

To The End



Kathleen Hayes

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TO THE END

By Kathleen Hayes

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A hooded man walks down a mist shrouded alley. He is dressed in a black doublet with blue sleeves. His face is shadowed by the hood he wears. In one hand he holds a bloody knife, and in the other, a gold piece of jewelry.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“Deth will come for you.”

Deth—the name he bestowed upon me so long ago that I barely recall my real name—is the bogie man that parents threaten children with when they misbehave. Yet it is those who would rise against the King who fear me most for I am no bogie man at all. They know I am real and who I serve. I am the ghost who, in the dark of night, enters their home unseen, taking nothing with me when I leave; nothing but the life of their loved one.

I am the King’s Assassin.

I no longer exist in the world I once knew. Those who knew me then mourn for me, as they do for my parents, believing me lost in the tragic carriage accident that took their lives.

But I was lost and my parents were dead long before their carriage rolled over that cliff. The new King taunted me with their deaths, and then threw me to the Assassin’s Guild. There, he said, I should be trained to live up to my name—Deth. I was seven years old.

Deth is all that I am now, but for one tiny keepsake that I have hidden away. How the King missed the glint of gold in my ear, I will never know. I am only glad that I have it. My childhood friend gave it to me as he and his family departed for distant shores, never knowing what fate had in store for me. It is knowing he is safe and free from the darkness that consumes me is all that keeps me clinging to life.

Sincerely,

SueM

P.S. I am definitely flexible on specifics such as his name, the carriage, his age, the keepsake, etc. I’d prefer a HEA if possible, please, and no BDSM. Thanks!

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: assassin, enemies to lovers, hurt/comfort, no sex, past abuse, reunited friends

Content Warnings: Gory description of torture chamber and victims of torture.

Word Count: 7,412

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Knock Knock, Death's at the door.

Run if you must 'cause there's nowhere to hide.

He knows all you've done; He's seen all your sins.

Tick Tock, your time's running out.

Run if you must 'cause there's nowhere to hide.

Death sees your soul and he's coming for you!

~*~*~*~

“Seriyanah has been found, My Lord.”

King Sirath's eyes glowed with cruel pleasure. “It has been taken care of?”

“Yes, My Lord. Neither your exiled sister nor her child will ever bother you again.”

The cruel glint in his eyes sharpened with triumph as he gestured towards the three women cowering on his bed.

“I am well pleased, General. Please take your pick as a well-earned reward.”

The General's stomach clenched in disgust at the thought of taking one of these poor women to his bed, but if he did not pick one all three would be punished. He nodded towards the one closest to him and she followed him out of the room without a word.

Twenty Years Later

Deth stalked silently through the night. He had the layout of the streets memorized and it took little effort to find the house he was looking for. It was like every other house on the street—wood front practically rotting off and shingles barely holding themselves to the roof. The outer walls appeared not to have had a coat of paint or even a decent washing in over twenty years. The only thing that differentiated this house from its neighbors was the occupant.

MarShael, leader of a rebel group that was currently vexing King Sirath, lived in this house. Deth was first among the King's Assassins and had been sent to rid MarShael of his ties to this life. Deth melted into the shadows beside the house to listen, to make sure his presence was undetected as of yet.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let his consciousness spread into every crack and cranny, sliding around corners and through windows. All around him people slept. Three houses away, the baker was sneaking into his daughter's room, and Deth pulled his mind back when they touched his thoughts. It wasn't what he was here for tonight, but he made a note of it. The baker was living on borrowed time and didn't even know it.

When Deth was sure no one was awake and paying attention to him, he reached in his shirt and pulled out the chain with a gold ring hanging on it. It was smallish, and worn smooth from the number of times Deth had gripped it in his fist over the years. As he kissed it and tucked it back into his shirt, sparkling blue eyes flashed in his mind. They were young and full of mischief, and he had no idea who they belonged to.

He knew his parents had been killed when he was younger, but Deth's only memories were of growing up as a dedicant to King's Assassins. He'd had the ring for as long as he could remember, which was odd in itself because dedicants were allowed nothing of their own—no clothes, no jewelry, no toys, nothing. And yet, he'd known the ring was important, and kept it hidden from his Masters and his fellow dedicants.

A familiar but unwelcome ache bloomed in his chest before he forcibly pushed it away. With the grace of decades of training, Deth swept into the house and all the way through it to the bedroom at the back, where MarShael was reported to sleep.

He paused in the doorway and froze momentarily. The man lying in the bed had dark, curly hair that had spread all over his pillow in his sleep. His pale face was peaceful in the moonlight that streamed through the lone window, high up on the wall. This man was beautiful—but more than that he seemed familiar. Deth shook himself at the absurd thought and forced his mind back to his mission, annoyed that he couldn't seem to keep focus tonight.

He drew his long knife from its scabbard and stalked the remaining paces towards the bed. Deth would never know what had given him away because he had remained as silent as the grave, but suddenly Deth was staring into blue

eyes he swore he recognized. Sparkling, youthful, mischievous. The flash lasted only a moment before he realized these eyes were slightly different—they were surrounded by small wrinkles and held a measure of grief that the younger ones did not.

Deth did not have the chance to continue his reverie because as soon as those eyes sighted on him, the man in the bed lunged forward. The next few moments played on sheer instinct as Deth manhandled MarShael onto the bed and straddled him, holding his arms above his head with one hand and placing his knife at MarShael's neck with the other.

Deth was about to pull his knife across the pale throat beneath him when he had his second major shock of the evening.

His blade pressed against a chain much like his own. Resting on the bed by his target's ear, still attached to the chain was a gold ring. A gold ring that was an exact match to his own. With lightning fast movements, Deth threaded his knife through the necklace and pulled the ring closer to get a better look.

A jolt of startled rage blasted through him. In a voice unused to speaking, Deth ground out, "Where did you get this, traitor?"

Deth could tell his question shocked MarShael. His eyes blinked twice before he tried to speak. He had to clear his throat and try again before any sound came out.

"Childhood friend and I got them together. Haven't seen him since." MarShael's voice came out almost as jagged as Deth's had sounded in his own ears. The air struggled to make it through a throat tight with fear and surprise.

Shock rolled through Deth and wiped out any remaining anger. Slowly, he leaned back. He didn't sheath his knife, but it wasn't quite so ready to spill blood as it had been a moment ago. He reached with his other hand and pulled his own necklace out.

Voice still rough, he said, "I've had this since before I can remember." Deth leaned forward slightly holding his ring up next to the one still dangling from the end of his knife.

MarShael's eyes widened and his voice came out in a whisper, "Iry?" It seemed that utter disbelief and hope were warring in this strange man's eyes as Deth continued to stare at him.

“What?” Deth growled, more confusion leaking through than he would have liked.

“Iry. That was his name.” MarShael said this with more confidence. Even as a whisper, his voice now held a clarion quality that seemed to draw Deth in. It made him think of late nights sneaking behind the tavern to steal dregs of ale and getting dragged by their ears all the way home when they were discovered. He shook his head, trying to clear it of this obvious nonsense.

He'd never had a friend growing up. Or a mother.

Steeling himself against the hope in this other man's eyes, Deth finally spoke after long moments of silence. “Well, my name is Deth, not Iry.”

If anything, that statement caused MarShael's face to whiten even further. His surety blazed from his eyes even as he spoke with quiet wonder. “Iryandeth Hirat. That was your full name. I called you Iry for short.”

MarShael had sat up as they were talking, but at that statement, Deth surged forward and pressed him into the bed again, knife once more at his throat.

“That's a lie. I grew up as a dedicant to the King's Assassins. It is all I have ever known. I am here to kill you because you have betrayed your King.” Deth said this in almost a rote fashion. It had to be true. There was no room in his life for hope or this strange fluttering in his chest. He hoped his words sounded more convincing to MarShael than they did to his own ears.

A look of revulsion flitted quickly across MarShael's face but was quickly pushed aside. Cautiously, as though he realized how close to death he really was, MarShael lifted a hand and placed it against Deth's cheek.

“My name is Akrandsmar Shaelen. You would call me Akr. Mother hated it. So, of course, I refused to respond to anything else.” A wistful smile flitted across MarShael's face as he spoke.

Suddenly, a memory flashed through Deth's mind. A small, bright room filled with cheerful laughter. A woman, no older than he was now, baking bread with two young boys sitting at the table throwing scraps of dough at each other.

His hand shook, and the knife was close enough to Akr's throat that blood began to trickle down towards the bed.

“No,” Deth whispered. But even he could recognize a losing battle while he was still fighting.

Akr saw the opening. “Iry. Let me show you. Let me help you remember who you are. Let me show you what I'm fighting for.”

Deth had almost given in until that last part. He was a King's Assassin, bred to do his will, loyal to the end, beyond question, and this man was a traitor. He lifted his arm to slit Ak... no MarShael's throat, but at the last minute, diverted the blow. He brought the hilt of his knife down on MarShael's head and knocked him out.

He had been given five weeks to find and kill the leader of the rebel group. It had only been one week. He could always find MarShael again and finish the job later. With that thought, Deth fled into the safety of the shadows.

Deth spent the next two weeks trailing MarShael. It didn't seem like he did anything particularly traitorous. The longer he followed MarShael around, the more he seemed to remember about the time before he became a dedicant. It was just small things—the smell of his mother's hair, his father's boisterous laugh, skinning both his knees trying to sneak sweet bread from the baker's cart with Ak.

Akr appeared to be a few years older than he was, but it seemed like there was nary a memory that didn't include him in some way. Deth still had trouble connecting the Ak of his memories with the man those outside the rebellion knew merely as MarShael.

Deth settled into an empty corner of the alley beside MarShael's house and wrapped his heavy cloak around himself. He extended his consciousness to check on all those around him—to make sure he was safe, he firmly reiterated in his own mind. It wasn't to see the man sleeping just on the other side of the wall he was leaning against. He'd spent every night of the last two weeks sleeping in this deserted corner, and if his back was somewhat the worse for wear, it was no harsher than much of the training he had been through as a child.

No matter how much Deth told himself to just get on with the job and return to the castle, every night he found himself, here, listening to MarShael sleep.

Except tonight, he wasn't sleeping. He seemed to be listening just as intently as Deth usually did. Deth held his breath for a moment.

It whuffed out of him as he heard MarShael whisper through the wall, "Iry, I know you're out there. Why don't you come inside?"

The words were so quiet Deth wouldn't have heard them if he hadn't had his senses so attuned to his surroundings. Yearning tore through him in a way

he had never experienced before. Growing up as a dedicant, it was assumed that nothing would be given and thus nothing was expected. Wanting did no good, and Deth had been a very practical sort of child.

He sensed that the decision he was about to make would change his life forever, in ways he couldn't even imagine yet. In a moment of absolute irrational exhilaration, Deth made the decision to go inside. His surge of energy and bravery lasted until he made it to the doorway of Akr's—yes he had decided to start thinking of him as Akr—bedroom.

Suddenly flooded with uncertainty, Deth asked, "Are you really my friend?" The words came out filled with incredulity and unfamiliarity. Deth had no idea what a friend should be like, except from the few memories that had been dredged up in the last two weeks.

Akr looked up from the bed, seemingly startled to find him standing in the doorway, despite the fact that he had invited Deth—or more precisely, Iry—inside.

"I was. And I'd like to be again." Akr gave him a tentative smile and it felt like his gaze bore holes through Deth's soul.

Deth nodded. Then he nodded again, like he couldn't stop himself.

Akr walked towards him cautiously, approaching as you might a wild animal you weren't sure you could trust yet. Appearing to be reassured when Deth didn't startle or move away in any manner, Akr reached out for him.

Deth was too shocked to move when he felt Akr's arms wrap around him. He stood stock still, hands by his side for a long moment before he allowed his arms to mimic the ones tightly clutching at him. He let himself revel in the feeling for the space of a deep breath, thinking he might like to be this Iry person Akr evidently believed him to be.

It was so tempting to just fall into it, to trust that this stranger would catch him, but all his experience—the years of training, hardship, and cruelty told him that wasn't the way the world worked. In the blink of an eye, Deth had his walls back up. If a small measure of the warmth Akr seemed to radiate so easily had sneaked inside them, Deth would do his best to ignore it.

Deth stepped back, forcing Akr's arms away from him. "Stop it," he growled. "I'm not one of your rebel comrades. I'm here to stop you." He paused and continued much more quietly, "I don't have a choice."

Akr seemed to understand and appeared to choose his next words very carefully. "Please. Let me show you two things. If you still feel the need to stop me, then I won't try to keep convincing you otherwise." Akr paused. "That's not to say I'll just lie down and let you kill me, though."

Deth thought about that for a moment. He still had two weeks before he had to report back in. Some part of him that he had no idea what to do with just wanted to give into any demand that Akr made, just to stay in his presence. He firmly pushed that idea out of his mind, but found himself nodding anyway.

"You have one week."

Akr's next words had Deth jerking his head up to look him in the eyes and sent a red-hot shock through his whole body.

"Stay with me." It wasn't a question and it took everything in Deth not to treat it like one.

Knowing it was the wrong choice but unable to stop himself, Deth nodded once more.

The next night found Deth pressed against the wall in a hidden passageway inside the castle, eavesdropping on a conversation between the personal aide to the General of the King's Assassins and the King's personal advisor.

Akr was pressed against him from knee to shoulder and had one hand over his mouth. He had to force himself to concentrate on something other than the lean body herding him against the wall. Deth's hands clenched at his side as he was blasted with unfamiliar emotions. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths, which worked until he was startled by the rough touch of Akr's cheek against his as Akr leaned forward to whisper in Deth's ear.

"Stay quiet. The aide is ours. We've worked five years to get him so well situated. Listen."

"*The King wishes his nephew dead?*" The aide's voice seemed loud in the echoing hallways. Deth burst with questions at this statement. Everyone knew there was no heir to the throne.

"*Yes. Preferably an accident, like the boy's parents, but he will accept any means that results in his death.*"

"*I understand. Being the King's first assassin is a dangerous post. I am sure something appropriate can be arranged when Deth returns from his current assignment.*"

Deth's heart seemed to stop in his chest for a moment, and his muscles tensed in preparation for action he hadn't quite thought through yet. Denial raged through him at the same time the truth of the words rang clear in the air. The only thing that kept him from giving away their position was decades of training and Akr's fiercely renewed grip on his arms. The conversation quickly concluded.

"You will be well rewarded for your troubles."

"Thank you, My Lord."

Deth and Akr waited in their strange embrace until the sharp staccato of boots on stone was long gone. As soon as it was apparent they were in the clear, Deth shoved Akr away from him.

"You expect me to believe *I* am heir to the throne? That the *King* had my parents killed? For what reason?" Deth hissed quietly, in deference to the echoing stone.

Akr responded in a similarly controlled tone. "Your mother was Crown Princess Seriyannah, sister to the current King Sirath. She was first in line for the throne after their parents until she was exiled for marrying a commoner—your father. Before they died, King Iryandan and Queen Sakranah realized the kind of man Sirath was becoming and threatened to disinherit him in favor of his sister's offspring—you. They met their untimely—but seemingly natural—demise before any of this could be enacted of course. No one suspected Sirath and no one had heard from Seriyannah in ten years."

Akr paused.

"You and your parents had been going to visit friends two days' travel west of here. All I knew for years was that my best friend had been killed when the horse pulling the carriage was spooked on the road and the whole carriage—passengers included—fell over a cliff nearby." Akr's voice was rough with emotion and Deth was surprised to see unshed tears clinging to the edges of his eyes.

Unconsciously, Deth reached up and wiped a thumb under each of Akr's eyes, collecting the tears gathering there. Akr's breath stuttered as he continued to speak in a low whisper.

"It wasn't until years later, when I was old enough to join the rebellion myself that my parents told me who you and your parents were and that you might have survived the 'accident'."

Akr leaned forward, pressed his forehead against Deth's and grabbed either side of his head like he was holding on for dear life.

"I can't believe you're really here, Iry."

For the first time, it felt like Akr was using the correct name when he said that. Memories flooded behind his closed eyes. Being ripped from his mother's lap by a soldier before the horse and carriage were forced over the cliff. Those first weeks as a dedicant when all he wanted was his best friend to come and rescue him. The torture and starvation he had been put through to break all ties to his previous life. Memories of Akr and his previous life slowly disappearing beneath the weight of the brainwashing he and his fellow dedicants were receiving. Through it all, keeping that damn ring hidden from everyone. Touching it to give him strength when he thought he would die, holding on to it when he wished for death, using it as a talisman of luck whenever he was sent on an assignment.

As the floodgates opened, more memories crashed through him. It seemed whatever block had been erected was now like so much dust.

Overwhelmed, Iry croaked out, "Akr, I remember."

Akr looked up at him, and Iry got lost in his eyes for a moment outside of time. Eventually, Akr broke the stare with a blink and a smile. "Really? Everything?"

"Everything," Iry rasped.

Iry smiled for a moment as well before it turned melancholy.

"I get why I would want to kill the king—knowing what I do now about my parents. But why does everyone else want to kill him?" His confusion was clear in his voice.

"Let me show you." Akr said, glancing towards the darkened end of the secret passage they were hiding in, before they found Iry's once more.

Iry nodded. "Lead the way."

Akr held out his hand, to give Iry a choice of whether or not to take hold of it. Iry stared at it for a long moment before experimentally threading his fingers through Akr's. A joyful surge sped up his arm when Akr squeezed his hand and didn't let go as they started down the secret passageway once more.

A short while later, they were forced to let go in order to descend a narrow staircase into the labyrinthine basements of the castle.

A winding journey through wine cellars, storage rooms, and holding cells brought them to another set of stairs.

Akr paused before he started down. “Only King Sirath and a few select are allowed down these stairs. The King is at a royal dinner tonight so it should be empty. But be prepared for anything.”

Iry nodded and drew one of his knives from its scabbard. Akr gave him an approving look and drew his own knife from the top of his left boot.

Iry grabbed Akr's arm as he turned to continue down. “Wait. Just a moment.”

Iry pulled out the ring from beneath his clothes, kissed it and focused. He spread his consciousness down the stairs and into the basement area they were about to enter. He didn't sense any guards but as he teased the corners and dark spaces, anger bloomed white and hot inside his chest and he felt his face harden at what he found.

His whole body went stiff as Iry pulled his consciousness back into himself.

“Come on,” he bit out. At Akr's confused look, he said, “There's no guards to worry about.”

Akr appeared mystified but nodded and followed Iry. Unerringly, Iry led them to a large room off the main corridor. The first thing Iry noticed in the dark of the room was the stench—the stench of dying rotting flesh and the stench of the processes of living with nowhere to go, feces, urine, blood, vomit—the works.

He heard Akr gag behind him and add a fresh contribution to the noisome air. Slowly their eyes adjusted to the low light provided by the intermittent torches along the wall and the stench was no longer the most terrible thing about this room.

In cages along the east wall were dogs and cats in every stage of starvation with gaping wounds and missing limbs. Along the west wall were similar cages, only these were holding human beings—mostly women. Along the north wall was a large table with manacles attached to it and shelves of devices Iry would have to make educated guesses on how they were used, along with more knives and saws than he had ever seen in one place. Then, just to the left of the door on the south wall was a pile as tall as a man's waist and running the whole length of the wall. Upon closer inspection, Iry realized it was a pile of corpses. The bottom layers were mostly bone at this point, sitting in puddles of blood

and decomposing bodily fluids. The top layers were fresher—bodies beyond recognition, severed limbs and even something that looked like it might have been a baby.

The minds of those in the cages were so broken, Iry's consciousness had barely been able to recognize them as human. He threw up all his walls and forced himself to walk towards the cages of animals.

He inspected each one before determining none of these animals could survive their wounds. Then one by one he caressed their heads, whispered a prayer and slit their throats. Better a merciful death than one more day in this hell hole.

Iry steeled himself as he walked to the other side of the room. Akr had regained a semblance of composure and handed Iry an iron key ring.

Iry used it on the first of the human cages. Inside was a naked woman whose hair had been shaved off completely. She was missing about half her fingers, one breast and the dried blood covering her groin indicated she was probably not whole there anymore either.

Iry knelt in the filth of her cage and lifted her face to look at him.

"Are you the angel of death?" the woman said, barely above a croaking whisper.

"Do you want me to be?" Iry responded. The words came out of his mouth without thought.

"Yes," the woman said as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Iry closed his eyes and centered himself as much as he could without taking a deep breath. This was something he knew.

"What is your name?"

"Ceresea," the woman responded, desperately.

"May you meet the keeper of the gates with a pure heart and find peace, Ceresea," Iry intoned with the gravity of a well-practiced but much-revered prayer.

She sobbed and said, "Thank you," just as Iry brought his blade up and across her throat in one quick and efficient motion.

In all, Iry collected fifteen names for the keeper of the gates from that place. Only two chose to continue living. One, a woman, had two children on the

outside and was missing only a hand. The other, a man, was battered and bruised almost beyond recognition but otherwise remained whole. They appeared to be the most recently acquired prisoners.

Three hours later, Iry and Akr had returned the two survivors to their families amidst many tears and much joy.

As they started towards Akr's home, Iry quietly said, "I need a shrine. Or a temple."

Akr merely nodded. "There is a shrine a few streets over from my house."

Iry and Akr walked in silence until they arrived at the shrine, offerings to the various gods and goddess overflowing all around it. Iry picked his way through the offerings of flowers and bread and ribbons to where a bowl sat, stained red brown from previous blood lettings, at the base of the small stone altar.

He knelt, crushing flowers under his knees and pulled a small knife from its sheath at his wrist. Iry pressed the tip of the knife into a small round scar at the base of his thumb until the blood welled. He wiped the knife on his sleeve and re-sheathed it.

"Great Ozandirath, keeper of the gates of eternity, I offer my blood in honor of those whose blood I have spilled this night. May my recompense bring peace to their souls and appease the debt you are owed."

Iry then let the blood that had pooled in the palm of his hand drip into the bowl, coloring the rust-colored stains bright red once again. As his blood flowed, he spoke the name of each of the prisoners he had killed and he mentioned the animals as well, if not by name.

When he was done, Iry stood, bowed towards the shrine and walked back to Akr. He pulled a clean bandage from one of his pockets and wrapped his hand before silently urging Akr to continue to his home.

The first thing Akr did when they walked through the front door was pull Iry into an embrace. This time, Iry's arms immediately wrapped around his friend. They clung to each other with shuddering breaths for an unknown amount of time.

Eventually, Iry broke the silence. His voice was hard with anger and absolute assurance. "He is going to die."

Akr leaned back to look in Iry's eyes before he spoke. "Are you sure?"

"I have spent years of my life killing those he declared deserved to die. None of them deserved to die as much as he does." There was not a single quaver or echo of uncertainty in Deth's words.

Akr nodded in agreement and then a ghost of a smile crossed his face. "You do realize that if you kill him you become heir to the throne."

Iry started visibly at that. After what happened in the dungeon, he had almost forgotten about the conversation they had eavesdropped on.

His heart ached that his parents had been so callously killed, but his head couldn't quite wrap around the idea that he was royalty.

"I have no desire to be king. That doesn't change the fact that Sirath will die by my hand." Deth shook off the statement. No one would ever make him king. No matter whom his parents really were.

"You may not be given a choice." Akr sounded like he was speaking words of warning but the spark in his eyes belied his tone.

Still not giving his royal parentage any real credence, Iry responded, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Inexplicably, a grin spread across Akr's face as he spoke. "Yes, we will." Akr reached for his hand, pulling him towards the bed. "Let's get some sleep."

Iry turned to go into the kitchen where he had made a pallet on the floor by the stove last night, but Akr resolutely kept hold of his hand as he walked towards the bedroom.

Iry's breath caught in his throat and his heart felt like it was beating out of his chest, but he didn't fight Akr.

They took off their outer clothes and climbed into bed in their underclothes in silence. For a moment both Akr and Iry lay flat, staring at the ceiling, seeming almost afraid to touch. Until Iry gathered his courage.

He reached over, grabbed Akr's hand and rolled on his side facing away from Akr. The motion forced Akr to wrap his arm over Iry's waist and mold his body to Iry's back. Once Iry made the first move, Akr sighed deeply and pulled Iry as close as he could go.

So lightly he could barely feel it, Akr brushed his lips against Iry's shoulder before laying his head back on his pillow.

Something inside Iry broke at that tender gesture and uncontrollable sobs wracked his body. He cried for his parents, and all the time he had lost with Akr, and for all the people who had been tortured to death by their King, and for the young boy who had been forced to forget his family and become an assassin. Iry cried and Akr held him until they both fell asleep.

Akr stood nose to nose with Iry as his finger stabbed Iry in the chest to punctuate each word.

“It is too dangerous. I won’t let you do it.”

The angry tension in the room was almost palpable.

Iry ground his teeth and did his best not to yell.

“My whole life has been dangerous. You know what? I’m the most dangerous thing out there. The King trusts me. And I have spent the last twenty years becoming the most efficient killer in the entire kingdom. It’s the only way.”

Akr practically deflated in front of Iry’s eyes. He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “I just don’t want to lose you again so soon. I just found you.”

Iry put a hand under Akr’s chin and tipped his head so that they were looking each other in the eyes again.

It felt like time stretched and shrunk at the same time, as it seemed went to do whenever Iry got lost in Akr’s eyes. He had meant to say something reassuring, something to help Akr understand why he had to do this. What he hadn’t meant to do was step forward and press his lips against Akr’s.

But somehow, that’s what he found himself doing. For a brief instant Iry just stood there, fingers on Akr’s chin, lips pressed together in a chaste kiss. Then, all of the sudden all the anger from moments before morphed into heat. Iry and Akr stepped closer to each at the same moment, bodies colliding in passion.

Iry slid his hands to tangle in Akr’s curls. Akr slid his arms around Iry’s back and pulled their bodies flush. All the while, their tongues danced and their hearts beat a loud tattoo in their ears. Iry couldn’t get enough of the slide and push of Akr’s tongue and reveled in being this close to him. A hole he hadn’t fully realized existed inside him began to fill itself in as Akr gave pieces of himself to Iry.

Eventually, passion settled into wonder and they broke the kiss. With wide eyes and short of breath, Iry vowed, "You're not going to lose me. We're in this together and I intend together to last long after that filthy excuse for a king is dead."

"Okay," Akr replied. "I'm not going anywhere either. Together—to the end," he vowed in return. Then, he added, "An end someday far in the future."

Everything was going according to plan so far. Iry—Deth—was well-known around the castle so his presence was unremarked upon. They had chosen the day the King held open court to make their move so that Akr would be lost in the crowd of those who could not gain audience with the King based on personal connections. One more loyal subject waiting for the judgment of his king.

Many hours passed before the court secretary's voice rang out calling, "Akrandsmar Shaelen," to come forward. Iry made his way through the crowd until he was even with Akr. Iry nodded encouragement to Akr before Akr turned his attention back to the King and dropped to one knee with a bowed head.

"What matter do you bring before my court this day, Akrandsmar Shaelen?" The King's voice rang out hard and cruel through the stone hall.

Head still bowed, "I come to make an introduction, Your Majesty."

Murmurs passed through the crowd. This was unusual. Iry stepped from his spot at the edge of the crowd to join Akr. As if sensing Iry's presence at his side, Akr stood. Iry pushed the hood off his head and faced the king without making any signs of obeisance.

The King became visibly enraged at this show of disrespect. "Deth, what is the meaning of this?"

Instead of answering, Iry gave Akr the floor. "Your Majesty, may I introduce you to Iryandeth Hirat, son of Blediyah and Seriyannah Hirat, who was the oldest child of King Iryandan and Queen Sakranah, former rulers of this kingdom."

The mottled red of rage faded from the King's face and the white pallor of fear took its place. The crowd went silent for a brief moment before astonished chatter broke out all over the room. Iry let it play out for a moment before he

held his hand up for silence. It was a move of such supreme confidence that almost everyone obeyed without a thought.

Iry's voice boomed clarion clear in the silent room. "I have come to challenge King Sirath to a personal duel for the affront of murdering my parents as well as the murder of countless of his subjects in the dungeon of this very castle by means of rape and torture. As is my right as a challenger of royal blood, I demand to be met in this challenge by Sirath himself and not a proxy."

The crowd gasped and the King paled even further before speaking. "This is preposterous. You have presented no proof of your identity, nor of the murder of your parents." The lie was clear in his voice.

It was at this point that the personal aide we had eavesdropped on only a few nights before stepped up. He was holding a large records book in his hands.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty." He cleared his throat. "Entry from the fifth day of the seventh month in the third year of the reign of King Sirath. Name and lineage of new dedicant: Iryandeth Hirat, son of Blediyah and Seriyannah Hirat, grandson of Atirkas and Niernah Hirat and Iryandan and Sakranah of the royal house of Kirnas. Age: seven years old. Status: orphan. Signed: General Ribkanit Arnolos."

He shut the book with a loud thud.

With as much sincerity as he could muster, Iry asked, "Do you accept my challenge, or do you accept guilt for the crimes I have accused you of?"

King Sirath seemed to have gotten a hold of himself for the moment. He sat back on his throne and waved at his guards insouciantly. "Kill him."

The guards hesitated for only a moment. Deth's reputation preceded him and no one was eager to begin a fight with him. It was enough though. Several people in the crowd stepped forward, disarmed, and captured the guards before they could make their move.

Iry was impressed with their speed and skill and still surprised there were so many people willing to be a part of this rebellion. He waited until the guards had been led out and secured in another room before speaking again.

"I will ask again, Your Majesty, do you accept my challenge or do you accept guilt for the crimes I have accused you of?" Iry's voice rang clear as a bell throughout the large room.

With a scream of inarticulate rage, King Sirath drew his sword and rushed towards Iry. Iry knew his skill would prevail but it didn't do to underestimate

one's opponent. Despite his age and seeming lassitude, the King had been very well trained and still practiced regularly. Iry met his attack with a series of quick blows that forced the King to retreat until he tripped on the steps up to his throne.

The fight lasted another few moments before King Sirath finally realized he was beaten and his confidence faltered. In that moment of weakness, Iry struck—quick and deadly. The victorious assassin offered up a brief prayer to the keeper of the gates, knowing he would be more thorough when he said his prayers at a shrine later.

He leaned over to wipe off his bloody sword on a patch of the King's clothing that was not already soiled, and then turned back towards the stunned crowd.

Akr stepped forward, took the hand that was not holding his sword and raised it above their heads.

“The King is dead. Long live the King.”

Stunned silence met his declaration.

Louder and with even more force, Akir repeated himself.

“The King is dead. Long live the King.”

Finally, the crowd erupted in cheers.

Iry glared daggers at Akir. Akir turned to look at him, sparkling eyes filled with mischief.

“I am going to kill you, Akir.” Iry said, voice rumbling with shock and embarrassment.

Akir's response was to smile and plant a kiss firmly on Iry's lips.

“Together—to the end,” he said.

The Beginning

Author Bio

Kathleen Hayes is a bit of an all-around geek. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats and is excited to have just added a fellow super geek to her clan. Kathleen loves to explore worlds—whether in her head or on page. She welcomes you into her worlds and hopes you have as much fun there as she does!

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