

ADVANCE READER COPY CHAPTER ONE

MARDAN'S ANOINTED

MARDAN'S MARK SERIES: BOOK TWO

by

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Dear Reader,

I simply cannot express how much I appreciate you! Thank you for joining the quest.

If you are receiving this sample chapter, hopefully you've read the first book in the series, *Mardan's Mark*. Keep in mind that the sample chapter will be revised before the final version is available.

Have fun! And watch out for pirates.

Kathrese McKee
Houston, Texas

CHAPTER ONE

Aldan adjusted Flame's reins and urged the horse forward. The humid coastal winds did nothing to relieve the August heat. His hair, secured by a strip of leather into a queue, offered little protection from the bright afternoon light that burned his neck above the collar of his tunic.

The blue uniform was borrowed, of course. General Olson wanted Aldan and his brothers to blend in. No more long conversations with Srilani. No more meals shared with the royal princesses. They were hemmed in at every turn by maids and guards always in attendance.

He glanced over his shoulder at the ladies' coach bumping along behind the troops and a few carts. How was Srilani holding up to traveling while her ribs were still mending?

The familiar sound of gulls' cries echoed across the vast plain over which the caravan traveled to reach Kaeson. Endless fields of grass stretched out to the right, dotted with herds of deer, antelope, and cattle. About four miles to their left, dunes undulated in a long line, separating them from the waves of the Great Gulf. A lone two-masted ship floated across the turquoise water far in the distance.

At the top of Kaeson's walls a couple of miles ahead, the tiny figures of

soldiers kept watch. Aldan shaded his eyes from Sol's rays. Two of the men erected a standard. The long, triangular flag whipped out in the sea breeze, sapphire and gold, waving as if in welcome.

"Prince Jamson's own banner," General Olson said.

Aldan glanced over at his new friend. A note of gladness infused the older man's voice, and Olson seemed to sit straighter in his saddle. "You're happy to be home," Aldan said.

Olson's grim mouth lifted at the corners. "As happy as I'm likely to get."

Prince Jamson leaned forward on Olson's far side. "Relax and enjoy the moment, Olson."

"You can say that, young man, because you don't have to prepare an army to repel an invasion."

Jamson shook his head and met Aldan's eyes, his eyebrows rising. "What do you think of my city?"

"It's beautiful from the outside," Aldan said. Any other remarks were cut off by the rising notes of a trumpet, high and clear, in a crescendo of joyous fanfare.

Flame shook his head and pranced to the side, and Aldan patted the horse's neck. His blood red coat had been brushed to a high sheen. The stallion's right ear flicked back as Aldan murmured quiet encouragement. Flame settled down, and Aldan turned his attention to the ramparts.

More toy-sized soldiers in blue tunics gathered on the heights. Aldan squinted. What would it be like if they wore green instead of blue, if there were forests instead of dunes near the walls, and if southerners instead of northerners waited for their prince to enter the gates?

Only, that wouldn't happen. His people thought he was dead, kidnapped and slain over twelve years before at the tender age of seven. His soldiers owed their allegiance to his sister, Yolani, but his infamous brother-in-law, Habidan, controlled Southern Marst. No one waited for Aldan in the city of Kaedan or in Kaedan Palace.

"General, you've seen Kaedan?"

Olson nodded. "The last time I saw your capital city--officially--was when your sister, Princess Yolani, wed Habidan."

"When was the last time you unofficially visited Kaedan?"

Olson cleared his throat. "Recently."

Aldan grinned. *Recently*. Olson knew how to keep a secret, one of the many qualities that made him an excellent commander and spy. "I see. How do the cities compare with one another? Is Kaedan like Kaeson?"

"The surrounding countryside is very different, but the basic structures are the same. The four gates face the points of the compass. The walls are the same height and thickness and built of the same white limestone from the same quarry. King Mardan wanted to show no favoritism between his twin sons, so he tried to make their palaces and fortifications equal. For the most part, he succeeded."

Aldan responded to the unspoken words he sensed Olson was holding back. "So how do they differ?"

Jamson spoke before Olson could form an answer. "We have the sea. Kaedan is landlocked."

Jamson's smug tone conveyed the idea that he considered this to be a point in Kaeson's favor.

Sam, on Aldan's other side, harrumphed. "That's not always an advantage. You're vulnerable to attack from the sea." He pointed to the bay. "Your eastern gate opens onto the wharves, right?"

"Yes." Now Jamson sounded wary.

"So. All Dzor would need is to send all his pirate ships at once to overwhelm your eastern side, and you'd be in trouble." Sam tugged at the too-short sleeves of his borrowed northern uniform tunic. His brilliant red hair seemed to bristle and, together with his intimidating bulk, gave him a fierce aspect.

Jamson chuckled, his hazel eyes narrowing. "Oh, like that would ever happen. When have the pirates ever worked together?"

"You're too hasty, Your Highness." Olson shook his head. "Just because it's never happened doesn't mean it's not possible." He turned to Aldan and Sam.

"You've put your finger on a potential problem King Terson takes seriously. Don't forget--His Majesty is a merchant, and he's lost a sizable amount to the Norlan pirates over the years. Terson keeps a navy for the defense of the coast and Kaeson Bay."

Sam's brows drew together. "Where was Terson's navy when his children were taken?"

At first, it seemed that Olson wouldn't answer. Finally, he sighed. "Elsewhere. We let down our guard and paid dearly. Praise El that the king's children have returned safely home."

Aldan's fingers clenched into fists. *Let down their guard?* Srilani, First Princess and Jamson's oldest sister by four years, had told him how she'd argued with her stubborn father, King Terson, to increase the coastal patrols and to assign extra guards. Her father had refused to consider her suggestions. King Terson should get the blame for all the hardships his children had been through.

The trumpet blasts renewed their song, and Aldan checked over his shoulder. Two carriages swayed along the dusty track at the center of the line of carts and mounted soldiers that formed their escort. The first carriage bore Jamson's three older sisters, and the second carried their maids and baggage.

The size of the cavalcade seemed ridiculous after the danger was over. Fifty guards and a score of servants to escort the four royal children home. The ox-drawn carts were laden with supplies and more servants. They'd brought a dozen tents and two pavilions for the prince and his sisters--Srilani, René, and Maelan--and all of their cooks, maids, grooms, and housemen. Every comfort had been provided, a stark contrast to the privations they'd suffered on Rozar's ship and during their overland journey.

Aldan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. They could have been here in half the time without the entourage. Of course, the entire group traveled slowly on account of Srilani's injuries, taking the journey in short stages to avoid setting back her recovery.

Olson touched Aldan's arm, drawing his attention.

"You should check on the princesses." Olson's expression conveyed a wealth of meaning. "This may be your last chance to speak with . . . the sisters . . . for a

while."

Aldan's stomach dropped. Olson meant Srilani. *How will it be to not see her at least a few minutes every day?*

"Thank you. I'll be back in a few minutes." Aldan pulled out of the group at the head of the train and turned Flame in the direction of the lead carriage.

As Aldan drew alongside the lumbering coach, Maelan pushed the curtain back to grin out at him. Her face was a female version of Jamson's, with the same sparkling hazel eyes, straight, dark brown hair, and impish smile.

"May El bless you, Aldan."

"May El bless you, Princess. How do you fare?"

She glanced over her shoulder, then back at him. "We are sick of this carriage. Would you like to speak to Srilani?"

"Please."

Maelan dropped the curtain, blocking his view of the dim interior. A few moments passed, then curtain swished back to reveal the dearest person in the world.

Srilani's wan face, lips whitened with pain, appeared in the window. Her blue eyes seemed too large above her sunken cheeks. How much weight had she lost during their journey to the Cauldron? Her weak appearance disguised the strong, fiery woman who had led them across Norland.

Aldan put his hand on the window's frame. "How do you fare?"

"I am well."

"That's not entirely truthful."

She smiled at him. "It's not entirely a lie either. I'm doing better."

René's voice issued from the coach's interior. "Srilani is pushing herself too hard."

Srilani turned away from Aldan to address René. "Hush. I'm fine." She shrugged and turned back to the window. She smiled again. "I would prefer to be on horseback instead of cooped up here. At least that way we could talk easily. But

I am doing better."

René interrupted again. "That's true, but you're still in pain. You should drink the willow bark tisane I've been offering you for the last four hours."

Srilani sighed. "I'll drink some tonight if that will make you feel better."

Aldan intervened. "Argue about that later." This was his last chance to speak to Srilani for the foreseeable future.

Srilani touched his fingers. "Thank you."

"You should do what René says."

"Oh please, don't encourage her."

Aldan switched to practical considerations. "Any last instructions?"

"Just . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't believe that I've changed my mind. No matter what you see or hear." Her expression pleaded with him to understand. "My father will try to twist things around to suit his preferences, but know this--not everything is as it seems at court. Do you understand?"

"I think so. I know you can make your own decisions."

Her mouth drooped. "Father does not."

He reached inside the window, took her hand, and gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze. "I am not your father, and I will remember what you've said." He released her. "I must return to the front before I cause any talk." He waved toward the shadowy figures behind Srilani. "May El bless you, René and Maelan."

The sisters returned his farewell. He stared into Srilani's eyes for several long seconds. Could he win her? He had her love, but could he convince her father?

"El be with you, Aldan."

"El be with you, Srilani."

Aldan spurred Flame to a gallop and left the carriage behind.

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Aldan slowed Flame beside Linus's dun gelding, and Sam guided his horse to Aldan's other side. The brothers joined the ranks of mounted soldiers who formed the escort in front of the carriages. Olson wanted them to blend in and not call attention to themselves.

"How do the women fare?" Sam asked.

"Bored." Aldan shook his head. "Srilani looks worn out."

"No doubt."

Linus looked back, his question clear.

"Don't worry, Linus. Your dog is fine. Although I can't say the same for the maids. I'm not sure how they feel about traveling with Kazka."

A sly smile flashed across Linus's dark face. Kazka had gained a certain notoriety since he'd arrived at the Cauldron Fortress with the royal heirs and their new friends. The giant wolfhound took shameless advantage of his size to do whatever he wanted, including stealing food, knocking over guards, and terrorizing the servants. In some ways, Kazka was the outward expression of Linus's inner child, the one who'd been robbed of his childhood.

From their vantage point, they could see everything as they followed General Olson and Prince Jamson into the shadows of the city walls. The Palace Guard, resplendent in their best uniforms, waited to escort the cavalcade through the city to the gates of Kaeson's Palace.

The citizens, possibly every citizen for miles around, had turned out to welcome their beloved prince home. As Jamson appeared at the mouth of the portal, the crowd gave a shout. The trumpets on top of the wall echoed it and segued into a variation on the prince's anthem.

"Here we go," Aldan said. "Are you ready for this?"

Sam grunted. "If I say no, will it make a difference?"

"Not a bit." Aldan glanced at Linus's closed expression. "What strange seas we are sailing on today."

Linus nodded once. "Indeed."

A tide of blue, the honor guard formed a wall on either side of the travelers. But Jamson wasn't content to wait on the stuffy carriages and carts. He pulled several paces ahead, waving to the people. They responded with a maelstrom of whistling, clapping, and waving hats. People lifted their children high for a look at their future king.

Aldan held Flame on a tight rein. The horse jittered and shied at the pandemonium, but the stallion quieted at Aldan's reassurances. The palace loomed at the end of the long road, pristine white stone steps leading up and up to an arched entrance. Near the top, a group of richly dressed people waited.

"Prince Jamson! Prince Jamson! El bless you! El bless you! Long live Prince Jamson!"

Jamson halted his horse in front of a man with a little boy perched on his shoulders. The prince placed his hand on top of the child's head as if in a blessing. The father's face glowed with approval.

Aldan followed the curve of the road. Jamson wasn't even fourteen, but he sure knew how to handle a crowd.

Leaving the proud father, Jamson rode along the line of people, clasping hands here and there while expertly controlling his horse with his other hand. At one point, an excited mother shoved her baby into his arms. He managed to hang onto his reins and the baby too. Quickly, he kissed the baby's forehead and returned her to her mother.

The mother hugged her child and raised adoring eyes to Jamson's face. The people gave a rousing cheer.

"That boy's head is going to swell so big that he won't fit through the palace doors." Sam's voice was low, a rumble of thunder.

Aldan caught his words and chuckled. "It's a wonder he's not more spoiled."

"Oh, aye. The people worship him. He could be a lot worse."

Aldan shook his head at the tumult. "I'll be glad when this is over."

Linus had but one word to say. "Indeed."

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