

## #1

*This is a deleted chapter written from James's perspective.*

*In the final draft of Royal Outlaw, it would fall between Chapters 3 and 4.*

*It describes James's first encounter with the Assassin.*

The viper slithered through the tall, green grass continuously flicking out his forked tongue to collect the scent particles. The air and ground were ripe with thousands of different smells, but he found his snake-sister's scent and followed it. A rattling sound came from up ahead, but James was not deterred by the warning-bell. He began to shift back into a man as he reached the rattlesnake. His olfactory senses lessened as he developed a weak, human nose, but the world sharpened around him and sounds met the ears he did not have in snake-form. He savored the familiar feel of the knives and sword that hung from his belt that the ancient magic he possessed allowed to become part of his skin when he shifted.

"You're late," his snake-sister declared, tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder.

"It is an absolute pleasure to see you too, milady," James teased. Anna scowled at him. James stopped smiling as he leaned against a nearby tree and braced himself for the information to come.

"Bad news about the mystery heir?"

Anna pursed her pale lips and took a deep breath. The news was definitely bad if Anna was taking an effort to restrain her infamous anger.

"Dreyfuss found the girl before we could."

James stood up straight and stared at her in shock, "*Girl?*"

Anna smiled bitterly. “Girl. That was probably part of the problem: we were looking for a male heir, not a female heir.”

James could not believe his ears, and checked to make sure that there were holes in the sides of his head for hearing, unlike in his snake form. “The information is erroneous. The de Sharecs would never choose a girl.”

“Well they did, and that’s a fact, I overheard Dreyfuss himself talking about it on his way back to the capital.”

“Did you see the girl?”

“No,” she snorted, “Dreyfuss was telling one of his magician pals that she was more than happy to be princess—stupid, cow-brained, people always jumpin’ at the chance for something better—”

“*Anna*, the heir.”

She muttered something that sounded like an apology, but James could not be certain.

“Dreyfuss was telling his friend that he had told the girl to wait a few weeks before coming to Fintel, let the word spread that an heir had been found, and let people get used to the idea of a girl being next in line for the throne.”

James shook his head in amazement, “The de Sharecs must be desperate. So who is the girl and how far removed is she from the king?”

“She’s a true de Sharec, almost as close as you can get. She’s the dead Princess Carolina’s daughter, the king’s own granddaughter.”

“*What?* First you tell me the de Sharecs chose a girl as heir and now you tell me the dead are walking among us? In the name of Serpía, what is this world coming to?”

Anna hissed, “Watch your mouth, do not use *her* name as a curse.”

“*Sorry*. What’s this undead princess’ name?”

“Mariel de Sharec,” she spat venomously.

James felt a shock run through him at the mention of the girl’s given name. To James’s relief, Anna was too busy trying to restrain her anger and retract the fangs that had grown in her mouth to notice his reaction. He pictured the beautiful girl he knew with her one-of-a-kind eyes and fiery temper; he would have a good time teasing her about sharing a name with the princess.

Anna stiffened and sniffed the air. James picked up on the odor too, even with his weak human nose. It was the smell of rotting flesh, so strong it made him want to gag. In a flash the blonde woman no longer stood beside him, replaced instead by a rattlesnake poised to strike. The rattle shook in warning, and James wondered if he should shift too, but the thought of that horrible smell multiplied in intensity by his sensitive smell organ made him decide better of it. Instead, he pulled out his knives and held them in the throw-ready position.

James could hear nothing except the soft breeze blowing through the trees. Even the forest life had silenced itself, which only made him more uneasy. The smell grew stronger and James and the rattlesnake braced themselves to strike whatever creature appeared. But James was not prepared for what stepped into view.

The thing had the same striped skin as the zreshlans, but instead of a healthy brown, the skin was two different shades of grey. The emblem of a brown recluse spider was stitched into the left breast of his grey robes where magician’s and military men wore their ranks. The smell of rotting carrion emanated from the creature, and James knew that this was not someone to mess with.

The pale, corrupted zreshlan approached the two serpentramel with ease and grace, not seeming to register the warning rattle that Anna was giving. Somehow, James felt that a rattlesnake bite was not something this creature was afraid of.

“The princess is alive?”

James was surprised to hear the voice was smooth and normal, he had been sure it would be something unnatural and creepy.

“She was supposed to die with her mother.”

James shivered. He was not happy that the princess had been discovered by the de Sharecs, but he wished no one to ever be placed in the clutches of this monster. But, right now he was more concerned with his own life and he wasn't so sure it was going to last much longer, as the creature stared at him with blood-red eyes.

“She ought to be dead.” The thing inhaled deeply. “However, I shall kill you first. You smell so tender, so fresh. I have not eaten a serpentramel in a long time, it shall be a treat.”

Before James could stop her, Anna lashed out. Her fangs never reached the creature's skin. A blast of magic sent both serpentramel tumbling over backward. Anna, being in her smaller, lighter form, flew further and smashed into the tree James had been leaning against earlier. When the rattlesnake made contact with the tree she morphed into human form, but did not stir. Blood dribbled from her temple and James stared at his snake-sister. He wanted to run to her side, to see if she was still alive, but the monster moved quicker.

The creature bent toward the woman and tore away a chunk of her neck with his sharp teeth. Blood spurted out, staining Anna's blonde hair red. Instinct drove James and he did not look back as he ran as fast as he could away from the thing.

His legs screamed in protest, but his fear kept him running. He stopped only to retch, the image of the monster eating his snake-sister impossible to dislodge from his mind. When he had emptied his stomach, he continued to run, as fast and as far as he could. He did not stop until he reached a human village, where he slipped into a tavern just to feel the security of not being

alone. In the darkest corner he could find, he let the tears fall freely and tried to banish the fear from his mind.

James reached out as a buxom waitress walked passed and grabbed a mug from her tray. He had the ale downed before the woman could even protest, the hard liquor burning his throat and mouth.

His sympathy reached out to a girl he did not know, and did not want to know. The man-eating Zreshlan was after the princess, and although James did not want the girl alive to continue the de Sharecs miserable, corrupted rule, he hoped that she did not meet the same fate as Anna. He would never wish that nightmare on anyone.

## #2

*This is a deleted chapter written from James's perspective.*

*In the final draft of Royal Outlaw, it would fall between Chapters 8 and 9.*

*It describes how James discovered Mariel's location at the convent.*

The snake's fangs swung forward to strike and with lightning speed he drove them into the furry body and waited for the toxic venom to kill the animal. When he no longer felt the rapidly beating heart of the hare, he retracted his long hollow teeth. He scented the air with his tongue and listened to the low-frequency sound that came through the small bones in the sides of his head. When he was certain the corrupted zreshlan was not nearby, he transformed into a lean man with wiry muscles and olive skin.

After skinning and cleaning the hare, James gathered bits of dried wood and lit a fire to roast it over. He sat with his back against one of the trees and kept his sword within reach as he waited for his meal to cook. A twig snapped and James snatched his sword out of its scabbard and jumped to his feet. He sniffed the air expectantly, but the only meat he smelled was the hare cooking over the fire and its aroma was fresh, not rotten like the stench he expected and feared constantly.

James continued to scent the air, but as the minutes ticked by and nothing happened, he relaxed and settled back down on the forest floor.

"I'm being paranoid," he said to an owl sitting on a nearby branch.

The encounter with the man-eating monster had scared James so badly he had fled the kingdom. He had spent a great deal of time in snake-form, hoping the corrupted zreshlan would be unable to track him. Whether the tactic had worked, or the monster was not interested in the

viper serpentmeal, James did not know, nor did he care. Either way, he was still alive and had not seen the creature since it had eaten his snake-sister Anna—except in the nightmares that haunted his sleep.

James traveled south now, toward Parloipae where he hoped to ask the zreshlans exactly who and what the thing that had killed Anna was. He passed Fintel the week before and when he had first reentered Natric he made contact with an old man who was a snake-brother and told him to report on Anna's death. It was the first time James had made contact with anyone he knew in weeks and he had not stayed long enough to find out about what was going on in the kingdom.

The young man suddenly realized that he knew less about what was going on than he ever had in his entire life. Profound fear had caused him to go into hiding, but James had begun to realize that the corrupted zreshlan was not looking for him and he should stop running. He would continue to Parloipae and stop at the zreshlan city of Ambras Añue and ask his questions there. With a plan in mind, James devoured his small meal and slipped reluctantly into slumber, aware that the man-eating monster waited for him there.

James woke covered in a thin layer of sweat just before dawn. He shivered in the cool morning air and from the nightmares that had haunted his sleep. He let his mind wander and listened to the peaceful noises of the forest as he walked beneath the trees. Most people used roads or well-used trails to travel, but James preferred the paths created by forest animals.

Wanting to make good time, he delayed stopping for lunch and plucked berries from bushes as he passed. In the late afternoon, he reached a junction in the deer path he was following. Although one of the paths clearly took him south where he wanted to go, the one that headed east was what caught his attention. He bent and inspected the footprints more clearly. They had been

made not by a wild animal but by a bare human foot, most likely a young woman of slight build. The footprints looked familiar.

“Can it be?” James whispered, excitement making his heart beat faster.

There was only one way to find out. James shifted his tongue into its snake form. The forked tongue shot into the air and when it settled back into his mouth it brought with it a variety of smells, but one in particular caught his attention: a unique odor combined with the scent of sweat, crushed needles from Ambras Añue, and . . . was that lavender?

James did not stop to ponder the latest smell that clung to the familiar scent; instead he took a detour from his journey south and followed the scent east along the deer trail. If anyone in the world could help to banish James’s fear of the zreshlan-creature, it would be this high-spirited girl. He also remembered a promise he had made himself the same day Anna had died, about how he had to tease his friend about sharing the same name with the princess. Mariel could also catch him up on news about what was going on, she would probably know more than almost anyone he could think of.

The sun had set by the time James saw the convent. He scented the air again to make sure he had not gone astray, but Mariel’s unique scent still clung in the air. Perhaps she had been sent here as a spy. However, Mariel’s scent did not head into the kitchen area as James expected, but rather to a large beech tree and into a second floor room. The scent was strong as though she had passed this way many times. James checked his surroundings to make sure no one was looking, and quickly scaled the tree.

The window was unlocked and the room empty, but Mariel’s scent hung thickly and he drank it in like an elixir. James inspected the room curiously. He wondered why Mariel was acting like a young noblewoman and laughed quietly at the idea of it. He had a hard time imagining the girl

dressed in the wide skirts and tight corset, and the expression of anger she would wear would be priceless. James had known Mariel for years, and she had always been a low-class girl on her missions, never a wealthy one. He did not even think she could behave enough to act well-bred. She must be going crazy acting the part of a student at this famous finishing school! James could not wait to tease her about it, or ask her about the princess whom she was most likely spying on.

It appeared that Mariel had a roommate, so he would have to hide and wait until the other girl fell asleep or Mariel was in the room alone, then he could pounce. Thinking the first happy thoughts in weeks, James shifted into viper form and slithered beneath the bed that hung thickly with Mariel's scent. He found her sword Aracklin hidden beneath a discarded petticoat, and wondered how many weapons she had hidden beneath her young noblewoman's uniform, two at least, if not more. He tried to guess as he settled in to wait.

### #3

*This is a deleted chapter written from James's perspective.*

*In the final draft of Royal Outlaw it would fall between Chapters 13 and 14.*

*It describes what happened after the Assassin attacked Mariel in the convent.*

The memory of Mariel falling kept replaying in James's head. He remembered the blood, there had been so much blood that sometimes it was all he remembered. The blood and helplessly listening to her screams lived in James's nightmares, although he had yet to sleep. But Mariel's screams were not what haunted him most, nor was the blood or the image of her falling. The thing that shook him to the core of his being, the thing that he would never forget, was her terrified begging: *"He's going to kill me, like he killed my mother. I'm scared. Please, don't let him kill me, James."*

Those were the words that she had sobbed and they were the words that refused to leave him. She had sounded so defeated and terrified, something he had never expected to see or hear in the high spirited girl. Perhaps what struck such a chord with James was Mariel had admitted to being scared. Mariel never confessed fear, not even when the truth was plainly reflected in her stunning dark green eyes.

His steps kept a steady rhythm now as he paced back and forth across the room Mariel and Cara usually shared. Mariel was not here, nor perhaps would she ever be again. Cara sat on her bed, her sad, blood-shot eyes following James as he moved. He would walk to the window, then turn and walk back toward the door, then back toward the window, then back toward the door.

He was surprised he had not worn a trail into the wood yet after pacing for so many hours. He had snuck into this room shortly after he had returned from the City of the Gods and had been

here ever since, helplessly waiting for a word—word about whether or not Mariel would live or die.

“You should sleep,” Cara said quietly, breaking the silence that had hung between them for hours.

“No,” James responded roughly, not looking at the girl.

“You haven’t slept since before . . . *it* happened.”

James reached the door, turned and started walking toward the window.

“Neither have you.” That was guess, but James had a hard time imagining doing anything as trivial as sleeping while Mariel hung between life and death. Perhaps she was already dead . . .

“I didn’t just ride to the City of the Gods and back in record time though.”

James ignored Cara’s comment. With Mariel bleeding and unconscious on the temple floor, High Priestess had taken action and ordered him to ride to the City of the Gods for help from those priests and priestesses with more power and knowledge of magic than those at the convent. He and Iyela had temporarily put aside their differences, united in the cause to save their mutual friend’s life.

Riding a unicorn, he had made the day-long ride in just a few hours and frantically went about the Citadel desperate to find someone of high rank, knowing that only someone very powerful could save Mariel. He thought the gods were playing a cruel joke on him when he ran directly into none other than the most powerful magician in the Eastern Lands, the archmagician himself, the heartless Dieter Dreyfuss.

Before he could get a word out of his mouth, Dreyfuss had him helplessly pinned against the wall with magic. James knew the archmagician studied poster sketches of outlaws as his hobby, and he had recognized the young man.

“The elusive James *Snaketongue*, as many call you, although you go by a variety of other surnames.” Dreyfuss had smirked. “You are one of those great criminals who manage to slip out of prison whenever he happens to get caught—although that is not very often. And here I finally have the honor of meeting you, running through a citadel corridor. I would not call that inconspicuous.”

Anger had flared in James. He hated this man who delivered so many injustices to people and seemed capable of oppressing the serpentramel or the Resistance whenever they began to make progress. Then he remembered Mariel and listening to her beg for help. And watching her fall. She was dying of wounds too great for any normal healer. She needed a powerful magician. She needed the zreshlan, but they were too far away. Perhaps the gods were not playing a joke on him after all.

“Mariel,” he had gasped through the invisible bonds that kept him plastered to the wall.

The name had caused Dreyfuss to pause. “What?”

James had felt the oppressive magic loosen around just his throat, but it was enough so he could speak.

“Princess Mariel was attacked at the Convent of Narel in Pribum. High Priestess Sonja sent me here for help.”

Dreyfuss had stayed very still, uncertain. “You expect me to believe the princess is hurt? That girl used to be one of the most wanted outlaws, although most people do not know that. She could fight off ten men before she so much as took a scratch.”

“The creature who attacked her knew how to use magic, and use it well. She didn’t have a chance.” Tears began to sting James’s eyes and he blinked them away. “We may have never agreed on anything before, Dreyfuss, until now. We both want Mariel to live. She is my friend,

and she is your only hope of keeping Natric from erupting in civil war without a direct heir to the throne. She was alive when I left, but there was so much blood I can't say whether she still is now. All I know, is she needs your help and the thing that attacked her was the same one who killed her mother."

Dreyfuss's eyes grew large at that last comment. James knew the archmagician had been new to his position at the time of Princess Carolina's murder and he had personally gone to investigate what had happened, not believing what he heard was truth. He had found the bodies of servants who had worked at Remel rotting in cages above the courtyard and he had seen what the princess's body had looked like after lying bloated in the courtyard—broken, stabbed, and bitten—until Sergeant Darren of the Versati Corps had discovered the grisly scene.

More than eleven years ago Dreyfuss had faced the choice of whether or not to track the princess and rescue her. He had chosen to let her die. Now he had the chance to save her again.

"Castion, I want five high-level magicians dedicated to the healing goddess Narel and a battalion of soldiers to meet me at the West Entrance with horses prepared for a hard ride," Dreyfuss had ordered one of the priests with him.

"What about the prisoner?"

Dreyfuss had gazed at James for a few long moments.

"He goes with us."

Cara moved suddenly, startling James from his memories. She had been sitting on her bed, almost completely still for hours, but now she walked across the room and pulled Mariel's sword, Aracklin, out from its hiding place. James watched as the girl proceeded to sit on their friend's bed and free the sword from its scabbard. Cara gently ran the tips of her fingers over the zreshlan name of the sword etched into the rare metal just beneath the hilt.

“Do you think it would have made a difference if she had this when she was attacked?”

Drawn to the familiar sword like a bee to a flower, James flipped the sword over and touched three horizontal wavy lines beneath the hilt, and then the deep green jewel set into the pommel that painfully reminded him of Mariel’s eyes.

“*Greslina*,” he muttered to himself, “River-emerald.” James continued to touch the sword, as though through it he could touch his friend. “No, Cara, I don’t think this sword would have made a difference in the outcome of events.”

Cara shivered. “But I’ve seen what Mariel can do with a sword in hand . . .”

James shook his head. “What attacked Mariel was no match for her, on any level.”

He pulled away and began to pace again. Silence stretched between them again, a silence of two friends anxiously waiting for news of someone they both cared about. James’s steps on the floor were the only sound in the room for a while, except his guilty heart.

He should have been there to help her. He should have been able to break into the temple and stop the monster from hurting her. “*Please, don’t let him kill me, James,*” she had pleaded, and he had been unable to do anything. He had stood by helplessly as he listened to Mariel scream. The promise he had silently made to protect her was broken, he had been powerless.

“I’m sure Archmagician Dreyfuss will heal her,” Cara said quietly.

“I’m glad you have more faith in that man than I do.”

“Why do you keep pacing? It isn’t going to help her.”

“Because it makes me feel like I’m doing something,” James snapped, not faltering in his movements. “I can’t just sit by and wait while Mariel lies dying and the person who is her only hope of survival is Dieter Dreyfuss, who is one of the people I hate most in this world.”

Cara fell silent again, lost in thought. James almost wished she would keep talking. Ever since Mariel had first brought her roommate to morning exercises, James knew Cara had fire in her and it just took the right coaxing to bring it out. However, this insightfulness that he was now witnessing was something he had only heard about from Mariel. He supposed it was a good sign that she was so relaxed around him, when she had been shocked and timid upon their first meeting. Cara's next words changed James's mind about the good of her friendliness toward him.

"You're in love with her, aren't you?"

The girl's words halted James in his tracks. He turned and stared at her. Mariel was right: Cara could be annoyingly perceptive when she wanted to be.

"Don't worry," Cara said, a slight smile on her lips, knowing she had guessed right. "I won't tell Mariel."

The door opened abruptly, and both of the room's occupants jumped in surprise. Knowing he was not supposed to be here, James had intended to shift into his snake form and hide when someone came with news of Mariel, but Cara's question had distracted him from listening for footsteps.

High Priestess's mouth hung open in surprise as she saw a man standing in the center of the room. He normally would have laughed at the expression on the usually composed face of the priestess, if he had not been staring at the man standing next to her instead.

Dreyfuss looked pale and tired, as though he might collapse from fatigue at any moment. James was not sure if the archmagician's exhaustion kept him from being surprised at finding James there, or if he had been expecting it. A smart outlaw would have run given the chance, but James was more concerned with the welfare of the girl he loved than his own.

“The blood loss was extensive,” Dreyfuss said jadedly, “and her wounds were severely damaging, but my magicians and I managed to keep her heart beating. She will take a while to recover, but she will live.”

James released the tense breath he had not realized he had been holding and laughed. Still sitting on the bed with Aracklin in her lap, Cara broke into tears. The need of one of her student’s broke High Priestess of her shocked stillness and she rushed to embrace the weeping girl.

“Come with me,” Dreyfuss told James.

James stiffened. He could feel the venom in his mouth as he grew his fangs and prepared to strike. Aware that he probably could not strike this man even in his weakened state, James still had no intention of going down without a fight.

Dreyfuss noticed the other man’s tense, fighting stance. He scoffed, “I was going to let you see the princess.”

“*What?*” The word burst out before James could stop it.

The archmagician smirked. “Do you expect me to believe that you had no intention of sneaking into her room tonight to make sure I am not lying about her survival? I have many guards on her room, and the chances of you being caught are high . . . then again you always seem capable of *slithering* into the most secure places. If you did get caught or spotted, it would only cause more of a headache for me since people would question my ability to keep the royal family safe, even when I am in the same building. Therefore, I expect you to come with me now.”

James did not want to trust this man he loathed so much. He did not like how Dreyfuss had emphasized the word “*slithering*.” It made James wonder if the archmagician knew or suspected

he was serpentramel. It was a death sentence to simply be discovered as that race, since they had been the rulers of Natric with their goddess Serpía before the de Sharecs had come with their war god Valmir and his sister Narel. But the temptation to see Mariel was great.

“Wait!” Cara cried, pulling away from High Priestess. She ran to James and held out Mariel’s sword. “Take this to her.”

James wanted to point out that Mariel would be in no shape to lift a sword or in any way defend herself if she had to, but then he realized that was not why Cara wanted her friend to have the weapon. Mariel never liked to admit fear, but after what happened she would be scared and she needed something familiar to comfort her.

“And one more thing.” Cara hurried to the washroom and returned carrying a small vial filled with an amber colored liquid. “She always takes a drop of this every night. I never asked her why, but I think it is important.”

Before James could take the vial from Cara, Dreyfuss snatched it from her hands and pulled out the stopper. He sniffed it and swirled it around, an annoyed frown creasing his pale face.

“I do not recognize this potion. Do you know where she acquired it?”

Cara shook her head.

James remembered seeing the vial in the room Mariel used in Parloipae, and he had a pretty good idea where she had obtained the potion, whatever it was.

Dreyfuss thrust the vial in Cara’s face and she stepped backward in surprise.

“Do you have any idea what this is, girl?” he demanded.

Cara stared at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“Archmagician,” High Priestess interrupted, “She told you she knows nothing.”

“You even said *you* didn’t know what it is, great archmagician,” James pointed out, coldly.

Dreyfuss narrowed his eyes and turned on the serpentramel. "I do not," he admitted reluctantly, "But I know it is powerful, whatever it is and it is not poisonous. I am the archmagician, I have studied every known potion there is, but I have never come across this before."

A smile twitched across James's face. "You're jealous of Mariel. Don't tie your robes too tight Dreyfuss. Don't expect her to tell you anything about that potion. She's full of secrets, and she is good at keeping them. Now will you let me see her before you arrest me, or should I make a scene? Either way is fine with me, I enjoy undermining you and making you look bad, but I would prefer if you would cooperate peacefully. If you let me see Mariel like you said, I might decide to come quietly and let you throw me in prison."

Dreyfuss glared at James, causing a larger smile to spread on the younger man's face.

"I certainly hope I will not live to regret the decision I made yesterday when you arrived at the Citadel for help, but only time will tell and the will of the gods."

Confusion tugged at James, what decision was he talking about? What did Dreyfuss intend to do to him? And why did the archmagician seem so unsure about his decision?

"Follow me," Dreyfuss said. "The sooner I take you to her, the sooner I can go to bed."

Dreyfuss led the way down the stairs, but he walked in a tense manner despite his fatigue, revealing his mistrust for James. James could not believe he was following this man he had loathed and fought against for so long. He could easily lunge and sink his venomous fangs into the archmagician right now and end the life of the powerful man many people hated. But he was not sure he would be successful, even with the archmagician in a weakened state.

Ten guards stood in front of one of the doors to the guest room on the first floor. Like all of the doors in the convent, a fox was painted on the wood, this one was black. He thought he might

be able to sneak into the room, but the risk of getting caught was certainly high, and his current goal was to see Mariel. Being arrested would not help that cause.

The guards snapped to attention as Dreyfuss strutted toward them. They eyed James suspiciously, even though he had traveled with them through the long night from the City of the Gods back to this convent. James was a wanted outlaw, but he did not have a poster with a reward posted in every town like Darren Brightsword had. Although James was not a member of the Resistance like Mariel, he worked for someone with a similar goal to Darren Brightsword's. James stirred trouble within the country and had been arrested a variety of times. While people might recognize his name as James Snaketongue, most would not know if he passed them on the street. Since he gave a different last name whenever he was arrested, most prisons did not even realize who they had caught.

"I trust there have been no disturbances?" Dreyfuss asked the sergeant in charge of the unit of guards.

"No one has entered this room since you left it, Archmagician."

Dreyfuss showed no sign of approval, but gestured to James. "This man, James . . ."

The archmagician paused, and James realized he was waiting for him to provide a last name. "Alecsson," he said hurriedly, half wondering if this was a trap to get him arrested. His heart hammered as he wondered if Mariel really was all right.

Dreyfuss smirked. "*Alecsson?* I was expecting something more creative from you. Alecsson is so *ordinary*."

James almost told the man that he really did not care if the name was ordinary, it was his real surname, and all he wanted was permission to walk through that door and see for himself that the

girl he loved was still alive. Deciding all he would receive in return for this information was trouble and a delay, he bit back the remark and glared angrily at the archmagician instead.

Dreyfuss flashed a superior grin at James and then turned back to the sergeant. “James *Alecsson* has my permission to enter into and remain within the room where the princess is.”

“With the sword?” the sergeant asked, eyeing the beautiful sword in James’s hand.

“That’s not a sword, Sergeant, it’s a fire poker,” said a burly guard. “I could snap it in half easily.”

James laughed, thinking about the tough metal called *pulion* that the sword was made of. The metal was stronger and lighter than steel, and it would be a sight to watch this soldier try to break something skillfully made of it. He shrugged and held out the zreshlan-made sword to the muscular guard.

“Go ahead and try. It isn’t my sword anyway.”

The guard suspiciously looked between the weapon and the young man holding it, then he glanced at his superior officer.

The sergeant turned to Dreyfuss, who stood by wearily. “I was not under the impression that you played tricks on people, Archmagician.”

Dreyfuss drew himself up into an erect standing position and turned his angry eyes on the commander of the guards. “I never joke, Sergeant. Mr. *Alecsson* is a trickster. I do not trust him; however, I do not doubt his loyalty to the princess. I have my reasons for permitting him to visit her, but they are *my* reasons and I need not deign myself to explain them to a lowly soldier like you. He keeps the sword and he goes in alone.”

The sergeant's face burned a humiliated red, but he and his guards slapped their fists to their chests and bowed in deference. Dreyfuss turned and walked away, leaving James standing alone in the corridor holding Aracklin with ten angry, recently disgraced soldiers glaring at him.

James smiled brightly. "Bad luck, boys. You've just been ordered to let a wanted criminal into the room you are guarding and the archmagician slapped you in the face defending him. Better luck next time."

When James stepped into the room, his breath caught in his throat and his humor vanished. No window revealed a glimpse of the outside world, something that would drive Mariel crazy when she awoke, but James recognized—and approved—of this safety precaution.

A single candle burned next to the bed, its flame the only source of light. What the small flame revealed though, wrenched his heart. Mariel lay on the bed, her breathing so shallow James thought she was dead for one horrifying moment. But no, her chest did move, if ever so slightly and irregularly. She was drugged, how heavy the dose was he did not know, but she would not be waking soon.

He stepped closer to her, sword and vial in hand. After each step, he paused to make sure her chest continued to rise and fall, before he took another. He set the sheathed sword on the side of the bed and placed the vial next to the candle. A curl of thick brown hair had escaped the bandages tightly wound around her head and James gently tucked it behind her ear. As he did so, he spotted a cut peeking out from beneath her bandages. This one was shallow and James assumed this particular healing had more to do with the last thirty hours it had had to scab rather than the work of magicians.

With what felt like a stab in the gut, the image of blood pouring down Mariel's face, into her eyes and mouth, triggered James's memory. He also remembered the deep slices in her abdomen

and the chunk of flesh that had been bitten out of her left arm. Those wounds were more life threatening than the head scratches, so the magicians had probably focused their efforts on them.

Carefully, James lifted the blankets and saw the bandaging wound around Mariel's middle from her waist to her armpits. With sudden dryness in his mouth, James noted the blood beginning to stain through the thick bandaging on her left arm. He should have expected it: healing was a complicated magical process that involved a massive amount of energy. Although Dreyfuss and his assistant magicians had been working on Mariel and trying to save her life since early that morning, some things would just have to heal with time or magic used later.

Gently lifting Mariel's undamaged right arm to above the blankets, James placed Aracklin into her loose hold. After the horrors she had endured yesterday, Mariel would need all the support and reassurance she could get. James remembered her begging, remembered her screams, remembered the corrupted zreshlan.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against her chapped ones. He half expected Mariel to awake and fight him off with a string of colorful curse words, but she remained in her drugged, sleeping state. He wanted to lie down next to her and tell her that he loved her, but even as she lay sleeping he could not find the courage to tell her how he really felt.

As much as he wanted to, those three seemingly simple words never seemed willing to pass his lips, not for Mariel. He feared rejection. He could laugh and cover his hurt when Mariel pushed him away when he kissed her. After all, he would tell himself, Mariel was aware of how many women he brought to his bed, but she did not know that he would give it all up if only she would return his love. But she did not realize that he saw her differently than all those other women. No, Mariel did not know, and he was too afraid to tell her, but that did not stop him from sitting beside her bed throughout the remainder of the night waiting for her to wake up.

As the hours passed, James calmed his racing heart and tried to compose himself because he knew Mariel would be in need of a warm reassuring smile and a joke when she awoke.

#### #4

*This is a deleted chapter written from James's perspective.*

*In the final draft of Royal Outlaw, it would fall between Chapters 20 and 21.*

*It describes what happened after the goddess Narel forces Mariel to remember her forgotten memories in the City of the Gods.*

A bright light flared, forcing everyone watching to look away. When James looked back the goddess had vanished. Mariel's eyes were shut and James lunged to catch her as she slipped from the bench.

He was the only one in the temple who moved. The rest of the congregants and priestesses remained stunned at what they had witnessed and the thunderous voice they had heard.

Cara was first to recover. She slipped out of the bench to kneel on the floor next to James who cradled the unconscious princess against him.

"Her eyelids are fluttering," the copper-headed girl said. "She'll wake up soon."

James was afraid of what would happen when Mariel woke up. He had not forgotten her reaction to his attempt to persuade her to face her memories on the night of his arrival a month ago. If Narel had used her powers to force Mariel to remember the terrifying events her subconscious had suppressed, he feared what would happen when she came back to consciousness.

"We have to get her out of here."

He lifted Mariel as he stood, aware that the rest of the people in the temple had come to their senses and were talking in astonishment and excitement. Many people were on their feet, trying to get a better look at the princess.

“Quickly,” Superior Priestess said, waddling up to Cara and James, who held the unconscious Mariel. “Follow me.”

The squat woman in black robes began to lead them toward a door that only the priestesses used. James had barely taken two steps when Mariel’s eyes flew open and she screamed.

The sound of the scream chilled everyone who heard it. It was a sound unlike any they had ever heard, one filled with nothing but pure terror.

Mariel thrashed and struck out wildly, forcing James to drop her. She hit the floor still screaming and began to scuttle backward, away from everyone. A torrent of tears ran down her cheeks. Her dark green eyes darting about the room contained a wildness and madness that scared James. He remembered Anoria telling him how Mariel had acted when she woke from nightmares after she first arriving in Ambras Añue.

“He’s going to kill me!” She screamed. “He’s hunting me and he’s going to kill me.”

The Superior Priestess reached out a hand toward Mariel. “No one is trying to kill you, Your Highness.”

Mariel screamed and slapped the stout woman’s hand away.

“He’s going to kill me like he killed Mother!”

James knew what needed to be done. “You need to make everyone leave.”

The woman just stared wide-eyed at Mariel as she rubbed the hand that had been slapped.

*“Superior Priestess!”*

“He’s going to kill me!” Mariel sobbed as she held her knees and rocked back and forth.

James spun back to the benches. “Dreyfuss, everyone needs to leave!”

With what seemed like a miracle, Dreyfuss did not turn arrogant and demand respect from the captain of the Princess’s Guards, instead he turned and started shouting orders for people to

leave. No one dared to disobey the powerful archmagician. Shocked and confused, the priests, priestesses, and visitors of the Citadel hurried out the door. At last, only the Superior Priestess, Dreyfuss, the Princess's Guards and lady's maids, and Mariel were left.

"What is wrong with her," Dreyfuss demanded as he stared in astonishment at the sobbing girl who rocked back and forth.

"The fox did something to her," Tristan said.

"The gods are fools, especially Narel," James muttered angrily.

Superior Priestess heard him. "Do not speak of the goddess with such disrespect!"

James spun on the woman who barely came up to his chest. "Your precious goddess forced Mariel to remember things that traumatized her. And look what good that did!"

"The fox was the goddess Narel?" Hallie asked.

"In all her arrogant glory," James replied sourly. He saw Superior Priestess open her mouth to respond indignantly, but he didn't care what she had to say. "Let the patron goddess of Natric strike me with lightning. I don't care!"

"Do you think *your* goddess will protect you?" Dreyfuss asked in derision.

"The major goddess he prays to should be Narel," Superior Priestess insisted. "She is the goddess to all those who live in Natric."

"She isn't goddess to everyone," Zeke told the woman.

Before Superior Priestess could open her mouth to retort with something religious, James cut in, "This is not the time to discuss gods!"

Cara seemed to agree with him. She crouched down and began to approach her friend like she would a frightened animal. She held out her hand. "I'm not going to hurt you," she said in a soothing, reassuring voice.

Mariel looked up from her knees and stared at the approaching girl without a hint of recognition in her eyes. “He’s going to kill me.”

“We will not let him kill you,” Cara crooned. “Please, Mariel, trust me.”

That struck something in Mariel. She tore at her hair, ripping out the pins that bound it up and tearing out several strands. “Humans cannot be trusted!”

“Don’t mention trust,” James told Cara who had stopped moving forward. “She doesn’t trust anyone who is human, except her father.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“You’ve probably never asked.”

Cara gave him such a sympathetic look that it nearly killed James to be on the receiving end. He squirmed under her gaze and looked away.

“Why are you acting like this?” Dreyfuss asked Mariel, angrily. “You are making a buffoon of yourself.”

“She doesn’t understand you.”

“What are you talking about? I am speaking in plain Natrician.”

“Look at her eyes: they’re wild. She isn’t Mariel right now, at least not the Mariel we know.”

“It is all an act,” Isabel said, drearily. “She just wants attention. You shouldn’t encourage her.”

James spun on her. He grabbed her arm and pushed her toward the main aisle. “Get out!”

“How dare you touch me and speak to me so! You have no right.”

“I can do whatever in Throvim’s Realm I want to. Now, get out!”

“You think that just because you are the captain of the Princess’s Guard you have the authority to . . .”

“Tristan, escort Miss Isabel out.”

“Gladly.”

With the threat of the large man looming over her, Isabel stopped protesting and left the temple without another word. Superior Priestess also decided to leave.

When the two women were gone, everyone turned their attentions back to Mariel who had begun rocking back and forth again. She constantly sobbed and mumbled, “He’s going to kill me. He’s going to kill me.”

Cara decided to try again. She began to creep forward. “He won’t get you. You’re safe now. Please, listen to me. We’re trying to help you.”

It was the wrong thing to say, James saw that immediately. Mariel looked up, and her face was mingled with fear and anger.

“No one helped me! The horse saved me from him, but he followed. He followed! And I kept running. I begged everyone I saw for help. But no one has helped me.”

“We’ll help you.”

“No you won’t! You’ll trick me into thinking you will and then you’ll throw me out on the streets, laughing. I’ll keep running, but he’ll catch me. He’ll catch me and he’ll kill me. No one will help me!”

Mariel returned to sobbing and Cara glanced back at the others, hoping they might have some idea. James was disturbed by something Mariel said.

“How old are you, Mariel?”

“I’m six! He’s going to kill me. I want Mother!”

James was not the only one who swore, several others did as well, and no one bothered to make apologies to the young women who were present or ask forgiveness of the goddess in whose temple they were in.

“She believes she’s six!” Dreyfuss exclaimed with incredulity. “How do we get her to remember nearly twelve years have passed since then?”

No one replied. James was lost in thought. “When I first met Mariel it was not long after her mother’s murder. She didn’t remember who she was. It was two years before she regained her memory, at least everything except what happened regarding Princess Carolina’s murder.”

“Why didn’t you mention this sooner?” Dreyfuss asked. “What triggered her memory?”

“Darren found her.”

“He will find me,” Mariel interrupted. “Papa will come for me. He loves me, but he’s the only one. But *they* won’t come. I always believed they would come for me and love me, but Mother and Papa said they wouldn’t. And now they’re going to let me die. They don’t love me! They don’t care about me!”

“Who won’t come for you?” Cara asked.

Mariel was lost in her madness. “I was a good girl, Mother. I’m sorry I got mad when you told me they didn’t care about me or anyone else. I’m sorry I didn’t listen. I’m sorry I wanted to be a real princess. I thought they would come! I thought they loved me! But they won’t help me! No one will help me! Papa won’t find me in time and the monster will kill me. I looked back, Mother! I shouldn’t have looked back! They were hurting you, Mother! And he killed you! He’s going to kill me too!”

The small group left in the temple stared at the sobbing girl. Something tore at James’s heart. Mariel’s hatred of her grandparents went far deeper than their mistreatment and cruelty to their

people. She had put her faith in them as a small child and they had betrayed her. They had broken her trust. They had left her for dead.

“Is she talking about the king and queen?” Hallie dared to ask.

James glared at Dreyfuss and pointed to Mariel as he said, “Are you glad you and the king refused to help Darren find his daughter when he begged for your help? Does your conscience release you from guilt that you knowingly left her to die?”

The archmagician could not meet James’s eyes. He was saved from responding to the questions by Mariel’s next exclamation. “The Brown-Spider Man will find me! He will tear me apart with his pointy teeth.”

“She remembers who the assassin was,” Dreyfuss said, turning the conversation away from his mistakes and back to the princess. He approached the girl. “Who is the man who hunts you?”

She crawled forward passed Cara, who still crouched on the ground, and stopped at Dreyfuss’s feet. She clutched the bottom of his robes and looked up at him with large, wild eyes. “The little brown spiders come first. They always come first. I smell dead bodies like at home when they killed the servants. He comes then! The Brown-Spider-Man comes!”

In his mind’s eye, James saw the pale stripped skin of the monster and his rusty colored hair. He could almost smell the stench Mariel spoke of and he remembered watching the creature tear into the flesh of his snake-sister Anna. This was the assassin who hunted the de Sharecs with a personal vengeance. He would not stop until the last two were dead, or he was.

“Describe him.”

“Don’t push her,” James warned. He had pushed Mariel before, tried to persuade her to face her memories and she had cracked. She had admitted to fear and it had frightened James to witness it. But she had been conscious of her surroundings then, she had not been trapped in

madness. Mariel thought she was six as she relived the nightmares of her past, but if she continued in her madness and remembered the weapons hidden on her body and how to use them she could become very dangerous.

“Mother, help me.”

“Describe the man who hunts you.”

“Papa, save me. Please find me before he does. Please. I want to go home!”

“You must describe him, so we can find him.”

“I killed a man! I killed him. He tried to pull me off the horse and I killed him. *I killed him!*”

“Wake up, Your Highness! You must tell us who the assassin is!”

“They don’t love me! They let me die!”

“You are going to die if you do not tell us who the assassin is!”

Mariel screamed, her voice filled with pure fear. She jumped to her feet and bolted down the main aisle of the temple.

James raced after her, afraid to know where she was going or what she might do. Would she ever break out of this madness?

She flew out of the temple as though possessed and he ran after her. She was in perfect shape after the months of recovery since the assassination attack and she ran with fear breathing down her neck. Mariel blasted down the corridors, darting in and out of people. James raced on behind her, slowly gaining.

A plainly dressed man stepped out of a room just before Mariel reached him. She had no time to change her direction and ran straight into him. The man took a step back to regain his balance in a move that impressed James. Mariel looked up into the man’s eyes and then dropped in a faint.

The man caught her when she fell, as James reached them. The man pushed her tangled hair out of the way and a look of surprise crossed his features when he saw her face. He looked up at James who struggled to catch his breath.

“Is there a reason why the princess is running headlong down this corridor without care into whom she collides, Captain Alecsson?”

James did not need to ask the man how he knew who he was, his green and silver uniform with its circle of stars marking him as captain provided the information.

“It’s a long story, Captain Clemens.” He reached out toward Mariel. “I’ll take her.”

The man raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Do I want to know how you know who I am when I am out of uniform?”

A smile twitched James’s lips as he lifted Mariel into his arms. He had always admired the captain of the Versati Corps. He was a man who had come from nothing and risen as high as anyone could without the aid of help of money to back him, yet he was still an advocate for the people of Natric. James knew that when King Vincent had discovered that Sergeant Darren had impregnated his only daughter, it was Captain Calvin Clemens who had intervened and saved Darren’s job.

Captain Clemens might appreciate James’s history as a criminal, but James did not feel like taking any risks. The captain could be a powerful ally, especially in protecting Mariel, James did not want to alienate him.

“No,” he replied.

The captain chuckled. “I didn’t think so.”

“Is she hurt?” Tristan asked as he and the other five guards arrive.

James looked down at the girl in his arms. “She fainted.”

Tristan swallowed hard and stared at Mariel with obvious fear on her face. “Do you think she’ll be herself when she wakes up?”

“And she is supposed to be the next ruler of our country?” Zeke scoffed. “She’s mad.”

James shot a deadly look at the black mamba. “She’s *scared*.”

“What’s the difference?”

James resisted hissing in challenge. His awareness that revealing that he was a serpentramel could cost him his life was the only thing that kept the hiss at bay. Instead, he sent his aggravating snake-brother away.

“Zeke, go back to the temple and tell the archmagician I’m taking the princess to her rooms.”

The serpentramel shot a curious glance at the captain of the Versati Corps before saluting and trotting off to do as James ordered.

“I have business with Archmagician Dreyfuss,” Clemens said. “It regards the princess.”

James did not like the captain’s tone, it made him nervous. “Then you better come with us.”

Mariel remained unconscious as the group climbed the stairs. James could feel her heart beating against his chest, and wanted to bury his face in her tousled hair and tell her how much he loved her and how he would not let the Assassin hurt her. He resisted temptation.

“Why do you think that fox was the goddess Narel?” one of the guardsmen asked.

James shot a covetous glance at Captain Clemens, who remained silent, but was obviously listening to every word and trying to piece things together. He had no intention of telling anyone that he had met the goddess and she had given him the challenge of helping Mariel remember.

“Have you ever seen a black fox before, guardsman?”

“No, Captain, but why would Narel want anything to do with the princess? And I still don’t understand what she was remembering.”

James did not answer and the guardsman did not have the opportunity to push the question because Tristan decided to change the subject.

“You were a part of the Resistance?”

James could not believe Tristan asked that questions when Captain Clemens was within hearing distance. The large man still did not fully respect his captain, and James had a sneaking suspicion this was because he had successfully won the fight against Tristan when they first met.

“Why would you believe I was in the Resistance?”

“You said you’ve known Mariel since just after Princess Carolina’s murder. She is Mariel Quickwit, daughter of Darren Brightsword, who was the leader of the Resistance. If you’ve known Mariel that long, it’s only because you were part of the Resistance.”

James knew he needed to be careful with what he said, and he hoped Tristan would not blurt out that he was the infamous Snaketongue in front of the Versati Corps captain.

“I said I knew Mariel *before* Brightsword found her. She didn’t even remember her own name when I met her. The people she lived with called her Greslina—it means river-emerald—because they found her wounded, starved, and half-drowned floating in a river and when they saw her unique green eyes they believed she was god-touched. But she remembered absolutely *nothing* of her life.”

“But that doesn’t mean she didn’t draw you into the Resistance when she joined when she was ten.”

“Mariel was eight when Darren found her. She was ten when she joined the Resistance and twelve when she started acting alone on missions. It wasn’t long after that when people began to call her ‘Quickwit’ for her cunning.”

“How can you know all that and not have been a part of the Resistance?”

James stopped walking and spun to face the recalcitrant guardsman, he wished he had sent Tristan away to find Dreyfuss instead of Zeke. “*You* were a part of the Resistance, Tristan. Did *you* know any of what I’ve told you? Or are you being obstinate because I slipped undetected passed you and five other guards and beat you in a fight, and your pride was hurt? Would you like to be dismissed from this unit? As your captain, I can arrange it.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, it is a fact,” James replied evenly. “The archmagician knows my history and he trusts me to be responsible for Mariel’s life. It is not your concern. I may have known Mariel for eleven years, and I did know Darren Brightsword, but not well. I was never part of the Resistance, and if you don’t believe me, ask Mariel when she wakes up.”

James started walking again and noticed the curious look Captain Clemens gave him, just before a placid mask fell over the older man’s face, concealing his emotions and thoughts.

Tristan was red with anger and unwilling to let James win. He opened his mouth to continue the argument, when one of the other guards jabbed him in the side and said, “Let it drop!”

Although the captain of the Versati Corps remained silent, James knew the wheels in his mind were spinning. Calvin Clemens had absorbed everything that James and Tristan had said and the way the words had been spoken. He did not know what had caused the princess to run into him and then faint, but he had learned plenty of other interesting details. The serpentramel suspected the captain was trying to determine who James was and exactly what his relationship was to Mariel.

James glanced down at the girl who still remained unconscious in his arms. He relished in the feel of her against him, but knew she did not feel the same way. It cut him deeply that he loved her so much and she did not return the feeling. Captain Clemens might suspect that the princess

and the captain of her guards were lovers, but the moment Mariel woke up he would know he was wrong.

James hoped she would not wake up until he got her safely to the privacy of her rooms and they were close, but the gods were not shining blessings on him today.