's side."

James heard Jenny hiss through her teeth.

"What!" Michael started at his father whose head was still lowered, "I'd not betray you father...I...I..."

Stephen looked up at his brother, "You just can't believe that Henry feels the same way that Samuel does. You need to hear it from Henry himself. Don't you?"

"Samuel is a snake, worse than a snake. I believe you can see his evil intents Steph. But Henry has been a good Regent. He has never..."

James raised his head stopping Michael, "He's never given us reason to doubt him. But Cala, you know I have doubted him."

"Then why haven't you ever asked Stephen to read him?"

"It wouldn't matter. Because I can't," Stephen answered. "I've tried. But there is something. I'm not sure what, but I can't read Henry." He looked over at his father, "You never asked. Is it because you were afraid of what I might learn?"

"Yes, but as you said, it wouldn't have mattered anyway."

Selena stood and shook out her skirts, "I think the fact that Stephen can't read Henry is significant. It means we can only judge him by his minions, and our poor senses. A man who keeps such as Samuel close is not to be trusted blindly, Cala. We need to talk to Aldric." She walked to sit in a chair close to the carved fireplace.

"She's learning well Jenny," James grinned, "So what do we do?" He leaned back in his chair, "Tomorrow, Michael and I will accompany the Lord Chancellor back to the bridge. Appearing appropriately outraged when we find his guard."

Michael frowned and spun his chair around to straddle it, "We really do need to hear what Aldric has to say," he muttered. "We can blame that band of thieves I caught yesterday. Say we must have missed one or two of the group. Could be true." He rested his chin on his crossed arms, "Can't read Henry? I don't like that!"

James shook his head. Michael never did like it when things were not neat. Well nothing was neat or clean about any of this.

"It might work," he said, "Just mumble something about them... Let Samuel do all the expounding, and don't confirm or agree."

Michael nodded and slid a glance at Will, "What about Will? He will not believe Will's reactions."

"Will stays here," James said. He raised a hand as Will moved to protest, "Michael is right. Samuel does not trust you. He knows you're Aldric's best friend." He paused, "Wait till we leave, and go with Stephen to the temple." A smile curled his lips, "...and Will leave no tracks."

"With pleasure father," Will grinned from ear to ear and swept him a bow.

Behind him, Stephen groaned.

"Father?" Selena tipped her head looking at Will, "Is it likely that William would obey you without challenging and not accompany you on the search for his friend?"

"Huh?" William stared at his pretty wife.

"No way!" Stephen said.

Michael nodded in agreement, "Will would raise a hue and cry."

"I would not!" Will snapped.

Jenny shook her head at him, "Yes, you would William." She considered her youngest son, "James, you're known as a hard man. Swift and ruthless in your judgement. That those four thieves that Michael caught yesterday are dead tonight is proof of that fact. You would not let William defy you. Would you?"

"No. I wouldn't," James slowly stood realizing what both Jenny and Selena were hinting at, a sad undertone to his words.

"What?" William looked at his mother, "I'd never defy father!" confusion in his eyes and voice.

"We all know that my word alone is all that would be needed to ensure Will's obedience," James continued gravely as he crossed the room to stand before his youngest son. "...but Samuel...Samuel is the kind of man who'll need visible proof."

Will frowned at his father, and shot puzzled worried looks at Stephen, Michael, and Selena. They looked down at the floor.

"Steph? Cala? Selena? Mother?" he turned to her.

"Yes, James, Samuel would need visible proof," Jenny said.

Will's eyes grew wide as realization hit. "Damn and damn," he said, "Well I Bloody well hope Dirk Bloody well appreciates this!"

With a sick wrenching feeling, James watched as Will slowly shut his eyes and squared his shoulders as he drew back his arm to mark his son with that "visible proof" that might just save his life.