

**A BURNT
SUMMER**
**SEASONS OF WITHER,
BOOK ONE**

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CAIL



To Find a Peach

The streets of the Royal City were choked with death. At first, Cail had been nearly overpowered by the stench, a putrid mixture of decomposition and charred corpses. As he walked the streets, he was forced to cover his nose and mouth with a strip of cloth he tore from his cloak, though in truth, it did little good in keeping the foul taste of the city at bay.

I have seen battlefields far less terrible, he thought. At least those deaths were new, and the dark odor of blood and shit and fear was all a man had to contend with. Not this rotten, plague-ridden, lingering smoke that hung throughout the city.

That was something else that nagged at him as he strode through the nearly deserted streets. On the field of battle, the dead and dying were almost all men. Warriors who had more or less chosen to be there. Or, if not chosen, at least *belonged* there. In the houses and the alleyways of the Royal City, just as many of the corpses belong to women and children. The

plague did not discriminate.

Beside him, Lande struggled to match Cail's long strides. The page's quick tapping footsteps barely registered as a counterpoint to the footfalls of his own solid boots.

I should have worn soft soles, he chided himself. The loud clunk of his hard heels announced their present to everyone within earshot. These days, most streets were quiet enough for the noise to echo off the walls of houses and businesses and carry far. In the days before the plague, the bustle of these same streets would have made it impossible for him to even hear his own thoughts, much less his footsteps.

Cail let his hand fall to the pommel of his sword. The cold metal brought little comfort. He was a steward, not a warrior. His days as a fighter were long behind him, and none of them had been glorious, only steady and, he hoped, honorable. He supposed there was a quiet glory in that, but the days of having the luxury to reflect on such things were also long past.

"Do you see something, my lord?" Lande asked.

Cail glanced at him. The page had dropped his own hand onto the knife at his belt, miming Cail's action. The lad was only eleven,

but he clearly dreamed of being a warrior. Perhaps he already saw himself as one.

The illusions we paint for ourselves, he thought. And how long we cling to them.

Cail stopped in front of a shuttered shop. There were no red Xs painted on the wooden shutters. He wondered if that meant the merchant was still in business, or if there'd simply been no one to mark them as plague-fallen. The sign above the door was for a tailor, which did him no good. His princess had asked for a peach, and by the Unnamed, she would have it. Just not from a closed tailor's shop.

"My lord?"

Cail met the page's gaze. Lande was trying to affect a stern visage, but the boy's trepidation leaked out through his eyes like tears. Cail could see it there. He didn't blame the lad. If he was being honest, the same fears lurked somewhere inside of him. He was just better at keeping them from seeping out for all to see. In the end, that might be the only true difference between the world of children and the world of men.

"What do *you* see, Lande?"

Lande's eyes widened slightly. "Me, lord?"

"You have eyes, don't you?"

"I do."

"Then use them. What do you see?"

Lande swallowed. His gaze swept the street and the buildings that lined it. Cail waited patiently. Lande was bright, even brighter than his previous page. When Lerner was given his sword and sworn into royal service as a warrior, Cail had plucked Lande from the crowd of pages to serve him personally. Stewards to the royal house had a great many responsibilities, but one of those was ensure that the next generation of stewards were prepared for their role.

"The street looks empty," Lande told him. "But it's not."

"No, it isn't."

"I see a few people moving."

"Together or alone."

He squinted. "In ones and twos. But they stay close to the walls of the buildings, and they hurry."

"They are afraid."

Lande swallowed, his expression conveying what he didn't say.

So am I.

"Most of the businesses are closed," Lande continued, his voice shaky. He pointed a wavering hand at the tavern halfway up the

street. "But that one is still open."

Cail examined the tavern front. Behind the cloudy glass, he could see the figures Lande was pointing at. "And doing a brisk business, I imagine."

"But why?" Lande asked.

"What do you mean?"

Lande looked Cail in the eye. "The sages say that people catch the plague from other people. That's how the queen died. The old king gave it to her."

"Lower your voice, boy," Cail growled. He glanced around to see if anyone might have heard Lande's words. He spotted a few of the shadowy figures well up the street that Lande had pointed out, making their way to whatever destination was important enough to risk the city streets. He didn't think any were close enough to hear the page's prattling.

Dutifully, Lande dropped his tone to just above a whisper. "And she passed it on to both princes, before she knew she was infected. So —"

Cail raised a hand, silencing him. He gave the boy a hard look. "Mind your tongue. The people can't know. Not yet."

Questions swam in Lande's eyes, but he didn't ask them.

Cail leaned closer to him, speaking in a gruff whisper. "This city is in bad enough shape. Knowing the king and queen are still in the royal palace is the only thing keeping what little peace there is. Understand?"

Lande nodded, then looked down. "I'm sorry, my lord. I didn't think."

Cail put his hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezed. "I know, son."

Lande looked up at the word "son" and smiled. Cail tried to smile back, but knew his grizzled features probably conveyed something closer to a pained expression. It was the best he could do.

Despite his misstep in speaking aloud, Cail knew Lande had pointed out the biggest danger of this plague, as he saw it. No one knew right away that the infection had settled into their bones. By the time a person experienced the first fever, which usually preceded the black boils, he could have spread it to many others.

Or she.

Cail remembered when the queen had summoned him to her chamber, just over two weeks ago. She made him stand outside, speaking through a cracked door, while she lay in her bed, attended by a single handmaiden. Cail had seen others afflicted by the plague.

Some experienced only a little pain, but for most, the black boils caused them agony. The king had roared almost until the end, as if he were facing a legion of his enemies on the battlefield. Only in his final moments did he fall silent. When Cail stood at the queen's door, listening to her panting breaths and grimaces, he could tell she was suffering dearly.

And yet, she uttered no complaints. No pleas for mercy. No pointless begging for a sage to offer treatment for what they could rarely cure, and then only in children. Instead, with short, staccato sentences, she asked after her sons.

"They show no signs," Cail had assured her.

"I touched them," she'd murmured through her tears. "I held them. I kissed their faces."

"They remain healthy, my queen."

"My sons," she moaned. "My beautiful sons."

Cail's own chest ached at the pain her voice. "They will stay beautiful, my queen. I will protect them."

She had laughed then. A short, barking, humorless laugh that ended in a phlegm-filled cough. "You are a liar, sir."

“My queen...”

“You are a liar, and may the Unnamed bless you for it.”

Cail had remained at her door for several minutes longer, but the queen had no more to say. Even so, she’d been right. Both boys were dead within a week, one right after the other. And Cail had been able to do nothing but watch them die.

“My lord?” Lande’s high-pitched tones brought him back to the present.

“What?” He glanced down at Lande. “What else do you see?”

The page shrugged. “Just those few people moving from here to there. They’re scared, like you said.”

“Scared of us?”

“I don’t think so. More scared of everything.”

Cail grunted. He took a step down the alley that would take him to the street that led to the food market, but Lande’s voice stopped him.

“My lord, you didn’t answer my question.”

He turned to him. “I didn’t?”

“No.” Lande pointed to the tavern up the street. “If they know they can get the plague

from other people, why go where there are people all around?"

Cail considered the question. The boy was only eleven. Then again, if he was going to see all this death, he might as well know the truths of life. "When it feels like the world is ending, different men react differently. Some men try to fight it. Some seek out the sages and pray."

"What do they pray for?"

"Either deliverance or forgiveness, depending on the man. But some men...?" He jerked his head toward the tavern. "Some men decide that the best thing to do while you're waiting for the world to end is to get soundly drunk and find a woman."

Lande's eyes flared open. "You mean... not his wife?"

"I mean exactly that."

"I would never do that." Lande touched his heart quickly with his fingertips and bladed his hand against his forehead, making the holy sign and holding it. "That goes against the writings."

"So it does. But you asked." Cail turned and headed down the alley. "Now, come on."

Lande scampered to catch up. "Why do they —"

Cail held up his hand. "If you're going to ask me about men and women, don't. We'll talk about it when your voice changes."

Lande didn't answer, so Cail knew he'd been right about the content of the boy's question. They walked down the alleyway in silence. Ahead, off to their right, he could hear the crackling of a pyre, and the smell of burning death grew stronger.

When they emerged onto the street again, Cail turned left, heading up the gradual incline to the hilltop market. If any food merchants were still in business, it would be there. Those that hadn't fled the city, before the king ordered the gates sealed and held, would be faced with a hard decision. Selling their goods meant risking infection. For the craftsmen, closing the shop meant being unable to buy food for their families. For the food merchants, it meant watching their wares rot, though at least their own families would eat. For a while.

"My lord?"

Cail didn't reply. He kept walking up the slow rising street, his hand resting on his sword hilt.

Lande asked his question anyway, though he had the sense to keep his voice low.

"Do you think they'll save the princess, my lord?"

"I do."

"But her brothers —"

Cail shot him a dark look.

Lande swallowed. "I meant to say, most people die from it."

"They do," Cail admitted. "But the sages caught her fever early, and that is the key. Or it seems to be."

Lande seemed to accept Cail's answer, and the boy fell silent as he half-ran beside him.

The taste of the oily smoke from the pyre they'd passed hung in the air. Cail spat, trying to clear it from his mouth. A few moments later, he heard Lande spit as well. He didn't need to glance over to know the boy's hand rested on his small knife, just as Cail's did on the hilt of his sword.

Why did I call him son? Cail mused. The last thing he needed was to feel that same terrible pain he'd gone through when Jerrel died. Or the two princes, for that matter. Better to keep the boy at an arm's length than to love him.

But he knew that was a lie as soon as he thought it. He had been a warrior once, out of duty, and he'd done what tasks are required of

a warrior. But he didn't have the cold bitterness of a warrior's heart. He loved too easily and too deeply, and he couldn't change that about himself any more than he could grow a third arm.

Maybe the boy would survive. Maybe they both would. The sages believed the plague had mostly burned itself out. Maybe the tumult and chaos it caused would pass, and life would return to some semblance of normal again. The princess's recovery seemed likely. She was a sweet girl, and the people would eventually love her. She had men like him to do that hard work that came with ruling and advising. The Royal City might have been ravaged by the plague, but it would survive, and recover. Then they would retake the areas in the central region where the opportunistic heretics had rebelled, claiming that the plague was His holy wrath. Cail would gladly swing the sword again in battle if it meant bringing those traitors to justice. Not for Him, but for the old king and the resilient queen and for those two beautiful dead princes. But most of all, for Kara, the little princess.

But first they had to survive. *She* had to survive. The last remaining child of King Olec. Once the bodies had all been burned, and the

remnants of the plague washed away, the people would learn that their king and queen had fallen prey to the disease. They'd hear how the princes were gone as well. In the midst of all that despair, they would need her. She would hold the city, and all of Thessalia, together. Though a young girl, she had a spark in her soul, one that made everyone around her feel like family.

That morning, he'd visited her bedchamber, where she was attended by a loyal handmaiden and Mattern, a sage who had risen to become the high priest, which also designated him as chief healer to the royal family. Part of Mattern's ascent could be attributed to his skill, but Cail knew that wasn't the only reason. Even sages were not immune to the plague, and the ranks of their order had thinned as badly as any other.

Kara had seemed in high spirits. Mattern reported that she'd eaten her breakfast, and held down her food when he lanced and cleaned a boil that had appeared in the night. The viscous liquid was mostly clear, rather than the black ooze it ultimately evolved into, which Mattern assured him was another good sign.

"We must lance any boils before they turn black," Mattern said.

“Does it hurt, Princess?” Cail had asked her.

She smiled at him. “Only a little.”

A pang of emotion hit Cail in the chest. So much rested on a nine-year-old girl. He wished he could protect her from all of it, but he knew he couldn't. It was her family's destiny to rule, and all he could do was help her when her turn came.

“You're very brave,” he assured her. “You should have a reward for your bravery.”

Her eyes lit up. “A peach, Lord Steward?”

Cail looked to Mattern for approval before he made a promise he might not be able to keep.

The sage gave him a nod. “The juices of the fruit will replenish her.”

Cail turned back to the princess. “Then you shall have it.”

He'd left her soon after, so that Mattern could continue to search her body for the beginnings of any other boils, and so she could rest.

The kitchens' stores were depleted. Agni, the cook, had died early on. She'd served three kings, but would not see a fourth. A thin apprentice named Hap had been promoted in

her place. He didn't have Agni's skill when it came to cooking dishes, though his fare was satisfactory. But where his culinary abilities lacked, his organizational skills far exceeded his former mistress.

"We've enough for six months," he'd told Cail that morning. "Maybe a little more, maybe a little less. Depends on how you want me to ration it. And who dies between now and then."

When he'd asked about a peach, Hap had shaken his head. "I've got some apples, though they're soft. There's still a few winter oranges from the west. But no peaches. Maybe in the market, Lord Steward."

Just a few hours later, he and Lande had ventured forth. The trip was as much to assess the city for himself as it was to find his princess a peach. He'd had reports from Marek, the veteran captain of the guard, who painted a picture of a subdued city, hunkered down to wait out the plague's run. Lerner, his former page who patrolled the walls now, had a slightly different view of things. According to him, small gangs roamed the city, preying on the weak. The guard patrolled to prevent this, but they couldn't be everywhere at once. Cail wanted to see the situation for himself, and

going to the hilltop market provided the perfect reason.

They came upon the first fruit stand halfway up the hill. It had abandoned by its owner, and what few pieces of fruit remained on the cart had turned so black that Cail couldn't recognize what they'd been.

Lande wrinkled his nose. "Stinks."

"You're just now noticing the smell?"

"I mean the fruit. Sweet stink is the worst."

Cail didn't answer, but he didn't agree with what the boy said. He'd already smelled the worst stench, and the strip of cloth across his face did nothing to keep it out. "Keep looking."

Lande made a face but returned to the cart.

"What are we looking for here?" The smooth voice came from behind them, and Cail heard the danger in it immediately. He whirled around to face the sound.

A tall, slender man in dark brown clothing emerged from the alleyway. Cail glanced down to the man's waist, where he wore a long dagger on each hip. Two more men stepped out of the narrow alley and into the street. One was short and wiry, the other a bit taller and stockier. Both held cudgels.

“Stand away,” Cail ordered. “We are on royal business.”

The man smiled darkly. “Royal business, is it? Has the good king sent his men out to raid my fruit cart? Things in the palace must be dire indeed.”

Cail sensed Lande standing beside him, but he kept his eyes fixed on the tall man who spoke. “Your cart?”

“Yes, mine.”

“You don’t look like a fruit monger.”

“And you don’t look like a thief.”

“That’s because I’m not.”

The man chuckled, his tone sarcastic. “What would you call rooting around in someone else’s property, intending on taking whatever you find? Because that sounds a lot like stealing to me.”

“Who are you?” Cail asked.

“Who asks?”

Cail hesitated for a moment, but decided to tell the truth. Perhaps his title would change their intentions. “I am Cail Auger, Lord Steward to King Olec. Who are you?”

The man’s eyes widened slightly when Cail spoke, but otherwise, he did not react. “I am called Silk.”

“I am on royal business, Silk, and you

will stand away!"

Silk smiled. "That's the second time you've given me an order. Will there be a third?"

"Does there need to be?"

Silk shrugged. "I suppose not. I'll ask you the obvious question, then." He leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. "Stand away... *or what?*"

Cail tore his sword from its sheath, but Silk was even quicker to draw his long daggers. The man lunged toward Cail, driving both blades at him. Cail stepped to the side to avoid the low blow and parried high to block the other. Silk grinned evilly at him.

"Let's play, old man," he said, his tone mocking. He twirled both knives, moving them in a crisscrossing pattern in front of him. "I've always wanted to carve something royal. You're not part of the royal family, but you'll have to do."

Cail brought his sword into a ready position, and waited.

"Oh, that won't be enough," Silk said. "I assure you." His evil smile brimmed with self-confidence.

Then he screamed. "You little *bastard!*" He whirled around on Lande, causing the boy

to lose his grip on his small dagger. He had buried it to the hilt in Silk's thigh. His two henchman stood frozen, gaping at their leader in surprise.

Silk slashed out at Lande, catching him across the cheek. The boy cried out and toppled to the ground.

Before Silk could follow Lande to the ground with his blades, Cail stepped forward and drove his sword through the small of the man's back. Silk let out a muted scream that dissolved into a wet gasp. His arms flopped uselessly to his sides, both knives tumbling from his slack fingers to the ground.

Cail jerked back on his sword, but it didn't budge. His blade was caught. He pulled again, but couldn't dislodge it. In desperation, he planted his foot against Silk's buttocks and pulled back while pushing forward with his boot. The blade wrenched free, and he staggered back several steps.

The cudgel blow caught him on the left shoulder a moment later. White pain shot down his arm and into his chest. He let out a cry and spun away. The next swing of the cudgel whistled past his ear as he turned.

Cail let his momentum drive him as he finished the spin with a blind swing of the

blade. He aimed for where he thought the man would be, and he wasn't far off. The edge of his sword cut deeply into the back of the stocky man's legs. The attacker fell to the ground, screaming. Blood pooled around him as he writhed on the stones of the street, clutching at his wounds.

He was finished.

Cail wheeled around to find the final enemy. He didn't have to look far. The short, wiry man held Lande by the hair, his cudgel raised in the air.

"Don't come any closer!" he screamed.

Cail watched him for a long moment, then took one careful step toward them.

The man gave Lande a jerk, making the boy gasp. "I'll bash his brains in, old man," he promised.

Cail took another step. He dropped his gaze to meet Lande's. A ribbon of blood ran from the cut on his cheek. The boy's eyes were scared, but not panicked.

"Stop, I said!"

"No," Cail answered, taking another step. "You won't hurt him."

"You don't think I have the guts to do it, old man?" the man sneered, though Cail could hear the fear in the man's voice. Silk must have

been the leader of this trio, and this man the consummate follower.

“No,” Cail said. He moved forward again. “You would do it. If you could.”

The man’s eyes hardened and he raised his cudgel in the air to strike Lande.

Cail strode forward rapidly, taking the final two steps to reach him. As he stepped, he swung. His blade arced through the air, slicing into the man’s arm just below the elbow. The hand and the cudgel flopped harmlessly to the ground. The wiry man stared in disbelief at the bleeding stump of his arm. He barely seemed to register when Lande tore away from him.

Cail raised his foot and drove a kick into the man’s midsection. The man flew backward, flopping onto the street. Then the street fell quiet once again, with only the low moans of the dying.

Cail didn’t wait to see any more. He turned to find Lande; but it was Lande who found him. The boy vaulted toward Cail, wrapping his arms around him. Cail returned the embrace, squeezing him tightly. After a few moments, he took Lande by the upper arms and moved him back to look at his face.

The cut from the crest of his cheekbone nearly to his mouth, but it hadn’t cut deeply

enough to go through. Lande reached up and touched it gingerly. "It's not bad, is it?"

"It's not good, but you'll live." Cail gave him a hint of a smile so that the boy knew he'd been joking. "But you'll never be handsome."

Cail retrieved Lande's dagger from Silk's thigh, wiping the blood on the dead man's shirt. Then he carefully sliced a strip and then a square from his already ruined cloak. He folded over the square and pressed it against Lande's cheek so that the wound was covered. "Hold that," he directed the boy.

While Lande pressed the cloth against the wound, Cail used the strip he'd cut to tie it in place. He tried several different ways before he found one that worked, wrapping the strip horizontally around the boy's head with the knot below his nose.

"It'll double as something to keep the stench out," he told him.

"It hurts," Lande said, his voice sounding like he had a cold.

"It's a cut."

"No, the knot. It's tight."

"Leave it. We'll get something better when we get back to the palace." He looked closely at Lande, wondering if he should take the boy back directly. He could return later for

the peach.

Lande seemed to sense his thoughts. "I'll be fine," he assured him. "Really."

Cail considered, but decided to finish what they'd started. The market center wasn't far now, and he didn't want to return empty-handed.

"All right," he said. "But if you feel dizzy or sick, you tell me."

"I will."

Cail looked at him for a moment longer, then squeezed his shoulder. "I almost lost you there, son."

Lande smiled despite the bandage. "That was incredible, lord. The way you swung your sword. I've never seen —"

"You've never seen someone who can truly wield a blade, or you wouldn't be so impressed," Cail finished.

"No, lord. You were very good. You —"

"I almost got us killed by not paying attention. Let that be a lesson to you of what not to do. Now, let's go."

They continued up the hill. Most of the shops were closed. Cail heard the rhythmic clank of a blacksmith working long before they passed his shop. He took some comfort in the familiar sound. At least some men chose to defy

the plague.

They gave a wide berth to the meat shop, though Cail saw a gaunt butcher standing at the counter inside. Only a few dark items hung from the ceiling, and he didn't like the smell of the place.

Cail stopped at a pair of rival flower carts right next to each other. Many of the small bouquets looked fresh. A young girl manned the first stand, an elderly woman the second.

"I'm looking for peaches," Cail said. "Do you know if any of merchants have peaches?"

The young girl shrugged and pointed at a wreath of daisies. Her eyes were vacant, and Cail recognized the expression. The petals of the Praying Tulip were edible. It was said that the tulip prayed to forget, and those who ate its petals forgot as well.

"She's a fool," the old woman snapped. "Young and beautiful and a fool."

Cail looked over the old woman's wares. They were in no better shape than the girl's. He looked up at the woman. "You own both carts?"

"What a stupid question. Of course I do."

"You're speaking to the Lord Steward!" Lande told her shrilly, though the bandage made him sound strange.

The woman's expression betrayed no

surprise. She scowled at Lande. "And you're speaking to your elder, so mind your tongue, boy. Or is that how you got your cut there?"

Lande blanched under her gaze. He flicked his eyes toward Cail for a moment, but remained silent.

"Peaches?" Cail asked again. "Do you know anyone selling them?"

The old woman swept her open hand over her flowers. "Perhaps if the Lord Steward were to honor an old woman with his patronage?"

Cail considered. Then he reached inside his shirt pocket for a silver coin. "Lande," he said, "pick a nice bouquet for the queen. She loves flowers at her dinner table."

Lande cleared his throat. "Yes, my lord." He took a long while before selecting a tiny bunch of white and pink buttercups.

Cail handed the old woman a coin. She took his from his fingers and hid it away.

"Randal," she said. "He always has the best peaches."

"He's still open?" Cail asked.

"Last I saw."

"When was that?"

"Yesterday afternoon. He bought some Praying Tulips for his wife on his way down the

hill.”

“Which shop is his?”

“You’ll find it,” she said. “There aren’t many open.”

Cail handed her a second coin. “By His mercy,” he said.

“May you never find the Hollow.”

He and Lande turned and headed back up the hill.

Empty shops and abandoned stalls flanked their way. Two of the shops were shuttered closed with red Xs slashed across the doorways. Another was burned nearly to the ground, a few black timbers the only skeletal remains.

What has happened to our beautiful city? Cail wondered if the heretics from the central region were right, and it was His wrath, punishing them for their sins. But what sins, exactly?

He smiled grimly. He supposed there was more than enough sin to choose from, if one were looking for reasons for Him to be angry with Thessalia and its people. All of the holy claims and surface rituals didn’t hide the acts that happened in dark places, and behind closed doors. He saw it all, in His glory.

Or so Cail was told. Belief was another

matter.

They crested the rise to the flat hilltop that was the central market. In times past, the market bustled with activity and so thick with people almost shoulder to shoulder. Today, he saw a lone woodcutter, splitting and stacking on the far side of the square. All of the stalls stood empty. Small tendrils of smoke rose from another blacksmith's shop, but Cail could hear no activity within.

"That's it!" Lande said excitedly, pointing. "Over there!"

Cail looked. The grocer's shop sat at the opposite end of the square from the woodcutter. Even from where they were, he could see that door stood open.

"Come on!" Lande cried, his voice ringing with excitement. He took a step, starting to run.

Cail grabbed hold of the boy's arm roughly, jerking him back. "Wait," he said. "We stay together." He released Lande's arm.

The boy rubbed where he'd grabbed, his expression hurt.

"Stick to my side," Cail commanded. "Understand?"

Lande nodded sullenly.

Cail started across the square, his eyes

sweeping left and right for any threat. There had been reports of crowds gathering earlier in the week. Angry crowds, he'd been told, though he imagined some were simply hungry. But there was little sign of anyone moving in the square, aside from the rhythmic whack and pause of the woodcutter's work.

As he neared the doorway to the shop, Cail tried to peer inside. The overcast sky gave as little light as it did warmth, and he could only see a few indistinct shadows. As best he could tell, they were shelves and tables.

What did you expect in a grocery merchant's shop?

"Stay close to me," he muttered to Lande, then stepped inside. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. A rustle of movement near the back of shop drew his eyes toward the sound. Before he could make out the shape, a match flared, briefly illuminating a lumpy man holding an unlit lamp.

"Welcome, friends," the man said, and used the match to ignite the lamp. A weak light filled the interior of the shop. The merchant held it out high at an arm's length in their direction.

Cail looked around for anyone else, but saw no one.

"Are you Randal?"

"I am. And this is my shop." He swept

his free hand across the room, then dropped it. "What's left of it, anyway."

"Most of the others are closed," Cail said.

"True. Most of them have either died, or their family has died. A few were smart enough to close sooner. Smarter than me. They stay away now to protect their families."

"But you're open."

Randal smiled humorlessly. "We all must do our part..."

"For the greater good of all," Cail said, finishing the popular aphorism from His word.

"Yes," Randal agreed. "Only I wish I were truly so unselfish. The truth is, I have no family. Not anymore. My son is gone, and my wife stares into the cold ashes of our fireplace with vacant eyes."

"Why aren't you with her?"

Randal shrugged. "She's not really there. And if I don't sell what I have in stock, it will rot. Then we'll both starve."

"You don't fear the plague?" Lande blurted.

Cail shushed him, but Randal shook his head and answered. "Death is death, boy. We all find it eventually, no matter how hard we may think we will not." He peered a little closer at Lande. "You look a little like my own boy,

even with that bandage. Pawel, he was called."

"An old name," Cail observed.

"Old," Randal agreed. "Unlike my son. The plague claimed him." He gave Cail an appraising look. "You, I know, I think."

"Perhaps."

"You are the Lord Steward to the King. Or whoever is still living in that palace, anyway."

"I am," Cail said.

"What profound mission brings you to my humble shop?" Randal said, smiling at his own soft sarcasm. "Will there be a royal feast that I can supply?"

"Nothing so grand, I'm afraid."

"No?" Randal looked disappointed. "Then what?"

"I'm surveying the state of our city," Cail said. "But when I saw your shop was open, I thought I might stop in for a peach."

"A peach?"

"Yes. The princess is fond of them."

Randal nodded slowly. He shuffled to a bin near Cail and held the lamp above it. "Most of my fruit has begun to rot, my lord Steward. But you are welcome to search while I hold the light for you. There may be a peach or two, though I doubt it."

Cail stepped forward, watching Randal's eyes. The merchant met his gaze without any sign of subterfuge, but that didn't convince him. Many men were skilled at hiding behind masks of their own creation.

"Lande," he said, continuing to watch Randal as he spoke. "Look in the bin."

The boy scrambled forward, immediately bending over the edge of the bin and scanning the fruit. "It's mostly bad," he said.

"My apologies," Randal said.

"It stinks, too."

"True enough, I'm afraid."

Cail waited while Lande moved pieces of fruit from one side to the other, searching diligently. The longer the boy took, the more impatient Cail could feel himself becoming. He almost joined in the search, but the shopkeeper's watchful nature worried him, so he waited. The wet thump of moving fruit and Lande's excited breathing were the loudest sounds. He strained his ears for any others, imagining the soft creeping footsteps of an attacker.

Randal glanced up at Cail, looking at him from under his thick brow.

"I've got one!" Lande cried out. He stood

suddenly, holding up his hand in triumph. His face beamed with pride.

Cail examined his find. The peach was small, and slightly wizened. The wrinkles made it appear as if it had grown elderly. A blackened patch the size of his fingernail adorned the side.

I can cut that away. This will work.

“Nicely done, lad,” he said gruffly, and turned his eye back to Randal. “What do I owe you?”

Randal smiled. “A peach for our beautiful princess? In the midst of all this death and fire? Now, that is worth quite a lot, wouldn’t you say?”

“You won’t chisel me, merchant. How much? And make it a fair price.”

“Prices in this city aren’t what they used to be.” Randal shook his head mournfully.

“Swords are.” Cail dropped his hand onto his pommel.

Randal’s eyes flared in surprise, and he raised his hands to placate him. “You mistake me, lord. I was indulging in mere bit of sad philosophy, that is all. I meant no affront.”

“A philosopher merchant, eh?”

Randal shrugged. “When you see as many people as I have, day after day, for as long as I have, it is inevitable. Wouldn’t you say?”

"I'd say leave it to the sages. How much for the peach?"

Randal's eyes flicked to the peach, which Lande still held up in the air like a prize. "It's priceless," he said, his eyes seemingly far away for a moment. Then his focus returned and he glanced back to Cail. "So it shall have no price. It will be a gift for the princess."

"A gift?" Cail peered at him, confused. A few moments ago, the merchant sounded like he was trying to gouge Cail for his entire money pouch. Now he wanted to give his wares away?

"Wait here," Randal said. He shuffled to the back of the store and returned with a small patch of burlap. When he reached out to take the wrinkly, decrepit peach from Lande, the boy pulled his hand away.

"Give it to him," Cail instructed.

Reluctantly, Lande extended his hand toward Randal, his expression suspicious. The merchant took the peach and wrapped it in the burlap, tying it shut with a bit a string. Then he handed it back to Lande.

"That should keep it safe until you reach the princess," he said.

"Thank you," Cail said. He reached for his pouch, but Randal shook his head and waved his hands.

“No, I meant what I said, my lord Steward. Keep your coin.”

Cail studied him a few moments longer, then nodded. “I’ll tell her from where it came,” he promised.

“That is enough.” Randal pulled the lamp closer to his own face, revealing a pair of small black boils on his neck, just above his collar. “It will be a comfort in the days to come.”

Cail understood then. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Randal waved away his sympathy. “It is better that I join them, if that is what awaits us.”

“I pray it is ending,” Cail said.

“We all do.”

“By His mercy, then.”

“May He protect you,” Randal replied. “Though He protected no one here.”

Cail backed away, watching Randal, but the merchant did not move. He only stared back, his eyes sad and resigned.

“Come on, Lande,” Cail said quietly, still walking backward. “Let’s go.”

Lande followed him out the open door. Only once he’d cleared the threshold did Cail turn around.

“You have the peach?”

Lande help up the burlap bag.

“Then let’s get home.”

The walk back down the hill was easier than the walk up. He gave a nod to the old woman at the flower cart as they passed. She nodded back, but the young woman next to her only stared at them blankly.

When they reached the scene of the earlier fight, all three men lay still, each in pool of their own blood. Cail made Lande give them a wide berth anyway. Once they were past, Cail hurried him along, watching for other street bandits.

They kept up a brisk pace. Cail swiveled his head back and forth, forward and back, but he saw nothing other than a few creeping souls. Their movements reminded him of the way the two boils on Randal’s neck crept out from beneath his shirt.

By the time they reached the palace gate, Cail’s jaw was sore from clenching it.

“Lord Steward,” the sergeant of the guard acknowledged him, then swung open the gate.

Once the gate was closed behind them, Cail allowed himself to relax. He held out his hand to Lande. “The peach,” he said. “And the bouquet.”

Lande looked hurt. “I’d... I’d hoped to

give it to her, my lord.”

Cail shook his head. “The sages won’t let but a few people near her. At least until the treatments run their course.”

Lande hung his head, but he handed over the items.

“Go see Hap in the kitchens,” Cail told him. “Get some stew and some bread in you. I’ll come get you after, and we’ll finish cleaning up that wound of yours.”

“Yes, my lord.” Lande’s tone was crestfallen.

Cail put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You’ll carry that scar for the rest of your life, son. Let it remind you of the day you became a warrior.”

Lande’s eyes brightened at that. “Yes, lord.”

“Now, go. And tell Hap I sent you.”

Lande scampered off toward the kitchen. Cail watched him go. He wasn’t Jerrel. He would never be Jerrel. But he was something. Something... good. And that was more than he thought he’d ever have again, outside of the royal family.

He made his way up the stairs to the royal apartments, letting the peach sway little in its little bag. Around the corner from the

princess's chamber, he stopped and opened it so he could carve out the blackness. He cut deeper than he needed to, flicking away some good flesh along with the rotted bit, but it was better to be cautious with these things.

Cail stared down at the pitiful piece of fruit. The peach seemed shrunken in on itself, as if aged. The hole where he'd excised the blackness looked like a wound. But despite that, he could smell the light odor of the peach. It smelled good to him. It smelled clean.

Carefully, he re-wrapped the burlap and tied it shut. All good presents should be presented thusly. He imagined what Kara's eyes would look like when she saw the peach, and when she ate it. That joy made the trip worth the cost. He regretted not bringing Lande along to see it, too. The boy had certainly earned it, in blood.

He rounded the corner and approached the door. The royal guard that stood watch recognized him right away. He stepped forward, then stopped.

"My lord..."

"What is it?"

"I'm... I'm not to allow anyone inside."

"Why?"

"The sage. He ordered it."

Cail swallowed hard. "When?"

"Half hour ago, lord."

Cail nodded, his heart sinking. "All right. Thank you." He stepped forward, reaching for the door. The guard seemed to consider stopping him, but didn't.

When he stepped through the door, Mattern the sage looked up sharply. His expression softened when he saw Cail. He stood and walked to him. "My lord, she's gone. I'm sorry."

"No." Cail shook his head. "She was responding to the treatments. She was getting better."

Mattern pressed his lips together and nodded in sympathy. "I know. But sometimes..." He trailed off, then began again. "There was nothing more I could do. She passed quickly."

Cail brushed past him. At the bedside, he looked down at Princess Kara. He'd hoped her face would appear peaceful, that he could take solace in that. But her features were slack and lifeless, no more.

Cail put the burlap-clad peach into her loose fingers, wrapping them around the gift. If he'd been faster, perhaps she could have tasted the peach before she died. She could have had

that, at least.

"She was the last of her family," Mattern said from behind him. "What will we do now?"

Cail set the small bouquet beside her, and stared down at the little girl who had once been so beautiful, so full of life.

"We carry on," he said, his voice thick with tears. "Like always."

Mattern was silent for a while. Cail stroked Kara's hair, remembering the magical moments when the little princess had smiled. Her loving nature made him feel as if he were family, and she shared that smile widely. She would have been a good queen, he believed, one the people would have loved. Early on, she'd have relied on her advisors to help her understand statecraft, but even as a young girl, she already understood people.

"How?" Mattern's voice was stern. "The family is dead."

Cail shook his head. "Not the whole family."

"Distant cousins remain, certainly," Mattern chuffed. "Thrice removed, at best. But they're few, and scattered across the realm. Besides, none is any more worthy than you or I."

Cail looked up from the still figure before

him. "Worthy?"

"Of the blood," Mattern clarified. "Part of the true family. Descended."

"There is one," Cail said simply.

"A bastard," Mattern said flatly.

"Blood is blood."

Mattern exhaled, his disagreement plain. "In the meantime, there is another answer," he said.. "At least for a while."

"What answer?"

"The one men like you and I must find. Or make happen."

"What are you suggesting?"

The sage touched his fingers to his chest and bladed his hand to his forehead. "May he give us the heart to fight for what is righteous, Lord Steward."

Cail didn't return the gesture, but merely started at him.

"Our city needs us," Mattern said. "Our nation needs us."

"Our nation needs the royal family. And they are all but gone."

"They are." Mattern allowed. "But ever has the faith served the family. What is it they say? The king rules, the sage advises, and the soldier serves."

Cail reached out and touched Kara's hair

that was spilled onto the pillow. He stroked it with small motions.

“Perhaps, for a while, the sage must do more than advise, but rule,” Mattern’s voice sounded both sad and resolute. “And the soldier has one great service remaining, it would seem.”

Cail didn’t answer. He knew what he had to do. And regardless of everything, he knew the one terrible truth that always remained.

Tomorrow would come. There was work to be done. And they would endure.

A Burnt Summer continues...