

Chapter Ten

"I do hope this works."

When it came to planning escape attempts, Albus Courtenay didn't possess much prior experience on which to rely.

Much was really a very generous term. He had none. Precisely none.

This was not lost on Albus, but the alternative was to admit defeat before ever embarking on the venture, and this Albus was resolved not to do.

"What would Eska do?" Albus muttered to himself, as he had done each morning for the past seven days.

The refrain was comforting, but Albus was aware it was not particularly useful. The truth of it was that Albus didn't know what Eska would do, having never witnessed any of the many adventures she had recounted to him. The closest he had come to adventure was living it through the texts he perused in the bowels of the Lordican, safely surrounded by books and artifacts and his fellow librarians—who, it must be said, were not the sort to go haring off after wild schemes or even to accompany military or diplomatic endeavors as historians. He certainly didn't know anyone who had managed to get kidnapped by a Seycherran pirate who intended to rain vengeance down on the Seven Cities of Bellara with the help of twins—children!—from an insular, forgotten city, twins with a dream of reminding the world—violently—of their existence and former power, twins with an uncanny similarity to the twin deities of Onaxos and an equally uncanny ability to rule a city without appearing to do so.

Albus's head hurt. It had done so more and more since he had promised Keleut, daughter of Nestor, that he would fight against her vengeance. He had been quite pleased with his little speech in the moment, but the morning light, after attempting to sleep and doing nothing more than tossing and turning, had reared its head the next day and shown Albus all the glaring holes in said speech.

Words. Words were one thing. Promises and vows. Spoken from the heart, but nothing more than that. Action. Action was something else entirely, and Albus was beginning to understand that his life of books and research and study and

passionate debate (more words!) with other scholars had done little to prepare him for action.

“Perhaps had I spent more time with other children when I was young,” Albus said to his morning meal. The elegantly trimmed slices of pear appeared indifferent to his plight, the bread and cold eggs oblivious of his confusion. He was not in the habit of addressing his food—he wasn’t Virdicus the Mad, by the great Giovanespi, no—but Keleut had not darkened his door since that night. Just as concerning, Albus had not seen Aurelia nox Macedonos or her twin, Aurelian, in just as long. After days of accompanying the girl around the city of Onaxos, indeed, after being brought across the Plains of Naxos and granted the privilege of seeing the strange mine and the even stranger warriors the twins intended to use to make Onaxos a power on the Anerrean Sea once again, there had been no knocking on Albus’s chamber door, no summons to climb in Aurelia’s litter, no further lessons from the Macedonos twins.

The notion of an escape attempt had come to Albus on the third day of silence. He had waved a figurative hand at it immediately and dismissed it. Surely the twins had further use of him. Surely Keleut would need him to secure her alliance with Onaxos. Surely there would be an opportunity to acquire crucial information that would help save Arconia from destruction.

By the fifth day, the notion was hovering continuously on the edge of Albus’s mind, given the fact that he appeared to have been forgotten. Oh, to be sure, he was fed and there was no outward appearance of imprisonment. But Albus had, on the fourth day, ventured from his chamber in search of a bit of fresh air. He had found it, as well as a good bit of sunshine and a lovely garden, but the experience was dampened somewhat by the constant presence of a large, trident-wielding man who appeared to have more muscles than Albus had thought the human body possessed. No words were exchanged, certainly no threats, and there was no indication Albus was not allowed to enjoy a moment in the garden, but Albus had found, by the time he returned to his chamber, his desire to do so was considerably lessened. He hadn’t tried again.

And so, by the fifth day he could not shake the thought that his options had become increasingly limited—namely to one.

Logic dictated that escaping from such a gentle prison ought not to be terribly difficult. After all, Albus was not locked inside and he was free to leave his chamber when he wished. The trident—with all its pointy aggressiveness—dictated that this was perhaps not true. Each time he tried to think past the point of slipping from his chamber in the night, he ended up pinned to the wall, the trident piercing him in a decidedly deadly fashion, blood trailing down the stones to pool at his soon-to-be lifeless feet. It was all very dramatic, which was another thing Albus was learning he had a rather low tolerance for.

Albus pushed away his morning meal, the pears no longer enticing, his appetite lost somewhere in the imaginary puddle of his own blood. His gaze roamed across his chamber and fell on the small balcony, an egress open to the sky, really. There was hardly enough room to take more than two steps in any direction.

The balcony. Climbing from it was the only notion that seemed to offer any opportunity. These sorts of things were done in the stories. Or at least so Albus was fairly convinced, but it had been an awfully long time since he had indulged in a story meant to entertain children and he was somewhat concerned his mind was making it up, out of a dearth of other ideas.

And besides, the yawning void of open air below the balcony was not to be contemplated.

The Macedonos home was perched on the second-highest level of the city of Onaxos. Above it was only the great spire, home of the—thoroughly useless—Wisdoms. Below, the rest of the city descended in increasingly larger circles until at last it met the sea. It was, assuredly, a lovely view, perfect in all ways, encapsulating the entirety of the Onaxos harbor and the great sea wall beyond. But immediately below the house was a rather sheer cliff face that ended abruptly a distance down Albus did not care to contemplate.

It seemed the equivalent of leaping from the top of the head of the colossal statue of the divine Taalo and Toora in the Onaxos harbor.

There was a small but persistent voice in Albus's head reminding him that not very many days before he had been prepared to jump off the sea wall of Onaxos—into the waiting jaws of sharks, even. Granted, it was either jump or be forced off and both were intended to end fatally. But Albus longed for a shred of that courage to return, not because he wished to end up a splatter of bones and internal organs on that terrace far below—this was not a statement he felt obliged to make—but because he feared that fear itself might render him so inert as to waste any opportunity he might have to enact his escape.

Albus approached the balcony, stepped out onto its grey stone floor, put one hand on the iron railing. A few raindrops stained the stones around his feet, the first rain Albus had seen since coming to Onaxos. A bird dove from somewhere above Albus's head to land in a crack in the cliff below him. He watched it flit here and there, pecking at insects, chittering as though impatient at itself.

Perhaps Albus could fashion wings of his own.

The thought sent his stomach plummeting.

No, there would be no flying to freedom. And yet the very outlandishness of the idea seemed to settle something within him. No flying, but he would find an alternative. He had to. Arconia, which Keleut had fixed on her horizon, might depend on his ability to do so. And if she succeeded there, she would turn her attention to the rest of the Seven Cities and remind them that the world had not forgotten the Alescus's reign of terror.

Albus glanced down at the distant terrace once more, resolved to think of it no more. But as he turned to leave the balcony, his gaze strayed over the rain drops darkening the stone, merging as the drops fell faster and harder, fat and wet, until the growing stain threatened dominion over all.

And Albus had an idea.

He requested fish that night for dinner. Cooked and served whole. It arrived—with an apology from the servant who tried to explain that this was not how fish was cooked in Onaxos and if it was improperly done and not to Albus's liking, the Macedonos cook would be pleased to make him anything, anything at all—and Albus nearly gagged at the sight.

It was monstrously done—undercooked, he suspected, the eyeballs still jelly-like—but Albus declared it marvelous and shooed the servant away. And then promptly pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger in an attempt to ward off the overwhelming desire to fling it from the balcony.

Fortunately for him, he had never intended this particular fish for eating.

As such, Albus let the fish grow cold—which further contributed to its inedible state and general unpleasantness—and set about attempting to remove its bones from its insides.

Deboning. Yes, that was the term. Albus giggled, vaguely aware that his nerves were getting the best of him. And yet there was really no way of getting around the fact that what Albus proceeded to do to the fish could not be classified as deboning, which suggested elegant skill and expertise, delicate filets, and minimal mess. No, what Albus performed was nothing short of butchery.

This was perhaps in part due to his choice of tool—which was no choice at all. With no other implement available to him, Albus had been forced to wield a letter opener—very pretty, the handle inlaid with pink shells. And yet he could not entirely blame the dull edge for Albus had never deboned a fish in his life.

The result was, in short, a sacrilege against the art form, but it did yield Albus exactly what he needed: a supply of tiny, translucent fish bones.

No sooner had he extracted the final bones from the tail than a knock on his door startled him so severely that the letter opener, the pretty handle now slick with fishy juices, slipped from his grasp and went spinning across the smooth stone floor. Albus froze, his gaze darting from the letter opener to his messy hands to the fish remains spread on the table before him.

“Albus?”

Keleut. The pirate captain rapped on the door a second time in the absence of an answer from Albus.

Seven days had passed, seven days full of opportunities to knock on his door—and she chose the moment in which Albus had begun fashioning the means of an escape.

“A moment,” he called out, still hovering, half standing, half sitting, over the fish bones. He winced at the waver in his voice he was fairly sure Keleut would hear, then swept the fish bones toward the edge of the table with one hand and proceeded to shove them, messily, into a pocket of his robe. He then unfolded the linen napkin delivered with his dinner and spread it out over the rest of the fish carcass, patting it gently here and there for absolutely no reason at all. Spinning toward the door at last, Albus’s toes sent the letter opener sliding clear across the chamber until it disappeared under an elaborately carved wooden trunk, where retrieval would be nearly impossible. There was no time to contemplate it. Wiping his hands on the robe—perhaps a better employment for the napkin than serving as a shroud for the fish, but what was done was done—Albus reached the door. Taking as deep a breath as his racing heart would allow, Albus cracked it open.

“My apologies, I was admiring my view,” Albus said. “You know how easy it is to get lost in a good view.”

Keleut’s expression suggested she did not know this. Her nose wrinkled slightly and Albus could see she was trying to look around him.

“Dinner,” he said, smiling in a manner he was sure was most unconvincing. “Delightful,” he added. If his heart beat any faster, Albus was fairly sure it might seize up.

“Official alliance negotiations begin tomorrow so that we may draw up the papers,” Keleut said. “As my interpreter, Master Tarvonos, you’ll be present.” She drew out the syllables of the false name he had given to the twins upon arrival in Onaxos. “I trust you’ll be prepared first thing in the morning.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Albus asked, because it was apparent he needed to say something.

The frown returned. “You tell me. You’re the one who’s been out of the city with Aurelian nox Macedonos for three days. Without a word to me,” she added.

That was interesting. Albus tried not to let this show on his face. “Oh. Yes,” he said. The fact that Keleut had been under the impression that Albus had been somewhere other than his chamber was most curious. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there.”

“Good,” Keleut said. “I’d rather not have to tell the twins that you are not who you say you are. You’ve developed quite the rapport with them. I wouldn’t want to come between you.”

Albus swallowed. “You mean you’d rather not have to tell them that you can understand their Bellaran perfectly well. We have both been duplicitous, Keleut.” A true statement, but not one likely to endear him to the pirate.

Keleut’s expression hardened and Albus was reminded of their first meeting and the way she had dispatched—murdered—a man with no more than a flick of her wrist. She was still that pirate with teeth clinking in her braids.

“Perhaps it is time we both put an end to our charades,” Albus said.

Keleut, apparently inclined to ignore his words, glanced over Albus’s shoulder once more, then returned her gaze to him. “I’ll be here at first light.” And then she was gone, turning away from the door. As she moved down the lantern-lit hall and faded from view, Albus saw the shadow of a trident on the painted wall. His stomach lurching, he shoved the door closed and stepped back quickly, as though the shadow might slink between the cracks at any moment.

The hallway remained quiet on the other side of the door and Albus let out a sigh of relief. He brought a hand up to rub at the moisture on his hairline—and immediately recoiled at the fish smell on his palm. He looked at his hands and saw they were smeared with a faint residue of fish. But a bath would have to wait, at least until he had taken care of the remains of his dinner.

Grimacing, he took up the tray with the fish under the napkin and carried it to the balcony. The rain of the morning had drifted out to sea, leaving behind bright skies falling into night. With a flick of his wrists, Albus dumped the fish from the tray—or tried. It stuck with a conviction it had surely never felt while alive, forcing Albus to wave his arms about in a rather wild manner until at last the fish disengaged. Albus watched it fall—with the white linen trailing after it—and too late thought to look to see if there were any unfortunate evening strollers occupying the terrace below. He looked now, but the dimming light made it impossible to know for sure. Perhaps that was for the best.

Returning to the chamber, Albus removed the fish bones from his pocket and set them on the now empty tray. He looked down on them, aware he had come to the point in his scheme from which there was no return.

Albus decided to push that point just a bit farther into the future. Resolving not to think on what he was about to do, he pulled the lever next to his door and waited for the answering servant to appear.

In the work of a moment, Albus was once more peering through his door, only this time he was requesting a bath. The results were prompt and Albus did not have to wait long before a copper tub was hauled into the room and filled to the brim with, if not steaming, at least warm water.

No, there was no need to remain, he did not need assistance, he assured the servants. No, he did not need to be oiled or to have scents combed through his hair. At last, Albus was left in peace. Disrobing, he slipped into the water—and then proceeded to sit rather uncomfortably. At least the smell of fish was dissipating, but Albus had never been one to lounge in a bath. Eska had extolled the virtues of a good hot bath on more than one occasion, and Albus understood why steam and warmth could, logically, induce a state of relaxation. No such state was induced, however. If anything the knot burrowing into Albus's stomach seemed to grow larger with every moment he spent in the tub, and at last Albus emerged and dripped his way across the stone floor to a dressing robe that had been set out on the bed.

The time had come. He knew this. His mind insisted on it. It would not be long before a servant returned to remove the tub. It had to be done before then. And yet his mind found a stubborn opponent within itself—because Albus had never done what he was about to do and did not know the precise result.

He knew the basics of what was likely to happen. After all, he had known from a young age that his body had a very negative reaction to the consumption of fish. A rash on his face, to start, followed by an unpleasant—to put it lightly—constricting of his throat muscles. Though he did not remember the particular incident, he had been told he had almost died once. As such, when Albus had begun to formulate this ridiculous plan, eating the fish was out of the question. To do so would be to

risk rendering himself truly helpless and incoherent—and certainly death was a possibility. But somewhere along the meandering path of his studies in the Lordican, he had come to understand that ingestion was not the only means of inducing the body to react to the substance it so abhorred.

Hence the small pile of bones.

Albus approached the table slowly, chided himself for treating it like a predator about to strike, and plucked up one of the thin, nearly transparent bones.

“I do hope this works,” he said to the empty air.

And then jabbed it into the soft flesh of the underside of his left wrist, just where a blue vein pressed against the surface of his skin.

Having no notion of how long it would take to have an effect, Albus knew he would have to work quickly. With far more precision than he had brought to the deboning process, Albus pushed the robe from his shoulders and began to stab himself with the bones, first up one arm, being sure to strike close to the veins, and then down the other. By the time he reached the opposite wrist, dizziness had set in, requiring Albus to concentrate hard in order not to miss. He glanced at himself, only partially aware that he was swaying rather like a sapling in a brewing storm, and laughed in a very un-Albus manner at the sight of himself as a human pincushion. The skin around each bone was raised and red—and, oh yes, there it was—terribly itchy.

There were two bones remaining. For good measure, Albus jabbed them into his neck. It was only in this moment that he understood the flaw in his plan. It would not do to be found with the bones in his skin. He needed to look ill, not deranged. Another laugh, this one more Albus-like as nerves threatened to take hold. And so, with painstaking tediousness thanks to the inability of his eyes to focus and the pounding in his head—that was new, how interesting—Albus plucked each bone free from his irritated skin and returned them to the tray. Tottering severely now, Albus lurched his way to the balcony and tipped the tray over the edge.

“An offering for you, Taalo and Toora,” he said, giggling. Somewhere below, the silver tray clattered against the cliff and Albus wondered who might discover the odd remains of his uneaten dinner and if it might be taken as a sign from the twin

gods. “No one can take a shit in this city without attributing it as a gift from those twins,” he said, then laughed and covered his mouth at the very unscholarly words.

He didn’t quite make it back into the chamber, though how he got to his knees he couldn’t fathom. And his skin really was very itchy. That was annoying. Yes, annoying. He slumped to the side and landed on one shoulder—why did the floor have to be so hard?—and then his cheek was on the stone and Albus Courtenay sank into darkness. At least it wasn’t itchy there.