

"Trust me, I would rather die than see the girl come to harm,"

March searched his eyes, then nodded once, sharply, turning away. "All right. I will accept it. But I will be somewhere close, where she can find me if she needs me."

"Not too close," cautioned Feor. "Sif may not know her, but you are another matter. And where you are, he might well expect to find Anghara."

"I cannot abandon her!"

"You will not," Feor said softly. "None of us can. None of us will. But we can be more useful to her now if we let her go. She tried to fly tonight, and almost broke her wings beyond re; we must let her go, to learn what she might of survival. She is strong, March; strong enough to doom herself if we let her."

Unexpectedly, March's warrior eyes prickled with tears. "She's a little girl," he whispered.

Feor shook his head rising. "She is a queen," he said, very softly.

THE REMARKABLE EPIC JOURNEY OF

ANGHARA KIR HAMA WILL BE

CONCLUDED IN *CHANGER OF DAYS*

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If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author

nor the pubhas received any payment for this "stripped book."

To David, *who was there when the story set sail, and to Deck, who was there to see it sail into harbor.*

I

THE

HIDDEN QUEEN

Prologue

T

here were still echoes of sporadic fighting, but night was drawing in fast. Fodrun, finding himself suddenly alone in the middle of what had until less than an hour ago been a fierce battlefield, paused and looked around, taking stock. There was blood on him, none of it his own, but faached like a wound and his wrists throbbed with the pain of simply holding his sword. He remembered very litafter the incandescent moment when he had seen Red Dynan, the king, stagger and slide off his horse with a cursed Rashin arrow in his eye. Fodrun had succumbed to pure battle frenzy, leading his small knot of men directly into the Tath army's flank, exposing all to certain death for an instant of revenge. All were now dead. All except him. And he seemed only now to have woken from a nightmare.

Sticking his sword point first into the turf, he sank down on one knee beside it, pulling off his helm. Scattered around his feet were broken weapons, discarded shields, the corpses of men and horses. There was one whose staring eyes immet Fodrun's own as he looked in the dead man's direction. The man wore Roisianan colors; he might well have been one of the men in Fodrun's command, but then, he could have been almost anyone. He'd taken a slash across the face and his features were twisted beyond recognition in a frozen mess of mangled flesh and congealing blood. Even Fodrun, a battle-tempered soldier used to death, turned away at the sight.

Another memory surfaced, unbidden, vivid: a Rashin mace swinging inexorably . . . *'Ware!* he had shouted, and

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Kalas had ducked, turned and met the mace with his shoulFodrun remembered seeing his general stagger . . . did he fall? Are they dead? Are they both dead? "My lord . . ."

The voice was hesitant, very young. One of the pages. Fo\expndtw0 drun looked up.

"My lord," gasped the boy. He couldn't have been more than thirteen or fourteen, and his eyes were round with hor\expndtw0ror. He had probably been sent to find Fodrun, or his body; instead he had found this blood-bespattered gargoyle with wild eyes ... Fodrun tried to smile, the expression more grithan anything else.

"Do not mind, boy, can you not tell black Tath blood when you see it?"

The wince that followed his words was lost on the young

messenger, but Fodrun knew the reason behind it would

soon spread its insidious poison in me army ranks. Not

many knew he was Tath-born, but enough did. Enough to make men balk at following him against the army on the other side of the river. His lineage tainted his loyalty. "What is it? Who sent you?" i

"The healers, sir... they have the general in their tent..." I Fodrun straightened, fatigue forgotten. His eyes blazed. "He j is alive? Kalas is alive?" I

"Yes, lord, but wounded ... badly wounded ... the heal- \ ers say he is in pain, and he has not been himself since they ^ brought him in. The army, sir . . . they bid me find you . . . they need orders, sir, and the general.. ."

As quickly as they had kindled, Fodrun's eyes faded into dullness again. His shoulders slumped. "The king .. ." The page hung his head. "Dead, sir." Dynan dead. Kalas, by all accounts, racked with battle lever. The army .. . headless. Except for him. Second GenFodrun. Tath-born.

Fodrun allowed his eyes to range across the churned plain iliil had been the day's killing field. Somewhere in the dis-lance he could see the blurred gleam of moonlight on the Kiver Ronval; and beyond the river . . . what remained of

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Duerin Rashin's army. They had withdrawn across th| Yes, he remembered that too. They would be back tomorAnd the army . . .

Fodrun sheathed his sword with a weary gesture. There would likely be no sleep for him that night. "Where are the other lords?" he asked the page, who stood shivering in the moonlight, whether from cold or the horrors of warfare, it was hard to tell. Faced with a direct question, something to do, the lad looked up with what was almost anticipation. "I'll take you to them, sir."

They went the long way round, first stopping by the heal\expndtw0 ers' tent, where Kalas was not alone. Perhaps more than a hundred men were laid awkwardly about, filling the tent alto overflowing; Kalas, his rank pulling privilege even when he was unconscious, had been given a screened-off corner of his own. That much they could do for him, and bind his shattered shoulder; but even if he came out of the delirium which whipped his head back and forth on his pil\expndtw-1 low, already soaked with his sweat, Kalas would never be a soldier again. The arm hanging from his broken shoulder would never again be able to lift a sword.

And then, the other tent. There were even more men here, with more arriving as Fodrun watched; but inside, on a bier made from bloodied shields, the body of Red Dynan, King of Roisinan, lay in state in an open space within a ring of flaming torches. They had plucked out the arrow that had claimed him; he looked almost whole, almost asleep, until one looked closer and noticed the waxy pallor of his skin and the ruined eye socket beneath one of the two heavy gold coins marking his state, payment for passage into Glas Coil. Fodrun stood for what seemed an inordinately long time, helmet in hand, and looked upon the king. Dynan had named him second general only a month ago, a deliberate act of faith against the background of rumbling discontent from those who knew the new general's lineage; but the king had chosen to trust him. Fodrun remembered the day, Dynan's laughing eyes, the strong brown hand that raised him from his knees. As chaotic thoughts tumbled through his brain,

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one suddenly coalesced out of the turmoil, presenting him with the narrow, thoughtful face of Dynan's lawful heir. Princess Anghara. She was back in Miranei, with the queen. The only child of Dynan's marriage, Anghara was heir to the chaos that had taken and slain her father—to this resurgent Rashin aggression, to war. She was only nine years old.

Fodrun shivered with what was almost a touch of pre\expndtw-2 science. Anghara would ascend the throne at Miranei, a pup\expndtw0 pet for a Regent Council for at least five or six more years. And in that time, Roisinan . . . Roisinan and the cursed Tath. . .

He turned to the page, who still hovered by him, waiting patiently until he had concluded his business. "Where are the lords?" Fodrun demanded again, his voice harsher than he had intended. "Take me there. Now."

Behind Fodrun, a shadow that had waited for his departure slipped into the tent almost before the flaps fell from Fodrun's hand. It was shrouded in a dark cloak, but armor gleamed beneath. The hood of the cloak was up, the figure's line shadowed. It came to the king's body slowly, almost hesitantly, unci stood rigidly motionless beside the makeshift bier, shoulders stiff with pain. A guard, who had thought the cloaked figure was with the general, woke up to its unsanc\expndtw0 tioned presence. "Hey! You there! Out!"

The cloaked man ignored the words, bending to plant a kiss on Dynan's pale, lifeless brow. The guard strode over, took hold of the other's shoulder, spinning him around. "You! What is your name? What are you doing here? You have no right to . . ."

The man threw back his cloak. His hair was a burnished red, almost the precise shade of the dead king's, and his pale eyes, faded blue, were implacable steel as he haughtily met the guard's angry stare. "My name," he said in a low, precise voice, "in this army is Horun; I took that name because oth\expndtw0 erwise my father would have discovered I had disobeyed him. But I have every right to be here, soldier. My true name is Sif. Sif Kir Hama. And that," he said looking down on the king, "is the father whom I disobeyed."

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The guard was out of his depth. There *was* a son, a young man called Sif, but how to prove ... "My lord," muttered the guard indecisively, "I must insist..."

Sif laughed, a harsh bark that had nothing of mirth in it. "I won't be far away," he said, and his words had the force of a vow, or a threat. He plucked the guard's fingers from his shoulder, flung his hood back up again and melted into the shadows outside.

His name remained, a whisper in the dark, spreading from the death-tent out into the night—5:/ *is in camp, Sif Kir Hama, Dynan 's son.*

Before long a messenger page stumbled into the tent where Fodrun sat with his war council, debating the morrow. Fodrun looked up sharply. "I thought I gave orders not to be disturbed," he snapped. Already there was doubt in some of the commanders' eyes; he could sense it, a cold, clammy touch on his skin like a dead man's hand. Everything deon him being able to hold them, and they were alwavering. And now this boy, breaking into the meeting, unravelling what Fodrun had already spent almost two hours trying to weave . . .

The page raised frightened eyes. "Lord," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "forgive me . . . there is important news."

"Well," said Fodrun impatiently after a pause, "what is it?"

The page's voice dropped even further, Fodrun had to lean forward to hear him. "It is rumored that Sif is in the camp, lord, Sif Kir Hama, King Dynan's son."

"Rumored?" Fodrun said. "What use do I have for rumors?" He would have been a lot more forceful a few hours ago, but exhaustion and cold dread were beginning to take their toll; he was slow to kindle his swift and much-feared anger.

"Sir," said the page, "one of the king's own guards spoke to him ..."

Fatigue or not, Fodrun got up so fast his chair overturned behind him. "What?"

The message was repeated. Fodrun stood rigid for a moment his jaw clenched. Anghara's face swam into his consciousness

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sciousness again, the wide, guileless gray eyes of a child. He forgot, for the moment, the cool, precocious measuring those eyes had given him when he was presented to the queen and the princess at Miranei only a few short months ago. All he could think of was the Tath army across the river, the dead king, the Rashin pretenders raising their hands again to a kingdom they had claimed once before in rebellion. The kingdom won back from them in days not too long gone. Bitter, bloody tales from the Rashin interregnum lived in the minds of the people. Roisinan could not hold against a renewed threat from the hungry Rashin clan, not with a nine-year-old girl on the throne and a foreign-born general leading her armies . . .

And now, this gift—Dynan's first-born. Illegitimate, but a man of age who could fight, hold, rule. A soldier. A king.

Fodrun turned burning eyes to the frightened page. "This guard, take me to him at once. My lords ... I will not be long."

He chose not to notice the eyes that would not meet his own as he swept out of the tent.

The guard could provide little further information, but he did volunteer a name. Horun. Feverish now, Fodrun sent messengers amongst the campfires. The soldier called Horun, or anyone who knows of him, was to come to SecGeneral Fodrun at once. *At once.*

Even as he strode back to his own tent someone touched his arm. Fodrun whirled. A young soldier stepped back from the general's haunted face, but stood his ground. "You are looking for a man named Horun, my lord?"

Fodrun closed the distance between them. "Yes. *Yes!* Where is he?"

"He is in my cheta, lord. My commander ordered him to picket duty tonight. He should be with the horses."

Fodrun had not even waited to hear the end of the sentence, already turned and halfway to the picket lines before the soldier finished speaking.

In the dimness of the horse-lines, far from the campfires, a shadowy figure stood amongst the beasts, lightly stroking

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the arched neck of a hobbled stallion. Almost stumbling upon him in the dark, Fodrun had to reach out and steady himself against the other's shoulder. His breath came short.

"Horun?"

It was too dark to see, but Fodrun felt rather than saw the other man smile. "It is one of my names."

Fodrun drew a deep breath. "I hear," he said, "that you claim another."

"I do."

The unconscious arrogance in those words convinced Fodrun of the truth. Still he asked, to hear it spoken. "What

name?"

The soldier who called himself Horun stepped forward, flinging back his hood with high royal pride. "I am Sif Kir

Hama."

Fodrun closed his eyes for a moment, the burden on his shoulders lifted by a blessed relief; the evanescent image of Anghara Kir Hama's gray eyes in the fastness of Miranei was gone almost before he was aware he had seen it. The only thing he could think of was Tath, and the honed blade he had just been handed to vanquish the Rashin clan. "Lord," he said, opening his eyes. "You are an answer to a prayer."

Sif offered no help, standing loose and relaxed, waiting for the general. Fodrun stumbled on, all soldier in this man whose friends were actions, not words. "An hour ago I sat with my commanders to plan tomorrow's battle, knowing full well we face disaster. Now . . . now I believe we have a chance. King Dynan is dead; but if we had you to lead us in his place ... Will you take this army, Sif Kir Hama? Will you lead us against the Rashin in the

morning?"

I Sif's eyes were smoky, veiled. "And what of the after-

math, general?"

*i "The aftermath?" echoed Fodrun, caught off guard.

T "When the battle is over, general. What then?"

I And Fodrun met Sif's eyes steadily, read the ambition

jj there, accepted it. "They tell me Kalas is dying," he said. "I

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command this army, set in my place by Red Dynan himself. You are no less his child than the girl at Miranei. Lead us to\expndtw0 morrow, lord, and I lay the army at your feet until you are crowned. We need a strong hand at the helm; Anghara can\expndtw-3 not lead us, not now. You can. You must." There was no dis\expndtw0 loyalty, no sense of betrayal; Fodrun was giving Roisinan into the hands most fit to hold it. He sank to one knee before Sif, his eyes never leaving the younger man's for an instant. "Take us to victory tomorrow, Sif Kir Hama, and I will call you king in Roisinan; so will every man in this army. We will take Miranei for you. You are the only one who can hold your father's realm."

Sif reached out a hand and raised Fodrun, his own eyes burning intensely with a pale blue fire. There was something wolfish in his smile, something that, for the last time, called up Anghara's gentle image in Fodrun's mind, this time acby what might have been regret. But the regret was swept away into a fierce joy as Sif spoke. Only two words, words that put a seal on the fate of a land and a small girl who did not yet know how easily she had been sup

"I accept."

13 'I council,"

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³ So'

/jne. Already—and he was Anghara's."

*s Rima, Red Dynan's widowed queen, paced her chambers, lacing restless fingers in and out of one another in palpable frustration.

"How, my lady?"

"Poison, they think. The healers who tended him say he died in great pain. And now there are six in council. And I can be sure of only two." She looked up, her eyes haunted. "How long, March? How long before some poisoned sweet is handed to Anghara? I cannot be with her constantly, I cannot protect her all the time, not while I am trying to save her throne!"

March, the queen's man from long before her marriage, stirred from where he stood staring into the leaping flames on the great stone hearth. "It might not be too much longer," he said carefully. "There has been other news."

"What? When? Why wasn't I told?"

March smiled, an indulgent smile from an old retainer for a mistress he had known from her cradle. "You are the first to know, my lady. The messenger arrived less than an hour ago."

Rima crossed the room and stood before him. She had to look up at his face; she had always been physically frail, small-boned, almost bird-like. In moments of tenderness, Dynan used to call her his little sparrow. But there was that in her face right now, which would make many a man twice her size tread lightly. "The message?"

"They are coming. They are coming here, for Miranei, for the throne. Sif will never be content with less, not with the army behind him. We knew this would happen."

I' Alma *Alexander*

"Damn Kalas!" murmured Rima, looking away into the lire. "Now, when I needed him most, he lies

dying. He would never have given Sif the army."

"They won the second battle," March pointed out. "PerFodrun knew what he was doing."

Rima made an impatient gesture. "Tath!" she said. "They have always been a thorn in our side. Our men were not that wanting. If only Fodrun hadn't lost heart. If only . . ."

They both knew if only what. If Dynan had lived . . . But if Dynan had lived, Sif would have still been waiting for his chance. Now at least he had declared himself, as openly as he could; his first act of defiance was to claim his father for himself, and for Clera, his mother. It was to Clera's manor that the messenger bearing the news of Dynan's death had gone, not to Miranei. Rima had known of it, probably as it had happened; she was Sighted, and gifted that way. She had known, perhaps, that she would never see Dynan again when she had girded his sword on him for this battle. But Sif had sent her no official messenger. What she could not have foreseen was just how fast things would fall apart at Miranei, after one of the squires had galloped from the battle field at Ronval to gasp out the news of Dynan's death and Sif's bid for the kingdom.

Rima had always been very good at hiding her feelings. Her court face was a carefully cultivated mask, pleasant, pretty, interested, a little abstracted—people said a lot in the presence of someone who seemed not to be listening half the time, and not fully comprehending what she heard even when she did pay attention. They had always thought her weak, the council lords and those who jostled for favors at Dynan's flanks. But here, in the presence of someone whom she trusted and who would not have been fooled for an instant with her court pretenses, Rima allowed her true feelings to percolate across her features. March, watching the play of emotion there, smiled, a little grimly. The court was about to learn how badly they had underestimated Dynan's "little sparrow."

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"They have accepted Anghara as queen, in full council," Rima was saying softly.

"And when they see Dynan's own banners on the moors before Miranei?" said March.

Rima glanced up briefly, acknowledging the question as one she had pondered herself. "I must get them to seal their vows. In writing. Now, while I can still control the council. You say nobody knows of Sif's coming as yet?"

"Nobody, my lady."

"Good. Make sure the messenger is rewarded for his trouble—I am sure he is another whose interests do not lie with Sif—but don't let him speak to anyone until I have done with the council. Where is he now?"

"I told him to wait in my chambers, my lady."

They exchanged conspiratorial smiles. "Keep him there," Rima said, "for the time being. And tell the stewards to convene the council. Now, within the hour."

March made her a slight bow and turned to leave. Her voice stopped him even as he reached for the door. "March."

"My lady?"

"Which of Anghara's ladies do you think we can trust?"

March considered this. A little too long; Rima's mouth thinned. Had it really come to this? That she couldn't find one of her daughter's ladies who would be loyal to the future Queen of Roisinan? But March met her eyes steadily enough. "I would think Lady Catlin, or Lady Nessa. I would keep Lady Deira as far from any secret plan as I could."

Rima smiled despite herself. Deira was an elderly gossip, to whom one could entrust any rumor one wanted spread around Miranei and the surrounding countryside within the space of a single day. The warning was well-placed. There was an equal warning in March's words, though, in the two names he had omitted to mention. Those who might sell Anghara, if they had the chance. Rima considered the two ladies March had named for a brief moment, while he waited patiently by the door for further instructions. "Catlin," she decided finally. "Send Lady Catlin to me. And

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make sure Anghara is attended by Lady Nessa at all times, when Catlin or I are not with her."

"Yes, my lady." March took a moment to gaze at the queen with something like pity. There was desolation in Rima's eyes. She had already suffered a sundering, one beyond repair; she was contemplating another at that very minute, one which could well be instrumental in saving her daughter's life. For nine-year-old Anghara had never been as vulnerable as she was right now, with a stronger claimant than she on his way to tear her from the throne she held so precariously.

By the time the council was assembled, grumbling at the haste, Rima had set a great deal into motion. She swept into the room clad in royal robes of scarlet and ermine, glittering with gems. She knew very well that any direct order she gave this dangerously unbalanced council might all too easily be ignored—at worst, they could rise up against her, against Anghara, there and then. But she knew how to play them; the judicious show of a little royal splendor was never wasted. With a mixture of courtly deference and a delicate pulling of Dynan's rank, Rima did not find it hard to lull them into believing they had been sweet-talked into adding their signatures and seals to the document she had already prepared—the least of things, merely a declaration of succession. They woke up abruptly at Rima's rather grim chuckle as she picked up both the original document and the copy she had also given them to sign and proceeded to read to them what they had just agreed. They, the undersigned, council lords appointed by King Dynan of blessed memory of the Realm of Roisinan, lawful king in unbroken descent of the Kir Hama dynasty, undertook to preserve and protect the successor to King Dynan, his only heir and legitimate child of his marriage, against all comers. They agreed to accept her as their sovereign queen. It was more than a simple declaration, it was an oath of allegiance.

"Majesty, was this really necessary?" protested one of the lords, one Rima was far from sure of. She could see beads of sweat gathering on his forehead.

Yes. Yes! You have already chosen a different master. Let's

see where you go from here. "I believed so, my lords. None of you forget for a moment, I am sure, that the princess is still very young." It was a sharp little gibe—of course they couldn't put from their minds that, technically, they were ruled by a nine-year-old. One or two councillors had the grace to look abashed. "There is one more thing I would ask of you. Would you please follow me?"

They did so, not without grumbling, but she was still queen and Miranei was still her court. They stopped abruptly as they entered the Great Hall. Openly displayed on a purple cushion was the crown of

Roisinan—and next to it, sitting very still in a chair only one step down from the dais on which stood the throne of Miranei, the princess they had just sworn to uphold. Anghara Kir Hama sat straight, not touching the back of the chair, her dignity almost frightening in one barely turned nine. She watched them enter with calm gray eyes, meeting no lord's direct look but seeming to encompass them all with her still, royal gaze.

"What is this, majesty?" one of the lords asked. "The princess? The crown?"

"Yes," said Rima, and cold steel rang in her voice. The lords looked at her, surprised. This was not the gentle queen they had learned to know. This was a she-lynx from the mountains, and on the dais was her young. The time was past for preening and purring. The claws were out. "We must wait for her crowning, her formal crowning. But today you, the council of lords, have all set your names to a docunaming Anghara as Queen of Roisinan. And today the council of lords will witness her first crowning. You, the council, will crown her. Once bestowed in this way, we all know the crown cannot be taken except by a usurper. And if it is so taken, you will all bear witness that it is worn by a false claimant. Lord Egan, Lord Garig, if you will."

One or two of the lords had glanced back at the door through which they had entered, but it had been quietly closed behind them. So were all the other doors. Rima noticed their furtive glances and smiled. "All doors are barred from the outside at my command," she said, "until this cer-

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emony is over, and until I give the word. My lords, your
queen waits."

There were those who still contemplated some sort of escape, but the two lords Rima had named glanced warily at one another and began walking toward the dais where Anghara sat. She had turned her head slightly to look at them: and their spirits quailed at the piercing power in her eyes. So unexpected in a child—eyes which seemed to see past their lords' council robes, expensive jin'aaz silk from Kheldri and into the sins festering beneath in their souls. Lord Egan was the first to look away. Lord Garig had declared openly for Anghara; that was partly why Rima had named him. He looked at the child with love and loyalty. But even he could not bear her direct gaze for long. Her eyes, the same gray as Rima's, were all Dynan's in that moment—the blood in his veins was royal, by the Gods, and it showed.

Rima shepherded the remaining four lords closer, so they might miss nothing. Lord Egan picked up the crown and could not prevent a scowl as he turned to hand the jewelled treasure into Lord Garig's waiting hands. He did so in silence; but Garig suddenly felt moved to say a few words, to legitimize what ought to have been a rite of royal pomp and panoply with a few phrases of ceremony. He lifted the crown he held high over Anghara's head.

"With this," he said formally, lapsing into the high tongue

of all ritual, "we accept thee as our queen, Anghara Kir "

Hama, daughter of Dynan. We hold thy life and safety above ;

our own, and we pledge our lives to thee in this place today ;

May the Gods bless and protect you." ;

The crown touched Anghara's bright hair and rested there for a few moments—men Garig lifted it away, with something like reluctance. It was not his place to crown her properly; but it was written in his face how much he wished Anghara could walk from this room his queen in more than just his dreams and wishes. Rima could see his expression (and also the daggers Egan's eyes cast at him over the crown) as he received it back. She suddenly wondered if this little tirade of hers would cost Garig his life. ;]

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None of this had been rehearsed; there had been no time, still Rima had to rely on Anghara's natural awareness of what was going on. The girl now startled them by suddenly rising from her chair. She might have been small-boned, like her mother, and still a child, but at that moment she had the presence Red Dynan had commanded.

"Thank you," she said to the two lords who had leaned their hand to her "crowning." She included them both in her thanks, but the smile hovering in her eyes was for Garig alone. Garig suddenly saw the means to cement the ceremony had just performed in terms that would bind the lords irrevocably, far more so than Rima's document. He dropped to one knee before the child-queen, lifting up his hands to hers, palms together. He caught her eye, this time fearlessly, and she read there his intent and raised her own small hands to cover his.

"I, Lord Garig, do swear fealty and allegiance and do take thee as my liege lady and my queen . . ."

This Rima had not planned, and the blood rushed to her face as she realized what Garig had done. Now he had sworn, they would all have to, or be instantly proclaimed traitors. The ancient oath might not mean much if Sif knocked on the doors of Miranei, but it was honor-binding. Rima blessed Garig for thinking of it, wondering how she ought to reward this most loyal of lords, while it was still in her power to do so.

She focused once more on the dais, where Garig had completed his oath and been raised by Anghara. Egan's color was also high, but not from joy. His face was thunderous. Still, under the challenging gaze of Lord Garig and Anghara's serenely expectant smile, he stumbled onto his knees and forced out the words of the oath of allegiance as though through clenched teeth. All the same, he had done it. When he rose, the next lord was already stepping onto the dais to take his place. Rima sought Garig's eyes, and he met her look across the heads of the file of lords waiting for their turn at the oath taking. He gave her a barely perceptible nod, approval of what she had done, acknowledgment of her grat-

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tude, which must have blazed from her eyes like a beacon. She looked away again, at Anghara, who stood less than ha-

the height of the burly men who bowed before her seemed to tower over them as they approached. Yes, though prima, she would do. She had it in her, the queenship; on why, in the name of all the Gods, did Dynan have to die before his daughter had turned fifteen? They would have accepted her then, even with Sif hovering in the background like a bad dream. But she was still a child, especially now in the afterglow of Sif's martial exploits. They would look for confirmation of the right to rule Roisinan in Sif's abilities on the battlefield, not in the quiet qualities of a girl-child who had never lifted a sword ...

"Majesty?"

Egan's voice beside her woke Rima from what had almost been a dream. She glanced up at the dais, where Angha now stood alone, and then around the faces of the lords who had rejoined her in the hall. Egan looked as if he might break every court protocol he had ever known, and go so far as to demand to be released from the room. But Garig stalled him, stepping forward in the instant of silence following Egan's challenge, and bowed to her.

"Our duty is accomplished," he said smoothly, "and the young queen has given us leave to go. Have we yours?"

"Yes, and my blessing," she said impulsively. She held his eyes for one last instant and then turned to walk to the nearest door and knock on it. "Open," she called, "in the name of the queen!"

The doors swung open at this invocation, and the lords, with a sketchy obeisance in Rima's direction, filed out. When the last had left, Rima turned to her daughter. Anghara had descended the steps of the dais and stood, gray eyes wide and questioning, looking more delicate and fragile than ever. "Mama?"

Rima held out a hand, and Anghara ran to hug her mother

around her slender waist. "Oh, my little queen, you did

so beautifully. They will not forget this. They might try, but this

day will never leave their memory. You may not have been

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uncrowned yet, but they saw the crown upon your head, and it looked as if it belonged there. They will not forget." | March popped his head around the door he had been « guarding. "My lady?"

Rima, her arm around her daughter's shoulders, looked up. "I have released the messenger," he said, cryptically. "Good," said Rima. The news would greet the lords as they came from Anghara's crowning. Only now would they realize what they had done. "Catlin?"

"She is ready, majesty," said March, a little more slowly. Rima's eyes were distant, looking inward, sifting through the memories. Then she roused herself, allowing a small moment of triumph to sweeten what had to follow, and hugged Anghara closer.

"Come," she said, "there are still a lot of things to be done, and we have little time. Come, Anghara."

Lady Catlin of Anghara's suite waited in Rima's private

quarters with two small travelling trunks. One was already

packed and sealed; the other still open. Catlin had finished *1 with it, however; the final space above the

layer of fine silk-paper covering the meticulously packed clothing was left for

IV another's hand.

Anghara had been told nothing of travel plans. Yet the trunks were hers, and Catlin was a familiar attendant, and Anghara's eyes widened as she saw them secreted away in her mother's rooms. March led Catlin out into the anteroom for the moment, giving mother and daughter a few moments alone together.

"My darling," said Rima, in a voice which was steady enough to an untutored ear, "you must go away for a while. Things could get a little dangerous for you here, and I'd have you well away from Miranei until you can come back to the court and be properly crowned."

"And you, Mama?" Anghara had no need to hide her feelings. The tremble in her own voice was all too apparent, and threatened to completely undo Rima's hard-won composure. "I will stay here," she said. "Someone needs to hold the castle for you."

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"But March could ..."

"March is going with you. And Catlin. They will take care of you while we are parted."

Anghara was a child, but she was a child born to duty. She lifted her chin. "How long must I stay away?"

"I don't know, my darling. I will send for you when it is safe. Now listen to me. This I will give to you." She wrapped Anghara's small hands around the document the lords had signed. "Don't ever lose it. The other one, the copy, I shall hide in a safe place, if you should ever need it." "Where, Mama?"

"March will know. Keep him close. And one more thing I will give you."

She rose and went to a casket by her bed, taking from it a massive gold ring, a man's ring, set with a great red stone carved with the crest of Roisinan. A fine gold chain had been looped through the ring. Rima stood looking at it for a few breathless seconds as the unhealed wounds in her heart began to bleed anew at the sight of Dynan's seal. And then she turned and placed the ring in Anghara's small palm, pouring the chain after it. "This was your father's," she said, and her voice was husky. "It is the seal of the kingdom. While it is yours, you are the Queen of Roisinan. Do not let it out of your sight."

Anghara bit her lip and then took the treasure, looping the chain over her head until the great seal hung dull red against the bodice of her dress. Rima smiled, and reached to tuck it inside. "Do not let it out of your sight, but do not reveal it to that of others. Not until you are ready to claim it again here in Miranei."

Anghara accepted this in silence. Her eyes strayed toward

the half-packed trunk. Rima noticed. "I asked Catlin to pack

for you," she said, "but that space is for you, if there is something you want to take, something she did not know about.

She's waiting for you now, and there is nobody in your

chambers. Go quickly and quietly, and bring whatever

might want. And then . . ." *mi*

"There is nothing," said Anghara. "What she chose

bring, I will take. I am content." |fr

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Rima gazed at her child for a long moment, with a mix of pride and sheer incomprehension. "Are you sure?" |he murmured. "It might be awhile. Is there some special treasure . . ."

i "I will be back," said Anghara, with a certainty that dragged Rima's sleeping Sight into full wakefulness. Look\expndtw-2 ing down at her daughter, she saw curiously double, the face of a young woman superimposed on the child's—a face that was no stranger to suffering. "Yes," Rima said slowly, rec\expndtw0 ognizing the abyss of pain-filled years lying between the (wo images. "You will."

She bent to kiss Anghara on the brow, then turned away to open the door of her chambers. "Lady Catlin, the princess needs to change into her travelling costume, and then you will take her down to the north courtyard. There is a wagon waiting. March will be there presently, he will be your escort on your journey. Make sure ... nobody sees where you go."

"Yes, majesty," murmured Catlin, her voice a pleasant smoky alto. "Come, princess."

Anghara, who had laid her copy of the council document carefully into the open trunk, obeyed. Her last farewell to her mother was a swift backward glance of those strange C.ray eyes, filled with a depth of understanding too great for her tender years. Rima blew her a kiss from the tips of her fingers, and Anghara smiled a little as she turned away. "March," said Rima, and March slipped into the room as Anghara left it, closing the door behind him.

"Lady?"

"The other scroll... if she should ever have need ... in

r secret place in Casein."

March took the document, folding it into the breast of his

veiling tunic. "I will keep it safe." "March . . ."

"And her, my lady. I will keep her safe."

Rima turned away, unable to bear the compassion in his

es. He waited for a moment, but she said no more. "I will send a man for the trunks," March said at length. "He can be trusted. The Gods watch over you, my lady."

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Rima kept her back to him, hearing him quietly close *Wk*> door behind him. She had no intention of being here when March's man arrived. The departure of her daughter had alleft a great gaping hole in her soul, added to the wound of Dynan's passing. Somehow, seeing those two small trunks disappear would be

worse than saying goodIt would be a haunting and permanent farewell.

Rima had no illusions; when Sif came to Miranei any siege would last a bare day or two—a week, if the defenses held at all. There were too many who were Miranei born and bred in the ranks of his army, too many who knew Miranei far too well. If there was a weakness, they would know it as well as the defenders. There would be someone in his army who knew rumors about secret passages; and they would know all the postern gates. There weren't enough men in Miranei to keep out Miranei's own army, even if all chose to fight, which was by no means certain. And when Sif gained the castle, Rima knew she was dead. As would Anghara be, if she were to wait within those walls, so secure against any one but their own children. But Rima could buy precious time. She could stay behind, inviting speculation; she could send three different expeditions in three different directions, at least one, with a girl answering Anghara's description, into a sanctuary of Nual. The priests wouldn't lie, but they would be fed only half-truths—if anyone did come knocking, the priests could not swear they were not harboring the vanished princess. Perhaps Sif would be content to leave her there, knowing she could never leave the sanctuary alive.

And other, truer paths she had already swept clean of tracks. She had sent a letter with March. By the time Anghara Kir Hama arrived at the manor of Casein, Rima's childhood home now belonging to her sister Chella and her husband, Lyme, the fosterling by the name of Brynna Kelen, whose identity Anghara would assume, would have been "living" there for two years. Rima trusted her sister—Chella had the ability to make the entire household swear to that, if Sif should choose to inquire. Even the children ... Rima al herself a moment of bitterness. There, at Casein, no

more than a small manor in the hinterland of Roisinan, were three sons waiting to inherit—while here, at Miranei, there was but one small girl to take up the burden of a kingdom, it was not fair. It was not fair! If only she had been able to give Dynan a son to supplant his first-born child by another woman—a true-born son instead of Sif, who gloried in his right to bear Dynan's name. Because Dynan had taken him, accepted him, set his stamp on him that all might know the boy for the king's own. He had loved Anghara, but Red Dynan came of a line of warriors, and all his pride had been for Sif. And now the daughter of his love could easily fall beneath the onslaught of the son of his pride. And Rima was a frail enough barrier to raise between them. Yet—there was still one last thing she could do, one thing her Sight could do for her daughter.

She left her room, and climbed the battlements facing south. There were several carts on the road from Miranei, folk fleeing the inevitable attack. One of them might well be the one carrying Dynan's daughter away from his keep. In a last moment of full and free memory, Rima was deeply grateful for the numbers on that road; they would mask Anghara's departure even more thoroughly than Rima could have hoped. Then she ruthlessly erased all traces of Anghara from her mind after the last bright vision of her daughter's small face beneath Roisinan's crown, deliberately left to torment Sif if he ever came close enough to Rima to question her. There was one small trigger, inaccessible to anyone but herself, that would restore her memory of Anghara's sanctuary; but Sif could not get at it. Even if she survived his assault on Miranei long enough to become his prisoner, he would never be able to drag the secret from her. He could not force her to divulge what she no longer knew.

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Both were gone from her now, Dynan whom she had loved and the daughter for whom she fought even as she chose to forget her. There was a great yawning hollowness inside her, a longing that could never be met, part of a puzzle that could only be resolved when Sif arrived in Miranei and she, Rima, went to whatever fate that hour held for her.

But now she was tired, empty. She crossed her arms upon the cold stone of Miranei's ancient stone battlements and rested her chin on them, staring unblinkingly across the moors into the flat horizon, as if she could already see in her mind's eye the dust raised by Dynan's army. Sif's army, coming to conquer. Roisianan's army, death behind them, death before, coming to bring a new king to the keep under the mountains.

It was not that Sif had counted on having Miranei handed over to him without a blow struck in anger, given his manner of having claimed its mastery, although it would have gratified him to have been welcomed there with acclamations. But neither did he expect the keep to hold out against him for so long. Even Rima had not realized the depth of the feelings that ran in the keep's defenders. Faced with a horrid choice, divided within itself, its people's loyalties shredded in the storm of Sif's coming like cobwebs in a high wind, Miranei was still the king's keep and he that waited beyond it, for all the claims of his blood, was not yet the king. And what was the king's was still within the walls, and would be defended. The garrison fought like men demented, even against those who rose up in Sif's favor in its own ranks. Miranei suffered agonies of both body and soul, but it held out for the heiress of Red Dynan for almost ten days. Even then, Miranei's gates were opened to Sif from within. Once in, the army's superior numbers made short work of any remaining pockets of resistance. But the picture that met Sif's eyes when he rode in to claim his city, was a swathe of blood and destruction. There were bodies in the courtyards, bodies hanging awkwardly from battlements. Torn, bloodied cloaks lay trampled underfoot; bright blood pooled on stairwells, left long, dull smears on walls. Those men who were still alive wandered about in a daze. A few recognized and greeted Sif according to the manner of their most recent feelings about him—some with a weary kind of joy, others, less subtle, simply turning tail

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and running for cover. There was an odd smell in the air, partly that of death, partly something more intangible, a smell, perhaps, of treachery, or regret. Someone had torched a grain storehouse and the fire hadn't fully caught—the roof still smoldered dully, adding acrid, murky smoke to the already polluted atmosphere. Sif, unaccountably, felt cheated.

"I wanted to ride into my father's city in glory," he said to Fodrun, riding beside him. He lifted a hand from his black stallion's reins, waving a waft of smoke from before his face. "There is no glory in this."

Fodrun could only agree. It was easy to forget in the heat of battle, but what they had just vanquished was not simply a body of men opposed to their own, it was the spirit behind those men, the spirit of a nine-year-old girl. There was something bitter in the thought, something dismal about Miranei, something that jarred badly at Fodrun's bright memories of it. But he could not put his feelings into words. He merely nodded. "But there is time for that, my lord. You will make the glory."

Sif's mood was bleak for prophecies of splendor. He

merely signalled forward a pair of troopers who rode at hand

back, "Go," he said to them, "take a detail and secure the

royal tower. If there is anyone there, detain them in complete

total confinement. Go." I

One of the men bowed from the saddle in acquiescence, raised a hand, motioning to a company of mounted men. They peeled off from the main group and made for the royal gate; a few, obeying a sharp hand signal, wheeled and passed under an archway leading from the yard, rounding the tower and vanishing from sight. Going for the postern, Sif noticed fleetingly, with approval; he made a mental note

to commend the men whom he had set in command of the cheta for their thoroughness. The men would not be surprised to find their new king knew them by name. That was part of Sif's power, part of the reason the army cohorts at his back, who had not all been entirely happy in the beginning at what they saw as Fodrun's treachery, were now behind Sif to a man, as once they had belonged to his father. This, if nothing else, had stamped Sif as Dynan's, and their own.

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Sif made a thorough tour of the battlements, offering a few well-chosen words to men he met on his way. But there was nothing he could have usefully done or changed there, his orders having been given and confirmed before Sif had ridden into the keep. Fodrun, walking two steps behind, could not help but think the tour was little more than a delaying tactic; Sif was as reluctant to join his men in the royal tower as Fodrun himself. Suddenly, here. Princess Anghara had returned to haunt Sif's general with a persistence he had never expected; being a practical man, he saw no pleasant future for the little princess once Sif had time to think about her potential as a focus for those who might plot his downfall. If he wanted to hold on to what he had won, Sif could not afford to let Anghara live at liberty, if he could afford to allow her to live at all.

At last Sif turned toward the royal chambers where a hard decision awaited. Dynan's queen had never liked him, and Sif had accepted that—how could she? She resented him; he had scented her. How much more he could have had than the rumors from Dynan's table, had Clera been queen, had he been born prince instead of king's bastard?

But Anghara ... After Dynan had acknowledged him and had him brought to court, Sif had seen his half-sister frequently. He vividly remembered the day of her birth, the day his hopes of Dynan's putting aside his queen, marrying Clera and announcing his only son as his heir had been finally dashed. If Rima had resented Sif, he had paid it back tenfold by resenting Anghara, with the implacable hostility of a twelve-year-old boy who saw in Dynan's new daughter the ruination of his dreams. But she had never hated him. She always had a way of keeping a friendly distance, a knack many an adult woman would have envied, if their paths happened to cross a little more closely than usual for a high-born girl-child and a bastard-born youth who spent most of his time in places she rarely frequented. She had never found occasion to pay him much attention, both from the point of view of being secure and unchallenged in her exalted position, and from the natural disinterest and incom-

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prehension bound to follow from the discrepancy in their age and sex. He knew that, she had been too young. And now Sif held her life in his hands. His face was clean of expression, but his hands were lightly clenched at his sides; Fodrun could tell his self-possession was hard-won.

It shattered without warning when they entered the

queen's private chambers, and Sif saw the woman laid out

on the bed. He slid from tight-leashed composure into a blinding parterring rage within the time it took to blink.

"I wanted her alive!" Sif snarled, having paused aghast in

the doorway. The guard who stood at the foot of the carved

four-poster bed cringed.

"She is, lord!" he had time to squeak, wincing in anticipation of a stinging blow across his face.

The blow never landed. Sif had himself in hand. "Exhe said brusquely, and the naked edge of his voice was no less dangerous for having been sheathed in a brittle control.

"Lord," the soldier began warily, "somebody was here before us. The room was a mess . . . whoever was here might have been looking for something, but it looked as though she had not fought her assailant—perhaps she knew them—but by the time we got here they had already gone." "Did you search the tower?"

"Yes, lord, we did. But there were blood-spattered men everywhere. If some of that blood was the queen . . . was hers . . . we could not know."

Fodrun allowed himself a small grim smile at the man's frantic attempt to retrieve his slip of the tongue. Sif would not want reminding of who had been queen in Miranei. And the guard's clumsy reconstruction of events may not have been far from the mark. Rima may well have known who attacked her. What she may not have known when they entered her chambers was where their loyalties had been given. "She was wounded," the guard was still babbling, "but she was not yet dead, and three of us came to see if we could help. But she had a knife, lord, one of those wretched small ones so damnably easy to hide, and if she had failed to fight

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the one who came to murder her, she certainly fought us, who came to help. She slashed at Radis' face—and then Talin grabbed at her arm—he didn't mean to break it, lord—and I . . . I pushed her away . . . and she fell . . . across that." The fender he indicated ringed the hearth, and was delisped. Some of the spikes, ornamental but deadly, were anointed with blood. There was more pooling by the hearth.

They had lifted the half-swooning queen onto the bed, the guard explained, and tried to bind the worst of her hurts, but by the time Sif had arrived the bed was soaked with blood that seeped through their makeshift bandages. Rima lay still, her face a bloody mask; her eyes were closed, but she was still breathing, very shallowly. Fodrun, no stranger to death, saw it stamped on her brow; but it was no part of his solbrief to see women laid out thus. He found himself feeling queasy. Part of the reason for this supplied itself a moment later when Sif asked the question Fodrun's subconscious could not formulate.

"And the girl? The princess?"

"Some of the men are still searching, lord. She was not in her quarters, nor here. Perhaps she is hiding somewhere; or perhaps . . ."

Yes. Perhaps somebody had already solved Sif's dilemma for him. Perhaps whoever had tried to do away with the mother had succeeded where the child was concerned. Sif dismissed Anghara from his mind for a moment, crossing over to the bed and bending over Rima's prone form. As though aware of his presence, her eyes flickered open. They were already filmed, glazing.

Sif reached out and shook her, none too gently. "Who was it? Why attack you? Why now?" he demanded. "Where is Anghara?"

She murmured something, and both Sif and the guard instinctively leaned closer to hear. "What was that?" said Sif impatiently.

"She said . . . sign? Signed?" volunteered the guard. Rima made a faint movement of her hand toward her breast, but

lacked the strength to carry it through; the hand fell back. Sif's eyes narrowed.

"Did you search her?"

"No, lord!" said the guard, sounding faintly shocked at the idea.

Sif had no such scruples. He'd followed the unfinished gesture to where it would have landed, and saw a subtle bulge there that belonged on no woman's body. Now he reached out and ran his hand over it, not able to suppress a quick grim smile as his fingers met parchment.

"It's my guess it was for this she was attacked. 'Sign,' she said. Or 'signed.' Something signed. What document is this?"

It was much crumpled and partly stained with Rima's blood, but it was still legible enough. As Sif tried to make sense of it, Fodmii watched his face change again, sliding into the old line only lately quelled. When he looked up, even Fikiiiiii quailed at his icy eyes even though the anger was miles away. Inmi Nil spoke to the guard without even turning his head in the direction. "Find me one of those Sighted women; they're used to my demands in the keep. Find me one, *mm* I will have her here within five minutes. Move!"

The *^luid*, suddenly anxious to depart from Sif's volatile presence, hurried to obey.

"My lord?" Fikiiiiii ventured.

"She was attacked for (his, but for that of which it tells," Sil spat, tossing the unsavoury parchment to Fodrun, who caught it awkwardly. "She had the council sign a declaration, which is just a statement of its existence; but that declaration, the original document, is a confirmation of Anghara's submission, signed by every lord on my father's own council. It is not for a new council, but this, this will bind them, too—this is a legal document, signed by a legal government in its full powers. Anyone producing the original, or proof of its existence, can hold a sword at my throat. This can bury me. I want that document. If none know of it but she and the *<* 'inn it, (then I can still. . ."

"lord, you wanted ..."

Sil Hinbbcil, the dishevelled, elderly woman whom the

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guard dispatched for Sighted prey had produced, his hand closing round her arm like a vice. Her eyes were round with horror, and she whimpered like a puppy at the new pain. Sif shook her, and she blinked, seeming to start out of deep shock, staring at him in fear.

"This woman is dying," Sif said, "and you will read her for me. I want answers, and I can no longer extract them myself. Come on."

"The queen . . ." moaned the Sighted woman, suddenly catching her first sight of the subject she was to probe. "I can't..."

"Oh yes, you can," said Sif grimly. "She *was* your queen. Right now, I am your king, and you will obey me. What is your name?"

"D . . . Deira ..."

"Listen to me, Lady Deira, and listen very carefully. I want to know two things. I want to know where the

original is of the document the general is holding. Do you need to see it to know what to ask?"

She seemed to have lost her voice completely; Sif made an impatient motion and Fodrun handed him the document. Sif thrust it at the woman, who received it almost mechanically. "Look at it!" he snapped, and she did, although it was doubtful she took any of it in. Sif didn't mind, he would have preferred her never to have seen it at all—if she couldn't understand what she was holding, all the better, as long as she had the vital link to get the truth out of Rima.

"The other thing . . . look at me, woman . . . the other thing I must know is the whereabouts of her daughter . . . what is it now?"

Large round tears rolled out of Deira's eyes at the mention of the princess. Sif shook her again. "I don't have much time. What is it? Do you know something?"

"She was my young lady... my lamb... she is gone..."

That could have meant a number of things. Sif jerked his captive forward, desperately afraid Rima might yet cheat him of the information he wanted. He could not let her die before he got it out of her. Deira stumbled against the bed,

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milking no effort to wipe her tears; Rima's eyes opened again. Deira gasped at the sight, her hands, one still holding the document. Hying to her mouth.

"Ask!" said Sif violently. "The original! The princess!"

Kima whispered something, very low. Deira's breath hissed out again as Sif tightened his fingers on her arm; she bent over her to listen, and then, sobbing, murmured the questions Sif had put. Rima was silent then, for so long that Sif already tasted defeat, but when her lips, almost bloodless now, opened again. Sif almost pushed Deira into Rima's face. The queen's voice rustled faintly, like the sound of wind in dying leaves, and then she was simply . . . gone. Fodrun could see the instant of her going, her breath stopping, her head lolling sideways, lifeless. Her eyes had stayed open, though, and if Fodrun had been called upon to interpret the expression that remained on her face he would have had to call it triumph. The thought gave him an odd shiver of apprehension. What was it she thought she'd won?

"She said," Deira said slowly, without being prompted, though Sif's fingers were possibly prompt enough, "the original is with Princess Anghara."

"And where," said Sif, who couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice, "is the princess?"

Deira looked up, her eyes clear and very candid. "She does not know, and she is speaking the truth. There is no memory of Princess Anghara in her mind, after the crowning."

Fodrun felt the temperature in the room drop. Sif took his fingers from the woman's arm as though she were unclean. "Crowning?" he echoed, and his voice was glacial.

"The council crowned her, and swore allegiance," said Deira, recounting the memory she had just read.

Fodrun watched Sif's face change. Even if he had wanted to spare Anghara it was now too late. There was no room for two crowned sovereigns in Roisinan, and Sif had already staked everything on the gamble he had taken to win the crown for himself. Rima's plan had doomed her daughter; if Sif's Nemvhci'N found the child-queen, she was dead.

"Who knew of this?" Sif asked, his voice flat.

"The council lords, who were there. And the queen's guard," said Deira.

"None else?"

"I did not know until this moment," said Deira, suddenly gathering the tattered rags of dignity befitting a lady of the royal chamber, "and I was Princess Anghara's own attendant."

"Go," Sif said abruptly. "Leave us. Guard!"

"Lord?"

"Get the woman out of here."

Deira went with alacrity, stealing a tender look at the woman whose last memories she had stolen for Miranei's new lord.

One of Sif's captains returned at this point to report no trace of Anghara Kir Hama could be found in the keep, livor dead.

"Could she have spirited her away under my very nose? Where would she have sent her?" Sif said, speaking only partly to Fodrun, demanding answers from himself.

"I could make enquiries, lord. Even in the chaos ... someone might have noticed something," Fodrun volunteered. Sif gave him a swift glance from beneath lowered eyelids.

"Yes. Do so. But if... when ... we run her to ground, it will be for me alone to know. As far as anyone else is concerned, she is dead, Fodrun. Anghara Kir Hama is dead, and will be buried with her mother. They cannot crown a dead queen; this way, even the damned document . . . where is that parchment, Fodrun?"

Fodrun's eyes widened. "The woman ... the woman had it... you gave it into her hand . . ."

Sif was already at the door. "Domar!" he called, and the man who had reported not finding the princess stood to attention. "The woman who was just here. She has in her possession a document. I want it back. Find her."

"Yes, lord!"

Leaning against the doorway of Rima's room, Sif laughed joylessly, his head bent, seeming to study with rapt attention the dust on his riding boots, so inappropriate for a royal

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lady's bedchamber. Then he looked up, and his eyes glinted with a savage determination. "I've been

careless," he said "it won't happen again."

He turned around and contemplated the dead woman in what had also been his father's bed. He could let that specter!-. drive him from this room, from this palace, but it would take *k* more than the dead to keep him from the dreams he had. clung to for so long. "Get someone to clear up this mess," he ordered abruptly. "I want this room habitable again before . tonight. For now ... I need a drink. Come, Fodrun, king Shall I show you a place where a would-be prince-in-waiting often used to go?"

It came as something of a surprise to Fodrun to realize the last thing he wanted to do was walk into some Miranei tav with the man who would be crowned king within days. When he had promised Sif Roisian, Fodrun had been think\expndtw0 ing only of the battle to come; he had wanted a prince who would be a war leader to his leaderless, aJI-but-crushed army. What he received was something far bigger than he had bargained for—Fodrun Kingmaker. For some reason it sat ill on Fodrun's ears. But the king he had made was waitand his words had been less a request than an order i thinly veiled in courtesy. Fodrun drew a deep breath and 11 dredged up a smile from somewhere. "Lead on, my prince." R.

The guards found Deira almost two hours later. By then H she no longer had the document they were seeking; her rep- p utation, so well respected by March, had been richly de- |^r served. When the matter was brought to him, Sif was |» intelligent enough to realize he had lost thai particular bat- ' tie. The contents of the damnable document must have been the stuff of tavern gossip even as he sat quailing ale with his general, who would emerge from that particular outing as the Chancellor of Roisian. Counselling by his newly apchancellor, now First Lord in Sif "s new council, he did not order the woman killed; after all, he himself had summoned her to Rima's chamber, and if anyone had been to blame for her keeping hold of the parchment, it was him. He had merely asked his guards, in a laconic tone laced wi

steel, never to let her cross his path again, and by nightfall she was packed and gone, set on the road of exile under per\expndtw0 manent ban from Miranei for as long as Sif Kir Hama reigned. She was followed, as an afterthought; it had been Fodrun's idea, and one of his own men who had been charged with it. Deira could conceivably have played them all for fools, and headed directly for Anghara's hiding place. But March's words had been heeded; Deira knew nothing. Fodrun's agent followed her to her brother's house, and, on his return, reported to Fodrun that the lady looked likely to stay there for the rest of her days, intimidating her brother's lady with grim tales of the Battle of Miranei.

The army that took Miranei had been only a fragment of the force that fought at the Ronval. These men had ridden hard and fast, reaching the keep quickly, ready for battle.

The remainder of the men, who travelled much more slowly, had been something of an honor guard, their task to escort

Dynan's body. Everything had waited upon them, for the re\parturn of the dead king. Sif merely held the reins of power, but

could not be crowned until his father's body had been prop\parerly laid to rest, and these arrangements had been the first |

order of business Sif attended to. Dynan was given a cere- f monial state funeral, which he shared, although it galled Sif [to enshrine that relationship even in death, with his queen—

and with a casket devoid of a body, purported to contain the remains of his daughter. Sif himself attended the formalities with his mother on his arm, Lady Clera having suddenly become a person of some influence at court. Not a muscle on his face moved during the ceremony, but Fodrun, who was beginning to read Sif's moods by the subtle signals of his a >flashing eyes, saw how much it upset him to see the grief expressed by the people at the sight of that third, smallest casket. Even at her own "funeral," his half-sister was successfully upstaging him. E

But that was the last time. With the past laid to rest, the next ceremony was wholly Sif's. He was crowned in the full brilliance of a royal sacrament, every detail meticulously planned. He would stamp his right to rule in the memory of I

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every man and woman who saw him take the crown. And if a heresy had already taken root, a story of another crowning, which should have been put to rest in an irrevocable manner with Anghara's burial but which only seemed to have been inflamed by it, it would have been a foolhardy man indeed who showed he knew anything about it at Sif's coronation.

And the story did flower in Miranei, and spread beyond. There were those who may have bowed to circumstance and accepted Sif as the new king in Miranei who nevertheless flatly refused to believe Anghara was dead, and spoke of her return as if it was preordained. When Sif first heard the tale, he had merely laughed. When it surfaced to taunt him again and again, he ceased to find it funny.

"I could order the body taken from the vault and exhiband put the whole thing to rest," he said to Fodrun one evening, in a particularly foul mood about the story that wouldn't die. He was pacing back and forth in front of the stone fireplace in what had been Dynan and Rima's bedwhich he had appropriated for his own use. "I should have thought of that before, however, and provided the body. Finding one now, one that looks sufficiently like her, at the right stage of decomposition—it might prove a lit\expndtw0 tle difficult. I laid her in the family vault, Fodrun, and she will not stay. Anghara is a restless ghost."

Sif had been king for almost two months, and only Fo\expndtw-2 drun and Clera knew just how vulnerable he still felt, part of the reason why the stories of Anghara bit so deep. People tended to forget all too easily, given Sif's considerable abil\expndtw0 ities and the tenacity and ruthlessness with which he pur\expndtw-2 sued his goals, that the new king was only a few weeks past his twenty-first birthday.

"I wonder what would happen," said Sif rather grimly, "if Anghara rode into the bailey and proclaimed herself queen, with that damned declaration in one hand and Dynan's great seal in the other. I never did

find that, Fodrun. If Rirna had anything to do with hiding it, she knew Miranei better than any born here. We've been over every conceivable place with a fine-toothed comb." If Anghara should choose

to challenge Sif for her heritage, his possession of the throne would count for little, should she convince the people of the truth of her claims. He knew that. Anghara would know it, too.

Fodrun, who knew he had been summoned that night to deal with his king's fit of despondency, as he had done on previous occasions, eyed a half-full decanter of red wine on a nearby table with longing, but the king had not. He swallowed, looked away. "I may have found something," he said diffidently.

Sif stopped pacing, whirled in mid stride. "Tell me!" he commanded.

"There was a sudden flurry of departures in the wake of the first rumors of your coming, lord," said Fodrun. "It's hard to be sure. But I have heard some of those wagons and carts were heading toward sanctuary."

"The priests of Nual?"

"Yes."

Sif rubbed his temples with his hands. "If she is there, the priests will never tell. And I cannot breach sanctuary with a raid. Roisinan may forgive Dynan's son much, but not that."

"But there is another way to find out. Not all who go into sanctuary go there for good. Nual shelters many who go to him for a few weeks, a few days, even; sometimes merely a wife fleeing from her husband's wrath, or a scoundrel evading the law."

"What are you saying?"

"What if a man sought sanctuary, a man who could learn from within who else the priests were harboring? They do not ask to know a seeker's sin if it is not freely told. The man could be in and out within a week. And we would at least know. Later ... we have time. We could set a watch, if we were sure. She would never leave those walls."

Sif allowed himself a guarded smile. "Do it. And report to me."

"Yes, lord." Fodrun had made it a habit to execute all Sif's orders instantly. People who lagged tended to be remembered. He was already on his feet when Sif laughed.

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"Tomorrow will do." There was amusement at Fodrun's alacrity in Sif's voice. Now, finally, he turned toward the decanter. "Wine?"

Fodrun settled back into the chair into which he had been waved at his arrival. "Thank you, my lord."

Sif's back was to him as he poured, and Fodrun studied him, safely unobserved for the moment. Even in the loo house robe, there was no disguising Sif's dangerous build, the breadth of his shoulders, the smooth

muscle in his back. This was a true warrior prince Fodrun had raised to power wild in all warriors' ways—a few words of prudent advice were all too often needed to calm his hot blood. Unpredictable, too; it was hard to gauge the sudden swing of Sif's moods. With all his faults, however, this was where Fodrun's fate had been cast. Why, then, did he sometimes find himself so reluctant to point out things Sif might have missed, especially daily on the subject of Anghara? Fodrun had thought on her intriguing disappearance, and the convenient amnesia of Rima's deathbed. He had been on the point of discussing these thoughts with Sif many times, yet somehow he could not bring himself to speak. Why? Did he still think he could protect Anghara? Against the power Sif consolidated daily? And what did his wanting to protect his king's only rival for the throne of Roisinan make of his loyalty to Sif?

Some of those thoughts, concealed so carefully for so long, must have showed on his face. Sif paused as he turned, two full wine goblets in hand. The king's eyes narrowed suddenly. "You have something else to tell me." It was a flat statement, not a question. More, it was an order; Sif's eyes were expectant.

Cornered, Fodrun grasped the nettle. "I was thinking about Anghara," he said. "She vanished too quickly, too well. They simply did not have time to plan this, my lord; King Dynan's death and your being at hand for the battle at Ronval was not something anyone could have foreseen long enough in advance to produce an entire contingency plan, not one that is flawless."

"What are you telling me?" said Sif, stepping forward, of-

fering a goblet. Fodrun accepted it, and took a convulsive swallow. Sif would not like what he was about to hear.

Fodrun said carefully, "Rima must have had help. Anghara did not merely disappear, she was actively hidden from you; and yet there was the document, which implied she had already claimed the crown. I believe she is alive, she holds the original, and she was hidden from you by something more than clever planning. By Sight."

Sif was frowning. "Sight," he repeated hollowly.

"None in Miranei ever saw her use it," said Fodrun, even more carefully, "but it was an open secret that Rima had it."

"Yes," said Sif flatly. "I know." The hand that was closed around the stem of Sif's goblet whitened. Fodrun tensed, waiting for the wineglass to shatter against the wall at any minute. But Sif thought the better of it, and took a large swallow instead, forcing himself to relax into a chair. He looked faintly revolted; he had never liked to traffic with Sight. Sometimes he used it, ruthlessly, if he saw no other way past some obstacle toward a goal—as he had wielded it to wring true memories from the dying Rima in this very room. But Fodrun had seen Sif shy from it several times so far during their short partnership. It seemed to frighten him sometimes; it repulsed him always. He clearly saw it as something dreadful, inhuman.

"Then Anghara could have it too," said Sif, after a pause. "She may well be alive, but she's out there somewhere, biding her time, waiting until she comes into her power. If she doesn't want to be found, I'll never find her."

"She is too young, Sight comes into its own only with adolescence," Fodrun said. "In her own right, I don't think she can be a threat, or even a factor in her own concealment yet. That still had to be done for her, by others, with mature powers. But yes, if she has inherited the gift, she will be able to use it, sooner rather than later. And one day she might well turn it against you. But if she has been hidden with Sight, lord, then she may be found with Sight. Perhaps."

"What do you mean?" The query was sharp, intense.

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"There are still Sighted women in Miranei. Set some of them looking."

Sif rose violently to his feet and crossed to the window, staring outside into the thin winter twilight. "I never liked dealing with those witches." It sounded as though he spat the words.

"They may succeed, where all else has failed," said Fo-drun with delicacy. He wished he could get rid of the foul taste the words left in his own mouth—he could not seem to rid them of the guilt of betrayal which clung to them like a skin. If Anghara was ever discovered, Fodrun knew he would go to his grave feeling like a murderer. And yet. . . not helping Sif's search was unthinkable.

Sif seemed to have come to terms with his own qualms. "I'll do it," he said, but his voice was heavy. "If it will help, I will do it. But I swear I do not like it. Why is just being human never quite enough in Roisianan?"

With a sudden flash of insight, Fodrun realized part of the reason Sif harbored such an implacable hostility toward Sight. When both Rima and Clera, Sif's mother, had come to Miranei there had been little to choose between them. Both daughters of country gentry, lords of distant manors who laid claim to neither great wealth nor power, all they brought with them had been their youth and beauty. If Dynan had been an ordinary man it might have been different—but he was more than a man, he was a king. Clera had borne Dynan a son, but it was Rima whom Dynan had married, and crowned; Rima, whose single advantage and addition to Dynan's treasury had been Sight—something that Clera, for all the proof of her devotion, could never offer.

A

Anghara had been very quiet during the first part of the journey from Miranei. Lady Catlin, who rode with her in the back of the covered wagon together with their trunks and bags, made no attempt to draw her out and wisely left her to herself for a while. Anghara had stared at Miranei for as long as she could see it through the rear of the wagon, where the flaps of the wagon covering had been tied back. They made good time. The great keep grew smaller and smaller, finally vanishing altogether; it was then that Anghara closed her eyes, sealing in the memory.

Catlin thought that the girl dozed, as their horse kept up its steady pace and carried them further and further into the night. But Anghara was not asleep; her senses, if anything, seemed to have been sharpened by the last few hours to something almost supernatural. She was aware of the way the lantern hanging by the side of the wagon swung and bounced, its wavering light keeping time to the rhythm of the horse's hooves striking the road. She was aware of the stars winking above in a sky deepening from salmon-pink and apricot clouds into shades of amethyst and indigo. She heard the tuneless whistling of the wagon driver on his seat, his back to them, and the dissonant counterpoint of another horse's hoofbeats, March's great heavy beast, pacing the wagon just out of her line of sight. This day's sunset, star-rise, swift travel on unfamiliar roads, these things were being burned into her and would stay with her for the rest of her life. Without fully understanding what it was that had

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touched her and brought her to this dark hour, Anghara tasted the bitter grounds of exile.

They stayed at a roadside han that night, anonymous travelers. The driver would sleep in the servants' wing; for the rest of the party, the han-keeper assumed the obvious and placed March, Catlin and Anghara into a large, spacious family room. They made no protest. March left the room in tacit understanding while Catlin, fastidious court lady that she was, and the girl who had until a few short hours ago been a princess, prepared for bed. Anghara was still mostly silent, and it was only when Catlin became aware of her darting eyes that she realized the child was looking for something. Seeing the turned-back covers of the wide bed she would share with Anghara, Catlin's hands suddenly flew to her face and she gazed at her in blank dismay over the tips of her fingers.

"Anassa! I forgot Anassa!"

Anghara's eyes were strange, both sympathetic and utblank at the same time. "It doesn't matter," she said, very quietly, climbing into the bed.

"But you have slept with her ever since you were a baby," said Catlin remorsefully. Tonight of all nights Anghara should have had the comfort of something warm, familiar. But Anassa, the battered doll that had been Anghara's fasince babyhood, had slipped Catlin's mind when she had been given orders to pack the child's belongings back in Miranei... was it really only a few hours ago? And now she stood blaming herself bitterly for the oversight, for the little bit of home she should have thought to bring into banish\expndtw-2 ment for the little girl who had already left too much behind.

Anghara turned away and curled up on her side of the bed. Catlin doused the lights, climbing in carefully beside her; she listened for a while, surreptitiously, but Anghara's breathing was deep and regular, no sound of crying. She seemed to have fallen asleep almost instantly, although Catlin was a little incredulous at the thought—especially after being severed in such a violent manner from a favorite edtime companion of many years. In the end it was Catlin

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who shed quiet tears in what she thought was the privacy of solitude with her charge asleep beside her, and it was Catlin who drifted off into sleep first. Anghara lay motionless for a long time, wide awake, staring into the darkness and re\expndtw-2 membering the way Miranei had faded from her horizon, the odd finality of it, almost as though it had been swallowed by the approaching night, or the yawn of immeasurable time. She was conscious of what was almost terror beating within her, a fear that she was somehow sundered from her home for good. Or that she would only come back after everything had changed, come back to rubble, or a different city alto\expndtw-1 gether, with every street distorted and every tower different from her memory. Should she forget the smallest detail of the place, it would happen, she knew this with a dreadful certainty; this was her nameless fear. She lay in the dark, try\expndtw0 ing to capture the perfect memory of Miranei, which lived within her heart. And yet, when she did fall asleep, it was only to dream the same dream that had haunted her waking hours—the vision of Miranei of the Mountains vanishing gently, slowly, into darkness.

The darkness also frightened her, for it lay before her as well as behind. She had no idea where they were going, and aside from her mother's vague warnings of danger, no inkling why. She clung to her silence for the first day of their journey, but eventually the thought of leaving her home fur\expndtw-2 ther and further behind while going forward in no certain di\expndtw-1 rection drove her to March, who at the very least seemed to know where they were heading.

She caught up with him at another roadside han, having followed him into the stables. He had not heard her drift in after him; he had gone to have another look at what might have been causing the increasing lameness of one of the wagon horses. It may have been the intensity of her regard that made him lift his head from his perusal of the gelding's left front hoof and look at her, with some surprise.

He dropped the hoof and straightened, pulling his fur-lined winter cloak, flung back so as not to hinder his examination, down over his shoulders. "And what are you doing

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here?" he asked lightly. He had never addressed her condeadult to child, but always, with a built-in deference that went without saying, as though they were equals. They had dropped all titles when they left Miranei and Ang-hara had instinctively understood, it was a matter of their disguise; but March's unspoken "princess" still hung between them in the small warm stable of the roadside han like a charm.

"March . . . Mama told me nothing about this journey. It all happened so fast; she only said there was danger, and she would call me back when it was over. But why didn't she come with us? Why couldn't I have stayed?"

March suddenly realized how little she knew. Nobody had found the time or seen any real necessity to explain any of the actions of the past days to a child who, royal or not, would simply do what she was told in the end. But Anghara was frightened and more than a little lost, crowned in Mi-ranei's Great Hall by her father's council lords one moment and fleeing madly into the winter night the next. All she had ever known had been torn from her in a matter of a few hectic hours. She had been sent away from everything familiar with only vaguely couched words of warning about a nebudanger, which must have sounded like a dragon of legend a few even vaguer promises about returning soon. It was to her credit that in the beginning, while time had been of the essence, she had obeyed those she trusted without question. But she was far too intelligent to take obedience into blind submission. March would have been disappointed if she had.

"We're going to Casein," he said, glancing around to make sure they were alone. "Where your mother was born. You will be staying there for a while, with your aunt and uncle."

"Mama took me there once," said Anghara slowly. "I was still a baby, I don't remember it at all. But Aunt Chella came to visit Mama at Miranei, when I was five. She had a baby with her, a little girl."

"Yes. Your cousin Drya. She would be about four now.

There are also the twins, Adamo and Charo, they are only a year older than you. And Ansen, he's the eldest, he's turning twelve this year ... or is it thirteen?"

Anghara, who had been rendered a solitary child through the circumstances of her birth, suddenly quailed at the thought of all those children, all those unknown cousins. The only one she had ever seen had been little Drya, and even that couldn't really count as any sort of acquaintance. The others, the boys . . . doubly alien, older than her, and male. Would there be any common ground there at all? At least they were kin; that ought to count for something . . .

March subsided onto a nearby bale of hay and patted the space beside him for Anghara to join him. "There are some other things you'd better know before we go much further," he said, and the seriousness of his voice distracted Anghara from her thoughts on kinship. "Now seems as good a time to tell you as any. When we left Miranei, we left a great deal behind—but you left something you haven't even missed yet. Your name."

Anghara stared at him in blank incomprehension.

"When we get to Casein," said March, "you go there not as Anghara Kir Hama, Princess of Roisinan. You'll be some\expndtw0 one else, a little girl called Brynna Kelen, come to foster at the manor. Your aunt and uncle will know who you really are, but not the children; you'll meet them as a new foster sister, not blood kin."

"But why?" wailed Anghara. Even that which she thought immutable in a world of chaos, her own identity, was being taken from her; nothing was left, nothing. She was being forced to take herself apart, and put herself together as a dif\expndtw0 ferent person. And all for . . . what? She still did not know what the danger was which hunted her, but by this stage it had grown into something huge, incomprehensible, all-powerful—something capable of reaching across half her world and tearing from her the very name that made her who she was.

March gently touched her hair. "There is another who wants what is yours, my princess," he said, very quietly.

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"Someone who wants to be in your place badly enough to destroy you, if he knew where you were. Someone who is coming to Miranei to steal your crown."

"But my father was the king," said Anghara, with innine-year-old logic.

"So was his," said March. "You know him. You share the same father, the same name. But it is your mother who is queen, not his, and that is why he has had to take by force what is rightfully yours."

"Who?" Anghara asked, genuinely bewildered.

"His name is Sif."

To Anghara it was as though the great black monster stretching against the wall showing huge, frightening fangs was suddenly revealed as nothing more than the shadow of a kitchen cat yawning quietly by the fire. "Sif? But Sif would never harm me." That, because she knew him, knew of him. The first reaction was to Sif, the person. But then ... "He would not dare. The lords swore the oath to me." The unconscious arrogance was there, the same arrogance Sif had shown in the army camp by the River Ronval. The same man had fathered these two; they were more alike than they knew. And yet, March had seen enough of Sif Kir Hama to expect no mercy to stay his hand, not this close to the fulof all his dreams.

"Yes," said March, "but oaths can be broken. And even if they held, Sif comes with your father's army, and he will take Miranei if it will not be given. And once he takes it, he will have his own lords. Ones who swore no oaths to you."

"But Mama gave me . . ." Anghara's hand leapt from the straw, and then sank back, slowly, as she had time to think the motion through, even here, with March, whom she trusted. But March was anticipating her.

"The seal?" he said. "It's all right, my lady told me what she intended. I know you hold it. Yes, that might slow him, but not stop him. He can declare it lost and have a new one carved. But unless he can prove it

lost or you dead, he will never sit securely on your throne. My lady the queen knows you are too young to resist him now; but if we can keep you

safe, in a few years you can face him, and nothing he can do will stand against you. You are King Dynan's true heir, and Sif knows that as well as you. But until then, you must remember you are Brynna Kelen, not Princess Anghara of Miranei—because if he finds you before you are ready, it might go ill for us. Can you do that?"

"Yes," said Anghara. "It won't be for long."

All the same, she glanced back at her bright name with yearning as she laid it gently for safekeeping into deeper recesses of her mind. She tasted the other, the one to be hers for a brief while before she could rise to reclaim her own lineage and name. "Brynna," she said experimentally. It felt foreign, but not unduly so; she started to practice wearing it. "Who is she, this Brynna?"

March impulsively discarded everything Rima might have concocted as Brynna's "history" in her letter to Chella, turning to the child beside him with an air of conspiracy. "I think," he said with a quick smile, "we will leave that to you. Who do you want to be? Nothing too involved, mind; you are trying to disappear. If you draw too much attention to Brynna Kelen you might as well wave a flag to announce where Anghara Kir Hama might be hiding. Do you want to think about it?"

He had distracted her, and there was a gleam in her eyes. Already she was creating a new self, something she would do far better than trying to live up to whatever artificial Rima had prepared. March would simply warn Chella in advance of the slight change in plans.

Anghara came to him again when they reached Halas Han, only a day or two's travel from Casein, and gave the seeds of her new life into his keeping. She had sensibly made Brynna from Miranei. March initially thought it dangerous, pointing an unerring finger to the place from which Anghara had fled; but then he saw the wisdom of it. It would have been nice to have made Brynna an exotic from Shaymir or from some seafaring family of Calabria, but Anghara knew little about either place, and her hesitations would have shown her as a fake within minutes to anyone who

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cared to probe the disguise. This way, nobody could trip her up on her story; she knew Miranei too well, even for one who had spent most of her short life immured within castle walls. She explained away her knowledge of the court by making Brynna a minor aristocrat, one of the dozens Anghara had observed around the palace, with enough access to the court to have first-hand information of what she "knew." It would also account for the clothes she was bringing in her trunks, rich enough for someone of standing, although Catlin had been warned to pack the simpler gowns and to leave the richest ones behind. Although only nine, Anghara was proving to have a gift for subtle intrigue; she was creating an effective camouflage, allowing just enough truth to shine through to make the lie convincing.

"Very good," March had said approvingly, once it had all been told. "You've done all the right things."

"Then call me Brynna from now on. I suppose I'd better get used to it. You should," she said with a faint air of admission. "I have done that from the beginning."

This was entirely true and March had already berated himself for not thinking of it before. He agreed immediately and found it remarkably easy to think of her as Brynna—already she was no longer the Anghara he had known. Catlin was worse. She kept slipping, and Anghara would turn instinctively at the sound of the old name, then a strange closed look would come into her eyes as she caught herself doing it. But she trained herself until it became second nature to respond only to Brynna. At the last, March felt his hackles rise as he watched her raise her head on one occasion at the sound of Catlin's voice, and then glance behind her with a motion as natural as breathing to see who it was that Catlin wanted. It was as though she had turned to look for her own lost soul. But in that moment she had achieved a total victory over herself; she had lived through a moment during which she had truly thought of Anghara as "other." It was what was needed; but March had turned away with something suspiciously like tears pricking at the back of his eyes. He caught himself wondering

whether they could ever really give back what had been taken from her on this journey.

Halas Han was one of the bigger hans, more of a small trading town than a simple wayside inn. It had small quays poking out into three different rivers, and there was a coming and going as porters bearing mysteriously wrapped bales staggered from quay to warehouse, or from the storerooms to the river boats waiting on the water.

The stables did a brisk trade, and half a dozen grooms were kept on the hop, saddling one horse, unsaddling and boxing another. Glancing into the cavernous depths of the han's stable as he passed his horse into the grooms' custody, March glimpsed two desert horses from Kheldrin. These were rare, usually fabulously expensive, and a badge of someone very highly born or very rich, someone who wanted to flaunt their wealth. He had only seen seven others in his life, and four of those had belonged to Red Dynan's own stables. He felt an abrupt pang of misgiving at the sight of desert horses deep in the heart of Roisinan. Who owned this pair? If the owner had been to the court at Miranei and seen Anghara, she was in danger. They could still lose everything, even here, at the very threshold of safety. He had pondered confining Catlin and Anghara to their room for the duration of their stay.

But Halas Han was a good place to be for someone seeking to stay lost. It was constantly bustling, crowded, new faces coming and going in a confusion of impatient men whose motto, howled unanimously from a thousand throats on every conceivable occasion, seemed to be, "I've no time to waste!" In keeping with han tradition, there was only one hostelry, a rambling building of motley architecture, spreading up and out over three floors and half a dozen haphazardly built-on wings added as and when it seemed necessary. A guest in one wing could go for a week without setting eyes on anyone from another wing, and a week was considerably longer than any guest would be expected to spend in Halas Han. The landlord was a man with a prodigious memory for guests, especially those about to depart and due for

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an accounting—but even he could hold only so much in his head. Even if March's anonymous lord tripped over Anghara in this bubbling cauldron, the girl who called herself Brynna had taken to wearing her bright hair in two long plaits, and looked nothing like the royal princess spirited out of Miranei several days before. If the lord should think the face was false even so, enquiries with the landlord, if they produced any results at all, would yield only a false name. And Anghara's best protection would be an innocence of danger. Any sign she was guarded in the presence of strangers might jog the memory of a name to go with that face, and could trigger an unwelcome train of thought.

But fears for their safety proved unfounded. They were only there for one night, and gone again far earlier in the morning than a pampered lord could have been expected to have been astir. They made their

departure cleanly, and were certain to have been wiped off the slate of the landlord's memory, making space for new arrivals, as soon as they had settled their account with the queen's gold. Their passing left hardly a ripple in the constant bubble and simmer of Halas Han. And the next stop was Casein—safety at last, and, for March, home. This was country he knew well, the land of his boyhood. While Anghara travelled deeper and deeper into exile, March was returning from a long one of his own.

Perhaps he had unconsciously picked up the pace, or else he was simply unwilling to stop over for another night so close to the manor. In any event, the last day of their journey was by far the longest they had endured. Catlin was tired and well shaken by the constant jouncing of their wagon, and Anghara had passed through tiredness into exand was fast asleep by the time they drew near Casein Manor. The moon was up and most of the house abed, but a messenger had been sent on ahead when Rima had conceived of this plan. Someone had been sitting in the gatehouse ever since word had come to watch for travellers out of Miranei. One of the two men on guard that night has\expndtw0 tened ahead to alert the manor's lord and lady as the other

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climbed onto the wagon next to the driver and directed him into the inner court. Lord Lyme was already waiting as March rode in and dismounted from his horse.

"Be welcome here, all of you," Lyme said. A childhood paralysis had left him the legacy of a withered leg and a carved stick without which he found walking difficult. He was now leaning on this, a man not yet past his forty-fifth year. The illusion of great age was strengthened by pale blond hair, almost white in the light of several small torches burning in the yard.

"Thank you," said March. Catlin poked her head out of the back of the wagon, rubbing her eyes, and scrambled to get down when she saw Lyme waiting. March turned to help her with instinctive courtesy, but his attention was still on Casein's lord. "Has there been any news out of Miranei?"

"Some," said Lyme. "You travelled slowly; news flies. It filters through the han, they know things there almost before they have happened; I keep a man at Halas constantly, and we hear anything new almost as soon as the han knows of it. Sif is at Miranei, with the army, but at the last count the keep was still holding against him."

March's head came up, his eyes bright in his white face. "Still? They hold still? I thought. . ."

"It can't be much longer now," said Lyme. There was sor\expndtw0 row in his voice; he saw Rima's death in the eventual fall of Miranei, and he was deeply distressed. "The child?" he asked, thoughts of Rima followed almost immediately by thoughts of her daughter, the cause of this desperate journey.

"She is asleep, my lord," said Catlin. "This has been a hard day for her."

"Her room is prepared," said a new voice, and Catlin curt\expndtw0 sied lightly to Lady Chella, Lyme's wife and sister to Dynan's doomed queen, who had joined them in the court. "Were you one of my sister's suite, lady? What is your name?"

"Anghara's own," said Catlin. "I am Catlin." Her voice cracked on a yawn she could not quite swallow.

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Chella smiled. "Let us bed the child down, and then peryou too can seek some rest. It has been a hard day for you all, and a harder journey." Her eyes glittered in the torchlight as she came up to the wagon, clear gray, Rima's eyes that Anghara had inherited. "Tomorrow we will have to think of a plan," she said. "There are few in my household who know who the child is, and it is better not to stir up questions best left unasked. We will find you a place here, Lady Catlin, but she cannot be seen to have a personal at\expndtw-1 tendant, not in the station in which she has been cast, or else people will start wondering. But for tonight, do you wish to share her chamber? She might find tomorrow easier in a strange place if she wakes to the sight of a friend."

"You are kind," said Catlin in a low voice.

Chella, who had reached into the wagon to gather Anginto her arms, smiled down at the sleeping child. Sud\expndtw-1 den tears sparkled on her lashes. "Yes," she said softly. "But kindness is a fragile enough cocoon for her, from whom so much has been taken. Kindness I can give her, and a kinswoman's love. I only wonder if it will be enough when the cold winds find her?"

They put Anghara to bed without her offering more than a faint, mumbled protest at the gentle removal of her travel\expndtw0 ling clothes. Certainly she had no memory of arriving at Casein, or of being carried into the room in which she found herself when she opened her eyes into the bright light of the next morning. She had half expected to see the close hangof the wagon all around her, and feel the gently swaywagon floor beneath. For a moment it was strange to find herself once again in a room that, despite lacking the grandeur of her chambers in Miranei, still had more style and grace than the sparsely furnished and barely comfortrooms offered by the average roadside han. She was alone, but Catlin poked her head round the door almost the moment Anghara opened her eyes, and the rest of her folwhen she saw her young charge had finally roused.

"Good, you're awake. You've slept almost twelve hours; you must have really needed a good rest in a decent bed."

"Where are we?" murmured Anghara, or Brynna as she had learned to think of herself even first thing in the morn\expndtw0 ing, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Casein. We're here at last. Come now, get up; your breakfast has been waiting for the better part of two hours."

Brynna found herself to be ravenously hungry all of a sudden at the mention of breakfast. She swung her legs out of bed and sat up, pushing her long hair out of her eyes. She accepted, as every morning, Catlin's gentle ministrations— shrugged into a robe Catlin handed her, slid her feet into slippers Catlin brought, sat still at the gentle tug in her tan\expndtw-1 gled hair of the comb wielded by Catlin's hand. But that was a vestige of Anghara, the princess who had always accepted such as her due. Now, coming fully awake and her mind clear and rested from her long sleep, she caught the faint re\expndtw0 gret in Catlin's eye as the woman moved away to lay the comb on the bedside table.

"I'm Brynna," she whispered, "and you were Anghara's. This will be the last morning, won't it?"

"Yes, my dear," said Catlin, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice. "I'll stay for as long as you need me, and be here for you; but they can't see you being set apart like this. I can only be your friend now, and perhaps, later, in some things, your teacher—but no more than that, not here. Persome day, when we go back ..."

"Then you'd better let me dress myself," said Brynna. "Go and tell them I'm coming to breakfast as soon

as I'm finished." And then, realizing the power of command was hers no longer, not in this place, she lifted her chin and smiled in Catlin's direction with a strange expression on her face. "If you would," she added.

Catlin looked down, a sudden wave of love and fierce pro-activeness threatening to overwhelm her. She covered the moment by dropping gracefully into one of the deepest curtseys she had yet offered her young mistress. "Yes, my princess."

Then she was gone. The girl who used to be a princess finished plaiting her own hair, and shrugged into the clean

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dress left for her. Then she stood before the closed door and tried to still her wildly beating heart and enter this house of kinsfolk whom she must count as strangers. In her whole life as a child of royal blood, sheltered and safe, there had always been someone there—her mother, her nurse, and then, later, Catlin and her other women. Now, when all security had fled, when she needed support as never before, she walked alone. It was a strange new dance. Brynna might know the steps, and it was the Brynna identity to which this frightened child now clung. The princess called Anghara felt the absence of all the familiar props and flailed in nothing; this was a country in which she did not know her way. But she would find it; in the tracklessness the goal rose like a light—her perfect memory of Miranei. From here, all roads would take her home. It just might take a little time.

She squared her small chin with determination. Anghara retreated into shadows to wait her time; Brynna Kelen stepped out bravely to enter a new and unfamiliar world.

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breakfast was a rather solitary affair. The only other person who awaited Brynna in the small room where it had been laid out was Lady Chella. Brynna had hesitated at the door, her two personalities both aroused at once: Anghara could not but respond to the stamp of her mother, so clearly etched in her sister's face, and Brynna was nebulously aware she must somehow keep control. Her aunt—her foster mother—had noticed the confusion, and smiled.

"Yes," she said, "it's hard denying something we both know. But even though I would love nothing better than to renew an acquaintance with the captivating little niece I left behind at Miranei almost four years ago, perhaps it's best if you remain Brynna, even here with me. Brynna is someone whom I must still get to know; March tells me Rima's whole life is mostly wrong. So come, tell me about yourself."

So it had been Brynna who had entered and sat down to breakfast; and it had been both easier and harder to cling to Brynna in Chella's presence than the girl who had been Anghara would have expected. She felt almost guilty, in what must seem like pointless play-acting, with both of them knowing what they knew. At the same time, a gesture, a look, a turn of phrase would remind "Brynna" of the mother Anghara had left behind, and Anghara would cry out with the thwarted need to find something more of her mother in her aunt. On the other hand, she realized juggling Brynna with Anghara at a whim, depending on the company she kept at any given moment, would drive her mad within

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days. And besides, what if there was someone else with her aunt, a stranger, and she made some silly small mistake? Discovery could follow all too easily. So she clung stubbornly to Brynna's thoughts and feelings; careful, thoughtful Brynna, who considered things conscientiously before she spoke, who would shy away from every unnecessary risk. Her first breakfast at Casein was something of an ordeal at the end of it Brynna, although exhausted, was aware of a feeling of what was almost triumph—she had earned and she had won. Chella had risen with her and given her a light kiss on the brow.

"You'll do very well," she murmured. "You're strong; you've got potential you haven't touched yet. It's probably just as well, for now. Do you want to go and explore a little? The grounds are quite safe, only don't go falling into any of the wells, they're still pure snowmelt. You might even run into the boys, they're out there somewhere; they know you're here."

Brynna colored a little and Chella chuckled.

"They are your cousins, remember, but even if you take that away, they are now your foster brothers. You're going to have to meet them sooner or later."

"How will I . . ." Brynna began, and then lost herself in the complexity of the question. She wanted to ask, without quite knowing how to go about it, how she was to know them, how she should approach them and win them. Her eyes dropped at Chella's liquid laugh, but it was not unkind, merely amused comprehension.

"They'll know you," she said, "and I hope I have instilled enough manners by now for them to introduce themselves and make a guest feel at home. After that, it's up to you. To all of you. Perhaps I do wrong in not telling them the truth, but maybe it's for the best—it's yourself they will take you as, not a cousin whom they must accept for form's sake."

Brynna wanted to ask what would happen if they didn't like her. She saw months and perhaps years unfold before her in a black tunnel of loneliness as the single outsider, the youngest not counting baby Drya, the only girl in a clutch of

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boys—but it was a pointless question. There would be nothing Chella could do if those particular fears came true. So she merely gave Chella what she thought of as a brave smile, not realizing just how much of her soul was revealed in those expressive gray eyes, and obediently left the breakfast room to seek a way into the grounds.

She was initially met with silence, with no sign or sound of children at play. The manor was set into a square of level, well-tended lawn which was nevertheless showing the effects of what must have been a recent retreat of snow—there were still patches of it in sheltered corners. The lawn was empty of any presence but that of what seemed to be a garden skulking around the edges and picking at something—perhaps an early and hardy spring weed or two. What surrounded the lawn looked like wilderness. Brynna chose a direction at random, heading toward a copse of thinly spaced trees. They were still mostly bare, just emerging from winter, but there was a promise about them, a quickening in the not-quite-buds on twigs preparing to wake into spring. A long-tailed bird of a kind Brynna had never seen before balanced precariously on one of the topmost and most fragile twigs and filled the air with liquid song. Beneath the bird there seemed to be a tended path, and Brynna took it, exploring.

Before long she heard the sound of water. She was soon to learn she would never be far from water in Casein. The manor was set into a lattice of no less than seven streams bubbling down from the mountains at its back toward the River Tanassa at its feet; it was these that had earned its sobriquet of

the House of the Wells. They had called Rima that, Rima of the Wells, but only now, here in the place where Rima had been born, did her daughter realize the name's true meaning. In Casein the streams were called wells, and the particular one Brynna had targeted was one of the smaller ones, clear mountain water rushing over smooth pebbles in its bed. Coming down to the edge, Brynna dipped a hand into the stream and gasped at the glacial water; beneath the surface odd-shaped stones and pebbles littered the

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stream bed upon a base of striated rock that formed the root of the mountain, interspersed with stretches of pale clean sand. A fragment of greenish rock caught her eye, rough-edged but carved into an intriguing shape by the water. It lay next to a larger stone, damp and slippery but at least partly out of the water and with a precarious possibility as a stepstone in the middle of the brook. Balancing herself on this, she leaned over to retrieve the fragment, almost falling into the well despite her aunt's explicit warning. She examined her prize with interest, still crouched and finely balanced mid-stream on her wobbly stepping stone, and then, clutching the treasure in her hand for want of a pocket, glanced around at the glade surrounding the well.

Two massive willow trees grew leaning into one another, directly opposite on the far bank. They were almost naked still, their grayish twigs and branches trailing disconsolately in the water as if they belonged to something that would never wake again. But even here there were signs, and Brynna realized the willows would form an almost self-contained grotto, a bell-like space beneath the spreading boughs, once summer put leaves onto their wintry skeletons. Intrigued, she crossed the well and pushed aside the trailing edge of the nearest willow. A few branch-ends caught at her dress but on the whole the barrier remained more visual than physical, and she was rewarded by the discovery of a quiet place, hidden by what would before too long be a screen of spreading branches. The outer edge, away from the well, was hedged by what seemed to be a sort of thorn bush, a guard against unexpected approach from the rear; and toward the stream the ground sloped steeply down to the water's edge. It was carpeted with moss and bracken, and what looked like it might well develop into a clutch of bluebells.

Brynna forgot about the other children she was meant to be seeking, sitting down with a sigh in this hidden place with so much potential for summer magic, letting go of her homesickness and confusion for a moment. She reluctantly abandoned the idea that the spot beneath the willows had

been left unknown and unclaimed, as close to the house as it was; but, for now at least, the bracken was undisturbed, and there were no footprints in the soft earth. Not secret, perhaps certainly no man's, not now. Hers, then, if she chose. In an act of claiming that was half childish and half pagan, out of time immemorial, she took the stone she had lifted from the well and planted it, sharp end down, into the soft earth on the highest point in the grotto. She worked it in until it looked properly rooted—not unlike a Standing Stone. A shiver of peculiar energy rushed through her, a feeling of having done something right, something she had yet to understand the significance of but which was never profoundly important in some way. And then, eventually, she left the tree-cave, careful to leave few traces of her passing, and resumed her search for Chella's sons.

They were still lurking in silence somewhere; she thought she heard a faint sound of raised childish voices once and tried to follow it, but it had soon faded. No matter; perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps it

would be better to meet all these young strangers, of whose welcome she was far from certain, in an environment made safer by the presence of friendly adults. At least then she would have the advantage of that first instant of acceptance forced by the presence of their elders, in the absence of any of her own. In any event, her thoughts far from Casein, she had ceased looking for them when she finally emerged into what looked like a small, empty clearing in the woods as she headed back to the house. When a sudden hissing sound broke the still of the glade, she looked up—and froze, transfixed by the sight of an arrow heading straight for her. Perhaps it was only the sudden breeze, or the shaft had been sped a notch too high, but the arrow suddenly lost height and fell short, embedding itself in the ground at her feet, where she stood rooted with shock. The arrow was followed by an exclamation with equal portions of anger, dismay and relief, and the sudden appearance of a rangy, fair-haired boy holding a sturdy bow.

She seemed to have found her cousins.

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The first boy was followed by another, dark-haired but with piercing blue eyes, and then by two more, obviously twins, their almost lint-white hair an unmistakable bequest from Lyme, their father. Brynna did a swift double take. Four? There were meant to be four children in Casein, but only three sons, the fourth being a much younger girl, still in the nursery. And Chella had said nothing ... she had said, the boys might be out there. Her words still applied. But no body had told her there would be more than three ...

The oldest blond boy scowled at her darkly from across the clearing. "You thundering idiot!" he said sharply. "I could have hit you! I still don't know why I didn't, you were such a perfect target! Who are you? Don't you know this is our practice range?"

"No," said Brynna, goaded into equal sharpness by the unexpectedness of this second attack. "How could I? I only got here last night."

"It must be the new fosterling, Ansen," said one of the plucking at his brother's sleeve. Brynna, her eyes flitting from one to the other, already despaired of ever telling them apart.

"Yes. It must be." Ansen put down the bow, but the scowl still didn't leave his face. "All the same, you shouldn't wander in our woods until you know where you should go." "Or where you shouldn't, I suppose," the dark-haired boy said with a sudden smile. "Lay off her, Ansen, she didn't do it for a purpose. We were pretty well hidden; you would have been even more upset if she'd seen right through our hiding place." NicpiK'd forward, the first of them to do so. "I am Kieran Plilli'i. of ('oba in Shaymir. I'm the other fosterling at Casein." 'Mv iiiime is Brynna Kelen." 'sinned to remember his manners. "I'm Ansen, and iic my brothers, Adamo and Charo." Iilih is which?" said Brynna, looking from one to the other in comic disbelief.

nl the twins giggled. "I'm Charo," he said. "If you

mii nl us talk, it's usually me. Adamo only really

H when spoken to."

Adamo succumbed to a slow flush at this brotherly gibe, but said nothing to disprove Charo's quip. Ansen crossed the clearing and bent to retrieve his arrow. He examined it minutely, and scowled at it

again.

"I don't get it," he said. "It's straight and true. By all rights it should have skewered you."

"Give over," said Kieran, his voice suddenly sharp. "Would you have rather it had?"

Ansen made no answer, wiping the point of the arrow clean of forest earth on his trousers and sliding it back into the quiver slung across his back. To say he was upset would have been putting it mildly; he had obviously set great store on the shot he had loosed—and he was right, it should have connected. And yet it had dropped like a stone when it came to within three feet of her.

"Where are you from?" asked Kieran, breaking the awkward silence lengthening between them.

"Miranei," said Brynna.

That earned her a quickening of interest from Ansen, at least. "Miranei? My aunt lives there, she's the Queen of Roisinan." It wasn't entirely unexpected; Ansen looked as if he had already enjoyed plenty of mileage out of his royal connections. Perhaps the best path to his acceptance would have been to tell him outright who she really was; he would likely never have left the house without his "royal cousin" in tow. "My father says there's a great battle going on there right now. Did you see it?"

"No," said Brynna, whose heart had missed a beat. Battle? "We left before the ... before. There was no battle."

"Miranei," said Ansen. "That's not so near. Why did you come here?"

"I'm from Shaymir," said Kieran reasonably. "That's a lot further."

"Yes, but you're a boy," said Ansen. "They hardly ever send girls far from home."

"Maybe she ran away from the battle," suggested one of the twins ingenuously.

That was getting rather too close to the bone. "But there

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was no battle!" Brynna protested. It only earned her another withering look from Ansen.

"You're only a girl," he said scathingly. "And probably a precious and pampered one. They might have heard the batwas coming, and they sent you away as far as they could so you wouldn't be there."

"Little did they know," said Kieran in a tone ripe with amusement, "that they would send her straight into the path of your arrow, foster brother. If it hadn't been for her, you might even have hit your target."

"Of course I would have hit it!" Ansen bristled, shooting another venomous look in Brynna's direction. She seemed to have wrecked a bet; and Ansen's failure, together with Kieran's teasing, seemed to be setting Brynna's relationship with her oldest cousin and, now, foster brother, into a mold of pique and resentment right from the start. She had not begun well.

They started out for home in a sort of unspoken common consent—it went without saying the morning

was ruined for Ansen. Kieran's interest in Brynna seemed to have been exhausted by his defense of her in the face of Ansen's rage and spite, and he walked ahead with Ansen, the two of them muttering something between themselves, too low for the other three to hear. Brynna was left to the mercies of the twins, or, rather, of Charo, since Adamo still maintained a grave silence. Charo, however, seemed to want to make up for his brother's sins of omission, for he didn't shut up for a minute during the short walk back to the house. Brynna learned all about the wells, Casein, Lyme, Chella, and every beast in Casein's mews, stables and kennels. This last apto be the topic of the moment, since one of the bitches in Lyme's prize hunting pack was about to whelp and the twins had been promised a puppy each from the exlitter.

When Charo stopped to draw breath, Adamo startled her by speaking for the first time.

"Father said Kieran might have a puppy too, if he wanted," Adamo said. He had a lower voice than his twin,

and spoke in slower, more measured tones; Brynna suddenly knew she would have no trouble at all telling them apart, once they opened their mouths to speak. "I guess you're also our foster sister now, same as Kieran is our brother. Maybe Father will let you have a puppy as well."

It was an attempt to accept her, to make her feel as though she belonged to this family; Brynna suddenly warmed to Adamo. Charo immediately took up the notion and took over the conversation again, but Brynna saw Adamo was the brother who originated ideas in this twosome and Charo was the chatty, bright, social face the twins presented to the world—a kind of a mask.

Ansen, too, had a mask—several of them. It was hard for Brynna to read him. When they reached the house and met Lyme in the hall, it was Ansen who told, in light, self-deprecating tones, of the incident with the arrow. Anyone would have thought he had dismissed the episode without a second thought—anyone who hadn't witnessed his reaction, or who didn't see, lulled by his light banter, the curiously intense look he gave Brynna as he related the story. He lingered only long enough to explain the whole thing to Lyme, as though afraid someone else might beat him to it with a different account, then he was gone, vanishing somewhere with the agility of a mountain cat. Kieran, who greeted Lyme with real affection almost surpassing that shown by his true sons, added nothing to Ansen's tale, and followed him into whatever refuge Ansen sought. The two were of an age, and obviously pursued their own interests when not lumbered by the younger brothers.

The twins, though, seemed to have adopted Brynna, something that seemed to amuse their father. Nothing would do but she had to go with them to inspect the canine mother-to-be in the kennels, and get caught up, which she found herself doing with surprising ease, in speculation about what the impending puppies would look like and which of these phantom puppies each would choose.

The children ate lunch with all the adults in the dining hall, but Brynna had the distinct impression, from the twins'

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table manners, that this was not an everyday occasion. It wasn't long before she was confirmed in her assessment by a whispered aside from Charo.

"Maybe it's because you've arrived, and they wanted everyone to have a good look at you at once, and you at them," Charo had hissed as a footman, bearing a decanter of wine, made an ostentatious detour around the end of the table where the children had been seated. "But when Kieran came they didn't..."

"We've probably got a new tutor," said Kieran with a comically doleful face, eyeing an unknown guest a few chairs down from Lord Lyme, in what might have been an indirect attempt to explain Charo's words.

Seeing the man was March, Brynna couldn't help grin; the smile brought her Ansen's immediate beady attend distracted from the wine-steward's retreating back. He had been allowed wine for the first time that year, and had developed a taste for it; he had been caught up in wishing the steward had not detoured quite so comprehensively.

"Do you know him?" Ansen asked, after a last disgusted look at the water in his goblet.

"He brought me from Miranei," Brynna answered, truthfully if not completely.

Ansen gave her a measured look. Brynna was instantly on her guard; she backtracked, thinking on what she'd said. Would an ordinary girl from Miranei rate an escort? Did she just plant a seed in Ansen's mind that she might be more than she looked? Thoughtfully, Brynna added a snippet of extra information. "He comes from here," she said. "He was coming home, and I came along."

Ansen still looked as if he wouldn't believe the time of day from her. Once again, unexpectedly, it was Kieran who stepped into the breach. "I don't suppose he looks like a tutor," he said, assessing March with a long, cool look. "Not unless he came to be our Arms Master, Ansen."

Distracted as always when it came to arms and fighting, Ansen's attention wandered from Brynna, and she breathed a surreptitious sigh of relief. All the same, she couldn't seem

to uncoil a tense knot somewhere within her. *Avanna!* she thought desperately. *It's not fair! I can't watch him all the time!* It was the thought of a child, but that, after all, was what she still was.

The question of tutors cropped up the very next morning. Brynna had retired to her chamber after breakfast, but it wasn't long before someone came for her and delivered her into a bright, spacious room with several bookshelves along the walls. Any remaining wall space was hung with an eclectic collection of items—mounted sets of twelve-point stag antlers, a large and brightly painted shield bearing Lyme's heraldic arms and several artistic displays of polished swords. A large window looked out onto the open lawn. The weather had turned foul again, the tail-sting of winter, and the window was lashed by sudden slaps of cold gray rain; there was a fire lit in the grate, and four chairs were set around it. One was empty. From another, the tallest, a long, lanky figure dressed in the blue robe of a priest of Nual rose as Brynna was deposited inside the library and the door closed behind her escort.

"I am told," said the priest, "that you are a new student. Come in, sit."

His voice was kind, but Brynna's heart was beating like a drum. In Miranei she had several tutors—but there it had been expected of her, as Dynan's heir, to be familiar with the history and the geography of the land she would rule. This was entirely unexpected, a cold surprise, especially the sight of her co-students in the other chairs—Kieran and Ansen peered at her, not the twins, whose age she was nearer and with whom she would more plausibly have been placed if education had been an issue. After all the talk of conceal what were Lyme and Chella trying to do here?

The priest studied her as she approached, settling back into his chair, as she took the one he indicated. "We are none of us here what we seem," he said cryptically, and Brynna stiffened in alarm before she'd had a chance to control her reaction. She forced herself to relax, but her hands stayed clasped in her lap,

her fingers twisted almost painfully into

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one another. "For myself, my name is Feor, and I was not always a priest of Nual. I was trained in Kerun's schools, given Kerun's knowledge, but I left the temple when I was of age and sought sanctuary. I have been Nual's, ever since. Hence this." He fingered a fold of his blue robe thoughtfully. "When Lord Lyme sought a teacher for his sons, I heard of it, and he took me," Feor continued. "That's what I'm doing here. As for the others, Ansen is twelve, and has been my pupil for two years; but a scholar's robe is just a disguise for his other inclinations, I very much suspect, and this room is, alas, rather too potent a reminder of what they might be. Even now he would rather be swinging a blade, or training a hawk in the mews, or chasing after some stag to put a set of antlers on the wall." Ansen looked both thunderstruck and abashed at this, but he held his peace; he obviously had great respect for the priest. "Kieran is thirteen and, like yourself, is not of this house," Feor continued. "He probably has other secrets I have yet to discover. And now there is you. Why would Lord Lyme require you to join us at our lessons, young Brynna? As far as I can gather, you have barely turned nine, and . . . forgive me . . . educating daughters does not seem to be a priority for most fathers in Roisinan."

Brynna had had a chance to recollect herself, and think. When she spoke, it was with a cool logic, offering unvarnished truth. "I'm not just a daughter, I'm an only daughter. An only child," she said, and Feor nodded, interpreting smoothly.

"Ah, not just an heiress, an heir. Your father is grooming you to take over . . . something, after his passing. That does explain the education, of which you have probably had a bit already. But enough to hold your own in this schoolroom with boys three or four years your senior?"

Anghara's response would have been a snap, rooted in the royal arrogance inherited from Dynan and never really disabused by those who surrounded her. But Brynna simply looked down into her lap, concealing eyes that danced with the challenge Feor had thrown her. "I don't know," she said.

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"Well, we shall see," said the priest, settling back into his chair. "Throw another log on the fire, Kieran, and you, Ansen, tell me where we stopped in our history lesson the last time."

"The Interregnum," said Ansen. His inspiration seemed to dry up after naming his subject, and he glanced toward Kieran for support.

"Continue," said Feor, giving him no chance to mangle. Once again, however, Ansen was being forced into a position where Brynna would witness a humiliation, for he sat mute and mutinous, his back straight, his face flushed with more than simply his close proximity to the flames Kieran had fed a smidgen too zealously.

Feor, who had been sitting back and watching Ansen through hooded eyes, sat up again with a sigh, lacing his fingers. "Very well, we will get back to you, Kieran?"

Throwing an apologetic glance Ansen's way, Kieran launched into an edited version of the first Rashin grab for the throne of Miranei. To Brynna, once again almost wholly Anghara at hearing these lessons of her childhood, this was exquisitely painful. It had not been concealed from her where her father had died, how, and why. Sooner or later they would come to the battle he had fought. That he had died in. It was too close, too close to home . . .

"Brynna? What happened next?" said Feor with impeccable timing, stopping Kieran with a gesture of his hand in mid-sentence and turning to face her.

Brynna would have hesitated a little, wondering, waiting to see what was expected of her. But Anghara sat without looking up from her folded hands, not seeing the sudden interest in Ansen's and Kieran's faces, and in Feor's own. She hesitated not at all. She launched into a very soft but error-accounting of what followed the point in time where Kieran had halted.

"Stop," said Feor after a minute or two of this. He thought for a moment, and his three pupils sat in silence, Ansen and Kieran staring at Brynna with a sort of fascination with which they might have watched a winged horse, Brynna her-

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"Let us find Lady Chella," he said at length. "Lord Lyme said you must have a proper education, but this was her idea. And the Lady of Casein does nothing without a good reason. She knew what she was about." He was a little uneasy, but he was not worried. Yet. Rima's sister had made this decision. And yet, it was to Rima March had sworn to keep her daughter safe—and now, here, already . . .

The time they took for this exchange in the corridor was enough, however, for Feor to forestall them. When Marcii and Brynna were ushered into the lady's chambers, they found him there already. The priest's strange, luminous eyes met Brynna's briefly, and she went white as she returned his look, again unable to control her reaction. Even if Feor had known nothing before, her chalky face would have condemned her, believing herself to have wrecked what had been a carefully laid illusion by betraying her secret at the very first test. Chella and Feor seemed to be ex-cryptic messages with their eyes, in total silence, and then Chella smiled. "It's all right," she said softly.

At the same time Feor, somewhat unexpectedly, suddenly lowered his long, angular frame onto one knee, bending his head before Brynna as a sign of respect before looking up at her. "Yes, it's all right," he said to her. "You see, Lady Chella was sure of me, and I think she was almost sure of you. Sure! of me, because she knew I would guess almost everything! within the first few moments I spent with you, and never tell J and sure of you, because she thinks you also have this gift that she and I and your mother share. And if I am your tutor" in things like history and geography, I will have occasion to teach you ... other things you must know. Am I right, Lady Chella?"

"I am truly sorry to have given you such a scare," said Chella, coming over to give Brynna a hug. Then she put her away, her hands still on Brynna's shoulders, her eyes steadily holding the child's. "I wanted Feor to read you unaware—if I had gone to him and told him of a Sighted child at Casein, we would have had to plot desperately for him to have access to you. This way, you have been placed in his charge by

Lyme himself, the lord of Casein. And there's another advantage to all this, another layer of concealment for you."

"If Sif comes looking for the female fosterling he may hear about at Casein, he might think she is perhaps twelve or thirteen, not nine, if he hears of her being tutored by the same man who teaches Casein's older boys," said March slowly.

"Exactly," said Feor. "And already I see she knows quite enough to stay with us. She certainly knows

more than Ansen." Chella grimaced at that and Feor, getting up creak-ily from his obeisance, could not help smiling. "So we'll have a few private lessons, young . . . Brynna, but not all of them will have to do with history, even though Kieran and Ansen will have to think so." He came up to her and cupped her chin in a gentle hand, tilting her small face up and searching her eyes. Brynna suddenly felt quite dizzy from the hypnotic depth of his look. "But not just yet, I think. In time. You are still so very young," he murmured. "It's astonto me that already we have been able to tell. In most children Sight does not show until they are into their teens. But you ..." He shook his head. "I think you may well be a melding of two very strong Sight lines, my child. It runs in your mother's family, although it seems to have passed by all her sister's children. And by all I can gather from the his\expndtw0 tory I teach, Red Dynan's line had it as well, although they always shrouded it carefully away. I wonder if some of the old kings ever really knew the potential they were leaving untapped ... but most Kir Hama kings wedded Sighted women. That alone should tell us something. Like calls to like, and you may be more than just a strong melding—you may be a culmination of many generations." Feor let her go, and his smile was warm, full of comfort and support. Freed from the terror of having betrayed herself so easily to a stranger, Brynna found herself smiling back. It was hard to like Feor—he had a distant, other-worldly air that precluded closeness—but he could be a tower of strength to his friends, and Brynna suddenly realized he wanted to be her friend. That by itself was worth a great deal; another layer of safety

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added to her precarious existence, another ally in the devas\expndtw0 tating and swiftly emptied world in which the exiled child-queen had been set adrift.

But ally or not, Feor was an odd and rather troublesome companion. He wandered Casein like a restless spirit, popup unlooked-for at unexpected moments, liable to come out with barbed double-edged remarks which could pass at face value with anyone who wasn't listening for hid\expndtw-1 den messages but which would reveal a great deal to those who were. He seemed to take pleasure in this baiting, and while Feor was capable of judging his audience very finely, never actually saying more than was prudent, two days of this was quite enough to completely unnerve Brynna in his presence. It did not help that there was always the menace, all the more frightening because it was shrouded in silence, of impending instruction in arcane matters concerned with Sight. But having told her she had it and that he would help her learn to deal with it, Feor seemed to have forgotten about the whole thing. But Sight does not allow itself to be easily forgotten or thrust aside. It was only a matter of days before it rose to haunt them all.

Less than a week after her first lesson with Feor, sitting once again in her by now accustomed seat by the fire, a shaft of indescribable agony lanced through Brynna's skull and she doubled over with a moan of pain, clutching her head. Ansen glanced up, and Kieran surged out of his chair, but both were forestalled by Feor who, languid though he looked, could nevertheless move witii remarkable swiftness and agility. He was already crouching by Brynna's chair, his long, bony hands gentle on her hair.

"It hurts! It hurts!" she moaned.

"Don't fight it," admonished Feor in a low voice. "It will pass. Ride it."

"Are you a healer, too?" asked Kieran, his attention dibriefly. Feor spared him a swift glance.

"I was a lot of things in my time," he said. His eyes were flooded with a strange sort of compassion, but Kieran could tell that, although Feor had looked directly at him, he'd been

very far from seeing him. His compassion was all for Brynna.

His attention was back on the girl, who sat small, fragile and somehow lost in the great chair, with tears streaming down her face. Feor seemed to be observing her with a furious concentration, his hands never leaving her temples. At length Brynna drew a ragged breath and he nodded, straightening up. "Good. You're through it."

"Is she feeling ill? Shouldn't she lie down or something?" Kieran, prompted, perhaps, by his memories of his own first days in a strange house as a new foster child—and other, deeper memories whose roots lay in his own childhood.

"I'm fine," said Brynna, wiping the tears with the back of her hand, sitting up straighter. She would not look at him, however. Kieran's acquaintance with his newest foster sister was still very short, but already he had seen how her eyes mirrored everything she was feeling, her emotions revealed for anyone to read. Kieran knew what would have been written in Brynna's eyes if she had looked at him—a residue of her pain; resentment she had succumbed so abjectly and a strange, still sort of fear, whose cause he could not pin down but which was always about her like a faint scent. Ansen, looking at him, suddenly snorted in what sounded like derision; Kieran looked away into the flames in the fireplace, aware that his own face must have been mirroring Feor's compassion.

Kieran would have liked the chance to have lingered, more curious than ever about this strange new classmate. But between them, Ansen and Feor gave him no chance—the former dragging him out of the room at the conclusion of the lesson, and the latter claiming Brynna's attention, excluding the two boys almost before they'd left the circle before the fire. Kieran glanced back from the doorway, but the teacher and the young girl were deep into a softly spoken conversation he could not hear—and then he was out, with Ansen closing the door almost pugnaciously behind him. He turned away, following his foster brother with ill grace.

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Back in the schoolroom, Feor was once again by Brynna's chair. "You did very well," he said encouragingly, "very well indeed for one so young. Perhaps I was wrong to wait. Perhaps you are ready to begin to learn."

"But what happened?" murmured Brynna, sounding a little lost, her eyes filling with tears even at the memory of the pain.

Feor, who had stretched his angular features into a rare smile, looked sober once more. "As to that, I cannot say," he said. "Something grave, though, else it would not have caused so much pain. Something very deeply connected to you. I do not know what might be happening in Miranei right now, but something of great importance for you has probably occurred there. If you were a little older, and maybe a little more trained, it would have come to you as an image, a sign. But you still do not know how to interpret these signs, even though you are obviously capable of receiving them. Let me speak to Lady Chella. Perhaps she could give us some answers." He rose. "You look better. But you are likely to nurse a headache for a while longer; go to the kitchens and ask Mariela to give you an infusion of worrow. It's as well to try and prevent a major . . ."

The door opened behind them, very softly and gently, but they both looked up with a sudden feeling of doom. Lady Chella stood there, her normally serene face drawn and white and her gray eyes dark with tears. Feor stiffened, glancing from aunt to niece, for the first time putting to this shared vision of pain into a picture that made all too much sense. The hand that suddenly dropped back onto Brynna's hair was no longer that of a healer with Sight, it was the hand of a friend helpless to shield a child from a mortal hurt. He did not speak, merely giving Chella an awkward little bow before lifting the edge of his blue robe and gliding out of the room. Watching him leave, Brynna had an abrupt, unaccountable vision of Feor

guard the door from outside, as implacable and perhaps far more dangerous than any soldier. Chella came inside and knelt by the chair, taking Brynna's small, cold hands in her

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own, lifting her face to the child's. There was something subtly different about it today, and Brynna suddenly knew what it was—Chella's eyes, the eyes that had reminded her so of her mother. They were unfamiliar now, eyes which might have had a passing resemblance to those of someone she loved, but nevertheless the eyes of a stranger. Something had vanished for good, a link, a nexus that was there before, binding the two of them into family. The disorientation lasted only for a moment, and then the world changed again, returning to something Brynna knew and recognized. She found herself looking down into painfully familiar eyes once again—and realized it was now Chella's eyes that were faand reminded her of Rima, not the other way round. It was as though she had never seen Rima's eyes, except in a distant dream . . . And then, just like that, she knew. "Mama . . . She's dead, isn't she?"

Chella reached out to gather her in a wordless embrace and Brynna stared over her aunt's shoulder into the leaping flames. She felt curiously empty, as though there were no more tears, as though she had cried them all, shed over nothing more than the pain which had wracked her so a moment before. The memory of Miranei, the perfect memory she still cherished and her last thought before she fell asleep every night, was intact. But in this instant it seemed to Brynna that the city and the keep were starkly empty of people and a woman named Rima had never walked its corridors or shared the Throne Under the Mountain with a king they called Red Dynan. There was nothing there, no memory of a face, of a form—nothing except a pair of beautiful and intense eyes which now existed only as remembrances, pale copies in the face of Rima's sister, and that of her daughter.

Chella drew away to look at her. "When it came to me I knew you must have felt it too," she said, "and you had no means of knowing ... it was a good thing Fear was with you. Come, Catlin is waiting for you upstairs. I thought..."

But the thought of seeing Catlin was suddenly unbearable. Catlin was a potent reminder of Rima and the world that had been torn from Brynna, the latest in a series of deep