

THE  
**BROKEN  
PRINCE**  
BRIALTA FRACTURED

BOOK ONE

JAMIE  
LOVECRAFT



*For my wife Kelly, whom I cherish dearly,  
and our daughter Luna, who gave existence meaning.*

*One mere lifetime together could never be enough. But perhaps  
through the stories we create and share, we can live a few more.*



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

I'd like to thank and acknowledge a couple of people.

Firstly, Tamika, a friend who was willing to give my book a chance in its unflattering and unfinished first draft, encouraging me to see it through.

As well as Richard Odey, who went above and beyond in his duties as a Beta Reader.





## CHAPTER 1

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# A NEW AGE

‘Please, just a coin or two,’ called out a meagre voice, followed by a moist cough.

Most wouldn’t have even heard such a pathetic cry, especially over the general hustle and bustle of the inner wards markets. This was a place for Stones and Golds to conduct business and trades, not for a Wood to beg for coins. But Jasper Emerald wasn’t most. It was in his name. *He* was an Emerald. His hearing was second to the King’s alone, and that beggar’s voice rang loud and clear in his ears.

He probably should have just ignored the man’s wail, but Jasper hated beggars, and why shouldn’t he? He knew he was better than them. Jasper turned to his friends, a group of three young Golds, each pursuing prestigious roles and wielding power beyond the ordinary. Fitting companions for an Emerald.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ said Jasper.

He strode towards a side alley, glancing back briefly, ensuring they followed without question. Directly behind him was Philip

Gold, an Apprentice General with an acute sense of touch. He swung his arms around with bullish anticipation.

Next was Julia Gold, an Apprentice Minister with a sharp set of eyes. She watched Jasper closely, undoubtedly trying to predict his next move.

And last was Dinah Gold, an Apprentice Alchemist with a scrupulous sense of smell. She sheepishly clutched her bag of tricks.

The four arrived in the alley and on Jasper's signal they spread out to surround the beggar. The man had a face damaged by both sun and time, which seated clouded eyes that failed to track the group. His leathery ears twitched as Phillip took a clumsy step.

'Oh, thank you,' his throat caught. 'I haven't eaten in days. Do you have any coins you could spare, o-or even some scraps?' he coughed with a wet splutter and his arm shook as he tried to cover his mouth.

Jasper focused on the feel of his round, dish-shaped earrings as he Manipulated their polished copper surface and the Verve within, using it to amplify the sounds around him. He could now hear the rattle in every breath the beggar took and the rapid, yet faint, beating of his heart. There was no doubt in Jasper's mind, this man had the white lung and would be dead within the year. Jasper scoffed.

'What do you think, should we give this *Cob* some coins?'

Phillip and Julia laughed, but Dinah stayed silent. Jasper tried to make eye contact with her, but she avoided his gaze. Of course, he knew why she was uncomfortable. Cob wasn't legally a class anymore, and Dinah had been adopted from a family that originally would have been Cob. But so was he, and he needed to teach her that she was better than that. That she had risen above such low lives, just like him.



The old man looked up to them, almost managing to match their position with his milky eyes.

‘Shame on you!’ he said. ‘The King would be appalled if he heard that kind of language being—’

Phillip shoved the man to the ground, grinning back at Jasper. As the man fell onto his side, a single coin slipped out of his tattered belt pouch. It bounced across the cobblestone ground, making a high-pitched ring with each hit, before spinning in place and slowly coming to a stop. Julia glared at the man with unbridled fury behind her eyes.

‘You dare speak about what the King would allow when you lied to us?’ she said. ‘You had a coin this whole time, you invalid!’

Her sharp eyes locked onto the coin, her pupils dilating as she focused for a moment. With a quick upwards flick of her eyes, it snapped up into the air and levitated off the ground at shoulder height. She reached forward and grasped it. Tears welled in the beggar’s eyes.

‘Please!’ He held back another cough. ‘I did not mean to deceive you. I was merely trying to avoid being robbed by obscuring the coin!’ His cough broke through, bringing up some pale white fluid. ‘Many would have taken advantage of—’

Phillip silenced the downed man by kneeling on him and aggressively taking hold of his collar. Jasper watched Dinah’s reaction. Her eyelids flickered as the corners of her eyes began to well up. She glanced at Jasper, as if to beg for the man, but instead pressed her hand to her mouth then turned away from the scene. Jasper rolled his eyes, then crossed his arms and huffed. Couldn’t she see that they were just having fun? It was their right, and hers now too.

Yet despite Jasper's own convictions, even he was beginning to feel bad for the Cob now. The man was too frail to put up any type of fight. He would offer little entertainment. But this was what Dinah needed to help her understand her place in society.

He nodded to Phillip and Julia, signalling them to continue their torment of the beggar. Phillip released the man, stepping back several paces before winking to Julia. The beggar let out a croaked sigh of relief, and Julia stepped in again.

'Well, if the coin means that much to you,' she said, 'I suppose you can have it back.'

The man started nodding as he shakily raised himself to a sitting position. Julia opened her hand and stared intently at the coin again. This time she made it fly towards Phillip at an astounding speed.

Phillip pulled back his arm and opened his hand, fixing his eyes on the coin hurtling towards him. In the brief instant that it made contact with his palm, he would feel the coin's texture, notice its imperfections, the ridges along its edge, and even the face of the King stamped into it. All of which would allow him to understand the flow of Verve through the object.

With both raw muscle and Manipulation, he thrust his palm forward, sending the metal coin flying at the speed of a cross-bolt back towards the beggar. It lodged itself halfway through the poor man's arm. Blood spurted and rolled down to his hand, where it pooled as he let out a howl.

Suddenly Jasper had a tight feeling in his chest, as if his own body was repulsed by him. But before he could think about it, Phillip's thunderous voice cut in.

'Woah! Not even I knew my sense of touch could be so powerful!'

He slapped his thigh twice then bit down on his opposite knuckle, just barely holding back a laugh.

‘Oh, please!’ said Julia, rolling her eyes. ‘You couldn’t have hit it so fast if I hadn’t Manipulated it towards you so expertly.’

The two stopped and scowled at each other for a moment, before they both burst into laughter. Phillip fell back onto the alley wall and his hearty laugh echoed around them, while Julia lent on his shoulder and continued to boast.

Jasper, on the other hand, was stuck in place. He desperately wanted to turn to Dinah. To ask for help, or apologise, or just make sure she was okay, but he could not move a single muscle.

‘Hey Jasper,’ boomed Phillip, cutting into his thoughts, ‘if Julia and I keep progressing at this rate, do you think we could be your High General and High Minister when you’re King?’

The beggar’s howls were suddenly cut off as he looked up again. This time though, despite the man’s milky eyes, his gaze felt intentional. His lip quivered for a second before he cried out, ‘I’m so sorry, Honoured Prince Jasper Emerald!’ He gasped for air and fought back another cough. ‘I had not realised it was you! I’m so sorry.’ His eyes quivered with fear. ‘I’m so sorry!’

Jasper wasn’t even sure the man knew what he was apologising for, and for that matter, neither did he. Yet, the old man continued his apologies as he repeatedly tried to get to his knees. But whether due to his new injury or his already weakened state, he collapsed again and again. Jasper’s breathing shook as he turned his head.

Julia, who was chuckling at the scene, slapped Jasper on the back, finally propelling him into action. Jasper grabbed Dinah by the arm and hurried out of alley without a word. Phillip and Julia

followed a moment later. He was sure they'd be confused by his sudden departure, but they wouldn't question him.



High General Catherine Gold stood stoically in the inner Castle's courtyard. She was waiting for the young Prince and his friends to begin training for the day. They were late, as per usual. But they were all fourteen, so she still had time to drill some proper etiquette into them.

Morning started pushing on the boundaries of the afternoon, yet the General refused to let her perfect posture break. Even as she began to doubt the Prince would show, and her mixed leather and steel armour gained weight from her sweat, she remained unbroken. But despite her appearance, fatigue was setting in.

Catherine let out a deep sigh and unsheathed a small dagger from her leather wrist brace. Using her superior sense of touch, she spun the blade around her hand in intricate patterns with a dexterity few others could match. She justified the action to herself as training. Of course, even a High General should take every opportunity to improve themselves. Being the best is no reason to stop.

Finally, she saw the heads of Jasper and his friends peeking up over the steep hill leading into the courtyard. She felt the Verve in her plate-metal chest armour – the perfect impromptu resonator – and took a breath in to call to them, but then she noticed Jasper's frown. That was a rare sight. Perhaps she'd go easy on them today.

'Afternoon, my Emerald Prince. How are you and my fellow Golds this fine day?' She bowed.

Dinah bowed in return, Julia and Phillip grinned and waved, but Jasper merely continued to glare.

‘I’m not here for pleasantries,’ he said. ‘What am I being made to learn today?’

Catherine shook her head as she straightened herself. Now she remembered why she usually didn’t bother being empathetic to the Prince. Just for a second, she wished she had such power.

‘Stand to attention,’ ordered the General.

Her students rushed to line up, then stood with their backs straight. In order, they were Jasper, Julia, Phillip, and Dinah. Which was a little odd; usually Dinah stood with Jasper, but that wasn’t her concern. Catherine tucked her arms behind her back and began pacing in front of the children.

‘For centuries in the Land of Brialta, we have fought wars with axes, swords, bows, spears, and of course Sense Manipulation,’ She smiled and looked off to the side for a moment, ‘But we live in a time of rapid change, and a new weapon is soon to enter the battlefield. Although yet untested in war, it has already proven highly effective in more *intimate settings*.’

Catherine spent a moment successively staring at each member of the group, causing them to sweat just a little. She’d already delayed this particular lesson several times due to their immaturity, but today something was different. She nodded, before continuing.

‘It is of utmost importance that our future leaders stay ahead of the curve.’ The wind changed, and the hairs on Catherine’s hands raised. She turned to the keep. ‘High Alchemist Octavius, right on time as always,’ she called.

The Alchemist stepped out from behind a pillar, making the children jump. It was a perfectly reasonable reaction. Something about the way Octavius skulked about put most on edge. Even Catherine wasn’t entirely immune.

Octavius slowly approached the group. He was a tall, slender character, robed shoulder to toe, with a hood covering most of his face. In his hand was a large briefcase, bound with brown leather. He placed the briefcase on a nearby ornate table carved from stone and unlatched it, completely ignoring the children.

Upon fully opening the briefcase, six identical and beautiful items that would be foreign to most were presented, three in each half. They had been packed in velvet draped carved wooden blocks, perfectly shaped to fit their every curve. The items were made of two finely patterned engraved metal pipes, one flared at the end and the other straight cut and smaller in diameter. More moulded metal parts were bolted on, and a perfectly sized wooden handle held it all together.

The whole package was just small enough that it was obviously designed for one-handed use, though Catherine knew their power rivalled that of any two-handed weapon she had ever wielded. Jasper, Philip and Julia were clearly intrigued by the items, but Dinah's face lit up immediately. Catherine motioned for the girl to speak.

'Well...' said Dinah, 'I've only read about them recently in my alchemy books, but I believe they're called flintlocks.'



A dumb smile crept onto Jasper's face as he watched Dinah talk. There was a purity to her when she was passionate about something. But what on earth was a flintlock? Catherine must have noticed his glee because she addressed him next.

'So you've heard of them too?'

She'd *clearly* only asked him to make him look like a fool, but Jasper wouldn't let himself be humiliated like that. It was true he

hadn't yet seen the weapon, but that in itself was a clue. If they had been invented by the Emerald Kingdom, he'd know about them. And the Opal and Citrine Kingdoms were both too invested in peace to focus on weapons, which only left one option.

'Yes, the Ruby Kingdom invented them,' he said lifting his chin, and locking eyes with the General.

'Excellent,' she replied. 'Then perhaps you could demonstrate its function to the class?'

'...I'm afraid my memory fails me.' His eyes darted to the ground. There was no doubt in Jasper's mind that she took pleasure in calling his bluff, but he'd only embarrass himself if he pushed the point any further.

'That's okay,' said the High General, 'I'll *remind* you.'

She gave Octavius a nod. The High Alchemist then called over a Stone class entourage in a monotone voice and had them place some training dummies made of straw and wood out in the courtyard. Jasper often wondered why they didn't just use some Wood classes for combat practice. Who would care if they got hurt? Certainly not him. Jasper held back a sudden unexpected lump in his throat.

The General began carefully pouring a strange black powder into the flintlock's flared pipe, followed by a small round chunk of lead, and lastly, a torn piece of cloth. She then removed a metal rod from the second pipe called the 'ramrod' and slowly started pushing it into the first pipe before replacing it. Finally, she cocked the 'hammer' back with her thumb, locking it into place on a latch and leaving it primed just above a small piece of flint – explaining the name. Catherine pointed the now 'loaded' flintlock at one of the training dummies and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud sound as the back of the flintlock exploded

into a small fireball of sparks, succinctly followed by the front end erupting with smoke. The dummy's shoulder splintered and popped, breaking apart. Its arm fell to the ground. Dinah hopped back, letting out a yell. Phillip and Julia jumped and cheered before beginning to argue about who would get a turn first.

Outwardly Jasper had no reaction at all, but something had caught his attention. He'd used his heightened vision to stare at the severed dummy's arm on the ground and noticed the chunk of glowing hot lead embedded within.

He began to picture the wooden limb as the arm of the beggar they'd tormented earlier, with the lead taking the place of the partially embedded coin. He saw flashes of blood trickling down to the wooden arm's non-existent hand as he began to hear the beggar's awful howl again. It disgusted him. Yet, the Prince could not look away. He may have remained frozen there for an eternity had Catherine not resonated her voice upon her armour.

'Quiet!' she ordered, cutting off Phillip's hearty laugh.

The group immediately stood to attention again. Jasper knew that as an Emerald, he was more powerful than her, yet her years of military and life experience gave her a supremely authoritative tone that shook even his core, and he hated that.



Appearances were very important to the High General, almost as important as structure and rules. She gave her pupils a moment to gather themselves and resume demeanours more fitting of future nobles and rulers, and of course, in Jasper's case, King. Satisfied that there would be no more interruptions, Catherine continued the lesson.



‘I’m going to hand each of you a flintlock, and I want you to practise reloading and firing the weapons at the dummies.’

Catherine walked the group through all the steps of loading the flintlocks, and they followed along with their own weapons. She even had Octavius stay back for a while, though his foot tapping showed his reluctance, to explain some of the theory and alchemy behind how the weapons worked before letting him skulk away. They needed to understand as much as possible before being trusted with such power, even if only Dinah seemed to appreciate that.

Most of the training went smoothly, save for a moment when Phillip looked down the front end of his flintlock’s barrel – while it was loaded. The General was honestly shocked that she had to explain why that was a bad idea. Lastly, Catherine talked them through how to aim the weapons, describing how to line up the back of the flintlock with a small piece of metal bolted to the front of the barrel. After making sure the field was clear, she let them begin firing at the dummies.

After a couple of hours, the most any of them had managed was an occasional scrape of the dummies, and the High General was sure that was by luck. Of course, she’d expected that. But Accuracy would come with patience and practise, not that she’d ever say something so encouraging out loud.

‘You’re all terrible shots,’ she said, before allowing herself a moments rest against one of the courtyard’s pillars.

Only Jasper appeared to take offence. The kid was good at everything else he tried so it was a rare treat when she could take him down a peg, and for his own sake, he needed to be. Catherine ordered them to stop firing, and their weapons immediately fell to their sides.

‘Now you’ve all experienced the shortcomings of flintlocks first hand, can any of you tell me how you could improve this weapon using Manipulation?’

Dinah raised her hand, but Catherine ignored it. She wanted the others to think for a change. Unfortunately, no one volunteered. *Disappointing.* ‘Okay then. It seems we need to go back over the basics.’

Jasper rolled his eyes, and she pretended not to notice.



Jasper let his mind wander as the General began a well-rehearsed speech.

‘Every inanimate object in this world has an energy flowing through it which we call Verve.’ He had always wondered why living objects didn’t have Verve. But that was a question even the High Alchemist couldn’t answer, so it was merely an observation. ‘We can Manipulate the Verve within these objects using our senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.’ Dinah raised her hand again, but Catherine ignored her and continued, which annoyed Jasper.

Catherine pointed to her eyes. ‘Sight Manipulation allows us to levitate objects and sharpen details, useful for blades.’ Next, the General pointed to her ears. ‘Hearing Manipulation allows us to resonate sounds, making things louder, quieter, break brittle objects, or even in the case of the King, cause an earthquake.’

Jasper wished to achieve that one day, but even he might not have hearing that good.

Catherine flexed her hands and smiled. ‘Touch Manipulation is all about reinforcement and dexterity. Make a sword unbreakable, throw a rock with incredible power, use tools with unimaginable

precision, and so long as your opponent is wearing sufficiently weighted clothing, send them flying with little more than a touch.' The General knocked on her armour.

'Last of all,' she said – a phrase Jasper was glad to hear – 'smell and taste Manipulation. Make the smells from objects more or less powerful, and detect the history of Manipulation used on objects. Excellent for alchemy and tracking.' Catherine stopped there.

Jasper knew there was much more to this lecture. Maybe she was going easy on them today. After all, this was the type of lesson you'd give a child. The High General repeated her question about ways to improve the flintlock using Manipulation, but again only Dinah raised her hand.

'Alright, I'll demonstrate one for you,' said Catherine, ignoring Dinah again.

She began loading the flintlock once more, but something was different this time. The dexterity in Catherine's hands increased around the weapon and its constituent parts. She still poured the black powder just as precisely, used the ramrod ever so smoothly, and cocked back the hammer with force. But it was all at a much greater speed. The loading process, which had taken her around ten seconds previously, was done in under two. Almost too fast for Jasper to follow. She offered the now loaded flintlock to Julia.

'Last time I fired this weapon, I hit the dummy's arm,' said Catherine. 'I want you to be more accurate than that.' The girl nodded as she grabbed the loaded weapon.

Julia drew the flintlock up, aiming towards a dummy. Her slender arm barely held the weapon steady. If she squeezed the trigger now, she would surely miss, yet she did so anyway. Jasper just barely

glimpsed the bullet between the speed and smoke. Evidently, so did Julia. With a flick of her eyes, the chunk of lead subtly shifted course, sending it directly towards the dummy's wooden head, which exploded triumphantly.

The Apprentice Minister laughed, and Catherine smiled at her.

'I know we've all done that many times before with arrows, but what you just did, Julia...' She ruffled the girl's hair. 'Well, it's only possible for someone with your vision.'

Julia smirked, soaking in all the praise she could get from Catherine for this. Catherine usually favoured Phillip, they both shared a heightened sense of touch, but in this case, the General was essentially admitting that Julia was better.

Jasper cracked his knuckles. His eyesight was better than Julia's, so it should be even easier for him. He began rapidly loading his own flintlock just like Catherine. He wasn't quite as fast as the High General, nor should he be with his average touch sense, but he was still able to finish the action in a matter of seconds. The Prince aimed his weapon at a dummy and was about to squeeze the trigger when Catherine stopped him.

'I know your vision is superior too,' she said. 'But I want you to focus on another sense.'

They'd already seen how sight and touch could Manipulate the weapon, and Jasper was only average with smell. That only left one option.

'I could make the weapon silent.'

The Prince's superior hearing sense would make this idea highly effective – two superior senses was why the King had adopted him, making him an Emerald.

'That's a good idea,' said Catherine. 'But there's something else

you could do with your hearing.’

A smile lit up Jasper’s face. He knew exactly what she wanted of him. Jasper aimed his flintlock again and squeezed the trigger.

At the exact moment the black powder ignited, he sensed the Verve in the weapon form into an explosion. He used his hearing sense to Manipulate the blast within the barrel. It resonated within, growing larger and louder. The explosion from the back of the flintlock was much bigger this time, and the recoil was tremendous. The butt of the flintlock flew backwards, dragging his hand with it. It took all of Jasper’s strength to avoid hitting himself in the face.

Phillip immediately began cheering at the sound, Julia stood stunned, and Dinah flinched. Catherine gave Jasper a pat between the shoulders. Of course, despite the apparent praise, he had completely missed the target. The bullet had presumably lodged itself into the ground or maybe further off in the distance into one of the stone walls of the keep. Disappointing.

Jasper wished to see what damage it could have done, but he could always try again. He’d combine it with the vision Manipulation this time. Unfortunately, before he could even begin loading the weapon, the General’s uncanny ability to read his intentions struck, and she removed the flintlock from his grip.

‘Alright!’ she shouted, gaining everyone’s attention. ‘That’s enough practice for today.’

She began collecting the flintlocks back from the group and placing them in the ornate briefcase they had come from. Jasper protested, but Catherine insisted it was time to finish the lesson. It figured that the one time he was actually interested, she would deprive him.

‘It’s better to walk before you run,’ she whispered to him.

‘Combining multiple new Manipulations simultaneously is too risky. You know better.’

Jasper stormed off in a huff. As if he would ever be at risk with his superior senses.



Was this really the end of the Emerald Kingdom’s 307-year reign? High Minister Olivia shifted her weight from foot to foot. She’d never foreseen it crashing down in her lifetime. Of course, she’d avoid voicing any such opinions until King Adolphus had his say, but every second she remained in the dark was excruciating, and he certainly wasn’t rushing his reply.

The King’s footsteps echoed on the stone floor as he paced. The endless drum only added to her anxiety. She needed to distract herself before she went mad. Unfortunately, the voting chamber had no windows, being lit by candles on stands alone – perhaps she would suggest a chandelier later. The lack of windows was, of course, an intentional choice, almost entirely eliminating the possibility of spies – assuming none were amongst the High Rulers. Though right now, it meant she only had one other thing to focus on, The Tacticians Table.

It was an enormous gold-embroidered slab of stone with jewel-encrusted sides located in the centre of the Voting Chamber. A map rested atop the table, hand-painted in black ink on the largest piece of parchment most would see in their lifetimes. She wondered how that map might change after their decisions today.

She shifted her attention back to Adolphus. He was almost as large and mighty as an ox, fitting for a King. But at this moment, he was stooped at half his usual size.

‘Sir,’ said Olivia, finally losing control of her tongue, ‘how should we respond? The other Kingdoms will not wait on this matter.’

She was pressing her luck, but this was urgent. Customarily she would have brought such communications to the other two High Rulers first to vote on together. They would then present their reports to the King, who would simply approve – or occasionally decline – their decisions. His seal making it an official response, decree, or law. Bringing such a matter to the King first was frowned upon, but the situation called for it.

Before she could open her mouth again, the giant wooden doors of the voting chamber swung open. In stepped High General Catherine Gold and High Alchemist Octavius Gold, and neither appeared impressed.

‘Did you begin a meeting without us?’ called Catherine.

Such direct approaches were typical of the General, but it still put Olivia on the backfoot.

‘Well, it’s not technically a meeting,’ she retorted in a sly tone.

Octavius threw his hood back.

‘Only a Minister deals in technicalities!’ he snarled.

Olivia had to look away. The Alchemist’s many experiments had disfigured his face, she was certain anyone else would have stayed hidden behind a mask, but the ever-inventive Alchemist saw its value in intimidating others. She could look past the scars and blemishes, but several years back, he’d suffered a strange burn resulting in an off-coloured patch of blisters and open wounds that changed frequently but never quite healed. The patch covered part of his lower face and neck, making it difficult to ignore. She had to suppress a gag.

‘You were busy training the children,’ she said, just barely

maintaining her composure.

Catherine's golden eyes lit up as she scowled. Olivia looked to the King for backup, but he was still pacing and shaking his head, seemingly unaware of the world around him.

'High King Adolphus Emerald!' she yelled. Using his full title was always a sure way to steal his attention.

Only now did the King appear to realise all his High Rulers were in attendance. His expression relaxed, and his posture loosened as he dropped his hand from his face, hiding any sign that he'd ever been distressed. *Was he just trying to maintain his image? Or was he truly calmed now that the others had arrived?* Adolphus waved a hand towards the High Minister.

'Olivia, fill the others in on the situation.'

The King may have been unstoppable in combat, but he would defer whenever possible in matters of importance. He took a step back, stroking a hand over his short midnight-black beard. Though, these days some rogue grey hairs were beginning to contrast both it and his dark skin.

Olivia scanned the other two. The King had settled this dispute for now. She knew Octavius was too afraid to talk back to him, and Catherine would never break rank. Tensions between them were still high, but that was nothing unusual. A subtle smile crept onto her face.

'The other Kingdoms have sent us a joint message.' She produced a piece of parchment, placing it on the Tacticians Table. 'I've verified the seals myself. All the Low Kings and Queens are accounted for, Ruby, Citrine, and Opal,' she hesitated. 'They are requesting to pay the Emerald Kingdom twenty percent less tax beginning this quarter. Permanently.'



Silence fell in the room. This year had been prosperous for Brialta as a whole, and the lower Kingdoms hadn't even listed a reason for the tax break. There was almost no precedent for a permanent tax cut, and certainly not a joint one. Catherine picked up the parchment, holding it tightly as she read over the message again. Olivia studied the General's expression as she undoubtedly came to the same realisation as Olivia had earlier.

*This was war.*

It may not be a direct or immediate declaration, but the Lower Kingdoms clearly believed the Emerald Kingdom no longer had enough power to remain the High Kingdom. They'd stuck them between a rock and a hard place. If the Emerald Kingdom agreed to the tax cut, they'd be admitting they did not have the strength to maintain superiority. Then they'd eventually either have to surrender the High Throne peacefully, or be prepared to hold it by force. But if they declined, then tensions would build and the Emerald Kingdom would be forced to display their might to maintain control, which of course, would result in conflict.

They had more than enough power to take on any of the other Kingdoms individually, especially the Citrine and Opal, but all three had signed this request. They would not be facing any of the Lower Kingdoms alone.

'Why an alliance?' questioned Catherine. 'Why *now*?'

Octavius shrunk as he replaced his hood and slowly stepped forward.

'It's the Ruby Kingdom,' he said softly. 'I should have warned you all sooner.' He opened a small slit on the side of his robe, revealing a hidden inner pocket. 'I doubt the Citrine and Opal rulers had a choice.'

He reached inside and withdrew a small rectangular piece of parchment, showing it to the room. Olivia gasped. It was a black and silver rendering of the Ruby Kingdom's keep. It was beautiful, especially when lit by the flicker of the orange candlelight, but that's not what shocked her.

Something was different about this image. It was neither painted nor sketched. It was far too realistic for that. 'They call it a photograph,' said the Alchemist with a shiver, 'and because of them, none of us are safe.'



## CHAPTER 2

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# THE FALL

‘Where’s Jasper?’ asked Julia.  
Dinah briefly glanced at the vacant seat beside her and lazily shrugged.

It was late, and the dining hall was full of the sounds of laughter, scraping cutlery and pewter mugs slamming into tables. But despite the hour and the ambience, Dinah wasn’t hungry. She glanced across at Phillip. Maybe his appetite could inspire her to eat something.

He was large for his age, but he wasn’t portly. Which Dinah found fascinating. Especially as she watched him tear an entire hunk of chicken directly off the bone with his teeth. Casting it aside into a quickly growing pile, he then switched his attention to his other hand, which held a fistful of butter-soaked potato. She was sure all that food went into his height, but often it seemed like he ate more than height alone could explain.

The Apprentice General stopped consuming for a moment – presumably to come up for air – and looked to Dinah, meeting her eyes and gave her a big grin. She had to physically restrain herself

from retching upon seeing all the food mashed up in his gob. She put her fork down and sighed. Not that Phillip seemed to notice.

Julia, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes at Dinah. Despite her apparent lack of empathy, Julia was surprisingly good at reading people.

‘What’s wrong?’ Julia asked.

*What’s wrong?* Had she really asked that? And it had sounded as if it came from a place of actual sincerity. Not the type of thing one would typically hear from an aspiring Minister. Dinah stared back, trying to dissect Julia’s every movement for a hint of something, anything, to prove to herself that this was merely a question asked in jest. But she couldn’t find it. She let out a sigh.

‘I wasn’t able to do what Jasper wanted this morning.’ She pushed her plate aside. ‘I couldn’t torment that Beggar. I think he’s upset with me. Why else wouldn’t he be here?’

Julia reached across the table and laid a hand on Dinah’s shoulder.

‘If that’s all it is, then just apologise to him.’ She smiled. ‘And don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of being a Gold soon enough. You just have to accept that you’re better than others now.’

Dinah slowly removed Julia’s hand. The idea of apologising to Jasper made her stomach churn. But it was probably expected given their places in society, and she didn’t want to lose a good friend over something considered normal.

Dinah thanked Julia for the advice and got up from her seat. She had some thinking to do. Phillip gave her a wave as she left the dining hall. He tried to choke out some farewell words, but they came out as a spray of food instead.



After training, Jasper stormed off towards his personal quarters instead of the dining hall. He wasn't in the mood for supper. As he entered the hallway leading to his room, he kicked some dust off the luxurious green carpet runner lining the stone tiled floor. The Stone classes who were supposed to keep it clean were useless. Ordinarily, he would have ordered them to be scolded, but something else was on his mind.

Why hadn't the High General let him practise more with the flintlocks? He assumed Catherine was concerned for the safety of the others, but he was more than powerful enough to look out for himself. So why was *he* being punished for *their* weakness? *Power is the only thing that matters.* That's why he was a Prince. That's why he would become High King one day. That's why his beginnings were irrelevant.

Jasper threw open the heavy wooden door to his room, slamming it behind himself. The Prince's quarters were beautiful, located within the keep, a luxury few others shared. Multiple stained glass windows overlooked the grounds below, and enormous tapestries of emerald green with gold trims covered his walls.

Some of the tapestries were merely decorative, containing pleasing patterns repeated to infinity. Jasper liked to lose himself in them from time to time. Others depicted historical and proud moments of the Emerald Kingdom. One such tapestry depicted the day the Emerald Kingdom began its 307-year reign by overthrowing the Opal Kingdom.

Another tapestry – clearly a bit more liberal with history – showed an agreement being signed by the Emerald King and a city of elves. It wasn't that Jasper doubted that event had happened in *some* form, but considering elves were merely creatures from

children's fairy tales, he doubted it was with them.

The function of the giant pieces of green velvet fabric was twofold: to be pleasing to the eye and, less obviously, to absorb the chaos of sounds that the harsh stone walls usually reverberated. Of course, Jasper could make any place silent with his superior hearing sense and dish earrings, but that required concentration.

Jasper sat on the edge of his wool stuffed bed and outstretched his hands. His fingers carefully traced circles in the cool silk sheets. He focused on that sensation. *Power is the only thing that matters*, he repeated to himself. It had to be. He closed his eyes.

The silence in his room, usually a welcome reprieve, was deafening right now. He boosted his hearing beyond the walls, searching for a distraction. At first, all he heard were drafts of air, but slowly those drafts transformed, sounding more like a *howl*. His spirit sank as he was reminded again of the beggar's cry for mercy. Was he really hearing it?

'No,' he whispered, 'I did nothing wrong.' He dropped back onto his bed.

But despite Jasper's reassurances, the howl persisted in his ears, eventually splitting into a chorus and surrounding him. The Prince reverberated his earrings, making the opposite sound, yet the howls only grew louder in response. He frantically agitated every metal object in his room, making a tumultuous ring, but again the howl remained. In desperation, he threw his hands over his ears, though even that failed him.

'This isn't real,' he said, 'I'm not hearing this.'

In the darkness of the Prince's mind, the anguished face of the Cob man appeared. At least he thought it was the Cob at first, but something was off. This was not the same man he'd seen

this morning. He looked closer. This was a face he hadn't seen in years, the face of his biological father. Rage built within Jasper, and finally, the screams stopped. Why was he being made to look at this despicable man? Who would do that to him?

A knock at the door caught Jasper's attention, and his eyes shot open. He painfully raised himself from his bed. His legs ached as he stumbled over to the door, and his stomach churned. *How much time had passed?* Stopping shy of the door, Jasper patted himself down in an attempt to look more presentable. He cleared his throat and pulled the door open a crack.

Before the Prince could even get a word out, the door was shoved open from the other side, knocking him off balance. Dinah stood in front of him, tapping her foot.

'I've only been knocking for ten minutes,' she said. She pushed past Jasper and sat at his desk, taking a moment before turning to him. 'Diamonds forgive me, but you look like crap!'

Jasper hovered back to his bed and sat in silence. Dinah frowned. 'I didn't mean to offend you,' she said apprehensively.

'No, it's okay,' he replied.

Dinah was the only person Jasper tolerated that type of language from. She had been adopted into a higher class just like him. Only her adoption was more recent – which was unusual – so she still had some of the mannerisms of the lower class.

'I missed you at dinner,' she said, before letting out a dragging sigh, 'And I'm sorry.'

Jasper raised an eyebrow. *What did she have to apologise for?*

'For earlier today with the... with the Cob,' she said, 'I shouldn't have turned away.'

Jasper desperately wanted to tell her to stop. Those words just

sounded wrong coming out of her mouth, but she was correct. Society dictated that she apologise to a higher class for disrespecting what he *wanted* to do. So the Prince held his tongue, and they sat in silence for a minute. Dinah stood up and walked to the door. Jasper watched her sheepishly. He didn't want her to leave, but he didn't feel like he deserved her staying either.

'Well, aren't you coming?' she asked, stopping shy of the threshold.

'Where are we going?' He jumped to his feet and smiled.

'I've got something to cheer you up.'



Dinah led Jasper to a small wooden door on the outer edges of the keep. He'd seen it before, but it was so unassuming that he'd never paid it any interest. They stood motionless for a moment just outside, but Jasper could hear the girl's breathing escalate. *Whose room was this?* Dinah knocked three times. He watched her lips as she silently counted to five. Nobody answered, so the young Apprentice Alchemist slowly pushed open the door.

Jasper prepared to mask the sound, suspecting they weren't really supposed to enter, but to his surprise Dinah covered it. It's not that she couldn't do it. Anyone could theoretically Manipulate any sense. But it was rare people bothered to practise with a sense they weren't gifted in beyond early childhood. Without specific training, it could be a frustrating experience.

Dinah poked her head inside the unlit room. Jasper listened as she inhaled through her nostrils. He was sure that right now, she could see virtually every aspect of the room in her own unique way. Seemingly satisfied with what she could sense, Dinah crossed the threshold, throwing an arm back, signalling him to follow.



With the door closed and the room cut off from the dim flicker of the hallway's torchlight, it was entirely pitch-black. Jasper stumbled over an unknown item on the ground. Dinah stopped. He hoped that didn't mean she noticed his clumsiness. After a moment, she took in another extended breath through her nostrils and took a few careful steps.

Jasper listened as she began to rummage through her satchel. Presumably she'd found what she was looking for, because there was a brief pause, then a metallic scraping sound trailed by pulses of bright yellow sparks. *A flint and steel.* Jasper's eyes suddenly stung as he found himself staring directly into a freshly lit candle. A large blob of light rapidly burned into his vision.

He turned his head and gave his eyes a rub, allowing his pupils a moment to adjust before turning back. The first thing he noticed, before any of his surroundings, was Dinah illuminated by the candle. He smiled.

'A warning next time, please.'

'No promises,' she teased.

The two were in a midsized round room that must have been located within one of the keep's turrets. There was an impressively large number of bookshelves chaotically crammed into the space. Jasper doubted as many could have fit if they were neatly arranged. All of them were packed to the brim with leather-bound books and trinkets. One such item was a small sculpture of a horse. Judging by its fine porous texture, Jasper assumed it was carved from bone.

In the centre of the room, tucked away amongst the bookshelves, was a mahogany desk. It was covered in parchments and was surrounded by drawers. Each drawer had a label carved into the front. Jasper recognised some of the words 'Iron', 'Magnesium', but

others were entirely foreign to him 'Pot-ash', 'Bismuth'. It was only now that all the pieces fit together in Jasper's mind, and he figured out where they were. High Alchemist Octavius's lab.

Dinah unexpectedly grasped Jasper's hand, forcing the Prince to turn his head so she wouldn't see the blood rush to his face. She led him over to the mahogany desk.

'Why did you bring me here?' he asked, staring at the floor.

'I saw how disappointed you were after training,' replied Dinah.

She let go of his hand and started quickly sifting through the surrounding drawers and cupboards. Jasper began searching too – not that he knew what he was looking for. He watched as Dinah grabbed hold of something large from one of the upper cupboards.

'Give me a hand, will you?' she said, straining to pull it down.

This time, Jasper put his hands around Dinah's and helped her remove a large briefcase. They placed it on the ground with an unexpected thud. Dinah looked at him.

'I thought this might be a good way to cheer you up.' She smiled.

Jasper smiled back, taking a moment before letting go of her hands. He hoped she didn't notice. The Prince looked at the brown leather-bound briefcase, recognising it immediately. Truly, no one knew him better.



The High King and his three High Rulers had locked themselves in the voting chambers for hours. Adolphus couldn't be sure exactly how long without windows, but judging by the now stumped candles, it was deep into the night.

High Alchemist Octavius Gold's news had shocked them all. The Ruby Kingdom's development of 'photographs' would allow

them to perform sight-sense Manipulation over great distances, the High Alchemist had claimed.

Usually, one needed to maintain contact at all times with the sense they wished to Manipulate. But these photographs were such perfect recreations that they allowed someone to vision Manipulate anything from a great distance. That knowledge frightened them all, but what was more terrifying was what they didn't know. Octavius couldn't tell them how the photographs were made, how many the Ruby Kingdom had, or even their range – presuming they had one.

Adolphus cursed the Ruby Kingdom for keeping the details so close to their chest. Yet, he also knew that he would do likewise in their position. Controlling information was always advisable, especially in the lead-up to a war. He didn't have to be a King to know that. *How long had they been planning this?*

'When was your visit to the Ruby Kingdom?' he asked Octavius.

'Their Alchemist invited me six months ago. That's when I learned about the photographs.'

That was around the same time the Ruby Kingdom had revealed another one of their inventions, the flintlock, and happily gifted it to them. Catherine had been vocal about her suspicions surrounding such a gift from the start. Adolphus should have listened to her. Of course, the obvious move would have been for them to obscure their work. He knew that, but he'd ignored it out of convenience.

Now he knew the truth, though. They were merely being teased. Compared to a photograph, a flintlock might as well be a wooden dagger. For all they knew, the Ruby Kingdom had photographs of knives in the chamber of every King, Queen, and Ruler's bedroom in Brialta and could execute them all in their sleep. How could he have been so ignorant?

General Catherine grunted in frustration.

‘Why did you not tell us immediately?’ she yelled.

‘Silence!’ commanded Adolphus.

He felt the General’s frustration, but there had been too many arguments tonight. If he didn’t start exercising his power, the night might never end. There was only one solution to the chaos: he had to give them clear direction, no matter what that direction may be. Adolphus stood as regally as possible, whipping his robes forwards.

‘I’ve decided!’

All three of his Rulers immediately lowered their guards to listen. Adolphus took one last glance around the room.

‘We are refusing to lower the taxes of the Lower Kingdoms.’

He grimaced. *Let them come.*

The High Minister was the first to break the silence.

‘But sir, even ignoring the photographs, we might not be able to win against such an alliance.’

‘We’re doomed either way,’ said Adolphus, turning away. ‘What choice do we have?’

‘What about the impact a war could have on our Kingdom?’ She shook her head. ‘The impact it could have on our people?’

King Adolphus inhaled slowly, giving his High Rulers time to cover their ears with both their hands and Manipulation. If even Olivia was unsure, he’d have to make his answer even clearer. The room began to rattle as he Manipulated the Verve from every potential resonator. From the gold trim of his robes to the stone of the walls and floor.

‘My judgement is final!’ roared the King.

He watched the Minister as she shivered where she stood. The other two quickly checked for bleeding from their ears. Of course,