**The Heir, the Prince, and the Traitor** by Hope

*Eradicate the fourth child of Their Majesties.*

The words rang in Fileus’s head. Each word pounded against his skull. He had never killed a child before, specifically one who wasn’t even a day old, let alone even born.

From the roof of a building near the Palace of Carnet in the kingdom of Kineallen, he peered through a glasscope at the bloodstone palace.

*Three floors up, five windows to the right,* he recited to himself.With a slight turn, the glasscope zoomed in on a massive balcony and a ceiling-to-floor glass window. The curtains had been pulled to the side. Servants in white hustled in and out of view but then they all stopped and bowed. A wet rag of a man appeared. Fileus recognized the mop of blond hair on top.

*High King Lennon.*

From his view, the king did not seem as intimidating as he appeared to the public. All confidence and bravado were gone as Lennon raced across the room and out of view. The servants paused and all turned in the same direction.

The minutes dragged on. Fileus’s hand shook, blurring his view. The cold bit at his skin. He wiped the rain from his eyes, cleared the tip of the lens with a portion of his damp shirt, and readjusted his view. One of the servants bounced on her toes, another clapped, and the others wore big smiles on their faces.

The child had arrived.

Fileus lowered the glasscope and turned up the collar of his trench coat. *Now to find a way in*. Guards in silver and red armor patrolled every hall, and servants would be everywhere in the hidden passageways rooted throughout the palace. He would need to make a precise calculation and end up on one of the balconies. The dark of the day and sheets of rain would conceal his appearance. Who would even think to watch the outer wall of the palace or the balconies? Even if he were caught, he wasn’t worried. He would simply disappear.

Fileus peered through the glasscope once more. Lennon cradled the newborn in his arms, the three princes crowding him. He held the infant up, displaying her to everyone in the room. Another man, the steward, cried in the corner. Fileus tore his eyes away. It was just a child. One child out of the thousands on this world, but this one in particular Arkhill wanted dead. But why? Arkhill would not convey the reason, but he said it was important. The child could not live, and Fileus had to obey.

He put the glasscope away in a satchel tied to his waist, folded in the flaps of his coat, and closed his eyes. The power in his veins sparked to life and flowed through his body, warming his chilled skin. The ground disappeared beneath his feet. A moment later, the ground returned, and he opened his eyes.

A massive, dark velvet bed occupied the center of the back wall of the room. A portrait of the royal family hung above the headboard. A fire blazed below a mantle with a sofa in front. Fileus’s skin turned cold.

*The king’s chambers.*

He cursed to himself. Once more, he closed his eyes. When the ground returned, he opened them and smiled. A wooden nest with furs and thick blankets occupied the center of the back wall. A small chandelier with crystal figurines dangled over the nest. Dolls and wooden animals lay by a sofa, and a small fire was at the far wall with a metal gate in front. The nursery. Luck was on his side. No one was in the room but for how long? A maidservant could come in at any moment with the child.

His eyes jumped around the room. Fileus turned around and sighed in relief. A door. Upon opening it, his heart filled with joy. Little outfits hung from a rod and a small wardrobe sat to the right. He hustled in and closed the door.

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*How long must they dote upon it?* His muscles were tight and his back stiff. No one had entered the room for hours. *How late is it?* It must have been nearly dawn.

 A door shut, and he froze.

 “Shall I call the guards, my lord?” a female voice called.

 “Not yet. I want a moment with her first.”

 “Of course, my lord.” Hinges squeaked, and a door closed.

 Fileus’s heart pounded. He held his breath and strained his ears. A soft whimper of a cry came from the other side.

 “Shh. It’s all right, my dear. It’s all right.”

 “Is she well?” a new voice inquired. Fileus recognized it. *The High Queen Elinor.*

 “Oh, she’s perfectly all right.”

 The hem of a dress rustled across the floor. “She’s so beautiful.”

 “You and Lennon must be so happy.”

 “We are. And so are the boys. They’re so pleased to have a sister.”

 No one spoke for some time.

 “We should allow her to sleep,” suggested Queen Elinor.

 “Yes, you’re right. I just can’t seem to put her down.”

 “Here.” Another whimper. “There, there, my little girl. I’ll have Lizzy come in shortly after she’s cleaned up. She’ll watch over her, so I think we’ll only need one guard posted at the door.”

 “Yes, Your Majesty.” Hinges squeaked. “You should retire as well, Your Majesty. It’s been a long night. You shouldn’t even be standing.”

“I’m all right, Anthony. You don’t always have to worry about me.”
“Yes, I do. Now, please go rest, or must I inform Lennon you are out of bed.”

“All right, I’m going.” A pause. “Sweet dreams, Alaine. I love you, my little bird.”

After a moment, the door closed, and silence fell. Fileus let out his breath. Quietly, he turned the knob and stepped into the room. The door back into the main corridor was shut. The fireplace remained dead. He tiptoed up to the nest and peered down at the newborn.

Her eyes were closed. Her small, red fists clung to the white hornethide wrapped around her. Fileus reached down and picked her up. *What had they called her? Alaine?* Absentmindedly, he rocked Alaine in his arms. Never in his life had he held an infant; a child a bit older, but never one like this. She was so small, so weak, so innocent. But he had an order. His fingers slowly wrapped around her neck and squeezed.

 Why did Arkhill want her dead? Did he see a future for her he did not agree with? What would she do? Who would she become? She was only a child, not even a day old. Her red face turned an even darker shade. Her mouth opened but no air drew in or out.

 His eyes blurred over. His hand holding her neck shook. He couldn’t disobey Arkhill. The demigod had been like a father to him, taking him under his wing after his parents’ death, feeding him, sheltering him, caring for him. But this little girl . . .

His hand fell limp and she sucked in air. Her mouth opened wide, and a wail drew out. Anyone could hear her and be in the room any second. He had to think. Arkhill needed to know he had ended her life.

 An idea sparked.

 With his free hand, he snapped his fingers. A flame flickered to life in his palm and licked harmlessly at his fingers. He threw the fire at the nest pulled Alaine into his coat, and disappeared.