

BOOK OF DRAGONS

BOOK THREE IN THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN

VOLUME FOUR OF FIVE



SARA REINKE

Book of Dragons – Volume Four

Copyright © 2007 Sarah Reinke

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Double Dragon eBooks, a division of Double Dragon Publishing Inc., Markham, Ontario Canada.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from Double Dragon Publishing.

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

A Double Dragon eBook

Published by
Double Dragon Publishing, Inc.
PO Box 54016
1-5762 Highway 7 East
Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 Canada
<http://www.double-dragon-ebooks.com>
<http://www.double-dragon-publishing.com>

ISBN-10: 1-55404-439-1
ISBN-13: 978-1-55404-439-9

A DDP First Edition April 10, 2007

Book Layout and
Cover Art by Deron Douglas
www.derondouglas.com



Double Dragon Publishing

Chapter One

By the third week of their journey, the party of Oirat had made it through nearly half of the deep mountain gorge called the Deguu Masiff. As the gradient of the ground shifted beneath the waters of the Urlug, and the landscape began to drop into the ravine, the river changed as well, growing faster and harsher. River banks became narrow scraps of gravel-strewn earth, littered with large boulders and chunks of granite that had tumbled down from higher elevations, or been carried by the swift currents of tributaries during past springtime floods.

Early in the week, they had encountered their first true and apparent trouble on the water. They had passed into a deep length of the ravine, a declination in the ground gradient that was imperceptible to the eye, but which churned the water beneath their boats into a violent, foam-capped torrent. While two of the boats managed to make it ashore, escaping the rapids in time, the lead knarr was not as fortunate. The force of the river's sudden, brutal current had smashed the boat into a tangle of broken granite. The planks of the hull had splintered with the impact, and men had been tossed into the waves, their shrieks drowned with their forms by the rushing roar of the water. The boat had been whipped about in the current, and they had been helpless to prevent it. Again, it had slammed into rocks, the keel rending apart against the stone. The knarr had shattered like a child's toy fashioned of twigs, and the Uru'ut aboard had been swept away by the river, dragged beneath the surface and lost.

This had left those who remained at a point of grave impasse.

"We cannot abandon the knarrs," Aigiarn had said firmly. "We cannot take them any further," Toghurul had argued, his hands planted firmly against his hips. He had been standing near her, and his voice had been sharp. She had lifted her chin stubbornly at him, her brows narrowed, her mouth turned in a frown.

"We will tie lines to them and draw them by shore in the shallows," she snapped back at him. "And if that does not work, we will carry them somehow. We cannot abandon them -- not until we reach the Hawr, where Juchin will have bergelmirs waiting to help carry our supplies."

They had followed Aigiarn's instructions, and though it had taken them until nightfall -- many long, grueling hours -- they had managed to haul, drag and wrestle the remaining two knarrs past the channel of rapid water, into a stretch of river where the current ran more predictably, and less violently.

This, then, had become their new routine. At least four times each day, they would have to disembark from the knarrs and lead them by rope, hand over fist through churning sections of rapids. The river did its best to lull them into false senses of security, running at a maneuverable pace for several miles and then whipping unexpectedly into foam-capped, furious water again. Yeb had suggested that those among them with hiimori -- himself, Rhyden, Nala and Baichu -- could induce qaraqju journeys, that they could send their ami sulds, or mind spirits, ahead of the knarrs to survey the landscape and the flow of the Urlug. Aigiarn had immediately and firmly rebuked this idea. All of the shamans, and even Rhyden, had found trouble since their encounter with Mongoljin. Their uthas had difficulty in reaching them; even Trejaeran only seemed to be able to visit Rhyden in dreams, as though all of the spirit guides were being deliberately kept from them.

"It is as though a shroud has been drawn over us," Yeb had remarked. He had seemed troubled by this turn of events, but not alarmed. "The Khahl would keep us blind," Nala had said, her brows furrowed. "They would summon all of their strength to keep our uthas from us."

"Perhaps," Yeb had said, glancing at her. "Or perhaps the Tengri simply mean for us to learn from this, to rely upon our own eyes and senses, and not those of the uthas."

I know what it is, Trejaeran had told Rhyden in a puzzling and somewhat disturbing dream. Trejaeran had offered no other explanation than this, and he had smiled at Rhyden, his form faint, like a shadow waning in a sunbeam. *Do not be frightened. Yeb is right -- it is a shroud. But it is meant to protect you, not blind you.* Aigiarn feared that Mongoljin or the Khahl shamans were to blame, although there seemed no other indication of buyu against them by the Khahl save this, and Aigiarn did not want to risk weakening the hiimori they had among them with such a task.

She had made her decision, and Yeb had not questioned her. He had merely glanced at Rhyden as Rhyden had directed his thoughts into the shaman's mind.

She is wrong, Yeb. Trejaeran told me it is nothing that will harm us. I believe him.

As do I, Yeb replied. But there is wisdom in her words, Rhyden. Even if it is not Mongoljin or the Khahl doing this to us, they are far from through with their efforts. That they have not tried anything else so far disturbs me more than Ogotai's silence or this shroud-like shadow that seems to have descended on us. Aigiarn is right -- we will all need our strength for when they come again. The Oirat learned in short measure other methods to detect changes in the river's current. Most conversations on the knarrs had been restricted, as every man and woman trained their ears upon the water, listening for the muffled roar of approaching whitewater. Rhyden and Baichu had proven particularly helpful at this; he was Elfin, and by this grace of birth, his hearing was sharply acute, while she had been blind long enough to have come to rely almost exclusively on her nose and ears for any sensory perceptions her utha could not provide her. Between the two of them, one at each prow, Rhyden and Baichu could glean the sounds of rapids in the distance from nearly a quarter-mile away, even when no one else could detect them.

They made it three days at this creeping pace, following the river currents for several miles before having to cross miles further by land, drawing the knarrs through the calmer shallows with them. By late afternoon of that third day, Toghrul and seven of the Kelet scrambled up a slope of crumbled granite and loose stone left behind after a flood, their ropes stretched taut between their fists, their brows drawn, their faces twisted with grim determination as they hauled one of the knarrs. Midway up the slope of rubble, the heel of Toghrul's guta settled on unsteady rocks that shifted and yielded beneath his weight. He yelped, startled, feeling the stones beneath his feet move suddenly, and then he spilled, his knees buckling beneath him. He turned loose of his rope and fell hard onto his rump, spilling sideways and tumbling as the mound of earth fell with him. He landed hard against the riverbank, rocks and loose granite hunks spilling about him, smacking painfully against his shoulders.

"Toghrul!" he heard Temu cry, his voice shrill with alarm.

"Toghrul!" Aigiarn cried, running toward him, turning loose of her own rope.

"Toghrul -- ayu ci jobaqu?" *Are you hurt?*

“Ugei...” he groaned, shoving his hands beneath him and sitting up. *No*. He felt pebbled sediment spill from his shoulders and spine, raining against the ground and he shook his head, sending another spray of grit scattering. He heard Aigiarn’s footsteps, her guttals scrambling for frantic purchase of the rocks, and those of the other Kelet, rushing to his aid. “I...I am alright,” he said, pressing his palm against his brow and opening his eyes. A stone had caught him squarely in the back of the head as he had fallen, and he reeled slightly. If he had not been wearing his heavily lined fur cap, he realized it might have likely split his scalp and skull open. “I am not hurt -- ”

His voice faded in a soft, startled tangle as his vision cleared, the pile of rocks swimming into view before him. “Tengeriin boshig!” he gasped, scuttling backward, his eyes flown wide in sudden fright.

“What is it?” Aigiarn cried. She ran up to him, her feet skittering in the loose gravel, and she stumbled forward, catching herself on her palms. She looked up and saw what had startled Toghrul; she recoiled, scrambling to her feet, her eyes widening, her voice escaping in a breathless mewl. “Tengeriin boshig!”

A body had been buried beneath the rubble. When Toghrul had fallen, disturbing the arrangement of stones and debris, the body had been unearthed, and they could see it now, a small, shriveled form protruding from the rocks. It was a small figure, a woman or child. A scarlet woolen scarf, tattered and weathered, had been wrapped carefully around the head, the ends tucked and secured in place to frame the delicate temples and cover the cap of the small skull. The flesh beneath was dark and withered, like tanned hide stretched taut to dry. They could see a face, a child’s small features, distorted by time, the elements and the cruelty of slow, but meticulous decay: a diminutive, shrunken nose; eyelids nearly closed, allowing only a margin of hollow darkness to be glimpsed beyond; thin, cracked lips wrinkled back from dark gums to reveal loosened, listing teeth. A tiny hand, no bigger than Temu’s, had landed draped near the body’s face, as though the figure was curled on its side, sleeping. Nothing more was visible beneath the rubble save for the edge of the child’s clothing, a scrap of red fabric, sun-faded but still discernable.

The other Oirat had drawn near, and stumbled to uncertain halts, all of them blinking in stunned bewilderment at the little, mummified corpse. "Ya...yagun ayu tere?" one of them whispered. *What is it?*

"Tere ayu kegur," gasped Nala, stumbling in aghast. She turned to Yeb, who stood beside her, his expression equally as stricken as hers. *It is a corpse.* "Yeb...tere ayu kelberi keukid." *Yeb, it is a child's form.*

Only Juchin seemed willing to approach the body. The burly Uru'ut noyan shouldered his way past Aigiarn and Toghrul and genuflected beside the rubble. He reached down and gently brushed his fingertips against the scarf bound about its head. "This is a *khadag*," he said. He began to slowly, carefully move aside rocks and rubble with his hands, sifting through it. He found something among the stones and paused. "These are the remains an l'uitan child. It has been here for many long years."

"How do you know?" Aigiarn asked. Temu had joined them; she heard the startled intake of his breath as he caught sight of the corpse, and her arm shot out instinctively to stay him. Rhyden beat her to it, catching Temu by the shoulders, his hands moving as reflexively as hers.

"Temu, no," he said.

"Temu, go back," Aigiarn said. "Go stand with bugu Baichu."

"Mamma, no," he pleaded. He looked up at Rhyden. "Please, Rhyden, can I see? Please? Bugu Baichu is old and she smells like -- "

"I said go stand with her, Temuchin," Aigiarn said.

His brows drew slightly, but he relented. "Yes, Mamma," he said, his shoulders hunched. He looked at Rhyden again, and sighed heavily as Rhyden turned him gently about, offering him a nudge in the right direction.

"How do you know it has been here so long, Juchin?" Toghrul asked, rising slowly to his feet and wincing slightly for the effort.

"Because this is a likeness of a *tjama*," Juchin replied, holding out his hand. Toghrul knelt beside him, studying the little stone figurine Juchin had found among the rocks. It had been deliberately carved and formed into the rudimentary shape of a deer or goat in profile. "A sort of mountain goat found only on the Lydian side of the Khar once," Juchin said, as Toghrul pinched the little figure between his fingertips and lifted it

from Juchin's palm, studying it with interest. "They have not roamed these mountains for at least one hundred years."

He touched the scarf wrapped about the body's pate again. "The l'uitan wore scarves such as these about their heads in this fashion -- a khadag. They called much of northwestern Lydia home. They were herdsmen; their tribes raised khoni for wool and meat. My aysil traded with them years ago. Before they kept khoni, their ancestors tended flocks of tjama. It was a sacred animal to them."

"I met them once," Rhyden said quietly. He stood near Yeb and Nala and blinked at the huddled little form, his expression crestfallen. "Years ago, when I first came to Torach, I visited with them."

"You are one of few, then," Juchin said grimly, his brows drawing as he looked down at the child's body. "The l'uitan are no more -- the empire killed them or snatched them for slaves. They have been gone many years from the Khar."

"Why is the child here?" Aigiarn asked softly, drawing Juchin's gaze. "Juchin, do you know what happened to it?"

Juchin leaned forward, using his hands to ease some of the stones and rubble away from the child's torso. They could see that the body had been wrapped in woolen blankets, and Juchin carefully drew aside the folds from the child's breast. "The l'uitan were not Oirat," he said quietly as he worked, his fingers finding a series of wooden buttons holding the child's del closed at its right shoulder. "Though these mountains and their tribes were once part of Kagan Borjigidal's great empire. They adopted many of our customs, our beliefs and language as their own." He glanced at Aigiarn as he unfettered the child's del. "They knew of the dragons, and Ag'iamon's promise. They knew of the baga'han. They considered these mountains sacred in the Tengri's regard, that the baga'han had blessed this land. They were the last people besides the baga'han to witness the migration of the dragons. Their legends spoke of it, the skies filled with dragons as they soared one last time among the peaks. They felt they had a sacred part in the destiny of the Negh."

"What do you mean?" Toghrul asked as Juchin opened the flaps of the mummified child's coat. "What are you doing?"

Aigiarn gasped softly, her hand darting for her mouth. The child's flesh was stained dark with death, fragile as old parchment, but what Juchin had meant for them to see beneath the flaps of the del remained apparent. The child had been tattooed; a pattern of darkened marks appeared on its breast. "The mark of the Dologhon?" she whispered, staring at Juchin, stricken.

"The seven sacred stars," Juchin said, nodding once. "When the dragons disappeared, the l'uitan spent generations searching for them, hoping to mark the path so that when the Negh came, they could lead him to the lair. They made pilgrimages into these peaks..." Juchin motioned with his finger toward the mountains around them. "Their noyan and shamans told me once that they had discovered the entrance to the lair thousands of years ago. The l'uitan had no written language of their own, though, and the location of it had been lost among the generations since. But they told me their ancestors had tried to mark the way for the Negh -- for Temuchin. They offered their children to the mountains to guide his way -- children bearing his mark, so that he would know them."

"They sacrificed their own children?" Aigiarn asked, staring in horror at the tattooed stars against the child's breast, the marks her own son bore by birth.

Juchin nodded again. "Gifts for the mountains, the gazriin ezen who dwell in the peaks," he said. "And the dragons, that they might know patience, and know they were not forgotten, that the Negh would come. They would bear the children high into the mountains, and bury them there."

"Alive?" Toghrul asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes," Juchin replied. He scanned the nearest cliff-sides of the ravine, studying them. "I would say that this child has been delivered here by the mountain. It was likely buried much higher up, and then thaws eventually brought her to a stream that bore it here." He stood, swatting at his del to wipe away loose dirt and gravel. "It is a gift to us, I think."

"A gift?" Toghrul stared at him, aghast.

Juchin nodded as he walked away, brushing past Nala and Yeb as he returned to the boats. "We are going the right way. The mountains would see that we do not lose hope, despite our troubles."

Aigiarn stumbled toward the little body, her eyes stinging with sudden tears. She knelt beside it, reaching for it, her hands trembling. She brushed her gloved fingertips against the delicate curve of its fragile cheek and her tears spilled. "Tegeriin boshig," she whispered. "It was just a child."

"It is what they believed," Juchin said, without turning around. "To be chosen for such sacrifice was a great honor among the l'uitan's ancestors -- gifts to the mountains, the dragons, and to Temu."

"It...it was just a child," Aigiarn breathed again. She closed the flap of the little del, drawing thin loops of hide about the oblong wooden buttons to fasten it in place once more. She could not even tell if the form was a boy or a girl. She tried to imagine the child's terror and confusion -- great honor or not -- as its family and loved ones had led it into the mountains and abandoned it to death among the peaks. She tried to fathom how a mother could do such a thing to their child, no matter their beliefs. It seemed inherently impossible to her, too horrifying to even consider.

"It will be dark soon," Juchin said. "We should find a place to camp for the night."

Toghrul knelt beside Aigiarn, touching her shoulder gently. He watched as she drew the blankets about the withered form, and touched its weathered face again gently, as if she hoped to somehow reach back through the centuries and comfort it.

"Aigiarn..." he said softly, pained for her.

"It was only a child, Toghrul," she said, lowering her head, her shoulders shuddering as she wept. He drew her toward him and she turned, pressing her forehead against the nook of his shoulder. He embraced her, turning his cheek against her
pate.***

The discovery of the child's body had disturbed the Oirat, but none more so than Aigiarn. They had moved the knarrs downriver, away from the site where the mummy had been found, and set up their camp along the narrow, pebbled beach. They built a small fire from their limited stores of wood, shared a cold supper of dried meats and fruits and then retired to their small tents for bed.

Aigiarn lay in the darkness for a long time, unable to sleep. Toghrul slept behind her, curled against her, his hand draped against her hip. She had not wanted his comfort. He had tried for several earnest minutes in the dark to nuzzle her, drawing his

lips through her hair, finding her ear lobe, the side of her throat with his mouth. He had cradled her breast gently against his palm and moved against her, but she had brushed him away, turning her face and shrugging her shoulder to dislodge his tender advances.

She had refused him in such fashion for weeks now, ever since the night that Mongoljin had attacked Temu. She knew it hurt him; most times, he would roll away, presenting his back to her, and it pained her to realize just how much she was breaking his heart. She had tried so hard to love him; for so many years, she had struggled to find within his embrace, his kiss those intrinsic things her heart yearned for, but she had never been able to. He did not understand it, and she was at a loss to explain, because Aigiarn did not understand it, either.

She felt Toghrul's breath grow slow and deep against the nape of her neck as his mind drifted into slumber. She closed her eyes, but all she could see in her mind was the child, the small and shriveled form huddled among the stones, wrapped in blankets with deliberate care, as though someone had loved it, even as they offered it in death. She could see the little stone tjama Juchin had found among the rubble with it. Perhaps it had been a favorite toy of the child's, she thought. She let Temu travel with his favorite toys, his bokus, the little wooden boats Yeb had bought for him in Capua, a collection of little wooden men, small figures Temu would spend hours wiggling about and inventing adventures for. She imagined this child, the l'uitan child, playing in his or her village with the little stone goat, making up adventures for it, murmuring to it like Temu would his wooden men. Perhaps the l'uitan's mother had tucked the tjama among the folds of blankets to comfort her child, and the realization of this left Aigiarn breathless with dismay, tears welling in her eyes.

At last, she slipped out from beneath Toghrul's hand, unable to bear the solitude of the darkness and her own anguished thoughts any longer. Toghrul stirred as she moved. He moaned softly, and then turned over, drawing his blankets with him as he rolled away from her. Aigiarn paused, kneeling against her pallet of blankets, drawing folds of fur about her shoulders against the cold.

I am sorry, Toghrul, she thought. She brushed her fingertips against the length of his braid, draped against the ground behind him. He loved her truly; she knew he did. As much as he loved his wives at his aysil, he had always loved Aigiarn more, and she

had always known this. *I have loved you, too, as best as I could*, she thought. *As best as my heart would allow, Toghrul.*

Such sentiment probably would have made little difference had he been awake and she had spoken the words aloud for him to hear. A distance was growing between them, one that Aigiarn had always felt and observed within her heart for as long as she had known him. He had been oblivious to it for fifteen years, but seemed to be growing more and more aware of it with each passing day. She did not know if he had resigned himself to this distance or not, but she knew either way, he was hurt and bewildered by it. He had tried his best for her; he always had. He had kept her and Temu safe and sheltered. He had tried earnestly and diligently to be a father to Temu, and a husband to her. Aigiarn was ashamed that her heart would betray him so, that her willful heart would defy her mind and seek its own course -- one that led her slowly but inexorably away from Toghrul.

And toward someone else, she thought as she ducked her head and crawled out of the tent, blinking at the soft glow of the waning fire that greeted her. Temu was in a tent across the campsite with Rhyden. She could see the faint glow of his lamplight seeping through the dark panels of wool. The treacherous passage on the river left Rhyden little opportunity in the daytime to work on the map, and he had taken to keeping long hours, with little sleep, working by oil lamp on his translations.

She did not want Toghrul's warmth or proffered comfort. She wanted Rhyden's. The distance that had grown between her and Toghrul seemed likewise to be filled by Rhyden. She kept near to him as much as she could, and when she could not, she felt anxious, longing for his company. No man had ever made her feel like that; she had never felt so safe as she did when he was near to her. She had never felt such an intrinsic trust for someone in all of her life as she felt for Rhyden, as though she could tell him anything, reveal all of her heart's secrets and fears without shame. No one had ever touched her as he had, and continued to do...no one except for Yesugei. *I am falling in love with him*, she thought, looking at his tent. *I am falling in love with Rhyden.* She was ashamed of this as well, because she knew Toghrul was perfectly aware of it, and pained and humiliated by it all the more. Aigiarn crossed the campsite, meaning to go to Rhyden's tent, and she paused, catching sight of Baichu, the Uru'ut idugan sitting

alone by the fire. She was bundled in blankets, the hem of her fur-lined cap pulled low upon her brow, and she rocked back and forth, sitting on a rock, muttering to herself. She held a dalbuur fan in one hand and she flapped it every once in awhile, stroking the blade of taut hide toward the sky and then down at the ground again.

Aigiarn walked toward her, and as she opened her mouth, drawing breath to speak, Baichu said, "It is late, Aigiarn. You should be resting."

Baichu did not even move her face at the sound of Aigiarn's approaching footsteps as she spoke, and Aigiarn smiled. She had always found Baichu's inherent astuteness to be amazing. "As should you, bugu Baichu," she said, lowering herself onto her knees beside the old woman. She felt the heat of the fire press against her cheek and she turned her face, luxuriating in the sensation.

"I must keep the *ibegel*," Baichu said, fluttering the fan again. "It is my turn."

The *ibegel* was a sort of ritual watch against Mongoljin and the Khahl shamans, and the three Oirat shamans -- Yeb, Baichu and Nala -- had been taking shifts each night to tend to it. "I could not sleep," Aigiarn said, looking into the flames, watching smoke and embers dance and whirl as Baichu's dalbuur stirred the air about them. "My mind would not grow quiet."

"Pleasant thoughts distract you," Baichu remarked. She turned her face momentarily toward Rhyden's tent, even though she could not see it, or have any concept of where his was among the eighteen clustered in a ring about the fire. She turned back to Aigiarn, her eyes closed, her brow raised as she flapped her fan at the sky. "And some that are not so pleasant as these."

Aigiarn thought of the little l'uitan child, wrapped in wool and of Temu. She had realized from the moment she had first seen the body that she might well be leading him to such a fate, delivering him with as much love in her heart to his death as the l'uitan child's parents surely must have felt. As though she had read Aigiarn's mind, Baichu said, "The death of a child always seems senseless, no matter what purpose it may serve." Aigiarn glanced at her, again impressed by the fact that Baichu had so accurately deduced what troubled her.

“They will know rebirth,” Baichu told her, reaching out and patting her hand against Aigiarn’s shoulder. “Umai shall see them know great blessings for their sacrifice. They shall reap ten-thousand fold in their next forms.”

“They must have been so frightened,” Aigiarn said softly.

Baichu’s dalbuur fell still and she lowered the fan to her lap. She turned to face Aigiarn. “I believe that child, and all of the children the l’uitan brought to these mountains did not die frightened,” she said. “Their ancestors came to them, the spirits of these mountains came to them and enfolded them with comfort and love. They were not alone. None of us are, Aigiarn -- never alone.” Aigiarn looked at the fire again. “How do I know I am leading Temuchin to that same fate, bugu Baichu?” she whispered.

“You can spend your lifetime searching for answers, Aigiarn,” Baichu told her gently, patting her shoulder again. “You can speak to countless spirits. You can witness a thousand signs. You can praise ten thousand gods, and in the end, it is a matter of faith.”

“I...I think I may have lost my faith today, bugu Baichu,” Aigiarn said.

“It does not matter,” Baichu told her, drawing her gaze. Baichu’s eyes were closed, but she smiled at Aigiarn as though she saw the younger woman plainly. She brushed the cuff of her fingers against Aigiarn’s cheek. “We all lose faith sometimes, child. Fortunately, it remains with us, hidden within our hearts. We have only to look for it.”

They heard the rustle of a tent flap, and Aigiarn turned at the sound. “Are you and Nala finished, then, Yeb?” Baichu asked, without averting her face from Aigiarn.

Yeb had ducked out from within one of the tents. He was tugging his sash about his yellow khurim and glanced at the fire, his brow lifted. He caught sight of Aigiarn sitting beside the idugan, and his expression shifting, growing briefly mortified. “Our...our meditation is finished, yes, bugu Baichu,” he said, regaining his composure and walking toward the fire. “Meditation, he calls it,” Baichu said softly to Aigiarn, the corner of her mouth hooking slightly. Aigiarn lowered her face, drawing her fingers to her mouth to muffle her quiet laughter.

“Good, then,” Baichu said more loudly, so that Yeb could hear. She stood slowly, with a low grunt, and folded her dalbuur against her palm, tucking it into her bogcu pouch. “You can keep the ibegel, and I will retire, I think.”

As she shuffled past him, Yeb reached out to help her. Baichu flapped her arm at him, shooing him. “It is seven paces ahead of me -- I heard your footsteps,” she fussed, her hand fumbling in the air until she found his cheek with her palm. “Meditation,” she muttered, patting his face. She shook her head, offered a brief snort of laughter, and shuffled on toward the tent, her hands stretched before her. “Meditation indeed.”

Yeb approached the fire and sat near Aigiarn, observing an uncharacteristic distance from her. He shifted his hips, pretending to be occupied in situating himself comfortably, in drawing his own dalbuur from his bogcu, and Aigiarn knew he was embarrassed. She struggled against a smile that kept tugging insistently at the corner of her mouth, and she looked down at the ground, trying not to giggle at his discomfort.

“Something amuses you, Aigiarn?” he asked, glancing at her after an awkward moment.

“Not at all,” she replied, returning his glance. She pressed her lips together against that nagging tug, the overwhelming need to snicker.

He nodded, his expression aloof as he turned his eyes to the fire. “You have not sensed Ogotai today?” she asked him.

“No,” he said. He flapped his fan in the air, stirring the wafting smoke, beginning his ibegel ritual.

“You have not seemed troubled by this.”

“I am not,” he replied. “You are not worried it is the Khahl shamans?” she asked, drawing his gaze. “That it is Mongoljin, wakened again, rested after her last attack?”

The dalbuur paused in his hand, poised in midair as he looked at her. “I think it is something that has awakened,” he said. “Something that Mongoljin’s attack roused, yes. But it is not Mongoljin again, and it is not the Khahl.”

“What is it, then, Yeb?”

He began to move the fan again, following the fluttering blade of stretched hide with his eyes. “I do not know. Rhyden told me Trejaeran came to him in a dream and

said that it is meant to protect us somehow, this shroud that has kept us from our uthas.”

“Is Trejaeran doing this?” she asked.

He glanced at her. “I do not think so,” he said again. There was more to it than this, she realized. Yeb suspected something, and it was not Trejaeran. It was obvious as he turned his eyes from her again that it was something he meant to keep to himself for the time. Aigiarn knew better than to press him; if he did not want to reveal something, Yeb could be fairly stubborn on the matter. She tried anyway, though, her curiosity piqued by his peculiar dismissal.

“I heard Nala say she thought it was the Khahl,” she said. “She said it felt like something very powerful pressed against us, keeping the uthas from you. She said only the Khahl shamans together -- or Mongoljin -- could summon such buyu.”

Yeb turned to her, his brow arched. “Nala has neither the experience nor the sensitivity with her hiimori to judge anything with certainty,” he said. “She is an idugan’oyutan -- a student -- and still learning about her gifts. I am a yeke shaman -- *your* yeke shaman, Aigiarn -- and I would hope that you would favor my word over Nala’s when I tell you it is not the Khahl, not Mongoljin -- and nothing we should fear.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and she said nothing. She had prodded enough to aggravate him, and she decided to let the matter lie for the moment. Yeb nodded again, taking her silence for satisfactory reply, and closed his eyes, letting his breath issue from a small part in his lips in a long, deep sigh.

“You have been helping Nala since leaving Tolui Bay,” Aigiarn said. He opened one of his eyes and regarded her for a moment. “With her hiimori, I mean,” Aigiarn said.

“Yes,” Yeb said, closing his eye again and shrugging his shoulders, settling himself.

“I had no idea that the two of you were so...close until this trip,” Aigiarn remarked. Yeb realized he was not going to escape her and sighed again, opening his eyes. She could not help herself and snorted with laughter, her hand darting to her face. “I do not laugh at you whenever you duck out of Toghrul’s tent,” he observed.

“I know,” Aigiarn said, laughing. “...I am sorry, Yeb. It is funny, that is all.”

He raised his brow. “I was going for discretion.”

She snorted again, her eyes smarting. *Tengri bless Yeb*, she thought. *I needed this -- to laugh awhile*. “I know,” she said, nodding. “What is so funny about it?”

“I do not know,” she replied, looking at him. “It is just so unlike you, that is all. Unexpected.”

“Unlike me?” he asked. “I am a man, Aigiarn. I have the same needs and weaknesses within my form as any other.”

“You are right,” she said, holding up her hands, presenting her palms to him in concession. “It is none of my business. Forgive me, Yeb. It is just that I suppose I have never thought of you like that.”

Yeb was a handsome man, only slightly older than she was, though it was easy for Aigiarn to forget this. He always seemed so much older, wiser than his years accounted for. In all the years she had known him, she had never seen Yeb surrender himself to any sort of youthful abandon; he conducted himself in every way with control and aforethought, as if he took great care and consideration for every word he uttered, every movement he made. Aigiarn tried to imagine him with the young idugan’oyutan, Nala Sahni, embracing her, kissing her with any sort of passion, but could not. *Passionate* was not a word that came to her mind with Yeb, and to think of him laying with a woman was as difficult as if she had tried to imagine her own parents intertwined.

“Any misperceptions you may have about my nature, Aigiarn, are ones you have gleaned on your own,” he told her. “Not those I have offered you.”

He looked somewhat offended, and she blinked at him. “Yeb, do not. You know what I meant.” She scooted her hips against the ground toward him, until her knee brushed against his. “I thought you were above that, that is all,” she said, draping her hand against his leg.

He had averted his eyes from her as she moved, looking toward the fire, but he glanced at her now, his brow lifting again. “In this circumstance, I was, yes,” he told her, and the corner of his mouth lifted wryly, nearly impishly.

She laughed, and he laughed with her. When she leaned toward him, pressing her cheek against his shoulder, he canted his head, resting his temple against her pate. “How do you always manage to make me laugh, no matter how badly I feel, Yeb?” she asked, letting her hand rest against his heart.

“Apparently, I do nothing more than live my life,” he remarked, making her laugh again. She sat back from him, tucking her hair behind her ears. She had unfettered her braid before trying to sleep, and had left her hat behind in Toghrul’s tent, but the warmth of the fire kept the chill from her. “Will you marry Nala, Yeb?” she asked, her eyes round and bright, like those of an eager child. He looked sheepishly at his lap, color stoking in his cheeks. “I do not think so, Aigiarn.”

“Why not?” He shook his head in mute reply, and she poked him with her fingertip. “Why not, Yeb?” Her expression faltered. “Not because she is from Galjin?”

“No,” Yeb said, glancing up at her. “Her birthright makes no difference to me.” He raised his brow. “Does it to you, Aigiarn?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Maybe once, it might have, but I...” She met Yeb’s gaze. “You were right when you told me we should judge one another by what is in our hearts. You said here we are all measured the same, no matter our cultures, or our birthrights.”

Her eyes wandered beyond his shoulder as she spoke, her gaze drifting toward Rhyden’s tent. She spoke of Nala, but her mind and heart were suddenly turned to Rhyden, with his pale skin and blond hair, his round eyes and angular features that had become so beautiful to her, so fond in her regard.

“I would not marry Nala because I do not love her,” Yeb said, drawing her gaze. “I care for her very much, and I enjoy her company, but I cannot force my heart to feel something it will not by nature. None of us can.”

She thought of Toghrul, all of his years of effort and cut her eyes to the ground.

“We cannot help who we give our hearts to,” Yeb told her gently. “It is beyond our minds to choose, beyond our reasoning to decide. It is not always logical, and very seldom fair, but it is what is inherent within us all.” He tucked his fingertips beneath her chin, lifting her eyes to his. “And when it is right, Aigiarn...when it is mutual with another, it is something so exquisite and rare. It is something that should be welcomed, not struggled against; something that should be cherished, not feared.”

He smiled. “You should go to him,” he said. He knew who she was thinking about. Aigiarn could hide many things from many people, but she had never been able

to fool Yeb, even for a moment. "He... he is working," she said, glancing at Rhyden's tent again. "On the map. I would not want to disturb him. He is trying so hard for us, Yeb."

"He is trying hard for Temu, Aigiarn," Yeb said. "And for you."

"He loves another," she said quietly. "A woman in Tiralainn."

"Does he?" he asked. "Or was he only trying to force his heart to go against its nature? Did his mind only mistake love until his heart truly discovered it?"

He brushed his fingertips against her hair, drawing it back from her face, and she blinked at him, her eyes aglow with sudden tears. "Yeb, I..." she whispered. "I cannot. I do not want to hurt Toghrul."

"You cannot live your life to please Toghrul," Yeb told her kindly. "You cannot deny your heart to spare him pain. No matter his shortcomings, I do not think Toghrul would want that of you. He is more than your lover, Aigiarn. He is your friend. He always has been."

"I will break his heart," she whispered, closing her hands into fists, turning her eyes toward her lap.

"I think you underestimate his heart," Yeb said. "And your own." She looked at him, and his brows lifted, his face softening gently. "I know what you saw today, the l'uitan child hurt you, troubled you."

She nodded. "Yes."

"And I know you did not leave Toghrul's side to come and sit by the fire with bugu Baichu, or with me. You left because your heart needs comfort, your mind, reassurance. Toghrul cannot give these to you anymore." His voice dropped a measure, and he touched her face. "And neither can I. Your heart is leading you to Rhyden, Aigiarn. The only one who can stop its course now is you."

He pressed his palm against her forehead and pretended to push her away, making her laugh, despite herself. "Go on," he said. "Go to him. Tomorrow is nearly upon us, and I have ibegel to attend to."

She caught his hand against hers, and leaned forward, embracing him. She turned her temple against his cheek. "I love you, Yeb."

She closed her eyes and he touched her face. "And I love you, Aigiarn," he whispered, brushing his thumb against her cheek.

Chapter Two

Aigiarn knelt outside of the flap of Rhyden's tent. She stayed there for an uncertain moment, listening to the simple, quiet sounds from within. She heard him sigh wearily; he shifted his weight, settling himself more comfortably and she heard the faint, whispering sounds as he tugged his furs about his shoulders. When he sifted through his papers, searching among his notes, she heard the pages flap softly against his fingertips.

At last, Aigiarn brushed her hand in light greeting against the wool. She knew he would hear her. He had probably heard her already, his keen ears detecting the sounds of her approaching footsteps, her knees settling in the gravel, her soft, hesitant breath. He hooked the edge of the tent flap against his hand and drew it aside. He smiled when he saw her, the grave lines and furrows of concentration and effort softening along his brow, the corners of his mouth.

"Beannacht," he told her, a quiet greeting in his lilting, native tongue.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked softly, drawing her eyes away from his face, his gentle gaze and spying her son on the ground nearby, nearly hidden from view as he slept beneath a tumble of blankets and furs.

"Not at all," Rhyden said. He followed her gaze to Temu. "He has been asleep awhile now. Do you...?" He glanced at her, and she glanced back. "Would you like to come in?"

He scooted himself sideways in invitation. It was a two-man tent; the Oirat sometimes slept in them in huddles of three against the cold, but the quarters were cramped. "Yes," Aigiarn said, crawling forward, slipping inside of the tent. She sat down beside him, drawing her legs beneath her. Her hair had drooped in her face when she ducked her head, and she tucked it behind her ears again. "Thank you."

He was quiet for a moment, seeming somewhat uncertain in her company. "It...it is cold tonight," he remarked at length. "Yes," she said, nodding, her eyes drawn toward the spread of parchment pages he had arranged before him. He still used a small wooden crate as a desk of sorts, as well as to store and tote the growing collection of pages and notes he had prepared. It seemed a haphazard jumble to her, but it must

have made a sort of sense to Rhyden; she had watched him strew pages about before, reaching for papers without even looking, plucking them from random piles as though he knew precisely where he had put everything.

“Temu is not bothering me,” he said, a note of worry in his voice that drew her gaze. “Does it bother you? That he is here, I mean. He comes now and curls up, and I do not have the heart to ask him to leave.”

“It does not bother me,” she said. “He likes to spend time with you, Rhyden, and you are good for him.”

“Oh,” he said, and he lowered his eyes to his lap. He moved his hand restlessly against a nearby pile of parchments, his fingertips stirring the pages. After a long moment, he said, “It is cold tonight.”

She smiled. “You have said that already.”

He glanced at her, his brow arched. “Yes...well, I...” he said. “So I have.” The corner of his mouth lifted and he shook his head, and whatever discomfort her unexpected presence, her proximity had brought to him dissolved. They laughed together quietly.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“I could not sleep,” she said.

His brows lifted, his face softening gently. “That child,” he said softly. “The l’uitan child, it upset you.”

She nodded.

He leaned toward her, scooting his hips so that his knee touched hers lightly. “That is not your fault. It is what they believed, Aigiarn. There would have been no dissuading them.”

“I know,” she said quietly.

He reached for her, his gloved palm settling against her cheek. “That is not what you are leading Temu to, Aigiarn. That child’s destiny will not be Temu’s. I promise you.”

She nodded without saying anything. That had been all that she wanted; all her heart had longed to hear -- Rhyden’s promise, his words offered to her sincerely, softly. With his voice, the terrible burden that had weighed upon her heart lifted, and she felt tears burn behind her eyelids, stinging with sudden, grateful insistence.

“I think Juchin was right,” Rhyden said, as he drew his hand away from her. “About the l’uitan. I have been working on the map, and I think he was right. I think they believed they had to do what they did -- that their people, their children had some part to play in Temu’s destiny.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He shifted, scooting nearly against her, and leaned forward, looking over her shoulder toward his makeshift desk. “Here, look,” he said, reaching for some papers. He did not mean any harm by his closeness to her. He had shifted all at once from his shy uncertainty into his concentrated efforts again, his fervent interest in the map. She had watched him at this, as well, these last weeks. He reminded her of Temu with his toys sometimes; the way Rhyden would seem to lose himself in his notes, in the map was like Temu, absorbed in his private games, little worlds of his own devising. A person could clap their hands by Rhyden’s ear when he was in that frame of mind and not draw him from his thoughts. She had disturbed him from his work, but only for a moment, she realized with a smile, as he mind drew him eagerly and willingly back into his studies again.

She took a page as he offered it to her, and he leaned over further, pointing to a line of text he had written down, something in Chegney she could not understand. “It says *e’ trie oashyragh gow kesmad harrish sole y’dorrys’noo, dorrys follit goll stiagh heese*,” Rhyden said, this ancient language, the dialect of the бага’han rolling from his tongue and lips like music to Aigiarn. “*C’raad convayrtan lhiennoo freill arrey as shiaght cruinnaghan’rollageagh brey feanishagh’tost da entreilys*.” He tapped his fingertip against the page without averting his gaze from his notes. “It means, *His feet cross over a sacred threshold, secret doors into beneath, where the bodies of children keep watch and seven stars bear mute witness to His passage.*”

“The bodies of children...” Aigiarn whispered.

“I think they knew,” Rhyden said, turning, his nose brushing against hers. He froze, his eyes widening slightly, his breath halting in his throat and then he lowered his face, settling his shoulders back, drawing away from her. “I...I think maybe the...the l’uitan shamans might have channeled the same gazriin ezen as Yeb’s father,” he said.

“The spirit of the Abhacan mage who showed bugu Inalchuk the way to the lair -- who used his hands to draw the map, to write these words.”

He met her gaze. “I think they were told the same thing as this,” he said, touching the parchment again with his fingers. “I think they thought it was what they were supposed to do. *Seven stars bear mute witness to his passage*. The child we found today had the Dologhon marks -- Temu’s birthmarks -- tattooed on its chest. Juchin said it was so that he would know them. They were guiding his way.”

“But to where?” she asked, raising her brow. “You said a sacred threshold. Does it mean the lair?”

“I do not think so,” he said, and he leaned forward again, pointing a series of characters out to her on the map against the crate top. “See these runes? They spell out *heese*. It is Chegney for *beneath*. This little symbol here...” He pointed to a small, curving character that looked like an idle tracing by a lazy pen point to Aigiarn. “This is an *anonym*, a way they showed something had a title, or stood for a person or place. Like your name would be this in Chegney...” He brought both his arms toward the crate as he reached for his plume. She watched him dip the whittled tip into a small, clay pot of berry pulp and then jot down a swift series of runes on the corner of one of his pages. “This is *Aigiarn*,” he said, glancing at her. “Only it is just a word as it is. All of the right runes are there to spell it, but it does not mean a place, a person you. It is only a word.”

She understood what he meant, and nodded. He wrote again, adding another character, the peculiar little looping rune at the end of her name. “This is the *anonym*. It makes the rest of these together a name. It makes this...” He leaned back and tapped his finger against the parchment in her hands. “It makes this a name, too. *Heese*. *Beneath*.”

She blinked at him, perplexed. “A place called Beneath?”

He nodded, smiling at her, pleased. “Yes a city, I think. An ancient Abhacan city. All of this time, your people -- and the Kahl, the l’uitan -- have looked for the entrance to the dragons’ lair in the mountain peaks, but what if it is not there, Aigiarn? They are sleeping beneath the Khar. What if to reach them, you have to start in *Heese...Beneath?*”

“Tengerii boshig,” she whispered.

He looked at her, his brown eyes round and excited. "The Abhacan have always built their cities underground. These mountains are probably filled with those they abandoned and left to ruin when they fled the Morthir for Tiralainn. Heese must be one of them."

"The dragons are there?" she asked.

"I do not know," he said. "But every path we have followed so far has led us between the mountains -- never into them, Aigiarn, not into the peaks. I do not think they are meant to. Just because the dragons could fly does not mean they flew high to reach the lair. The Abhacan blasted out gigantic plateaus in the mountainsides, places where people could not see them from below, places they grew crops, raised livestock. They opened into their cities -- into the mountains. They would have been large enough, wide enough for dragons to pass through. The city might have already been abandoned by the Abhacan, the plateaus left open and barren. The plateaus led to their cities, and their cities led to their mines, tunnels that stretched for miles beneath the mountains." He met her gaze. "I think your dragons are somewhere in tunnels like this, beyond this place -- this city called Heese."

"Beneath the mountains," she said.

"We are supposed to go down," he told her. "Not up into the peaks, but down, like this ravine is bringing us, to the foundations of the mountain range. Juchin was right -- the location of the lair must have been forgotten by the l'uitan. They thought -- like everyone has thought -- to reach it you were supposed to go up, that the entrance must lie in the crests. They were wrong, Aigiarn. The entrance is here." He tapped the runes forming the word *Heese* again. "*Beneath* the mountains."

"How do we get there?" Aigiarn asked.

"I do not know," he said. He sighed, his expression growing weary as he looked at the map. "Not yet, at least." He glanced at her. "But I will. It is in here somewhere." He flapped his hand toward the map. "I just have to translate it."

Rhyden forked his fingers through his hair, shoving it back from his face. "There is so much still to be done..." he murmured, staring at the Chegney runes all along the margins of the page. "And so much of this is bloody unfamiliar to me. I do not even know if what I have so far is right or not."

"It is, Rhyden," she said. "I trust you."

"But, Aigiarn, I have not..." he began, his brows lifting. She pressed her palm against his cheek, staying his voice. "I trust you, Rhyden," she said again.

He met her gaze, his expression softening. In that moment, Aigiarn realized that he felt it, too; the bond that she had sensed growing between them, the tenderness she felt in her heart for him was shared in equal measure. They had both been so lonely, so isolated for so long -- each in their own ways. They had found within one another someone to trust and turn to, someone to confide in and from whom they could each draw comfort. He looked at her, and it was so apparent in his face, she nearly lost her breath. When he reached for her, brushing the cuff of his fingers against her cheek, her hair, she could feel it in his gentle caress.

"Aigiarn..." he said softly, leaning toward her. He canted his face at a slight angle and she tilted her head to meet him, letting her chin lift, her mouth draw toward his. His nose brushed against hers, and he whispered her name again, his voice no more than a delicate flutter of air against her mouth. She closed her eyes, anticipating his kiss, her heart pounding beneath her breast in a sudden, eager rhythm as she felt the soft intake of his breath against her lips.

"Mamma!" Temu cried out, twisting beneath his blankets, sitting upright from his pallet. The sound of his alarmed and frantic voice startled Aigiarn and Rhyden, and they jerked away from one another, whirling toward the boy in sudden, bright fear.

"Temu!" Aigiarn said, scrambling around the side of Rhyden's crate for his son. Temu blinked dazedly, his eyes filled with confusion as she reached for him. "Temu, what is it?" she said, kneeling before him, touching his face with her hands.

"Mamma?" he whispered. "Rhyden?"

"I am here, Temu," Rhyden said, his eyes round with worry as he glanced at Aigiarn. "We are both here, oyotona," Aigiarn said. She reached for Temu, but he pulled away from her. He lay down again, curling onto his side, drawing his hands to his face. "Temu," she whispered, and she lay down next to him, putting her arm around him. She kissed his cheek. "Tell us what is wrong. Did you have a bad dream?"

Temu nodded, shuddering. He closed his eyes, hooking his fingers against Rhyden's hand as Rhyden touched him gently. The boy was more asleep than awake,

his frightened mind roused, but not coherent. “Temu...” Aigiarn said softly, stroking her hand against his sleeve.

“Hurt you...” Temu whispered, his fingers tightening against Rhyden’s. Rhyden blinked at Aigiarn, startled. “I heard you screaming...”

“No, Temu,” Rhyden said. “No one hurt your mother.”

“Not Mamma,” Temu murmured, his mind fading again. “She...she was crying...*you* were screaming. The little man hurt you.”

“What?” Aigiarn asked. She raised herself from the pallet, propping herself on her elbow to look down at her son. Temu did not answer; he did not open his eyes again, and she touched his arm. “Temu, what did you say? What little man?”

“Aigiarn,” Rhyden said quietly to her, drawing her gaze. He gave his head a little shake and then looked down at Temu. “He is sleeping again.” When he glanced at her, he could see she was alarmed by Temu’s words and he reached for her, brushing his hand against her cheek. “It was a bad dream, Aigiarn. That was all. He did not even rouse fully from it. He -- ”

“Sometimes Temu’s dreams are not just dreams,” Aigiarn said. “Rhyden, sometimes Yesugei shows him things -- visions through his hiimori, like the ravens at the Uru’ut aysil. Sometimes they are -- ”

“Sometimes they are just dreams,” he said gently, tucking his fingertips beneath her chin.

“And sometimes they are not,” she said, her brows drawing as she shook away from him. *Sometimes they come true*, she thought, frightened. Temu’s words to Rhyden echoed in her mind, peculiar and ominous: *You were screaming. The little man hurt you.* “No one is going to hurt me,” Rhyden said as she sat up. “He saw the body today, Aigiarn -- the little l’uitan child. I know he must have, even though we caught him before he got too close. I am sure it disturbed him. It disturbed me, and I am not a young boy with a good imagination.” She was unconvinced, and he smiled at her. “If something was going to happen to me, Trejaeran would warn me.”

“Trejaeran cannot reach you,” she said.

“No, Trejaeran does not want to reach me. He told me this shroud Yeb and the others sense about us, keeping the uthas away is meant to protect us, not hurt us. I

think Trejaeran feels it is strong enough to keep us safe from the Khahl and Mongoljin for right now and he does not want to hurt that by forcing his way through it. If he sensed that I was in trouble -- if something was going to hurt me -- he would come. He would warn me. I know he would."

Sometimes Temu's dreams show him things no one else can see, Rhyden, Aigiarn thought. Yesugei shows him things unrevealed to other shamans or their uthas - - maybe even to Trejaeran.

"It was a dream." Rhyden reached for her again, cupping his hand against her face. "Nothing more." *I do not want something to happen to you, Rhyden,* she thought.

"Nothing is going to happen to me, Aigiarn," he said, brushing his thumb against her cheek, as though he had heard her distraught thoughts. He looked down at Temu. The boy was sound asleep again, his breath rattling softly from his agape mouth in quiet snores. "I should bring him back to my tent," Aigiarn said. "If he wakes again, he might be frightened, and I..."

"Why do you not leave him?" Rhyden asked. "He is comfortable. Why rouse him again? You could stay here." She blinked at him and color stoked immediately, brightly in his cheeks. "If...if you would like, I mean. I think it would comfort him to have you here."

It would comfort her, too, and he obviously knew it; Temu's frightened cry, his strange and sinister dream had troubled Aigiarn.

"You do not mind?" she asked.

"You do not snore, do you?" he replied, raising his brow, and she laughed.

"No," she said. "Then I do not mind."

She lay for a long time on the pallet against the ground, spooned against her son. She had drawn furs over her shoulder, and lay with her face near enough to Temu's head to smell the soft, delicate fragrance of wood smoke infused in his hair. She rested with her arm around his middle, his body snuggled against hers, as she had when he had been small. Temu might be embarrassed to wake and discover her; any more lately, as he drew closer to that threshold between childhood and manhood, her affectionate gestures seemed to aggravate or disconcert him. For the moment, however, at least in his sleep, Temu remained her little boy, a fragile and delicate child

she had born and nursed, and she held him. She could not sleep and lay awake awhile, listening to the soft measure of Temu's breath. She lay on her side with her eyes open, watching Rhyden by the soft, golden glow of the oil lamp as he leaned over his crate, his plume in hand, studying the map.

He seemed fully absorbed in the task, seldom averting his eyes from his papers and parchments as he worked, jotting notes or thumbing through pages, referring to his copious notes. If he was bothered by Temu's words, his dream

You were screaming. The little man hurt you.

it did not reflect in Rhyden's face, or distract him from his translations. He worked for nearly an hour in oblivious diligence before glancing up at her. He blinked, as though surprised to find her still awake, and his mouth unfolded in a smile.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She nodded, feeling loose strands of Temu's long hair brush against her nose. "Yes."

He set aside his plume and crawled toward her, leaning over Temu. "Go to sleep, Aigiarn," he told her softly, letting his lips press against her forehead. She had actually started to feel somewhat drowsy, her eyes heavily lidded, lulled by the warmth of her son's body, the soft sounds of his breaths. All at once, sleep did not seem like such an impossibility for her, and Aigiarn let her eyes close.

She nodded once, slowly. "Alright," she murmured. She did not realize as she spoke, nearly an hour had lapsed since Rhyden had kissed her gently and told her to go to sleep, that he had long since retreated to his map and notes again. She had drifted off in the meantime without realizing it; her mind succumbing to exhaustion.

Aigiarn awoke again several hours later, stirring groggily as she heard the fluttering sounds of papers moving. Rhyden was collecting his notes together, tucking them inside of the crate, finished with his work for the night. He stored everything in the crate now; he had accumulated so many pages of notes and translations, it seemed a logical place to keep them all together in his personal semblance of order, along with the map and Yesugei's box. He closed the crate and scooted it aside without noticing Aigiarn had roused. He had set the small clay oil lamp on the ground, and leaned over.

His hand moved to his ear and she realized that he was instinctively reaching for the long sheaf of hair he no longer had, as if he meant to tuck it behind his ear, clear of the flame. In her dazed and semiconscious state of mind, Aigiarn found this reflexive gesture poignant, and for a moment, she mourned for him, for the parts of his life that he had lost because of her, things he might never recover or restore.

Rhyden huffed a soft breath against the smoldering wick and the fire died. Darkness fell within the tent, and as her eyes adjusted, she could see nothing. She could hear him, though, as he moved on his knees for the tent flap. She heard the rustle of wool as he drew the flap aside, the soft scrabbling of his gutal against the ground as he ducked outside. She heard his quiet footsteps against the graveled beach, moving away from the tent as he went to relieve himself.

Temu groaned quietly from beside her, and Aigiarn drew him all the more against her, lifting her chin and kissing his ear. "Bi ayu ende, oyotona," she whispered to him as he stilled once more, drawing comfort from her. *I am here.* "Bi chamd khairtai." *I love you.*

She closed her eyes again, feeling Temu's heat seeping through his blankets, warming her. It brought such pleasant memories to her tired, fading mind; memories of winters spent in the aysil, snuggled against him, just the two of them together. When he had been very small, four or five years old, she would whisper stories to him in the darkness, tales of the ancient dragonriders, and of his ancestor, Borjigidal's mighty empire. She would murmur stories and lore to him until he would drift off to sleep, tucked against her.

She had nearly dozed off again, enfolded in such soft and tender memories, when the sounds of Rhyden's footsteps returning to the tent drew her mind awake again. She heard the whisper of the tent flap moving, and she heard him creep quietly inside again. She heard his hands pat the ground as he blindly groped his way along in the small tent; she felt his fingers fumble against her feet, her ankles and then past her. He moved, laying down beside her in the dark. She felt the immediate warmth of him, the light friction as he stretched out, his clothes brushing against her blankets, his furs tugging against hers as he settled himself atop the pallet. He rolled onto his side

facing her; she felt the sudden, delicate heat of his breath against the back of her neck as he sighed quietly, wearily.

After a long, hesitant moment, she heard his blankets rustle again, and felt his hand drape against the slope of her waist. He squirmed a bit, restlessly, situating himself, drawing himself close to her. She felt his chest against her back, his legs against hers as he mirrored her posture, spooning against her. She moved, inching herself back toward him, feeling his chin tuck against her shoulder, his breath against her ear. Her body fit perfectly against his, her smaller form, her more petite limbs resting against the contours of his own as though they had been made to lie side by side in such fashion; as though Rhyden's body and hers had been designed for no other reason but this, this effortless complement of forms.

His arm moved, his hand sliding against her belly toward the pallet, and he slipped his fingers through hers, holding her hand gently.

Stay with us, she thought, closing her eyes. Stay with me and Temu -- just like this. We do not need the dragons. We do not need an empire. We have only ever needed this, Rhyden. We have only ever needed you.

She slept again, her mind at ease simply at his touch, his closeness. She thought she heard a soft scrabble of gravel beyond the threshold of the tent as her mind drifted into darkness; she thought she felt a sudden hint of cold breeze, as though the flap had been drawn back, and she opened her eyes, blinking dazedly in bewilderment. She lifted her head, looking at the flap, but it was closed and in place. No one was there.

"It is alright," Rhyden murmured. He had fallen almost immediately asleep, and spoke from a distant and exhausted doze. She lay down again, feeling him nestle against her. "Just a dream," Rhyden whispered in his sleep to her, and Aigiarn rested against him, drawing her son against her, letting her mind fade once more.

She awoke shortly before the first hint of dawn had begun to glow among the towering granite cliffs around them. She stirred slowly, her eyes opening in the darkness, aware of an aggravating and insistent need to relieve herself. She was tucked between the mutual and marvelous warmth of Temu's body and Rhyden, and she was loathe to leave either of them. When she moved slightly, she felt Rhyden's arm tighten

gently, reflexively against her, his hand against her stomach as though even in his sleep, he sensed her intentions and tried to stay her. Temu had rolled toward her during the night, and he nuzzled against her, as well, tucking his head against her shoulder. It was the sort of new morning she had always longed for in her heart, and dreamed of; something she had never found with Toghrul, despite his best efforts, because her heart had simply never allowed it. The three of them had slept curled together, like an Oirat family huddled against the cold. *A family*, she thought, as Rhyden drew himself against her, moving his face against her hair, his hand against her belly. *It feels like a family.*

Aigiarn closed her eyes again and tried to ignore the persistent nagging of her bladder, to force her mind back to sleep, but it did no good. After a long moment, she sat up, shoving her disheveled hair back from her face. She crawled forward on her hands and knees toward the threshold of the tent. She pushed aside the flap and crouched, her legs drawn beneath her as she crept outside. It was bitterly cold; she had drawn a pair of furs with her, about her shoulders, but the chill cut through her instantaneously, viciously. She stumbled to her feet, shivering.

The fire in the center of the campsite had faded into ash; the Kelet guards posted as sentries were somewhere out there in the darkness, but Aigiarn could scarcely see her hand in front of her face, much less the guards. She walked slowly away from the ring of tents toward the nearest cliff face, peering about, her brows drawn as she squinted through the shadows. They had discovered signs of ikhama visiting them in the night at previous sites; telltale paw prints revealed that the large animals had crept within close proximity to the Oirat tents on numerous occasions. Ikhama were generally scavengers, and relatively skittish, despite their tremendous size and imposing appearance. However, they had been known to attack people before, particularly during harsh winters -- like this one -- when their food supplies dwindled, and they grew bold with hunger.

Aigiarn folded her hand around the hilt of her dagger beneath her furs. She walked slowly along, keeping a wary eye out for ikhama or any other unexpected guests, but saw no movement about her. None of the other Oirat had stirred yet, and likely would not for at least another hour. They had been trying to break camp and strike

out each morning with the first light of dawn. Their travels had grown painstakingly slow, and they tried to get as much distance in as they could during daylight.

When she had reached a satisfactory and discreet distance from the camp, Aigiarn hoisted the furs up against the small of her back in a lump of heavy folds. She hiked the hem of her del, as well, and dropped her trousers, letting her knees fold as she squatted. When she was finished, she stepped away from the puddle she had left against the dirt and lowered all of her coverings swiftly in place again.

She turned to make her way back to the tent.

“Did you lay with him?” A quiet voice came out of the shadows.

She had been looking down at her gutal, but at the sound, her head darted up, her hand instinctively jerking the knife loose from her belt. She saw a silhouetted figure standing nearby, as though he had followed her. Her moment of bright start passed as quickly as it had come, and she lowered the blade, her brows narrowing.

“Toghrul, you frightened me.”

“You frightened me,” he replied. She made no move to approach him, and he did not step any closer to her. They stood there facing one another, at a point of impasse with their forms that matched that in their hearts. “I woke up in the night, and you were gone. I did not know where you went.”

“Temu had a nightmare,” she said, drawing her furs aside and tucking her dagger back in its sheath. “I thought he might wake up again, frightened, so I stayed with him.”

“You stayed with him,” Toghrul said. The emphasis he placed on the word *him* let Aigiarn know he did not mean Temu.

“I stayed in his tent, yes,” she said. “With Temu.”

“And with him,” Toghrul said. She was leery of him all at once, because there was nothing in his voice that betrayed his emotions. Toghrul was not a man who masked his feelings well by nature. He spoke to her calmly, as though they discussed the weather, and his nonchalance troubled her. “With the Elf.”

“I could not very well toss him out of his own tent, Toghrul.” She stepped forward, lifting her chin stubbornly. “Temu was comfortable there -- sound asleep again nearly at once. I did not want to disturb him.”

“Is he alright?” Toghrul asked, his voice softening. She could see him a bit now in the shadows, and she relaxed her stern exterior, feeling somewhat ashamed of her defensive reaction. He looked at her, his brows lifted with worry for Temu, his face weary and forlorn.

“Yes, Toghrul,” she said gently, and she walked toward him. “He slept the night through after that.”

She stopped within an arm’s length of him, and he looked at her mournfully. “Did you lay with him?” he asked again, pained. “Aigiarn, did you lay with the Elf?”

“No,” she said. “I saw you,” he said, lowering his eyes to the ground. “I saw you with him in the tent, lying next to him...curled together.”

She remembered the soft whisper she had thought she heard, the sound she had thought was the tent flap moving as she had drifted off to sleep. She remembered the sudden flutter of cold air against her, like a draft, and she realized. “I lay beside him, Toghrul,” she said. “Not with him.”

“Do you love him?” He raised his eyes from his gutal, looking at her, his expression heartbroken because he already knew.

“Yes,” Aigiarn told him, meeting his gaze. Too much lay between them to lie to him, deceive him; he had the right to know. “Yes, Toghrul, I do.”

He sighed, looking away from her, stricken. “Aigiarn...” he said. “You cannot mean that.”

“I do, Toghrul.” She reached for him, but he stumbled away from her. His recoil, his apparent and poignant hurt pained her, and she felt tears burn her eyes. “I am sorry,” she whispered.

“He is not even Oirat,” Toghrul said. “Not even your kind, Aigiarn.”

“He is my kind in his heart.”

He shook his head. He forked his fingers through the crown of his hair. “He has put buyu upon you,” he said. “He has done this to you somehow with his hiimori. He has tricked your mind -- and your heart.”

Aigiarn frowned. “He has not, Toghrul,” she said, and she turned, walking past him. She felt his hand hook against her elbow and she whirled, wrenching her arm loose. “I do not belong to you, Toghrul!”

He blinked at her, wounded. "I have never wanted you to belong to me," he said. "I only wanted you to belong with me...you and Temu...*with* me."

She looked at him for a long moment. She had expected anger from him; rage was a natural instinct in Toghrul, an inherent reaction, and she had been trying to prepare herself for this moment, this conversation, his wrath. She was bewildered and distraught to find no anger within him at all, only this tremendous sorrow and pain.

"You have always had that," she said. She began to walk again, tearing her eyes away from him, unable to bear the hurt and disappointment in his gaze.

"He will leave you, Aigiarn," Toghrul said, and her footsteps faltered to a halt. "What do you think will happen when this is over? If any of us survive? That he will stay with you here in Ulus? That he will abandon his life in the empire -- his home in Tiralainn -- and remain with you?"

She heard his feet against the gravel as he approached her, but she did not turn her head. "He will leave you," Toghrul said again. "And Temu. He will abandon you both, leave you hurt and confused." His hand fell lightly against her shoulder, caressing her hair. "He will break your heart, Aigiarn. And Temu's."

She shrugged away from him, her brows furrowing. "You do not know that."

"Yes," he said, touching her again. "I do. And so do you."

She swatted his hand away, turning angrily to him. "You do not know that."

"Aigiarn, I love you," Toghrul said, his brows lifted in implore. He stepped close to her, cradling her face between his hands. When she tried to turn away from his touch, he tilted her head gently toward him. "I have always loved you."

Her brows unknit slowly, and a tear slipped down her cheek. "...I have loved you the best I could, Toghrul," she said.

"I know, Aigiarn." She looked into his eyes, more tears spilling. "I do not want to hurt you."

He stroked his fingertips against her cheek. "I know," he told her, gently. "And I do not want you to be hurt, either. That is all he will do, Aigiarn. He will hurt you. He will use you until he is tired of you, and then he will leave you broken."

Aigiarn jerked away from him. "You are wrong."

"No, I am not," he said. He reached for her again, but she drew away.

“Aigiarn?”

She turned, startled to find Rhyden walking toward them. “Is everything alright?” he asked. He looked between Aigiarn and Toghrul, his brow raised slightly, his stride broad, but leisurely, as though he had simply come to look for her, curious by her absence. Toghrul met Rhyden’s eyes as he approached, and the two men stared at one another for a long, cool moment, neither averting their gazes. “Yes, Rhyden,” Aigiarn said. “Everything is...it is fine.”

“Good, then,” Rhyden said, still keeping his gaze leveled at Toghrul. Aigiarn had never seen him as he looked at that moment; as imposing as Toghrul could seem, all at once, there was something even more commanding within Rhyden. He had told Aigiarn that among his people in Tiralainn, he was considered a legendary hero, a warrior of renowned -- and to Rhyden, often embarrassing -- reputation. This status was part of the reason he had made a life for himself in the Torachan empire; he had been desperate to escape such an overwhelming reverence that he did not necessarily feel he deserved. She had difficulty in imagining him as a man who had fought in two wars, who had helped stop two violent attempts to seize his king’s throne. The tales of adventure and battle he had told her seemed like lore to her and she could not fathom this gentle, kind-hearted man in the middle of such brutality. Suddenly, this did not seem like such an unlikelihood to Aigiarn, as he stood nearly toe-to-toe with Toghrul, holding the bahadur’s gaze. Only slight and subtle affectations had crossed Rhyden’s face; a slight furrow between his brows, a soft settling of his jaw at a stern angle, but it had granted him a very grave -- and very intimidating -- appearance. All at once, Aigiarn could fully believe he was a skilled and famous warrior among his people.

Toghrul apparently noticed it, too, because he lowered his eyes after a long moment spent under the imposing weight of Rhyden’s stare. “I am not wrong, Aigiarn,” he told her, his brows furrowed slightly. He turned on his boot heel and walked back to the tents. He paused and glanced at her over his shoulder. “And I will still be here long after he is gone. You only ever have to call me, and I will come.”

When Toghrul was gone, Aigiarn felt Rhyden’s hand slip gently against hers, and she looked up at him. His face had softened, the severity drained into sorrow, and she knew that he had come because he had been worried for her. Rhyden had exceptional

hearing, and she felt shamed color stoke in her cheeks to realize he had likely overheard her entire conversation with Toghurul.

“I am sorry, Rhyden,” she whispered, feeling the dim heat of new tears.

He touched her face with his hand, cupping her cheek against his palm. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“He is hurt,” she said. “Angry with me. He does not understand.”

“I know,” he said. “But he is wrong. I will not leave you. I will not leave Temu.”

She closed her eyes and lowered her face, nodding.

He took her face between his hands, lifting her gaze to his again. “I will not leave you,” he said again. “And I will never hurt you. By my breath, by my honor -- my life, Aigiarn -- I will not.” He leaned toward her, his breath soft against her face. “For so long...years now, I have never felt anyplace was my home. Until now. Until you and Temu.” He kissed her, his mouth settling lightly, gently against hers. She lifted her chin, drawing her hands against his face, stepping against him, letting the kiss deepen.

“I love you, Rhyden,” she whispered, her lips dancing against his.

He drew her against him, embracing her, holding her tightly. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tucked her face against his shoulder. “I love you, Aigiarn,” he whispered, turning his face to offer these soft words against her ear. In all of her life, the entire length of her days, Aigiarn had known few sweeter.

It had not been Aigiarn’s absence that had roused Toghurul from sleep. He had told her this, but in truth, he had been exhausted from the day’s labor and travels, from hauling the boat by hand for miles along the river’s edge, and by the shocking, disturbing discovery of the mummified l’uitan child. He had been asleep in the tent almost from the moment he had rested on his side beneath his furs. Aigiarn had left him in the night, but that was not what had awoken him. It had been the voice.

She has left you, bahadur.

Toghurul thought of the voice as he tromped away from Aigiarn and the Elf, walking back toward the campsite. It had come to him softly, gently, stirring him in the darkness as though it had been whispered against his ear.

She has gone to the Elf...more than just her body, bahadur. Her heart has gone as well. You have lost her.

Toghrul had sat up in his tent, this delicate murmur echoing inside of his head. It had felt more dream than real to him; he had pressed his palm against his temple as if he had hoped to muffle it with his hand. He had realized Aigiarn was indeed gone. Her half of the pallet was abandoned, the furs on the floor long since cold to the touch, her body heat fully dissipated.

All that you have done, Toghrul, has been for nothing, the voice had purred, and he had jerked his head, his eyes flown wide with startled fright. "Ken ayu ci?" Toghrul had asked, staring about in the darkness. *Who are you?* His voice had been hoarse with sleep. "Ken ayu ende?" *Who is here?*

All of your sacrifices, your efforts...all of these years, Toghrul, and she would leave you, body and heart -- she would abandon you.

He had left the tent, stumbling beyond the woolen flap of the threshold, convinced he had been dreaming. He had looked around the campsite, blinking dazedly. Yeb had sat beside the fire, performing the ritual of ibegel, his eyes closed, his mind absorbed in his incantations. Toghrul had heard faint footsteps, gutal soles brushing through the pebbled ground, and he had followed the sound with his gaze. In the shadows beyond the firelight, he had seen the Elf walking toward his own tent. Toghrul had watched the Elf duck his head, his knees folding as he disappeared inside, and Toghrul had followed him, his brow narrowed, his hands closed into fists.

The voice from his dreams had not come to him again, but the words it had offered had echoed in his mind as he had stood outside of the Elf's tent, listening to the Elf squirming and rustling about against his pallet. *She has left you, bahadur.*

He had not heard Aigiarn's voice from within the tent, but Toghrul had known she was there. She was not in their tent or by the fire with Yeb. That left little alternative in Toghrul's mind, and his frown had deepened.

She has gone to the Elf...more than just her body, bahadur. Her heart has gone as well. You have lost her.

The Elf had quieted after a few moments, and when Toghrul was certain it was safe, he had reached out, slowly drawing aside the tent flap. He peered through the

narrow margin of space into the shadows beyond, and saw them together. Aigiarn slept in the middle, curled against Temu. The Elf slept behind her, tucked as snugly against her form as would a lover. His hand was draped over her hip, his fingers folded through hers. He slept with his head tucked near to hers, her body drawn against him and he held her with an apparent tenderness that had speared Toghrol's heart. He had staggered away, his eyes flown wide, his breath tangled in a painful knot in his throat.

All of your sacrifices, your efforts...all of these years, Toghrol, and she would leave you, body and heart -- she would abandon you.

He had been hurt, confused, betrayed and distraught. He had stumbled toward the fire again, stricken, and realized Yeb was looking at him, watching him, his incantations having fallen silent. Yeb's expression had been gentle, his brows lifted sympathetically.

"I...I suppose you will say this is the will of the Tengri," Toghrol had said, his brows furrowed deeply, his fists trembling. He had felt filled with helpless rage and despair, and the kindness in Yeb's eyes had only aggravated this, not assuaged it. Toghrol had thrust one shaking, emphatic finger at the Elf's tent. "That this is what is meant to be, while I am powerless to prevent it."

"I do not know if it is the Tengri's will, Toghrol," Yeb had told him, meeting his gaze. "But it is Aigiarn's -- and yes, bahadur, you are powerless to prevent it."

Toghrol had spared Yeb a glare and then he had turned, stomping to his tent again. Had he remained, he probably would have driven his fist into Yeb's face, if only to batter that gentle sympathy from him.

Toghrol had lain awake for hours after that, angry with the Elf, with Aigiarn -- and with himself that he had not done something to prevent this while he still might have been able. For weeks now, he had sensed its inevitable coming. More than Aigiarn's curt rebuffs of his advances, his rebuked kisses and attempts at lovemaking, he had seen it in her face. He had watched her spend time with the Elf, keeping near to him, and it had been apparent. He might have stopped it had he tried from the first, had he not convinced himself that Aigiarn would come to her senses and realize not only the foolishness of any affections for the Elf, but the futility of them, as well.

When he had at last emerged from the tent and confronted her, he had hoped to plead with her, reason with her. *I might have been better served bashing my head against the cliff wall*, he thought, as he walked toward his tent again, leaving her behind him with the Elf. *Reason with Aigiarn when her mind is set upon something -- no matter how ridiculous? Maybe I am the one who has been under some sort of buyu all of this time.*

“You look upset, bahadur,” said a soft voice as he passed the darkened remnants of the campfire. Toghrul paused in mid-stride, turning to look to his left. Nala sat beside the fire, having taken Yeb’s place tending to the ibegel ritual. She was a slim, silhouetted form in the darkness, sitting against the ground, and she rose slowly to her feet, walking toward him.

“Are you alright, Toghrul?” she asked.

Others were beginning to stir, the sounds of his argument with Aigiarn rousing them as much as the nearing dawn. Toghrul could hear soft sounds of blankets and furs rustling, of gutals against the ground as they began to emerge from their tents, murmuring to one another in sleepy greeting.

Baichu, the elderly Uru’ut idugan emerged from a tent near the fire. She shuffled slowly, holding one gnarled hand outstretched. She held a walking stick clamped in the other, and she tapped it about against the ground as she stepped forward.

“I am fine, Nala,” Toghrul said, glancing at young idugan’oyutan. He began to walk again, his brows drawn, his hands clenched. He did not want to speak to anyone; he did not want anyone to see him in such a state. Aigiarn’s words, and the stubborn and hurtful resolve behind them had nearly broken him. He could not tell if he trembled more with rage, shock or anguish.

“We give our hearts so freely to one another,” Nala said quietly, giving him pause again. “It seems unfair when our gifts are taken for granted, does it not?”

Toghrul glanced at her, thinking of the soft voice that had drawn him from his slumber. *All of your sacrifices, your efforts...all of these years, Toghrul, and she would leave you, body and heart -- she would abandon you.*

“Did you call to me earlier, Nala?” he asked, and she blinked at him, seeming surprised. “Several hours ago. Did you come to my tent and call for me?”

Nala shook her head. "No, bahadur," she said. "Perhaps it was Aigiarn."

Toghrul snorted, and he turned away, walking again. "Or perhaps it was my own good sense, at long last," he muttered as he left.

"Have shame, oyutan," Baichu said to Nala.

Nala turned to her, one of her thin brows arched. "Sain bainuu, bugu Baichu," she said, lowering her face in polite greeting. "I do not understand your meaning, bagsi." She called Baichu *teacher*, but even this courteous reference did not dispel the frown from Baichu's face.

"You were meant to tend the ibegel," she said, wagging her finger at Nala. "Not visit the jabsar for your own purposes. Our forms are vulnerable now without our uthas to protect us fully. You might have invited disaster, leaving your suni alone. Yeb forbid it of us."

Nala blinked at Baichu, caught off guard by Baichu's discovery. "...I was not gone long," she said. "Only a few moments."

"A few moments are all Mongoljin would need to force her spirit into your form -- to drive yours into the qarang'qui," Baichu told her.

"How did you know?" Nala asked, lowering her eyes, looking sheepish. "How did you sense me without your utha to -- "

"I do not need my utha to sense what you have done, oyutan," Baichu said. "I have my ears and my heart, and both know you well. I heard what Yeb said last night by the fire to Aigiarn -- and I heard your breath draw still as you listened to it, too."

Nala did not lift her gaze. Her face blazed with shamed color.

I would not marry Nala because I do not love her, Yeb had told Aigiarn. Baichu was right; Nala had overheard their quiet conversation. She had listened to every painful word, and though she had always known this, to hear him say it aloud -- to hear him say it to Aigiarn having only just moments earlier drawn away from Nala's embrace had filled her with dismay.

I cannot force my heart to feel something it will not by nature, Yeb had told Aigiarn. *His seed had not even finished flowing from me, dried against my thigh, and he*

would tell her this, Nala thought, feeling tears sting her eyes. *I was still trembling from his touch, and he would betray me so.*

She felt Baichu's hand hook against her arm, closing against the sleeve of her del and she looked at the older woman. "You went into the jabsar, and you went to Toghrul," Baichu said in a low voice. Her eyes were closed, but her brows were drawn in disapproval. "You sent your ami on a qaraq journey and you went to his tent. You woke him. You have brought the pain you were made to feel upon him. Have shame."

"I have spared him pain, bagsi," Nala said, shrugging her arm away from Baichu's hand. She frowned, leaning forward and speaking quietly, nearly hissing, lest anyone else overhear. "How many years now has Aigiarn toyed with his heart, a boku ball against the toe of her gutal, bouncing at her whim? He has given her all that is within him, and she disregards it for the affections and form of the Elf."

"You do not care that Toghrul -- or even Rhyden -- loves Aigiarn," Baichu said. "You care only that Yeb loves her." Baichu's expression softened and she stepped toward Nala, cupping her hand against the young woman's cheek. "You have always known this, Nala. He has never hidden it from you or lied to you of it."

"I know," Nala whispered, crestfallen. "Why can they not see, bagsi? She is a spider. She draws hearts into her web and when she tires of them, she paralyzes them - kills them -- with her poison."

"She is not a spider, child," Baichu murmured. She drew Nala against her shoulder and held her as the younger woman trembled. Baichu turned her cheek and kissed Nala's hair. "Aigiarn is a woman, the same as you or me. She cannot make someone love her anymore than the rest of us."

Nala stumbled back, pulling away from Baichu's embrace, her proffered comfort. Her brows narrowed and she pressed her lips together in a frown, looking away from Baichu. "Uch...uch'lara, bagsi," she said. *I am sorry.* "You are right, of...of course. Forgive my weakness."

"It is not weak to love someone, Nala," Baichu said. She turned, hearing Yeb's footsteps as he emerged from his tent. Nala caught a glimpse of his yellow khurim from the corner of his gaze as he approached them. "You are *buyan* to him, child --

blessings. Do not think that you are not, or that he does not know this. You are special to him.”

Nala turned away from Baichu. She spied Aigiarn and Rhyden walking together toward Rhyden’s tent and watched them, their hands clasped lightly, fondly together. As she cut her gaze back to Yeb, Nala realized he had seen them, as well; there was no other accounting for the sudden, swift passage of melancholy that shadowed his face.

“I am not special enough, bagsi,” Nala whispered. Toghrul might have been willing to abandon his heart, to give up in his efforts like a cowed dog kicked one too many times for its liking, but Nala would be damned before she would. She watched Aigiarn smile, her long hair fluttering against her face, and she hated the woman with such ferocity that she shuddered. “Not yet, anyway.”

Chapter Three

They were underway again by the time the sun rose. While the others loaded their bundled tents and blankets into the knarrs, preparing to leave, Toghrul stood at the edge of the Urlug River, his eyes upon the water. He had spoken little that morning; a couple of grunts in greeting to Juchin and some of his Kelet, but otherwise, he had lapsed into a withdrawn and sullen silence, his brows caught in a furrow along the bridge of his nose, the corners of his mouth turned down in a frown.

When Temu approached, his small boots scraping softly along the pebbled beach, Toghrul had glanced behind him, his expression softening, his frown waning into a slight smile.

“Sain bainuu, ko’un,” he said.

Temu looked at him, his large, dark eyes troubled. The boy knew something had happened between Toghrul, Aigiarn and Rhyden. He may not have known what it was, or understood it in full, but he realized enough to be disconcerted by it. “Sain bainuu, Toghrul,” he said. He blinked at Toghrul for an uncertain moment. “Are you...are you alright?”

Toghrul reached for him, slipping his hand away from his sword and uncurling his fingers in gentle beckon to the boy. “I am fine, Temu,” he said as Temu stepped against him, letting Toghrul draw him in an embrace. “Your Mamma told me you had a nightmare last night.”

Temu nodded, his cheek tucked against Toghrul’s ribcage. He offered no comment but this mute reply, and Toghrul’s brows lifted kindly. “It frightened you, ko’un?”

Temu nodded again. “Do you want to tell me of it?”

Temu shook his head. “I just...I want to forget about it,” he said quietly. “Alright, then,” Toghrul said, giving him a gentle squeeze. “You know the secret to bad dreams, do you not?”

Temu glanced up at him. “No,” he said, looking puzzled and hesitant.

“I have never told you?” Toghrul asked, raising his brow. Temu shook his head. “Etseg, the father of the sky, has two eyes, like we do.”

"I know," Temu said. "The sun in the daytime, the moon at night."

"Yes, well, his night eye is not as bright as the sun," Toghrul said. "And it does not see as well. Wicked spirits scamper about in the shadows when the moon is out, and they like to frighten people, creep into their minds and give them bad dreams. Etseg would not let them, of course, if he knew -- but he cannot always see them well."

Temu looked up at him, his eyes wide with attentive fascination.

"What Etseg cannot see with the moon, he sees well with the sun," Toghrul told him. "And whatever frightening things evil spirits sneak into our minds in the night are gone in the light of the day. Etseg keeps them from us. He watches us very closely." He turned and pointed eastward, to where the golden glow of the new dawn was apparent among the mountain peaks. "He is watching us now, ko'un, and whatever bad things you may have dreamed of are gone now. He will keep them from you. If you tell him of them, whisper them to the sun, Etseg will keep them from coming back again. He will train his moon-eye upon you in the night, and his gaze will not waver."

"Do you think so, Toghrul?" Toghrul could tell by the sudden, hopeful look in Temu's eyes, his face, that whatever visions the boy had seen in the night had disturbed him terribly, and that Toghrul's words had helped assuage his fears.

"I know so, ko'un," Toghrul said. "I often ask Etseg for the guidance of his moon-gaze."

"You have nightmares?" Temu asked, looking surprised by this.

"Yes, Temu," Toghrul said, smiling sadly at him. *And I wish last night...this morning had been one of them.*

Temu looked at him for a long moment, and then, as though he had overheard Toghrul's thoughts, he said quietly, "Mamma did not mean to hurt you, Toghrul."

Toghrul raised his brow, caught somewhat off guard. "Did she tell you something of me, ko'un?" he asked. He nearly frowned again. *Our troubles are between us, Aigiarn*, he thought, angrily. *How could you bring Temu into this? He is just a boy. He will not understand.*

"No," Temu said. "But she..." He glanced over his shoulder and spied his mother walking toward one of the knarrs with Rhyden. Aigiarn carried the bundled tent and

blankets in her arms while Rhyden trundled the crate of his translations. “She is sad this morning, I think. And you are, too. You are both sad.”

Temu had undoubtedly overheard him and Aigiarn that morning, just like the Elf had. Temu was not stupid; he had sensed the mounting tension between his mother, Toghrul and the Elf for weeks now. With the innocence of a child, Temu had tried his best to show all of them that he loved them, and Toghrul realized the boy thought himself to blame. He thought he was the reason, and he had been trying desperately to make things right again. Toghrul’s heart nearly broke at this, and he hugged Temu.

“Whatever I feel is mine, ko’un,” he said. “You have not brought it upon me, or your Mamma.” He stepped away from Temu and cradled the boy’s face between his hands. “I love you very much, and your Mamma, too. That will never change, I promise you.”

He glanced over the top of Temu’s head and found Aigiarn looking at him, watching them with a pained expression on her face. The Elf had stepped into the knarr ahead of her, and reached for the blankets she carried, drawing them from her hands. He followed her gaze, his eyes locking briefly with Toghrul’s. Toghrul’s brows narrowed at the Elf’s glance, and he frowned. “No matter what happens, Temu, that will never change,” he whispered.

They shoved the knarrs off of the graveled shoreline and into the shallows of the Urlug, taking to the water again. “May I ride with you today, Toghrul?” Temu had asked.

Toghrul had blinked at him, surprised and moved. Despite his best efforts to conceal it, Toghrul’s pain must have been fairly apparent, because Temu had kept close to him that morning, as though he hoped to comfort the man. Toghrul had smiled at Temu, offering his hands and helping him clamber aboard the knarr. “If you would like to, ko’un,” he had said. “Of course.”

Whatever unhappiness was plain to Temu seemed less so to Juchin, although the Uru’ut noyan was a man who had pretty much made a life’s habit of disassociating himself from emotional ties and trappings. That morning, Toghrul found himself somewhat envious of Juchin’s stoic detachment, his heart’s full and unwavering dedication to his mission, and not his own personal longings.

“Another two days at this pace, maybe three and we will reach the confluence of the Hawr,” Juchin remarked. He stood at the stern of the knarr, his thick arms crossed over the broad expanse of his chest, the line of his scar crimped as he squinted against the glare of the sun on the water. He glanced at Toghrul. “Into the Oi’jaga region -- the foothills and high forests again. My Kelet will be waiting for us with bergelmirs. We can travel faster over land following the Hawr south to the Modun River. Rhyden said we will need to follow this west to the Okin River, toward the great peaks of Golomto -- Ondur Dobu and Mongke.”

As with anything else that came out of the Elf’s mouth, Toghrul was suspicious and doubtful of this direction. “No one has ever reached the peaks of Ondur Dobu and Mongke,” he said. “They say Keiden dwells there, stirring the winds to keep Golomto asleep beneath the stone. He draws the very air from a man’s chest. Ag’iamon would not have led the dragons there. No man could climb high enough to reach him, not even the Negh. We will suffocate trying.”

“We might, yes,” Juchin said. “If we were meant to climb, that is.”

“What do you mean?” Toghrul asked, raising his brow.

Juchin nodded at the knarr ahead of them on the water, the one with Aigiarn and the Elf aboard. “Rhyden thinks we are not meant to climb the mountains at all,” he said. “We are meant to go beneath them.”

“*Beneath?*” Toghrul repeated.

Juchin nodded. “The lair is somewhere beneath the peaks,” he said. “And legend tells of the dragons flying among them, their last migration, when Ag’iamon summoned them. Rhyden thinks they entered the ruins of a бага’han city in the mountains among the crests, but then moved deep beneath the ground, in ancient бага’han tunnels. That is where he thinks the entrance will be found -- the threshold to the lair. Not among the peaks, but beneath the ground.”

“That is madness,” Toghrul said.

“I think it makes a sort of sense,” Juchin said.

Toghrul looked at him, frowning. “For ten thousand years, our legends have told us the entrance lies in the peaks -- upward, not beneath, Juchin. Countless shaman

have said it. You would abandon the guidance of their hiimori on the word of the Elf alone?”

“Only one shaman ever saw the lair, bahadur,” Juchin told him pointedly. “Bugu Inalchuk, Yeb’s father. He was the strongest yeke shaman our people have ever known. He stood at the threshold and brought part of it back to guide us. He wrote the map on how to reach it again. I would follow the guidance of his hiimori before that of anyone else’s -- ten thousand years or one hundred thousand.”

“Bugu Inalchuk’s hiimori failed him in the end,” Toghrul said. “The bugu he summoned to make that map killed him, condemned his ami to the qarang’qui, and madness.”

He heard a sharp cry from the knarr ahead of them; one of the Kelets shouting out and he and Juchin whirled, their eyes flown wide in startled alarm. “Yagarqu usun!” the Kelet cried. “Yagarqu usun!” *Fast water!*

Baichu stood at the bow of the knarr, poised -- as was Rhyden on the lead boat -- to listen for any rapids ahead of them and neither she nor the Elf had called out to Juchin or the Kelet at the rudder. Baichu turned at the guard’s cry, her brows drawn as if she was puzzled.

The knarr lurched beneath them, caught on a sudden swell of swift water. Toghrul stumbled against Juchin as the stern swung in the current. He heard more of the Oirat crying out, and then the boats were swept around a bend in the river, dragged without warning into a channel of violent rapids.

“Tengeri ibegel bide!” Toghrul cried, falling gracelessly over Juchin and slamming hard against the portside gunwale as the knarr heaved. *Tengri help us!* The boat pitched to port, its side rolling with the current and sending white-capped water pouring inside.

There was no time to think or react; no time to wonder how the deafening roar of the water had escaped not only Baichu’s and the Elf’s sensitive ears, but everyone else’s besides. The little knarrs were caught in a surging bombardment of waves, dragged and spun toward a steep, winding pass clogged with tumbled rocks and submerged debris. The knarr pitched to starboard, and Toghrul rolled backwards, his shoulders smacking into Juchin, his legs slapping helplessly against the nearby

benches. He felt the back of his head crack against the far side of the boat, and then Juchin slammed into him, *whoofing* the breath from him as another wave spilled over the gunwale, dousing them.

He heard Temu cry out, his voice high and frightened, and Toghrul's eyes flew wide. "Temu!" he screamed, shoving Juchin away from him. He staggered to his feet, stumbling as the current swung the stem in a broad, swift arc, dragging it in tow. He saw Temu ahead of him. The boy stood near the mast, the middle of the boat, and floundered about, his shoulders hunkered, his del and leggings sopping, his eyes enormous with terror.

"Temu!" Toghrul cried, rushing toward him, struggling to keep his feet beneath him as the knarr rode the roiling waves.

Temu turned to him, cowering against the mast. "Toghrul!" he cried. A wave smashed over the starboard gunwale, knocking Kelet and Uru'ut aside in its path. It struck Temu and the boy staggered clumsily, falling onto his knees, choking and gasping for breath.

Toghrul ran to him, tripping over benches, sprawling to the floor. He scrambled up and reached out, grasping Temu firmly by the back of his del, pulling the boy against him. He felt Temu's arms wrap fiercely around his neck and Temu clung to him, shuddering with fear.

"Toghrul -- !" he whimpered.

"I have you, ko'un," Toghrul said. "I have you." When the knarr heaved again, pitching precariously to the left, he held the boy tightly, shielding him against another volley of froth-tipped waves that smashed over the gunwales, dousing them.

"Turn it!" Toghrul heard Aigiarn scream from the lead knarr. He jerked his head up from Temu's shoulder, his eyes flown wide.

"Aigiarn!" he gasped.

"Turn it! Turn it hard!" she screamed, and he watched in horror as her knarr whipped about in the current and slammed nearly broadside into a jagged snag of fallen boulders. It struck with enough force to splinter the overlapping pine beams of the hull and crack the mast, sending it crumpling. Waves shoved against the knarr, forcing it onto its side, listing toward the river, threatening to overturn it. The mast splintered and

collapsed, dragging the heavy breadth of the sail with it, and then the knarr flipped over. Toghurul screamed as he watched the Oirat aboard tumble in all directions, falling into the violent current.

“Aigiarn!” he shrieked as she fell, unmistakable with her slight form, her long whip of hair gathered in a plait. She tried to hook her hands over her head, to dive clear of the capsizing knarr, but the waves caught her in a rush of whitewater and she disappeared. “Aigiarn -- no!”

“Give me that rudder!” Juchin shouted from behind him. The burly Uru’ut noyan seized the rudder in his hands and jerked against it, planting his feet and gritting his teeth as he tried to turn their own boat’s bow away from the rocks. It was no use; Juchin’s strength was no match for the furious force of the water, and Toghurul had one bright, terrified breath to realize they would hit, too -- the river would smash them into kindling.

“Temu -- Tengri have mercy -- hold onto me,” he said, clutching the boy against him. He pushed Temu’s head against his shoulder and tucked his cheek against Temu’s. “Hold onto me -- do not let go, ko’un, do not -- ”

The knarr plowed into the rocks, pummeling through the smashed remnants of the first boat. The impact sent Toghurul reeling. He fell, dragging Temu with him, keeping his arms around the boy. He heard the sickening crunch of wood yielding to stone, and felt the floor rise beneath him as the boat listed to starboard. He heard his friends screaming, felt them stumbling and staggering into him as the knarr heaved. He heard Temu utter a soft, frantic whimper against his ear, his arms tight enough around Toghurul’s throat to throttle him.

“Hold onto me,” Toghurul said, as the knarr lifted, overturning. “We have to jump. Wrap your legs around me, ko’un -- do not let go.”

He staggered, hoisting Temu in his arms, feeling the boy’s legs coil about his midriff. The knarr pitched, and he stumbled forward. He leaped for the water, watching it swing into his line of sight, becoming a new and churning horizon before him. He hit hard and sunk deeply, the icy chill of the water sapping breath, wits and strength from him with brutal force. He kicked his legs, turning loose of Temu with one hand as he struggled to swim, to drag them clear of the boat. He felt it hit the water behind him,

splintered beams and broken timbers collapsing. He could not tell which way was up; he tried to open his eyes, but there was nothing to see but swirling, silty water. He felt debris from the knarr hitting him, tangling against his legs and he fought to reach the surface.

His face broke the water, and he sucked in a whooping, desperate mouthful of air. He heard Temu choking for breath, and then the current had them. It felt like powerful, enormous hands clasped him firmly by the ankles and jerked him beneath the waves again. He could feel himself flipping pate over heels in the violent water; again and again, as they were swept downstream, he fought his way to the surface only to be dragged under once more. Usan, the water elemental meant to have them, and he was unwilling to let them go.

The river slammed Togrul into a broad outcropping of stone hidden beneath the water. He took the brunt of the blow with his shoulders, the back of his head, cracking his skull hard enough to cause pinpoints of light to dance in sudden frenzy beneath his eyelids. He opened his mouth reflexively to cry out and sucked in water; his body instinctively tried to cough it up, but he was submerged, and only whooped in more.

He felt his mind fading, and he clung to Temu, desperately clawing with his free hand for the surface. They had been under too long. Their lungs were searing with the need for air, and he could feel the strength in Temu's arms, his grasp waning. Togrul knew if he fainted, they would both drown. Temu was not strong enough to fight the water on his own. *Tengri have mercy*, he thought. *Please, help us. Take me, but not Temu. With all that I have, I beg you -- not my son.*

Shadows engulfed him; he felt Temu's hands loosen against the nape of his neck, his legs slackening around his middle. He felt himself sinking, his gutal suddenly weighed down as if by stones.

Please... he thought, as his consciousness slipped away, draped in darkness. *Not my...not my son...*

He woke up gasping for breath, dragging in a wheezing mouthful of air. He felt water rise in the back of his throat, and he had a dim and bewildered moment to realize he was looking up at the sun, the sky, with dry ground beneath him and the Elf above

him, leaning over him before he began to retch. He felt the Elf's hands on his face, one tucked beneath his jaw, his fingertips lifting Toghrul's chin, and the other against his brow, his fingers slipping away from Toghrul's nose. The Elf had been very close to him, close enough that even as Toghrul had sucked in his desperate breath, he had felt the Elf's against him, the Elf's mouth poised so near to his own they might have kissed.

Toghrul convulsed as he vomited up water. The Elf moved his hands, cradling one palm against the back of Toghrul's head, the other against his shoulder as he rolled Toghrul onto his side. Toghrul groaned, and then heaved again, feeling water spew in a thin, dribbling stream from the corner of his mouth, splattering down the curve of his cheek toward the pebbled beach.

"It is alright," the Elf said softly. He stroked his hand against Toghrul's arm in comforting fashion, and Toghrul shrugged his shoulder, flapping his elbow to dislodge him.

"Do not...do not touch me..." he gasped, and his stomach heaved again. There was nothing left to come up, and he moaned, writhing.

"It is alright, Toghrul," the Elf said again, leaning over him, draping his hands against his arm. Toghrul mustered some strength and shoved him away, rolling toward him, his brows drawn.

"Get...get your hands...off me..."

The Elf sat back against the ground, his eyes wide and somewhat wounded. His clothes were soaked; his hair clung to his face in a sopping, disheveled mess. "Toghrul! Temu cried, and the boy appeared in Toghrul's line of sight, leaning over him. His mouth was unfolded in a bright, broad grin, his eyes glassy with tears. "Toghrul! Toghrul!"

"Ko'un..." Toghrul whispered as the boy fell against him, clinging to him in a fierce, shuddering embrace. He felt weak and could not seem to move his arms or legs with any coordination. His head ached, his mouth tasted sour and foul, and he was disoriented and bewildered. "Are...are you alright, Temu?"

Temu nodded, his face tucked against Toghrul's shoulder. "Are you?" he asked, looking down at Toghrul, his tears spilling. "You...you were not breathing, Toghrul. I thought your ami had...had left for the spirit tree...but Rhyden, he...he..."

Toghrul sat up slowly, wincing, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow. His memories of what had happened were dim and fuzzy, but he remembered the knarr breaking apart against the rocks. He remembered being dragged under by the strong current of the river, and hitting his head.

“Toghrul?” Temu asked, alarmed by the expression of pain that crossed Toghrul’s face.

Toghrul opened his eyes, his vision side slipping lazily into focus as he looked at the boy. He reached out and cupped Temu’s cheek with his hand. “I...I am alright, Temu.”

He looked beyond the boy’s shoulder toward the Elf. He seemed to have dazed recollection of shadows closing in on him, of sinking beneath the brown, churning waters of the Urlug. He had thought he would die; there had been no air to draw, nothing but water and no escape he could find. He remembered dimly something wrapping around him, hooking beneath his arms and pulling him from the depths. He also remembered the first realization of full breath. It had come moments before his mind had roused completely. He remembered air filling his lungs, as though Keiden, the wind elemental had blown it into his mouth. “Rhyden saved us, Toghrul,” Temu whispered. “You were not breathing but he...he...”

Toghrul blinked at the Elf in startled realization. It had not been Keiden easing air into his lungs, drawing breath to him, life back into his waning form. *It was you*, he thought, stunned.

They lost nearly everyone to the whitewaters of the Urlug River. The few that survived were left stricken and shocked, stumbling along the narrow gravel shores, finding one another, drawing together in a stunned and tremulous group. They struggled to find enough dry wood along the riverbanks to build a fire, and they gathered around it, huddling in their sodden clothes, shivering and trying to fend off hypothermia. Baichu was gone, caught by the furious current and dragged beneath the waves. Her oyutan, Nala, sat against the ground before the fire, her eyes enormous and haunted, her arms drawn about her chest. Aigiarn had fought the rapids long enough to make her way to shore and sat across from Nala, staring numbly at the fire, with Temu tucked against

her. As they had realized the enormity of their losses, Temu had seemed to shrink, his shock and grief overwhelming him. He had not spoken for hours; he cowered against Aigiarn, his eyes glassy and dazed, his lips quivering with cold.

Juchin had also managed to swim ashore. He stood by himself along the water's edge, staring at the foam-capped, swirling current that had taken his friends, his brows drawn, his expression unreadable.

Yeb moved among those who remained, drawing from his bogcu whatever medicines he had been able to salvage, helping to tend to their injuries. Toghrul sat near Aigiarn and Temu and watched the shaman genuflect beside the wounded each in turn, murmuring to them in a quiet, gentle voice, trying his best to soothe their pain.

Rhyden helped him care for the injured. The map and wood carving -- the entire crate the Elf had used to carry his translations -- was gone, washed away by the river. *We are lost without it*, Toghrul thought. *Even if the Elf was misguiding us, leading us along the wrong path, at least we still had the map.* He looked at Aigiarn and she met his gaze, her eyes shocked and swimming with tears. *We are lost without it. We will never find the lair now.*

The Elf knelt for a time before Temu and Aigiarn, and Toghrul watched as he cradled Temu's face between his hands, raising the boy's head from his mother's shoulder. Rhyden cupped his hand over Temu's eyes one at a time, moving his fingers slightly and studying Temu's face. He slipped his fingertips beneath the shelf of Temu's chin, along the side of his throat, feeling the measure of the boy's pulse. He pressed his ear against Temu's chest, as if listening; he drew Temu's gaze with his finger, tracing lightly in the air and watching intently as Temu followed the motion at his beckon.

"He is in shock," Rhyden said to Aigiarn. He let Temu huddle against her again, and stroked his hand gently against the boy's wet hair. "Keep him near to the fire. Keep him talking if you can."

Aigiarn nodded mutely, her tears spilling. Rhyden caressed her face and leaned toward her; it nearly broke Toghrul to watch her face soften as his forehead met hers, as her hands fluttered against his cheeks.

"The map..." she whispered. "Rhyden, the map is gone."

"I know," he breathed, nodding.

She closed her eyes. "We will never find it now. We...we will never find the way."

"Yes, we will," he said. "Somehow, some way, I promise you we will, Aigiarn. All that I have -- all that is mine -- by my breath, we will find it."

She kissed him, and then clung to him, her fingers splayed against his shoulder as she shuddered, weeping. Toghrul turned away as Rhyden held her.

"We should move," Juchin said, turning away from the river to face them. He closed his hands into fists and walked back to the fire. "My men are waiting for us at the Hawr River. If we follow the shoreline -- if we keep moving -- we will reach them by week's end."

"This boy is hurt," Rhyden said. He turned to a young Uru'ut nearby whose leg had been mangled. Earlier, Rhyden had used long, sturdy beams of shattered wood from the knarrs to brace the Uru'ut's broken limb. He had borrowed a blanket from one of Toghrul's Kelet and ripped it into broad swaths, binding the young man's leg between the shafts of wood from his ankle to the apex of his hip. "He cannot walk."

"Then we will leave him here," Juchin said, and Rhyden stared at him, visibly startled. "These others who are hurt can still move on their own, and set the pace we will need to mark."

"But he will die if we leave him," Rhyden said. "If his injury does not kill him, the cold will."

"We will all die by the cold if we do not move, Rhyden," Juchin said. "We have no dry clothes and that fire will not last. We have no food except what we carry in our bogcus. Our only hope is to leave them and reach the Hawr -- reach my men."

"Fine," Rhyden said, standing. "Then we move. But I will carry him."

"Rhyden..." Juchin began, his face softening.

"I will carry him," Rhyden said again, his brows narrowing. "It is by me that this has come upon him, and it is my burden. Let me carry him."

"It is not your fault this has happened, Rhyden," Yeb said quietly, rising to his feet.

"I did not hear the rapids," Rhyden said, turning to him. His eyes were filled with anguish. "I did not hear them, Yeb, and I...if I had, I might have prevented this. Your people would still be alive; we would still have the map -- this boy would not be

hurt!”“None of us heard the rapids,” Juchin told him, stepping forward. “It is not your burden or your fault. You have done your best for him, and that is all that could be asked. You will know buyan from the Tengri -- blessings, lad -- for your sacrifice. But there is no help we will find for him beyond this point. We have no choice.”

Rhyden met his gaze, and Juchin’s expression softened all the more to see the pain in his eyes. “I am not leaving without him, Juchin,” Rhyden said.

Juchin nodded once, clapping his hand kindly against Rhyden’s shoulder. “Alright, then,” he said.

By dusk, the Uru’ut with the broken leg had died. They had reached the outskirts of the Oi’jaga region, where the mountains yielded to cragged foothills and sparse, thin woodlands and had stopped to rest. Rhyden had not realized at first; he had knelt beneath a stand of scraggly pine trees and lowered the young man from his shoulder, laying him against the ground. When he saw the Uru’ut’s face, his expression twisted with grief and dismay.

The boy looked up at him, his eyelids half-closed, his lips parted, his expression frozen in a peaceful mask. Death was new enough to his form that his flesh remained warm.

“No,” Rhyden whispered. He leaned over the young Oirat, canting his face to bring his ear close to the boy’s mouth. He felt no breath against him, heard no air moving even weakly from his lungs.

“No...” he whispered again, moving his hands, pulling the Uru’ut’s scarf out from beneath the fur-lined collar of his del. He slipped his fingers along the side of the young man’s throat, feeling vainly for a pulse. “No, please...”

He lifted the Oirat’s chin and pinched his nose closed. He leaned over and pressed his mouth against the boy’s, breathing into him. He glanced at the boy’s chest and watched it rise, his lungs inflating with the proffered life. He loosened his fingers against the boy’s nose, feeling air escape his mouth, brushing feebly against his cheek and then the boy was still. “Wake for me,” Rhyden said. He pinched the Uru’ut’s nose and breathed again into his mouth. “Wake for me, lad. Come on now. Wake for me, le do thoil.” *Please.*

He moved to the boy's chest, opening the front of his del and shoving aside the overlapping layers of fur-lined hide. He clasped his hands together and pressed the heel of his palm over the young man's breast bone. He shoved against his chest, sharp, rhythmic thrusts, counting them out in measures of five. He paused, his fingertips fumbling along the boy's throat again, hoping to no avail to find a pulse.

"Wake for me," Rhyden whispered, pushing against the Oirat's chest again. He opened his mind to the boy, straining to feel even the faintest hint of cognizance, of life remaining in him. There was nothing. He pivoted, leaning toward the boy's face, breathing against his mouth again. "Wake for me," he begged. He drew two full breaths into the boy's form and then pumped his hands against his heart once more.

"Wake...wake up...come back for me. Come back for me."

He felt a hand drop against his shoulder, and he turned, startled. He had been so absorbed in the young Oirat, he had not heard anyone approach. He was even more surprised -- and bewildered -- to find Toghrul beside him, lowering himself to his knees.

"He is gone," Toghrul said quietly.

"No," Rhyden said and he shook his head. "No, he...I...I can..."

He moved to begin his chest compressions again and Toghrul closed his hand over Rhyden's, giving him pause. "He is gone," Toghrul said again. He moved his hand, easing the boy's eyes closed with his fingertips. "Ci yabuqu ende olqu sunesu modun," he whispered. *Leave here to find the great spirit tree.* "Ci ayu sula, ami seunesu sibaqu, sula nusku ogere kuliyeke toruku, qariqu." *You are free, ami spirit bird, free to fly upward to wait for rebirth, to return.*

He turned to Rhyden. "The senis of his ancestors will embrace him, guide him from us, and Umai will welcome him to the great spirit tree. His suni has abandoned his form for the lower realm. Erleg will comfort him there. You might coax its return with your hands, your breath, and Erleg might let it go, but his ami is gone. He is gone."

Rhyden looked down at the boy helplessly. "I...I do not even know his name."

"His name was Kishiligh," Toghrul said. "Kishiligh Qulange." He rose to his feet, turning to walk away. "Bugu Baichu did not hear the water, either," he said without turning around. Rhyden looked at him, startled. "She turned at the Kelet's cry as if it

surprised her. She did not know. She did not hear it. None of us did. I do know what that means, but I know it is not your fault.”

He was gone without another word, making his way back among the trees for the river’s edge, leaving Rhyden alone.

While they rested, as others foraged among the thorny scrub and thin trees gathering firewood stores and any edible roots and lichens they could find among the foliage, Nala knelt by herself on the bank of the Urlug. She had moved throughout the day like most of the others, in a state of bewildered and dazed shock. She stared at the water, her eyes distant and forlorn, completely oblivious to the coarse, pebbled ground pressing the hide of her leggings and into her knees.

Yeb knelt beside her, but it was not until he draped his hand against hers that Nala averted her gaze from the river and looked at him. He held something out to her, and she blinked at him, puzzled as he unfurled his fingers, cradling a small toli against his palm.

“It was bugu Baichu’s,” he said. “She loaned it to me at Tolui Bay. I think she would have liked you to have it.”

Nala drew the toli from his hand and looked at it for a long moment. She curled her hand against it and brought it to her lap. She lowered her face and closed her eyes.

“Baichu lived many long years,” Yeb said. “And though some of those brought great suffering to her, many more brought her only joy. The greatest of those, Nala, were the ones spent with you. She loved you very much.”

Nala nodded wordlessly.

“For all of her gifts in sharing the childbearing secrets of others, Baichu never had children of her own,” Yeb said. “She told me once that was the first vision she ever saw -- the first time she realized her hiimori. She saw she would die with a barren womb.”

Nala blinked at him, her dark eyes filled with tears. He smiled at her gently, brushing the cuff of his fingers against her cheek, the mark of her catasta tattoo. “But she also saw that she would know a mother’s love some day,” he said. “She did not understand this for a long time -- for most of her life. She told me when she found you,

brought you among us, that she realized what this vision had meant. She loved you as if you were her daughter.”

His words, meant to comfort, only seemed to bring Nala more pain. Her brows drew slightly and she turned her face in the direction of the water. She pressed her lips together, struggling against tears.

“Nala...” Yeb said, cupping his palm against her cheek, drawing her gaze. He leaned toward her, brushing his lips against hers. She tucked her forehead against the nook of his jaw and trembled against his shoulder. He stroked her hair gently, holding her as she began to weep.

“It will be alright,” he whispered against her ear. “I promise you, Nala, it -- ”

“Bugu Yeb! Bugu Yeb!” one of the Kelet cried, racing out of the trees toward the river. “Bugu Yeb! You must come! We have found something -- you must see!”

Yeb rose to his feet, drawing away from Nala. “What is it?”

“Jelmei said it is an *oboo* -- that we should find you at once,” the young guard replied. “He said you would know what it means.”

Yeb glanced at Nala, and she blinked at him, startled. “An oboo?” she said, standing.

Yeb turned to the Kelet and nodded sharply at the woods. “Take us to it,” he said. “Show us.”

The oboo stood about eight feet high, a conical arrangement of stones built in a small clearing among the trees. The three Kelet who had discovered stood around it, keeping a wary distance, their eyes wide. Jelmei, whose father as an oyutan shaman under Yeb at the Kerait aysil had recognized it almost at once for what it was, and as Yeb and Nala joined them in the shadow of the pine eaves and towering stones, he turned to Yeb.

“Is it an omen, bugu Yeb?” he asked. “Is it a sign from the Tengri?”

Yeb looked up at the stones, his brows narrowed thoughtfully. “It is an oboo, Jelmei,” he said. “Earth and stone. Whatever else it may be remains to be seen.” He walked slowly toward the oboo, studying it. “Who made it?” Nala whispered, following him.

“If I had to guess, I would say the l’uitan,” he replied. “Their shamans followed many of our rituals and practices.”

He heard the rustle of hurried footsteps in the pine needles behind him and the sharp intake of Aigiarn’s breath as she stumbled into the clearing. “Tengeriin boshig,” she whispered.

“Mamma, what is -- ?” Temu asked, his voice cutting off as he ran behind his mother, catching sight of the oboo.

“Temu, keep back,” Aigiarn said, holding out her arm, catching him squarely across the chest.

“It is alright, Aigiarn,” Yeb said, walking in a slow circle around the oboo. Some of the rocks had come from the river, their sides rounded by the rough waters. Some had obviously come from distant place unfamiliar to the mountains; stones of bright colors and glossy surfaces infused with minerals foreign to the region. Some had been carved with primitive characters Yeb had never seen before. Some had been adorned with paint that had long since faded. In and among the piled stones were braided lengths of rope, their once-vibrant hues waned with time and the elements, their tight plaits unraveled. The l’uitan had no written language; they had used different colors of thread wound together into ropes and fashioned into series of knots in place of rune characters or an alphabet. The ropes were implores and prayers, he realized, left among the stones to beseech whatever spirit the oboo was meant to honor.

“Yeb, what is this place?” Aigiarn whispered.

Yeb paused, brushing his fingertips against one of the braided ropes. “Someplace sacred,” he said quietly. He walked around the oboo three times without stopping. He closed his eyes as he passed and lowered his face respectfully toward the ground. “Ba takiqu jug ci, afula sunesu,” he said softly. *We make an offering to you, mountain spirit.* He slipped his hand into his bogcu, finding among his belongings a small, rounded creekstone he had carried with him from the Nuqut. As he completed his third pass around the oboo, he genuflected, setting the stone among the others along the base of the tower. “Ba takiqu jug ci.”

“l’uitan shamans must have built this,” he said, turning to Aigiarn. “It is an oboo, a shrine of sorts, meant to honor an ayy -- a nature spirit. To pass an oboo without

making an offering in its honor would offend the ayy it is meant for -- and bring great misfortune.”

“What ayy is this one meant for?” Aigiarn asked.

“Yeb, one of the Kelet said you had -- ” Rhyden said, approaching from the direction of the river. Toghrul followed shortly behind him, and the two stood in uncharacteristic proximity to one another, both of them startled by the sight of the oboo.

“Hoah...” Rhyden murmured.

“Tengeriin boshig,” Toghrul said softly.

Yeb saw something on the ground, hidden at the base of stones by a scattering of dried pine needles. He frowned, brushing the needles aside with his fingertips and saw a small hide pouch tucked against the oboo. He lifted it in hand, his frown deepening. The soft hide was worn and faded, but he could see that it had once been painted with shaman marks -- symbols meant to bring buyan and bolster hiimori. Small wooden beads had been sewn along the top of the pouch, and adorned the slender strap of sinew that had secured it once around its owner’s neck. He could see the remnants of tattered feathers fashioned to the pouch as well. It was an ongon -- the ongon of an Ulusian shaman.

He closed his fingers around the ongon, holding it against his palm. His breath had drawn still, tangled in his throat; it took him a long moment before he was able to force himself to breathe again.

“We should leave,” Temu said quietly. He shied next to Rhyden, catching the Elf by the hand and tugging at him. “We should go. We are not supposed to be here.”

“It is alright, Temu,” Yeb said quietly, rising to his feet.

“Shamans use this place to call spirits, Temu,” Nala said. “They do not dwell here. We are safe.”

She had turned to look at him, and Temu met her gaze for a long, quiet moment, his expression pinched and troubled. At last, he turned away and pulled against Rhyden’s hand. “We should go,” he said again.

“Temu, what is it?” Rhyden asked. “I...I do not know,” Temu said. He looked up at Rhyden. “I think I dreamed of this place. Please, tell Yeb we have to go.”

“We will set up camp here tonight,” Juchin said, tromping into the clearing. He saw the oboo among the trees and paused, his brow lifted. He uttered a soft, harrumphing sound and then turned to Aigiarn. “Evening is upon us. We cannot go any further until the morning.”

“Rhyden, no,” Temu whispered, shaking his head. “No, we cannot stay here.”

“Why do we not go a bit further?” Rhyden asked Juchin. He glanced toward the sky. “We have an hour of daylight left, at least. We could make it further down the riverbank, another mile, maybe, if we -- ”

“Predators will be coming out soon,” Juchin said. “Ikhama, narsana packs, all of them in these woods. It is too dangerous to move further tonight. We will set make camp here, and gather plenty of wood to build the fire through the night. That should keep them from us.”

“Rhyden...” Temu whispered, tugging at his hand again.

“Juchin is right, Temu,” Rhyden said, looking down at the boy. “It will be safer if we stop. We will leave with the morning -- first light, I promise you.” He reached out and cupped his hand against Temu’s cheek. “It will be alright,” he said softly, and he smiled. “I will let nothing happen to you.”

The boy looked unconvinced, but fell quiet, pressing his lips together in a troubled line. Rhyden hooked his arm about Temu’s neck and drew him against him fondly. He glanced over the cap of Temu’s head toward Aigiarn, and realized she had heard her son’s quiet protests, and was worried by them. He smiled for her, wanting to reassure them both. “It will be alright,” he said.

Chapter Four

“We have lost the map,” Juchin said. It was the first time the group had broached the subject outside of dismayed murmurs, and as they sat in a tight ring around a blazing fire, their faces and forms aglow in the dancing light, Temu realized they were all frightened, nearly broken, by this realization.

They were exhausted, damp, cold and hungry, their hearts and resolve still so crippled by the loss of their friends that the straggled survivors simply stared at the fire as Juchin spoke, their eyes stricken and haunted. Temu sat between his mother and Rhyden with the heat of the fire against his cheeks, the bitter chill of the night against his spine and shoulders. At Juchin’s words, Aigiarn lowered her face, hanging her head, her brows lifting as though she felt pain.

“We have lost the map,” Juchin said again. “And the Khahl are still moving behind us. We cannot hope that the rapids that caught us this morning will slow them down at all. They have an ayy spirit to help them, and even if Mongoljin did not cause the fast water, even if she did not somehow keep us from hearing it until it was too late, then she can keep them from it. She can make sure they pass through it safely.”

This was also the first time any among them had pointed out this possibility aloud, although it had occurred to them all. They had not felt or seen any signs of Mongoljin or the Khahl shamans since leaving Tolui Bay, but none of them had thought they were gone. The fact that Baichu and Rhyden -- and the rest of them, besides -- had not heard the sounds of the rapids seemed too peculiar for simple happenstance, which left few alternatives in anyone’s mind.

“If the Khahl catch up to us before we reach the Hawr, we are dead,” Juchin said, looking at Aigiarn. “Even then, we will not stand much chance against them. We do not know how many of them there are.”

“They could not have sent many,” Aigiarn said. “Not without making the empire suspect something.”

Juchin looked at her grimly, his scar wrinkling as his brows narrowed. “If they sent only fifty Minghan, Aigiarn, they will outnumber us now,” he said. He glanced at Toghrul. “We should go back to the Nuqut, to the Kerait aysil.”

“No,” Aigiarn said, looking up, her brows drawn.

“We can take the rest of the Kerait Kelet,” Juchin said. “We can send word to the other Oirat aysils and we can use their Kelet as well. We can come together and figure out some course, a plan, something, and we can come back. We can try again with stronger numbers.”

“No,” Aigiarn said, closing her hands into fists. “Returning to the Nuqut, summoning the Oirat Kelet will take months -- time we cannot afford. We are here. This is the time of the prophecy. Whatever has happened -- whatever will happen -- that has not changed. We cannot turn back. Not now.”

“Aigiarn, we cannot go on,” Toghrul said quietly, drawing her gaze. “We have lost the map. We do not know the way. It is the heart of winter, and we cannot stumble about the mountains in the hopes of coming upon the lair. We will all die. Juchin is right -- we should wait until the spring, gather the Kelet to us and try again.”

“I can get us to Heese,” Rhyden said. “I know we must follow Qotoyor Berke gorge, the Okin River between the mountains, Ondur Dobu and Mongke. The entrance to Heese is there somewhere, the threshold to the Abhacan city.”

“But you do not know where to go from there,” Toghrul said, meeting Rhyden’s gaze. “The lair could be anywhere beneath those mountains, beyond this place, this baga’han city.”

“I will ask Trejaeran,” Rhyden said. “He will show me from there. He can find it -- I know he can.”

“You have been unable to call to Trejaeran since leaving Tolui Bay,” Juchin said quietly.

“No, Trejaeran has been unwilling to come to me,” Rhyden replied, turning to the Uru’ut leader. “This shroud that has blocked our hiimori -- Trejaeran told me it is meant to protect us. Whatever has caused it, he does not want to hurt it. If he uses his powers to break through, to come to me, he must think it will cause harm.” He looked at Aigiarn. “But he will come if I call him. He can show us the way.”

“You cannot be certain of that,” Juchin said.

“We cannot be certain of anything, Juchin,” Aigiarn said, frustrated. “Tengeriin boshig, nothing in this journey has come out as we had thought or believed it would. That does not mean we should give up.”

“We cannot take that chance, Aigiarn,” Toghrul said. “Not with winter upon us -- not without the map to guide us.”

“The map is not supposed to guide us,” Temu said softly, and everyone turned to him. He looked up at Rhyden. “And Trejaeran is not supposed to, either. You are, Rhyden. You are supposed to guide us.”

Rhyden blinked at him. “Temu...” he began.

“How can he guide us without the map, ko’un?” Toghrul said. “He cannot -- ”

“I do not know how he is supposed to,” Temu said, looking at the fire again, his expression troubled. “I only know that he is.”

“We should not worry for it tonight,” Yeb said, as he and Nala walked toward the fire. The pair had been down by the river, performing rituals in honor of the Oirat they had lost to the waters that day. The soft sounds of their ceremonial hand-drums beating in harmonic rhythm had echoed throughout the foothills for several hours after the sun had set.

“We are all exhausted,” Yeb said. “Our hearts are heavy, our minds filled with the weight of sorrow. This is no time to make decisions. We should rest. We should continue with the morning. We should reach the Hawr, and then we can give the matter more thought.”

“Yeb is right,” Aigiarn said. She ran her fingers through her disheveled hair, shoving it wearily from her face. “All we should be worried about right now is keeping ahead of the Khahl and keeping alive until we meet the Uru’ut.” When Juchin opened his mouth, drawing breath to speak, she raised her palm to him, stilling him. “Juchin, please. You and Toghrul have made your points of view well known. It is my decision to make, and I will make it -- but not tonight. No more.”

“Teyimu, Aigiarn,” Juchin said, nodding once in polite deference. Yes.

As the group settled in around the fire for the night, Temu watched Rhyden stand and draw Yeb aside. The two stood just beyond the perimeter of the fire’s glow,

silhouetted in shadows together, speaking in soft voices. Temu let Aigiarn coax him onto his side by the fire; she draped a blanket over him and stroked her hand against his shoulder as she leaned down, kissing his ear. "Oroin mend, oyotona," she whispered. *Good night.* She was worried about him, and the effects the day had taken upon him. Temu knew it. He wanted to tell her he was alright; he thought it was Yeb she should worry about. Yeb had seemed strangely distracted since they had found the oboo. Even now, as Rhyden spoke to him, Yeb seemed only partially attentive to the conversation. Temu watched as his eyes kept wandering again and again toward the trees, and the tower of stones that lay somewhere nearby in the darkness.

The others had seemed to have lost their hiimori. It was "shrouded," as everyone kept saying, but Temu had seen visions in his dreams. He had still been able to feel things. *Too many things, sometimes,* he thought, drawing his knees toward his chest, curling himself into a tight little ball. He glanced across the fire at the oyutan idugan, Nala, and found her watching him, her expression unreadable, her dark eyes fixed upon his. As he met Nala's gaze, she blinked, as though snapping from a reverie and looked away.

When Temu had first seen the oboo, he had been seized with a feeling of dread, an icy chill that had shuddered down the length of his spine. *It is a bad thing, a bad place,* he thought, looking at Yeb again, watching his gaze travel in the direction of the pines. *Something bad happened there, and Yeb knows what it is.*

Temu had dreamed of the oboo only the night before, although the memory of his visions, the contents of the dream remained murky and only dimly recalled in his mind. He remembered looking up at the stones, that same pervasive, ominous sensation rippling through him. For some reason, he had heard Rhyden screaming, a sort of cry Temu had never heard before. There had been such agony punctuated in Rhyden's shrill voice, such mindless, basic terror and pain that Temu had forced himself to wake up, unable to bear the sounds of such helpless fear and suffering.

Something bad happened there, he thought. *The little man hurt him.*

He remembered *the little man*, too -- a vague image of a withered old man, his hands deformed into crippled, misshapen hooks. Temu could not remember how the

little man had hurt Rhyden, only that he had. He had done something bad, something that had broken Rhyden, left him shrieking.

“I can find the way, Yeb,” Rhyden told the shaman quietly. Temu could hear them as though he stood among them, even though Aigiarn, who was settling herself beside Temu against the ground gave no indication she could hear their soft conversation at all.

“We cannot turn back -- not now. I can get us to Heese, and from there, Trejaeran can show me the way,” Rhyden said, placing his hand against Yeb’s shoulder. “I know he can. He will break through this shroud. He will use his power to guide us if I ask him to. I know it.”

“There might be another way,” Yeb said, his eyes moving from Rhyden’s face toward the trees again. At his words, the peculiar tone of his voice, Temu shivered.

What is this place, Yeb? he thought. *You know, do you not? You know what it is. You know what happened here.*

“Another way?” Rhyden asked. “What are you talking about, Yeb? There is no other way. Without the map, what other choice do we have? We -- ”

“Rhyden, there are more directions the wind can blow than simply north or south,” Yeb said. “Move your feet even a slight measure and you follow a new course, a different route. There is always another way.”

Rhyden was quiet, bewildered by Yeb’s words. “You shoulder such heavy burdens, Rhyden,” Yeb said. “Most of which are not yours to rightly bear.” He smiled. “Let it go for now. Find some rest, at least for tonight.” He turned and began to walk toward the fire. “But, Yeb, I...” Rhyden began. His voice faded as he realized the shaman would not turn around or return. He forked his fingers through his hair, shoving it back from his face in frustration. “Bloody rot it all,” he whispered.

Rhyden came back to the fire and lay behind Aigiarn. Temu listened to the soft rustling of blankets as the two of them drew near, curled against one another. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. He heard the quiet sound of Rhyden kissing Aigiarn’s ear, and the soft, trembling intake of her breath as she struggled against tears.

“I...I do not think I can do this anymore, Rhyden,” she whispered.

"It is alright," he said.

"My people died today," Aigiarn said, her voice hoarse and choked. "Bugu Baichu...Toghrul's Kelet...Juchin's men...all of them are dead."

"It is not your fault, Aigiarn."

"But it is," she said. "I...I led them into this, and they died. What if...what if Temu had been killed? Or you...or...or Yeb...the others? I could not bear it, Rhyden. I...I could not."

"I know," he whispered. "I cannot do this anymore," she breathed. "Juchin is right. I know he is right. We should leave here. We should abandon this. Not until the spring, or until we gather more Kelet, but for good. We should leave it behind us."

"I will do whatever you want," he said.

"It is not worth it," she whispered as she began to weep. "Nothing is worth this loss. No empire, or prophecy. Nothing is worth risking my son. I...I do not want this. Not now, not anymore. I do not want this."

Temu knew what his mother wanted. He could sense it in her, poignantly, powerfully. She wanted a family. She wanted the simple, quiet pleasures of the aysil, with someone to love her and Temu, someone they could love. She wanted Rhyden.

"Come with me to Tiralainn," Rhyden whispered to her. "Come with me -- you and Temu. We can leave all of this behind -- all of us. We can start over, Aigiarn, like none of this has ever happened."

That sounded so wonderful to Aigiarn. Temu could feel this within her heart, a deep and desperate longing. She whimpered, and Temu heard Rhyden kiss her.

"Whatever you want, I will give it to you," he breathed. "Whatever is in my power, Aigiarn. I will buy you the largest house marks can buy, right in the heart of Belgaeran." She must have grimaced at this, because he laughed softly. "No? A house and ten acres in the midrealm. A hundred acres? A thousand acres? Whatever you want -- say it. I will give it to you."

"We cannot leave," she said. "We cannot leave Yeb and Toghrul, the aysils of the Nuqut, our people to the empire. We..."

"Then we will take them with us," Rhyden said. "All of them -- every Oirat in Ulus. I will buy them all homes and land. I have enough money for it. Kierken will give me a

bloody village if I ask it of him -- it could be theirs, Aigiarn. It could be yours -- ours. Our home.”

“Our home,” she echoed. It was what they both wanted, Aigiarn and Rhyden, what Temu knew they had both been searching for, yearning to find for many long, lonely years. Not a place that was their own, but a place that was safe. A place where they could be safe from their sorrows and fears. “If you want to end this, I am with you,” Rhyden said. “I love you, Aigiarn. I love Temu. I will do whatever you want. Whatever you ask of me.”

Temu blinked, startled as another fragment of his dream came back to him. He remembered Rhyden screaming, and his mother crying. He remembered Aigiarn on her knees, her hands over her face as she wept, inconsolable.

Stay with me, she had pleaded, her voice soft and anguished. *Please, Rhyden, stay with me and Temu. Stay with us.*

Disturbed, Temu looked toward the fire. Toghrul was curled on his side nearby, asleep with the Kelet. Yeb sat facing the blaze, his eyes closed, his dalbuur fan in hand as he tended to the nightly ibegel watch. Juchin had found a perch for himself near the campsite in the darkness, keeping visual watch for predators or Khahl.

Nala lay beside Yeb. At first, Temu thought she was sleeping, but she opened her eyes and looked at him, as though she had known he was watching her. Temu closed his eyes, his breath caught in a startled, somewhat shamed gasp. He did not know Nala well. She was Yeb’s friend, and Yeb seemed to trust her, but Temu always had a funny feeling when she was near to him, a peculiar sense of uneasiness that would not wane. Her hiimori was strong; Yeb had told Temu that, but she was only just learning to use it.

“She is like you, Temu, new to her gifts,” Yeb had said. “It takes a shaman many long years before he has mastered the capacities of his hiimori, and Nala has been without the guidance of a yeke to show her the methods and means for most of her life.”

Temu was not so certain about this. Sometimes, he felt like Nala really did know how to use her hiimori well; she only pretended that she did not. Temu had long suspected that this was because she had fond feelings for Yeb, and the need for tutelage brought her into his company frequently. Temu could feel that about her -- she

was in love with Yeb -- just as he could feel other things about her, like the fact that Nala did not like Aigiarn.

He thought Nala was sneaky. Yeb had told them not to exercise their hiimori outside of the ibegel rituals, but Nala had been going on nightly qaraqju journeys. She had been visiting the jabsar. Temu had sensed this, but he did not know why, or what she was doing there. He did not understand why Baichu, Yeb or Rhyden had not sensed this, when it had been apparent to him, and it troubled him. Nala had cried earlier over the death of Baichu, and there had been genuine sorrow within her at the loss of her teacher, but there had been something else, too; again, something Yeb had not sensed, or Rhyden, either. Temu had sensed it, and it had felt sneaky to him. Nala had been sad that Baichu was gone, but there had been something else within her heart, something that had not been completely surprised or distraught by this.

He risked a quick peek and saw Nala's eyes were closed. She did not open them again, and Temu squirmed backward a bit, snuggling against Aigiarn. He felt her arm draw about him, and then Rhyden's as well, draping over the two of them.

Nothing bad can happen as long as Rhyden is here with us, he thought, finding Rhyden's hand and curling his fingers through the Elf's. No matter what she is doing, Nala's hiimori is not stronger than Rhyden's. We are safe with him and nothing can hurt him as long as he is away from that oboo. He promised we would go in the morning, and the oboo will be behind us and gone. Mamma will say it is over, and we will leave the mountains. Rhyden will take us to Tiralainn, and we will be a family together. No dragons, no prophecy -- just us, a family. Nothing bad is going to happen.

Temu closed his eyes, comforted by this thought, by Rhyden's presence, his touch. *Nothing bad is going to happen.*

Quoi ta'iu?

Rhyden jerked in his sleep several hours later, his fingers slipping loose of Temu's. *Who are you?* the voice in his dream demanded, a whispering, slithering voice that caused him to moan aloud, pressing himself against Aigiarn as if he hoped to hide.

Nagh vel shiu ny shawk'airhey, the voice hissed. *You are not the golden falcon.* It spoke in Chegney, the ancient tongue of the Abhacan, though it spoke with unfamiliar annunciation, dialectal nuances Rhyden did not recognize.

Quoi ta'iu? C'red shiu laccal aynshoh? the voice cried. *Who are you? What do you want here?*

Rhyden's eyes flew open, and he woke with a startled gasp for breath. He was disoriented, his heart hammering out a frightened, frantic rhythm beneath his breast, and it took him a long moment to realize where he was. He sat up slowly, blinking dazedly at the waning glow of the fire. Aigiarn stirred beside him, murmuring in her sleep, but she did not rouse. She snuggled against Temu, her voice fading, her expression softening as she rested once more.

Quoi ta'iu?

Rhyden did not understand the dream upon waking any better than he had while sleeping. There had only been that disjointed fragment of words, phrases in Chegney that had shivered through his mind like a cool, damp draft. He had seen a man, a withered scrap with a tangled, blanched beard and a weathered, lined face; a man whose voice had come from his mind, not his mouth. His hands had been disfigured, his fingers crippled and twisted like broken tree limbs, hooked towards his palms, and he had flapped them in the air as he had cried out with his mind, his voice filled with bright alarm. *Nagh vel shiu ny shawk'airhey!*

The golden falcon. The old man in his dream had been crying out about the golden falcon in Chegney. He had said *you are not the golden falcon*, but Rhyden had not had the impression that the man was talking to him, or about him. He felt as though he had just eavesdropped on a small portion of a conversation, as though his sight had drawn him somewhere and shown this to him with some purpose.

But what? Rhyden thought, bewildered. The quest was over, golden falcon or not. Aigiarn had said as much that night. The river had stripped whatever precious store of resolve and determination she had mustered within her. She wanted to leave the mountains, and Rhyden wanted to leave with her. He wanted to go with her wherever she wished; he did not care. He only wanted to be with her and Temu.

The quest was over...so why would his sight have shown him such things? Rhyden closed his eyes and opened his mind. *Trejaeran?* he thought. *Trejaeran, what does it mean?*

If Trejaeran heard him, he offered no reply, and Rhyden opened his eyes again, troubled. He realized Yeb was gone, and he blinked, startled. He had fallen asleep with the shaman across from him by the fire, absorbed in his nightly ritual of ibegel. There was no sign of Yeb now. Rhyden looked all around, but could not see him, and he frowned. Yeb had not roused Nala to take his place at the ibegel, which was completely unlike Yeb's habit, even if he had only stepped away from the fire for a moment to relieve himself.

Yeb, where are you? Rhyden thought, opening his mind again. He stood, and then a voice shuddered through his mind in reply, staggering him.

Quoi ta'iu? Rhyden cried out softly, his hands darting for his face. He shoved the heels of his hands over his eyes as bright pain speared through his skull.

C'red shiu laccal aynshoh?

The voice faded, and Rhyden looked around, stumbling, bewildered. It had been the voice from his dream, the old man with the ruined hands speaking Chegney within his mind. It made no sense. He did not understand why he would be hearing those words, that voice. They were many long days east of where he thought the entrance to the Abhacan city of Heese might be; miles and miles from anything even remotely Abhacan. He turned toward the woods, and froze, his eyes flying wide.

Yeb's father, Inalchuk had channeled the spirit of a gazriin ezen, the soul of an ancient Abhacan mage who in life had been given the task of hiding the dragons' lair, and marking it so that the Negh would know it when he came to claim it. The mage had supposedly cut out his own tongue and maimed his hands in fire so that he could never reveal or write the lair's location.

Rhyden thought of the man in his dream, of his deformed, crooked hands, and he felt his breath tangle in his throat.

The mage's spirit had proven stronger than Inalchuk; it had forced his ami from his form, banishing Inalchuk to the darkness of the qarang'qui. The mage had used

Inalchuk's body to draw the map Rhyden had been translating -- a map written in ancient Chegney variations.

Rhyden thought the l'uitan shamans had once been able to channel this same Abhacan spirit and had learned of the lair's location through it. Perhaps their distant ancestors had known enough of the Abhacan language to decipher the gazriin ezen's instructions and find their way there, but over time, they had misinterpreted the Chegney, forgotten of the lair's location. Yeb had told them the oboo they had discovered in the forest that evening had been built by l'uitan shamans in honor of an ayy -- or nature -- spirit, like an endur or...

"A gazriin ezen," Rhyden whispered in stricken realization.

"There might be another way," Yeb had told him. "There are more directions the wind can blow than simply north or south. Move your feet even a slight measure and you follow a new course, a different route. There is always another way."

"Mathair Maith, no!" Rhyden gasped. He started to run, but tripped in his sudden, frantic haste. He fell hard against the ground and sat up, spitting out dirt and pine needles. He had loosened the ties of his bogcu pouch earlier to reach his supplies as he had helped Yeb tend to the injured, and the contents of the bag had spilled against the ground beneath him. There was no time to gather the fallen packets of food and medicines, however, and Rhyden scrambled to his feet, running again toward the trees, toward the oboo.

"Yeb!" he cried. "Yeb -- Mother Above, no! No!"

Yeb must have known all along, Rhyden realized as he sprinted through the pines. He must have realized from the moment he first saw the oboo that it was the place where Inalchuk had channeled the spirit of the Abhacan gazriin ezen. The l'uitan shamans had channeled it first, ages earlier, and they had left the oboo to mark the site, the place where the Abhacan mage's spirit could be invoked and drawn.

Maybe Yeb had found something there that had confirmed his suspicions. Rhyden had seen him pick something up from the base of the stones and tuck it swiftly into his bogcu. Rhyden had not thought much of it at the time; his own mind had still been distracted and distraught at the death of the young Uru'ut with the broken leg. He

realized now that Yeb must have seen something among the stones, something Inalchuk had left behind in offering, something unmistakable to his son years later.

Yeb, what are you doing? Rhyden thought desperately, ducking around low-hanging pine boughs, feeling limbs and needles whipping against his face. Bugu Inalchuk had been the strongest yeke shaman the Oirat had ever known. Yeb freely admitted that his own formidable hiimori did not match that of his father's. The Abhacan gazriin ezen had overpowered Inalchuk with seeming ease; Yeb would stand no chance against it.

And you know it, Rhyden thought in dismay. *You know -- and you do not care. You mean to sacrifice yourself if only to get another map. You are willing to risk the qarang'qui again -- only this time, Trejaeran is not here to save you from it.*

"Yeb!" he shouted, his voice shrill with alarm. "Yeb! Stop!"

He staggered into the clearing among the pine trees and could see the oboo before him, a towering silhouette looming in the shadows, bathed in dim and iridescent moonlight. He could see Yeb kneeling before it, his hands resting against his thighs, his head lowered toward the ground. "Yeb!" he cried, rushing to the shaman. He fell onto his knees next to Yeb, grabbing him by the shoulders. He glanced down at the ground and saw to his horror that Yeb had discarded his ongon. The small hide pouch that channeled the spirit of Ogotai, his utha suld, rested at the base of the stones. Beside the ongon was a small square of cloth with two small, dried berries resting atop it. The berries were poisonous; in small quantities, the juice could have hallucinogenic effect, inducing a spell of qaraq. Yeb had taken them and entered the jabsar, and by leaving any physical connection to Ogotai behind, he had willingly abandoned any hope he might have had for spiritual protection against the gazriin ezen.

"Yeb!" Rhyden cried, cradling the shaman's face between his hands. Yeb's eyes were closed, his mouth slack and slightly agape. He did not respond to Rhyden's voice or touch and his head lolled clumsily on his neck as Rhyden leaned toward him. "Yeb, answer me," Rhyden said sharply. "Wake up, Yeb. Wake up!" He did not know how to enter the jabsar; the last time he had found his way there -- when he had fought Mongoljin -- he had done so purely by accident. *Yeb, do not do this,* he thought, opening his mind, his sight in full. He could sense the shaman's mind, his spirit, but the

sensations were feeble and waning. *Yeb, damn it -- this is your other way? Come back, please. Do not do this. It is Rhyden, Yeb -- it is me. I am here. Come back to me. Can you hear me, Yeb?*

Yeb's hands shot up, his fingers hooking fiercely against Rhyden's wrists. His eyes flew open and he stared at Rhyden. "Mee clasht shiu," he said, hoarse and hissing. *I hear you.* It was Yeb's voice, and yet it was not. Rhyden recognized it and realized it was the gazriin ezen, the Abhacan mage speaking.

Oh, Mathair Maith, it is in him, he thought, desperately. *It is in him already. Yeb is still there -- he has not succumbed to the qarang'qui yet, but he is fading. It is in him and it is killing him.*

Feaysley'eh, he said to the gazriin ezen with his mind. *Release him.* He locked eyes with Yeb -- with the Abhacan spirit that could now see through Yeb's eyes. *Nar creaut eh. Mee ta aynshoh. Ta ny shawk'airhey. Feaysley'eh,* he thought. *Do not hurt him. I am here. I am the golden falcon. Release him.*

"Ta'iu ny shawk'airney?" Yeb hissed, spittle spraying from his lips, peppering against Rhyden's cheek. *You are the golden falcon?*

"Mee ta," Rhyden said. *I am.* "Ta aynshoh. Feaysley'eh." *I am here. Release him.*

Yeb seized Rhyden by the face, startling him, shoving his head back. Rhyden gasped as Yeb leaned over him, his fingers shoved painfully against Rhyden's cheeks and brows. "Mee ec fieau er dty hon," Yeb whispered to him. *I have been waiting for you.*

Rhyden arched his back, crying out as the Abhacan mage entered him, searing through his mind. Images, thoughts, memories and emotions flooded into him, and he convulsed, his breath and voice escaping him in a strangled garble of sounds. He could see every moment of the Abhacan mage's life; he could hear every voice the mage remembered, visualize every face, draw every fragrance or taste he had ever experienced and kept in his mind. He could see the city of Heese, looming buildings carved beneath the mountains; he could see the entrance to the dragons' lair, a place sealed with earth and stone, carved and marked with the Seal of the Seven. He could feel the horrendous agony as the mage had cut out his own tongue; Rhyden writhed, arching his back until his shoulders met the ground behind his ankles, and he

screamed. He could feel it when the mage plunged his hands into a smithy furnace clear to his elbows, ruining his hands in fire. *He was left behind!* his mind shrieked. He could see it, the Abhacan's memories of standing on an abandoned agricultural plateau among the Khar peaks, watching his people leave him, the Abhacan citizens of Heese abandoning the Morthir for Tiralainn aboard hundreds of knarrs. They had left him behind; they had seen visions of the dragons' migration, and their part to play in it, and the mage had been left to see to the lair. He had waited in Heese for Ag'iamon and the dragons to come -- for seventy-five years he had waited in the abandoned city. This isolation, this profound and determined sense of purpose had remained with the mage even after his death. It was the essence of his spirit, and it seared through Rhyden like fire.

He hooked his hands into desperate claws and groped for the sky, the moon. He thrashed against the ground, choking for breath. He had never felt anything as powerful as the gazriin ezen in all of his days; this was no Mongoljin, newly roused from millennia of slumber, weak yet and vulnerable. This gazriin ezen was ancient and aware -- and brutally powerful. Here was the reason Inalchuk had broken beneath it; it was filled with desperate, frantic energy -- the need to impart its secrets, the secrets of the lair. It was indomitable and stopping it would have been like trying to bridle the wind or prevent the sunrise. It seized Rhyden's mind just as it had Inalchuk's; it seized his form, and it overwhelmed him, stripping him of reason and thought, of breath and voice. As it forced itself upon him, the gazriin ezen took as well, wrenching from Rhyden's heart and mind every secret and thought he had ever harbored, every wish and desire. It stole from him his memories and feelings; it ripped them from him, tearing them loose of their moorings within his very soul, and he wailed, the pain indescribable as his mind was torn asunder.

Jeeagh'eh, the Abhacan hissed as images of the lair's threshold flashed before Rhyden's eyes, as the winding passage to reach it along the dilapidated streets of Heese, the dark, cramped tunnels of the mines darted before him. *See it.* Rhyden shoved the heels of his hands over his eyes. "Geddyn magh my kionaghey!" he shrieked. *Get out of my head!*

Cooinaghtyn'eh, the Abhacan said as again and again, Rhyden flew in his mind through the tunnels beneath the Heese, and again and again, he saw the lair's

threshold, the carved Seal of the Seven. *Remember it.* “Trejaeran!” Rhyden screamed. “Trejaeran -- help me! Mathair Maith! I cannot keep him from me! Help me!”

Fow’eh, said the mage, the images buffeting Rhyden’s mind, breaking him. *Find it.*

“Trejaeran!” Rhyden shrieked. “Trejaeran -- le do thoil -- !”

Leeideil eh huggey, hissed the mage. *Lead him to it.*

Temuchin

Temu stirred by the campfire at the soft voice, the gentle beckon. His eyelids fluttered open and he moaned quietly.

Temuchin

Temu blinked, disoriented and bewildered. He sat up slowly, groggily, pushing his disheveled hair back from his face. He felt Aigiarn’s arm droop against his side and then fall away from him. She grumbled quietly, but did not rouse.

Temu, over here.

Temu turned to look over his shoulder. Even though the voice was only in his mind, it seemed to originate from behind him, among the trees. He frowned, studying the tree line, straining to peer beyond the outermost edge of the fire’s glow and into the darkness.

Who is there? he asked.

You must come with me, Temu, the voice said, and Temu’s breath drew still as he spied a silhouetted figure standing beneath the trees. The shadow of its arm moved, extending toward the boy in gentle beckon. *There is not much time. You must hurry.*

“Father...” Temu whispered. Yesugei had never come to him before, but surely that was who called to him -- his father. He was dreaming again, some sort of prophetic vision brought by his hiimori, and at last, after so long, Yesugei had come.

“Father!” Temu said again, breathlessly, scrambling to his feet. He ran heedlessly away from the fire toward the trees, his eyes flown wide. “Father! Father!”

As he drew near to the figure, he could see it was not Yesugei at all, but someone unknown to him, a stranger. He stumbled to a halt beneath the pines. “You are not my father,” he whispered.

“No,” the figure said gently, stepping forward. “But I am a friend to you, Temu. Do not be afraid.” The waning light of the fire danced against his form, and Temu saw a young man with dark, tousled hair and pale skin. He had the angular features of a Torachan, pointed ears like Rhyden’s and large, kind blue eyes.

“Who...who are you?” Temu asked, drawing away, uncertain.

The young man smiled at him. “My name is Trejaeran MuiREL,” he said, and Temu blinked at him, startled. “You are Rhyden’s utha sulD,” Temu said. “You are his endur.”

Trejaeran nodded. “I am, yes,” he said. He met Temu’s gaze, and his expression grew solemn. “Rhyden is in trouble, Temu. He needs your help.”

“Rhyden?” Temu whispered. “But he is sleeping with Mamma...” He turned to the fire and realized to his dismay that Rhyden was gone. Aigiarn was alone, asleep by the blaze, and Temu whirled to Trejaeran, his eyes wide with alarm. “He went to the oboo!” “Yeb is there,” Trejaeran said, nodding. “Rhyden realized what he meant to do and he is going to try and to stop him.”

Though Trejaeran said no more than this, Temu suddenly understood, as though Trejaeran had taken many long moments to explain it to him in full. “The oboo is meant to call the бага’han mage,” he said. “The one who hurt Yeb’s father, bugu Inalchuk. That is the bad thing I sensed about this place -- it is where Inalchuk was banished to the qarang’qui.”

“Yes,” Trejaeran said, nodding again.

“Yeb thought he could call the mage,” Temu whispered, aghast. “We lost the map, but Yeb thought he could call the mage and make another one for us. Make another, or let the mage take us there in Yeb’s body.”

“He had hoped for this, yes,” Trejaeran said.

“He cannot beat the gazriin ezen!” Temu cried. “It will send him into the qarang’qui! We have to stop him!”

He meant to move, to bolt through the forest, but again, although Trejaeran said nothing, it was as though with his gaze alone, with his mind, he spoke volumes to Temu. Temu froze, his eyes widening. “Rhyden will stop him,” he whispered. “He is on his way there now, to the oboo -- he will open his mind and the gazriin ezen will leave Yeb’s body -- his ami alone. He will go inside of Rhyden.”

“Rhyden is the golden falcon,” Trejaeran said. “The Abhacan gazriin ezen has been waiting for thousands of years for him to come, to find this place, those stones, so that he can show him the way. You were right, Temu. It was not the map that was supposed to guide you -- or me. It has always been Rhyden.”

“But it will hurt him,” Temu said. He stared at Trejaeran, stricken. “I dreamed of it -- I heard Rhyden screaming in my mind. It will hurt him!”

Trejaeran looked at him, his brows lifted mournfully. “It will destroy him, Temu,” he said softly. “It will send his ami to the qarang’qui, and he will be lost.”

Temu staggered away from Trejaeran, shaking his head. “No,” he whispered. “No, you...you can stop it. You can stop it, Trejaeran -- you can help him.”

“Not this time,” Trejaeran told him. “I cannot bring my power here, not in full. Not right now.”

“What?” Temu asked, confused. “Why not?”

“There is something here,” Trejaeran said, motioning with his hand toward the sky. “Something that has come over you, Temu, and your friends. I cannot disturb it. It has a purpose you do not realize yet. It is supposed to be here, and I would harm it if I used my power to help Rhyden.”

Temu knew what he was talking about; the “shroud” over their hiimori. “Nala is doing it,” he said, his brows drawing angrily, his hands closing into fists. “Nala is keeping our hiimori shrouded. She is not helping us, Trejaeran. I think she tricked us this morning somehow, so that we would not hear the rapids. She hates my mother and wanted her to drown in the river, only she...she messed up somehow. She did not mean to -- but she killed Juchin’s men, Toghrul’s Kelet -- our people! That is it, is it not? It is Nala.”

Trejaeran smiled at him. “I cannot help Rhyden,” he said, as if he had not heard Temu at all. “But you can, Temu.”

Temu blinked at him. “I...I cannot fight a gazriin ezen,” he said. “I am not strong enough -- I could not even cross the jaqa line in the jabsar!”

“You do not have to be strong, Temu,” Trejaeran said. “You only have to be pure of heart.”

He walked past Temu, heading for the campfire. Temu followed him, bewildered. "I do not know what you mean," he said. "Please, Trejaeran! Rhyden needs you. I cannot do this! Please, help him!"

Trejaeran genuflected, lifting something from the ground. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled at Temu again. As he closed his hand, a spear of brilliant blue fire appeared above his fist -- the shaft of the anam'cladh's blade. Temu shrank back, drawing his hands toward his eyes, gasping.

"Rhyden dropped it," Trejaeran said, rising to his feet. "I knew you would need it, so I tripped him." He winked at Temu, the corner of his mouth lifting wryly. "But do not tell him that, or he will be sore with me."

He held the sword out to Temu, and his expression grew grave again. "Take it in hand, Temu," he said. "Take it and come with me."

A shriek ripped through the night, an anguished, agonized sound that bounced off of the tree crowns and granite slopes. Temu cowered at the cry, hunching his shoulders, his eyes flown wide. He knew the scream; he remembered it from his dream, and he stared helplessly at Trejaeran, terrified. "Rhyden! The little man is hurting him!"

Trejaeran turned his face to follow the sound of Rhyden's voice, his brows narrowed, his lips drawn in a grim line. "We must hurry," he said. "Come on, Temu. We have run out of time."

The scream wrenched Aigiarn from sleep, and her eyes flew wide, her breath tangled in her throat. She realized two things simultaneously in that dim, disoriented moment where her startled mind was ripped from asleep to awake -- Temu was gone, and so was Rhyden.

"Temu?" she gasped, sitting upright, frightened and confused. "Rhyden?"

The shriek startled all of the Oirat from slumber. Toghrul sat up, scrambling to get his knees beneath him as his hand darted clumsily, groggily for the hilt of his scimitar. He jerked the blade loose of its sheath, stumbling to his feet. "Tengri ibegel bide!" he cried. *Tengri help us!* "What was that?" one of his Kelet, Jelmei, cried hoarsely, staggering up, drawing his scimitar.

Another scream resounded through the night, seeming to echo through the trees, and Aigiarn leapt to her feet, pulling her own blade loose from her hip. "That was Rhyden!" She whirled about in a broad circle, trying to figure out from which direction the scream had come. "Rhyden!" she cried out, desperately. "Rhyden -- where are you?"

Juchin rushed toward them from out of the shadows, his scimitar in hand, his brows drawn. "What is that?" he shouted. "What has happened?"

"Where is bugu Yeb?" Jelmei cried, his voice overlapping Juchin's and Aigiarn's.

"Where is Temu?" Toghrul said, realizing the boy was gone. He met Aigiarn's gaze, stricken. "Where is Temu?" he cried again.

Nala had stumbled to her feet, her expression twisted with fright and alarm. She turned toward the trees, her fingertips pressed against her brow. "They have gone to the oboo," she said softly.

Aigiarn spun to her. "What?" she cried. "Why? What are they doing?"

"I...I do not know," Nala said, closing her eyes, concentrating. "But they are there, all three of them." She opened her eyes and looked at Juchin, frightened. "And they are not alone. Something is with them."

"Rhyden!" Aigiarn shrieked, and she began to run. "Aigiarn -- no, wait -- !" Toghrul cried, racing after her. She did not slow her pace at all at his plea; she ran as hard and as fast as she could, plowing through the pines, clutching her scimitar in her fist.

"Rhyden!" she screamed, as another cry wrenched through the night. She had never heard such a piteous, terrifying sound in all of her life. Rhyden sounded as though his heart was being torn from him, twisted, mauled and drawn, yet beating from his breast. "Rhyden! I am coming! I am coming!"

She did not know what could make a person scream like that, as though their body and mind were being broken, torn apart. She felt tears stream down her cheeks as she raced through the woods; she felt wayward limbs slap and whistle against her face. Her gutal soles skittered in the thick carpeting of pine needles, but she did not slow. She ran with all of her might, screaming his name, straining for breath.

"Trejaeran!" she heard Rhyden scream. "Trejaeran -- help me! Mathair Maith! I cannot keep him from me! Help me!"

“Rhyden!” Aigiarn shrieked. She rushed headlong into the clearing where the oboo stood, draped in shadows and moonlight. She had one bewildering, horrifying moment to realize Yeb lay crumpled before the tower of stones, and Rhyden was beside him, on his knees, his spine arched back so that his shoulders and head rested against the ground. Rhyden was convulsing, his hands pawing and flapping at the sky, and he was screaming, a strangled, cawing mixture of sounds and unfamiliar words flying from his lips.

“Rhyden!” she gasped, and then she saw Temu across the clearing from her, running toward Rhyden. His movement, and a sudden, blazing point of bright blue light attracted her gaze, and she realized he had the anam’cladh; somehow Temu had come to have Rhyden’s Elfin sword in his hand.

“Temu -- !” she screamed, and her voice ripped up shrill, anguished octaves as she watched her son grasp the hilt of the sword in both hands and plunge the blue, fiery blade without a moment’s hesitation squarely into Rhyden’s breast.

“No!” Aigiarn shrieked, stumbling. She fell, dropping her scimitar, and scrambled, forcing her gutal beneath her. “No, no, no -- Temu! No!”

She reached him, grabbing him by the shoulder and shoving him away from Rhyden. Temu staggered back, turning loose of the anam’cladh as he fell onto his rump. The bright blade of the sword faded into abrupt darkness as the boy’s fingers uncurled from the hilt, and Aigiarn was momentarily blinded as shadows fell upon them.

“Mamma -- ?” Temu gasped, and then he grunted as he hit the ground.

“What are you doing?” she screamed at him, collapsing to her knees. She pawed in the darkness, groping until she found Rhyden’s legs. Her eyes began to adjust, and she could see him in the dim moonlight, a silhouette lying still against the ground. She could smell singed hide and fur from his del; the sweet and pungent stink of scorched flesh, and she uttered an anguished cry. “Temu, what...what have you done?” she wept, clutching at Rhyden. He was not screaming anymore, or moving. He lay limply against the ground, and she folded herself over him, weeping. “What have you done? Why...why have you done this?”

“Mamma...” Temu whimpered, and he began to cry. “Mamma, I...I did not mean...! Trejaeran...he...he told me...”

“What?” Aigiarn whispered, lifting her head and looking at him, startled.

“Trejaeran told you to do this?”

Temu nodded, tears streaming down his cheeks. “He...he came to me. He said Rhyden needed me -- the little man was hurting him!”

She remembered his dream from the night before, the one Rhyden had tried to dismiss, if only to keep them from being frightened. *The little man hurt you*, Temu had said to Rhyden. Aigiarn reached for her son. “Temu...” she said, and he fell against her, shuddering. “I am sorry, Mamma!” he cried. “Trejaeran told me to do it! He...he said my heart was pure...that it would drive the little man out of him...it...it would save him!”

Toghrul and Juchin burst through the trees and into the clearing behind them, both of them bearing torches in one hand, their scimitars in the other. “Temuchin!” Toghrul cried out, frantic. He fell onto her knees beside Aigiarn, and she felt his hands against her shoulders, his breath a frightened rush in her ear.

“Is he hurt?” he cried. “Ko’un -- what happened? Are you hurt?”

Toghrul looked down at Rhyden, drawing back, startled to see smoke curling in loose, waning tendrils from the breast of his del. “Tengri ibegel bide!” he gasped. “Is...is he...?”

“I did not mean to, Toghrul!” Temu wailed, clutching at Aigiarn. “I did not mean it, Mamma! Trejaeran told me it would save him! He...he told me...!”

“Hush now,” Aigiarn whispered, holding him fiercely, kissing his pate. “Hush, oyotona.”

Toghrul leaned over the Elf, letting his fingertips slide beneath the angle of his jaw, along the side of his throat, finding the measure of the Elf’s pulse. “He is alive,” he said, looking at Aigiarn. She blinked at him, startled. “Aigiarn, he is alive.”

Rhyden moaned softly at Toghrul’s touch and Aigiarn reached for him, cradling his face between her hands. “Rhyden!”

“We must get them back to the camp,” Juchin said. He and Jelmei had been kneeling beside Yeb; now Juchin stood, cradling Yeb in his arms. He spared a glower at the oboo. “Away from this place. Toghrul, can you carry him?”

“Yes,” Toghrul said, drawing his arms beneath Rhyden’s shoulders and knees. He hefted the Elf against his chest and then rose to his feet, lifting him in his

arms. Aigiarn and Temu hurried alongside Togrul as they made their way back through the trees. Aigiarn held Rhyden's hand the entire way, her fingers closed against his as they moved. "Stay with me," she whispered to him. "Please, Rhyden, stay with me and Temu. Stay with us."

Chapter Five

Rhyden remembered the searing agony of the gazriin ezen within him, consuming him. He had felt his mind come unhinged, his soul wrenching loose and tumbling, flying into utter and absolute darkness. He had understood what was happening

the qarang'qui...

Mother Above, it is sending me to the qarang'qui!

but had been helpless to stop it. The gazriin ezen was too strong, its power too brutal and primal. It had known only one purpose in its primitive, relentless determination -- to show Temu the way to the dragons' lair -- and if Rhyden could not contain it, it meant to seize his form, his mind and bring the boy itself.

It is the way of the Tegsh, Yeb had told him once. Two amis cannot inhabit the same form at the same time for any measure. The strongest spirit will prevail, leaving the other to the darkness.

Rhyden had screamed until his voice abandoned him. He had screamed for Trejaeran, shrieked for his friend, and then, as the darkness of the qarang'qui, eternal and endless, engulfed him, he had felt new pain, fire spearing through his heart. He had looked down and had been blinded as a spear of blue flames pierced the darkness. The fire had sent the shadows scattering, dissipating with its brilliant glow, and then there had been nothing...until the woman.

He had seen a woman with the complexion and features of an Ulusian, a woman whose beautiful face was unfamiliar to him. Somehow, he had come to be on his knees in front of the oboo again, and the woman held his face between her hands, leaning toward him.

What was given to you was taken, as well, the woman whispered within his mind.

No, he had thought, trying to pull away from her. He had been seized with such bright and overwhelming terror, he could not breathe. No, no -- do not -- please --

He had seen her eyes and he tried to scream. She had Mongoljin's eyes -- black, featureless planes -- and she caught his frightened, strangled voice against her mouth,

kissing him. *What was given to you was taken, as well, Mongoljin purred again. And now it belongs to me, Rhyden Fabhcun. It is all mine.*

He had struggled against her, but he had felt so weak, as though all of the strength had waned in his form. At her touch, her kiss, he could feel her drawing life from him; he could feel himself weakening all the more, fading like a feeble flame caught in a draft of air.

No, please... he whimpered in his mind, as shadows swooped down upon him again, as Mongoljin drew his soul from him. *No...do not...*

He opened his eyes, dragging in a whooping, gasping mouthful of air. He jerked, drawing his hands to his chest, his arms tangling in something warm and heavy draped over him. He was confused and disoriented and did not realize at first it was only a wool blanket. He struggled, frightened, twisting his body beneath the folds.

“No -- !” he cried out, his voice hoarse and damaged.

“It is alright,” he heard Yeb say. The shaman leaned over him, appearing in his dazed line of sight. “It is alright, Rhyden,” he said again. “Do not be frightened.”

“Yeb?” Rhyden croaked, falling still. He blinked at the shaman, bewildered. “Yeb...where...where am I?”

“Rhyden!” he heard Aigiarn gasp, and she leaned over him, clutching at his hand. Her dark eyes were filled with tears, her lovely mouth unfurled in a smile. She lowered her face, letting her lips settle lightly, gently against his. Mongoljin’s face flashed through his mind, a disturbing fragment of memory or dream, and her voice whispered within him.

What was given to you was taken, as well. And now it belongs to me, Rhyden Fabhcun. It is all mine.

“Rhyden?” Aigiarn said, feeling his breath catch against her lips, feeling his body stiffen at her kiss. “Rhyden, it is me. It is Aigiarn.”

He blinked at her, the groggy cobwebs lifting from his mind. He reached for her, brushing the cuff of his fingers weakly against her cheek. “Aigiarn...” he whispered.

“It is alright now,” she said, stroking his hair back from his brow. “You are safe, Rhyden. You are safe here.”

He struggled to sit up, to raise his head and shoulders from the ground, and Aigiarn and Yeb helped him. The three of them were inside a large tent. Yeb had set small oil lamps around to offer warm glow. He had struck flints to bowls of incense in all of the corners to fill the space with hazy, aromatic smoke. Rhyden could hear muffled voices and tromping footfalls from beyond the tent walls -- far too many to account for the less than a dozen Oirat who had survived the Urlug River. He could see diffused sunlight seeping through the wool and he turned to Yeb and Aigiarn, puzzled.

"Where...where are we?"

"We are among the Uru'ut, Rhyden," Aigiarn said gently. "We have reached the Hawr River, and Juchin's men from the Nuqut."

"The Hawr?" Rhyden whispered, startled. He looked up at a rustling sound as the tent flap opened, and Temu ducked his head inside. The boy's eyes flew wide when he saw Rhyden and he scampered forward, his mouth spreading in a broad, eager smile.

"Rhyden!"

"Temu -- " Rhyden said, and then the breath was *whoofed* from him as the boy fell to his knees and hugged him fiercely. "Hoah, lad...beannacht to you, too."

"Easy, Temu," Aigiarn said, reaching for her son. "Do not -- "

Rhyden shook his head at her, staying her. "It is alright." The boy was shuddering against him, clutching at him, and Rhyden returned his embrace. "It is alright, Temu."

"I thought I had hurt you," Temu gasped against Rhyden. He sat back, his brown eyes swimming with tears, his brows lifted in dismay. "I...I thought I had killed you, Rhyden."

"That was you?" Rhyden asked, cupping his hand against Temu's cheek. "You with the anam'cladh? I could see it in the darkness...driving back the shadows..." Temu nodded, his tears spilling down his cheeks, and Rhyden smiled, pressing his forehead against the boy's, letting the tip of his nose brush against Temu's. "Hoah, lad, you did not hurt me," he whispered. "You drove it from me...the gazriin ezen...you brought me back from the darkness."

Toghrul poked his head into the tent, following Temu. "Ko'un, do not yell while the Elf is..." His voice faded, and he blinked at Rhyden, his expression caught between

surprise and uncertainty. "...sleeping," he finished softly. He glanced at Aigiarn and then at Rhyden. "You are with us again."

Rhyden remembered Toghrul carrying him. He dimly recalled Toghrul kneeling before him at some point, cradling the back of his head, trying to coax him to drink from a waterskin. "Ende," he had said quietly, gently to Rhyden. *Here*. "Ci ugugu ene. Tere ayu sayinn." *Drink this. It is alright.*

Rhyden nodded at him in the tent, bewildered by the memory of Toghrul's kindness. When he met the man's gaze, Toghrul looked away, lowering his eyes to the ground, still standing crouched and poised at the threshold of the tent.

"That is good," Toghrul said. "Temu...he...he has worried for you."

"Bayarlaa, Toghrul," Rhyden said quietly. *Thank you.*

Toghrul did not look at him, or say another word. He ducked back beyond the tent flap, disappearing outside.

"We have all been so worried, Rhyden," Aigiarn said, drawing Rhyden's gaze. "I was afraid you would not come back to us."

He leaned forward, taking her face between his hands. "I will never leave you or Temu. I love you, Aigiarn." He drew her toward him and kissed her deeply.

Yeb drew his legs beneath him, standing. "Come, Temu. Let us step outside. I need to stretch my legs a bit."

Temu blinked at him. "What?" he said. "No, Yeb, please. Rhyden is only just awake again. Do I have to?"

"I think your mother might enjoy some time alone with him," Yeb said, glancing at Aigiarn and smiling. "We could put some supper together. I am certain Rhyden is hungry. He has been asleep for three days."

"Three days?" Rhyden asked, startled.

"Come along, Temu," Yeb said, flapping his hand in beckon. He ushered Temu from the tent as the boy sputtered protests all the way. When they were gone, Rhyden looked at Aigiarn. "I was asleep for three days?"

"Yes," she said, brushing her hand against his cheek. Tears gleamed in her eyes. "I was so frightened, Rhyden," she whispered. "I thought I had lost you."

He kissed her again. "You will not lose me. I promise, Aigiarn. I swear it to you."

She smiled at him, her eyes swimming with tears again. She drew a small, ragged breath and touched his face. "Do not ever frighten me like that again."

He laughed softly. "I will not."

"Next time Yeb does something foolish -- let him do it," she said, and he laughed again.

"I promise," he said. She leaned toward him, pressing her lips against his. "I love you," she breathed, her mouth brushing his as she spoke.

She helped him bathe and change into clean clothes. She dipped the corner of a linen in a small bowl of water and brushed it against his face, following the contours of his brow, his cheeks.

"Your catasta mark is gone," she said, running the linen gently against his temple. He had closed his eyes, but opened them again to find her smiling at him. "I told you it would fade."

She washed his face, her movements slow and tender. If he moved to do it himself, she would catch him by the hands and smile at him. "Let me do it," she would say. "You are still weak. I do not mind."

She unfettered the buttons at the shoulder of his del, drawing back the overlapping panels of fur-lined hide from his chest. She was so near to him as she worked, he could smell the fragrance of incense infused in her skin, her hair. He closed his eyes as she slipped the del from over his shoulders; he brushed his cheek against hers, letting his breath whisper against her ear.

"Aigiarn..." he said softly, as her fingertips trailed against his shoulders, his chest. As her hands moved against his sternum, she looked down and he followed her gaze, finding a bright scarlet mark, like a burn seared against his heart.

"Where the anam'cladh pierced me..." he whispered, as her fingers danced across the mark.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, and he raised his face, brushing his nose against hers.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Trejaeran...he was pierced by the sword twice. The first time, it left a mark like this upon him. He had it all of his days. It never faded from him."

She brought her hands to his face, cradling his cheeks against her palms. "You were screaming," she said, stricken. "...I could hear you and I..."

She closed her eyes as he rested his forehead against hers. A tear slipped from beneath her lashes and rolled down her cheek. "What did the gazriin ezen do to you?" she whispered. He was quiet for a long, uncertain moment, remembering the helpless and horrifying sensation of the gazriin ezen, this unfamiliar and ruthless force within him, shattering him, wrenching his thoughts and memories from him, ripping apart his soul. He remembered his frailty in the face of the mage's spirit, his terror and the excruciating, overwhelming pain. He did not want to admit to Aigiarn that he had been helpless against it; it had forced its way into his mind, his form and he had been powerless to prevent it.

"You can tell me," Aigiarn said, as if sensing his insecurity, his shame and he closed his eyes, tears of his own welling. "It is alright."

The creature had seen everything that was within him, the contents of his heart seized and discarded without his consent. The gazriin ezen had not cared that Rhyden loved Aigiarn, or Temu. His hopes and dreams, these new and fledgling desires that had been fostering within him over the last weeks -- dreams of a life with Aigiarn and Temu -- had meant nothing to it. It might have taken these from him forever, and it would not have felt nothing remorse, compassion or even sympathy for his loss. He had been nothing to it; any power he called his own, any life or love -- all of it nothing.

"...I do not know," he said, his voice tremulous. "I only know that it hurt."

She caressed his face, anguished for him, more tears spilling. "Rhyden..." she said.

"It hurt," he whispered, trembling against her. He remembered the image of Mongoljin, the strange young Ulusian woman who had Mongoljin's black eyes. He did not know if this was dream or memory, but he could close his eyes and feel Mongoljin's lips against his, her tongue forcing its way into his mouth. He could feel the same helpless terror he had against the gazriin ezen as Mongoljin had forced his life from him, drawing his spirit and mind from his form with her mouth.

"It hurt, Aigiarn," he whispered again. Rhyden had always kept physical and emotional pain tucked deep within him, beyond anyone's thought or concern -- including

his own. He had never wanted the clumsy attempts of others to comfort him; he had never completely confided those hidden measures of his heart with anyone -- not even Qynh. He had only ever trusted Trejaeran that much, only ever loved his friend enough for such admittance. Rhyden felt Aigiarn's hands against him, her breath against his face, and for the first time since Trejaeran had taken his life twenty years earlier, Rhyden realized he wanted -- and needed -- the comfort Aigiarn offered. He brought his hand to his face and gasped softly, shuddering as he began to weep. Aigiarn drew him against her in a fierce embrace. "It is alright," she whispered, clutching at him, her fingers splayed in his hair, her lips pressing against his cheek. "It is alright now. You are safe with me, Rhyden. You are safe now."

When he had dressed, Aigiarn brought him outside of the tent to meet the Uru'ut. Forty of Juchin's Kelet had gathered among the pine forests along the convergence of the Urlug and Cagan Rivers, the apex of the Hawr to await their arrival from the north. The Uru'ut had traveled by bergelmir across the Khar foothills, and the campsite was filled with a flurry of activity as the sun sank beneath the sloping hillsides and tree crowns. She led Rhyden to a large bonfire built in the center of the camp. Here, most of the Oirat had gathered together, arranging their tents in close proximity and sitting comfortably by the warm glow of the blaze as they shared supper, skins of qumis and affable conversation. The Uru'ut Kelet all regarded Rhyden curiously; like the other Oirat, they had never seen an Elf before and were unaccustomed to someone with features so similar to a Torachan walking among them as their ally.

They sat by the fire, and Temu hurried to Rhyden's side, keeping near to him. Juchin had caught sight of Rhyden as he had approached; once he had sat, the Uru'ut noyan walked over to him, his brow arched, his arms folded across his chest.

"So it is true, then," he said, looking down at Rhyden. His thin mouth spread in a smile, his scar wrinkling along his cheek. "Welcome back to us."

"Thank you, Juchin," Rhyden said.

As Juchin walked away, Yeb came to stand in his place. He genuflected before Rhyden, his eyes filled with concern. "How do you feel?"

Rhyden glanced to his right, where Aigiarn sat, her knee touching his, her fingers twined lightly through his. He glanced to his left at Temu, who had leaned against Rhyden, resting his cheek against his shoulder. "I am better now," he said to Yeb, smiling at the shaman.

Yeb's expression softened into sorrow. "I brought this upon you," he said, anguished. "I can sense the shadow of suffering it has left with you, within your heart. Forgive me."

"Yeb," Rhyden said softly, shaking his head. "No, le do thoil. There is nothing to forgive. You were trying to do what you thought was best."

"I thought I could handle the gazriin ezen," Yeb said. "Even though it had taken my father, in my arrogance, I thought my hiimori would suffice. I thought I could keep it from taking over me if I could only make it see -- make it understand."

Rhyden had opened his mind to the gazriin ezen with the same confidence. He knew the humbling effects of that misguided certainty himself; as Yeb said, it remained a shadow on his heart -- one Rhyden doubted would ever fade in full. "None of us could have made it understand," he said. "There was nothing within it capable of that. I have never felt anything so single-minded ...so relentless in all of my life."

Yeb gazed at him, distraught. "My pride nearly saw it take you from us," he whispered. "You were nearly lost to it, Rhyden, to the qarang'qui because of me. If it had not been for Temu, it would have..."

"Yeb, le do thoil," Rhyden said, his brows lifting in implore. "You saved my life," Yeb whispered, hanging his head, shamed. "It is not the first time you have made such sacrifice for me, and I am humbled by you, Rhyden."

"You are my friend, Yeb," Rhyden said, drawing his gaze. "It is no sacrifice to help a friend. I do it for you willingly, Yeb -- gladly."

He leaned forward and Yeb hugged him tightly, clapping his hand against the back of Rhyden's shoulder. "I am blessed for you, Yeb -- for all of you," Rhyden whispered to him. "Hoah, do you not know that? I am blessed."

"It is you who is a blessing, Rhyden," Yeb said, drawing away from him. He pressed his hands against Rhyden's cheeks, smiling at him. Tears gleamed in his eyes. "Every day of my life since we met has been filled with buyan. I have known no greater."

“Yeb, are you crying?” Temu asked, blinking in surprise.

Yeb pretended to frown at him. “Of course not, Temu,” he said. He stood, swatting his palms against the knees of his del. “Not that there is any shame in tears -- it is our ami’s way of cleansing our heart. Mine, however, is smoke in my eyes, Temu, that is all. If you would pardon me, I should go and find Nala...”

Aigiarn smiled as he left them. She leaned against Rhyden’s shoulder, lifting her chin to speak in his ear. “I have never seen him near to tears before.” She squeezed his hand gently, making him smile. “He is so fond of you. He has not left your side these past three days. I do not think he has slept at all.”

Temu patted his hand against Rhyden’s sleeve to draw his gaze. When he glanced at the boy, Rhyden arched his brow; Temu’s expression had grown troubled as Yeb had left, as the shaman had mentioned finding Nala. Temu’s brows were pinched, his lips drawn together in a thin line. “What is it, Temu?” Rhyden asked. “What is wrong?”

“I...I need to talk to you, Rhyden,” Temu said softly, lifting his face and cupping his hand against Rhyden’s ear. “Alright,” Rhyden said, nodding. “Someplace where no one will hear us,” Temu whispered. “I do not want Yeb or Mamma to know. It is about Nala.”

Rhyden blinked at him, surprised and bewildered. “Alright,” he said again. “We can go back to my tent, if you would like. We can -- ”

“Our golden falcon is among us again,” Juchin said loudly, striding toward the fire and holding up a skin bladder filled with qumis. “Tengeriin boshig -- he is with us and strong again!”

“Tengeriin boshig!” cried the Oirat, their voices booming in resonant harmony, echoing through the forest and among the foothills. They all raised their qumis in toasts to Rhyden, and Juchin brought the spout of his skin to his mouth, tilting his head back and swallowing a deep mouthful of the fermented milk.

“Now at last, we can come together,” Juchin said, walking slowly around the fire, addressing his men. “Now we can hold counsel and decide what is to happen.” He turned to Aigiarn. “My Khanum, again, let me say that with only three months, we would have enough time to return to the Nuqut, to gather the tribes of the Oirat and return to

these peaks. There are Khahl behind us -- I say let them die lost in these mountains. We should rally our forces and return all the stronger.”

The Uru’ut men all murmured in agreement with this, nodding and muttering to one another in concurrence.

“I think we should leave, too,” Aigiarn said, rising to her feet. Juchin turned to her, startled, and from across the fire, Toghrul blinked at her in surprise. “I think we should leave,” Aigiarn said again. “Not just the mountains, Juchin, but the Nuqut as well.”

An image flashed through Rhyden’s mind, and he winced, his hand darting for his brow. In his mind, he saw the threshold of Heese, the Abhacan city; he saw himself flying through the ancient gates and into the ruins beneath the mountain, sailing at impossible, terrifying speed through the winding streets and among the broken, crumbling buildings.

Jeeadh’eh, he heard the Abhacan mage’s voice hiss within him. *See it.*

“Aigiarn, what do you mean?” Toghrul asked, standing. He looked completely bewildered. “Leave the Nuqut?”

Cooinaghtyn’eh, the gazriin ezen’s voice whispered, and Rhyden flinched, gasping softly as he saw images of the city whipping past him. In his mind, he moved beyond Heese and into mine shafts, flying along dark, cramped passageways, twining deeper and deeper into the belly of the Khar range. *Remember it.*

“Rhyden, are you alright?” Temu whispered, draping his hand against Rhyden’s arm, his eyes wide with concern.

“I mean exactly what I said, Toghrul,” Aigiarn said. “We should leave the Nuqut. We should gather all of the Oirat to us, yes, Juchin -- all of the tribes. We should come together, and we should leave from Tolui Bay, across the Chagan Sea and beyond the Garyelloch Isles.”

“And what then?” Toghrul asked, utterly flabbergasted, gawking at Aigiarn as if she had been struck daft.

“And then we go to Tiralainn,” Aigiarn said, turning to him. “We leave Ulus. We leave the Khahl and the empire behind us. We leave behind all of the killing and running and hiding and we make new lives for ourselves -- for our people, Toghrul. Free lives.”

Toghrul blinked at her, shocked mute.

“And what about the dragons?” Juchin asked. “What about Temu, Aigiarn? His destiny? Ag’iamon’s promise to -- ”

“I do not care about the dragons,” Aigiarn said sharply, drawing a startled, collective gasp from her people. “I do not care about the prophecy, Ag’iamon’s promise or Dobun’s empire. Not anymore.” She stared at Toghrul, pleading. “I am tired, Toghrul. I am tired of watching our people die. Where does it end? If we claim the dragons? We will still have to fight -- our people will still have to die. The Khahl will not just give Kharhorin to us, or the Taiga, and the empire will not just hand over Ulus.”

She turned to Juchin. “No more. This has driven us all to madness, all of these legends of the Negh and the prophecy. We do not have the map -- the only means we had to find the lair is gone, and there is no getting it back. Yeb and Rhyden nearly died trying to replace it for us. When is it enough?”

Rhyden shoved the heel of his hand against his temple, gritting his teeth as the darkness of the mine shafts flew past him within his mind. He could see the threshold of the lair, the carvings in the stone gates, the inscription cut deeply into it -- the Seal of the Seven.

Fow’eh, he heard the Abhacan mage say. *Find it.*

“Rhyden?” Temu whispered, his fingers tightening in alarm against Rhyden’s elbow. “What is it? What is wrong?”

Again and again, these images flew through Rhyden’s mind, faster and faster until he was dizzy, reeling. *Leeideil eh huggey*, the mage had told him. *Lead him to it.*

“We have no way to find the lair now,” Aigiarn said. “No hope of finding it -- not with three months, Juchin, or with three thousand years. There is no other choice -- no other way.”

“Maybe there is,” Rhyden said quietly, and she turned to him, startled.

“What?” She realized his distress and she rushed to his side, her eyes flown wide. “Rhyden, what is it? What is wrong? Temu, what happened?”

“I do not know, Mamma,” Temu said, frightened. “He...he just...”

“Aigiarn, it is alright,” Rhyden whispered, opening his eyes. “There is hope,” he said softly, and she drew back in bewildered surprise. “There is another way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Is he alright?” Yeb asked, hurrying to Rhyden’s side, dropping to his knees.
“Rhyden, what is it?”

“What did he say?” Juchin asked, as he and Toghrul strode swiftly toward Rhyden, both of them confused and alarmed.

“He said there is another way,” Temu said, looking up at them. Juchin and Toghrul each paused in mid-stride, completely baffled.

“What other way?” Toghrul asked.

“To the lair,” Rhyden said, and he rose to his feet. Aigiarn and Yeb stood with him, their eyes wide with worry, their hands fluttering about him in case he decided to keel over in a swoon. “The lair?” Aigiarn repeated.

He met her gaze and nodded. “When the gazriin ezen entered me, it showed me the way. I remember it, Aigiarn. I know the way to the lair.”

“Tengeriin boshig!” Toghrul gasped, his eyes flying wide.

“Are you sure?” Juchin asked. “We do not have the map anymore. We have no way of know if what you -- ”

“I do not need the map, Juchin,” Rhyden said. “I have the memories of the man who made it inside of my mind. No riddles, no translations. I can see it in my head -- I know the way.” He looked down at Temu and found the boy staring at him, his eyes bright with worry. Rhyden genuflected beside him and touched Temu’s face. “You were right,” he said. “It is me who is supposed to guide you, Temu. And now I can.”

“I am sorry, Aigiarn,” Rhyden said quietly. It was late; the Oirat had spent many long hours around the campfire debating their options, and he knew the discussion and dissention had left Aigiarn torn and troubled. The two had returned to his tent. Temu had told Rhyden he wanted to talk to him in private, something about Nala that had seemed to trouble the boy, but Temu had fallen asleep by the fire before Rhyden had the chance to find out more than this. When Aigiarn had moved to wake Temu, to trundle him to the tent for the night, Toghrul had stopped her with a shake of his head, telling her he would keep with the boy. There had been sorrow in his face as he had spoken, as he had watched Rhyden and Aigiarn leave the fireside together, but there had been resignation in his eyes as well.

Aigiarn sat on the pallet of blankets, unwinding her plaited hair between her fingers. She glanced at Rhyden, her brow raised. "You have nothing to be sorry for," she said with a smile.

"I should not have said anything," he said. He forked his fingers through his hair and shoved it back from his face in frustration. "The images came into my mind, and I could not keep them from me. I should not have said anything. You had made your mind up about what you wanted to do. You could have convinced the others if I had just been quiet."

Rhyden's visions had only served to reaffirm within Juchin's mind the determination to keep moving. The Uru'ut noyan had even said he would continue on from the Hawr without returning to the Nuqut for the rest of the Oirat Kelet. "Rhyden knows the way to the lair," he had said. "There would be no more uncertainty -- no more hesitation. We can keep ahead of the Khahl because we will know the path and all of the dangers along the way. This is buyan, blessings from the Tengri, Aigiarn. A sign -- a good omen -- that we are not meant to turn back. We are meant to keep going."

Aigiarn reached for Rhyden, touching his face, drawing his gaze. "My mind was not made up," she said. "My heart might have been, but not my mind. Yeb told me once that we can never follow one line of thinking -- no matter how appealing -- so rigidly that we close our minds to the possibilities of another course. We spend our lives running around in circles, if we do. Juchin has a point. You can find the lair. You can bring us there. The prophecy is not so futile now. It is something to be considered."

He looked at her, troubled. "What will you do?"

She met his gaze for a long moment. "I would be lying if I said I want to abandon this now," she said quietly. "That I still thought we should leave without finding the lair, forget about the prophecy." She looked down at her lap, her brows lifting forlornly. "But I would also be lying if I said that I did not want to leave, go with you to Tiralainn and build a new life for my people there."

She smiled again. "I do not think it is my decision to make any longer. This is Temu's destiny we are pursuing. It should not be about what I will or will not do -- what I do or do not want, or anyone else for that matter. It should be Temu's choice; what he wants to do, what he thinks is right." She brushed her fingertips against Rhyden's

cheek. "I will talk to him in the morning. I will explain things to him, and I will let him decide."

Rhyden turned his face against her hand. "Whatever happens, I am with you."

"I know," she whispered. He leaned toward her, taking her face between his hands, kissing her deeply. "I love you."

"And I love you," she breathed. She kissed him again, drawing herself onto her knees, pressing herself against him. He spread his fingers in the dark tumble of her hair and drew her close, feeling her body against him. He canted her head to the side and followed the contour of her throat, her jaw with his mouth, feeling the soft intake of her breath his ear.

She whispered his name as her fingertips brushed the front of his del, unfettering the buttons that held it closed at his shoulder. She pushed the overlapping flaps of hide aside and moved her hands against his chest, his stomach. Her lips danced lightly against the tapered angle of his ear, the length of his throat. She kissed the scar above his heart, the mark of the anam'cladh's fire, and he caught her face with his hands, lifting her gaze to him as he pressed his lips to hers.

He leaned her back, lowering her gently against the pallet of furs and blankets beneath them. He kissed her as he opened the front of her del, as his hands slid lightly against the smooth muscles of her belly, his fingers draping gently, deliberately against her breasts. His mouth followed the path of his hands, and she arched her back, whimpering softly. Her legs slid around his hips, her strong thighs resting against his, and when she moved against him with deliberate friction, she drew the breath from him. "Aigiarn..." he whispered, raising his head, leaning toward her face. He kissed her, and she lifted her head from the ground to meet him. His hand trailed beneath the waist of her leggings, sliding against the outer curve of her hip, pushing them down from her waist. She unfettered the ties of his leggings, easing them away from his hips.

"I love you, Aigiarn," he whispered as she shifted her weight, helping him pull her leggings from her. At his words, her mouth unfurling in a smile that was so beautiful to him, he could scarcely breathe for it.

"I love you, Rhyden," she said, her thighs pressing against his hips, drawing him near. He lowered himself slowly, deliberately against her, and when he entered her, she

arched her back to greet him and his voice abandoned him in a low, breathless moan. He slid his fingers through hers, holding her hands and she looked up at him, her breath tremulous and whimpering, the corners of her lovely mouth unfurled. "Stay with me," she whispered.

He kissed her, moving against her, setting a rhythm that would, in short measure, leave both of them exhausted and shuddering with pleasure. "Always."

"Juchin thinks we should continue on," Temu said to Aigiarn the next morning. The two of them walked together along the riverbank. She had drawn him aside after breakfast and talked with him awhile, explaining their circumstances to him.

Temu looked up at his mother. "He thinks since Rhyden knows the way to the lair now, it would be foolish to turn back. He thinks the Tengri meant for this to happen -- all of it -- so that Rhyden could lead us to the lair."

"Juchin thinks that, yes, oyotona," Aigiarn said, nodding.

Temu paused along the water's edge, studying Aigiarn with a troubled expression. "But you think we should go back," he said. "You want to go to Tiralainn with Rhyden. You want to forget about the dragons."

"I think our people have suffered a long time so that we could come to this point, this moment, Temu," Aigiarn said. "But I do not think it is my decision to say whether or not that suffering has been without purpose, just as it is not Juchin's to say this is what the Tengri have meant for us. I think it is yours."

Temu looked away from her, his brows pinched slightly as he gazed out across the Urlug River. "If we were meant to turn back, to forget about the dragons, why would our people have sacrificed so much?" he asked quietly. He glanced over his shoulder at her. "For thousands of years, Mamma, the Oirat have hidden, run, fought, died...they have gone hungry and cold, caught by the Khahl, sold as slaves." He frowned and turned back to the water. "If we were not meant to find the dragons, why would all of that have happened? Why would so many people suffer so much if it did not mean anything in the end?"

"I do not know, Temu," she admitted softly.

“Tiralainn could be our chance to end that,” Temu said. “We could be free there, Mamma. We would not have to run anymore.”

“You are right,” Aigiarn said.

“But if we found the dragons,” Temu whispered. “We would be free then, too. We would not have to run.”

Aigiarn nodded. “You are right again.”

“You said we would have to keep fighting, even with the dragons. But we would be fighting for what is ours -- what has always been ours. Would Tiralainn be our home, Mamma? Or would it just be a place we have borrowed from Rhyden’s people? A place like the empire where people are afraid of us? Where they think we are ignorant and savage? You told me that is what the Torachans think of us -- what if Rhyden’s people think that, too? What if we are not free there? What if we are just as trapped there as we are here -- on lands we are not welcome on? By borders made because other people are afraid of us?”

“I do not know, Temu,” Aigiarn said.

Temu genuflected, lifting a small, flat stone from the damp riverbank. He turned it over and over between his forefingers and thumb, toying with it. “If we had to fight for Ulus, at least it would be ours,” he said. “Is that not the balance of the Tegsh, Mamma? That maybe our people have suffered and sacrificed for so long because in the end, it would be worth it? We would have what was ours -- we would have the dragons again, and Ulus?”

He stood, flicking his wrist and sending the little stone skipping across the surface of the water. He lowered his gaze to his gutal and sighed heavily. “Maybe that is why my father died. Maybe the Tengri knew it would come to this...that we -- that I -- would have to choose. Maybe they wanted me to see that my father cannot have died for nothing.”

“Yesugei died because a man with a scimitar killed him, Temu.” Aigiarn knelt, looking up at him. “Not because the Tengri wanted to show you something, teach you a lesson. A man with a knife stole him from you -- from us -- and robbed us of whatever happiness or comfort we might have known in our lives with him.”

He blinked at her. "But now we have that chance again," he whispered. "For happiness and comfort -- a family...with Rhyden."

"Yes, we do."

Temu turned away, his brows furrowed, his hands closing into fists. "I cannot choose!" he cried. "Why are you making me, Mamma? I do not know the answer to this. There is no answer that is right! If it is my decision to make, then it is already made. You are asking me to choose, to lead us -- you are asking me to be the Negh! If I am the Negh, Mamma, then we have to go on. That is what I am supposed to do -- find the dragons, free them, restore Ulus."

"If you are the Negh, Temuchin, then you are our leader by birthright," Aigiarn told him. "A leader must choose what is best for his or her people, and not what any legend says is best. That is what I am asking you to do, Temu -- that is what I am asking you to be."

"I do not know what is best!" he cried. "I do not know what to do, Mamma! I want what you want -- I want to be with Rhyden! I want us to be a family, Mamma, but I want what Juchin wants, too! I want to see the lair -- I want to know! I want to do what is right -- I want to do what my father would have wanted me to do!"

Aigiarn touched his face and stood. "Yesugei would have only wanted what would make you happy, Temu. No prophecy can promise that. We choose that for ourselves."

She reached into her bogcu pouch and pulled something out, cradling it against her palm. She held her hand out, offering it to Temu, and he was surprised and bewildered to see his ongon, the one he had thrown away after Mongoljin's attack.

"Yesugei loved you, Temu," Aigiarn told him, pressing the ongon against his palm. "He loves you yet, and he is with you, whether you can see him or not. I think..." She looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears. "I think he knew that Rhyden needed that chance in the forest against Mongoljin. That Rhyden needs us, just like we need him -- a family, Temu. I think your father let him come to you in his place so that Rhyden would know...he could understand."

He blinked at her, struggling against sudden, helpless tears. "Mamma..."

“When you went to help Rhyden against the gazriin ezen, did you stop and think about it?” she asked. “When you drove the anam’cladh through him, you did not know for sure it would not kill him, but you did it, anyway.”

“Trejaeran told me it would free him,” Temu said, bewildered. “He said that -- ”

“You knew what outcome had been promised, Temu, but you still chose to wield the sword,” Aigiarn said. “How did you decide to do that?”

He shook his head, flustered and confused. “I...I did not...” he began.

The corner of her mouth lifted. “Of course you did, Temu. Why did you choose to help him?”

“Because I love him,” Temu said. “He was hurting, and I...I love him. I wanted to help him.”

Aigiarn brushed the cuff of her fingers against his cheek. “You followed your heart, and you made a choice,” she said. “That is all there is to this, oyotona. That is all there is to anything, really. Listen to what your heart tells you.”

She left him alone on the riverbank and walked slowly back to camp. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingertips, wiping away her tears. Her admittances about Yesugei had pained her; the realization of her son’s anguish as he struggled to reconcile matters within his mind, to decide what they should do pained her all the more. It was a decision she knew he could make. Temu had guided them in his own way for a long time now, and certainly since they had left Qoyina Bay for Capua, they had relied on his hiimori, his visions to lead them. She had never directly asked him to make a decision before, however, and certainly none of such importance to their people, and Temu was left stricken by the responsibility, frightened by it.

She smiled softly. If he had not been born to be a leader, he would not have felt the weight of such a choice. *Yesugei would be proud of him*, she thought. *And I am proud of him, too.*

She glanced up and saw Yeb ahead of her, standing along the water’s edge. She was still a distance from the camp, and she raised her brow curiously as she drew near to the shaman.

“You did very well,” Yeb remarked, looking out over the water.

“You were eavesdropping on me.”

“Not on purpose,” he replied, glancing at her. He tapped his fingertip toward the river. “Sound travels with the water. You did well with the boy. You offered him his choices in a clear and unbiased fashion. You let him reason out his arguments for himself, and left him with the right to choose based on his own opinions, his own thoughts and feelings.”

“I have been listening to you too much,” she said, pretending to frown. “I am trying to be the water, not the scimitar.”

The corner of Yeb’s mouth lifted in a momentary smile. “He has already chosen in his heart.”

Aigiarn nodded. “Yes,” she said. “I...I think so, too.”

“He has chosen to go on to the lair.”

“Then that is what we will do,” Aigiarn said.

“You do not want this,” Yeb observed. “It is your indecision, Aigiarn -- your hesitations -- not his, that have given him pause.”

“I know.”

Yeb smiled. “And it is your faith in Temu, Aigiarn, your trust that has given him the strength to choose what he thinks is best for his people.” He touched her face. “You have raised a good son. You should be proud of him.” “I am,” she said, the corner of her mouth lifting. “No matter what he had chosen, I would be.”

“I know.” Yeb turned to the water again, his expression growing troubled. “Nala is gone.”

She blinked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I woke this morning and found her gone from my tent. She is not at the camp. She is nowhere to be found. She is gone.”

“Has something happened to her, do you think?”

Yeb shook his head. “No,” he said. “I think bugu Baichu’s death has simply been too much for her heart and mind to deal with. I have tried to comfort her, but it has served little good.”

“She could not have gone far,” Aigiarn said. “It is only just the full light of morning. She could not have made it far in the dark. Have you told Juchin and Toghrul? We can gather some Kelet together and search for her. We can -- ”

“I do not think she wants to be found, Aigiarn,” Yeb said, glancing at her again.

“Yeb, she will die alone without any food or shelter,” Aigiarn said, her brows drawing. “And the Khahl are somewhere out there, not far behind us along the river. We cannot just leave her to -- ”

“Aigiarn,” Yeb said, turning to look at her. There was something in his face, something so plaintive and grave that her voice faded. “I do not think she wants to be found.”

She blinked at him again.

“There are places within Nala’s heart I have never seen,” Yeb said. “Places I do not think bugu Baichu ever saw, either -- places even Nala is not fully aware of. I think she came upon one of those places within her...she discovered something within herself, and she did not like it, Aigiarn. I think she felt it was best that she leave.”

Aigiarn looked at him, stricken. “Yeb, did Nala... Has she betrayed us to the Khahl somehow?” she whispered. “To Mongoljin and their shamans with her hiimori? Has she -- ?”

“I do not think so,” he said, shaking his head. “She could not keep that from me. But I have long suspected there was more to her gifts -- and her knowledge of them -- than she was willing to admit or outwardly demonstrate. Her leaving has only confirmed that in my heart.”

“The fast water,” Aigiarn said, realizing. “The rapids that Baichu and Rhyden did not hear -- that none of us heard. She did that? Nala kept us from hearing it?”

“I think she used her hiimori to create what is called a *manang*,” he said. “A sort of spirit fog that could have clouded our ears and kept us from hearing the water until it was too late. She knew without our uthas to warn us, with our hiimori stifled as it has been, even Rhyden and I could not have sensed it, not enough to grow suspicious of it.”

“The shroud,” Aigiarn said. “The shroud over your hiimori -- the one that has been blocking your uthas from reaching you -- did Nala cause that, too?”

“What has blocked our hiimori is similar to a manang,” Yeb said. “But Nala is not that strong, Aigiarn. It takes incredible hiimori to create such a force -- to block Rhyden’s hiimori in particular requires great power. He is stronger than any shaman I have ever sensed before. Nala could not stop him. She could not match his strength.”

“Then who...*what* is doing it?” Aigiarn asked, bewildered. “Is it Trejaeran? Temu said he came to him, warned him about Rhyden. He can break through the manang if he wants to. Is he the one doing this?”

“No,” Yeb said, looking at the river again. “I do not know what is causing it, but it is not Trejaeran. He says it is meant to protect us, and I believe him.”

“It did not protect us from the river,” Aigiarn said, frowning.

Yeb glanced at her, thoughtfully. “Maybe it did,” he said. “At least...those it was meant to protect.”

Aigiarn’s frown deepened. He was offering her riddles and analogies again and she hated it when he would simply not answer her. “If Nala brought this manang on us to mask the sounds of the rapids, why would she do such a thing?” she asked, planting her hands on her hips. “That I do not know,” Yeb said.

“We should send out some Kelet to search for her,” Aigiarn said. “Whether she wants to be found or not, Yeb, if she caused our people to die in the river, then she is a danger to us. We have to find her.”

She walked past him toward the camp. “Aigiarn, I do not think that is -- ” he began and she turned to him.

“You do not seem to think at all anymore, Yeb, and that disturbs me,” she said. “First, you lead Temu into the jabsar and Mongoljin nearly kills him -- and then you go after that Abhacan gazriin ezen and nearly see Rhyden lost to the qarang’qui! What has come over you lately? Has your reason abandoned you? I am sorry you have fond feelings for Nala, but if she has murdered more than twenty of us, Yeb, what else is she capable of? She is dangerous -- you should have told me of your suspicions from the first. I would have never allowed her to come with us this far. How could you have kept this from me?”

Yeb looked at her, wounded and shamed. He lowered his eyes to his gutal and said nothing.

“Tengeriin boshig, Yeb,” Aigiarn muttered, shaking her head, furious with him. She turned on her gutal heel and marched away, her hands closed into fists.

Chapter Six

"I did not mean it," Nala whispered. She hid along the crumbling face of a steep foothill slope, tucked among the rocks and thin underbrush. The Uru'ut were calling for her. She could hear them, their voices reverberating through the forest, her name called out in haunting, resonant refrain. She pressed her shoulder against the rock wall and hunkered low to the ground, drawing her knees against her chest. If they found her, they would kill her. She knew they would. Temu had told them. She had seen the way he had been watching her, and she had understood nearly from the first -- *he knew*.

For as long as Nala could remember, she had known how to use her hiimori. Among her people, the Sarasvats in Galjin, it was called *upahaar*, or *the gift*, and it was one granted to only a precious few. The shamans of her village had recognized the upahaar within Nala when she had been born, and she had been taken from her parents and raised at the temple of the river goddess Sarasvati in the peaks of the Bara'Qadan mountains. Here, Nala had grown up embracing her gifts, learning to wield them through rituals and practices known as *sadhana*. When the empire had come, plundering the Sarasvats' ancient and sacred homes and temples, Nala had been forced from this tranquil and comforting lifestyle. She had been brought to a catasta, marked with the foul tattoo that still stained her face and sold as a slave.

In the long years Nala had spent suffering in such servitude, she had turned to her upahaar for sanctuary. Her masters could beat and rape her form, but they could not touch or imprison her mind, and here, Nala had always been free. She could escape to the jabsar at will and linger there until they were finished with her body, the bloated Torachan nobilissimi with their powdered wigs askew, their blanched and painted faces streaked with the sweaty sheen of their efforts. When she had met Baichu, the Ulusian idugan had known right away. She had been blind many long years by this point, but she had draped her hands against Nala's face and she had smiled. *It is strong within you, child*, Baichu had said, and it had been so long since Nala had heard another's voice within her mind that she had burst into tears. Kelet from both Juchin's and Toghrul's aysils had rescued Baichu and Nala. It had been Baichu's idea to tell Juchin that Nala was inexperienced with her hiimori, and that she would need the guidance of a

bagsi, a spiritual teacher to hone her skills. Juchin had not wanted to keep Nala among them because she was not Ulusian, but after hearing Baichu's earnest pleas, he had relented.

The two women had lived this lie for five years among the Uru'ut. Baichu had always known that Nala was stronger than she was; Baichu had always secretly agreed with Yeb's belief that Nala's skills were squandered as an apprentice uru'idugan -- and that was precisely why she had always encouraged the tutelage Yeb offered to Nala, and why she had never said more against the physical relationship that had formed between the two. The shroud that had come over those with hiimori among their group as they had left Uru'ut Bay had been a blessing to Nala in many ways. At long last, with the others wary without the guidance of their utha sulds, and keeping their hiimori reined, she had been able to open her mind, to visit the jabsar at her leisure without fear of discovery or rebuke. On the morning Baichu had scolded her for this, Nala had stood alone on the banks of the Urlug River, pretending to be absorbed in looking at the water. Her heart had been seized with rage and dismay, filled with hatred against Aigiarn and Yeb. She had been so angry, so envious of Aigiarn that she had opened her mind; she had released her ami to the jabsar and she had soared in the spirit form of a bird along the winding course of the river.

The escape she had hoped for, the respite from her own restless emotions had not come, but a seeming solution to her problems had presented itself nonetheless. She had seen the rapids, the sharp bend in the river's passage and the narrow channel beyond, clogged with fallen rocks, surging with whitewater. As her ami had sailed over the rushing water, she had realized what she needed to do.

I will never have Yeb's heart so long as Aigiarn lives, she had thought. No matter who she makes her bed with -- the Elf, Toghrul, ten men or ten thousand -- she will hold his heart, and she will hold it fiercely.

She had watched the rapids and on the riverbank miles away, the corner of her mouth had lifted in a smile. She had known what to do. It had seemed so easy to her, a simple manang she could conjure with her hiimori, delicate enough to escape attention from Yeb, Rhyden or Baichu, but strong enough to cloud their senses, block their ears and keep the sounds of the encroaching whitewater from them. By the time their

lookouts spied the rapids, it would be too late to avoid them. The knarrs had been caught in swift channels before, and they had been tossed back and forth in strong currents. It would frighten them; foam-capped waves crashing against the hull, rocking the knarrs precariously against their keels. They would scramble about, oars in the water, desperate to ease the knarrs loose from the violent water. Confusion would come upon the crews, and in that confusion, someone jostled too roughly too near the bulwark could be easily lost overboard -- misfortune so innocent in the occurrence, no suspicion could be drawn. Even better than this, it would seem the handiwork of the Khahl shamans and their gazriin ezen, Mongoljin. Aigiarn's death would be a tragedy to her people, and it would galvanize their resolve to find the lair and then revenge against the Khahl.

I would be doing them a favor, Nala thought as she had flown back to her form, the plan in place within her. She had been startled when she snapped from her reverie on the beach and turned her head to find Temu standing nearby, watching her.

She had blinked at him, feeling color stoke in her cheeks. The boy could not have known what she had been doing. He had hiimori of his own, but Nala had never felt it strongly within him. Temu had been unable to muster the power to cross the jaqa line in the jabsar when Mongoljin had attacked him; she knew he could not have summoned enough hiimori to peer beyond the spiritual shroud over them and sense her qaraq into the jabsar, or know what dark thoughts she held hidden within her mind.

He could not have known, and yet he stood there on the beach, staring at her, his brows narrowed slightly, the corners of his mouth turned down in a frown. After a long moment of such unwavering, dark scrutiny, Nala had managed a fluttering smile and found her voice.

"Sain bainuu, Temuchin," she had said. "Is...is something wrong?"

He had not answered her; merely stared at her, and she had felt the delicate hairs along the nape of her neck stir uneasily at his regard. Temu had only turned when he heard Toghrul's voice. As the Kerait noyan walked near the boy, Temu glanced after him, his expression softening. He had spared Nala one last glance and turned, following Toghrul in the direction of the boats.

Temu could not have known, and yet in the days since the rapids, she had caught him countless times as he had looked at her like that, with pinched brows, his mouth drawn in a suspicious line. Every time she turned around, it seemed Nala would discover Temu close at hand, watching her. She could feel his eyes on her, even with her back turned, like little creeping fingertips against her scalp.

I did not mean it! she wanted to scream at him. *I did not know the water would be so violent! It was not supposed to happen like that!* "I did not mean it," Nala whispered. She tangled her fingers in her disheveled hair, tears welling in her eyes. "...I did not know," she whimpered. "I did not know."

In the aftermath of the rapids, the full and horrifying realization of what she had done had not struck Nala until Baichu could not be found. Nala had wandered the gravel beaches screaming Baichu's name until she was hoarse, but the ibugan had been lost to the water. This stunned realization had struck Nala like a brutal blow to the gut, and she had spent the days since in a stricken, guilt-wracked daze. "I did not mean it," Nala whispered, shoving the heels of her hands over her eyes. It might have been so easy to forget; even though Baichu was gone, a woman who had loved Nala like a daughter -- and whom Nala had loved as a mother -- she might have still been able to forget. Yeb had been so tender to her, so attentive and comforting, she might have convinced herself that it had been worth the while in the end. She might have, except Temu had known.

He had come to her last night. She had never in all of her life been drawn unwillingly into the jabsar, but all at once, as she had lay asleep in Yeb's tent, feeling his warm body spooned against hers, his arm draped about her middle, she had been wrenched from her form, her ami hauled like a fish speared by a hunter and drawn abruptly, forcefully from the water.

The jabsar had looked like their campsite, and she had been brought to stand before the campfire. She had caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye -- something huge and looming in the shadows, a hunkered silhouette with broad protrusions, like wings and she had whirled, frightened. She had been bewildered to discover no monster at the camp, no looming, winged figure. Instead, Temu had been

there, standing across the blaze from her, glaring at her, his face and eyes aglow with the crimson light of the flames.

You will leave, he had said, his voice within her mind making her shudder. *You will leave this place, and you will never bother us again.*

“Temuchin...” she had whimpered, struggling to force her voice through the constricted confines of her throat. “Temu, what...what do you mean? What are you -- ”

I know what you did, Temu said, and it was as though a powerful, unseen hand seized her by the chin, shoving her head back, forcing a startled, breathless cry from her. *I know what you did, and I know why you did it.*

“Please!” she had gasped, and she had seen it again, that hulking form looming within the periphery of her gaze. Whatever the shadow form was, it gathered around Temu in the jabsar, enfolding his form, stretching its dark wings around him.

You will leave tonight, Temu had told her. *If you ever come back to us, if you ever bother us -- or my Mamma -- again, you will answer for it, Nala. I will tell them what you did.*

“Te...teyimu,” she had whispered, nodding her head against the invisible hand that crushed her jaw. Yes. She had felt tears well in her eyes, spilling down her cheeks and she had trembled, helplessly. *Go away and leave us alone*, Temu had said.

“Teyimu,” Nala had whimpered, bobbing her chin up and down, weeping. “I...I will, Temuchin. I...I promise I will.”

She heard her name shouted again, closer now, sharper, and she cowered against the rocks, forcing herself into a tight corner of stones. He had told them after all. She had left, just as she had promised. She had jerked herself awake in her body once again, and had wasted no time, easing herself away from Yeb, struggling to control her hiccupping sobs lest he hear her and rouse. She had gathered together her meager belongings and fled, scampering from the camp and fleeing into the night. She had only paused long enough as she passed the campfire to spy Temu curled on his side, asleep by the blaze, tucked against Toghrul. There was power in the boy, so strong and apparent now, she wondered how she could have been oblivious to it before -- how Yeb or Rhyden could not sense it. There was something immense within him, something that

was only just beginning to stir. She had caught glimpses of it in the jabsar: the terrifying, hulking silhouette, the shadowy, winged figure surrounding the boy.

He is the Negh, Yeb had told her once. Lord of dragons and men. He is the only one in all of history who shares the spirits of both of these races -- the melding of earth and sky in one form, the human incarnation of the restored Tegsh.

Nala had felt a bitter chill shudder through her as she had staggered to a clumsy halt, blinking at the sleeping boy, and then she had whirled, bolting for the trees, weeping as she ran.

I did not mean it! she wanted to shriek as the Uru'ut cried out her name, shouted for her. *Please, I did not mean it!*

The Uru'ut were searching for her astride their bergelmirs. Nala had managed to put some distance between herself and the campsite, but in the darkness, the unfamiliar woods, it had been only a slim margin at best. The Uru'ut Kelet had closed that easily with their fleet-footed bergelmirs, and they drew closer with every passing moment. Nala trembled, huddled against the rocks, immobilized with fear. The bergelmirs had acute senses of smell. They were hunters and scavengers by nature, and she knew it was only a matter of time before the weasels caught her scent in the early morning air and followed it unerringly to her. To keep running seemed as futile as crouching among the stones, and Nala was filled with indecision.

No matter what I do, they will find me, she thought in dismay. And when they find me, they will kill me.

Nala, a soft voice whispered within her mind. At the sensation of it, Nala recoiled, jerking against the stones, her eyes flown wide as she gasped in sudden terror. She looked around wildly, thinking at first in her panic that it was Temuchin; somehow the boy had used his hiimori—that dark and horrifying power she had sensed and seen lurking in the shadows the night before—to track her down. There was no one she could see. The voices of the Uru'ut still sounded distant, and bewildered, Nala drew herself onto her knees, peeping over the outcropping of rock.

Nala, the voice whispered again.

“Who is there?” Nala shrank against the stone behind her. She opened her mind warily, extending her hiimori. *Who is there?*

I am, child, the voice said, and Nala's breath drew abruptly short. Her eyes widened again in shock.

"Baichu...?"

Yes, Nala, Baichu's voice said softly. *Come to me, child. It is safe here. They will not find you.*

Nala could feel a gentle force within her mind, a tug against her hiimori, coaxing her to her feet. She stood slowly, anxious and bewildered, and followed the sensation as it guided her along the slope of the hillside, drawing her out from the shelter of the nook she had pressed herself into, leading her away.

Baichu, is it really you? she asked. She took shuffling, hesitant steps, like a child frightened of a scolding. She drew her arms about her bosom and shivered; all at once the air around her seemed to have dropped at least ten degrees, and the chill seeped through the heavy layers of her clothing.

It is not possible, she thought. *Baichu is dead. She drowned in the river.*

It is me, oyutan, Baichu said. *I am here. I am with you.*

They had not found Baichu's body along the shores of the Urlug, but they had been unable to find the remains of most of those lost to the water that day. The rushing current of the river had swept miles downstream and their bodies were likely long-since washed ashore and devoured by ikhama and narsana.

She could not have survived, Nala thought, stricken and confused. *I know she could not have. She could hardly walk, much less find the strength to fight the current. She could not have survived. It is not possible.*

Ahead of her, nearly hidden along the rock face by a tangle of nappy firs and thorny underbrush, she saw a narrow, dark opening carved into the cragged stone. She crept toward the mouth of the cave, and a faint, unpleasant odor met her, a hint of mildew and rot, as though something had crawled deep inside the cave and died. Nala frowned as she tried to peer into the darkness. "Baichu, are you there?"

I am here, Nala, Baichu said, and Nala heard the faint, scrabbling sound of guta! soles against stone and gravel, as though someone hidden within the cave moved. *It is safe here, Nala. They cannot find you. I will not let them. I can protect you here.*

Nala hesitated at the cave's entrance, trembling and uncertain. She heard an Uru'ut call out sharply from somewhere in the woods—closer now than ever—and she flinched, mewling softly. “It has caught a scent, bahadur!” Nala heard the Uru'ut cry to Juchin or Toghrul. She jerked her head to look over her shoulder. “This way—she has passed this way!”

Come to me, Nala, Baichu whispered in beckon. They will kill you if they find you. I can keep you safe.

Nala turned, shoving her way through the scrub and spindly trees, ducking her head as she scurried beyond the threshold of the cave. The passage was so slim, even Nala's slight form was enough to nearly fill it. She stooped, hunching her shoulders and hunkering down. Her body blocked most of any dim sunlight that might have found its way inside, and she squinted, struggling to see in the gloom.

“Baichu?” she whispered, inching forward. The stench of decay was stronger and she reached out warily, patting her palms against the walls of the passage. “Bagsi, where are you?”

She heard the soft crunching of gravel beneath boot soles again, and then a hand met her own, grasping her from out of the darkness. Nala yelped in startled fear; there was surprising strength in the hand that gripped her, and the fingers that held her firmly were as cold as ice. “I am here, Nala,” Baichu said, and Nala could see her, a silhouette among the shadows in front of her. These were the first words Baichu had offered aloud, and her voice sounded peculiar to Nala, moist and gurgling, as though the idugan's throat was filled with water. Her skin was damp against Nala's, and Nala could hear the faint spattering of water droplets hitting the ground, falling from Baichu's form.

Nala whimpered, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Baichu...” she whispered.

“It is alright, Nala,” Baichu said. “You are safe now, child. This is a place of buyan—a manduaga the l'uitan shamans used once to draw spirits. They will not find you here, or sense you.”

“Baichu, I...please...I am sorry.” Nala began to sob and sank to her knees. She covered her face with her hands, shuddering as she wept. “I am sorry, bagsi!” she cried hoarsely. “I did not mean it! I...I did not mean it!”

Hush, child, Baichu said gently in her mind. Nala heard a rustling sound as Baichu knelt before her. She felt Baichu's cold hands cradle her face, drawing her gaze. "I did not mean for you to die," Nala whispered. Baichu was dead; this was the idugan's spirit, her ami visiting her. Manduagas were places of great power, where shamans traditionally channeled or sought counsel with spirits besides their uthas, and the idugan's ami would have been drawn to the cave, able to manifest itself in physical form within the tight confines. "I...I did not know...the water...I...I only meant for Aigiarn to...!"

I know, Nala, Baichu said. *You did not kill me, child. You have set me free me from blindness and infirmity. You released my ami from my aged, withered form.*

"But so many died, bagsi." Nala clutched at Baichu's hand, ignoring the clamminess of Baichu's flesh and drawing the older woman's palm against her cheek. "I did not mean for it to happen. I...I summoned a manang, but I...please, bagsi, I only meant to hide the sounds of the water so that Aigiarn could fall...so that I...I could..." She closed her eyes, shuddering as more tears fell. "Not you, Baichu. I never meant for you...you to..."

Your hatred for Aigiarn is strong, Baichu murmured. *I have never sensed it within you fully until now.*

"It does not matter." Nala wept, looking into the darkness, toward the silhouetted shape of Baichu's head. "Not now, Baichu, not anymore. All I wanted was for her to be gone—if she was gone, then Yeb might...he might have loved me."

I know, Baichu whispered.

"That is all I wanted! I only wanted him to love me!"

I know, child.

"But...but now...now so many are dead—you are dead, bagsi—and it is all my fault. Please forgive me. Please, I...I am sorry!"

"Hush now," Baichu said in that strange, sodden voice. She reached out and stroked her hand against Nala's hair. Nala could feel droplets of icy water spattering from the old woman's fingers against her neck, and she shivered. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness of the cave, and she could see the outline of Baichu's form clearly; she could see the idugan's ami was nude, her hair unfettered and hanging over

her shoulders in damp sheaves. "You summoned the manang," Baichu whispered, and Nala nodded, abashed.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, bagsi, but I...please, I only --"

"This shroud that hides you," Baichu said softly. "I cannot pass it. I could not come to you among the Uru'ut. I could only reach you here, through this place, this manduaga. The buyan within these stones keeps us hidden from them."

Baichu cradled Nala's cheek against her palm. The smell of rot was coming from Baichu, a sodden stench that seemed to be growing stronger by the moment. Nala tried to turn her face away, disturbed by the odor, but Baichu caught her cheek against her free hand and turned her head toward her. *Did you summon the shroud, as well, Nala?* she asked.

Nala blinked, surprised. "No," she said. "No, bagsi, it...it is not me. My hiimori is not strong enough for that."

No... Baichu agreed, sounding thoughtful. *It is not.*

"I think it is the boy," Nala whispered. "I think it is Temuchin. He is causing it somehow. Last night, he came to me in a dream. He forced me into the jabsar. He is the one who told me to leave. He knows, Baichu. Somehow he knew, and he said he would tell."

The boy, Baichu said, still in that thoughtful tone.

"I can sense him now," Nala said. "I do not know why I could not before...why Yeb and Rhyden do not even now, but I --"

"Rhyden," Baichu hissed, her voice sharp and filled with venom. Spittle sprayed against Nala's cheeks and lips. "Rhyden Fabhcun, the Elf-falcon with his endur and his golden sword. His mind is closed to me -- but it does not matter." Her hands tightened against Nala's face, and Nala winced, frightened again. "Bagsi...!" she whimpered.

"I know all of his secrets now -- all of his little, hidden, sacred thoughts," Baichu seethed. "What was given to him was taken as well -- and now it belongs to me. His shames and sacrifices, his lots...his love...it is all mine."

"Baichu, please!" Nala gasped. "You...you are hurting me...!"

Baichu's hands immediately loosened from Nala's face. When she spoke again within Nala's mind, her voice was calm and gentle once more. *Something is awakening*

in the boy. She leaned toward Nala, and the faint light from the entrance of the cave cast a dim, pale glow upon her skin, outlining the contours of her chin, her lips. Nala nodded. “Yes,” she said. “Last night in the jabsar, I saw something about him, a spirit shadow in the shape of a dragon.”

It is time, then, Baichu said. *I must ask you to help me, Nala.*

“Help you?” Nala asked. She saw the corner of Baichu’s mouth lift in a crooked smile. *Yes, child. I will need your hiimori.*

It occurred to her that Baichu’s face was different, what she could see of it. Her skin was smooth, not wrinkled with age, creased with lines and crevices. It was the mouth and jaw of a young woman no older than Nala herself. “Baichu?” she asked, her heart fluttering in sudden, horrified realization: *This is not Baichu at all.*

She caught a glimpse of the woman’s eyes as she leaned closer, and Nala uttered a shriek, trying to recoil. The woman’s eyes were smooth and featureless; twin, glittering orbs of utter blackness sunk into her pale flesh, into the pockets of her skull.

I will need all of the hiimori I can get, Mongoljin hissed, and then she shoved her mouth against Nala’s, muffling her terrified scream with her tongue.

The fire of the anam’cladh had nearly dissipated Mongoljin’s spirit to the qarang’qui. When the Elf’s brilliant, golden blade had pierced her, she had felt shadows descend upon her, dragging her into darkness. She had retreated, struggling desperately to reach the sanctuary of Yisun’s body, the one place where she might escape the eternal void. Rhyden Fabhcun had been right on that account. As a spirit, Mongoljin survived by the merits of having a physical form to turn to. Yisun was young and strong; the suni spirit of her form was vigorous, and it was only by this grace that Mongoljin had escaped the qarang’qui. She had forced her ami back into Yisun, miles away from Tolui Bay. She had rushed there like a gale-force wind; Yisun’s body had nearly toppled from the saddle of her bergelmir as the Khahl rode across the Taiga to join Targutai with the force of Mongoljin’s desperate re-entry. Mongoljin had scabbled for purchase, clinging to Yisun’s life force, using the strength of the young Qatun’s suni to keep her ami in place and free of the darkness.

She had remained here, cowering within Yisun's form for many long weeks, her spirit as feeble and helpless as a newborn kitten. She had found respite and restoration in an inadvertent gift the Khahl idugan, Khidyr Shriagal had left for her -- the circle of shamans Khidyr had relied on as her counsel. The shamans Khidyr had summoned to her were twelve of the strongest among all of the Khahl. Though Khidyr had been the strongest of them, they had all commanded formidable hiimori in their own rights, and Mongoljin had used this to heal herself, to reclaim her strength and quicken the restoration of her spirit that might have otherwise taken her centuries to accomplish.

She had drained each of the shamans in turn, summoning them to her in the night, as the small group of Minghan had made camp. The shamans came, albeit hesitantly. Mongoljin was weak, but she was still stronger than any of them, and they did not dare defy her. Mongoljin had kissed them each, drawing from their mouths, their forms all of their hiimori, all of the strength and vitality within their sulds. She had been desperate and greedy in her efforts, and left none for the shamans. They had died of course; sacrifices that had been necessary, at least in Mongoljin's opinion.

It is for the good of the kingdom -- and the Khahl, she thought as she devoured the life force, the hiimori within the Oirat idugan, Nala Sahni. She thrust the young woman's body away from her, listening to the rustle of her clothing, the dull thud as her head struck the ground in the darkness of the manuaga. She brushed her fingertips against her mouth, wiping Nala's saliva from her lips, smiling softly as she felt the girl's hiimori, her strength coursing through her, invigorating her.

The girl was strong, as the shamans had been strong, but even with all of their hiimori combined within Mongoljin, they had not proven strong enough. She still could not see beyond the shroud of the manang over the Oirat; she still could not cross this invisible but impenetrable barrier to reach them. Mongoljin had suspected the source for this shroud and her suspicions had been confirmed by what the girl had told her.

Duua's heir, she thought. *Temuchin.*

Mongoljin had discovered Baichu Cherendai, the elderly Uru'ut shaman washed ashore along the banks of the Urlug river. She had sensed it immediately when the old woman had been swept by the water beyond the perimeter of the manang; Mongoljin had felt Baichu's hiimori trembling in the air as a spider feels the slight vibration of a

moth caught in its web. She had released her ami, pouncing as a spider will upon its prey -- swiftly, deadly. Time and infirmity had weakened what was already feeble within Baichu, but her hiimori had been a meal nonetheless. Mongoljin had consumed her waning life force, her memories and frail hiimori and then left the old woman to rot among the tangled underbrush of the riverbank.

She had learned of Nala through Baichu's mind, and when she had sensed Nala running in the night, bolting beyond the manang -- or forced from the safety of its shroud by Temuchin -- she had again seized easily presented opportunity. The more hiimori Mongoljin devoured, the more she craved it. There had been one sweet, fleeting moment when she had enjoyed a delicate, all-too-brief taste of Rhyden Fabhcun's power, and she longed for the chance to draw near enough to drain him in full. His hiimori was impossibly strong; she could tear through the Oirat's manang with ease using his strength, and yet have power to spare beyond that effort.

By the time Targutai and his group of Khahl had reached the spot along the river where the l'uitan had erected their oboo, Mongoljin and her party had been waiting for them. None of the shamans remained; Mongoljin had disposed of them long before, and she had nearly been restored in full, a thousand-fold stronger than she had been when she had faced Rhyden Fabhcun in the jabsar.

The Khahl had understood who she was -- or rather, who she was not. Yisun, trapped in the body of Khidyr Shriagal, had stared at Mongoljin, her dark eyes wide and trepidations. She had dropped to her knees in the graveled soil of the beach, as had her Minghan eunuch, Megetu. One by one, the other Minghan had followed suit, until only Targutai remained standing before Mongoljin.

He had glared at her, so much like Duua in form and appearance that Mongoljin could not help but to smile. It had not taken Targutai more than this momentary, baleful glance before he had realized. He had seen her eyes, and he had blinked, taking an uncertain, hedging step backward.

"Sain bainuu, my Kagan," Mongoljin had told him, Yisun's delicate voice escaping from her throat.

"You are not my mother," Targutai said, his hand dropping against the hilt of his scimitar. Yisun had looked up at him from her prostrate pose in Khidyr's form.

“My Kagan,” she had said softly, alarmed. “My Kagan, do not -- ”

“No, Targutai Bokedei, I am not,” Mongoljin said gently, her smile widening at the boy’s proffered ferocity. “Where is my mother?” he demanded, his brows narrowing, his fingers closing about his hilt.

“She has sent me in her stead, my Kagan,” Mongoljin said. “I am Mongoljin Burilgitu. Your mother and your shamans have summoned me to help you defeat the false one and claim the dragons, restore your empire.”

“She is Duua’s mother, my Kagan,” Yisun had said. “She -- ”

“I know who she is, Khidyr,” Targutai had snapped. “I know that name. I am not ignorant.”

“She is very powerful, my Kagan,” Yisun had said. “She is a gazriin ezen, an ayy spirit, summoned from Tengri Lake. Her hiimori is vast, and she can help us against the Oirat, against the Elf -- ”

“I know what a gazriin ezen is, too,” Targutai had said, glowering at Yisun. He had turned to Mongoljin. Uncertainty had flickered across his face, and then he had frowned again, lifting his chin proudly. “I do not care who you are,” he had told her. “I am not bowing to you. I am the Kagan -- the sacred son. I do not bow to anyone.”

Mongoljin’s smile had only grown. “Of course not, my Kagan,” she had murmured. She lowered herself to her knees, folding Yisun’s legs beneath her. She had turned her gaze to the ground in respectful deference to Targutai. “You are indeed the sacred son. It is I who should bow before you, my Kagan.”

She had led them through the trees toward the oboo. Targutai had seemed irritated by this seeming delay; they had found debris from the Oirat’s wrecked knarrs, and he knew they traveled on foot now. Their own longboats had made it through the rapids with little damage, and he had been eager to be underway again, to close the brief margin of distance between them.

“Where are you taking us?” he had complained. “This is not helping. You said you would help us. Take us to the Oirat and destroy them. If you are so powerful, you know where they are going -- where the lair is. We do not need them anymore.”

Mongoljin had glanced at Yisun, amused to see the bright horror in the young woman's face. "I do not know where they are going, my Kagan," she told Targutai. "Not yet, I do not. They have summoned great hiimori to protect them from my sight."

Targutai had stopped, frowning at her. "Then you are no help to us at all," he said, angrily. He turned to Megetu. "Turn around and go back to the boats. Why are we wasting time here?"

"I do not know...yet, my Kagan," Mongoljin had told him again, placing gentle emphasis on *yet* and drawing his gaze. "But I am about to find out."

She had been able to sense the gazriin ezen of the Abhacan mage at the oboo. Its spirit was too weak to flee the tower of stones and retreat to the mountains that harbored it, and she knew what had happened. It, too, had been pierced by the anam'cladh's blade. It had not been destroyed -- more a testimony to the sheer strength this spirit must have possessed than to any lack of effort on the part of the Oirat. One of them had channeled it -- likely Yeb Oyugundei, their yeke shaman -- and then they had used the anam'cladh to drive it out of Yeb's form before he had been overpowered, banished to the qarang'qui. She had sensed it, and it had sensed her as well. She could feel it slithering deep within the stones of the oboo, shying away from her, trying to hide. Where it was weak yet, nearly helpless, Mongoljin was restored and strong. She had summoned it, narrowing her brows at the oboo and drawing it forth, forcing it from its pathetic little burrow. It had scrabbled for purchase, struggling against her. She had felt it tickling in her mind, and when she focused her energy, her hiimori against it, she had heard it shrieking in her mind in desperate, frantic alarm.

Nagh vel shiu ny shawk'airhey! it had screamed. It spoke in the tongue of the baga'han, but Mongoljin had been strong enough to understand its garbled words. *You are not the golden falcon!*

No, she had hissed to it, hooking her hand in the air. *I am not.* The baga'han's spirit had seeped from the stones in wisps of smoke. Even Targutai had been dumbstruck with startled wonder as he had watched these waning tendrils of fog curl out from among the rocks. They had floated in the air, coming together in the bowl of Mongoljin's outstretched palm.

They had been unable to see more than this; one needed hiimori to see the gazriin ezen's form. Mongoljin had been able to see him, a withered scrap of old man, only four feet tall, with a white, gossamer beard, his eyes enormous with terror, his hands gnarled and scarred by fire. She had cradled his face between her hands and leaned toward him.

Where did you send them? she asked. *What did you show them?* *Nagh...nagh vel shiu ny shawk'airhey...!* the baga'han whimpered, struggling to pull away from her. *You...you are not the golden falcon...!*

But he was here, was he not? Mongoljin had purred, sensing this. Her mouth unfurled in a smile. *He channeled you -- not the shaman. The shaman was not strong enough...but neither was he. You entered him...you touched him...felt him...tasted him...did you not?*

She had lowered her mouth against the baga'han's. Until the anam'cladh had run him through, his power had been immense -- perhaps even greater than her own. He was weak now, and his frailty was her strength. She destroyed him, draining every iota of remaining hiimori and vigor within him, stripping him of even this meager ability to keep from the qarang'qui. As she had drawn his memories, his power within her, she could see clearly what had happened. As his thoughts flooded within her mind, a sweet and unexpected surprise had come, as well.

What you gave to the Elf, you took as well, she had realized, laughing against the baga'han's mouth. She had felt the contents of Rhyden Fabhcun's mind, all of his thoughts and memories within her, his history, his feelings, his pathetic yearnings and frail shortcomings. She had been unable to enter Rhyden's mind in the jabsar, but it did not matter now. Here was his mind in full, everything within his heart and soul for her review, her consumption.

The gazriin ezen and the Elf had become so intimately intertwined in the brief moment the baga'han had forced itself upon him -- it had been so eager to discover him, the golden falcon it had waited millennia for -- that it had ravaged the Elf's mind, nearly breaking him. They were yet intertwined, at least for the moment, bound together by whatever remained of the baga'han's strength. For one fleeting moment, it was not the gazriin ezen Mongoljin consumed at all; it was Rhyden Fabhcun himself. She had

seen him on his knees in the baga'han's stead, helpless against her. She had kissed him deeply, the strength of his young form, his powerful spirit so sweet against her mouth, she had nearly moaned aloud. *What was given to you was taken as well*, she had whispered to him, feeling him struggle weakly against her, trying to pull away. She had sensed all of his memories as if they were her own. Here was the name of his endur protector, a young man she had seen clearly in her mind, someone Rhyden had loved; someone for whom he mourned. *Trejaeran Muirel*.

No, he had pleaded. *No, no -- do not -- please --*

All of the hiimori she had drawn within her from the shamans, varying degrees of strength and potency, and none of it had compared to that brief, magnificent taste of him. All of his secrets -- his delicious, delicate secrets -- had become hers, and when he tried to cry out, she had caught his voice against her tongue, savoring his fear, his pain.

What was given to you was taken, as well, she had whispered again. *And now it belongs to me, Rhyden Fabhcun. It is all mine.*

"They know the path now," Mongoljin had said softly, breathlessly. Rhyden Fabhcun had faded; she had devoured the gazriin ezen, banishing it to the qarang-qui, and without its power to bind their minds, Rhyden had been freed. She still trembled with that moment of Rhyden's power within her.

She had turned to Targutai. "This place is an oboo to the baga'han mage that hid the dragons' lair," she said. "The false one was here first. He used his Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun, to channel the baga'han."

"Why?" Targutai had asked, frowning. "They have a map. The Elf can read the map for them. Why did they need to summon any spirits?"

"Perhaps they lost the map, my Kagan," Yisun had said, drawing his gaze. "They crashed their knarrs into the rocks," she said. "And we have seen some of their bodies washed ashore. Perhaps the map was lost to them in the water, swept overboard. They would have had no choice but to try and channel the spirit. They have no other way to find the lair."

"I know where they are going," Mongoljin had told them. "I know where the lair is."

Targutai had blinked at her. "The baga'han's spirit told you?" he asked.

The corner of her mouth had lifted wryly. “Yes, my Kagan,” she said. *You might call it that*, she had thought.

Chapter Seven

“No! No, let me go!”

The scream rang out in the crisp, damp air of the new morning. Rhyden and Aigiarn were working together, unfettering the lines that held the canvas folds of their tent in place on its wooden frame, and they both jerked in startled, simultaneous alarm at the cry. “Tengeriin boshig, what was that?” Aigiarn gasped.

“No—not again! Let me go! You cannot take me!” the voice shrieked, and there was something vaguely familiar about it to Rhyden, something in the dialect, the tone that he thought he recognized.

Nala was missing. She had fled the camp, and Juchin had sent out his Kelet warriors to scour the surrounding landscape, searching for her. The screams had come from somewhere over Rhyden’s shoulder, in the direction Juchin and the Kelet had headed earlier.

Rhyden and Aigiarn reached for their scimitars nearly in unison, both of them closing their hands about their hilts. Temu sat nearby, cross-legged on the ground, under the pretense of humoring Aigiarn and nibbling at a scrap of dried burlagh meat for breakfast. He scrambled to his feet as the first scream cut through the valley, his eyes flown wide in bright, startled fear.

“Temu—stay here,” Rhyden said, abandoning the tent and running toward the sound. Toghrul and several other Kelet, also alarmed by the screams, had already bolted away from the campsite, racing along the riverbank with their scimitars in hand.

“But, Rhyden...Mamma...!” Temu began in protest.

Aigiarn darted after Rhyden, drawing her sword from its sheath. “Temu, keep put!” she called. Rhyden caught sight of Juchin and his sentries coming around a bend ahead. They had spurred their bergelmirs to a fleet-footed, urgent pace, and as they drew closer, the shrieks came again.

“Get your rot damn hands off of me! Let me go! No, no!”

Rhyden stumbled to an uncertain halt, his eyes widening. *It...it cannot be...!* he thought. The voice was not familiar to him, but the accent was; distinctive and lilting. "What in the duchan...?" he whispered.

Aigiarn paused in mid-stride as she came up behind him. "What is it?" she asked, alarmed all the more by his stricken expression. "Rhyden, what is wrong?"

"I am not sure," he said softly. *Mother Above, it cannot be,* he thought. *It cannot. There is no way.* He glanced at her. "Come on," he said, and then he moved again, running alongside of her toward Juchin and his riders.

Juchin reined his bergelmir to a skittering halt as Toghrul and the Kelet approached. "What is it?" Toghrul asked him. "Did you find her? Did you see any sign of Nala?"

Juchin raised his brow slightly. "Not exactly," he replied. Toghrul looked beyond the cantle of his saddle. "A Torachan?" he asked Juchin when he caught sight of the Kelet's wriggling, screeching captive, arching his brow in bewildered surprise.

"Looks as much to me," Juchin said, grimly.

"Here?" Toghrul asked, dumbfounded. "In the middle of the Khar?"

Juchin's scar crimped along his cheek as he frowned. "We saw him along the riverbank," he said. "Crouched on his knees, his hands in the water. He started when he saw us, tried to run. We did not see any others besides him, and judging by his appearance, I would say he has spent some time wandering in the wilds alone. He has no weapons on him, no food or water."

Rhyden and Aigiarn ran up to them. When the bearded man in the blue coat caught sight of Rhyden, his eyes flew wide above the cuff of the Kelet's hand, and his stifled cries intensified, growing insistent and loud. Rhyden saw the man and staggered, his breath drawing sharply, like he had just taken a punch to his gut. His hand fell away from the hilt of his scimitar, and he blinked at the man, stunned.

"Maybe he is with the Khahl," Juchin said. "They are allies with the empire."

“He...he is not with the Khahl,” Rhyden whispered. Juchin glanced toward him, his brow raised. “What?”

“I know him, Juchin,” Rhyden said. *It cannot be*, he thought, shocked, but there was no denying what was plain to see, no more than ten feet in front of him.

“Rhyden, what are you talking about?” Aigiarn asked, bewildered and startled.

“You know him?” Toghrul asked, stepping toward Rhyden, catching him by the sleeve. “Rhyden—you recognize this man?”

“I think so,” Rhyden said. He looked between Toghrul and Aigiarn, stricken. “I...hoah, I think he is from Tiralainn.”

Jobin Dunster. Rhyden did not recognize the name, much less the man’s face, but there had been so many crewmen aboard the *a’Maorga* whom he had met only in polite passing. He had only really grown acquainted with the few he had spent time with on a regular basis, and this man, Jobin Dunster, had not been among them.

Jobin had recognized Rhyden, however, immediately and from the first. When the Kelet rider had lowered him from the saddle, turning him loose as his boots settled against the ground, Jobin had rushed to Rhyden, falling against him and seizing him in a fierce, clutching embrace, as though they were long-lost kin.

“Lord Fabhcun! It is you!” he had cried, shuddering as Rhyden had blinked down at him, completely baffled as to how the crewman had come to be there. “You are alive! You are unhurt! Oh, praise the Good Mother! Praise the Good Mother Above!”

They had brought Jobin back to the camp, seating him before a fire to warm himself. Rhyden had offered him a pair of blankets, kneeling before the man and wrapping them about Jobin’s shoulders. He had given Jobin a waterskin and something to eat and Jobin had gobbled down thick strips of dried burlagh as though he had not tasted of food in ages.

“Hoah, thank you,” he said, trembling, his hands shaking as he drew another slice to his mouth, cramming his cheeks nearly full. “Thank you, Lord Fabhcun.”

“Rhyden,” Rhyden said gently, drawing a third blanket around his shoulders. Jobin paused in his chewing and blinked at Rhyden, seeming bewildered. “My name,” Rhyden said, and he smiled for the young man. “You can call me Rhyden.”

“Hoah,” Jobin said, wide-eyed and nodding. He managed a smile and then resumed munching. “Hoah, then, thank you kindly...Rhyden.”

Rhyden had not asked any questions of Jobin yet. It was obvious to him that the young man was in a state of prolonged shock. His clothes were damp and malodorous with filth. He was disheveled, dehydrated and starved. His large, dark eyes were shrouded with heavy shadows, lending his face a haggard, haunted look. Whatever had happened to him, however Jobin had come to be in the Khar Mountains, it had been nothing pleasant or easy. Rhyden was patient with the young crewman, keeping his voice quiet and soothing, realizing that even though Jobin was a relative stranger to him, obviously his face, his presence brought some sort of profound and welcomed comfort to the man.

The Oirat stood nearby, all of them keeping a wary, uncertain distance and granting Rhyden a modest berth as he tended to his friend. Toghrul and Juchin stood together, shoulder to shoulder, leaning toward one another in grave counsel, to judge by their shared frowns. Aigiarn stood within earshot of them, but her attention was fixed on Rhyden, her face drawn with worry. Temu stood in front of her, and Aigiarn draped her hands against his shoulders, holding him near. The boy regarded Jobin with drawn brows, his lips turned in a pensive, troubled line. Of them all, only Yeb approached Rhyden and the crewman, carrying an armload of folded clothes.

Jobin blinked at Yeb, cowering as the shaman knelt beside Rhyden. He glanced at Rhyden, fearfully, and Rhyden smiled at him. “It is alright, Jobin,” he said. “This is Yeb Oyugundei. He is my friend. I asked him if he might find some clothes to fit you, so you could change.”

Jobin glanced at Yeb again, still uncertain, and Yeb smiled gently at him. “Sain bainuu,” he offered in greeting. “You do not need to fear among us. You are safe now.”

“Thank you,” Jobin mumbled, accepting the del and leggings Yeb offered. He looked at them somewhat curiously, brushing his hand against the heavy hide front of the folded robe, and raising his brow with inquisitive interest at the thick layer of insulating burlagh fur inside.

He had a long shallow gash along the side of his temple. The wound had started to close, but looked inflamed and sore. Rhyden leaned toward him, worried about infection. “Hold still a moment,” he said quietly, cradling Jobin’s face between his hands and tilting his head so he could get a better look at the wound. He glanced at Yeb. “Would you pour some water on a scrap of cloth for me, le do thoil? Thank you, Yeb.”

He pressed his thumb lightly along the outer perimeter of inflammation surrounding the gash, and Jobin flinched, sucking in a sharp breath through his teeth. “I am sorry,” Rhyden said. Yeb handed him a dampened cloth and Rhyden looked at Jobin. “I am going to clean this wound,” he said, and Jobin nodded. “It may hurt a little. I will try to be quick.”

Jobin nodded again. His eyes were filled with hesitance, but he seemed to draw some reassurance from Rhyden’s soft tone of voice. When Rhyden carefully pressed the wet cloth against his face, he gasped again, jerking. “I am sorry,” Rhyden said.

“It...it is alright, my lord,” Jobin said.

Rhyden glanced at him, the corner of his mouth lifted. “Rhyden,” he said again. “My father is the lord, not me.”

He washed the wound deliberately, gently. He frowned as he worked; he would have liked to have sealed the gash with some sutures, but judging by the looks of things, it had been open too long to risk further infection. He raised his hips, reaching for his bogcu, where he had tucked some of Yeb’s prepared medicinal mixtures and poultices wrapped in squares of hide. He fumbled around inside the bag, drawing the silver hilt of the anam’cladh out and setting it aside, out of his way. Jobin stared at the bladeless hilt, his eyes round with curious fascination as it glittered against the ground, reflecting pale beams of new morning sunlight.

Rhyden opened one a packet he found inside the bogcu and dipped his fingertips into a thin herbal mixture that would help soothe the soreness, and draw the infection from the wound. "How did you hurt your head?" he asked Jobin, drawing the young man's gaze from the anam'cladh.

Jobin winced, but managed not to flinch as Rhyden gently applied the paste to his temple. "I fell," he said. "Down an embankment four days ago. Hit a rock."

Rhyden nodded. He took a small square of linen in hand and brought it against Jobin's temple. "Hold that in place for a moment," he murmured. He shifted his weight again, slipping the narrow length of the dagger Aigiarn had given him from his belt. Jobin blinked at the blade, momentary alarm and uncertainty flashing across his face.

Rhyden cut a strip of wool from one of the blankets, and then tucked the dagger back against his hip. He leaned toward Jobin, wrapping the piece of fabric around the young man's head to hold his makeshift bandage in place. "They cut your hair," Jobin said softly, and he brushed his dirt-crusting fingertips against the shorn tips of Rhyden's hair. When Rhyden nodded, Jobin said, "He told us they had. Captain Fainne said they had cut your hair...marked your face with a tattoo..."

His fingers trailed lightly against Rhyden's cheeks, and he looked puzzled by the absence of any catasta mark. "It faded," Rhyden told him. "My Gaeilge healing must keep the marks from being permanent on my skin."

"Oh," Jobin said, nodded. The mention of Aedhir's name had brought a profound and poignant pain to Rhyden's heart. "You know what happened to me in Capua?"

Jobin nodded. "Captain Fainne told us you were taken," he said. "Brought to a catasta and sold. He tried to find you. He searched all over the city until he found a woman at one of the auctions. She told him she had seen you -- she told him some Oirat had bought you."

"A woman?" Rhyden asked. He wanted to grasp Jobin by the shoulders and shout: *Where is Aedhir now? What in the bloody duchan happened?*

Jobin nodded again. "A slave woman from Achaia," he said. "Captain Fainne bought her. She said she thought she knew where the Oirat were bringing you. She could show him the way north."

Jobin's voice faded, and he blinked down at his lap. *What happened, Jobin?* Rhyden wanted to cry at him. *Where is Aedhir? What are you not telling me? What has happened to him?*

He said nothing, tucking his tongue between his teeth and his fingertips beneath Jobin's chin. "Look up, le do thoil," he said, raising his hips again. He cupped his hand over Jobin's right brow, shrouding his eye in momentary shadow, and watched as the man's pupil obligingly drew smaller against his iris. "Did you knock yourself out when you fell and hit your head?" he asked, performing the same gesture to Jobin's other eye.

Jobin shook his head, perplexed by Rhyden's actions. "No."

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Rhyden asked. "Cut or bruised?"

Jobin nodded, shrugging his shoulder slightly. "My wrists, I guess," he said, and he looked down at his lap. "They kept me trussed up fairly well. I had to walk for hours and hours...if I stumbled or fell, they would jerk me up again."

Rhyden cupped his hand Jobin's wrist, raising his arm and drawing the cuff of his tattered greatcoat back. There were bright bands of deep, apparent contusions beneath the juncture of his thumb, weals that encircled his wrist. Rhyden examined his other arm and found the same marks; in some places, Jobin's flesh had been chaffed raw, and blood had crusted in thin, dried lines.

"They?" he asked, looking up at Jobin.

Jobin glanced at Yeb, warily, and then toward the Oirat beyond Rhyden's shoulders. "Like him," he whispered, nodding at Yeb. "Like them."

Rhyden and Yeb exchanged quick glances. "The Khahl," Yeb said and Rhyden nodded.

"How many of them were there, Jobin?" he asked, and the young man shrugged.

"I...I do not know," he said. "They kept me blindfolded. At least a hundred, I think. Probably more. There were a lot of the bloody bastards, I can tell you that."

Rhyden gasped softly, and he looked over his shoulder at Aigiarn, stricken. "One hundred?"

"They took me," Jobin whispered, his voice tremulous. "I...I did not know what to do. Deag and Prew...and...and Tuathal all run through with arrows. The boat ran aground, and we...we ran into the woods. They were shooting arrows at us." He looked up at Rhyden, his eyes swimming with tears. "I did not know what to do," he said again. "What, with Captain Fainne gone and the Lieutenant screaming at us to go...so we did. Only the boat ran aground, and these...these things...these narsana..." He shuddered, closing his eyes, drawing his hand to his brow. "They killed Phelim and Frey, and I was all alone. I just kept running. I ran until I...I could not manage another step...not one, and when I looked up, I saw them. They took me."

"The Khahl fired arrows at you?" Rhyden asked, and Jobin shook his head.

"No," he whispered. "The Enghan. The Enghan attacked us." He looked at Rhyden again, his tears spilling. "Hoah, they...they killed Captain Fainne."

"Wh...what...?" Rhyden asked, stunned.

"They killed Captain Fainne," Jobin said again. He covered his face with his hands and shuddered. "Hoah, Lord Fabhcun, they killed them all. The Enghan butchered them!"

Jobin told him everything, and Rhyden listened in wide-eyed, stricken disbelief. Aedhir had sent the *a'Maorga* to Cneas, with orders to dispatch immediate word to Tiralainn of Rhyden's abduction. He had sent the frigate south under the command of his second officer, Lieutenant Haely, while Aedhir had taken a party of men with him aboard a longboat heading north in pursuit of the Oirat. Aedhir had apparently never been more than a day in full behind Rhyden as they had sailed along the coast of Torach and across the Chagan Sea toward Lydia.

“He kept saying he thought there was a woman and a child with you,” Jobin said, glancing at Aigiarn and Temu. “The slave girl told him an Oirat woman bought you, and we kept finding little footprints in the sand. Small footprints, like a child’s.”

When Aedhir had reached the eastern edge of the Chagan Sea, he had made a mistake, one that Rhyden knew must have seemed logical in Aedhir’s mind, but one that had apparently cost his friend his life. “Captain Fainne said they were bringing you to the Khar Mountains,” Jobin said. “He said he thought they had found something—an old, sealed-up Dwarf arsenal or something, and they needed you to read something carved in the doors, something that would open them.”

Rhyden blinked at this, raising his brows, surprised and impressed that Aedhir might have so accurately come to this conclusion. “He said he found a drawing in your coat pocket,” Jobin said. “Some kind of rubbing he said the Oirat had showed you in Capua—something you were interested in. It was part of a seal, he said, Dwarf magic they would write on doors to keep stuff safe.”

Because of this assumption—that the Oirat were bringing him to Ulus, and from there into the Khar Mountains, Aedhir had sailed east along the Qoyina branch at the Forks of Sube, not realizing that the Oirat had turned their knarr south into Tului Bay, toward Lydia. Jobin told Rhyden their lookouts had spotted three longboats run aground on the northern shore of Qoyina Bay along the coast of Sube. Aedhir had again accurately assumed the Oirat meant to meet with more of their numbers once they had reached their destination; although the boats in Sube seemed to suggest that whoever had been aboard had not been headed for the Khar Mountains across the bay in Ulus after all, Aedhir and his crew had not believed anyone else could account for the boats’ appearance on the beach. Aedhir had ordered his boat anchored in the shallows, and then he had taken a portion of the crew ashore to search the pine forests and foothills. Jobin had been one of the men assigned to remain aboard the longboat in the meantime.

He told Rhyden about the horrific attack of the Enghan, and how hundreds of the men had swarmed the beach, armed with bows, brandishing swords and axes in their hands. “It was madness,” Jobin said, ashen and shivering at the recall. “Lieutenant

Finamur...I could hear him screaming at us to go, and they had him, and Captain Fainne...Mister Feldwick...I could see them struggling and squirming. We dropped the oars and tried to get away, and that slave girl...she jumped in the water like a bloody damn fool, screaming and yelling. Mister Poel jumped in after her, and I do not know what happened to them. The Enghan were shooting arrows at us, and we just rowed with all our might."He blinked at Rhyden, mournful and aghast. "They killed them," he whispered. "I...I know they must have. They shot the boat all full of arrows, and Deag, Tualag and Prew...they took shots...they just keeled over dead on their benches. I...hoah, I have never seen anything so awful as that, never in all of my days."

While Jobin changed into the warm, dry clothes Yeb had brought him, Rhyden stumbled to the river's edge. He stood motionless on the bank, his eyes round with shock. He heard soft, hesitant footsteps behind him, and felt Aigiarn touch his sleeve.

"Rhyden?" she said.

"He said there are hundreds of Khahl," Rhyden said, his voice hoarse and quiet. He did not look at her; he stared out at the water. He remembered on the day they had sailed into Tolui Bay, he had felt one fleeting—and he had thought, imagined—moment where he had sensed Aedhir, when he had thought he heard his friend screaming in his mind. *Pryce—please, get to the boat—get out of there! They are taking us to the beach. Mother Above—get out of there! They are taking us to the beach!*

He realized now to his profound dismay that this had not been imagined at all. He had likely sensed Aedhir in those brief and terrifying moments as the Enghan had attacked. These thoughts had probably been among Aedhir's last, and Rhyden closed his eyes, gasping softly in anguish.

It is my fault, he thought. If I sensed you then, why could I not sense you before, even when I tried? I could have told you to turn back. I could have saved you. I could have prevented this. Hoah, Aedhir, this is my fault, and I will never forgive myself.

"There are hundreds of Khahl," he said again, his brows narrowing. "He said he managed to slip out of his bonds and escape sometime last night. He wandered the

night through, he said, following the riverbank. The Khahl cannot be more than a half-day behind us.”

She stroked her hand against his arm gently, offering him comfort. He looked at her and found her dark eyes filled with sorrow and pity. “We should go,” he said. “We cannot stay here. They are too near.”

“Rhyden, I am sorry,” Aigiarn said softly. She reached up, touching his face. “He was your friend, this man, Aedhir Fainne.”

Rhyden felt tears well in his eyes, and his brows furrowed all the more. He lowered his face, nodding once. “Yes,” he whispered, closing his hands into fists, struggling to defy his grief. “Yes, he...he was a good man. One of the best I have ever known.”

“I am sorry,” she whispered again. He felt her arms draw about his neck, and she stepped against him, embracing him. He tucked his forehead against her shoulder as her hand draped gently against the back of his head. He trembled against her, but did not weep. He gritted his teeth until his jaw ached with the strain; he stood against her, stiffened and rigid, refusing to yield to his pain. Aigiarn turned her cheek and pressed her lips against his ear. “I am so sorry,” she breathed.

Temu watched as his mother went to Rhyden along the edge of river. The news of the death of Rhyden’s friend had been like a knife shoved into his gut. Temu could sense a confusing, conflicting mass of emotions from Rhyden. One moment, he was so seized with grief and sorrow, he could scarcely breathe for it. In the next, within a batting of the eye, he was so filled with helpless and bewildered rage that to Temu, it felt like the very air around Rhyden trembled. He could feel how much Rhyden had cared for the man, Aedhir Fainne—the dark man Temu had dreamed of speaking with Rhyden on the deck of the *a’Maorga*. Rhyden’s heart and mind surged in a poignant, anguished tug-of-war of thoughts and feelings, swirling like the white-capped, frenzied waters before them.

He felt a hand fall against his shoulder, and Yeb smiled at him gently. "He will be alright, Temu."

"He is hurting," Temu said. "And angry...confused. He thinks it is his fault somehow."

He looked up at the shaman. They had found Nala's body several hours earlier, just after Jobin Dunster had been delivered to the camp. Yeb had been heartbroken and bewildered at the grim discovery. The young Galjin idugan had managed to make it about a mile and a half from the campsite during the early morning hours. When the sun had risen, she had apparently sought sanctuary in a tiny, cramped cave among the foothills and pines. She had died here; they discovered her crumpled in a heap within the narrow confines of stone. Her face had been frozen in a mask of stricken shock; her eyes had been opened, her mouth slightly agape, a thin froth of saliva trailing down her chin. Temu had overheard Juchin say that Nala must have swallowed a lethal mouthful of the qola'nola berries shamans used to induce qaranqu. The contents of Nala's bogcu had spilled beneath her hips as she had collapsed in the cave, and they had found a number of the shriveled fruits scattered around her.

The discovery of her body, the realization of her apparent suicide had held sobering effect on the Oirat. All of the Uru'ut with them had known Nala for years, and her death had stunned and bewildered them as much as had her deceit and betrayal. Yeb had taken it especially hard.

"She does not deserve an honorable funeral," Juchin had growled in disapproval, folding his arms across his broad chest, his brows drawn. Despite this, Yeb had brought Nala back to the campsite and set about tending to the traditional funereal rituals of the Oirat, preparing her body and wrapping it as best as he could. He had burned bowls of aromatic incense, letting the smoke waft across her shrouded form. Temu could still smell the fading incense of it in the air.

Yeb had waved his dalbuur fan over her as he had murmured quiet, mournful incantations. He had struck a slow, gentle rhythm against his ritual drum, turning it in his hand as he had lifted his voice in ceremonial songs. The sound of his voice, the profound sorrow that punctuated each note and word, had left Temu breathless with pity for the shaman, and helpless to comfort him in his grief.

“It is not Rhyden’s fault his friend is dead,” Yeb told Temu on the riverbank.

It is not your fault, either, Yeb, that Nala died, Temu thought. It is mine. I sent her away. He could not tell Yeb this, not aloud, not so the shaman would believe him. She did not commit suicide. Mongoljin killed her. She was here, nearby in the woods. She tricked Nala somehow and then she devoured her.

“Are your things packed and saddled?” Yeb asked him, drawing his gaze. “Juchin is anxious to be on our way. The Khahl are not far behind us—less than a day, Rhyden’s friend said.”

Temu frowned slightly, glancing over his shoulder at the strange man, Jobin Dunster. He had washed up a bit, changed into a del and leggings, and sat against the ground, shoving his feet back into his boots. Jobin looked up, as though he felt the weight of Temu’s dark gaze, and he blinked at the boy, his expression shifting, growing somewhat fearful. His eyes darted back to his boots and he did not look up again.

“He is not Rhyden’s friend,” Temu said quietly. “Rhyden does not even remember him from the ship.” There was something peculiar about Jobin Dunster; Yeb and Rhyden could not sense it—just as they had been able to sense Nala’s hidden treachery, but Temu could. He could more than feel it—he could see it. There was a darkness about Jobin’s form, like a shadow that had enveloped him, clinging to every inch of his form. It was cold and black, as if all light drawing near to Jobin was swallowed by it. When Temu turned his eyes, his mind to Jobin, it felt like he smacked headlong into an invisible wall, a spiritual jaqa that had been drawn around the man somehow.

“He traveled with Aedhir Fainne, Rhyden’s friend,” Yeb said. “Rhyden trusts him.” He noticed Temu’s distracted attention, his troubled expression and followed his gaze. “But you do not,” he observed quietly.

Temu turned to him. He wanted to tell Yeb the truth; that though Yeb, Rhyden, Baichu and even Nala had been unable to summon much hiimori, he still could, that despite this mysterious shroud that had seemed to stifle them, keep them from their uthas, he felt like he was still seeing visions—Yesugei was still revealing things that only

he could see, just as he always had—just like the shadow Temu saw surrounding Jobin. He wanted to tell Yeb that his hiimori did not feel muffled to him anymore; just the opposite, in fact—every day now, it felt like something within him was awakening, growing, something tremulous with anxious energy.

“I do not know,” he said. He could not tell Yeb. If he did, he would have to tell Yeb that he was the reason Nala had left them—he had driven her away. He was the reason Nala was dead, and Temu knew if he told Yeb these things, Yeb would be angry with him. Yeb had loved Nala, no matter what she had done, and he would be angry with Temu. *You would hate me if you knew*, Temu thought, blinking against sudden tears.

Yeb touched the boy’s face. “Temu,” he said softly, his brows lifting in concern. “What is it? What is wrong?”

Worse than this realization was another even more awful. Rhyden blamed himself for Aedhir Fainne’s death. He thought it was his fault because his sight had not showed him that Aedhir was in danger. He thought he could have warned Aedhir if he had known; he could have prevented the man’s death if his sight had only allowed him. Rhyden blamed himself, but Temu knew that it was misplaced. He had always been able to sense when Rhyden would open his mind, searching for his friend with his sight. It had not happened often lately, but it had quite a bit when Rhyden had first awoken among the Oirat. Temu had been able to feel Rhyden’s powers extending, seeking Aedhir, and every time he would sense it, Temu would panic. *If he finds the dark man, he will call to him*, he would think, frantic and alarmed. *He will try to leave us—they will come and take him away. What if thinking that kept Rhyden from finding him?* Temu thought, dismayed. He was beginning to understand that his hiimori was different somehow than other Oirat shamans. Like Rhyden’s, somehow his seemed to follow its own rules, governed by its own whims. Like the visions Yesugei would show Temu, his own gift of hiimori was unique to him—and it was growing stronger. *What if I somehow blocked Rhyden’s power, kept him from reaching his friend? What if it is my fault Aedhir Fainne is dead, because I made Rhyden be unable to sense him, warn him?*

He blinked more fervently against his tears and glanced at the river. He saw Rhyden and Aigiarn walked together toward him, and he gasped softly, horrified. *Rhyden would hate me, too. It is my fault. I did this somehow, and he will hate me if he finds out. Rhyden, Yeb...maybe even Mamma. They would all hate me.*

The hastily eaten meal of burlagh meat Jobin had gobbled did not sit well on his poor, withered stomach. His belly had begun to groan in unhappy protest after he had changed into the fur-lined robe and leggings the Oirat had given to him. He had pressed his hand against his stomach, but there was no staving the inevitable, apparently. Jobin whirled about, drawing his legs beneath him and vomited, crying hoarsely as frothy fluid and chewed globules of meat spewed out of his mouth.

He heard footsteps behind him, and then Rhyden knelt beside him, placing his hands against Jobin's shoulders. "Easy now," he said quietly, as Jobin writhed against him, retching up another foul mouthful. "Easy, Jobin."

"I...I am sorry..." Jobin gasped, spitting and sputtering, panting for breath. Another spasm wracked his midriff and he leaned forward, gagging. There was nothing left to come up but thick, stringy bile, and he groaned.

"There is nothing to be sorry for," Rhyden told him. He had a very soothing voice, a comforting manner about him Jobin had not taken notice of aboard the *a'Maorga*. He had dressed Jobin's wounds, tending to his scrapes and bruises like someone familiar with the healing arts, and as he let Jobin lean against his shoulder, shuddering miserably, Jobin decided it was a vocation for which the Elf was well-suited. "I...I ate too bloody fast," Jobin said, closing his eyes. "They did not give me much food. I...hoah, I was so hungry."

"We have plenty," Rhyden said. "Why do we not wait awhile and try again, a little less this time?"

Jobin nodded. "Alright," he whispered.

“Here,” Rhyden said, and Jobin opened his eyes as the Elf pressed a waterskin between his hands. “Take a mouthful and rinse it around. Do not swallow it, not just yet. It would only make you sick again.”

“Thank you,” Jobin said, tilting his head back and letting water pour into his mouth. He puffed his cheeks out, letting the water rinse away the bitter, thick flavor of vomit. He leaned forward and spat against the ground, closing his eyes again. “Do you feel up to riding?” Rhyden asked. “You can sit behind me on my saddle, rest your head and sleep awhile.” His brows lifted, apologetically. “We have to keep moving. The people who took you are called the Khahl. They are enemies to the Oirat. They will kill us if they find us.”

Jobin nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I...I can ride.”

Rhyden stood, offering his hand to Jobin and helping the younger man stumble clumsily to his feet. Rhyden put his arm around Jobin’s shoulders and let him lean against him as they walked toward a nearby cluster of bergelmirs.

“Where are they going?” he asked, looking up at Rhyden.

Rhyden did not answer him at first, and Jobin did not expect him to. The Khahl had never told him what they were searching for; what they believed the Oirat were leading them toward. They had not told him much of anything since he had first encountered them. The weird, creepy bitch they had met in the forests—the woman with black eyes whose stare alone seemed to wriggle through Jobin’s brain like icy fingertips—had told him only what she had wanted him to know. She had given him very specific instructions, and she had sealed them with a kiss.

Rhyden Fabhcun carries a sword with him, she had whispered to him, only her mouth had been closed as she had knelt before him, holding him fast, impaled by those featureless, blackened eyes. He had heard her voice inside of his mind, like she had crept into his brain, and his bladder had loosened, flooding his trousers at the cold, hissing sensation of her. *A very special sword*, the woman had told him. He had heard the others speak of her—though they very seldom spoke *to* her, as if they, too, were

terrified. Her name was Mongoljin. *A bladeless sword, a simple, silver hilt. You will take it from him and you will bring it to me.*

“Y-yes,” he had whimpered, bobbing his head up and down, a cowed and obedient puppy. *Bring me the sword, and I will set you free,* she had whispered. *Deliver it to me, and I will see you home again, Jobin Dunster.*

Jobin could not understand why Mongoljin would want a bloody useless sword, the sort with no blade, but he would have agreed to climb to the sky and scratch the moon down from the backdrop of stars if only it meant she would get out of his head. *But do not dare fail me,* Mongoljin had said, and she had cradled his face between her hands, her mouth lifting in a smile that might have been sweet had it not been for her eyes, her dark, terrible eyes. *No matter where you run, I can find you again. Do not think you can betray me. Do not think you can escape me.*

“I...I will not...!” he had pleaded, trying to draw away from her. Her grip against his face had tightened, her palms mashing his cheeks in toward his nose. She had leaned closer, and her breath had been dank and foul, like something moist left to rot in a darkened corner of a cellar. *I know you will not,* she had murmured, and then she had kissed him, pressing her lips firmly against his. She had opened her mouth, and Jobin had writhed, struggling as she had vomited a violent burst of icy water into him. His voice had been muffled, drowned by the water, stifled by her mouth as he tried to scream in horrified revulsion. He had gagged, feeling the water spew down his throat, splashing into his stomach, filling his gullet and rising, spraying out of his nose, streaming out in rivulets from the corners of his mouth. When she had turned him loose, he had scabbled away from her, retching. There had been no ridding his gut, his form of her, however; whatever she had sicked into him had remained. He could feel it within him. It was like a nest of spiders had hatched in his belly and scurried about inside of him now. He could feel it; he could feel her whispering, buzzing deep within his ears; he could feel her tickling and creeping behind the pockets of his eyes. It took every ounce of his will not to break out shrieking, clawing at his face, tearing into the soft meat of his eyes with his fingernails to try and gouge her loose from him. Wherever they were going, whatever they were all looking for, it had to do with the Oirat boy; Jobin knew that much.

There was something about the kid that was special and powerful, and whatever it was, it was enough to trouble Mongoljin.

You will not have much time, she had warned Jobin. There is a boy among them. Rhyden Fabhcun is leading him to something that belongs to me -- and my Targutai. This boy will try to stop you if he is able. I can keep him from you, your mind and thoughts, but only for a short time. You will have to hurry. If he discovers your intentions, he will kill you.

Jobin glanced up from Rhyden's shoulder and toward the boy, who stood nearby watching them. There was something creepy about the kid, that much was for certain. He had been staring at Jobin from the moment Jobin had been brought among them and there was an imposing weight to the boy's stare that had nothing to do with the stern, disapproving expression on his face. It was as if when the boy's eyes locked with Jobin's, he could feel the kid trying to enter his mind, as Mongoljin had. It was a nearly tangible impression, as if the boy took the blade of his fingertips and physically thumped Jobin in the forehead.

Sunlight splayed against the ground around the boy, dappled with shadows from the mountains slopes and cragged cliff faces. The kid's shadow was wrong; it spilled ahead of his feet in a large, hulking sprawl -- not the slender, elongated silhouette of a child's form, but something else, something monstrous and inhuman. It looked like a giant bat, some sort of hunkered, winged form, like a beast crouched behind the boy, its shadow swallowing his own whole. No one else seemed to notice, but Jobin did, and it raised the downy hairs along the back of his neck with tickling, creeping horror.

What in the duchan is that? he thought, and then he made the mistake of looking into the boy's eyes.

You are not Rhyden's friend, he thought he heard the boy say within his mind, his voice sharp and menacing. *What do you want here?* Jobin wrenched his eyes away from him and stared down at the ground as Rhyden led him toward the bergelmirs. He had seen the sword and knew now where Rhyden kept it—in a large hide pouch fettered to his belt. He only had to figure out how to take it from the Elf -- and quickly.

I can keep him from you, your mind and thoughts, but only for a short time, Mongoljin had told him. *You will have to hurry.*

“What are the Oirat looking for out here?” he asked Rhyden, looking down at the pouch at the Elf’s hip as they walked together. “What do they think you can lead them to?”

“Dragons,” Rhyden said after another moment’s hesitation. “They want me to lead them to a dragons’ lair.”

When this elicited no response from Jobin, Rhyden glanced at him. “I know that must seem hard to believe,” he said.

There had been a time not too long ago when Jobin would have nodded and said, *Yup. You are right. That seems bloody damn madness to me.* However, that was before Mongoljin had looked at him with those black eyes and crept around in his mind, slithering through him like maggots in soft loam. That was before she had kissed him, infusing something of herself within him—a squirming, restless shadow that hissed in his ears and scraped against the backs of his eyes. That was before he had seen the enormous, winged shadow cast by a seemingly slight and diminutive boy, and heard his voice within his mind. He might have once thought finding a dragons’ lair was the daftest thing he had ever heard of—but that was before he had understood that though Mongoljin and the kid both wore the forms of people, neither of them could be human.

“I do not know about that,” Jobin told Rhyden, and he shuddered. “Anymore, I would say I am inclined to believe just about anything.”

Chapter Eight

“Good morrow, my Lady Finamur,” Aulus Tertius said as a handmaid escorted him into the parlor of the his former apartment at the royal palace, a suite of rooms he had assigned to Aelwen Fainne-Finamur upon her arrival in Kharhorin. He found Aelwen much as he had every morning for nearly the last two weeks: seated before the expansive hearth at a small table, her breakfast on a tray in front of her. She had only roused a short time earlier. Her hair tumbled against her shoulders in wayward tendrils and disheveled ringlets, and she still wore her linen nightgown, a billowing dressing robe lashed loosely beneath her bosom for modesty.

“Good morning, Lord Tertius,” Aelwen replied without sparing him a glance. She was trying to coax a young girl sitting across from her to eat a small bite of egg. Aulus had bought the girl for Aelwen, having had the child shipped all of the way from a premium catasta in Serdica to the Ulusian royal city. He had thought the girl would please Aelwen; she, too, was of Median descent. Her skin was a lighter complexion than Aelwen’s, and her large eyes were a striking shade of blue, but Aulus had thought the familiarity in form, nonetheless, might help put Aelwen at ease. Like most of his other efforts to endear himself to the young woman, however, this attempt, too, had failed.

“She is a slave,” Aelwen had said, staring in aghast at the tattoo marked on the child’s face.

“Yes, from the Dius catasta in southern Torach,” he had told her. The name of Serdica’s finest auction arena had meant nothing to Aelwen, and she had turned to him, her brows furrowing.

“My people do not believe in slavery,” she had said with a frown. “It is an abomination in the eyes of the Good Mother.”

The child would not talk, which did little to improve matters. This had distressed Aelwen terribly, and she spent a great deal of time coddling the girl, trying to ease even soft sounds, if not words from her mouth. “What happened to her?” she had demanded of Aulus. “She is terrified -- that is why she will not talk. What did they do to her at this catasta of yours?”

“It...it is hardly mine, my lady,” he had replied, flustered by her ire. “I do not know what happened to her there, save that she is intact. You have my assurances of that. I paid an extra two thousand dorotus for it. Children can command such prices when their virtues remain unblemished.”

The fact that he had paid to make sure the child was not raped did nothing to endear himself in Aelwen’s regard. “How compassionate of you, Lord Tertius,” she had told him with a glower. Aelwen had arrived four days ahead of the other bellatori from Engjold under Decimus Paulus’ command. She had been delivered in the protective company of Paulus’ Optio, first officers from among the four cohorts, and had been anything but the delicate damsel in distress Aulus had been anticipating. Her account of her circumstances as told to Aulus had not varied much from what Decimus had written to him; she told Aulus that she had newly married in her home realm of Tiralainn, and that she and her husband, a Lieutenant in the Tiralainn Navy named Pryce Finamur, had planned to travel with her father -- and Pryce’s commanding officer -- Captain Aedhir Fainne along the northern coast of the empire, into the Chagan Sea. They had encountered a bad storm, Aelwen had said, that had left their ship battered. They had abandoned it by longboat for shore and had been captured by the Enghan on the southern coast of Sube.

Her story had seemed rather feeble to Aulus. At first, he had been unable to decide why she would lie to him about it, but suspected nonetheless that she was. A day spent sifting once more through the mountains of correspondence Yisun had kept from him had revealed the truth -- he had discovered a letter from Quintas Camillus Vitus, imperial propraetor of the city of Capua. Yisun had apparently not had time in her last weeks at the palace to read through all of Aulus’ letters, because this one remained sealed and unopened.

I have sent notification to Cneas, but as you are consul to Ulu, my lord, I felt you, too, should receive these tidings, Vitus had written. A man claiming the name Aedhir Fainne, calling himself a Captain in the Crown Navy of Tiralainn came to my offices last night. He charged that a companion had been a victim of raptio. He stated this companion is a liaison for the Crown Realms of Tiralainn and Tirurnua, an ambassador to the empire named Lord Rhyden Fabhcun. He further claimed that a

party of Oirat Ulusians purchased Lord Fabhcun and have taken him from our port. I have confirmed this man's identity through the harbor registry, but I do not believe his account of events, as he came to me reeking of liquor and in the disreputable company of an Achaian whore whom he had just purchased at a catasta. However, I felt notification might be prudent, no matter the circumstances. If Lord Fabhcun was truly taken, then his disappearance could be source of concern for our Pater Patriae and Senate, as well as his own realm.

Aedhir Fainne -- Aelwen's father. Vitus had mentioned that he had confirmed the arrival -- and subsequent departure -- of Captain Fainne's ship, a merchant frigate from Tiralainn registered with the Lunan Bay harbormaster as the *C.N.S. a'Maorga*. According to harbor records, the *a'Maorga* had no written orders of dispatch from Tiralainn, and it had indeed suffered storm damage -- though much further south than Aelwen had claimed. It had been en route for Cneas, commissioned according to the harbor registry by Lord Rhyden Fabhcun, royal ambassador to the empire. *Why would she lie about this?* Aulus had wondered, troubled by the note as well as Aelwen's deception. He had treated her with the utmost courtesy since her arrival in Kharhorin, assuring her that she was a guest of the empire, and not a prisoner. He knew Decimus Paulus well enough to know the Praetorius had likewise ensured only toward and respectful treatment of the lady while in the company of his officers. He could not figure any reason for her deceit, except that she was frightened of seeing her father in trouble. Perhaps Captain Fainne had decided to pursue his friend's captors, and sailed north to reach the Chagan Sea, and from there, the Forks of Sube, which led between Engjold territory to the north, and some Oirat territory to the south. If Captain Fainne had done so, it was without imperial permission -- and could probably see him with a great deal to answer for, both with the empire and his own land.

After pondering the matter awhile, Aulus had found no other reasonable explanation than this, and had been satisfied. If nothing else had become apparent to him about Lady Aelwen Fainne-Finamur during their brief acquaintance, then this surely had -- she was fiercely protective of her father...and her husband. He might have told her it was not worth the bother or effort to lie. From what he had heard of Decimus' campaign in the Keiliselgr Mountains, it seemed unlikely that anyone not taken by the

bellatori that day could have survived. Captain Aedhir Fainne was in all likelihood dead, buried beneath the rubble of the detonated mountainside, as was Pryce Finamur. He knew this had occurred to her; it was apparent in her eyes, but she was a stubborn, magnificently willful woman who had simply refused to accept this.

“She is not given breakfast in the slave quarters?” Aulus asked, nodding at the little Median girl.

“She does not eat it,” Aelwen replied. “She will only eat for me.” The child had slipped from her chair at the sight of Aulus and shied around the side of table next to Aelwen. She tucked herself against the young woman’s side, as if frightened. Men in particular seemed to intimidate the girl, and Aulus had begun to wonder -- much to his chagrin -- if his extra two thousand dorotus had been spent in vain. “Perhaps she should remain here in your company in the evenings, then, my lady,” Aulus said, drawing Aelwen’s surprised gaze. For the first time in several days, her sharp regard softened and her brows lifted with sudden, eager hope.

“Could she?” she asked, putting her arms around the little girl. “That would be wonderful. Could she really, Lord Tertius?”

“Of course she could,” Aulus replied. “Being with you seems to bring comfort to the child. I will take care of it right away, my lady, if it would please you.”

Her mouth unfurled in a lovely, unguarded smile. “It would please me very much, my lord. That would be very kind of you.”

“It would be my pleasure, then, my lady,” he told her, brushing his fingertips against the front of his waistcoat and lowering his head courteously.

The prospect of keeping company -- and perhaps a bed -- with a timid noblewoman in need of tender comforts had prompted Aulus’ interest in Aelwen since he had learned of her pending arrival. The fact that Aelwen was anything but this had only stoked his fascination with her all the more. Her beauty was exotic and elegant; he had difficulty taking his eyes from her. He had deliberately assigned her his former appointments at the palace, the apartment of rooms he had called his own until claiming Yisun’s larger, more luxurious accommodations. He had done this because he had discovered the Qatun’Eke’s little network of hidden tunnels between the walls -- and the peepholes she had used to spy on him. One peered into his parlor, another into his

bedchamber, and he had sworn aloud to realize the rotted bitch had probably been standing there, watching her whores each have their way with him.

He used to the peepholes to watch Aelwen. Late at night, when a tub would be brought and drawn for her, he would stand motionless behind the wall, his breath stilled as he watched her undress and slip into the water. She would pin her hair up against the crown of her head to reveal the graceful measure of her throat, and she would lean back against the curved edge of the tub, letting her arms drape over the sides. Sometimes she would weep here, alone in her bath, and he could hear the soft whimper of her voice as she said her husband's name over and over again. "Pryce," she would whisper, her voice fragile and forlorn. "Pryce, where are you? Please be alright. Please, Pryce. I...I love you."

She was so beautiful. He would watch her abandon the tub and draw measures of linen along the supple lengths and curves of her legs, torso and arms, drying herself. He would watch firelight dance off of water droplets she missed, small, jewel-like beads aglow against the slopes of her breasts, the edge of her shoulders, the apex of her stomach. He would watch as she put her gown and robe on and stand before the fire; the silhouette of her body apparent in the glow through the thin fabric was nearly as enthralling as seeing her nude. He would draw himself to a slow, powerful climax watching her from the shadows, and sometimes she would turn at his quiet gasp of release, her expression curious, as though she had heard the soft, sharp intake of his breath.

"Perhaps if it would further please my lady, I would invite you to join me this afternoon for lunch," Aulus said to Aelwen. "And then perhaps a brief stroll? There is something I have been wanting to show you, my lady. Something very special."

Aelwen blinked at him uncertainly, her expression toughening again. She owed him now; he had not had to offer to let the girl remain with her, and they both knew it. She relented, but only begrudgingly. "I...I suppose, my lord."

"Splendid, then. Shall we say eleven-thirty? I will send my steward for you."

Aelwen nodded, looking down at the girl. "Yes, fine," she said. "Eleven-thirty."

“I shall leave you then,” he said, lowering his head again. “I have interrupted your breakfast, and I have some matters of my own that I should see attended to before our lunch. If my lady will excuse me...?”

“Thank you, Lord Tertius,” Aelwen said, nodding without looking at him. “Good morning to you, sir.”

Pryce awoke to the muffled sounds of voices drifting softly through the door of his cell. He lay on his side against the damp, cold ground, opening his eyes dazedly and blinking at the darkness. He did not know if it was day or evening, midnight or morning. He had long since lost any track of time; minutes, hours and days blended together into one prolonged, murky haze. He groaned softly, moving his hands, listening to the sounds of the iron chains binding his wrists together between tight manacles drag against the ground. He was shuddering; the air was freezing, and he wore only a thin leine and pants against the chill. The voices grew louder, closer to his cell. Pryce pressed his palm against the dirt and tried to raise his head. He was weak and could not remember the last time they had given him any food. Decimus Paulus, the Praetorius of the imperial army had ordered him fed along their journey from Engjold to the Ulusian city of Kharhorin. True to his word, the Praetorius had also kept Pryce from harm on the trip, and none of the soldiers or the Hildofar had tried to hurt or assault him again. However, Decimus' authority had been conceded to his superior -- Aulus Tertius, the tribunicia potestate of Kharhorin -- upon their arrival at the royal city, and where Decimus might have demonstrated some civility, if not compassion for his captives, Aulus Tertius apparently shared no such sentiment.

Pryce had been deprived of food. He had been deliberately incarcerated away from Einar and the other Enghan, kept alone in a tiny, dank, pitch-black cell. Every so often, a soldier would bring a shallow bowl filled with water to him, and Pryce would have to make it last for several days before it was replaced. He stayed disoriented in the darkness, and he suffered disturbing dreams. Sometimes he woke himself crying out for Wen or Aedhir. Sometimes he could hear a voice seeping through the stone walls, a quiet voice, like a child's, rousing him from dazed and restless dozes, and he wondered if he was going mad.

“Please,” he would hear the child say, the voice muffled and faint. He could hear soft whimpers, as though the child hiccupped against tears. “It is alright. Do not be frightened.”

Aulus Tertius had none of Decimus’ compunctions about inflicting injury to his prisoners, either. On the day of their arrival in Kharhorin, Pryce had been brought before Tertius. Aulus had regarded Pryce as something he might have scraped off his boot heel and he had flapped his hand at a table, a sheet of blank parchment.

“You will write to your uncle, Konung Fjolnir Itreker,” Aulus had told him. “You will tell him that he will tender all of his lands and peoples to the Torachan empire.”

Pryce had met his gaze evenly, his brows drawn. “I will not.”

“Write it,” Aulus had said again. “Write it and your people, the boys we brought here with you will go free. I will dispatch them under imperial protection today for the Engjold border.”

“Free them first,” Pryce had countered. “Free them now -- every one of them.”

Aulus had closed his hand against Pryce’s jaw, forcing his head back. The consul’s eyes had blazed with rage as he had leaned toward Pryce’s face. “This is not a bartering session, boy,” he hissed, spraying Pryce’s mouth, his cheek with spittle. “And you, Einar Eirikson, are in no position to make demands of me.”

He had thrust Pryce away from him with enough force to cause Pryce to stagger, the lengths of chain binding his ankles together tripping him. He had fallen to the floor, and Aulus had punted him mightily in the gut, whoofing the breath from him. “You will write the bloody damn note,” Aulus had seethed, closing his fist in Pryce’s hair, wrenching his head back. He dragged Pryce to his knees, forcing him to his feet and toward the table. “You will write every word I tell you to -- every line and measure exactly as I say, and when you are finished, you will sign your rot damn name to it. Do you understand me?”

He had twisted his hand in Pryce’s hair and shoved him against the table. “Do you understand me?”

Pryce had refused, and Aulus had punished him with his fists and boot heels for it. When Pryce had still refused, Aulus had summoned bellatori to take him. They had dragged him to the lower levels of the palace, a dark, dismal network of subterranean

tunnels hollowed out of the bedrock and earth. They had forced him into a cell and they had left him alone, bleeding and hurting in the darkness.

Some time later, Aulus had come to him, again demanding his signature. This time, the consul had written the letter with the imperial conditions for Fjolnir's surrender himself. He had only ordered Pryce to sign it. When Pryce had told him to go bugger himself, Aulus had him dragged from the cell, out of the tunnels and into the dazzling brightness of midafternoon. Pryce had been bound to a whipping post, his hands extended above his head. They had stripped off his clothing, leaving him nude, and a large group of soldiers had gathered about, jeering at him.

Pryce had been frightened. His alarm had only mounted as he heard Aulus behind him, announcing to the bellatori that for ten dorotus apiece, they could each enjoy one stroke with the lash against Pryce. Judging by the approving roar of the crowd behind Pryce, plenty of the soldiers had money to spend.

Pryce had closed his eyes, trembling with terror, closing his hands into desperate fists. *I can take this*, he told himself firmly, trying to muster his courage and resolve. *I have to do this for Einar and for Tiralainn.*

He had twisted his wrists against the steel cuffs binding his hands in place, feeling the edges of the manacles slicing through his skin. He had never felt so vulnerable, so helpless in all of his life. He remembered hearing the frantic, frightened measure of his heart racing, thrumming beneath his breast and the fluttering, gasping sounds of his breath even above the cheers of the crowd.

I can take this, he had thought, straining against his chains. *I have to...Oh, Sweet Mother, I must...*

He had heard the length of the lash hiss in the air as the first soldier came forward to take his turn. The strap whipped against Pryce's shoulders, a searing, shocking pain that had stolen his breath and brought tears to his eyes. He had closed his eyes tighter, feeling the manacles shear into his wrists as he pulled against them.

I will not cry out, he had thought. *I will not give these bloody bastards the satisfaction. I will not.*

The next man had swung the whip and then the next, and the next. There was a small metal barb coiled at the end of the lash, and with each blow, it sliced open his

back like a sharpened knife. The fourth lash cut into flesh that had already been laid open and bloodied, and Pryce jerked, his resolve abandoning him, his voice escaping his throat in a hoarse, sharp cry. The soldiers bellowed and cheered, and then the next approached the post, all of them forming a line.

Twenty men took their turn before Decimus Paulus had arrived. Aulus Tertius had been standing in front of Pryce, as if relishing the sight of the pain in his face, his desperate struggles against his bonds. Decimus had blinked at Pryce, his expression somewhat aghast, and then he had closed his hand against the sleeve of Aulus' great coat.

"My lord, stop this," he had said.

"Get your hand off me," Aulus had said, frowning, flapping his hand away. He had glanced at the Praetorius and uttered a bark of laughter. "Stop? I have only just begun, Decimus. There are forty more men at least willing to drop ten dorotus for the chance."

The next whip blow had nearly stripped the senses from Pryce. He had slumped against the pole, his legs crumpling, his head drooping toward the ground. He had moaned softly, semi-conscious, and trembled in new fear as he heard Aulus snap out: "Someone bring me a bucket of water! Hold that whip now, lad! Douse him -- get him up! I want him awake for this!"

"My lord," Decimus had said in a low voice. "He has had enough."

"He has had enough when I say he has had enough," Aulus said. Pryce had closed his eyes; he opened them dazedly as Aulus had seized him by the hair, lifting his face. "Will you sign the letter?" he asked. "Put your name to it, and I will stop this. I will stop it now, Einar."

"Bugger...off...bastard," Pryce had whispered, and Aulus had opened his hand, letting Pryce's head drop again.

"You see?" Aulus had said, turning to Decimus, holding his hands out demonstratively. "The little rot is as stubborn as a mule. And just like a mule, Decimus, the willfulness in him will be broken by the lash." He had called out to the soldiers again. "Where is my bloody damn water? I said bring me a bucket!"

Decimus had walked toward the whipping post. He did not touch Pryce. He never had, as though he feared to soil his hands or clothing, but Pryce heard his boot soles in the gravel and raised his head. The Praetorius had looked at him as he had regarded Pryce from the first, an unaccountable mixture of contempt, dismay and pity in his face.

“Lord Tertius,” he said, at last turning away. “The boy cannot sign anything if he is dead.”

This had apparently not occurred to Aulus, and the consul said nothing in immediate reply.

“He has had enough, my lord,” Decimus said again, his voice low but stern.

Aulus had ordered Pryce released from the pole and returned to his cell. Decimus accompanied the soldiers who dragged Pryce between them. He had stood at the threshold of the small chamber as the guards had dropped Pryce, letting him crumple to the floor in a shuddering heap.

“Bring some water,” Decimus had ordered his men. “And a shirt, some breeches. He will freeze to death.”

“Yes, my lord,” the soldiers said, their voices overlapping.

Decimus had squatted beside Pryce, balancing his weight on his toes. “It is funny to me,” he said quietly, his voice little more than a hush. He regarded Pryce with his brow cocked slightly, his hands resting on his knees. “You do not sound like an Enghan. Your accent, I mean.” He flapped his fingers near his mouth demonstratively. “You do not speak like one, either. ‘Bugger off’ is Torachan slang.”

Pryce had been more unconscious than awake, his poor body wracked with pain. He had blinked up at Decimus, his vision blurred and fading, like his mind. “Whoever you are, you can end this,” Decimus said. “Tertius thinks you are Einar Eirikson and I will not tell him otherwise. He is an idiot. He will never know the difference.” He leaned toward Pryce and whispered near his ear. “He will only keep hurting you and it will only get worse from here. Sign the bloody paper, boy.”

“I...I cannot...” Pryce had whispered.

Decimus had sighed wearily. “Then you will die for it, lad,” he said, his voice nearly gentle. “He will break you, kill you or both. You will die for Einar Eirikson.”

Pryce had looked up at him, summoning some last, feeble reserve of consciousness, of will. "I...I am Einar Eirikson."

Decimus had stood. "Of course you are," he said, shaking his head and walking away. "And I am the Pater Patriae."

Pryce heard the clattering scrape of a key turning in the lock of his cell door and he roused in full, shrinking back against the wall. He heard the scraping sound of the heavy door swinging open, and saw dim torchlight from the threshold. He squinted against the glow and saw three silhouetted forms step into the doorway.

"Get him up," he heard Decimus say.

A pair of soldiers hauled Pryce roughly to his feet and dragged him from the cell, out into the corridor. Decimus led them along the tunnels, and the soldiers followed. Pryce stumbled along in tow, lugged between the two men.

"Who is Wen?" Decimus asked, turning to glance over his shoulder at Pryce. Pryce's disheveled, battered appearance must have offended the Praetorius' delicate sensibilities because he frowned slightly, as if disgusted, and looked away again. "My guard tells me you have been crying for someone named Wen."

Pryce had been dreaming of Wen; his hurting, bewildered mind drawing him into some semblance of familiar comfort. He had dreamed of being on the ship, in his bunk and of Aelwen being with him, kneeling at his bedside. "It is alright," he had dreamed of Wen saying as she cradled his face between her hands. He had dreamed of her pressing her lips lightly against his brow, his cheek, his mouth, and even imagining her gentle voice, her delicate touch had been enough to bring tears to Pryce's eyes. "I am here, Pryce. I love you. It is alright."

"Who is Wen?" Decimus asked, sparing Pryce another disdainful glance. "Someone known to you? A friend, perhaps?"

Pryce managed to furrow his brows. "Bugger off," he said to Decimus.

They delivered him to Aulus Tertius' suite at the palace. The tribunicia potestate was in the process of dressing, with a bevy of slaves attending to him. He sat on a chair with a paper cone over his face while a pair of valets walked slowly around him, dousing his wig with powder and engulfing his head in a hazy cloud.

“Oh, splendid,” Aulus said, lowering the cone momentarily and sparing Pryce a glance. “Right on time, Decimus, splendid. Your punctuality is a merit.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Decimus said, lowering his face in a polite nod.

“I do hope you will excuse me,” Aulus said, rising from the chair. The valets began to swat at his shirt, sweeping away powder while another pair scurried forward, offering an embroidered silk waistcoat. “I have a luncheon engagement of some importance today,” Aulus said, as he slipped his arms through the waistcoat and let the slaves draw it into place over his shoulders. He winked at Decimus. “Lady Fainne-Finamur has softened, it seems, and graciously accepted my invitation.”

Pryce’s breath drew still, and he blinked at the consul, stricken. *Wen...?* he thought. He had not seen Wen at all since the explosion in the mountains. She had not been among the soldiers traveling to Kharhorin, and he had nearly lost any hope of her safety or survival. *She is here? Wen is here at the palace?*

“Has she now, my lord?” Decimus asked.

Aulus smiled broadly as his servants tugged and jerked the long flaps of his waistcoat into place over his hips. “She has indeed. Perhaps her mourning for her husband has at last waned, and she is ready for some comfort.”

Her husband? Pryce thought, bewildered. Aulus had called her *Lady Fainne-Finamur*. Had Wen told them she was married to him? She might have; Wen was fairly resourceful, and she understood both the proclivities and protocols of noble society. She would have likely told the Torachans she was married to remind them of their manners, and to ward off any untoward advances they might have otherwise offered.

He looked around the room desperately, knowing he would not find her there, but hoping nonetheless. *Wen!* he wanted to scream. *Wen, where are you? Wen, I am here!*

“But alas, business before any presumed pleasure,” Aulus remarked. When a slave tugged too long for his liking against the hem of his vest, he cuffed the boy sharply against the pate, cowing him. “Enough already, bloody rot it all. Where is my justicoat?”

You rot bastard, Pryce thought, his fear and misery abandoning him for a moment as he filled with sudden rage. He glared at Aulus, his brows drawn, his hands closing into fists. *If you touch her, I will kill you. I will tear you apart, you bloody rot.*

Aulus walked toward Pryce, letting his slaves flutter about him, adjusting his jacket into proper place as he moved. "You are a stubborn, bothersome stone in my shoe, Einar Eirikson," he said. He walked past Pryce to a small table where a porcelain tea service had been set. He began to prepare himself a cup, adding a dollop of cream to the steaming infusion. "I am tired of beating you," he said, glancing at Pryce. He smiled wryly. "It does not do me much good anyway, apparently." His brows lifted sympathetically. "I am not a bad man. I am not even one accustomed to this sort of luxury and authority, if you can believe it. I was a tax exactor in Serdica before being sent to this dismal corner of the Bith. I have a mind for money and numbers -- not for beating young men lame."

"I will not sign it," Pryce said, struggling to hold his own balance, to keep his eyes fixed on Aulus. "Do your worst. I will not sign it."

Aulus smiled at him gently. "Oh, but I believe you will," he remarked, and he flapped his fingers in beckon toward the parlor door. Pryce turned as four bellatori guardsmen entered, hauling Einar and another young Enghan man in tow. Einar saw Pryce and his face twisted with anguish; his voice escaped him in a low, agonized cry.

Pryce whirled toward Aulus, shrugging loose of his captors. "No." Aulus was still smiling at him and Pryce knew what he meant to do. "No, you bastard, do not touch them."

"Sign the letter to Konung Fjolnir," Aulus told him. He tapped his fingertips against a parchment page sitting next to the tea service and held a plume out to Pryce, offering it to him. "No," Pryce said, his brows furrowed deeply, his fists tightening.

Aulus shrugged and wagged his fingers at the guards again. Pryce turned, and his eyes flew wide in horror as one of the bellatori seized the young Enghan man beside Einar by the hair. Pryce saw a wink of sunlight seeping through the draperies against brandished steel and then the guard jerked the blade of a dagger beneath the shelf of the boy's chin, opening his throat. Blood spurted from the wound in a sudden, hot spray. "No!" Pryce cried out, shambling forward, his bound hands outstretched in futile, helpless protest. The guard released the boy, and he crumpled against Pryce. He buckled beneath the boy's weight, trying to cradle the young man as he knelt, lowering him to the ground. "No...no, please...please..."

He lay the boy on the ground. He was covered in blood, his shirt soaked with it, his face and hair streaked and stained. He clutched the boy's face between his hands and leaned over him, feeling the young Enghan's last, feeble, gurgling breaths press against his face.

"No, no...oh, please..." For a moment, twelve years of Pryce's life were slapped from him, and he was in his mother's bedroom again, holding her bloody face in his hands just as he held the young man's. The boy's eyes were open, his lips parted as if he meant to speak, just like Inire's had been. Pryce pressed his forehead against the boy's, as helpless to prevent his death as he had been his mother's -- and seized with as much stunned and agonized culpability as he had been with Inire. "I...I am sorry," he whispered. He stared up at Einar, anguished. "I am sorry...!"

Einar opened his mouth to speak, reaching for Pryce, and then the guard behind him jerked against a handful of his hair, shoving a dagger beneath his jaw.

"No!" Pryce cried, scrambling to his feet. "No -- do not hurt him! Please, I beg you!" He turned to Aulus, holding out his hands in implore. "I will sign it! I will sign anything. Anything you want -- please, I beg you."

Aulus offered him the plume again. "Deeds, not words, lad," he said, smiling at Pryce. "That is what I have come to appreciate in my life as an exactor. Deeds, not words."

Pryce took the plume. His hand was trembling, his breath fluttering in his throat. His eyes were so clouded with tears, he could not even read the surrender terms Aulus had prepared. He set the tip of the plume where Aulus pointed with his fingertip, and he struggled to write Enghan runes, to remember somehow what they had looked like engraved against Einar's sword. When he had finished, he dropped the plume and staggered back from the table. The guard did not lower his blade from Einar's throat, and Pryce met the younger man's wide, frightened eyes, seized with sudden horror, thinking Aulus would have Einar killed anyway.

"Please...!" Pryce said, turning to the consul. Aulus was rolling the parchment into a tube between his palms, frowning slightly at the blood Pryce had left smeared on the page. "Please let him go. Please."

Aulus looked at him and smiled, the corner of his mouth lifting with cold, deliberate contempt. "I told you that you would sign it," he said, and then nodded at his guard. The soldier released Einar, but before Pryce could go to him, Aulus motioned again, seeming bored. "Get them out of here, Decimus," he said, passing the rolled parchment to his steward. "Lock that in my safe, Faustus. Summon a decurio to me, Decimus -- your swiftest cavalry officer. I want this delivered along with the boy's sword to the Engjold border today."

"Yes, Lord Tertius," Decimus said as his bellatori guards began to haul Einar and Pryce roughly from the room.

"And someone get that off of my floor," Aulus said, jabbing his finger toward the dead Enghan. "Get a mop and bucket in here -- get that blood up before it spreads to the rugs. Those are hand-loomed. I had them bloody imported from Galjin. Faustus, do not just stand there -- put the letter in my safe and get a bloody bucket! Must I do everything around here?"

Pryce's cell was beneath the palace. Einar, on the other hand, along with the rest of the young Enghan prisoners were held in the *carcer*, a separate prison area on the palace grounds. The *carcer*, a row of five long chambers carved out of the bedrock, was only partially underground; the tops of each chamber were lined with narrow, barred windows that allowed sunlight and open air to seep down into the cells without allowing enough space for even the slightest of men to wriggle through. Originally designed as a holding area for slaves, Aulus had ordered the cellblock used to contain the growing number of imperial prisoners he was accumulating -- the Enghan boys and a number of Khahl Minghan soldiers and servants he had not yet sold to *catastas*.

Decimus had accompanied the guards with Einar toward the *carcer*. Before the bellatori deposited the young man in the communal cell he shared with ten others, Decimus motioned for the soldiers to draw him aside, into a small interrogation chamber at the front of the cellblock. He ordered the bellatori to leave him alone with the boy, and he stood quietly, watching Einar with his brow raised slightly as his men obeyed him, closing the heavy iron door behind them. Einar stood across the room from Decimus, his

expression wary and frightened. When Decimus walked toward him, he shied away, pressing himself into a corner, his hands drawing into fists.

“Here, lad,” Decimus said, reaching beneath the overlapping lapels of his coats. He pulled a folded sheet of parchment from an inner pocket and held it out to the young man. When Einar made no move to take it from him, Decimus waggled it slightly. “It is alright,” he said. “Take it.”

Einar stepped hesitantly forward, his brows drawn suspiciously. He took the page, snatching it from Decimus’ fingers and then backpedaled against the wall again. “What is it?”

“It is the same document your friend just signed,” Decimus told him. “The empire’s terms for Konung Fjornir’s surrender.” He smiled gently. “Only this one, you are going to sign, Einar.”

The boy blinked at him, drawing against the wall, his large, dark eyes widening.

“It was a good plan in the effort,” Decimus said. “And that is a very brave young man who would take such abuse in your stead. But it is over now, lad.”

Einar did not say anything. He shrank against the wall, staring at the Praetorius in obvious fright.

“What is his name? I doubt he would tell me if I asked it of him. Who is he?” When Einar offered no reply except for his stricken, dismayed gaze, Decimus smiled again. “No? It does not matter, I suppose. Moderate curiosity on my part, that is all.”

He tapped his fingertip in the air toward the parchment. “When Fjornir receives the surrender demand with your friend’s signature on it, he will know,” he said. He arched his brow at Einar. “I suspect Fjornir knows you well enough to recognize your hand set to paper, does he not? He will see that unfamiliar script and know no matter what the letter says, no matter your engraved sword that accompanies it, that page was not signed by Einar Eirikson. He will not agree to the terms. He will not surrender his armies and lands to us. The Enghan Herr will go forward with their plans for open war against us. That was the idea, was it not? Like I said, it was good in the effort, at least.”

He stepped again toward Einar. “Keep away from me,” Einar said. Decimus paused, holding his hands up in concession. “I am not going to hurt you,” he said. “I only want you to sign that paper. I want you to affix your mark, and write your uncle a brief

note so that he will know without question that it is you. Aulus Tertius need never know of this. No one would need know, lad, but you and me.” He raised his brows sympathetically. “Do you not think enough have suffered? I saw the pain in your eyes as you watched your fellow die. I saw how much it hurt you to know your friend has been tortured, beaten in your place. I know how much this has all come to weigh upon your heart.”

“You do not know anything about me,” Einar hissed. He threw the parchment at the Praetorius, letting it flutter to the ground. He darted across the cell, pressing himself into the far corner of the room. His voice was angry, but his eyes were round and anguished, filled with tears.

“I know that you want to do what is right, Einar,” Decimus said, turning to him. “I know that you do not understand what a war against the empire will do to your people, although you think you do. It will not be over swiftly or easily, lad. It will be months...years, even, of bloodshed and fighting. Thousands will die; your people and mine, Einar, butchered. And in the end, it will be for nothing. When we conquer your people, Einar -- and believe me, lad, we will -- all of that struggle and bloodshed and death...it will have been for nothing.”

Einar blinked at him, trembling.

“You can end it now,” Decimus said gently. “There will be no war if you sign that page. Fjolnir will not risk harm to you -- you know this, lad. And I know it, too. He will surrender to us, and it will all be over.”

“No, it will not,” Einar whispered, shaking his head. “We will be part of your empire. You will make slaves of us. You will hurt us, and...and you will...”

“Have you ever tasted of war, Einar?” Decimus asked. “You have seen battle, yes, but not war. Battles are brief. They blaze like a flash-fire in dried grass, filled with heat and fury, burning bright with searing energy, and then they are gone. That is battle, lad -- not war.”

Einar did not answer. A tear slipped down his cheek, delicately aglow in the torchlight. “I have seen war,” Decimus said. “For the last fifteen years, war has been my life’s work, and I know it well -- and I despise it. I despise it in all of its harsh and heartless guises, lad. It is years of suffering. It is not just the moments of battle -- it is all

of the moments in between, too. Long moments of unyielding suffering, misery that does not end. It is my army keeping food from your people. Not for weeks, Einar, or for months, but for years, if need be. We will burn your crops. We will poison your harbors, kill your fish, scar your forests with fire so that your game are driven from you.”

“Stop it,” Einar said.

“Do you think death lies only along the edge of sharpened steel? Death lies everywhere in war, lad -- there is no turning from it, no escape. There are no innocents in war, and we will bring disease to your people. We will pollute your wells, infect your villages with pox and we will watch your people roast with fever. We will watch your women and children die retching and writhing. We will watch your elders go mad as disease devours their minds.”

“Stop...” Einar pleaded, shying against the wall, tangling his fingers in his hair.

“There is passion in battle, lad -- but there is none in war,” Decimus said. “There is no courage, honor or dignity. There is nothing but cruelty, brutality. It strips reason and rationale from even the sanest man. It wrenches our hearts from us, and any decency we might harbor. It makes us animals, you and I, Einar, like pit dogs turned loose to tear with teeth and claws. It is senseless and uncivil, and though I deplore it -- with all of my heart, lad, I find it offensive in its boorish and primitive methods -- I will bring it upon your people. I will bring it gladly, Einar, because that is my duty to my emperor and my people.”

Einar pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes. “Please, stop!”

“You have a duty to your people, as well,” Decimus told him, drawing his gaze. “A man who would be king must do what is right -- what is best for his people. He does not hide behind the sacrifices and suffering of another to see it done. Your friend has given enough, Einar. Your people have given enough.” Decimus stooped, lifting the parchment from the floor. He stood and walked toward a small table in the corner of the cell. He set the paper down and lifted a plume in hand, offering it to Einar. “Please, lad,” he said softly. “Sign the page. Let us end this, you and I, like the civilized men of reason that we still are.”

Chapter Nine

The night before the explosion and the imperial attack, as the Enghan caravan had made its way through the mountains toward the valley of Ve'dar, Pryce had kissed Wen for the first time. It had been very late and Odhran, Arnora and Einar had long since fallen asleep in the back of the wagon. Wen had rested her cheek against Pryce's chest, his arm drawn about her as the gentle, swaying motion of the cart had lulled her to sleep.

He had brushed his fingertips along her cheek, rousing her from a light doze, and she had lifted her head sleepily. He had uncurled his fingers slowly in her hair, cradling her cheek against his palm and he had leaned toward her without saying a word, his mouth lifted in a soft, tender smile. He had brushed his nose against hers and she had felt his breath against her mouth. He had tilted her face up, letting his lips brush lightly, sweetly against hers. "I love you, Wen," he had whispered, bringing tears to her eyes.

He had kissed her again, his mouth lingering against hers this time, the tip of his tongue dancing delicately against hers, drawing her voice in a soft whimper. He had kissed her for a long, breathless, wondrous moment and as he drew away from her. "I love you," he said again.

Wen held fast to that moment, the memory of Pryce's kiss in the long, frightening days that followed. She would lie awake in her bed at the palace and close her eyes, imagining his touch, his voice. *I love you, Wen.*

It made her weep in the night, though Wen would draw her hands to her face and try to muffle her tears with her pillow. It filled her heart with such anguish and despair to think of his face, the measure of his smile, the faint, gentle sound of his heartbeat through his kyrtil as she had nestled against him, tucked beneath his arm.

You cannot be dead, she thought, standing at the window of her parlor in Kharhorin. She looked out over the thick, undulating snow banks and watched her breath frost against the glass in a dim haze. Aulus had left about an hour ago, but Wen had accomplished little more than getting up from the table, her breakfast abandoned, and coming to perch at the window forlornly. *I know you are not dead, Pryce*, she

thought, closing her eyes against the heat of tears. *I would know it somehow if you were. I would know it in my heart.*

She had found fragile hope in her first days at Kharhorin. Aulus Tertius, the tribunicia potestate of the royal city, seemed determined to charm and please her, and had brought her to the carcer, a building once used to house palace slaves, but which, he had explained, had been converted to a prison. "We managed to capture some of the Enghan savages who so brutally abducted you and your kin, my lady," Aulus had told her, leading her across the grounds, following pathways shoveled through snow drifts at least nine feet high in places. At his words, Wen had blinked, her eyes flying wide, her breath tangling.

Aulus had smiled at her. "Yes, nearly forty of them, I am pleased to report," he said. "I thought you might enjoy the opportunity to see them in their new...circumstances, should we say? The civil welcome they greeted you with has been returned a hundred-fold, I assure you, Lady Fainne."

"Finamur," Wen had murmured, filled with sudden, tremulous hope. *Pryce could be among them. He could be here!* "My name is Finamur, Lord Tertius."

"Of course, my lady," he had said, brushing his fingertips against the lapel of his great coat and lowering his head politely. "I beg your pardon."

He had brought her to the carcer, and she had been dismayed to find young Enghan men forced together in the cramped confines of the prison's cold, dank cells. Aulus had led her along the cell block, chattering all the way, but she had not listened to him. She had searched through the faces desperately, her breath still in her throat with anxious hope. *Please, she had thought. Please be here, Pryce. Please be alright -- please.*

She had stumbled to a stricken halt outside of one of the cells. She had recognized one of the young men inside, and he had recognized her. His dark eyes had flown wide as their gazes locked, and he had shoved his way to the gated entrance of the cell. He had wrapped his hands around the iron bars and stared at her, his face twisted with anguish.

"Wen!" Einar had gasped. Aulus, who was still busy yammering inanelly, had not noticed that Wen had stopped, and he continued on for several paces, oblivious.

“Einar,” Wen had whispered, stepping close to the cell. Tears had flooded her eyes, and she had gasped softly for breath. She had reached for him, her hands trembling, and his fingers had loosened from one of the bars to grasp hers.

“I would have a care, my lady,” Aulus had said, his hand falling against hers, staying her. She had turned, startled, and he had smiled as he drew her back. “They are a dangerous and uncivilized lot -- though I am certain I do not need to tell you this. I no trust them than I would a pack of feral dogs.”

He had led her away, and she had looked over her shoulder, meeting Einar’s eyes. *Where is Pryce?* she wanted to cry out. *Einar, please -- where is he? Is he with you? Is he alright?*

She had been grateful that she had not called to the young man, however, because as Aulus had escorted her from the carcer to the palace once more, he had said something peculiar, something that had troubled her ever since.

“We have one of their leaders -- a son of their Konung’s kin, at least,” he had remarked. “A boy named Einar Eirikson. They will barter generously for his return, I am certain, and in the meantime, I am keeping him from those others lest he incite them somehow into revolt.”

Wen had been bewildered, and looked over her shoulder at the carcer, where Einar was being held. “He is not at the carcer, then?”

“Oh, no, my lady,” Aulus had replied. He had mistaken her expression for alarm, and had taken her by the hand, offering a reassuring squeeze. “He is someplace where he cannot get loose. Do not worry for that. I have one hundred bellatori on guard within the palace and upon these grounds at all times. You are safe here, my lady.”

Aulus had promised her that he had sent word to Cneas about her arrival and her circumstances, that they might dispatch word to Tiralainn, and to Kierken. He had told her it could take months for such correspondences to be exchanged -- and Aulus clearly intended that Wen should spend those months in Kharhorin. Wen frowned at the parlor window. She did not trust Aulus Tertius. Her impressions of him from the moment of their introduction had been anything but kind. He affected proper manners in her company, and treated her with courteous regard, but from the first time he had set eyes on her, Wen had felt decidedly uneasy. He watched her as though it was habit to him.

He had offered her clothing and jewelry upon her arrival as though he had been anticipating a fond visit from a lover. She seldom found more than a two-hour breadth without the intrusion of his company, and even when she was alone in her chamber, soaking in her bath, lying in her bed, or sitting before her fireplace, it seemed she could feel his eyes on her, creeping along every measure of her form.

The little girl walked up to her, slipping her hand against Wen's, startling her from her distant thoughts. Wen looked down and smiled. The girl had been a "gift" to her from Aulus, though the very idea that he considered the presentation of a child he had bartered for at an auction house a "gift" turned her stomach. She was a delicate little wisp of a creature, no more than four or five years old, with enormous blue eyes, a tousled headful of ringlets like Wen's own, and the dusky complexion of someone born to Median heritage.

She did not speak, and Wen did not know her name. She had started calling the girl *Coinin*, a Gaeilgen word that meant *bunny*. It had been a nickname Wen's stepfather, Vaughn, had called her when she had been little. The child had warmed to Wen through concerted and gentle effort on Wen's part. Caring for the girl turned Wen's mind from her own sorrows and troubles; finding ways to comfort her, to coax Coinin from the shadowy horrors she had undoubtedly faced at the catasta helped Wen find solace from her own pain and fear.

"Hullo, Coinin," she said, stroking her hand against the girl's hair. Coinin had been looking at her, her eyes round and troubled, as though she had realized Wen's sadness. "Do not worry," Wen told her, smiling again. "I am alright."

"My lady, it is eleven o'clock," said one of the handmaids, a young woman with a catasta tattoo named Lucia.

"Is it?" Wen asked, her smile broadening as Coinin risked a fleeting, bashful smile at her and then tucked her face against the folds of Wen's dressing gown. "You are to meet my Lord Tertius at eleven-thirty, my lady," Lucia reminded. "Perhaps my lady would care to bathe her face and dress?"

"Perhaps, yes," Wen murmured. Coinin peeped up at her and giggled, a soft, delicate sound -- one of few the child ever offered -- and then pressed her face against Wen's leg. Her smiles had come more easily over the last four days or so, and as they

had, she had grown more attached to Wen, seldom straying from her side whenever she was in Wen's company.

Wen glanced out the window and frowned. She leaned forward, pressing her fingers against the glass. She could see four men crossing the shoveled paths through the snow along the grounds. They were tromping away from the palace, in the direction of the carcer; a pair of bellatori guards distinguishable by their bright red infantry greatcoats, a taller man, whose adorned coat and tricorne hat marked him surely for an officer of some meritorious rank, and another who stumbled along between them, as if his feet were shackled together.

"Einar," Wen whispered, recognizing his dark hair and lean build, even from a distance. Her breath frosted the glass and her frown deepened as she wiped it away. She watched Einar and the soldiers disappear around the end of a tall stone perimeter wall. Einar had been at the palace that morning. For some reason, they had brought him from the carcer.

She remembered what Aulus had said earlier. *I have some matters of my own that I should see attended to before our lunch.* Wen wondered if those "matters" had somehow involved Einar.

Aulus does not realize who he is, she thought. *At least he did not at first. Does he know now?* That did not make sense in Wen's mind. Aulus had told her they had Einar Eirikson; the empire was holding Einar separately from the other Enghan, and somewhere besides the carcer. Aulus was a braggart, but he did not strike her as the sort to lie, at least about something like that. He had been genuinely enthusiastic -- gleeful, even -- to reveal this to her. Whoever he had tucked away in some hidden cell, Aulus Tertius believed it was Einar Eirikson.

"Is it you, Pryce?" she breathed, dismayed. *Mother Above, are you pretending to be Einar to try and fool them? To keep Einar safe?* Coinin tugged against her hand, unsuccessfully trying to draw Wen's attention.

"Pryce, are you here?" Wen whispered, watching the heat of her breath cloud the glass again. Coinin grunted, frustrated now, yanking against Wen's arm. "He is alone in the dark."

Wen blinked at her, startled from her thoughts. "What?"

These were the first words the little girl had ever uttered to Wen. She knelt beside the child, wide-eyed as she cupped her hand against Coinin's cheek. For a moment, she thought Coinin meant Pryce -- that Pryce was alone in the dark, and then she shook her head. *She is only a little girl*, she told herself. *She does not even know Pryce.*

"Coinin, what did you say?" she asked.

Coinin glanced over Wen's shoulder, as if making sure the handmaids were all busy tending to the breakfast dishes or making the bed. "He is alone in the dark," she said again to Wen, whispering the words, cupping her hands around her mouth. "It is scary there. Sometimes I hear him. I think he is frightened."

"What?" Wen breathed. "Who is, Coinin? Who is alone in the dark?"

"My lady, if you please...?" Lucia said from behind her. Coinin recoiled at the maid's soft voice, shying against the window and pressing her lips together in a thin, mute line.

Wen turned to Lucia, furious at the interruption. "What, Lucia?" she snapped.

Lucia blinked at her, wide-eyed and abashed. "My lady, it is ten minutes past," she said. "I thought it would please you to dress, my lady, lest you keep my Lord Tertius waiting."

Wen looked at Coinin but realized the girl would not speak again. She had been startled by Lucia's approach, frightened of discovery, and she had clammed up tightly with no intention of uttering another peep. The child looked at Wen and then tugged restlessly at the draperies, trying to draw them around her little body to hide. Wen rose, her brows furrowed as she glowered at Lucia. "Tell Lord Tertius he can bloody well wait," she said, stomping toward her wardrobe. "I will be there when I am damn good and ready."

"The murals tell the Ulusian legend of the Negh," Aulus told her.

Wen stood in a shrine on the palace grounds, staring in wonder at the paintings on the walls, a collection of large-scale, intricately detailed mural panels that featured images of winged dragons.

Wen had tried her best during their lunch to charm information from him about Einar, and the prisoner he thought was Einar. Again and again, she had brought the matter up idly, but each time, he had danced around it. He had not told her why Einar had been brought to the palace that morning. He had not told her anything, really, except further, relentless and droll anecdotes about himself, his position of imperial authority in Ulus, and his aspirations for further power and glory. When they had finished eating, the imperial consul had again told her there was something he wanted to show her, something “special,” as he called it. Wen had hoped that it might be this secret prison where “Einar” was being held, that her insistent curiosity had stoked his ego enough to reveal it to her -- and that she would find Pryce in Einar’s stead. She had bundled up in a heavy wool redingdote and muff and followed Aulus out into the snow-draped palace gardens, trembling anxiously. He had brought her to this place, this shrine, and it had been a long, disappointing moment before what she was looking at within the vaulted chamber had occurred to her.

“The Negh,” she said softly, walking toward the largest of the paintings along the rear wall. This one depicted an Ulusian man on his knees, surrounded by mountain peaks, the air above him filled with dragons. The Ulusian man’s long robe was unfastened, and his chest bore a peculiar series of marks that must have held some purpose or meaning to the Ulusians familiar with the tale. The man’s arms were outstretched and the sun shone down upon his face, as if he received blessings from above.

“It means *the one*,” Aulus said. She heard the soft sounds of his boot heels on the polished stone floor as he approached. “Yisun, the Qatun’Eke -- the Kagan’s Queen Mother -- showed this place to me. She told me about the legend.” He hooked his hand genteelly against her elbow and led her across the room, toward the first of the murals. “This one is Ag’iamon, the dragon lord. The Ulusians believe their ancestors were able to ride dragons, and that with the dragons’ help, their people once built a mighty empire here in the Morthir.”

He pointed to the painting. “That is Dobun, son of one of their greatest Kagans, named Borjigidal. When Dobun found out his father meant to leave his empire to his half-brother, Duua, he decided to seek revenge. He lured his father’s dragon --

Ag'iamon -- from Kharhorin and deep into the Khar mountains, an underground cave. He tricked Ag'iamon into coming, and then he poisoned him."

He led her to the next mural. "Ag'iamon called all of the dragons from Ulus before he died. They rallied to Ag'iamon's side, and into the mountains. Dobun trapped them there, sealing the entrance to the cave."

Wen looked at the painting, at the small, sneering man depicted alongside of Dobun. "That is an Abhacan. That little man in the mural -- he is Abhacan."

"Yes, a Dwarf," Aulus said. "The legend says it was a Dwarf mage who showed Dobun the cave and helped him lure the dragons there. The Dwarf used his magic to trap the dragons. He marked the threshold with some sort of magic seal." He wagged his fingers demonstratively, hoping to coax a smile from her. She was too absorbed in admiring the paintings, however, and did not even spare him a glance. "All of these lands used to be a part of their realm," Aulus remarked, tucking his hands into the pockets of his great coat. "Tirgeimhreadh, I think they called it. They live in Tiralainn now, as I understand it."

"They are allies to our people, the men and Elves of Tiralainn," Wen said, nodding. "I have known some well. They come sometimes from Tirurnua to Belgaeran, the royal city to teach at the university."

Aulus blinked at her. "Tirurnua?"

"That is their region, the territory our king, Kierken gave to them as their own," Wen said. She walked away from him, toward the back wall again. She paused to look at the saddle, her eyes widening slightly, and then she glanced at Aulus. "What does it mean, the *negh*?" she asked. "Who is *the one*? The one what?"

Aulus had been looking down at his shoes, his brow raised thoughtfully. He looked up and offered a soft laugh, as if drawing his mind from deep musings. "Oh, the one," he said, and shook his head. "The one who will free the dragons and restore the Ulusian empire. He is supposed to be a sacred son, the rightful heir or some such nonsense, born with those marks on his chest." He tapped his fingertip at the mural. "Some sort of stellar constellation. He is supposed to be led into the mountains to find the lair, and then he is supposed to wake them up."

"How?" Wen asked.

Aulus shrugged. "Shout in their ears, perhaps? I do not know. It is nonsense, really, my lady."

He reached up, placing his hand against one of the stones. Wen gasped, startled, as it slid back into a hollow recess. She shied back in new surprise as a door obligingly swung open in front of them. Aulus smiled at her. "This is all fairy lore," he said, nodding to indicate the murals, the saddle, the statues of dragons arranged about the room. "This is what I really wanted to show you."

He held out his hand and she looked at him for a long, uncertain moment. "It is alright. Do not be frightened."

Wen reached out slowly, draping her palm against his. "Come with me," he said softly, drawing her toward the doorway.

"Mother Above..." Wen whispered.

Aulus glanced at her and smiled. "I told you it was special, my lady."

Wen walked slowly toward the center of the chamber. As they had reached the bottom of the stairs, the skull had come into view; an enormous, hulking form, with a long, broad snout and a tapered, tubular crest of bone rising from its pate. She stared at it, her enormous eyes widening all the more as she caught sight of the mummified dragon behind it, mounted with its wings extended, its body nearly perfectly preserved.

"Mother Above," she whispered again. She turned to Aulus. "They...they are dragons!"

"Yes, my lady," he said, still smiling. "The skull is said to be that of Ag'iamon, the dragon lord -- Kagan Borjigidal's steed. The blue dragon is one the Khahl believe lost during the great migration, when Ag'iamon summoned the dragons to the Khar. It was frozen in a glacier among the peaks."

"Then it..." Wen turned again, craning her head back, staring in amazement at the dragon. "It is true. The paintings on the walls upstairs...the saddle...it is all true. They rode dragons."

"I doubt it," Aulus said, with a soft snort. He walked toward the massive pedestal supporting Ag'iamon's skull and drummed his fingertips lightly against the bony ridge of its bottom jaw. "I am sure the Ulusians found this skull among the mountains -- and later

those remains -- and invented their own legends to go with them. The paintings tell a story meant to give an impoverished people hope, that is all. There might have once been dragons in these skies, but there are not anymore, and none likely ever again."

"But they believe it," Wen said softly, reaching up and brushing the delicate surface of the dragon's wing.

Aulus snorted again, wedging his fingertip into the hollow crevice of the skull's nose and wiggling it experimentally. "Yisun said the Khahl do, my lady," he remarked, adding softly, cryptically, "And she would seem to herself."

Wen blinked suddenly, her eyes widening again. "Do the Oirat believe it?" she asked, turning to Aulus. "The Ulusians in the south -- the Oirat. Do they believe it, too?"

"They are even worse off than the Khahl ever were," Aulus said. "Yes, I would imagine they believe in the dragons -- the legends of the Negh, too. They are descendants of Dobun, or so it is told -- Dobun and his ally tribes. The Khahl are supposedly descended from Duua and his allies. Kagan Targutai Bokedei is said to be blood kin to Duua himself."

"Where are they?" Wen asked. "This queen you keep mentioning, Yisun...the Kagan, Lord Bokedei. I have not seen them."

"They have left Kharhorin, my lady," Aulus said. The corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked smile. "I doubt they will return any time soon."

Wen nodded, turning her gaze above her once more to the dragon. He walked behind her, his footsteps soft against the ground. "What do you think, my lady?" he asked quietly. "It is beautiful," she said, her voice fragile with wonder.

He brushed his fingertips against the nape of her neck, above the folded cuff of her redingote and through the tendrils of hair that had escaped her gathered bundle. "Yes," he said, leaning toward her, his lips dancing against her ear. "It is."

Wen drew away from him, whirling about, jerking her redingote closed about her bosom. She stared at him, her brows drawn, her mouth turned in a frown. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Stop that."

Aulus smiled at her, raising his hands in supplication. "Forgive me, my lady," he said. "I meant no disregard. You are a beautiful woman, and -- "

“I am a *married* woman, Lord Tertius,” Wen said, her brows furrowing more deeply. “I would expect you to bear that in mind, sir.”

Aulus pressed his hand against his lapel and lowered his gaze to the floor. “You are right, my lady, of course,” he said. “And I was out of turn. I beg your pardon, Lady Finamur. It shall not happen again.”

You are damn right it will not, Wen thought, glaring at him. She could feel her heart hammering in anxious, frightened measure beneath her chest. It had only been when he had touched her, when his mouth had tickled against her ear that she had realized just how vulnerable she was alone with him. She had been so dumbstruck with wonder at the sight of the dragon, she had not even given thought to the fact that the chamber was underground beneath an empty, isolated shrine -- and that if she had screamed, no one would have heard her.

She walked past him, giving him a wide and wary berth as she snatched her skirts in hand and started up the stairs. “I am leaving.”

“My lady,” Aulus said, following her, his tone of voice condescending. “My lady, please -- a moment. I will escort you to your chamber.”

He reached out and caught her by the elbow. Wen jerked her arm away and stared at him, frightened and angry. “I will see myself there, thank you anyway, my lord.” Aulus’ brows lifted in implore. “My lady...” he said, reaching for her again.

Wen drew back and then turned, hurrying up the stairs. “Good day to you, Lord Tertius,” she said, not sparing another glance behind her until she was well beyond the shrine and out on the grounds once more.

Aulus had enough sense not to try and visit Wen again that day, although he had a gift delivered to her room in the evening, a small box containing a delicate strand of pearls from the Surenusu Sea, on the eastern coast of the Morthir. He had slipped a square of parchment into the box, a brief note that read only: *Amends for my trespass, my lady, and, I hope, restoration in your heart’s gracious regard.*

Wen had crumpled the note in her hand and threw it into the fire, her brows drawing. “He is bloody mad.”

The sun had long since set, and she was getting ready for bed. It was the first night Coinin was to spend with her instead of the slave quarters, and the girl was on her knees beside the bed, her small hands clasped together, her eyes closed in prayer. At first, Wen had found this display adorable. Ten minutes passed, however, and as Wen watched Coinin's brows furrow slightly, her small mouth moving endlessly, silently, she worried over what a small child could possibly find to pray about for so long and with such fervency.

While Coinin prayed, Wen stood at her window and thought about the dragons, forcing Aulus Tertius and his unwelcome advances from her mind. She thought about the dragons, and about what her father had told them about the Oirat Ulusians when they had first set out from Capua for the Chagan Sea.

I believe they found something there in the mountains, Aedhir had said, referring to the Khar in Lydia. They had not known what the Oirat had discovered, only that it was something important to them. Aedhir had thought it might be an Abhacan weapons arsenal, or even something they believed magical in nature that they could use in rebellion against the empire. He had told them that an Oirat shaman had approached Rhyden in Capua, showing him a piece of stone engraved with Abhacan rune characters, a piece Aedhir thought might have come from the threshold of this secret, hidden place.

They want Rhyden to read the inscriptions, to open the doors for him and so they took him, Aedhir had said. *The Oirat are a simple, ignorant people who have managed to survive thousands of years with this belief system -- this faith in magic.*

"This faith in dragons," Wen whispered, tapping her fingertips lightly against the glass panes. She frowned. The Ulusians believed that the Negh would come one day -- this sacred son and rightful heir Aulus had described -- to find the dragons' lair and set them free. The Oirat were descended from the ancient Ulusian prince, Dobun, the one Aulus had told her had trapped the dragons. *What if the Oirat think Dobun was the rightful heir, not Duua?* she thought. *Aulus said Dobun poisoned Ag'iamon for revenge against his father naming his brother the heir. What if the Oirat think all of Dobun's descendents are rightfully Kagan? That they are supposed to find the dragons?*

“That is why they took Rhyden,” she said softly. Aedhir had told them that to open a threshold marked with an Abhacan incantation, it was believed one had to recite the incantation -- to read it. *They wanted him to open the lair -- to release the bloody dragons!*

This realization made no difference -- Rhyden was dead. Her father had told her this. Rhyden had been brought by the Oirat to a village on the Ulusian shores of Qoyina Bay. Eirik had told Aedhir his scouts discovered this village plundered, the corpses of the Oirat heaped together and set afire, burned beyond recognition. Eirik had feared that Rhyden had been among them, and Aedhir had believed this, too.

She heard a soft rustle from behind her and turned. Coinin had finished her prayers and risen from her knees. She blinked at Wen, her expression uncertain, her fingers plucking anxiously at her nightgown.

“Are you done then?” Wen asked, smiling at her. When Coinin nodded, she walked toward the girl. “Alright, then. To bed with you. Up, up, up.” She drew back the heavy layers of quilts and coverlets and patted her hand against the mattress.

Coinin climbed into bed and wriggled about as Wen drew the blankets snugly about her shoulders. Wen sat beside her and smiled again, stroking her hand against the little girl’s tumble of curls. Coinin looked up at her as she tugged the sheets up to her nose. Her blue eyes were round and troubled.

“Do you want to sleep here tonight, Coinin?” Wen asked her softly.

Coinin nodded, and then paused, disconcerted. She shook her head once and then drew the covers over her nose.

“You are worried about the boy in the dark you told me about,” Wen said, and Coinin nodded again, her hair bouncing against her forehead. She lowered the blankets from her face momentarily.

“It is scary there,” she whispered, her eyes swimming with sudden tears. Wen leaned over and pressed her lips lightly against Coinin’s brow. Lucia, the hand maid had told her that Coinin was the only slave child in the palace. She ordinarily slept in quarters separate from the other slaves, a small room she was locked in each night and had all to herself. Wen had asked Lucia about the sounds of someone else Coinin had mentioned, and Lucia had looked at her for a long moment. “Sound travels sometimes

through the stones, my lady," she had said. "There are vents and drain shafts in the cells. There are more than ten slave quarters beneath the palace, and each holds nearly twenty people. It is not a comfortable or pleasant place, my lady, and I would say the sounds could have come from anywhere." "It is not scary here, is it?" Wen asked Coinin, and the little girl shook her head. "You have this nice, big bed...these fluffy, soft pillows...Lady Mailli to keep you safe and warm..." Wen lifted a small rag doll made from stockings stuffed together and twisted into the approximate shape of a baby. She had made it for Coinin, having had one herself as a little girl. She had sewed buttons for eyes on the doll's bald head, and added a line of stitches for a smiling mouth. Wen waggled Lady Mailli at Coinin, making a smooching sound as she snuggled the doll against Coinin's cheek, and the girl smiled at her.

"I will not let anything scary happen here," Wen whispered, kissing Coinin again. She drew away from the child and leaned toward the bedside table, dimming the wick on the lamp. "Go to sleep, Coinin. Oiche mhaith." *Good night.*

She moved to leave and Coinin caught her by the hand. Wen thought she might speak again; her attempts at conversation that day had startled and pleased Wen, but Coinin merely blinked up at her, holding Lady Mailli tucked against her in a fierce headlock.

"Are you thirsty?" Wen asked, and Coinin nodded. Wen smiled. "I will get you some water." She waggled her finger in the air. "And then to sleep, alright?"

"Alright," Coinin whispered, smiling briefly, sweetly.

Wen crossed the room to the far wall where a small table stood. A pitcher of water sat on the table, with a pair of tumblers, and she poured a dollop of water into one of the cups. As she set the pitcher aside, she glanced up and paused, her brows drawing slightly.

The wall here had been decorated to match the opulent colors and furnishings in the chamber, with delicate flower blossoms painted on it in an elaborate, woven pattern. Above the table, nearly at Wen's eye level, she spied a peculiar little hole punched through the horsehair plaster, as though at one time a nail had been fixed there.

That is an odd place to hang a picture, Wen thought. The hole marked a spot too low on the wall to be pleasing to the eye. It was also far to the right side of the wall,

completely off-center. She reached up, brushing her fingertips against the hole. It did not appear to be accidentally hewn, a result of something having been smacked against the wall. In fact, the hole seemed to be deliberately hidden from ready notice among the lines and brushstrokes of the painted flowers.

Wen turned, looking over her shoulder. The hole seemed to fix its dark gaze directly across her bedchamber -- and her bed.

"That bloody bastard," she whispered in sudden, furious realization. She leaned toward the hole, squinting as she tried to peer through it. There was nothing but darkness, and her frown deepened. "Bloody bastard," she said again.

She turned around, closing her hands into fists. Aulus Tertius had been spying on her. Somehow he must have been able to stand in an adjacent room or alcove between the walls and peer through the little hole into her chamber. She stared in aghast about the room. *I bloody bathe in here*, she thought. *I dress for bed -- I dress for my day -- and he has been watching me all along, the bloody rot!*

She stormed across the room to another table on which she had set a plate of sliced cheeses. She had called for the cheese as a snack for Coinin before bed, but the girl had only picked at it, uninterested. Wen had left it sitting out for the maids to collect in the morning when they delivered the breakfast dishes. Wen snatched up a wedge of cheese and then went to her highboy, opening a draw and sifting through a tangle of scarves and stockings.

He had been watching her. She was trembling at this realization, shocked and outraged...and disturbed. He had assured her that she was his "guest" at the palace, but Wen had always known she was anything but. Aulus Tertius regarded her as some sort of property or prize, a spoil of war, perhaps. She wondered now -- and doubted to her horror -- that he had notified Cneas at all of her presence. He had no intention of the empire -- or Tiralainn -- learning where she was. He had become fixated on her; he meant for her to remain.

"The bloody duchan I will," she muttered, finding a hatpin in the drawer. She marched back across the room. Coinin sat up in bed, watching her with wide, anxious eyes, clutching her doll against her.

Wen shoved the wedge of cheese over the peephole and then jammed the hatpin through it to spear it in place. She stood there for a long moment, pressing her hands over her eyes.

He has been watching me. What else was Aulus Tertius capable of? She did not know him -- she knew no one really at the palace, or for at least one hundred square miles, for that matter. Einar and the other Enghan were imprisoned in the carcer. She did not know where Pryce was, or what had happened to him, Odhran and her father.

Mother Above, I am all alone, she thought, frightened. Up until that afternoon, Aulus had been persistent, but otherwise unthreatening in his attention. Now she understood that there was probably far more going on in his mind than she had suspected. Courtesy alone was probably bidding the consul to bide his time with her. He was, however, a man of authority, with no one immediately at hand to answer to for anything -- and he knew it. If he decided to abandon civility, Wen would be all alone against him.

Hoah, I think I am in trouble here, she thought.

“Wen...?”

Coinin’s voice, soft and tremulous from the bed, drew her gaze. The little girl blinked at her, bewildered and frightened, and Wen hurried across the room, bringing the cup of water. “I...I am sorry, Coinin,” she said.

The little girl drank a quick swallow, and then let Wen ease her back against the pillows. As Wen tucked the covers once more about her, Coinin reached up, brushing her fingertips lightly against Wen’s mouth. “Wen?” she said again, softly.

“Yes, Coinin?” Wen asked, looking down at the girl.

Coinin smiled at her, another brief, fleeting upturn of her mouth, and snuggled herself comfortably against the pillows. “Wen,” she said, drawing her doll against her mouth.

Wen blinked at her, puzzled. “I am here, Coinin,” she said. “It is alright.”

Coinin closed her eyes, nestling beneath the warm folds of quilt, and Wen turned down the light and stretched out beside her. She lay in the darkness next to the child, her gaze wandering across the shadow-draped room toward the far wall, the peephole.

Was he there now, watching her? Had he seen her discover it? Had he simply moved to another and watched her from there?

She craned her head to look over her shoulder, staring uneasily around the room. It seemed she could feel him now, his eyes crawling across her, even though she knew it was impossible. *He cannot see me in the darkness*, she thought, drawing near to Coinin. The child brought some semblance of simple comfort to her; here, of all of the strangers at the palace, was one at least familiar -- and fond -- to her. *He cannot see me. He cannot see us. Not in the dark.*

She closed her eyes against the heat of tears. *We cannot stay here*, she thought, brushing her hand against Coinin's shoulder, listening as the little girl's breathing grew slow and steady with encroaching sleep. She pressed her fingertips against her mouth, stifling a hitching gasp for breath as her tears spilled. *We have to get out of this place. We have to.*

But where could they go? They were in Kharhorin; in Ulus, part of the Torachan empire, someplace strange and unfamiliar to her. *Mother Above, even if we run, where can we go?* She could not leave. Even if she knew someplace safe to flee to, Wen knew she could not. Pryce might be in the city somewhere, a prisoner; even if he was not, Einar and the other young Enghan men were, and she could not abandon them. Not to the empire. Not to Aulus Tertius.

What am I going to do? she thought in dismay. Wen lay in bed for a long time, listening to the quiet measure of the mantle clock counting out the passing moments. Finally, after she was sure Coinin was soundly asleep, she moved, drawing herself slowly from the bed. She crept across the room to her wardrobe and opened the door, wincing, her eyes darting about in the shadows as it squealed softly on its hinges. She drew out her redingdote and shoes and hurriedly pulled them on.

They could not stay there, but she could not go, not without Einar and the others. *Not without knowing where Pryce is*, she thought. *If he is here somewhere, I have to find out. I have to know. I cannot leave here without him. I will not leave here without Pryce.*

She tiptoed over to the patio door. She had seen windows in the cramped cells of the carcer. They had not been much; barred slivers of space toward the ceilings of each

cell to allow some circulation of air. The carcer building was built somewhat recessed in the ground along the face of a slight slope; the windows and roof were the only protruding parts of the carcer exposed along the slope's crest. If she was careful, if she kept to the shadows and avoided being seen by the guards, she might be able to reach the top of the hill and call to Einar through the windows.

If Pryce was impersonating Einar, surely it could not be without Einar's knowledge or consent. He would have told someone long before now who he was, otherwise. If Pryce was there -- and Wen suspected that he was -- and he was pretending to be Einar, then Einar would know, and he might know where Aulus was holding him.

Wen opened the patio door, gasping as the bitter air outside snatched her breath away. She stepped hurriedly onto the terrace, closing the door behind her before the chilly draft roused Coinin. She made her way through the thick, heavy snow toward the balustrade and managed to swing her legs over and hop down to the gardens. She followed the shoveled paths, not wanting to leave any tell-tale footprints behind. She worried that Aulus had seen her leave through one of his peepholes, and she kept turning as she hurried along, her soles skittering for uncertain purpose on the slick snow. No one followed her yet, but she did not consider that an escape. She kept close to the drifts piled along the paths, tucked among the shadows cast by the mountainous piles of snow.

Einar will know, she thought. Please let him tell me Pryce is at least here. I will find him somehow on my own, just please...Mother Above, please let him be alive. Let him be here somewhere.

She knew they could not stay. She had to find a way -- some way, no matter how desperate -- to get her, Coinin, Einar and the Enghan out of Kharhorin. *But not just yet,* she thought grimly as she made her way through the snow. *Not without Pryce.*

"Einar?" she called softly. She had crept up the sloping hillside framing the carcer and now lay on her belly before one of the narrow windows. She had been able to see a pair of guards posted outside of the carcer as she had approached and had ducked into the shadows, creeping through the snow, and they had not noticed her. She could hear

their faint voices as they laughed and talked together and could see the dim light of torches near the entrance aglow through the barred window. She tried to crane her head, pressing her face against the icy stone wall to peer down into the cell, but she could not see anything. The windows were carved about ten feet from the floor of each cell, and she could only hope that her memory served her, and this window was the one where she had seen Einar.

“Einar?” she called again. She was shuddering, numb and aching with cold. The snow had seeped through her redingote and gown, and the wind buffeting the top of the hill was bitter, wrenching her breath from her. She shoved her hand between the tight confines of the iron bars and flapped her fingers. “Einar, are you there?”

She heard a soft scuffling sound, quiet voices and footsteps from below. She drew her hand back, and after a long moment spent shivering, watching her breath waft in front of her mouth in a dim haze, she heard a scrabbling of boot soles against mortar, and someone hissing from within the cell: “Hagal -- help me. Give me a boost.”

She heard more scratching sounds, and then a hand reached up, closing about one of the bars near her face. Wen sucked in a startled breath, drawing back, and then Einar grabbed another bar and raised his head into her view. Someone must have been beneath him, cradling his foot in their hands, because he wobbled unsteadily, craning his head back to look through the window at her.

“Wen!” he gasped. “Einar,” Wen whispered, her eyes flooding with tears. She wrapped her hand over his and pressed her face against the bars. “Einar, I am here.”

“Are you alright?” he asked. “Yes,” she said, nodding. “They tell me I am a guest here at the palace.” She snorted, her brows drawing. “They have not hurt me. Are you alright?”

“Yes,” he said. “For now. They are not feeding us much, but we...” His expression softened into desperate implore. “Is Arnora with you?” he asked. “Wen, where is she? Do they have her in the palace?”

Wen shook her head. “I am sorry. I do not know what happened to her. Is Pryce with you? Is he here? Is Odhran?”

“Odhran is not,” Einar said. He moved his hand, loosening his fingers from the bar and clutching at her. “But Pryce is here, Wen, though they are keeping him

somewhere else. He is not here in the carcer.” “I knew it,” Wen whispered. She did not know whether to weep or smile. *He is here! He is alive!* She looked at Einar. “Where are they keeping him, Einar? We have to find him. We have to get out of here.”

“I do not know,” Einar said. He glanced down at whoever held him aloft, and then back at Wen. “I think it is somewhere in the palace. They brought me there this morning -- Pryce was there. I saw him. They separated us and they brought me back here. They led Pryce away. I did not see them take him from the palace.” His eyes filled with tears of his own. “They hurt him,” he said.

“What...?”

“It is my fault,” Einar said, anguished. “They hurt him because he told them he was me. He said he was me.”

He reached through the bars and grasped her redingdote. “You have to find him,” he said, his brows narrowing. “One of them knows -- he took me aside today and told me he knows who I am. He made me sign something to send to Fjolnir -- a surrender demand.” He met her gaze, his expression grim. “He knows, and Pryce is in danger. You have to find him. We have to help him.”

“Who knows?” Wen asked, stricken. “Is it Aulus Tertius, the tribunicia potestate?”

Einar shook his head. “No, this one is a soldier,” he whispered. “A man named Decimus. I heard the soldiers call him a Praetorius -- he is a leader to him, I think.”

“He will tell Aulus...” Wen whispered, horrified.

“He told me he would not,” Einar said. “He said Aulus Tertius is an idiot. But he knows the truth and I do not trust him.” His fingers tightened against her coat, his eyes frightened. “You have to find Pryce.”

“I will,” she said, closing her hand over his. “I will find him, and then we will get out of here -- all of us somehow.”

“Wen, no,” Einar said, shaking his head again. “No, you and Pryce leave -- go north and find my father. He will come for me. I know he will. He is still alive, I know it, and he will come for me. Find him.”

“I am not leaving without you, Einar,” Wen said. “We are all getting out of here.”

“There is no way out of here -- not for all of us,” Einar pleaded. “Wen, please -- this is an imperial city, and there are too many of us. There is no way we can all escape. There is nowhere we could all hide that would be -- ”

“I will find a way,” Wen said. She squeezed his hand, and he looked at her, desperate and afraid. “I promise you, Einar.”

Einar glanced down beyond her line of sight again, and then his face shot toward her, his eyes flown wide. “The guards!” he hissed in alarm. “Wen, they are coming -- go!”

“I will be back,” she promised, holding his hand fiercely before turning him loose. “I will figure out something and I will come back as soon as I can.”

“Wen...” he whispered, but she shook his head, staying his protest.

“Go -- I will be back,” she said. He met her gaze and then pivoted, dropping from view. She heard his boots smack the floor, and she scuttled, recoiling from the window. She could hear the guards barking into the cells.

Wen crept backwards on her hands and knees, following the trench in the snow she had cleaved clambering up to the carcer rood. It sounded like the soldiers had stepped inside to scold the Enghan; both of them were distracted, their posts abandoned, and she was able to dart away from the carcer without being noticed.

She hurried along the drift-lined paths toward the palace again. She nearly made it; she was almost to the terrace of her bedchamber when a silhouetted figure stepped out of the shadows and into her path, startling her. She gasped, recoiling, her shoes skittering for uncertain purchase on the snow.

“It is a bit late for a stroll, my lady,” Aulus said.

Wen’s heart hammered beneath her breast and she shied away as he approached. *Does he know?* she thought, staring at him, wide-eyed and wary. *Did he see me leave the chamber? Did he follow me to the carcer? Does he know?*

“I...I could not sleep,” she said. “I thought some air might do me some good.” She frowned at him. “I thought I was your guest, not your prisoner and could come and go as I pleased.”

He stopped a courteous distance from her. “You are my guest, my lady,” he said. “But even these guarded grounds are not safe at night. The Khahl may call themselves

allies to the empire, but they resent our intrusion here. They cause trouble for us sometimes. That aside, it is freezing and you are hardly dressed for the weather. You will catch frostbite, if not hyperthermia.”

He held his hand out to her. “Why do you not come inside and warm yourself by the fire? I will send for some tea for you.”

He was being very polite, friendly even, but she was suspicious of him nonetheless. Aulus’ brows raised in implore. “My lady, please. You are turning blue. Come inside.”

There was no point in remaining rooted in spot; she was already caught, and she would help no one if she simply stood out in the snow, staring at Aulus until she froze to death. She walked past him, trying to force an air of nonchalance into her gait, her stance, and he followed her.

She used an entrance off a formal parlor rather than that leading to her own bedroom. Once inside the palace again, she was disoriented, and let Aulus walk ahead of her, leading her along the corridors to her suite.

“Where did you go, my lady?” Aulus asked. His tone was still mild enough, but she had roused his suspicion. Wen could not take a chance on Aulus doubting her; Einar had said he did not realize who Pryce was, but it would not take him long. If his Praetorius had figured it out, Aulus would, too, in short measure -- which meant Wen was running out of time.

“I went to the dragons’ shrine,” she said, and he looked at her, his brow raised. She managed a smile for him, trying to look coy. “I...I worked myself into a state this afternoon, and I left in a huff. I wanted to see them again.” She looked at him, batting her eyes. “I hope you do not mind.”

“Not at all, my lady,” Aulus said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile. “I often find a moment or two of respite there myself. It is a very serene place, I think.”

“Me, too,” she said. She paused, looking down at the sopping hem of her redingote. “I wanted to apologize to you, as well, Lord Tertius,” she said. She glanced at him, seeing she had piqued his interest and drawn him to a halt. “I spoke rather harshly to you today, and I am sorry. You have treated me very kindly, and with the utmost courtesy since I have come to Kharhorin, and I...”

“My lady, there is no need,” he said quietly. “You were right in your rebuke. I was out of turn. You are, as you said, a married woman, and my mind abandoned me. A momentary lapse of judgment that will not repeat itself, I assure you.”

He does not know, she thought. She could see it in his eyes; he had no idea where she had been. He must have spied her along the garden path from his own window and come to investigate, nothing more. She would have been unmistakable to him, even in silhouette and darkness, with her nightgown and redingdote on.

He escorted her to her room, and waited politely at the threshold as she struck flints to a lamp. As she adjusted the wick, and golden light filled the room with dim glow, she looked across the parlor toward her bedchamber and frowned. “Coinin?” she said, holding the lamp aloft and crossing the apartment.

“Coinin?” Wen called again. She stopped in the bedchamber doorway and looked around in bewilderment. The little girl was gone. The coverlets had been turned back, the bed abandoned. Wen walked around the room, calling to the child, but there was no sign of her.

“What is it, my lady?” Aulus asked.

“It is Coinin,” Wen said, setting the lamp on the bedside table. She knelt, dropping onto her hands and knees to peer under the bed. She looked at the consul, who stood in the doorway of the room. “The little girl. I left her sleeping in bed.” She stood. “You did not have her sent away, did you? Back to the slave quarters?”

“No, my lady,” he said, looking somewhat wounded by the question. “I told you she could stay here with you. I am a man of my word, I assure you.”

Wen’s eyes widened, and she looked toward the patio door. “Oh, Mother Above,” she whispered, and she rushed for the terrace doors, opening them wide. “Coinin!” she cried, stepping outside. “Coinin, where are you?”

She heard Aulus’ footsteps behind her; he brought the lamp with him, and its light spilled in a broad swath across the ground. “She must have followed me!” Wen exclaimed, whirling to him, distraught. “She must have seen me slip out the door -- she must have followed! She is out here somewhere! We have to find her -- she will freeze!”

Aulus looked down, studying the snow-covered terrace floor. "I do not see her footprints, my lady," he said, glancing up at Wen. Wen blinked at him and then down at the ground. He was right; the only prints apparent in the snow were her own.

"If she went outside, she did not use this terrace," Aulus said.

Wen looked at him, bewildered. "Then where could she be?" she asked, feeling new tears sting her eyes. "Why would she leave? Where would she go?"

"I will find her." Aulus reached out, draping his hand across her shoulder, steering her indoors once more. "I will summon my steward, Faustus at once, along with some bellatori pairs. They can search the palace and grounds."

He led Wen to the fireplace, and settled her in a chair by the hearth. He knelt before her and took her hands. "She is here, and we will find her. Do not worry for that. Here, I will leave you, and see your handmaids called to you with some tea. They can help you change out of these wet clothes."

"But Coinin..." Wen began.

"I will find her," he said, drawing her voice still. "I promise you."

Pryce heard a soft, scrabbling sound in the darkness of his cell and froze, his eyes flying wide as he turned his head in the direction of the noise. He had been straining against his manacles; for hours now, since they had brought him back to the cell from the palace, he had been struggling against them. He had tried shoving his heels against the short tether of his chains, hoping to strain the links, break them somehow. He had sheared his wrists bloody trying to twist his hands free from the iron cuffs. He had hunkered in the darkness, scraping the manacles against the ground, banging the chains against the stone walls, hoping to break them, crack them, something -- anything.

The horror and shock of seeing the Enghan boy murdered had shifted within him, waning from anguish into rage, a sort of searing, helpless, relentless fury he had never felt before. It had seized him, welled within him, and he had moved about in the dark like a man possessed as he had fought against his bonds.

Bloody bastards, he had thought over and over, gritting his teeth as he had torn his wrists open. *I will get out of here. I will get out of these bonds -- out of this place.*

He had thought of Aulus Tertius' face, and it had been all he needed to galvanize him when he strength waned, his efforts faltered. He thought of Aulus, and his cold, contemptuous smile as he had rolled the parchment between his palms. *I told you that you would sign it.*

"Bastard," Pryce had hissed, slamming his manacles against the wall. "Bloody rot damn bastard...!"

At last he had understood why Aedhir had punched Vaughn Ultan in Tiralainn. Sometimes it was too much; sometimes even the most reserved and rational of men could simply be pushed too far, asked to endure too much. You could kick a dog and cow it, but only so many times, Pryce had come to realize. *And then it bloody well bites you back*, he had thought, drawing his legs toward his chest and hooking his bare feet against the chains binding his hands together.

I will kill you, Aulus Tertius, he had thought, shoving against his heels with all of his might, until the long muscles in his thighs ached and throbbed with exertion, until the muscles bridging his shoulders and neck screamed in protest and the crusted wounds left in the wake of his flogging tore open anew, dampening his shirt with fresh blood. *And if you touch Wen -- if you even breathe on her, you bastard rot, I will rip open your throat with my hands. I will tear you apart.*

He heard the scraping sound again, and his brows narrowed. "Pryce?" he heard a soft, muffled voice whimper; a child's voice.

He had imagined a child -- this child -- calling to him over the last several days and he shook his head slightly, frowning. "Get out of my head," he whispered, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow. *I am going mad. Hoah, I am going mad here in the dark. There is no one there; no one calling to me. No one knows my name here. No one knows who I am.*

"Pryce," the child said. "Are you there?"

The voice warbled, as if on the verge of tears, and the tremulous sound was so poignant and clear that he blinked, startled. *Mother Above, that is real*, he thought. *That is not in my head. I am not imagining it.*

"Pryce?" the child called again.

“Who is there?” he asked, his voice a hoarse croak in the darkness. The voice seemed to drift from somewhere to his left, and he crawled slowly toward the sound.

“Pryce...are...are you there?”

“Who are you?” he asked. He could not see anything, and his outstretched hands slapped against the wall unexpectedly. He blinked, and then patted his palms against the clammy stones. “Who is there?”

“Pryce?”

The sound was coming from low to the floor, and Pryce leaned over, creeping forward on his knees, his hands fumbling along the wall. “Who are you?” he asked again, and then he gasped softly in surprise as he felt a narrow opening, a slight margin of space no more than two inches high and six inches long where the wall met the floor. He could feel the cool press of a slight draft against his face and realized it was some sort of rudimentary vent or drain, a small crevice meant to allow air to circulate or water to drain. He gasped again as he felt something protrude suddenly from the opening and grope against his hand. He recoiled, crying out softly, startled.

“Pryce?” the child said, a little girl’s voice coming from the other side of the hole. Pryce moved forward again; this time, when his hands found the opening, he felt small fingers brush against him again, a child’s little hands shoved as far as could fit through the hole, reaching for him.

“I am here,” Pryce whispered, leaning his face close to the hole. He felt the child clutch at his hands. He could not see the hole in the darkness, much less what lay on the other side. “Who are you?” he asked, bewildered. “How do you know my name?”

“I will not tell them,” the little girl said. “Do not be scared.” Her hands withdrew, the diminutive fingers slipping away from his. He heard the scrabbling sound and then the girl touched him again, pushing something against his palm.

“Who are you?” he whispered, and then he knew what she had given him; he caught a whiff of its light aroma against his nose, and his stomach trembled. It was a small wedge of cheese. Pryce sat back from the wall, drawing the cheese to his face, sniffing it warily. He poked it with the tip of his tongue, tasting it and then tucked it in his mouth. He nearly wept at the marvelous flavor of it and he almost swallowed it whole and choked.

“Here,” the little girl whispered, and he reached down, finding another proffered piece of cheese. Again and again, she passed cheese through the hole to him, and he wolfed it down, his withered stomach crying greedily for more. When at last he reached down, and found only her empty fingertips to dance against his, he heard her whimper softly, on the verge of tears. The sound nearly broke his heart.

“I am sorry,” she said. “That...that is all...all that would fit in my pockets.”

“It is alright,” Pryce said, pressing his cheek against the stone, lying with his head close to the opening. “It was enough.” He caught the girl’s fingers with his own; they were so small. Surely she was young, no more than six at the most, just a baby. “Thank you, lass.”

“I...I will bring some more tomorrow, Pryce,” the girl said. “How do you know my name?”

“I will not tell them,” she said again. “I will not tell them who you are.”

“Please,” he said. “Tell me your name -- tell me who you are. It is alright. I will not hurt you.”

“I know you will not,” she said. He felt her fingers brush against his, and she whispered soft words in gentle rhythm, like a prayer. She said no more than this implore offered in the darkness, but she stayed with him, even as he closed his eyes, exhaustion settling in full. He hurt all over. More than this, his heart ached, and as he listened to the quiet measure of her prayer, he drew a forlorn sort of comfort from the child’s simple proximity, her quiet voice, her touch. His mind faded and he slept, her fingers curled against his.

Chapter Ten

“Thierley, I need you to go with Eirik’s men from Elbeuf to Tiralainn,” Aedhir said. Before the Enghan had divided at the Ve’dar Valley pass, with some en route westward for Elbeuf, and the rest of the Herr turning east for Ulus, Aedhir had drawn the master-at-arms aside for a moment’s quiet counsel.

At his words, Thierley blinked in surprise and Aedhir met his gaze, closing his hand against the taller man’s sleeve. “I cannot trust that Kierken -- or even Neisrod -- will be fully swayed with just my note alone. They have no way of knowing whether or not I wrote it under duress.”

“Begging your pardon, and what-not, sir, but I would say this...” Thierley flapped his hand at the crumbled mountainside around them, the smoldering piles of rubble and debris. “Probably more than counts for ‘duress’ in most opinions.”

Aedhir frowned. “I need an officer to accompany the Enghan,” he said. “One who can offer first-hand account of what has happened here and what Torach plans to do. I cannot go -- they have Wen and Pryce, and by my breath, Thierley, I will get them back. Odhran cannot go. I cannot depend that they would take his word, given his youth and inexperience.”

Thierley looked thoughtful. “I suppose that would leave me, then,” he said. “Though I am only a petty officer, Captain. I do not know how much clout I could -- ”

“Then I am promoting you to commissioned status,” Aedhir said. He clapped Thierley on the shoulder. “Congratulations. You are now a lieutenant.”

“Hoah, well,” Thierley remarked, the corner of his mouth lifting. “There was pomp and circumstance worth fifteen years of Naval service.” He cut his eyes toward the nearest group of Enghan. “I do not like leaving you and Odhran with them,” he said in a low voice, his expression grave. “Trouble could come of it. They think we had something to do with this. They are frightened and frazzled -- wary now. That is a bad mix, I say.”

“Eirik believes me,” Aedhir said. “He knows we are not with the empire.”

“Eirik is one man,” Thierley said. “There are an awful lot of Enghan, by my observation and you are about to meet up with a rot damn lot more of them from the sounds of it.”

“I trust them,” Aedhir said. Thierley opened his mouth to protest, and Aedhir cut him off. “Thierley, I trust them.”

Thierley closed his mouth and shook his head slightly. He crossed his arms over his chest and regarded Aedhir. “You are asking me to go across hundreds of miles of bloody damn ocean on one of those rickety, open-decked square-riggers the Enghan float around in? You are asking me to cross the sea to Tirurnua and convince the King of the Little People to send his gunships to Cneas?”

“Frankly, Mister Feldwick, I am ordering you to,” Aedhir said. “I am counting on you.” His voice was soft, hoarse from screaming for Pryce and Wen. His face was dusted with dirt, smudged with dried smears of blood. His eyes were haunted and shocked, his face haggard with grief and exhaustion and Thierley did not have the heart to argue with him. He patted his hand gently against Aedhir’s arm. “Alright then, Captain,” he said, quietly.

“Thank you, Thierley.” Aedhir offered his hand, clasping his palm against Thierley’s thick wrist. Thierley drew Aedhir against him in a brief but fond embrace. “Be careful,” he said. “You and the lad -- Odhran -- the both of you. Be careful.”

“You do the same, Thierley.”

The ragtag remnants of Eirik’s and Thorir’s Rekkir regiments reached the foothills of the Nordr Mountains and within ten miles of the Ulusian border two weeks later. They rode with little pause across the Merki isthmus and into the steppe plains of Eng, traveling east. By the time they arrived at the Herr encampment, they found thousands of warriors from every corner of Engjold already preparing for battle. Tents had been set up as far as the eye could see across a shallow valley between the sloping foothills. The fragrance of wood smoke wafted in the air from cooking fires and makeshift smithies. As they approached the camp, slowing their bergelmirs, they could hear the sounds of metal banging and scraping against metal as swords were sharpened, axes were hewn and plate armor readied. They saw young Seggr trundling armloads of firewood among the tents; Rekkir warriors gathered together, practicing sword strikes and ax swings. Some squatted outside of tent clusters, tending to supper over small fires and iron pots; others tended to sewing kyrtils or darning stockings in the waning light of day.

There were Enghan everywhere, all of them in seeming motion, a flurry of activity within the valley. Their animals were grouped in large, hastily constructed corrals; Aedhir stared in wonder at enormous, wooly rams as they chewed boluses of cud and watched him pass. There were elks taller than any man by at least three feet, with broad antlers that spanned a good ten feet from the caps of their skulls. There were burly, barrel-chested horses that made the lean, spindly-legged varieties found in Tiralainn seem dwarfed by comparison and bergelmirs that rolled and tumbled together in good-natured play within their pens like rambunctious kittens.

“Mother Above...” Aedhir whispered. He heard the soft, sharp intake of Tacita’s breath from behind him in the saddle, and felt her arms tighten about his middle in reflexive surprise. Even in her travels throughout the empire, clearly she had never seen the likes of the animals, either. Odhran rode alongside of Aedhir astride his own bergelmir and the young midshipman’s eyes were wide with awe, his mouth agape.

“Those are *hav’elgar*,” Eirik told them, pointing as they passed a large pen framing a herd of more than two dozen towering elk. “From the Ve’dar region of Sube and the Stedi peninsula. My uncle, Hamal’s warriors ride them. The bergelmirs are all the A’Mithal kyns—the people of the Eng tribes.

“Those are *haf’rik*.” He pointed again, directing Aedhir’s gaze to a herd of the rams, each taller and broader at the shoulder than the largest plow ox Aedhir had ever seen. Seggr youth stood among the animals, drawing brushes through their heavy woolen coats or cleaning out their wide, cloven hooves with wooden picks. Eirik frowned and turned his head, spitting over his bergelmir’s flank. “Mountain rams from the Nordr peaks—the Nordri’s steeds, like those horses there.”

“The Nordri,” Tacita said quietly.

“Thorir thought the Nordri betrayed you to the empire,” Aedhir said, glancing at Eirik.

Eirik nodded, his expression grim. “I am surprised they would come,” Aedhir said, raising his brow.

“I am not,” Eirik said, and he spat again. “They probably did not expect any of us to survive the empire’s attack.” He raised his fist to one of his Rekk riders and then pointed to a clearing among the tents. “We will set up here,” he called out, reining his

bergelmir to a halt. He swung his leg over the weasel's shoulder and dismounted, his boot soles sinking in the trampled snow.

The rest of the riders stopped and began to dismount, taking their bergelmirs by the bridles as they unlash blankets and tent rolls from their saddles. Aedhir swung down and held his hands out, helping Tacita hop to the ground beside him. Odhran led his weasel by the reins toward them, stepping gingerly and grimacing as his stiff, aching limbs unfurled and stretched fully for the first time in days.

They followed Eirik among the maze of tents. The Enghan stared at them as they passed, whispering among each other. Odhran might have looked like an Enghan dressed in his kyrtill and with his scraggly growth of beard, but there was no mistaking Aedhir's dark complexion or Tacita's catasta mark -- they were strangers, and worse. They looked *imperial*. The Rekkir watched them with drawn, suspicious brows and undisguised scowls. Tacita shied near to Aedhir as they walked along, not missing the fact that many of the Rekkir curled their hands about their sword hilts or ax handles. Several of them spat as they went by, muttering under the breath—the word *Torachan* apparent even in their hushed, harsh voices. Odhran glanced over his shoulder at Aedhir, his expression anxious. “Captain Fainne...?”

“It is alright, Odhran,” Aedhir said, feigning ease he did not feel. “Keep moving, lad. Stay close to Eirik.”

As he spoke, an Enghan man stepped directly into his path. He was tall and brawny, with a silver brooch fashioned in the shape of an elk's head securing his cloak about his broad neck. Aedhir stopped in mid-stride, drawing Tacita protectively behind him as he lifted his chin and narrowed his brows, meeting the Enghan's gaze. “Hroerar,” he said. *Move*.

The man raised his brow at Aedhir, the corner of his mouth lifting in mild amusement. He made no effort to step out of Aedhir's way, and when Aedhir moved to his right, meaning to shove past him, the man matched his stride deliberately.

The furrow between Aedhir's brows deepened. “Hroerar,” he said again. *Move*.

The Enghan nodded at Tacita. “Hann er ambatt,” he said. *She is a slave*. Tacita drew close to Aedhir, shying behind his shoulder as the man's eyes crawled along her

form. He glanced at Aedhir and his smile widened. “Er vaenn,” he said. “Knarrarbringa. Hvert er hann viligisl at thu? Hvert thu far sugandi af hana, Torachan saurr?”

Aedhir had no idea what the man had said—save for the word *Torachan*—but judging by the guffaws of the other Enghan around him, and their sudden, imposing attention directed at Tacita, he surmised it was nothing flattering. “Ek em eigi Torachan,” he said, closing his hands slowly into fists. *I am not Torachan.*

“Er at sva?” the Enghan sneered. *Is that so?* “En ek em Tyr.” *And I am Tyr, the war god.*

“Thu ert dauthr ef hroerar eigi,” Eirik said, clapping his hand firmly against the Enghan’s shoulder and spinning him smartly about. *You are dead if you do not move.* The Enghan stumbled back, blinking at Eirik in furious surprise, and his hand fell against the hilt of his sword. “Thau eru meth mik,” Eirik said loudly, glaring among the Enghan. *They are with me.* “Eru vina at mik—en mik kyn.” *They are friends to me—and my kyn.*

“Er thu ert?” the Enghan asked Eirik, keeping his hand on his hilt, his brows drawn. *Who are you?*

“He is Eirik Gerpír -- Hersir and Fylkir of the Ríkr’kyn,” said a man walking toward them, shouldering his way among the Enghan. At his voice, Eirik turned, his stern expression waning into a smile.

“It is alright, Thorgills,” the man said, returning Eirik’s smile and spreading his arms wide in greeting. “He is my nephew.”

“Uncle Hamal -- heill!” Eirik exclaimed, stepping into the proffered embrace and clapping his hands against Hamal’s shoulders. Hamal hugged Eirik warmly, turning his cheek to brush his lips against Eirik’s cheek. “Heill, sveinn,” he greeted, calling Eirik *lad*. As Eirik drew away, he cupped his hands against the younger man’s cheeks, his brows lifting in sorrow. “We arrived only hours ahead of your messenger,” he said. “We traveled south from Elbeuf, the midland pass through the Keiliselgr. We had already reached the Merki Isthmus when you left Lith. We did not know, Eirik. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Hamal,” Eirik said. “It was Urd’s will. Nothing could have prevented it.”

“How many lost?” Hamal asked.

“I do not know,” Eirik said softly, pained. “Too many to count.” His brows narrowed and his hands closed into fists. “They took our Seggr from us. They took Einar. They...the bastards took my boy, Hamal.”

Hamal drew him against his shoulder, holding him fiercely. “We will get him back. I promise you, Eirik.”

He and Eirik stepped apart, and he looked beyond Eirik’s shoulder at Aedhir, his brow raised curiously. “These are friends, you say?” “Yes. This is Aedhir Fainne, Tacita Metella and Odhran Frankley. They are guests of my kyn and allies to us. This is my uncle, leader of the Berg’kyn, Hamal Bildr.”

“Heil to you,” Hamal said, lowering his face in a courteous nod.

“And to you,” Aedhir replied, turning his eyes toward the ground. At this cue, Odhran likewise dropped his gaze. “Hullo,” he said quietly.

“Thorgills, send some Seggr to help Eirik’s men set their camp,” Hamal instructed. He turned to his nephew. “Come. I will take you to Fjólnir. He has been anxious for your arrival.”

“Where is Thorir?” Eirik asked Hamal as they walked through the camp. “Fjólnir has called a Motinn, a meeting of all clan leaders. They are gathering as we speak. He should be there to represent the Dalr’kyn...”

His voice faded as he met Eirik’s gaze. “I will represent the Dalr’kyn,” Eirik said. “I sent Thorir to Elbeuf. He was hurt in our attack...grievously.”

“Will he survive?”

Eirik’s brows lifted in sorrow. “I do not know. Eir, the goddess of healing bestows her blessings on so few of our people anymore, it seems.” He glanced at his uncle. “How many Herr have arrived?”

“There are some still en route from Efst’fit and Beinoy to the north,” Hamal said. “One thousand hross’folk, the Nordri Blesi’kyn and Hvalmagi’kyn. You are the last from the west; the other A’Midal and elgr’folk gathered this past week. Five thousand Rekk strong here -- another two with the Seggr.”

“And the empire?” Eirik asked.

Hamal looked at him grimly. "Three legions now along the border," he said, and Eirik paused in mid-stride, his eyes widening in stunned disbelief. "They have called them from every corner. We have heard rumor of more cohorts arriving from the southern states, Achaia and Teutoni every day."

"Nine thousand bellatori?" Eirik asked. "They have fortified the border with nine thousand soldiers?"

"They are trying to intimidate us," Hamal said, frowning. "They have always outnumbered us -- and we have always outlasted them." He began to walk again. "Let them come, as many as they can call. Nine or nine thousand -- they will not stop us."

Eirik looked at Aedhir, visibly stunned, but said nothing. He turned, following Hamal through the crowd.

"Nine thousand," Odhran whispered, breathless with shock. He caught Aedhir by the sleeve, aghast. "Captain Fainne, that is nearly twice again the number of Rekk here."

Aedhir nodded. "I know."

"That is not war," Odhran said, and he looked at Tacita, visibly shaken. "That is suicide!"

The council of Enghan leaders had gathered in a broad circumference around a large bonfire. More than one hundred and fifty men stood shoulder to shoulder around the blaze, their voices blending together in a resonant din of fervent, grim conversation. Aedhir, Tacita and Odhran followed Eirik and Hamal as they made their way through the crowd. They approached the far side of the fire, a clearing in the throng where a large table sat. A man stood behind the table in counsel with several Enghan. As Eirik drew near, he looked up and his brows lifted in fond recognition.

"Eirik!" he said, brushing aside a man who had been leaning near to speak against his ear. He walked around the table and strode toward Eirik, opening his arms in greeting. "Urd and Tyr be praised -- you are with us."

Eirik accepted the embrace. "Fjolnir," he said, clapping his Konung on the back. "Heill to you."

Fjolnir was dressed no differently than any of his Herr. Those his clothes did not reveal his power among his people, in his face, his stance, his status as king was

apparent. He had russet hair, like his nephew, streaked in places with blanched grey. His brows were drawn in a furrow that seemed permanently crimped at the bridge of his nose, and his mouth held a stern measure to it, a thin line that tugged down at the corners even when he relaxed, framed by the braided twists of his mustache.

As the men stepped apart, Eirik caught sight of an Enghan Hersir standing behind the Konung -- a man wearing a brooch shaped like a ram's head. At this, Eirik's eyes blazed with rage, his brows furrowed with murderous intensity and his fingers folded against his palms in tight, trembling fists.

"It is you," he seethed, drawing the Hersir's gaze. The man blinked at Eirik, seeming startled and taken aback by the venom in Eirik's voice. "You have brought this upon us all," Eirik said, and then he shoved past his uncle, charging. "You bastard!" he screamed, launching himself at the man, plowing nearly headlong into his chest and sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Eirik -- no -- !" Hamal cried.

At his cry, Aedhir realized. This man was a Nordri -- one of the northern tribes who had betrayed Eirik's people, who had set them up so that Einar could be taken -- along with Pryce and Wen. Eirik grappled with the man, closing his hands against his throat, pinning him beneath while he throttled him. When four other men wearing the ram brooches of the Nordri rushed forward, seizing Eirik roughly and trying to drag him away from their leader, Aedhir's hand fell against the butt of his an'daga. *These are the bastards who had Pryce and Wen taken*, he realized with a sudden, searing burst of fury. "Get your bloody hands off him!" he shouted, drawing his pistol and shoving it at the nearest Nordri. The tip of the barrel caught the man against the temple, and he froze, staring out of the corner of his wide eyes at Aedhir, his hands poised against Eirik's forearm.

"Aedhir -- no," Tacita gasped, laying her hands against his shoulder.

"Let go of him. Now," Aedhir said, ignoring her plea, and then he heard the hiss of metal as another Nordri began to draw his dagger.

"Captain Fainne -- !" Odhran exclaimed, jerking his own pistol loose from its holster. He clasped it between his hands, aiming squarely for the Enghan who had

moved for his blade. "What are you doing?" Fjolnir cried, alarmed and bewildered. "Eirik, turn Illugi loose! Let him go!"

"What sort of blade is that?" one of the Nordri asked, frowning as he stepped toward Aedhir. Aedhir turned the pistol in his direction and drew the doghead back against his thumb with an audible click.

"Come another step closer, and you will find out, you bastard rot."

"What is the meaning of this?" Fjolnir demanded again, and then he and Hamal grabbed hold of Eirik, hauling him backwards and to his feet. "You betrayed your people!" Eirik shouted at the Nordri leader, Illugi. "Bastard coward -- what did they promise you? What did they promise you for my boy? Half a crown, a crippled land is better than none, so long as it is Nordri?" He fought wildly, swinging his fists, spittle flying from his lips. "You gave them my boy! You bartered my son! You sold us all into slavery, you bastard -- to be king of nothing! Nothing!"

"What?" Fjolnir blinked, startled and stricken between Eirik and Illugi. "What are you talking about, Eirik?"

Eirik shrugged his shoulders mightily, wrenching himself loose from his uncles' grasps. "The Nordri betrayed us," he snapped, shoving his forefinger at Illugi. "They made a deal with the empire -- a deal to claim the crown, Fjolnir."

"That...that is untrue," said Illugi, his voice hoarse and wheezing. He clutched at his throat as two younger Nordri helped him rise shakily to his feet. He looked at Fjolnir, his brows raised in desperate implore. "Fjolnir, that is not true."

"You lie!" Eirik roared, rushing forward again. Hamal grabbed him, restraining him, and he struggled. "You are a liar, Illugi Vethr! You and your kyn, the Hildofar -- all of your Nordri tribes are traitors!"

"You shut your mouth, A'Midal bastard," one of the younger Nordri said. He stepped forward, closing his hand against his hilt. "The only liar here is you to slander my father so. I will -- "

"Arngrim, no," Illugi said, catching his son by the elbow. The young man turned to him, angry and bewildered, and Illugi shook his head, his brows drawn firmly. "No."

"Eirik, how do you know this?" Fjolnir asked. "What proof do you have?"

“How else could the empire have known where to find Einar?” Eirik cried. “How else could they have learned he was your heir, and where his kyn could be found -- where we would go, and how we would get there? His kin married your daughters hoping to get the throne, and when you named Einar, he betrayed us to know revenge! They were waiting for us, Fjolnir -- along the pass between the Keiliselgr and the Ve’dar valley, the empire was waiting for us, and they murdered my people! They took our sons from us -- they took my boy!”

“Eirik...” Illugi said quietly, stepping past his son, his expression softening. “Eirik, please. I know your pain. I know it well, but I did not betray you. I would never -- ”

“You know nothing of my pain,” Eirik hissed at him. “But when I am finished with you, you will understand it clearly. You will feel every measure of it.”

“Eirik, Illugi has been by my side these past weeks since the Motinn in Vornirtindr met,” Fjolnir said, and Eirik turned to him in surprise. “Illugi and his Herr -- nearly all of them, all along. He could not have made any deal with the empire. He did not know about Einar until the Motinn and he has been with me ever since.”

Eirik turned to Aedhir, distraught and confused. “That...that cannot be...”

“Would you call me a liar now, Eirik?” Fjolnir asked gently, and Eirik looked at him, stricken. “The strife between our kyns -- between the Nordri and A’Mithal -- is in the past. Now, more than ever, we must act as one people, one race. Illugi’s sons married my daughters to try and bind us, not divide us. Not to claim the throne.”

“If Illugi did not betray us, then one of his kin did,” Eirik insisted. “There are other Nordri tribes -- Illugi himself has eleven sons. Have they been here all along, all of them accounted for?”

“How dare you accuse us!” Illugi’s son, Arngrim cried, trying to shrug away from his father’s restraining grasp, his eyes flashing hotly. “My brothers and I gathered our people from the corners of H’rossjord and Mikillfit, moving them to safe havens -- just as you moved yours, Eirik Gerpir! We fought among our men defending our byrs in the southern mountains. My brother Bersi died against the empire, and you would defile his honor? Accuse us?”

Eirik blinked at him, and then at Illugi. Illugi met his gaze, his face gentle and sympathetic. “You see?” he said quietly. “I do know your pain, Eirik. The empire took my

boy, too -- Bersi Kappi. They captured him, took him from us. We cannot know how long he lived as their prisoner, but we found him a week ago, his body torn apart by scavengers west of the Nordr foothills. He had been run through with a sword and left to die alone, suffering in the cold." His face grew pained, his voice tremulous. He lowered his face to the ground and Arngrim draped his palm against his father's shoulder. "Father, please..." he whispered.

Illugi looked up at Eirik and his brows narrowed. "It is possible Bersi told them of Einar and where you would be found," he said. "I imagine they took their time with him, and learned everything they could force from his mouth."

"Or perhaps these strangers you have brought among us are the ones who have seen us betrayed," Arngrim said, turning to glower at Aedhir. "This man has the dark skin of a southern Torachan. I have seen his sort among their troops. Their woman is an imperial *ambatt*, a slave with their mark on her face. Maybe they are the ones who -- "

"I would watch my words if I were you," Aedhir told him. He had lowered the pistol, but still held it in hand, cocked against his thumb, his forefinger settled against the trigger. "Aedhir..." Tacita said quietly, touching his sleeve. "Please do not..."

"These people are my friends," Eirik said. He turned to Fjolnir. "They fought bravely alongside of us and they have lost along with us. They did not betray us." He glanced at Aedhir, pained. "They did not ask for this -- any of it. I am the one who brought it upon them."

"I will believe you at your word, Eirik, if you believe me at mine," Fjolnir said. "Illugi and the Nordri did not betray us, either. They could not have. They would not have."

Eirik stared at Fjolnir for a long, uncertain moment. His brows narrowed and he turned to meet Illugi's gaze. "May you rot in Niflheim if you are lying to me, Illugi," he said. He looked at Aedhir and Odhran. "Put your weapons away." Odhran glanced at Aedhir uncertainly, and Aedhir nodded once. "It is alright, Odhran," he said, releasing the doghead of his an'daga. He slipped the pistol back into its holster at his hip, unfurling his fingers slowly from the grip.

"Aye, Captain," Odhran said. He spun the an'daga once by the trigger guard in a loop about his index finger and slid it back into his holster.

“This was delivered by the empire to our border,” Fjornir said. The Motinn had gathered around the fire, a semblance of civility settling among the men once more. Fjornir walked slowly around the blaze, looking among the leaders of his people, holding a sheet of parchment in his hand. “It is a list of demands and promises—terms of surrender to Torach.”

At this, a loud stir of voices fluttered through the crowd. Men turned their heads and spat by their boot heels, muttering and shouting out in disapproval, their faces twisted in angry, defiant sneers.

“It was delivered with this,” Fjornir said. He had walked toward the table, and lifted a sheathed sword in his hand. As he held it up above his head, turning so that all of the assembled could see it plainly, Aedhir heard the sharp, ragged intake of Eirik’s breath from beside him.

“Einar...” Eirik whispered, anguished.

“That is Einar’s sword,” Odhran said softly to Tacita. “The sword Fjornir sent to him after the last Motinn. The inscriptions on the hilt and scabbard declare Einar his heir.”

“This parchment is signed with a pair of *Eik* runes—Einar’s Eirikson’s mark,” Fjornir said, and Eirik lowered his face, pressing his fingertips against his brow. “The empire promises to release him—to release all thirty-seven of the Seggr they have stolen from the Rekr and Dalr kyns if we agree to these terms.”

“Is it the boy’s mark?” one of the Enghan Hersir called out. He stepped toward the fire, nodding sharply at the parchment. “How do we know? Anyone could have signed that page. The boy could be dead among these foothills as we speak, just as they killed Illugi Vethr’s Hersirson, Bersi Kappi.”

More shouts and muffled voices raised in concurrence at this. Fjornir waited until the din waned, and then he turned, meeting the Hersir’s gaze. “It is Einar’s mark, Kylan,” he said. “The empire left no doubt in my mind, or my heart. There is more than Einar’s mark. He has written to me.” Fjornir looked at the parchment, his face filled with sorrow, his voice hoarse as he read aloud:

“It has been nine years since I last saw you in person. I traveled from Enthemork with my family to Sube and you met us at Elbeuf. Hamal held a feast for us at the hall of Fyrkat overlooking Bildvag Bay. You let me taste from your mead, hidden behind your chair so my father would not see. My mother was still alive. It was the last time you saw her.”

Eirik uttered a soft, pained noise, his hand still pressed over his face. “It...it is Einar.”

“Only Einar Eirikson would know this,” Fjolnir said. “Only Einar would remember.” He lowered the parchment to the table and stood there for a long, silent moment, as if composing himself. When he looked up again, his brows were drawn, his mouth turned in a stern frown. “We will know vengeance,” he said, and he curled his hand into a fist.

A ripple of concurring harrumphs and muffled shouts met this, and Eirik looked up, startled, lowering his hands from his face.

“The empire thinks they will cow us now,” Fjolnir said, his brows furrowing, the sadness in his face shifting to fury. “They take our sons—they barter with our children like silver for grain stores—and they think we will bend to it.”

“Cowards!” someone shouted out, and more cries rang in agreement.

“Have they not learned?” Fjolnir cried. “For ten years, they have come upon this land, besieged our people—and here we remain! For ten years, they have tried to take our lands from us—our freedom—and here we stand, united together with our swords and axes, blessed by Tyr and ready to face the golden hall of Vanaheim itself!”

The Motinn council members raised their fists skyward and tilted their heads back, crying out in agreement.

“They think we will surrender?” Fjolnir asked. “They think their threats will turn our hearts from war? They have taken our sons—this steels my heart for war, not turns it! They would take my heir—the boy Urd, the goddess of fortune herself named to be Konung of our people? They would challenge fate—stand in brazen defiance of the gods’ divine will? We will not cower to their numbers. Let them bring bellatori from every

corner of the Bith—they will not stop us! We will face them as Enghan, the warriors of the Herr, and they will know our wrath!”

The crowd roared. Eirik blinked at Fjornir, ashen with shock, as if he could not believe what he was hearing. He staggered forward, his eyes flown wide. “What are you saying?” he cried, as the din of the throng’s roar died. Fjornir turned to him. “You cannot mean you would still go to war? That is Einar’s hand on that page—he is alive! We must surrender!”

Muttered hisses sounded from the crowd, and the Enghan regarded Eirik with dark and undisguised disapproval. He stared around at them in dismay, realizing their resolve. “He is my son!” he shouted. “My boy!”

“He rode among your Rekk in Sube,” one of the Hersirs said, his brows drawn. “Einar wielded his axe and sword as any other warrior of Tyr that day. He has passed the *mannraun*—the test of manhood by which all Seggr become Rekk warriors. He is a man among his people now—a boy no longer.”

“They will kill him!” Eirik cried. He whirled to Fjornir, closing his hands into fists. “You will see Einar dead if you do not surrender!”

“I will see us live by the honorable words of the poet Olvir—our ancient *skald’mikli*,” Fjornir said. “Drengar, vega ok althri benda at aethra. Bua thinn hjarta meth hreysti ok heithr, ok eigi hugsa thinn fjor naer thu horfa fjandiarnir. Lata oss vega fyrir varr byggth ok deyjum hraeddrat bjarga var barnar.” *Young men, fight and never bend to fear. Make ready your heart with courage and honor, and forget your life when you face the enemy. Let us fight for our settled lands and die unafraid to save our children.*

At these words, the Motinn cheered, raising their fists and shaking them in the air. Eirik blinked at them as if they had all gone mad.

“This is not about Engjold—not our lands or our people, Fjornir!” he shouted. “This is about gersimi! That is what they want—it is all they want—and they will kill my son to get it!”

Fjornir looked at him for a long moment, his brows narrowed. “The empire takes what they want throughout the Morthir and none stand against them. What they want,

they seize; what they cannot seize, they take by burning, starving, raping—murdering, Eirik. Gersimi is ours -- Engjold is ours. They cannot have it.”

“And if Einar dies? If our people die against the empire, Fjolnir?”

“Better to fight and die for even brief freedom—to be welcomed with opened arms and honor into the golden hall of Vanaheim—than to surrender to a lifetime of slavery,” another Hersir growled, glowering at Eirik.

“There are nine thousand men waiting only miles from here to give you that,” Eirik snapped. “Nine thousand soldiers—and more on their way—to see you and your sons know death, Erlend. And when they are finished—when we have all fallen for that brief taste of freedom—the empire will take our lands. They will seize our byrs and they will sell our women, our children. We will have died for nothing. It will have been for nothing.”

Another din of outraged exclamations filled the air at this. “You are a coward, Eirik Gerpir!” the Hersir, Erlend shouted. “Unfit to take a place among your ancestors at Vanaheim!”

“He is my boy!” Eirik shouted back. “I have already buried his mother! I have buried his grandparents—his kin! I have buried enough who are dear to me—I will not let you bury my son!”

He turned to Fjolnir. “War will not end this! Can you not see that? Have you all lost your minds? This must stop. It is madness, and too many of us have suffered, too many have died.”

“We will stop it, Eirik,” Fjolnir said. He walked toward his nephew, but Eirik recoiled, his eyes bewildered and hurt as Fjolnir reached for him. “I love Einar, too,” Fjolnir said gently, his expression pained. “Do you not know that, Eirik? If I had a son, I could not love him as much as your boy. That is why the empire took him. We have shown them no weaknesses. I have shown them no frailty in their efforts to take our lands and our gersimi. They thought what they could not crush in spirit or resolve, they could destroy in heart. I cannot give them that, Eirik. I cannot give Engjold to them—and our people—just to spare Einar.”

“You bastard,” Eirik said.

“We are alone against the empire, Eirik,” Fjolnir told him. “We have no choice. We must stand against them. It is how our people claimed these lands, and it is how we have kept them—by fighting for them.”

“You are not alone, Fjolnir,” Aedhir said, stepping forward and drawing the Konung’s gaze. “As we speak, some of your people are sailing across the Chagan Sea for the Muir Fuar, and from there to my land, Tiralainn. The empire attacks Engjold because Tiralainn will not give them black powder and we are strong enough to keep them from it. My people will help you. We have warships—armored ships with cannons—that can cross the sea in a matter of weeks and blockade Torachan ports. The empire cannot stop us. If my King declares war against them, they cannot defeat us. Give my people time to get here, to reach Cneas.”

“I have been told that you fought among our people in Sube,” Fjolnir said. “That your people died, that your son was taken.”

“And my daughter, yes,” Aedhir said, nodding once.

“I am sorry this has come upon you,” Fjolnir said. “I am sorry for what it might bring to your people, and your land. But we cannot wait.”

“Fjolnir, please...” Eirik said. “Please—he is my son. Do not do this—I beg of you. With all that I have, Fjolnir, I beg of you. Give Aedhir’s people time, and let them—”

“We do not have time, Eirik,” Fjolnir said. “I am sorry. We have four days to agree to the terms of surrender.”

“What?” one of the Hersir exclaimed. The men erupted into alarmed, dismayed cries. “The offer of your allegiance is honorable and decent,” Fjolnir said to Aedhir. “But I am afraid it comes too late.” He looked among his council. “We have four days to plan a battle,” he called out loudly. He raised his fist and held it skyward. “By Tyr’s axe—let us make it one worthy of legends!”

The Motinn howled at this, their voices bellowing against the canopy of the night sky. The Herr picked up the cry, and the Enghan roared with approval. Eirik stumbled backward, his eyes round with horror, filled with raw, bewildered disbelief.

“Einar...” he whispered, shuddering. “Oh, my...my son...!”

Chapter Eleven

The Motinn concluded, and the atmosphere around the Enghan encampment grew filled with eager anticipation as the Herr, already stoked for war against the empire, had been stirred all the more by Fjolnir's passionate resolution. Word had spread quickly among the ranks and in four days, they would ride for the Ulusian border, where they would face more than three legions of imperial bellatori in full. It was certain to be a massive, bloody and brutal battle—one that most of the warriors gathered from the far corners of Engjold would likely not survive. This did not seem to deter the Enghan in the least; if anything, it bolstered their resolve, and the mood that night throughout the camp was one of excitement and fervor, nearly celebratory. "I am sorry," Eirik said to Aedhir. The two sat around the small communal fire in the center of the Rekr and Dalr kyn tents with Odhran and Tacita. Eirik looked stricken and ashamed by the din of enthusiastic conversation around them. The Rekr warriors paid the four no mind as they laughed and talked and swore loudly, fervently against the empire. In fact, since Eirik had offered his protests at the Motinn, none of the Enghan -- including Eirik's uncle, Hamal or even his own men -- had offered Eirik or the other three much regard, except for occasional, dark sideways glances and muttered grumbles about cowardice. Eirik had swiftly and officially alienated himself from his people; he sat among Aedhir, Odhran and Tacita as much an outsider -- and regarded with as much suspicion and disdain -- as the rest of them.

"This is my fault," Eirik said, his shoulders hunkered, his head hung. "I will never forgive myself for bringing you into this, Aedhir."

"It is not your fault," Aedhir said, drawing Eirik's gaze. "I brought myself into this seventeen years ago. Every decision in my life since I joined the Crown Navy has led me to this." He gazed at the fire, his brows drawn, his mouth a stern line. His dark eyes were troubled. "I have brought this on myself."

"Aedhir, no..." Tacita said, reaching for him, touching his hand.

He did not avert his eyes from the blaze, and the furrow between his brows deepened. "All of my life, I have acted selfishly and foolishly," he said. "There was never

anyone to suffer for it really but me, or so I thought. But now we have all answered for it." He glanced at Odhran and Tacita. "And now my children are answering for it."

"Captain Fainne, that is not true," Odhran said.

Aedhir met his gaze. "I want you to leave in the morning," he said to the young man. "With the dawn's first light, you and Tacita for Sube -- for Elbeuf."

Odhran blinked at him in surprise. "Sir?"

"No," Tacita said, equally taken aback. "I am not leaving you, Aedhir. No."

Aedhir kept his eyes on Odhran. "That is an order, Mister Frankley," he said. "You will see it through. Take Tacita to Elbeuf -- keep her safe. From there, you will both follow Mister Thierley's course by boat for Tiralainn."

"I am not leaving, Aedhir," Tacita said, moving her hand to grasp his sleeve and draw his gaze. "I am not leaving," she said again. "You need me. You --"

"I need you alive," he said, his expression softening as he brushed the cuff of his fingers against her face. "I need you and Odhran alive, Tacita. Too many people have already died or suffered because of me. It ends here -- now." He looked at Odhran. "You were right. This will be no battle the Herr plan to ride into -- it is suicide, and I will not see either of you a part of it. Those who are not killed will be taken by the empire, and if they see Tacita's tattoo -- the catasta mark -- they will take her back to the slave auctions."

He turned to Tacita. "I will not risk that," he said. "There is no slavery in Tiralainn. You will be safe there. And I can count on Mister Frankley to see you safely there...can I not, Mister Frankley?"

Odhran blinked at him. "Yes," he said quietly, nodding. "Yes, sir, of course, sir."

"I am not leaving without you," Tacita said to Aedhir, her brows pinching.

"Yes, you are," he replied. "I cannot leave...not without Wen and Pryce. I have to get them back somehow."

"And what will you do?" Tacita asked. Her voice was sharp, but her eyes were filled with alarm and fright. She stared at Aedhir, stricken. "What will you do against the empire? Ride across the border and barter with them? Ask them to give Pryce and Aelwen back?"

Aedhir raised his brow. "Actually, yes. That is what I had in mind."

“Aedhir, you cannot -- !” Tacita said.

“Captain Fainne, sir, please, they will kill you,” Odhran said.

“No, they will not,” Aedhir said. He looked at Eirik. “They will not risk bringing the children to the border, the battle lines.”

Eirik nodded. “I read that parchment of Fjolnir’s,” he said. “The surrender terms. Fjolnir is to sign it and return it within four days. On the morrow of the fourth day, the Herr is to surrender in full -- Fjolnir is to ride across the border into Ulu and tender the army and lands to the imperial Praetorius. The empire said the children would be returned at an undisclosed time, once the Herr have been disarmed and secured.”

“Which probably means the empire never meant to return them at all,” Aedhir said.

Eirik lowered his face toward the ground, nodding. “The empire would not kill them,” Aedhir said. “Not all of them, anyway. They might still have need of them, even if they had convinced Fjolnir to surrender. They are bargaining tools -- the empire would not risk having them close to battle, but they would want them near at hand, should the need for them arise.”

Eirik glanced up at him. “Kharhorin,” he said.

Aedhir nodded. “The closest imperial city,” he said. “You said it is what...? A two-day ride from the border? If I left tomorrow morning for Ulu, I could reach it before your Herr ride to battle. I could still get Einar out alive -- and Pryce and Wen. I might even be able to prevent this battle altogether -- and keep Engjold with your people.”

Eirik looked at him, his brows raised. Whatever Aedhir had in mind was lost on Odhran and Tacita, but apparently not to Eirik, to judge by his sudden, pained expression.

“If you are not run through by the empire when you approach the legions at the border,” Tacita said. “Aedhir, this is madness. You cannot do this. They will kill you.”

“No, they will not,” Aedhir said.

“They will not barter with you,” Tacita insisted, her eyes swimming with tears. “They will not reason with you. You have nothing they want, and they will kill you.”

“You are wrong,” Aedhir said quietly, and he touched her face again. “I do have something they want.”

Odhran gasped softly in stunned realization. "You know how to make black powder."

Aedhir managed a crooked semblance of a smile for him. "Very good, Mister Frankley," he said with a nod. He cut his eyes toward the perimeter of firelight, making sure the Herr around them were too preoccupied with cups of mead and boisterous conversations to overhear. "Call it a privilege of being a Naval officer," he said, dropping Odhran a wink. He looked around at his friends. "I have seen it made. I remember enough of its components to convince the empire -- point them in the right direction, at least. And I have something to offer them that the Enghan cannot -- something I think will surely sweeten the deal for me."

He patted his hand against the butt of his pistol. Odhran stared at him, aghast. "Captain," he breathed. "Sir, you...you cannot mean to give them...!" He blinked at Aedhir. "Sir, that is treason."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Aedhir said. "They will hang you for it in Tiralainn," Odhran whispered. "Captain Fainne, they will string you from the Pionos gallows for certain if you..."

"My duty to my children comes before any to the Crown," Aedhir said. His expression grew pained. "I have forgotten that for far too long. For seventeen years, I have forgotten. Nothing matters to me except Pryce and Wen. I will do whatever I have to -- whatever it takes -- to get them back." He looked at Eirik. "The empire will listen to me. They will bargain with me. I will trade black powder and our firearms for Pryce, Wen and Einar. Maybe I can convince them they do not need Engjold anymore -- if they know how to make the powder, and I can tell them whatever they need to know about the mechanisms of our weapons, they might be convinced to leave your land in peace. There would be no battle -- no war."

"At what cost?" Tacita exclaimed. "Aedhir, you cannot do this. Please, listen to me. You -- "

"They are my children, Tacita," Aedhir said. "Would any cost be too high if you knew it would get your daughter back?" Tacita looked at him, a tear rolling down her cheek. Aedhir cupped his palm against her face and leaned toward her, kissing her,

pressing his forehead against hers. "They are my children," he whispered again. "I will give whatever I have to get them back. I have to."

"You could not come back," Odhran said. "You could not return to Tiralainn, sir. They would know, and they would..."

"I will make sure Pryce and Wen are sent back," Aedhir said. "I will send them by ship to Cuan'darach. You are right. I cannot return." Tacita gasped sharply, more tears spilling. "I suppose even friendship with the King could not forgive this offense," he said, offering a soft laugh.

"I will not leave you," Tacita whispered. "Please, no, Aedhir. I do not want to go anywhere you cannot be. I...I do not..."

"You have to." He looked her in the eyes, his expression grave and filled with despair. "Tacita, please. My heart must be fixed on this. I have to do it -- no hesitation, no qualms, and if you and Odhran are on your way to Tiralainn and out of harm's way then I can. If I think you are in danger, I..." His brows drew. "Please," he said. "I am asking you -- begging you both -- to do this. I will be alright. I will fix this. It is my fault this has happened, Tacita, please let me fix it. There is no other way."

"I will go with you," Eirik said, and Aedhir turned to him.

"No."

"You cannot do this alone," Eirik said, frowning.

"I have to," Aedhir said. "Eirik, please. Trust me to this. I will need you here. The Herr cannot learn of what I am doing...what I am planning. If they do, it will not be the empire I should worry about running me through. I need you to help me slip out of here unnoticed tomorrow. I think I can stop this war. I think I can free our children and see the empire abandon Engjold, but I have to do it alone."

"There must be another way," Eirik said. "If you can think of one, I am open to it," Aedhir said.

"I will talk to Fjolnir," Eirik said. "I will get him away from the Herr, and I will talk to him. I will try to reason with him, get him to sign the surrender. There is your other way. If he -- "

"Eirik, he will not sign it," Aedhir said. "His mind is set -- you heard him at the Motinn. He -- and his army -- are fixed on war."

Eirik looked at him, anguished. He forked his fingers through his hair and shoved it back from his face in frustration. "I cannot ask you to do this, not alone, Aedhir. Betray your people? Your land to the empire? There must be another way."

"You are not asking anything of me, Eirik," Aedhir told him. "I am doing what needs to be done -- for all of us."

"It is not right," Eirik whispered. "It should not be your sacrifice alone to make. It is not right."

"Maybe so," Aedhir said. "But it is the only way. And I am doing it."

"I do not want to leave you," Tacita said to Aedhir. They had retreated to the solace of their tent and he lay next to her beneath the dark drapes of hide, closing his eyes and feeling the simple comfort of her warmth against him. He was spooned against her, his chin tucked near her shoulder, his arm draped across her waist.

"I know, Tacita," he said quietly.

"I am not afraid of them." Tacita turned her head to look over her shoulder. "I am not afraid of the empire, or what they might do to me."

Aedhir propped himself on his elbow and looked down at her. He cupped his hand against her cheek, brushing aside disheveled strands of her blond hair. "I am afraid of them," he said. "There is no slavery in Tiralainn. You will be safe there. Free. I have a flat in Penmanshiel that Pryce and I use when we are not at sea. Odhran can bring you. It is not much...four rooms, crates of Pryce's books...he...the lad would spend all of his marks on books if I let him..." He closed his eyes, pained by the simple mention of the young man's name. "Aedhir," Tacita whispered, heartbroken for him.

"You could stay there," Aedhir said, opening his eyes, looking at her again. "I will sign something...write a note to give you legal authority to it. My Naval pension, too. I have Pryce listed on official record as my beneficiary...and Wen, too, but I will write that we were married here, that you are my wife...if something happens to me, to Pryce and Wen, it would be yours."

"I do not want it," she said, blinking against tears. "I...I want to be with you, Aedhir."

He leaned down to kiss her. "I cannot leave without them, Tacita."

She nodded, closing her eyes. "I know."

"It will be safe for you in Tiralainn," he said. "I do not want to lose you," she said. "Already I have lost my...my Aurelia..." More tears spilled. "I cannot lose you, too. It is too much, Aedhir. I love you. I cannot bear it."

"Please, Tacita," he said. He drew her in his arms, holding her. He closed his eyes against his own tears and turned his face against her hair. "Please," he whispered.

"Eirik...?" Odhran called, rising to his feet when he saw the Enghan Hersir duck his head from beneath his tent flap and step outside. Several hours had passed since Tacita and Aedhir had taken their leave for the night. When they had left, Eirik, too, had retreated to the sanctuary of his tent, but Odhran had remained by the fire, his mind too restless and troubled for sleep.

Eirik had started to walk briskly away from the camp, his brows drawn, his mouth set in a stern, disagreeable line, but at Odhran's voice, he paused, turning to look over his shoulder. As Odhran approached him, his face softened and he managed a half-hearted attempt at a smile. "Odhran, heill, sveinn," he said in greeting. "It is late. You should find some rest. You have a long journey ahead of you again in the morning."

Odhran nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "Actually, sir, that is why I was hoping to speak to you."

Eirik raised his brow at him, his curiosity piqued.

"I have been thinking about it, sir, and I...if you would approve, I would like to bring Arnora with us, sir," Odhran said, feeling color stoke brightly, warmly in his cheeks. Eirik blinked at him in surprise, and Odhran opened his mouth, forcing his words out in a rush before the man could object.

"And your mother, uncle and Bjarki, of course, sir -- all of your family," he said. "They would be safe in Tiralainn. They would be safe with me -- I swear that to you, sir. I have money, sir...well, at least my parents have money...though they have probably disowned me at this point for joining the Navy but I...by my breath, sir, if they would not help me, I would find a job and I would work hard to take care of Arnora. I am certain there must be some sort of well-paying position for a man of honest means who was a history laureate candidate once and has no other marketable skills or trades save I can

sew a bit...and cook if called upon. I could stay in the Navy, even, if they would have me...it is modest pay, but a man could survive on it, I think...and a woman, of course. I would take care of her, and she would be safe.”

Eirik did not say anything. He merely looked at Odhran, and Odhran felt his cheeks blaze all the more. “If you would like, that is sir,” he said. “And I would see no dishonor to Arnora, sir. I would marry her, sir, in proper fashion...if she would have me that is, and if you, sir, would grant me permission as such.”

“You would marry my daughter?” Eirik asked, raising his brow again.

Odhran nodded. “Yes, sir. I have come to know her -- in a perfectly proper and courteous manner, of course, sir -- and I...I have grown rather fond of her.”

Eirik smiled at him. “I would be very grateful, Odhran,” he said, drawing the younger man’s gaze. “And it would bring my heart a great measure of ease to know Arnora and my kin are in your company and care.”

Odhran blinked at him. “Then you would not mind?”

“No,” Eirik told him. “I would be honored for it, Odhran.”

Odhran blinked again. “Thank you, Eirik.”

Eirik patted his shoulder. “No, lad -- thank you,” he said softly, and then he turned and walked away.

Eirik found Fjornir still sitting near the large bonfire where the Motinn had gathered earlier. The Konung was surrounded by leaders from the various Enghan kyns; Illugi, the Hildofar Hersir sat beside Fjornir, as close as kin, leaning toward the Konung’s shoulder as he offered quiet counsel against Fjornir’s ear. The mood here was as triumphant as throughout the rest of the camp, and whatever Illugi said drew a broad smile to Fjornir’s face, and hearty laughter from his throat.

Bastard, Eirik thought, scowling. Though he walked in the shadows just beyond the perimeter of the fire’s glow, when Fjornir looked up, he saw Eirik. The smile faltered on his face, fading as he locked eyes with his nephew. Eirik paused in mid-stride, meeting Fjornir’s gaze evenly, his brows drawn in furious disapproval.

Bastard, he thought again.

Illugi noticed Fjornir's distraction and followed his gaze. He blinked at Eirik, and then said something softly to the Konung. Fjornir nodded without taking his eyes from Eirik. Other Enghans around them noticed Eirik in the shadows as well, and they spared him scathing glances as they nudged one another and nodded toward him.

"Hann eigar eigi hreysti etha somi," one of them said, his voice low, but deliberately loud enough that Eirik could hear. *He has no courage or honor.*

"Eirik Gerpri alar svivirthing a varr thjod," said another, glowering at Eirik as he spat against the ground. *He brings disgrace upon his people.* Eirik turned his eyes from Fjornir's, and walked away. He struggled to loosen his hands; he had closed them into fists so tight, he could feel the strain in the tendons bridging his knuckles. The bonfire's light faded behind him, and with it, the sounds of the Herr's conversations and scorn. Eirik walked alone, not stopping until he reached the far edge of the Herr's camp perimeter, a place of relative peace and solitude near one of the pens of haf'rik. No tents were set up nearby, and no others wandered close at hand. Eirik stood with his arms crossed along one of the makeshift fence rails, quietly watching the giant elk as they snuffled through the snow and mud, searching for grass and lichens to munch.

He closed his eyes and lowered his head. He remembered the afternoon before his kyn's Herr had ridden with Thorir's for the southern shores of Sube, toward the encampment of imperial soldiers they had attacked. Eirik had not wanted to go, but Thorir had been desperate for revenge, so filled with fury and grief, it had consumed his reason, stripped him of any logic. Eirik had relented only because Thorir had been insistent, and determined. Einar had come to him, standing quietly in the doorway of their small barn in Elbeuf, watching Eirik sharpen his ax blades.

"Fathir?" he had asked quietly, drawing Eirik's gaze. His large, dark eyes had been hesitant but hopeful, and he had lingered at the threshold like a young and anxious child.

Eirik had paused in his work, smiling at his son. "What is it, Einar?" "Fathir, may...may I ride with you?" Einar asked quietly. He had lowered his gaze to the ground, his hand toying absently against his hip, and for the first time, Eirik had noticed he wore the sword fettered to his belt, the one Fjornir had sent to him.

That damnable sword, Eirik thought, listening to the soft, comforting lows of the elk. He closed his hands into fists again as tears stung his eyes. *It has brought us nothing but misery and loss. That damnable sword of Fjornir's.*

Eirik had blinked at his son, startled by the question. Einar knew how he felt about battle. He had consented to allow Einar to serve in the Seggr, as this was every boy's duty to his village and clan, but Einar had never pressed him on the matter of his *manntau*, the first battle rights that initiated older Seggr lads into the ranks of full-fledged Rekk. Einar knew Eirik did not want him to go into battle—not ever, no matter what war may come, and yet he had stood in the barn doorway, lifting those large, brown eyes with such earnest implore toward his father that Eirik had felt his heart tremble.

“Einar...” he had begun, setting his axe aside. “You know that I...”

“Fathir, I might be Konung someday,” Einar had said, his fingertips tapping restlessly along the hilt of his sword. “You will not,” Eirik had said, and his tone had been more sharp than he had intended, because he had been frightened. He had known that moment would come from the moment Fjornir's courier had delivered that damned blade to them. At last, it had come upon him and he was terrified. Einar had shied at his harsh words, and Eirik had risen to his feet, walking toward his son. “Einar, that sword is just a precaution on Fjornir's part until he has a son of his own,” he had said, his expression softening. “It is a gesture to put his mind at ease that his throne will be safe from the Nordri kyns, nothing more.”

“I know,” Einar had said, nodding. He had looked at Eirik; he was nearly tall enough to meet his father in the eye, but not quite, not yet. “Fathir, I would like to ride with you.”

“No, Einar,” Eirik had told him, and Einar had blinked at him, visibly wounded and bewildered. “It is not safe for you—especially not now. Not with this...” He had nodded at the sword. “You will be safest among the Seggr, and I am counting on you there. You are their Fylkir, their leader. You are the one who—”

“The Seggr is for little boys, Fathir,” Einar had said. “All of the others my age have had their manntaus—either in battle or by combat trial. I am the oldest left among the Seggr. It does not look right. Not among the others.”

“I do not care how it looks among the others,” Eirik had said. “You are my son, Einar, and you will remain among the Seggr until I say you are ready for your manntau.”

Einar had blinked at him again, hurt. “Please, Fathir,” he said. “I am seventeen. Can I not ride among the Rekkir now like a man?”

Eirik had touched Einar’s face. Even now, he could remember the warmth of his son’s skin against his palm, the angled contours of his cheek and jaw. He could remember the sound of Einar’s breath, the soft flutter of it against his wrist as the boy had struggled proudly not to cry in disappointment before his father. He could remember brushing his fingertips against Einar’s dark, tousled hair, and how he had hated himself then—and even more so now—as he had conceded. “Alright, then, Einar,” he had said, and Einar’s eyes had flown wide, his mouth spreading in a broad, delighted smile.

Eirik heard the soft scuffle of footsteps against the snow-covered ground, and whirled, startled from his memories. “When I was a boy, it used to amaze me,” Fjornir remarked, walking toward him. He nodded to indicate the elk corral. “My father told me stories of how the Herr once rode these creatures during times of war, the frontline of their cavalry. Our ancestors used the haf’rik and their antlers in defense against the dragonriders of Ulu.” He smiled wistfully as he came to stand beside Eirik along the fence rails, crossing his arms and mimicking his nephew’s relaxed posture. “These great beasts stood their ground against dragons. How that amazed me.”

He shook his head. “I had no idea that the time would come when I would see our Herr ride them again, that our people would know such dark days of war and strife as have come upon us this last decade. How simple and marvelous the Bith seems through the eyes of a child. How innocent and uncomplicated.”

“You followed me,” Eirik said with a frown, drawing away from him.

“Yes and no,” Fjornir said with a smile. “You are upset. You are just like your father, Eirik. You retreat for solace when you are troubled. I knew there were only a few quiet places you might find around the camp to be alone.”

“And so you took it upon yourself to intrude,” Eirik said, his frown deepening. He moved to tromp past Fjornir, to leave his uncle’s side. “Why I am not surprised? You have intruded on every other portion of my life as it has suited you lately.”

“It was supposed to be you, you know,” Fjornir said, drawing Eirik to an uncertain halt. “Tjorvi, my seer drew the Arf stone—the rune of inheritance—for you at the Motinn in Vornirtindr. They all had their turn...” Fjornir nodded at the camp. “Each of the Hersirs and Hersirsons were cast. There seemed no fair way to name my heir but by the divine providence of Urd herself. When your turn came, and Tjorvi drew the Arf stone, I was pleased and disappointed all at once.”

Eirik turned to him, his brow raised.

Fjornir smiled. “Pleased, because you were who I had in mind all along. You have your father’s spirit about you—Thrand’s wisdom, his strength. You would make a great leader to our people.”

“I do not want to be a great leader to our people,” Eirik said. “And my father did not either. That has always been your ambition, Fjornir—your flaw—not ours.”

Fjornir smiled again, although there was a brief moment when his expression faltered at Eirik’s words. “I know,” he said. “And that was why I was disappointed. I knew you would not accept it. You would see it as a burden, not a gift.”

“And so you gave it to my son instead,” Eirik said, his brows narrowing.

“No, Urd gave it to Einar,” Fjornir said. “His name drew the Arf rune, just as yours did. Of them all, you were the only two. Tjorvi also drew the Gipt stone for Einar—the rune of giving, and I knew. Nothing is hidden from Urd, and she knew though you might be chosen my heir, you would never accept it. She marked you so that I would know—and you would know, Eirik—that such capacities lie within you, whether you want to admit or embrace them or not. She marked Einar with the Gipt so that I would know he was the one to choose.”

“He is a boy,” Eirik said. “A boy who has known enough sorrow and loss in his days without this gift of yours and Urd’s. You did not even tell me, much less ask for my consent. You made your announcement and sent him the sword. He had no concept of what it meant—how could he? I have spent his life trying to keep him from such things as this. Even when the empire came to Enthimork and attacked us—killed my father—I have tried to protect Einar, and all of my children, from the weight of this war.”

“I know, Eirik,” Fjornir said, reaching for him. “Please, if you would just—”

“Do not patronize me,” Eirik snapped, frowning as he slapped Fjornir’s hand away. “You brought it into my home, Fjornir—you delivered the war by courier to Einar’s hands with your damn sword. How dare you put my son at such risk? How dare you speak about the innocence of childhood? You took that from Einar. You took that the moment you opened your mouth and called him your heir.”

Fjornir did not answer him. He studied his hands, his face pained.

“I brought my boy to war,” Eirik said, blinking against sudden tears. “How dare you ask that of me? How dare you leave me with no choice when he comes to me wide-eyed, saying ‘Fathir, if I am to be Konung someday, can I not ride among the Rekr now like a man?’”

Eirik closed his hand against Fjornir’s arm, drawing the Konung’s gaze. “How dare you,” he seethed. “How dare you use my boy for your own twisted agenda and try to call it Urd’s will?”

Fjornir shrugged his arm loose. “I have never—”

“You named Einar your heir to spite the Nordri,” Eirik said. “No matter what you say, no matter your little tales of runestones and divine providence, there is your reason. You do not trust them. You know Illugi’s sons—the Nordri Hersirsons—married your kin for no other reason than to stand heir to your throne, and that is why you named Einar.”

“That is untrue,” Fjornir said, his brows narrowing.

“It is true, you bastard, and you know it,” Eirik snapped. “And now you would use Einar again—you would use him to wage your war. You know you have no chance—not against nine thousand bellatori—but you would use my boy to instill hope in our people’s hearts. You would sacrifice him to the empire just to incite them all the more.”

“I would never,” Fjornir said. “Eirik, I love Einar. If I could save him somehow I would, but you are asking me to sacrifice our lands—all of our people—for him. Please try to understand. I—”

Eirik shoved his uncle away from him. “You do not love Einar. You have sold him to the empire! You took my child from me with that sword. You took my son from me with your damned runestones, and now you will take what I have left—you will abandon him to die for this war of yours?”

“Eirik...” Fjornir said quietly, reaching for him.

“Stop this,” Eirik said. He flinched away from Fjornir’s hand, stepping backwards. He stared at his uncle, pleading. “Stop this now, I am begging of you. It is not too late. Save my son. Spare your people from death. You know that is what they ride toward. Call it Tyr’s will, or Vidar’s, war or vengeance, it is all the same—it is death. You can stop it, Fjornir. Sign the surrender. Give the empire what it wants.”

“I cannot, Eirik.”

“You mean you will not.”

“What would you have of me?” Fjornir asked. “What would you do in my stead? Yes, our people are going to die. I am no fool—and neither are my Herr. We know this. Would you see me cower? Would you see my people lose what precious little hope remains within them to know my despair?” “I would die as I have tried to live, Eirik—as our ancestors lived—with courage and honor. They left their words for us to mark, Eirik, in the verses of their skalds, their poets: *‘Here is courage, the most precious possession of man. Here is the greatest reward a young man tries to win—when a man stands his ground against the spears of his enemy without fear or desire to flee and with a brave and able heart. Let him always fight shoulder to shoulder with his clan, face to face against his enemy.’*”

Fjornir leaned toward Eirik. “I would see our people make a stand with honor, Eirik, like our ancestors, clinging to this land we call our own until our very last breaths. We may not hold it, and we may fall—but by Grimnir, Eirik, we shall make such a war against the empire as to shake the boughs of Laerad itself.”

“You are the coward, not me,” Eirik said. “Hiding behind your legends and lore -- spouting half-forgotten quotes that will serve us no different—or better—than they have any Enghan before us. Prophecies and poems—that is what our ancestors left to us, Fjornir. Foolish superstitions and ancient idealisms that should have long ago been burned or buried to rot with the forefathers who dreamed them! Those superstitious prophecies of our ancestors cost me my wife! Now their ancient poems, the words of their skaldar will cost me my son! Your people might have found hope in life, even as part of the empire, if you had instilled it with the passion you have used to barter war.

No matter what skalds tell you—or what prophecies your seers babble—there is no honor or courage in sending good men to die without cause.”

“Eirik, please,” Fjolnir said again, his brows lifting in sorrow. “We are kin. Will you not give me the chance to...”

“If you will not sign the surrender and end this, you are no kin of mine,” Eirik said. Fjolnir stared at him, wounded, and Eirik leaned forward, hissing in his ear. “No? Then so be it. Have your war—make your ancestors proud. Shake the limbs of the universe itself, Fjolnir. But Grimnir help you if the empire touches my son.”

He turned and stomped away, his hands closed in tight fists. “Let all of the gods combined try and keep me from you if they hurt Einar.”

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, just as the sun was beginning to cast a rose-colored tint beyond the foothill peaks, Tacita and Odhran prepared to leave. They loaded a pair of bergelmirs with enough supplies to see them back across Eng and into Sube. The Herr warriors who noticed their efforts said nothing to them, but shot dark glances at Eirik and muttered among themselves as he helped Odhran strap waterskins to the bergelmirs' saddles.

"Why does the coward not leave with them?" Odhran heard one of them hiss. Eirik obviously heard as well; he lowered his face slightly, his brows narrowing, his hands pausing along the ties he was knotting against the saddle. "There is Eirik Gerpir's place," said another, offering a sharp snort of laughter. "With the boy and the woman, fleeing from harm's way."

"They are wrong, Eirik," Odhran said. "You are not a coward. You and Captain Fainne...you are the bravest men I should ever hope to meet, sir."

Eirik managed a faint, fleeting smile for him and resumed his work. "It does not matter, Odhran," he said, patting his palm against the weasel's haunch. "Let them think what they want of me. I do not care."

He walked toward the younger man and rested his hand against Odhran's shoulder. "But thank you for that."

Tacita was inconsolable, though she struggled not to show it. She stood nearby with her arms crossed fiercely over her bosom, her narrow shoulders trembling with sobs she fought against. Tears gleamed in her eyes as she watched Aedhir tend to her saddle; they trickled down her cheeks in thin rivulets that caught the new morning sun's glow and sparkled.

Aedhir went to her, and held her, drawing her against his shoulder. She clung to him with the desperation of a drowning woman clutching for aid; her breath fluttered from her mouth, and she pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "Please," she whispered. "Please, Aedhir. Do not ask this of me. Please let me stay."

She had told him something the night before; there had been precious little sleep for either of them. She had wept as he had made love to her; she had wept in the hours

spent in between, and the sounds of her despair had broken his heart. She had whispered something to him in the dark, something about dragons.

“I think that is why the Oirat took him,” she had said softly, laying with her back to him, holding his hand as it draped across her waist. “Your friend, Rhyden. They believed their ancestors had tamed dragons and rode them like horses in the sky. It is said once that all of these lands, from Eng to Achaia were once part of a mighty Ulusian empire -- one their ancestors built with the help of dragons.”

“Dragons,” Aedhir had repeated. He had kissed her ear through her hair. “What do dragons have to do with Rhyden?”

“Ulusian legend says the dragons left them,” Tacita had whispered. “Some offense drove them deep into the Khar mountains, into a hidden lair. They are said to sleep there, but that they will rise again one day to help the Ulusians restore their empire.”

“The Oirat believe this?”

Tacita had nodded. “And the Khahl in the north. That is where I learned of it -- in Kharhorin, from the Khahl. You said you thought the Oirat were looking for something in the Khar mountains, that they thought Rhyden could lead them to it. I had thought all along perhaps they meant for him to find the dragons’ lair for them, but I...”

Her voice had faded for a moment, and her hand had tightened against his. “I am sorry,” she had whispered. “I should have told you from the first, but it is just a legend.”

“It is alright,” Aedhir had said, kissing her ear again. His face had softened with sorrow as he thought of Rhyden, dead and burned among the corpses of the Oirat at Qoyina Bay. “It does not matter now anyway.”

“I never understood how they could hold such faith in it,” she had said. “It was not like a religious faith. It was more passionate within them. Something that gave them hope. Something they wanted so badly, they had no choice but to believe.” She had turned her face to look over her shoulder at him. “I understand now. Because I want to believe that I will see you again, that you will come to Tiralainn, and it will all be alright.”

He had touched her face, kissed her mouth. “I want to believe that, too,” he whispered. “With all that I have, Tacita, all of my heart -- I will try. I promise you.

“Do not lose faith in me,” he had said to her, and he said it again to her that morning as she wept against the lapel of his justicoat. He had dressed in his Naval uniform again, trading the comfortable warmth of the Enghan kyrtil and leggings for the accustomed fit of his overlapping coats, his shirt and waistcoat, his breeches, stocking layers and jackboots. “Do not lose faith in me,” Aedhir whispered to Tacita.

She lifted her face, tears dampening her cheeks, and took his face between her hands, kissing him deeply. “Never.”

He brushed his fingertips against her cheek, her tears. “Just like the dragons,” he said with a wink, forcing himself to smile.

She struggled to smile for him, too. “Just...just like the dragons.”

“Odhran, are you ready, lad?” Aedhir asked, turning as she drew away. He was afraid to hold her too long; if he did, he would never turn loose of her.

Odhran nodded, jerking the last knots of bundled supplies secure against his saddle. “Aye, Captain.”

“You have your weapons?” Aedhir asked.

Odhran patted his hips; he carried a pistol holstered at either side. He had borrowed a second belt from Eirik and rigged another holster to it. “Yes, sir,” he said. He also carried a dagger sheathed on one belt, a pair of rifles and two axes strapped within ready reach on his saddle.

Aedhir turned to Tacita. “And you?”

She patted her own hip, where an an’daga had been slung. Odhran had been teaching her the basics of the weapon, and she also carried a sword and knife on her belt. “Aye, Captain.”

Odhran looked at Aedhir, his eyes swimming with sudden tears. Aedhir stepped against him, drawing the young man into a fierce embrace. “Do not weep, lad,” he whispered, clapping his hand against Odhran’s shoulder. “Hoah, you will break me, Odhran.”

“I will speak to Kierken,” Odhran said, turning his face to speak against Aedhir’s ear. “I will demand audience with him. I will tell him your circumstances, sir, and I will make him understand. You have no choice. I will make him pardon you. I will make him bring you back to Tiralainn.”

Aedhir stepped back and cupped his hand against Odhran's cheek. "You will make a fine officer one day, Mister Frankley. I hope that I am there to see it."

"You will be, sir," Odhran said. "You and Wen both, sir -- and Pryce. I know it, Captain Fainne. I know it."

"Take care of Tacita for me," Aedhir said.

Odhran smiled, offering Aedhir a salute. "You can count on me, sir."

"I know I can, Odhran."

He and Eirik stood side by side watching Tacita and Odhran mount the bergelmirs. "You are sure they will not try and follow us?" Odhran asked, glancing uncertainly over his shoulder toward the Enghan milling about nearby. His bergelmir pawed the ground beneath him, shaking its head as he took the reins in hand.

Eirik followed his gaze, his brows drawn. "No," he said. "They will not leave. They are all too eager to die and find their places in Vanaheim."

Tacita reached down from her saddle and grasped Aedhir's hand tightly. "You will go, too, then?"

They had already packed a bergelmir for Aedhir, strapping to its back a small, two-wheeled cart under the pretense of trundling more supplies for the journey west. In actuality, the cart was loaded with all of the firearms crates. Aedhir meant to follow Odhran and Tacita's course at first, making pretenses in his actions of still packing for the journey to explain the delay in his departure should any Enghan take notice. Once he had traveled a safe enough distance from the Herr's encampment, he meant to turn south for Ulus -- and the empire.

"I will be right behind you," Aedhir said. She leaned over and hooked her arms around his neck.

"I love you, Aedhir," she whispered, kissing him.

"I love you, too, Tacita. Have faith."

She sat back in the saddle, blinking against helpless tears. "Like the dragons," she told him. "I will see you soon."

“You are ready, then?” Eirik asked Aedhir. Tacita and Odhran had left the camp nearly an hour earlier, and at last, Aedhir had abandoned the pretense of finishing his own preparations.

Aedhir patted his hand against his bergelmir’s neck and sighed heavily. He glanced over his shoulder at Eirik. “As ready as I am going to get, I think,” he said, doing his best to smile. He was frightened; he was not the sort of man who admitted such things readily, and he did not admit it aloud now, but it was obvious in his face, his eyes. *I do not know what in the bloody duchar I am doing*, he thought. *Hoah, I think I would rather sail into a maelstrom than face this.*

Eirik put his hand on Aedhir’s shoulder. “Let me come with you,” he said quietly, pained. “Please. There is nothing for me here, and you will need me. I can help you.”

“There is plenty for you here, Eirik,” Aedhir said. “There are still three days left. You can still reason with Fjolnir -- you can keep trying. I will do what I can with the empire. Do what you can with your people. We can stop this.”

“They will not listen to me,” Eirik said. “You heard them last night at the Motinn. They are fixed on it. I cannot move them. It is beyond my power, Aedhir.”

“Keep trying, Eirik,” Aedhir said. He held his hand out, offering it in friendship.

Eirik clasped hands with him, and Aedhir drew him near in a brief, fond embrace. “I will get Einar out,” he whispered. “I will get him back for you.”

Eirik nodded as they stepped apart. “You are a good man, Aedhir,” he said quietly, his voice choked. He glanced at Aedhir. “And a good friend. I...I have been blessed for you.”

“I am no less for you, Eirik,” Aedhir told him. He planted his hand against theommel ridge of his saddle and hooked his foot in the stirrup. He swung himself onto the bergelmir’s back and took the reins in hand as the great weasel grumbled at his sudden weight and shuffled its paws restlessly against the ground.

“Good luck to you,” Eirik said, looking up at him.

“And to you,” Aedhir said. A cry rang out from the encampment, a sharp voice shouting out shrilly: *“Drap! Drap!”*

Eirik whirled toward the shout, his eyes flown wide with start. All around them, the Herr began to murmur and call out to one another in bewildered alarm. “What is it?”

Aedhir asked, frowning, looking over his shoulder. The cry sounded again, the Enghan words unfamiliar to him.

“Hann er dauthr! Drap! Drap! Konungr er dauthr!”

“Donar’s hammer...!” Eirik gasped, staggering in place. He turned to Aedhir, his face ashen with shock and horror. “It...it is Fjolnir,” he said, stricken. “Hjalpar mik! Hjalpar! Hann er dauthr! Drap! Drap!” someone screamed.

“They are saying Fjolnir is dead,” Eirik said to Aedhir. “They...the gods have mercy, they say he has been murdered!”

“What?” Aedhir gasped, stunned. He pivoted in his saddle, craning his neck to look over the swarming mass of Herr soldiers. The cry -- the grim and startling news -- had whipped the camp into a sudden frenzy of voices and activity as the panicked Rekk warriors all surged toward the center of the campsite, and their Konung’s tent. “Fjolnir has been slain!” Aedhir heard a man cry out hoarsely above the din. “He has been murdered in his tent! They have stolen our Fjolnir from us!”

“There is a traitor among us!” roared another. “Lopt has sent a wolf among our flock and it had reaped a bitter quarry!”

As the Enghan bellowed and rushed about in stricken, confused panic, Aedhir blinked at Eirik. “But who would...?” he asked.

Eirik stared at him, aghast. “It does not matter,” he said. “Go -- they will say it is you.” Aedhir jerked in his saddle, startled. Eirik reached for him, meaning to slap the bergelmir on its rump and spur it into motion. “They will say it is you -- go, Aedhir! Go!”

“Mother Above...!” Aedhir hissed, and he kicked his heels against the bergelmir’s flank. The weasel leaped forward, plowing through the crowd of Rekk that had closed in around him. Apparently others among the Enghan had shared Eirik’s thought, and the bergelmir made it no more than two strides before several of the Herr caught it roughly by the bridle, wrestling it to a halt.

“No -- !” Eirik yelled, shoving his way toward Aedhir. “Here is the wolf!” one of the Enghan holding Aedhir’s bergelmir by the bridle shouted out. The weasel shook its head, struggling to loosen their grasps, but more hands fell against it, and Aedhir, jerking on both the animal and its rider.

“It is as we have said all along -- here is Lopt’s traitor! Here is the murdering wolf among us!” someone cried, trying to drag Aedhir from his saddle.

“Get your bloody hands off me!” Aedhir shouted, fighting them. He felt more hands seize him, grasping him firmly by the arms, his coat, and he slipped sideways, hauled him from the bergelmir’s shoulders. He struggled, balling his hands into fists and striking at them; as his feet were forced from the stirrups, he kicked at them, driving his boot heels into guts and faces, shoulders and necks.

“Let go of me -- rot bastards!” Aedhir yelled. He fell against the ground hard, and he twisted, crying out sharply as someone kicked him mightily in the stomach, whoofing the breath from him.

“Flugu!” one of the Enghan screamed. *Murderer!*

“Meinvaett!” another shrieked, and Aedhir felt broad fists pummel against his arm, his shoulders. *Evil beast!* He drew his hands toward his face; too late to block powerful knuckles from plowing into his temple, knocking dazzling pinpoints of light into his field of vision. “Nothing oborna!” cried another, and again, a heavy boot caught him in the groin. *Honorless bastard!* More drove against his spine, his shoulders, and Aedhir cried out.

“Leave him!” Eirik shouted, struggling to reach Aedhir. “He is innocent! Leave him alone!”

Four Herr caught Eirik, and he thrashed between them, cursing at them and fighting to get loose of them. “Let go of me! Do not touch him!” he screamed. “Aedhir! Bastards! He is innocent! Let him go!”

“Perhaps you have helped him in this plot of Lopt’s, Eirik Gerpír,” one of the Enghan said, closing his hand against Eirik’s chin and forcing his head back. “You are the one who calls this wolf your friend -- who brought him among us. You are the coward who would turn his back on honorable battle for surrender.”

Eirik recognized the man, and the silver ram’s head brooch he wore at his throat. Eirik’s brows narrowed and he spat at the man. “Arinbjorn Illugison, if there is one among us who knows nothing of honor, it is you, Nordri saurr,” he snapped, calling Arinbjorn *dung*. He lunged between his captors, jerking his face free of Arinbjorn’s

grasp. "Of us all, you had reason the most to hate Fjolnir, to murder him!" someone cried to Eirik.

The Enghan dragged Aedhir to his feet. He was gasping for breath, blood streaming from his nose, mouth and a gash along his forehead. He stumbled, and they forced him upright among them. One of the Enghan wearing the brooch of the Nordri kyns punched him in the gut, plowing what little breath he had regained from him again.

"Trying to run from us, coward bastard?" the Nordri cried as Aedhir slumped, choking and spitting up blood. "You sent the bitch and the boy from us -- did they have a part in this, too? Were you hoping to join them, to leave us to despair with our fallen Konung?"

"Othveginn oborna!" another shouted. *Filthy bastard!*

"Get him on his knees! Here is how murder is answered among the Herr!" Arinbjorn roared, turning away from Eirik and toward Aedhir. He reached for his belt, unfettering his axe and taking the shaft in hand. "Get him on his knees, I say! Let him find his way back to Lopt without his blackened head to guide him!"

The Herr roared at this and Aedhir cried out breathlessly as they shoved him to the ground, forcing his legs to buckle beneath him. He struggled feebly against them, trying to shrug loose of their hands.

"I...I am innocent..." he gasped, and he stared up at Arinbjorn as he strode near, axe in hand. Aedhir's brows narrowed and he spat out a mouthful of blood. "I am innocent!" he shouted out hoarsely. "I did not do this!"

"Liar!" one of the Enghan cried, driving the cuff of his knuckles against the back of Aedhir's head. "Still his lying tongue, Arinbjorn! Send him to the bowels of Niflheim! Let Lopt claim him from the wretched walls of Elvidnir!"

"Hold him, Bjolan," Arinbjorn snapped. "Arngrim -- help him, brother. Hold him fast." He hefted the axe between his hands and raised it over his shoulder. "No!" Eirik screamed, thrashing between his captors. "No, no -- Aedhir!"

He managed to wrench himself momentarily loose; as the Enghan's hands loosened, he danced away from them, shrugging his shoulders mightily and staggering forward. He rushed toward Aedhir, shoving his way through the Herr. He knocked one

of the Nordri holding Aedhir by the arm aside and fell on his knees, folding himself protectively over Aedhir.

“You will have to kill us both, you bastard!” he shouted at Arinbjorn.

“Summoning some mettle, Eirik?” Arinbjorn sneered. “A pity it is wasted, then.” He moved to swing the axe, and a strong, broad hand closed abruptly against his wrist, staying his blow in mid-swing.

“What are you doing?” Hamal demanded, holding Arinbjorn’s arm fast even as the younger man tried to shrug him loose. “My brother -- your Konung -- is murdered in his bed and you would dare raise your blade against his kin? What is this?”

“Here is Fjolnir’s murderer!” one of the Nordri cried, shoving his finger at Aedhir. “It is as Arngrim said from the first, Hersir Hamal -- he comes among us under the guise of friend, but sneaks upon us in the night -- a wolf of Lopt -- to murder!”

“He is innocent, Hamal!” Eirik cried, still huddled over Aedhir. He looked up at his uncle, pleading. “He is innocent, by my breath and life, Hamal! There is a wolf among us -- a murderer in our flock -- but I say it wears a more familiar disguise!” He narrowed his brows at Arinbjorn, and the Nordri’s younger brother, Arngrim lunged forward, his face twisted with rage.

“You would accuse us of this as well?” he cried, reaching for his dagger. Two of his fellows caught him, restraining him, but he fought. “You coward bastard, Eirik Gerpir! You know nothing of honor that you would defend a Torachan outsider and offer accusations against your own!”

“Arngrim, stand down -- take your hand from your blade,” his father Illugi commanded loudly, shouldering his way through the crowd. He looked at Arinbjorn. “Lower your axe. Put it back on your belt, Arinbjorn. You would raise it against Eirik? What madness is this?”

“No madness at all, Father,” Arinbjorn said. “Here is Fjolnir’s murderer, caught as he tried to escape.”

“He is innocent!” Eirik cried again. “Where is your proof of it?”

“Konung Fjolnir lies in his tent, punched through with a blade!” Arinbjorn shouted. “I have only just come from seeing his bloodied corpse with my own eyes! What more proof do we need? Who among us stood against him enough to know such hatred?”

Such wrath? No one but the man who would counsel us against war!" He met Eirik's gaze, his brows narrowed. "Or the *men* who would offer such counsel, I should say."

"Hold your tongue, Arinbjorn," Hamal snapped, and he drove the blade of his hand against Arinbjorn's shoulder, forcing him a stumbling step back. Arinbjorn blinked at him, his eyes ablaze with fury, and Hamal frowned, stepping nearly nose to nose with him.

"If you would accuse my nephew, you charge me, as well," Hamal said, closing his hands into fists. "Eirik Gerpír is Fjólnir's kin -- there may have been differences between their minds, but there was love yet between their hearts. Eirik could no more see or allow harm upon Fjólnir than he could his own father. You will not speak against him so or I will see you answer for it."

He turned to Eirik. "You have brought this man among us, but none among us call him friend but you," he said, pointing to Aedhir. "He is innocent, Hamal," Eirik said, drawing his arms about Aedhir as his friend panted for breath.

"Tell me how you know that," Hamal said. "Were you with him the night through? Can you account for his presence all night?"

Eirik blinked at his uncle, stricken. "Tell me, Eirik," Hamal said.

Eirik looked down at Aedhir. "I..." he said quietly. "Hamal, I..."

"Were you with him the night through?" Hamal asked, his voice sharp now.

Eirik lowered his head, shamed. "No," he said, and the Herr all cried out at this, their voices raised in fury and outrage together.

"Kill him!" someone shouted. "Arinbjorn is right! He is husband to Ithunn -- Fjólnir's first-born daughter! That gives his word authority here -- that marks him for the throne!"

Hamal drew his sword in a swift, sharp motion. He thrust the blade at the Rekk who had cried out, his brows furrowed deeply. "I do not know which Motinn your Tithendar attended," he said, as the man stumbled back from him, his eyes flown wide and fixed upon the unwavering tip of his blade. "But mine attended none where Arinbjorn's marriage gave him the throne. Mine was there when the runestones were cast -- when Einar Eirikson was named Fjólnir's heir."

The crowd of Herr fell silent at this, their outraged cries fading. Hamal turned about, glaring at them, holding his sword aloft. "Arinbjorn Illugison has no voice here," he shouted. "Urd has named Einar Eirikson our Konung -- Fjolnir is dead, and destiny has spoken. Who here would defy the will of the gods?"

"Einar Eirikson is not with us," Arngrim said, stepping forward, meeting Hamal's gaze evenly. "He has no voice here, either -- no guidance to proffer. Fjolnir is gone. I say that mantle by right falls to my brother. There is no defiance of Urd, or her will. There is sense, Hamal. We must be led. Someone must shoulder the burdens Fjolnir has left us." He raised his brow and offered a derisive snort. "But I suppose you would say that should be you, Hamal, as you are blood kin to Fjolnir -- his brother. I suppose you think this makes you more due than Arinbjorn."

"There is only one due to speak in the Konung's stead among us, Arngrim Skytja, and it is not you, or your brother," a man said as he shouldered his way through the crowd. He was older than most of the other men gathered among the Herr; his coarse hair was more silver than black. The long trim of his mustache was interwoven into the plaits of his beard, and he walked with a pronounced limp, favoring his right side. As he spoke, as he passed among them, the Rekkir drew obligingly aside, lowering their heads politely, as though the man commanded some preferential deference from them all.

"Who is that?" Aedhir croaked to Eirik, leaning heavily against his friend's shoulder as his battered head swam.

"Tjorvi Stoti," Eirik whispered. "He is Fjolnir's sjona -- his seer, the highest counsel in Engjold."

The man stopped before Arngrim and met his gaze for a long, silent moment until Arngrim, too, hung his head and stepped backward, courteously granting Tjorvi space.

"I drew the Arf rune, the stone of inheritance for two when Fjolnir sought my counsel on his heir," Tjorvi said. "I drew the Gipt stone for Einar Eirikson to mark him as the one, but only because Urd, to whom no fortune remains unseen, knew that the first -- his father -- would never accept such appointment."

A murmur of bewilderment and surprise rippled through the Herr as the Enghan gawked at Eirik in startled disbelief. Arinbjorn flinched as though he had been physically slapped.

“Eirik Gerpír shall speak in the Konung’s stead until Einar is among us to lead,” Tjorvi said. “Urd knew such events as these would come to pass -- she knew we would need one marked to guide us when those who have been chosen for the crown have been taken.” He forked his fingers in the air and waggled his hand. “It is Urd’s decree -- let no man here stand against it.”

“It is the law,” Arinbjorn said, his brows furrowed, his hands balled into fists. “It is by the law of our people -- set and fixed in place by Grimnir himself to our ancestors that this man should die!” He pointed to Aedhir. “Death answered with nothing less than equal measure -- that is the way! Urd’s decree cannot alter Grimnir’s edicts. His wisdom gave us such laws and by our hands, we honor him with their fulfillment!”

“He is innocent!” Eirik cried, rising to his feet. “There is only one who knows with certainty,” Tjorvi said. “And only one who can choose to reveal it to us. Grimnir knows -- the answers lie in the runes he has given us. Urd will guide us through the stones if we are meant to know.”

“Tjorvi is right,” Hamal said. “Eirik, if you stand in Einar’s stead, then you should consult the stones.”

Eirik blinked at his uncle. “No,” he said. “No, I do not consult oracles.”

“Are you afraid of the truth they will reveal, Eirik?” Arngrim said. He turned to Tjorvi. “Bring your stones here, then -- read them before us all. Eirik may tremble at the proffered guidance of the gods, but we men of valor and mettle do not!”

“I am the Konung’s sjonar,” Tjorvi said. He looked at Eirik, holding his gaze. “I read only for his counsel. No other.”

Hamal stepped near to Eirik and hooked his hand against his sleeve. “Take his counsel,” he whispered, his brows narrowed.

Eirik tried to shrug his arm loose of Hamal’s grasp. “I do not consult oracles,” he said again to his uncle. “It is foolish superstition and I -- ”

“If Tjorvi says this man is innocent, the others will believe it,” Hamal said, touching Eirik’s arm again. “Nothing else will convince them.”

Eirik glanced at Aedhir. His friend was bleeding and reeling, on his knees in the snow, his hand pressed against his temple. “If he did not do it, you have nothing to fear,” Hamal whispered. He nodded to indicate Tjorvi. “Take his counsel.”

Eirik flapped his elbow, knocking Hamal's hand away. "Alright then," he said, frowning. He turned to Tjorvi. "I will hear you read."

Tjorvi lowered his head in a nod. "Come, then, Eirik," he said, and he turned. "We shall take conference in my tent."

Before they went to Tjorvi's tent, Eirik and the sjona went to Fjornir's. Eirik had not wanted to leave Aedhir alone, but the Herr had voiced disapproval of allowing Aedhir to leave with Eirik. "How do we know he will not only try to help him escape?" Arngrim had cried out, eliciting a stir of concurrence from the others.

"I will keep with him," Hamal had told Eirik. "My kyn and I will let no harm come to him until you have returned and told us what the stones reveal. I give you my word on that, Eirik."

"I will hold you to it, Hamal," Eirik had replied sternly.

Fjornir lay on his pallet of blankets on the floor of his tent. A small, dark spread of blood stained the blanket draped over his form, but of the knife that had pierced his heart, there was no sign. There was little other blood Eirik could see besides this solitary stain on the blankets, but when he drew the folds of coverlets aside, he jerked, startled to find Fjornir's kyrtil beneath soaked in it, the light-colored hide darkened with its dried taint.

"How is this possible?" he whispered as he knelt beside the body of his uncle. Fjornir's hands, draped across his midriff as though he had been killed while asleep and comfortable, were smeared with dried blood; it was crusted beneath his fingernails. His mouth was caked with it, his beard matted, as though he had choked up mouthfuls as he tried to drag in his final breaths. And yet, the blankets atop him had been relatively unstained. His posture was relaxed, like one sleeping, but the blood on his body suggested he had known no peace in his passage. Eirik looked over his shoulder toward Tjorvi, his expression grief-stricken. "He was not killed here," he said, his voice hoarse, strangled with sudden tears. He had not been of like mind with his uncle on many occasions in the last years, but Hamal had been right; he had always loved Fjornir. Fjornir had doted on Eirik as a boy, just as he always had Einar, and Eirik -- like Einar --

had loved the man for it. To see him, to realize his death had not been instantaneous, and likely filled with suffering, broke Eirik's heart.

Tjorvi said nothing. He merely lingered at the tent's threshold, watching Eirik's face twist with sorrow and bewilderment. "Look," Eirik told him, holding up the blanket. "There is no hole here. This blanket is intact. Where is the puncture from the blade? How could it have punched through to his heart if it did not even pass through the wool?"

His last words to Fjolnir had been harsh and cruel, filled with a helpless rage Eirik had been desperate to release. He had unleashed his fury, his frustration on Fjolnir only in part because it was due; he had also lashed out at his uncle because there had been no one else to direct it toward. He could not punish the empire, the people who had taken his son, but Fjolnir had been close at hand, and had set himself up inadvertently as culpable in Eirik's regard.

He looked down at Fjolnir and brushed the cuff of his fingers lightly against his uncle's cold cheek. "Forgive me," he whispered, feeling tears well in his eyes. He drew his hand to his face and covered his eyes. He had hated Fjolnir last night; his rage had been so bright, his frustration and helplessness so complete, his heart had known little other choice. Death had stripped the flaws from Fjolnir's form, the erring of his heart and mind, and left only the face of the man Eirik had loved. "Forgive me," he whispered again, his shoulders shuddering as he wept. "I drew the Heill stone last night," Tjorvi said from behind him, drawing his gaze. "The rune of despair and ruin. It was a poor omen. I knew nothing good would come of it. I tried to find Fjolnir and warn him, but he was not in his tent."

Eirik shook his head. "No," he said. "No, he had walked to the far side of the camp. He followed me there, near a hav'elgar corral."

They went to Tjorvi's tent and knelt together, facing one another on the ground. Eirik watched the sjona spill runestones in a tumbled pile across the surface of a tafboard. He mixed them with his hand at the seer's bidding, and then selected five.

"You do not believe you will find answers here," Tjorvi said as he arranged the five tiles in a cruciform shape. He did not turn them over to reveal the rune inscriptions; rather, he looked up at Eirik, his brow raised slightly.

“I do not know what I will find here,” Eirik replied. “But it has bartered me some time until I can find something that will give me answers.”

“Why do you doubt the power of the stones?” Tjorvi asked. “Your daughter, Arnora, possesses the gift and is learning the ways of the runes -- Hamal told me this. And your wife, Eydis, was a gifted seer, as well. She served your father, Thrاند, for a time as sjonir to his kyn, did she not?”

“Yes,” Eirik said, and he looked down at the tafboard, frowning. “Until she hemorrhaged giving birth to our son, Bjarki, and bled to death in our bed, yes, her gifts - - as you call them -- served her well.” He glanced at Tjorvi. “Urd did not reveal that to her in the stones -- just like she did not warn you of Fjornir’s murder.”

“You are angry with Urd for this.”

“Urd guards her secrets a bit too well for my liking sometimes,” Eirik said. “She is selfish with them and cruel. She took Eydis from me without warning. It was her divine decree that marked Einar for Fjornir’s heir and has brought this upon him. I am entitled to be angry with her -- to doubt the power of her stones. I have seen them fail too many times.”

“And yet here you are, beseeching her for answers,” Tjorvi said. He turned over one of the stones. “It is a difficult time for you, both within the world around you, and within your heart. This is Nauth, and to some, it is the rune of hardship. To others, though, it can be a symbol of change, of lessons to be learned and growth to be discovered. Which of these it is for you, Eirik, remains up to you to decide. You have found yourself at a place of seeming impasse, when your heart is confused and filled with despair. Do you remain in such a state, letting your sorrow, shame and vulnerabilities consume you, break you? Or do you take them for what they can be -- tools that can be used to build something stronger, more resilient within you?”

Tjorvi turned over another stone. “The Munn stone reversed,” he said. “Deceit in the past has brought you to this moment. The treachery of others has forced these circumstances to come to pass.”

He turned another of the tiles. “The Mathr rune,” he said. “It stands for friends, enemies, the interdependence of men with one another. You will find help, Eirik, if you choose wisely -- friend from foe. Perhaps you have misjudged one for the other.

Perhaps it means finding forgiveness in your heart -- choosing to judge one for the other, a seeming foe for a friend in order to gain insight into their hearts, their minds. A decision they have made is not one you would have -- why would you have chosen differently? And why would they choose as they did?"

Another tile turned beneath Tjorvi's fingertips. "Hestr, the rune of movement. This is your obstacle stone -- Hestr in this position means you must find some way to change if you are to hope to find your answers. Now is the time to decide if the Nauth stone means your situation is filled with despair or hope. Now is the time to decide if the Mathr stone means you must change your heart to understand that of another." He met Eirik's gaze. "Now is the time to decide if Urd guards her secrets too well for your liking, or if she simply guides you in directions you do not want to follow. There is no prophecy that can make you change; no seer who can give you the answers you seek. But you can find them yourself if you choose to change -- if you follow Urd's guidance."

He turned the final stone over. "Bolli," he said. "The rune of revelations. It means you can find the answers, Eirik. You can see your friend vindicated -- and perhaps yourself in the process. It is yours to decide." Eirik blinked at him. "That is it?"

Tjorvi settled back comfortably on his hips and nodded. "That is what the stones would tell me, yes."

"There is your wisdom of Grimnir? The truth Urd would offer to help me?" Eirik slapped his hand against the taflboard, startling Tjorvi and sending the runestones scattering. He stood, drawing his hands into angry fists. "They think my friend murdered Fjolnir!" he cried at the sjoni. "They mean to kill Aedhir -- blood for blood, as is the law -- and you give me riddles about choices and change?"

"Wisdom is not given by Grimnir, Eirik. It is earned from him," Tjorvi said. "And the truth is something Urd lets us discover; she does not offer it freely. If you would find wisdom, and the truth to spare your friend, the path is laid for you. It remains up to you to follow it."

"Tell Grimnir to keep his wisdom, then, and Urd her truth," Eirik snapped. He turned on his boot heel and stomped away, thrusting aside the tent flap and leaving Tjorvi alone. "I will find my own."

Chapter Thirteen

Eirik had been gone for more than an hour, and the natives were starting to grow restless. Aedhir could hardly blame them. He was getting pretty anxious himself. Eirik's uncle Hamal had promised he and his Rekkir would keep Aedhir from harm, but frankly, even Hamal himself looked less than pleased with this responsibility, and many among his men complained as loudly as any of the other Enghan about Eirik's delay.

"Where is he?" one of the Rekkir cried out, echoing Aedhir's sentiments fairly well. "That coward—he has abandoned us! He has run off into the foothills like a dog kicked in the haunches!" shouted another.

They had gone to the seer, Tjorvi's tent some time ago, only to discover Eirik missing. Tjorvi remained, sitting on the floor beneath the flaps of hide, but of Eirik, there had been no sign.

"The stones did not give him the answers he wanted!" the Nordri Hersirson named Aringbjorn yelled, stomping in a broad circumference around Aedhir, his hand closed against the handle of his axe. "Urd would not lie! If Eirik has run off, it means the stones spoke against him—and named this Torachan dog the murderer, just as I have said all along!"

The other Enghan yowled out their agreement, and when they pressed forward, Hamal's men stepped up to meet them, blocking their passage without any real conviction in their faces or efforts.

"Keep back!" Hamal snapped, marching toward Arinbjorn. "Get back, Arinbjorn! We will wait for Eirik!"

Aedhir did not know what had happened to Eirik, or where he had gone. Though he doubted Eirik had truly fled the camp, he knew for all the good any of his efforts would do, he may as well have taken a rod and tackle in hand and gone fishing. The Herr meant to kill him. Nothing short of Eirik stumbling across the assassin in the flesh, the bloody knife still in his hand was going to convince them of his innocence, and Aedhir knew it. He knelt on the ground, huddled over in the pretense of semi-lucidity from his beating. He remained hunkered like this for a long time, wracking his brain, struggling to find some way out of the mess. He had been in predicaments before; his

short temper and proclivity for action before semblance of rational thought had seen him in scrapes plenty of times. However, Aedhir had to admit, this current situation was probably the damndest he had ever found for himself. There were at least fifty Enghan surrounding him in his immediate vicinity and several thousand more were spread out in any direction throughout the encampment. They were all well-armed and stoked for battle; a little bloodshed at Aedhir's expense would not have troubled any of them in the least. They were also all bearded, pale-skinned and dressed in the native garb of their people. With his dark complexion and tailored Naval uniform, Aedhir knew he would find no place to hide among them if he decided to run.

I would stand out like a bloody, pus-filled boil wherever I went, he thought grimly. He spared a quick glance up, before dropping his gaze again, affecting an appropriate low moan of misery to keep the Enghan nearest to him from growing too suspicious. The bergelmir he had saddled and packed remained nearby, maybe ten or fifteen broad paces if he shoved his way through the Rekk. The weasel was large and burly and even with it laden by the bulky wagon, Aedhir thought it might be able to bolt through the camp. If he could fend off the Enghan, keep them from dragging him off the saddle again until the bergelmir could make it into the open, he might actually have a chance for escape.

The Enghan had not bothered to search him, or take his weapons from him. He carried his an'daga holstered at his hip, beneath the overlapping flaps of his wool coats. He had a Naval-issued dagger sheathed on his belt, and a sword opposite his pistol. Eirik had given him a pair of Enghan battle axes, one with a short-handle for close combat, the other with a longer shaft for a broad swinging circumference. These were fettered to the bergelmir's saddle, along with a loaded and readied rifle. *I could fight my way to the bergelmir,* he thought. *With a bit of luck, I might not even have to fight. Maybe if I fire the an'daga, it will frighten them. They do not know what it is—the sound of it, the smoke frightened Eirik and Thorir's men the first time. Maybe if I fire it in the air, it will startle them enough to back off.*

If he could reach the weasel, he could unfasten the longer of the axes. He could use it to drive back any advancing Enghan as the bergelmir moved forward. If need be, he could shoot the isneach into the air over their heads and cower them as he

escaped. *The minute you move, they are going to be upon you*, Aedhir imagined Pryce saying. It was something Pryce would say; something sensible Pryce would think of in his stead. *Can you draw your pistol fast enough before they grab you, wrestle it from your hands? They will take it from you, and then what will you do?*

Pryce would probably never find himself in such a mess. Pryce's good sense had served him far more good—far more often—than Aedhir's irrational temper ever had. Pryce knew how to fight—Aedhir had taught him personally, and the young man had a wicked left hook on him when he felt so inclined—but he had never been in a scrap in his life, not even a modest push-and-shove over portars at a pub. Pryce's calm nature, his inherent sensibility kept him from troubles that seemed to come by nature to Aedhir. *Pryce would not have wound up here in the first place*, Aedhir thought. *He would have done what bloody well made sense—he would have ridden west with Odhran and Tacita, returned to Tiralainn and let the King do the bloody bartering. Hoah...what am I saying? Pryce would still be in Tiralainn, laid up in port—he never would have left Cuan'darach without written orders.*

What were you thinking, Aedhir? the Pryce in Aedhir's head asked, and Aedhir could nearly see him, his expression unhappy and disapproving. *What are you thinking now? You cannot simply jump up and run out of here. Have you gone bloody daft?*

Well, I cannot bloody squat here and do nothing, Pryce, Aedhir replied, pressing his hands over his face. *What? You would have me abandon you and Wen in Kharhorin? Keep still and let the Enghan lop my damn fool head off? I am not doing this for me, Pryce—I am doing this for you, and for Wen.*

And a splendid job of things you have done so far, said the Pryce in his head, raising his brow. Aedhir groaned softly, and in unfeigned misery this time. He had taken one too many blows to his head, he realized. He was imagining conversations with Pryce. Someone had obviously driven their fist against his skull too often for his mind's liking. He frowned and moved his hand slowly, letting his fingers creep along the edge of his great coat lapel, reaching for his pistol. *Wait for Eirik*, Pryce pleaded. *He is coming Aedhir. He would not leave you here. He is coming back.*

"There...there is nothing he can do, lad," Aedhir whispered, his hand slipping beneath his coats. *You do not know that.*

“There is nothing he can find that will convince them.”

He felt the butt of his pistol and slowly curled his fingers about the polished, brass-trimmed wood. He slipped his index finger against the hook of the trigger, and settled his thumb against the doghead.

They will kill you, Aedhir, Pryce said. *Then I will take a couple of them with me, at least,* Aedhir thought. He shifted his weight from his knees to the balls of his toes, so that he could unfurl his legs and spring forward. He closed his eyes, holding the pistol in his hand, drawing the hammer slowly back against his thumb.

He thought of Pryce, of the day twelve years ago when he had arrived at the a’Pobail orphanage in Gartsharie to collect the boy. It had been a month since Inire Finamur’s suicide; two weeks since her note with all of its grim and heartbreaking contents had reached him and he had turned the *a’Maorga* for Tiralainn again. He remembered the monks bringing Pryce to him in the vaulted main foyer of the orphanage. Aedhir could still recall the soft, resonant sound of their shoe heels against the polished granite floor, and the indistinct shape of his own shadow as it had played across the stone before him in the waning daylight. He remembered the whisper of the brothers’ cassocks against the floor, and he remembered seeing Pryce between them, a small scrap of a boy, slender and fragile-looking, his sand-colored hair tousled despite obvious efforts to comb it into some semblance of order. Pryce had blinked at him as they had approached, his blue eyes enormous, seeming to swallow his whole face. Aedhir had genuflected, drawing his uniform tricorne hat from his head, and he had held out his hand in fond, gentle beckon.

“Hullo, Pryce,” he had said quietly.

The monks had paused, letting the boy walk slowly ahead without them. Pryce had stopped before Aedhir, still blinking at him, his eyes filled with trepidation and confusion. Aedhir had touched his face, smiling as he had brushed the cuff of his fingers against Pryce’s cheek. “He does not speak,” one of the brothers had said to Aedhir, as though the child before him was completely unknown to Aedhir, a stranger whose acquaintance he met for the first time. “He has not spoken a word since he was brought to us.”

In the years following the First War, the Finamurs had become a surrogate family to Aedhir. Though there had never been any romantic or physical involvement between Inire and Aedhir, he had taken care of her as he might have a wife, and had loved Pryce every bit as much as a child of his own. He had been unable to be a husband to his own wife, a father to his own daughter, and through Inire and Pryce, Aedhir had found a semblance of home and belonging.

Aedhir had looked at Pryce in the foyer of the orphanage, and his heart had nearly broken. Pryce had always been a bright and curious child; on Aedhir's shore leave visits with the Finamurs, Pryce had been fond to follow Aedhir as closely as a shadow, chattering with nearly nonstop exuberance about anything and everything. Inire had been so withdrawn, so consumed with the melancholia that had eventually seen her take her own life, that to have someone to talk to -- who would talk to him in return, and pay attention to him -- must have seemed a blessing to Pryce.

"Would you like to come and live with me, Pryce?" he had asked the boy softly, cradling Pryce's cheek against his palm.

Pryce had blinked at him, his eyes swimming with sudden tears. He had looked uncertain, and glanced over his shoulder toward the clergymen, as though he feared some sort of rebuke. "It is alright," Aedhir had said, drawing his gaze. "They will let you come, if you want to. Would you like that?"

Pryce had nodded mutely. He had looked at Aedhir for a long moment, a solitary tear trailing down his cheek. "Please take me with you," he had whispered.

Aedhir had felt tears of his own stinging his eyes. "Alright, Pryce," he had said.

"Please," Pryce had whispered, and Aedhir had drawn him near in a fierce embrace. Pryce had buried his face at the nook of Aedhir's shoulder, trembling against him. "Please, Aedhir...please do not leave me."

"Hoah, lad," he had breathed, stroking his hand against Pryce's hair, turning his face to kiss the boy's ear. "I will never leave you. Never, Pryce."

Please do not do this, Aedhir, said the Pryce inside of Aedhir's mind.

Aedhir moved, his legs unfolding as he drew his feet beneath him. *I have to, Pryce,* he thought, pulling the an'daga loose of its holster and out from beneath his

coats. *I am coming for you. I told you I would never leave you -- and by my breath, lad, I never will.*

He sprang to his feet, darting forward, rushing toward the bergelmir and catching the Herr around him completely by surprise. He heard one of the men utter a sharp, startled cry, and then Aedhir ducked his head, plowing into the man with his shoulder, shoving him aside. He moved blindly, frantically, racing for the bergelmir. He felt heavy hands slap against him as he jostled into and past the Enghan, hands groping for purchase against his coat, his sleeves. He made it about five wide strides before he stumbled, the Herr grasping at him, slowing him. Aedhir staggered, whirling about, trying to draw the pistol up and fire it above their heads. He felt a strong arm hook him firmly about the throat, jerking him and he rammed his elbow back, striking the offending Rekkir squarely in the gut. He heard the man gasp for breath and his hold about Aedhir's neck loosened reflexively. Aedhir shrugged away from him, stumbling; when another man grabbed him from behind, Aedhir buckled, seizing the man's arm long enough to throw him over his shoulder and sending him crashing to the ground.

"Get him!" he heard someone shout out. "Get the bastard! Bjolan, grab him!"

More hands fell against his shoulders from behind, and Aedhir whirled, taking his assailant by surprise. It was a young man, no older than Pryce, and when Aedhir grabbed him, coiling his arm beneath his chin, crushing his throat as he jerked the boy against him, the young man uttered a breathless, startled yelp.

Aedhir shoved the barrel of the pistol against the young man's temple. "Get back!" he shouted at the Enghan, dragging the man with him as he limped in a circle, glaring at the Herr. "I will blow his bloody brains across this campsite! Get your rot asses back!"

"Bjolan—!" one of the Herr cried; Aedhir recognized him as Arngrim, one of Nordri leader, Illugi's younger sons. Arngrim stared in wide-eyed, helpless fright at the boy Aedhir held pinned against him.

"Let him go," said another Aedhir recognized; this one was Arinbjorn, Arngrim's older brother. He had unfettered his ax from his belt and held it clasped between his hands, leveled with intimidating purpose at Aedhir. "Let him go, you murdering coward. Face us like a man if you would fight us."

“I am not a murderer,” Aedhir said. He caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye; one of the Enghan trying to grab him, and he pivoted, hauling Bjolan with him, keeping the barrel of the an’daga jammed against Bjolan’s head. “Keep your distance!” he shouted. “If any of you lay your hands on me—if any of you so much as move toward me—I will empty this boy’s skull!” He turned again, meeting Arinbjorn’s gaze, narrowing his brows. “Do not think I will not. There is not a man here who can move fast enough to stop me. I will pull this bloody trigger.”

“Arinbjorn...!” Bjolan whimpered, pawing lightly, desperately against Aedhir’s arm. He hiccupped for breath, frightened.

“Stand back—all of you do as he says,” Hamal said, stepping forward. Illugi stood with him, both of them wearing stricken and stunned expressions. When Hamal moved again, meaning to approach Aedhir, Aedhir whirled toward him, wrenching a sharp cry from Bjolan as he clamped his forearm firmly against the boy’s throat.

“You, too, Hamal—keep back,” Aedhir snapped. Hamal froze, offering his empty palms in concession.

“Aedhir, please,” he said. “You do not want to do this.”

“You are right,” Aedhir replied, taking a step back toward his bergelmir, drawing Bjolan in tow. He glanced warily over his shoulder as he moved, and the Herr obligingly stepped out of his way, glowering at him, toying with their sword hilts and ax shafts with anxious fingertips.

Aedhir looked at Hamal again. “What I want is to get on that bergelmir and get the bloody duchan out of here. Let me do that, and I will let the boy go.”

“There is no place you can run we cannot follow,” Arinbjorn said. “Eirik has abandoned you. He has run off like a coward. How far do you think you can make it, even by bergelmir, before we find you?”

“You are right,” Aedhir said. “I suppose I will have to take the boy with me...” He jerked his arm against Bjolan’s throat to wrangle a strangled cry from him for emphasis. “Just for insurance.”

Arinbjorn frowned at him. “Wherever you go, we will hunt you down,” he said. “You, your boy and your bitch, and we will ram our axe blades through your bellies.”

“Arinbjorn, be quiet,” Illugi said, drawing a startled, furious glare from his son. Illugi stepped toward Aedhir. “Please,” he said. “Let the boy go.”

Aedhir jerked Bjolan back again, shoving the gun against the young man’s cheek. “Get away from me,” he said, and Illugi fell still, his eyes wide with alarm. Aedhir looked around at the Enghan. “Let me get on that bergelmir and ride out of here! Let me go, and I will let the boy go! Try and stop me, and I will kill him!”

“He will know the glory of Vanaheim, then,” Arinbjorn said, his brows furrowed. “He will die with honor and valor, and be welcomed into the golden halls.”

Be that as it may, the idea apparently did not settle well with Bjolan, who mewled at this, squirming against Aedhir. “No...!” he whimpered to Aedhir. “Do...do not listen to him! Please, do not...!”

Someone seized Aedhir from behind, clamping their arm around his throat while a strong hand closed firmly against his wrist. Aedhir yelled; Bjolan mewled again as Aedhir dragged him, struggling against his attacker. The Enghan was strong, and forced Aedhir’s arm, the an’daga away from Bjolan’s face. Aedhir felt someone snatch Bjolan by the front of his kyrtil, wrenching him away from Aedhir’s grasp. More hands grabbed Aedhir before he had the chance to recover, and he struggled to wrestle his arm free. “Let go of me!” he shouted, and then someone drove their fist into his face, moving in unexpectedly from his right. The Enghan’s knuckles plowed into his cheek, and Aedhir saw dazzling lights suddenly dance before his eyes. He felt more hands grabbing him, fumbling against his arms, his clothes, and he cried out in dismay as someone seized the an’daga from his fingers.

“No!” he cried. He was punched in the gut, the breath pummeled from him. The arm about his neck loosened and he slumped to his knees as a volley of fists struck him, slamming into his head, shoulders, belly and groin.

“Hold him!” he heard Arinbjorn shout, and a hand fell against the back of his head, forcing his face toward the ground. He tried to struggle, but more hands held him helpless and fast.

“Arinbjorn—no—!” Hamal shouted, but as he rushed forward, other Herr stepped deliberately in his path, blocking him.

“Hold him, I say!” Arinbjorn cried again, and Aedhir managed to crane his head enough to look up. The Hersirson towered above him, drawing his axe between his hands toward his shoulder.

“Arinbjorn, this is not yours to decide,” Illugi cried to his son.

“No, Father, it is Grimnir’s!” Arinbjorn shouted in reply. “Eirik has abandoned us. One among us must find the courage to heed divine decree! Blood for blood—that is Grimnir’s law! Let no man stand against the will of the gods—not even you, Father!” *Hoah, shit*, Aedhir thought, watching sunlight wink against the sharpened edge of the axe blade. Arinbjorn planted his feet, poised to bring the axe down against the nape of Aedhir’s neck in a brutal, lethal swing. *Told you they would kill you*, said the Pryce in Aedhir’s mind, shaking his head, his expression sorrowful.

Pryce, forgive me, Aedhir thought as the Enghan forced his head down again, his eyes to the ground. He gasped in bright, desperate terror. *Pryce, Wen, Tacita...please...I am sorry!*

Eirik had left Tjorvi’s tent and found his way to the outer edge of the camp, the elk corral he had visited the night before. Fjolnir had been right, although Eirik would be damned if he would admit it aloud; Eirik was exactly like his father. Whenever Thrand had been troubled, the burdens of his Hersirship over his people weighing heavily upon him, he would retreat for quiet solitude. It was a habit Eirik had adopted, and drew comfort in, and one he practiced now, though he knew he could hardly afford such luxury.

What am I going to do? he thought, closing his eyes and leaning his arms against the fence rails as he had the night before. He frowned, furious with himself. *What did you expect? Answers from the stones -- just this once, perhaps something would reveal itself in whole and truly through them? I was mad to take Tjorvi’s counsel. I have wasted my time, and Aedhir’s. There were no answers in those runes -- only damnable riddles, just like always.*

The runestones are not meant to offer answers, Eirik, he remembered Eydis telling him once, and the memory of his wife, of her soft voice and bright smile seized

his already anguished heart and wrenched at it mercilessly. *They are only meant to offer guidance. We each decide for ourselves if we follow or not.*

He remembered her the day she had said this to him. They had lived in a village in the northern Sithr peninsula in Enthimork. They had enjoyed a quiet life; Eirik had not been burdened with his father's mantle of leadership in their army or their people yet, and he had known only days of labor casting fishing nets in the deep, generous waters of Djupr'vag Bay, and nights spent with his family. He remembered coming home from the water that evening nine years ago, two months after their last visit to Elbeuf to see Fjolnir, and still a month nearly in full from the labor that would take Eydis from them. She had been heavy with Bjarki, a tall, slender woman with a full, distended abdomen. He had walked into their house and found her sitting on a bench, reading the runestones.

"This is an odd omen," Eydis had remarked, turning to look at him as he came in. He had leaned down and kissed her, glancing over her shoulder at the spread of five tiles arranged before her.

"No, this is an omen," he had told her, wagging a hide sack laden with fresh fish he carried in one hand. He had smiled at her and kissed her again. "And the five nets we drew in today were omens -- the best kind. Those are just marks carved in stone, Eydis."

She had laughed as he had walked over to the broad hearth, laying the fish on the floor. "Why do you doubt the power of the stones?" she asked -- the exact same question Tjorvi would ask of him nine years later.

"Why do you believe in it so much?" he had replied, playfully antagonistic.

Eydis had known and loved him well enough to pay no mind. She had leaned over the stones again, tapping one with her fingertip. "I have drawn the Thurs rune first, meaning change for us, I think."

"I do not need runestones to know change is coming for us," Eirik had told her, pointing at her belly. Eydis had looked at him, her smile fading into a troubled expression. She had rubbed her hands anxiously against her stomach, and he had known whatever she had seen had bothered her. He had wanted to go and smack the stones across the floor, to tell her they did not need superstitions bringing more doubt

and uncertainty into their lives. The empire had just begun its encroachment into their lands, and there was talk of imperial soldiers raiding byrs in southern Eng, murdering entire villages full of people in their sleep. The world was uncertain enough without runestones.

“It is more than that, Eirik,” she had said quietly. “I drew the Heill stone next. It is the rune of despair and ruin.”

Eirik had turned to her, folding his arms across his chest. “From where, Eydis?” he had asked, raising his brow. “What will bring despair and ruin upon us?”

Eydis’ expression had softened and she had smiled at him. “The runestones are not meant to offer answers, Eirik,” she had said. “They are only meant to offer guidance. We each decide for ourselves if we follow or not.”

Eirik had walked toward her, taking her face between his hands and kissing her deeply. “Then let us not follow them to ruin and despair,” he had said, drawing laughter from her. As Eirik stood before the elk, he lowered his head, letting tears slip unabated down his cheeks. He had told Tjorvi the stones had offered Eydis no warning of her impending death, but he knew in his heart this was not true. He had never admitted it; he had struggled to force the memory of that evening -- of Eydis’ predictions -- from his mind. *But they had warned her*, he thought, anguished, his shoulders trembling. His breath escaped him in a soft sob, and he pressed his hand over his eyes. *Whatever message Urd was trying to send to her, she...she never finished the reading. I kept her from it. I dismissed it, and she forgot about it by my word, my assurances alone.*

The runestones were not wrong about ruin and despair -- weeks from that moment, it crashed upon us, and has been with us ever since. The stones were not wrong then...

What if they are not wrong now?

He looked up at the sky, helpless. “What do you want from me?” he cried out. “I asked something simple of you -- just an answer! My friend is innocent -- I asked you to help me prove it! Why could you not? Why just this once, could you not offer more than riddles? What do you want from me?”

The elk snuffled and grumbled at him in reply. Urd offered no insight; the gods remained silent and hidden in the sky. Eirik lowered his face, closed his eyes and dragged the cuffs of his fists against his cheeks, mopping at his tears.

The runestones are not meant to offer answers, Eirik, Eydis had said. They are only meant to offer guidance. We each decide for ourselves if we follow or not.

“Then help me follow them, Eydis,” he whispered. “You were the sjonir -- the one with insight into the runes. What does it mean? How can I follow them if I do not understand?”

He opened his eyes and looked down at the ground. He blinked and then moved his gaze, looking beyond the haf'elkr pen toward some pine forests beyond. There were footprints here. He had not noticed them at first; his mind had been too preoccupied, and the ground around the perimeter of the elks' fence was tramped and riddled with the overlapping impressions of boot soles left in the snow. However, there was one pair that moved beyond this area and into unmarred snow. Here, the prints trailed toward the trees, leaving an indelible path in the snow and disappearing into the shadows among the laden pine boughs.

Did Fjolnir walk into the woods last night? Eirik wondered. His uncle had been upset when Eirik had left him; Eirik's words had been filled with venom and rage, and he had hurt Fjolnir -- exactly as he had meant to at the time. Fjolnir was also very much like Eirik's father, Thrand, and just as fond of Thrand's habit for solitude as Eirik was himself. Eirik had accused Fjolnir of following him to the elk pen, and this might have been true. However, it was equally as likely that Fjolnir had been troubled by Eirik's rage, and had sought his own solace away from the revelry of the Herr. *He was upset when I left him, Eirik thought. Did he walk away from the pen and into the woods to be alone?*

You will find help Eirik, if you choose wisely -- friend from foe, Tjorvi had told him, only now as Eirik recalled the words, it was Eydis' voice who said them. *Perhaps you have misjudged one for the other.*

Fjolnir had certainly seemed an enemy to Eirik the day before, but at the same time, he had known Fjolnir was not acting to be deliberately cruel. Fjolnir had loved Einar, and loved Eirik, too. Eirik had been too angry and hurt to see it the night before,

but he realized it now as he remembered his uncle's eyes, his words as he had pleaded with Eirik to understand; Fjornir's decision not to barter surrender for Einar's release had agonized him.

A decision they have made is not one you would have chosen, Eydis whispered within his mind. Why would you have chosen differently? And why would they choose as they did?

Eirik began to follow the footprints into the trees. When Eydis had been alive, he had been concerned only with the care and well-being of his family; keeping them housed and fed, safe and warm through the winters had been his only priorities. He had handled his Hersirship after his father's death in much the same way and keeping his people fed and safe had been his ultimate -- and mostly solitary -- priority. He had held no interest in battling the empire, in defending their lands against imperial encroachment until Thorir and the Dalr'kyn had come among them. It had been Thorir's passion for vengeance, his zeal to fight that had forced Eirik into reluctant concession, and into the war.

Eirik stepped among the trees, ducking his head beneath a low-hanging, snow-draped bough. The footprints continued on, soft impressions left against a carpet of dried needles and snow. *I have never understood how to be a leader*, he thought. He had told Fjornir that desire had been his flaw, and he regretted those words now. His father had shared Fjornir's intrinsic abilities to govern his people; Eirik had not been truthful when he had told Fjornir otherwise. Eirik had seen the burdens such responsibility had given to Thrand -- and to Hamal and Fjornir as well -- and he had wanted no part of it. He still wanted no part of it.

Perhaps it means finding forgiveness in your heart -- choosing to judge one for the other, a seeming foe for a friend, Eydis said quietly within his mind. *Why would they choose as they did?*

Eirik paused, draping his hand against the trunk of a tree. *Yes, our people are going to die*, Fjornir had told him. *I am no fool and neither are my Herr. We know this. Do you think I am not frightened of it? They are not?*

The Herr were frightened. They were gathered en masse, stoking one another for war with fervent pledges to ride for Vanaheim under the guiding blessings of the gods.

They called Eirik a coward for his protests, but Eirik knew that they all felt the same as he did. No matter their words, their oaths or revelry, it was apparent in their eyes. They knew they were going to die. They knew the futility of their efforts -- their own deaths -- and they were terrified of it.

Would you see me cower? Would you see my people lose what precious little hope remains within them to know of my despair? Fjolnir had asked.

When Eydis had died, Eirik had been stricken numb with grief. He remembered sitting alone in his barn, staring into the open air, too dazed and shocked to even summon tears. It had been only hours since Eydis had bled to death in their bed, and he had been unable to even string together three words to his mother, Einar or Arnora -- much less hold his newborn son, Bjarki in his arms. He remembered sitting in the barn and Einar, only eight at the time had come to stand behind him. He had listened to the hiccupping sound of Einar's breath as the boy cried, but he had not even turned to his son. "Fathir...?" Einar had whimpered. He had called to Eirik over and over until at last, Eirik had turned around. When he had seen the stricken, anguished expression on his boy's face, something within him had softened. He had understood. It was more than Eydis' death that had so hurt and frightened Einar; it was Eirik's reaction to it, his own profound despair. "Einar," Eirik had murmured, reaching for his son. Einar had crumpled into his arms, clutching at him, and Eirik had stroked his hair, holding him tightly. "It is alright," he had whispered. Eirik looked down at the footprints in the snow and understood. Just as he had forced himself to dampen his own grief for his son and daughter, so, too, had Fjolnir pushed aside his own fears and trepidations to be brave for his people. Eirik's strength had brought comfort and resolve to Einar and Arnora; he had been able to make them understand and believe that they could survive without Eydis -- no matter that within his heart, for a long time, Eirik had held no such convictions. *I would see them make one last stand with honor, Eirik, like our ancestors, clinging to this land we call our own until our very last breaths,* Fjolnir had told him.

Just like I saw my family make one last stand, clinging to our hopes and our home, Eirik thought.

There may have been no courage or honor in sending men to die without cause, but at last Eirik realized that Fjolnir's strength, his determination had given his Herr that

cause. *You knew we would be defeated, that our lands would fall to the empire no matter what we did*, he thought. *You knew but you gave them hope that in the end, it would mean something if we at least fought back. If we did not give it to them, there could still be honor, even if there was no hope.*

We may not hold it, Fjornir had said. *And we may fall -- but by Grimnir, Eirik, we shall make such a war against the empire as to shake the boughs of Laerad itself.*

Eirik saw something dark on the ground ahead of him, something more than shadows cast beneath the trees. He frowned, walking toward it, realizing the footprints led directly to the spot. He stumbled to a startled halt as he drew near; his breath escaped his throat in a tangled gasp.

"Grimnir have mercy..." he whispered, kneeling slowly in the snow. It was blood. Blood had spilled against the earth in a broad swath, melting the snow and staining the pine needles. Eirik could see the dim outline of a crumpled form in the snow that remained. A man had fallen here -- a man who had been bleeding profusely.

Sunlight winked through the tree crowns overhead and off of something metal. Eirik caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye and turned, curious. Here, among the thin, barren scrub and lichens, the snow and pine needles swept and shoved against the base of the pine trunk, was a small, round brooch, a silver pendant used to fasten a cloak together.

Eirik reached for it, lifting it from the ground. The silver was stained with blood; it looked like bloody fingertips had groped against it, ripping it from its wearer's throat. He saw the emblem on the brooch; it had been fashioned into the shape of a ram's head, and his brows narrowed, his mouth turning down into a frown.

Deceit in the past has brought you to this moment, Eydis told him, repeating Tjorvi's words. *The treachery of others have forced these circumstances to come to pass.*

"Nordri," Eirik hissed, closing his hand against the brooch. He rose to his feet and stared down at the bloodstained ground. Fjornir had left the elk pen and walked into the woods to be alone. Had he stumbled upon the Nordri, or had they crept upon him unawares and assaulted him? Eirik could not be certain, but he did know one thing.

“Fjolnir did not die in his bed,” he whispered, and he turned, running through the trees toward the camp. *Grimnir have mercy -- he died here in the woods. The Nordri murdered him.*

Before he returned to Aedhir, Eirik went once more to Fjolnir’s tent. The Konung’s personal regiment of Rekkir stood in a tight perimeter around the tent, keeping curious Enghan at bay. They allowed Eirik to pass, as they had before, and he ignored their dark stares, their muttered insults as he shouldered past them.

He entered the tent and knelt beside Fjolnir’s prostrate form. He drew aside the blankets and slipped his hand against Fjolnir’s. The Konung’s hands remained draped atop one another over his breast, his fingers smeared with dried blood. Eirik moved his right hand, canting Fjolnir’s elbow to peer at his uncle’s palm. The pads of his fingers, his palm were also crusted with blood, and he saw a peculiar, shallow gash cut at a diagonal above the joint of his thumb.

The brooch he had found had been unfastened, the thin silver pin opened on its hinge. If Fjolnir had pawed at his assailant as he had fallen in the woods, if he had torn the brooch loose of his murderer’s cloak as he had collapsed, the sharp, tapered point of the pin could have easily caused such a wound. Eirik lowered Fjolnir’s hand to his chest again and rose to his feet, his frown deepening. He left the tent, pushed past Fjolnir’s Rekkir and strode briskly away. As he drew near to where he had left Aedhir, he saw the gathering of Herr had grown considerably since he had left and the mood remained agitated. He could hear men shouting out, their deep voices overlapping in angry bellows.

“Do it, Arinbjorn!” he heard someone cry out. “Blood for blood—it is Grimnir’s law!” another yelled.

Startled, Eirik began to run, shoving his way through the crowd, his heart thrumming in sudden, alarmed measure. His pace only quickened when he heard Hamal cry out, his voice shrill: “Arinbjorn—no! Do not!”

“Aedhir!” Eirik gasped breathlessly, and he struggled to get through the throng, shoving Herr aside, ramming his elbows and shoulders forcefully against the men to push them aside. “Aedhir!”

He stumbled into a small clearing in the tight cluster of warriors. To his horror, he saw Aedhir on his knees, surrounded by Enghan who held him fast, forcing his face toward the ground. Arinbjorn stood near him, with his axe grasped purposefully between his fist. Hamal had apparently lunged at him, seizing hold of the axe shaft, and the two men were grappling over it, both of their faces twisted with determination.

“It is Grimnir’s law!” Arinbjorn roared at Hamal. He was younger than Hamal, taller and stronger, and he shoved mightily, sending Hamal staggering backwards. Hamal’s hands slipped loose of the axe and he fell onto his rump. “You cannot stop this, old man!” Arinbjorn shouted at him, hoisting the axe again, meaning to send the blade flying down against Aedhir’s neck. “No man defies the will of the gods!”

“No!” Eirik cried. He reacted with instincts he did not even know he possessed. He was not a man of violence, but his hand moved for his belt, jerking his dagger loose of its sheath as if the motion was second nature to him. He thrust his arm forward before he even realized what he was doing and saw the wink of sunlight off of the metal blade as it flew from his hand. The dagger sliced through the narrow margin of space between Eirik and Arinbjorn; it cut through the air above Hamal’s head and punched into Arinbjorn’s chest, spearing half-way to the hilt in the joint of his shoulder.

Arinbjorn shrieked and floundered back. His hands opened against his axe shaft and the heavy blade fell to the ground. His arms pinwheeled in the open air and then he crashed against the snow, his legs sprawled skyward.

The Herr whirled to face Eirik and a strange, foreboding silence settled swiftly, suddenly over the crowd. Arngrim scrambled toward his brother, crying out his name, his voice the only sound punctuating the heavy quiet that had fallen upon them.

Arngrim put his arm around Arinbjorn’s shoulder, his free hand fluttering helplessly against the hilt of the dagger as Arinbjorn gasped and mewled for breath. Arngrim stared at Eirik, wide-eyed and enraged. “Oborna!” he screeched, spittle flying from his lips, peppering his beard. *Bastard!* “You coward bastard! What have you done? Arinbjorn!”

“Aedhir Fainne is innocent!” Eirik shouted. “Get your hands off of him! Turn him loose! He did not murder Fjolnir!”

“You are a liar!” Arngrim cried, his voice hoarse with tears as he clutched at his brother. “You are a liar and a coward, Eirik Gerpir! We know the stones showed you no proof. You abandoned Tjorvi in his tent because the answers his stones revealed were not what you wanted to hear! You attack my brother for having the mettle you lack—the courage to see Grimnir’s law fulfilled among his people!”

“The stones do not offer answers,” Eirik told him. “They only offer guidance, Arngrim -- guidance I have chosen to follow, and that has led me to the truth.” He shoved one of the Herr holding Aedhir aside. “I said get your hands off of him! I speak for my son and my uncle now—there is Grimnir’s law. I speak for the Konung and I say he is innocent!”

Eirik knelt beside Aedhir, drawing his arm around Aedhir’s shoulders, helping him sit up as the Rekk turned loose of him. Aedhir looked up at Eirik, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow. “About bloody time you showed up...” he muttered, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile that left him wincing.

“Bastard...” Arinbjorn hissed, blood spitting from between his lips. He glared at Eirik, struggling to pull away from his brother’s insistent grasp. “Konung Fjolnir was murdered in his bed...run through by this...this dog you...have brought among us...”

“He did not die in his bed,” Eirik said. He drew the brooch out from his belt pouch and held it aloft to award all of the Herr a good look. A bewildered murmur fluttered through the ranks.

“Deceit in the past has brought us to this moment,” Eirik said. “That is what the runestones revealed to Tjorvi. He told me the treachery of others has forced these circumstances to come to pass.” He looked gravely among the Herr. “Fjolnir was murdered in the forests beyond our camp. I found the blood-stained earth among the trees where he fell. I found this in the snow. Fjolnir died fighting, and ripped this from the throat of his murderer. It is smeared with Fjolnir’s blood—who among you will argue with such proof in front of you? The pin cut his palm for the effort. I saw the mark on his body myself. The man who murdered Fjolnir is the Nordri to whom this brooch rightfully belongs.”

At this, the Enghan began to look around at one another. Eirik turned his gaze toward Arinbjorn and Arngrim, and was disappointed to see that both of Illugi’s sons had

their brooches in place at the apexes of their throats. Another young man knelt with them, this one a Nordri named Bjolan, and at Eirik's words, Bjolan blinked as though he had been cuffed across the face. His hand darted to his neck, where his cloak gathered, fastened only by loose ties. Arngrim blinked with him, staring at Bjolan, his eyes widening in sudden aghast.

"Bjolan," Eirik said loudly, rising to his feet, helping Aedhir stand with him. Bjolan turned to him, stricken, his face as ashen as a corpse's. "Where is the brooch of your folk?"

The young man shrank, stumbling to his feet. He hiccupped for breath, and stared down at Arngrim and Arinbjorn, desperate for rescue. "...but I only..."

"You would say anything to slander the Nordri, Eirik," Arngrim snapped, but he, too, was pale and visibly dismayed. "Your dark-skinned friend—this wolf of Lopt's you have brought among us—it was probably he who left that pin to trick us, to give you cause to blame us."

"Where is your brooch, Bjolan?" a man asked, stepping forward, walking toward the young man, his mouth turned in a disagreeable frown. Eirik recognized the man; it was Ulfkell Gullauga, Bjolan's father.

Bjolan blinked at Ulfkell, a low, breathless moan escaping from his agape mouth. He staggered backward, and when two of the Rekk behind him lay their hands firmly upon his shoulders, staying him, he moaned again. "Fathir, I...I..." he stammered helplessly.

Ulfkell's face twisted with anguish. "Tell me it is untrue," he said softly. "Bjolan, I beg of you. Tell me it was not your hand."

"He is lying!" Arngrim cried, springing to his feet. His hands were stained with his brother's blood and he shoved his forefinger at Aedhir. "That bastard killed Fjolnir! No Nordri played a part in it! Eirik wants nothing but ill-will between the kyns. Who here did not witness his malice firsthand only yesterday?"

"Bjolan would never have a part in this kind of treachery on his own," Illugi said. "His heart is not in murder."

"Do you see?" Arngrim exclaimed, looking among the Herr. "Father is right—this blame is falsely placed at Bjolan's feet. He—"

“Bjolan’s heart is too soft for such a thing,” Illugi said, his voice overlapping his son’s, his sharp, derisive tone drawing Arngrim to an abrupt, bewildered halt. “Bjolan would yet be among the Seggr were he not his village leader’s son, and the shame too great for one of his age and status.”

Bjolan looked between Illugi and his father, obviously startled by Illugi’s insult, and expecting Ulfkell to come to his defense. When Ulfkell said nothing, and merely stared at his son, his brows narrowed, Bjolan shied back a step. “Fathir...?” he whimpered.

“Bjolan could not have committed such a crime alone,” Illugi said, and he turned his gaze toward Arngrim and Arinbjorn. “But he could be coaxed into it by those he trusted—pushed into participation by those he called friends.”

“Father, what are you saying?” Arngrim asked, stricken. “Surely you cannot think that Arinbjorn and I would—”

Illugi slapped him across the face, making him stagger in shock, his hand flying to his cheek. Arngrim gasped for breath and stared at his father, his eyes enormous and stunned.

“Eirik has been right from the first, has he not?” Illugi asked. “You and your brothers -- the sons of our Nordri kyns -- have betrayed us to the empire. You bartered Eirik’s son. You told them about Einar because you hoped Fjolnir would surrender.” He looked from Arngrim to Arinbjorn. “What did they promise you? The throne when Engjold was theirs -- the secrets of gersimi with the empire? That ambition reeks of your devising, Arinbjorn. Arngrim has the gilded tongue of a skald, but you -- you have always had the greedy heart of a man longing for power to which he has no rightful due.”

He turned to Bjolan. “What happened to my son, Bersi?” he asked. “I do not doubt now that he was a part of this -- all of you as close as littermates, all of these years since childhood. You could not have kept him from it. What really happened to him? Did we offend Grimnir with our offerings of an honorable pyre?”

“Father, listen to me...” Arngrim said, and Illugi whirled toward him, wrenching his sword loose from his scabbard. He shoved the tip of the broad blade at his son, laying

the sharpened edge of steel beneath the shelf of Arngrim's chin. Arngrim froze, his eyes flown wide, his breath caught in his throat.

"What happened to Bersi?" Illugi hissed, looking over his shoulder at Bjolan, who cowered between his captors in abject, absolute horror.

"He...he named Einar Eirikson from among the Seggr taken," Bjolan whimpered, trembling. "He read Fjolnir's inscription on the boy's scabbard. We read the runes on all of their weapons looking for it and Bersi...he...he found him. He tried to hurt Einar...tied him to a cart and he...he meant to..." Tears flooded his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. "But the Praetorius stopped him, ran him through. He told us the boy was silver to the empire."

"Were my other sons with you?" Illugi asked. When Bjolan only mewled quietly, he snapped loudly, cowing the young man. "Were Arngrim and Arinbjorn part of this?"

"Yes!" Bjolan cried, bobbing his head up and down. "You are a dead man," Arinbjorn hissed at him, blood streaming from his mouth.

Bjolan blinked at him, stricken, and then at Illugi once more. "I did not mean it!" he cried. "He was listening among the trees! He was supposed to surrender, but he did not, and Arinbjorn was going to ride across the border to warn them!" He stared at Eirik in helpless, desperate implore. "I did not know it was the Konung!" he pleaded. "He had his sword in hand and when I touched him, he turned to me with it brandished. I did not know who he was!"

Illugi glared between Arngrim and Arinbjorn. "Your ancestors would rise from the ashes of their pyres to learn of this. You have betrayed your people -- murdered your Konung. You have brought shame upon your kyns -- disgrace to your folk."

"The only shame is yours," Arinbjorn said to his father. He clutched weakly at the dagger in his shoulder, his brows furrowed deeply. "You abandoned your folk years ago, you pathetic bastard...you betrayed the Nordri when you became Fjolnir's lapdog...licking the boot heels of an a'Mithal oborna like a cowed mutt." He made a harsh sound in his throat and spat at Illugi. "There is...our disgrace," he hissed. "That you would betray what belongs to us...to our folk...Nordri kyns...by right."

Illugi blinked at him, startled to realize his son's bitterness, his hatred.

Arinbjorn spat at Eirik. "I hope they cut his throat," he said. "Your boy...your precious Einar. I hope they wrench his head back by that fair hair of his...lay him open...neck to navel...leave him to...to rot..."

"Bastard," Eirik hissed, stepping forward, closing his hand against his sword hilt.

"Eirik -- no --" Aedhir said, catching Eirik by the arm, staying him. Eirik turned to him, startled, but Aedhir was looking at Arinbjorn, his expression puzzled and dismayed.

"It is mine!" Arinbjorn shouted hoarsely. He stared around at the Herr, his eyes aglow with manic rage. "The throne is mine -- by birthright, by marriage -- it has always been mine! Who does not think this? Who among you would follow a boy instead of me -- swear your allegiance and your lives to an a'Mithal cub barely weaned from the teat!" He glowered at Eirik, slumping weakly, catching himself with his elbow. He panted for breath. "They...they would have left it all as it is," he said. "Our lives...our freedom...all of it. The empire would have taken the gersimi...given me the crown...and left us. You were right. That is all they want from us. All Fjolnir had to do...was sign the parchment. It would have been over." The corner of his mouth hooked in a gruesome, blood-smeared parody of a smile. "Who would have thought...the old man had so much mettle in him?"

"Or blood," Arngrim whispered, his father's sword still poised against his throat.

"Blood for blood," Illugi said, pressing the edge of his blade more firmly against Arngrim's neck, drawing a frightened gasp from him. "Is that not what you both have been crying for? It is Grimnir's law -- is that not what you have told us?"

"Father...!" Arngrim whimpered, his eyes flown wide.

"Illugi, no," Ulfkell said, laying his hand against Illugi's sleeve. "They are your sons."

Illugi did not avert his gaze from Arngrim. "I have no sons," he said, his brows furrowed, and Arngrim whimpered again. "These men are strangers. These are not the boys I loved and raised. My sons are dead to me."

"Illugi, lower your blade," Eirik said. "There has been enough bloodshed."

Illugi stared at him for a long moment, and then obeyed. He let the tip of his sword fall away from Arngrim's neck, and drop toward the ground. Eirik looked around among the Herr. "I act in the Konung's stead until Einar is with us once more," he

shouted. "Hear me now and heed me -- whoever does not wish share the fate of these three." He turned to Arngrim, Arinbjorn and Bjolan. "Bind their hands and feet. Bind them fast with their hands behind them and then lash them to the saddles of their hafrik. Whip their rams and turn them loose into the foothills -- send them running. Let the mountains claim them if they will."

The Herr hesitated at first, bewildered and uncertain. Hamal strode forward, raising his fist in the air. "You heard your Konung!" he cried loudly. "Heed him!"

As the Rekr sprang into motion, seizing hold of Arngrim and hauling Arinbjorn roughly to his feet, Eirik turned to Aedhir, his grave expression softening. "Are you alright?" he asked. "You are bleeding."

"I...I will live," Aedhir said. He met Eirik's gaze. "Thanks to you."

Eirik smiled at him, hooking his hand against the back of Aedhir's neck. He drew Aedhir against him, hugging him briefly, fondly. "You are not leaving us," he whispered, turning his cheek to speak against Aedhir's ear. When Aedhir drew in breath to protest, Eirik leaned back. "You are not riding for the empire. I have the power of the Konung now. They may not like it..." He cut his eyes toward the Herr. "And neither do I, but is mine, and I will use it. I will not see you sacrifice yourself to the empire -- not when I can end this."

"What will you do?" Aedhir asked.

Eirik's eyes filled with sorrow. "When we are through with them?" he asked, sparing a dark glance at Arinbjorn and the others. "I will honor Fjolnir. I will have a pyre built for him -- a blaze so bright they will see its glow from Vanaheim itself." He closed his eyes, lowering his head, his expression anguished. "I was wrong about my uncle. Wrong about so many things. I will see him greet the golden halls with honor. I will see him know eternal glory."

He opened his eyes. "And after that? I will summon the clan leaders together. It is time for another Motinn -- and reconsideration for what we must do." He caught sight of Hamal out of the corner of his gaze and called to him. "I need you to keep with Aedhir," he said to his uncle. "Bring him to his tent. Let him bathe his wounds and change his clothes. I want no one to trouble him -- never again. He is my friend, and our ally. No one will speak against him again."

“Yes, Eirik,” Hamal said. “I will not fail you this time, sveinn.” He looked somewhat sheepish and distressed, and Eirik rested his hand against his shoulder, drawing his gaze.

“You did not fail me, Hamal,” Eirik said. “You did your best to defend Aedhir. I am grateful for you. I always will be.”

As Hamal escorted Aedhir back to his tent, Aedhir glanced back over his shoulder at Eirik. *It is time for another Motinn*, Eirik had told him. *And reconsideration for what we must do.*

Aedhir did not know what Eirik had in mind, but he had been doing some reconsideration of his own ever since Arinbjorn had looked at Eirik and hissed: *I hope they cut his throat. Your boy...your precious Einar. I hope they wrench his head back by that fair hair of his...lay him open...neck to navel...leave him to...to rot...*

Aedhir had realized it, almost from the moment the words were out of the Nordri Hersirson’s mouth, and with this revelation, the strength had nearly waned in full from his legs.

I hope they wrench his head back by that fair hair of his...

Einar had dark hair, darker even than his father’s. But Pryce had tawny hair, fair by anyone’s standards.

Sweet Mother... Aedhir thought in dismay.

He did not know how it had escaped him; how he could not have thought of it before now. Arinbjorn and his co-conspirators had not known what Einar looked like, but they had known he would be bearing Fjolnir’s inscribed sword. Bjolan had said they had taken the weapons from the captured Seggr and read the inscriptions on each aloud, searching for Einar.

Mother Above, Pryce must have realized what they were doing -- and why -- and took Einar’s sword, he thought, stricken. *The Nordri sons thought Pryce was Einar.*

Worse than this realization was yet another. *Mother Above, the empire must think he is Einar, too!*

Riding into the empire, surrendering himself -- and his weapons -- was too great a risk now. The stakes had just flown far too high, and Aedhir was not a man who

gambled when the odds were so grossly beyond of his favor. There had been a chance before; he had doubted that he could barter for Einar's release, but he had been fairly confident the empire would willingly trade Pryce and Wen for the secrets of gersimi.

He told us the boy was silver to the empire, Bjolan said. Einar would remain silver to them -- as long as they believed they could force Engjold's surrender with him. The empire thought Pryce was Einar; if they learned otherwise, they would kill him -- and even if they did not learn the truth, Aedhir could not hope to bargain for his freedom, to save him. They think he is Einar, he thought again desperately. Mother Above, Pryce, have you lost your damn fool mind? Rot it all, how could you do something so foolish and reckless? When in the bloody duchan did you start thinking like me?

Chapter Fourteen

“That one...him and the one behind him...and that one there, yes, him,” said the Torachan man as he walked slowly along the row of carcer cells. Einar recognized him, Aulus Tertius, the tribunicia potestate of Ulus, and the man who had ordered the murder of Einar’s friend, Oddi, the day before. Aulus paused in front of Einar’s cell, accompanied by at least a dozen bellatori soldiers. He tapped his forefinger in the air, picking Enghan out from the prisoners inside, and the soldiers unlocked the heavy iron gate to enter the cell and drag the selected youths out.

The boys were frightened as Aulus’ eyes scanned among them, his brows pinched with deliberate scrutiny, as though he selected choice fruits from an overabundant basket. They shied together, shrinking toward the back corners of the cell. When the soldiers tromped inside, they whimpered together, cowering, those chosen to be taken crying out softly in tremulous fright as they were seized.

“What do they want?” Einar’s friend Hagal whispered. He and Einar huddled together, shoulder to shoulder. Hagal knew about what had happened to Oddi; they all did, and they were terrified to share his fate.

“I do not know,” Einar whispered back. Aulus Tertius’ gaze settled upon his face, and Einar saw a flicker of recognition dance across the consul’s eyes. The corner of Aulus’ mouth lifted wryly, and he nodded once. “And him,” he said, pointing. “The dark-haired one.”

“Einar!” Hagal gasped, his eyes flown wide with fright. He drew himself protectively in front of Einar as a pair of soldiers approached.

“It is alright,” Einar whispered, although he had gone ashen with sudden fright. He draped his hand against the sleeve of Hagal’s kyrtil, struggling to keep his voice steady. “Let them take me, Hagal. It is alright.”

Despite his attempts at reassurance, when the soldiers tried to reach around Hagal and grab Einar by the collar, Hagal stepped forward to meet them, tussling with them. Einar reached for him, trying to stay him. “Hagal—stop, no...!” he pleaded, and when the bellatori beat Hagal, driving their fists into his gut, making the boy *whoof* for

breath and crumple onto his hands and knees against the floor, Einar cried out in dismay. “Hagal!”

The soldiers grabbed him, hauling him roughly forward, and he stumbled in tow, craning his head to look frantically over his shoulder. “Hagal!” he cried again, helplessly.

The guards forced Einar from the cell and dragged him from the carcer. They led him staggering through the snow. He was terrified that Tertius had somehow learned about Wen’s visit the night before—or worse than this, that Decimus Paulus had told him the truth of Einar’s identity. He was bewildered and frightened all the more when the soldiers did not bring him or the other Seggr from the carcer to the palace. Rather, they were led across the grounds and into a small building, a stone block that marked the entrance to a network of dark, deep underground tunnels. The soldiers took torches in hand and forced Einar and the Seggr through the passageways. At last, they jerked the boys to abrupt and startling halts, forcing them each in turn and one by one into small rooms opening off of the corridor. Einar stumbled into one such chamber as the soldiers behind him shoved him forward. He blinked around him in confusion as the guards stepped across the threshold behind him, and the broad glow of their torch filled the room. It appeared to be another holding cell, far smaller than the ones at the carcer, no more than ten feet square in circumference. The walls were stone blocks; the floor, dirt and gravel of the exposed earth foundation. There were no furnishings or adornments, and a man stood quietly in one corner, looking between Einar and the guards, his expression stoic and unreadable.

Einar flinched at the sight of the man. He was very large, his shoulders and chest broad and strapped with thick muscles. He was Ulusian; his skin was golden-hued, his eyes slanted and narrow, his nose wide and short, pressed relatively flat between the well-defined arches of his cheeks. He wore a long, double-breasted scarlet robe, cuffed and trimmed in thick bands of fur. It looked almost like a kyrtil, except the hem fell past the man’s knees, and no leggings were exposed, only his boots—a peculiar sort with a heavy sole, hewn from hoof or wood, with toes that drew upward, tapering into points. The man’s black hair had been shaved back from his face until well beyond the cap of his skull, exposing his bare scalp and lending his face a rounded appearance. The rest of his hair had been gathered in a thick plait that draped down over his shoulder,

dropping nearly to his groin in length. He struck an imposing visage, framed in shadows and dancing firelight, his heavy brows drawn, his eyes narrowed at Einar.

“Stand over there,” one of the bellatori told Einar, shoving him toward the Ulusian. Einar stumbled, yelping softly. He looked at the towering Ulusian man and then glanced uncertainly at the guards. One of them cuffed him sharply across the back of the head, and shoved him again. “Move it now—go, you little rot.”

Einar stood beside the Ulusian. He chanced a look at the man again, lifting his chin to peek at the man’s face. He stood at least a full head taller than Einar, and did not turn to meet the boy’s gaze. He kept his eyes fixed forward on the guards, his brows drawn, his lips pressed together in a disagreeable line.

“Take your clothes off,” one of the soldiers said. “Both of you strip.”

The Ulusian man’s stern expression did not waver in the slightest, but Einar blinked at the guards, stricken and confused. “What?” he whimpered, shying back against the wall. The bellatori carried swords strapped against their hips, and they reached for them, curling their fingers about their hilts. “You can do this yourselves,” one of them said, his brows narrowing. “Or we can do it for you.”

“Strip,” said the other, tightening his grip on his sword. “Right now.”

The Ulusian man reached for his waist, never averting his gaze from the soldiers. He began to unwind a long, wool sash he wore about his robe, loosening the folds from about his middle. Einar did not understand what was going on, but he obeyed the guards. He unfastened the front of his kyrtil, shrugging his way out of the heavy, wool-lined hide vest. He folded it neatly between his hands, sparing frightened, uncertain glances at the soldiers. He squatted, setting the kyrtil on the ground and then stood, drawing his overlapping wool shirts over his head.

The Ulusian had unfettered a pair of elongated wooden buttons holding his robe closed at his right shoulder. He drew the robe off, letting it drop unceremoniously into a heap around his ankles, atop his fallen sash. He wore no shirt beneath, his broad, strapping chest exposed. He and Einar moved in near tandem, each of them balancing on one foot at a time—the Ulusian with far more grace and seeming poise than Einar—as they pulled off their boots. Einar looked at the man as he straightened his spine and began to loosen his pants, pushing them down from his hips. The Ulusian moved

purposefully and silently, and seemed relatively unbothered by the soldiers' demands. He did not seem the least bit frightened; in fact, to judge by his expression, he was aggravated by the inconvenience of it all. Einar hooked his hands against the waistband of his leggings, loosening the ties, and then he glanced at the soldiers, anxious and bewildered. "Everything, rot," one of the guards said, frowning at him. "Do not be shy now. Shuck them. Underpinnings, too."

It was cold; the air was damp and frigid, and as Einar dropped his trousers, stumbling clumsily to kick his feet free, he drew his arms about himself, as much for modesty as against the cold. He shrank against the wall, naked and shivering, blinking at the soldiers.

One of the guards walked toward him. "Move your arms," he said, flapping his hand at Einar. "Drop your hands to your sides."

"What...what do you want?" Einar asked, his voice soft and tremulous. The soldier was looking at him, his eyes traveling along his form. It was not lecherous or lewd scrutiny; rather, the guard seemed to be inspecting him, taking in his physical merits.

The soldier reached out, his hand clamping against Einar's jaw, wrenching a startled cry from the boy. He shoved Einar against the wall, forcing his head backwards. Einar heard the hiss of steel loosening from a scabbard and then the soldier lay the flat side of his dagger against Einar's cheek, bringing the tip to rest at the corner of Einar's eye. Einar whimpered breathlessly. "Please..." he gasped, frightened.

"Do not speak to me," the guard hissed at him, leaning close to Einar's head. "Do not question me, rot. Do not plead with me. You do as you are told when I tell you to do it, or I will open your throat. Do you understand me, boy? Nod your head or shake it—do you understand?"

Einar nodded, his eyes enormous with alarm. The guard held him pinned there, the knife against his face for another long, terrifying moment, and then he released him, stepping back and sheathing the dagger again. He grasped Einar by the arm and spun him smartly about, shoving him against the wall again with his arms spread as he looked at his back.

The other soldier had been inspecting the Ulusian with significantly less incident. He turned the Ulusian around and pushed him against the wall. The man stepped without protest, resting his palms against the clammy stones. He turned his face toward Einar, meeting the frightened boy's gaze. For the first time, something within the Ulusian's face softened, and his brows raised slightly, as if in gentle sympathy for Einar.

"He is a eunuch," the soldier looking at the Ulusian remarked to his fellow, his voice tinged with contempt. He offered a sharp snort of laughter.

"Bloody bitch," said the other, and he, too, snickered. He reached out, cuffing the Ulusian across the back of the head. "Are you not, m'lady?" he sneered. "A bloody rot damn bitch, cut and tied."

"They are bloody mad, these Minghan rots," said the first soldier. He stepped away from the Ulusian and stooped, collecting his clothes. "Can you believe they bloody do that to themselves? Willingly no less? Could you sit still and let some butcher take a blade to your meat and vegetables?"

"They are not mad," said the other. "They are savages." He leaned toward Einar, his breath hot and damp against Einar's ear, making him flinch. "Enghan...Minghan, the bloody damn lot of you. Feral dogs turned loose to roam and rut."

"Well, some of them to rut, anyway," remarked his fellow, laughing heartily as though he amused himself as he reached down, grabbing Einar's clothes.

"Do you know what you do with feral dogs, little lamb?" the soldier purred against Einar's ear. He drew the tip of his tongue slowly, deliberately against the outer curve of Einar's lobe, and Einar cowered. The guard clamped his hand against the back of Einar's head, shoving his cheek painfully against the stone, holding him still. "Do you, baby Enghan? You drive your blade through their soft bellies. You open their tender innards and let them spill about their paws. They are too stupid to know death is upon them and they will eat their own liver and lights until they die."

The second soldier walked toward the chamber door, carrying the Ulusian's and Einar's clothes between his arms. "Mother Almighty, these ought to be burned," he muttered. "They stink like rot—bloody savages."

The guard stepped away from Einar, opening his hand and releasing him. Einar remained pressed against the wall, his eyes closed, his breath fluttering in frightened, frantic measure. “Turn around,” the soldier said.

Einar and the Ulusian both did as they were told. When Einar tried to cover himself with his hands, humiliated and afraid, the guard caught him by the hair, jerking his head roughly. “Move your hands,” he ordered. “Leave them at your sides or I will cut them from your wrists.”

His fellow entered the cell once more, and he glanced over his shoulder. “These will both do,” he said. “Lord Tertius will be pleased.”

“Here,” said the second soldier, and he tossed a pair of wadded, rumped linens at Einar and the Ulusian. “Put these on and then stand facing the wall, your hands against the stones—both of you. You have two minutes.”

The bellatori walked away, leaving the room. A heavy iron door swung closed behind them, a resounding boom reverberating as it slammed shut on its hinges. Einar did not move. He stood, trembling, rooted in place, staring in stricken confusion at the ground.

The Ulusian stepped forward, stooping and taking one of the proffered linens in hand. He gave it a shake to unfurl it and then stood, his brow raised slightly as he regarded the scrap of fabric.

Einar looked at him, and recoiled, his breath shuddering from him in a startled gasp. The Ulusian man’s genitalia were gone. Einar had not meant to look; he did not mean to stare, but now that he had noticed, he could not help himself, and he gawked, wide-eyed with horrified fascination. The Ulusian had a patch of dark, coarse hair at the apex of his groin, but beneath it, between his thighs, there was nothing. The sum of those most tender and private parts that defined a man’s form from a woman’s were simply gone. The Ulusian noticed Einar’s stricken attention and looked at the boy, impassive and silent.

“What happened to you?” Einar whispered. He looked into the man’s eyes, aghast. “Did they do that to you?” He cowered again, pressing himself further into the corner. “Grimnir have mercy, will they do that to me?” His hands darted for his crotch reflexively, covering himself. The abruptness of the gesture apparently struck the

Ulusian as amusing. The corner of his mouth hooked in a fleeting smile, and he shook his head, looking away from Einar. He studied the linen for a moment, and then wrapped it about his midriff experimentally, knotting it at the crest of his left hip. He walked past Einar toward the wall and followed the soldier's instruction, placing his hands against the stones. After a long moment of heavy silence, he turned, glancing over his shoulder at Einar, who still had not moved.

"Are they going to do that to me?" Einar asked again, his eyes round and fearful. "Please...what do they want?"

The Ulusian did not answer him. He turned his face to the wall again, apparently intending to offer neither reply nor further regard. Einar stumbled back against the wall, drawing his arms about his middle. "Please," he whispered to the man. "Please, what is happening? I...I do not understand this. What do they want?"

The Ulusian man's shoulder slumped as he sighed somewhat wearily. He dropped his hands from the wall and turned, walking toward Einar. He reached down, plucking the second linen from the ground with his fingertips and thrust it out to the boy, his brows drawn slightly, his dark eyes narrowed.

"No," Einar said, shaking his head. "No, I...I want my clothes back. I do not want to put that on. Are they going to sell us?" His dark eyes filled with sudden, distraught tears. "Are they going to make slaves of us? Are they going to send us to a catasta?" He glanced down at the man's crotch, blessedly covered from his view now. "Are they going to do that to me?"

"No," said the Ulusian, startling Einar. He had spoken softly, and his voice had been high-pitched, sweet and delicate, like a woman's. He pressed the scrap of linen against Einar's hands and turned, walking back to the wall.

"What happened to you?" Einar whispered.

The man did not answer. He pressed his palms against the wall and shrugged his shoulders, settling himself into a comfortable stance to await the return of the guards.

"What is your name?" Einar asked, following him. He drew the linen about his waist, tying it in place. He stood next to the Ulusian, looking up at him. "The soldiers said *Minghan*. Is that your name?"

They heard a scraping sound, like a key turning in the lock of the iron door, and then the hinges squalled in protest as the door began to swing. The Ulusian turned to Einar, his eyes widening with alarm. He grabbed Einar by the arm and yanked him beside him against the wall.

“What do they want?” Einar asked, frightened anew. “You know, do you not? Please tell me.”

“Stop talking,” the Ulusian whispered, his brows furrowed slightly.

The door swung outward into the corridor beyond the chamber and the two bellatori walked inside. “Hoah, now, look at this,” said one. “A lamb and a ewe.”

One of them grabbed Einar, jerking him away from the wall, while the other grabbed the Ulusian. “Come on,” he barked, shoving the Ulusian forward. “There are others who need to be checked and changed. Move your bloody ass.”

“Any more words to offer, lamb?” asked the soldier holding Einar. He grabbed a fistful of Einar’s hair again, forcing his head back. “Ready to go back to your cell now? I will make a deal with you, lamb, a little barter.” He glanced at his friend and snickered. “Give me a suckle, and then my fellow, Tullius there, as well—the both of us, each in turn.”

“Hoah, yes—and a swallow,” the guard, Tullius added with a laugh.

“Something slow and worth our while, and we might take you back,” the other guard said to Einar. “We might let you out of this if you—”

The Ulusian turned, halting in mid-stride. His brows had furrowed deeply, and he closed his hands into fists. The soldier behind him took a hedging step back at his intimidating posture and expression, and his hand darted for his sword hilt.

“Hoah, now, big fellow,” he said. “You just keep moving there. Do not work yourself into a state.”

“Jealous, are you?” the other soldier asked, laughing. He shoved Einar forward, turning loose of his hair, and Einar stumbled, nearly falling to his knees. “What were you two doing in here all alone and for but a moment? Making friends of a sort?”

“Little one is stupid boy,” said the Ulusian, his common tongue clipped and slow, as though the language was unfamiliar to him. He frowned at the soldiers. “Leave him. You make trouble with me.”

“Listen to the songbird warble,” said the bellatori, laughing again at the Ulusian’s high voice. His smile faded swiftly, and he jerked his dagger from his belt again. “You want trouble, you Minghan bastard? I have your trouble right here—come and claim it.”

“Falerius, Tullius, what are you doing?” another bellatori complained, poking his head in from the corridor. He dragged a young Seggr in tow, a boy Einar knew named Gisli. “Get your rot asses out here, will you not? Consul Tertius told us to have them up in the circus arena at one o’clock sharp and here it is, a quarter ’til!”

“You will see us all flogged, you rot damn jobs,” another cried out from beyond the doorway. “Move your asses!”

The soldier, Falerius frowned. “We were just having a spot of fun, Trupo. Untwist your knickers, you bloody bastard.” He tucked his dagger back into its sheath. He snatched Einar by the arm and shoved him forward. As they were herded into the corridor again, jostled shoulder to shoulder, Einar glanced up at the Minghan. “I am not stupid,” he whispered, his brows narrowing.

The Ulusian spared him glance. “Still your mouth moves,” he whispered back, frowning. “You are stupid enough.”

They were led through the twining subterranean passageways and narrow tunnels until at last they came to an open chamber. Other prisoners had already been brought here; three Enghan and three Ulusians, all in pairs, just like Einar and the Minghan. They were kept separated from one another by the proximity and watchful eyes of their respective guards, and Einar blinked at his friends, recognizing the other Seggr. Here was Thorod, a fifteen-year-old he had known all of his life; Authun, another fifteen-year-old, and a boy Einar had played with during his childhood at their byr. The other was familiar to him, too, named Aslak. All of the boys looked frightened and distraught, all dressed in simple loincloths and shivering, wide-eyed and uncertain.

The room apparently served as some sort of armory, and Einar looked around, his bewilderment growing all the more. The walls were lined with wooden racks filled with enough weaponry to outfit a sizeable unit of soldiers; dozens of spears, rows and rows of sheathed swords and daggers. There were racks filled with various-sized shields and bucklers; shelves stocked with different types of helmets and mismatched panels of plate armor. An imperial soldier walked among the prisoners, inspecting each

in turn with his brow raised, his thin lips pressed together and turned in a frown. A pair of slaves followed him, each of them marked with blue catasta tattoos. They trundled armloads of swords with them, and as the soldier paused before each prisoner, one of the slaves would present him with a sword.

When the sheathed blade was shoved against Einar's hands, he blinked at it in confusion. It was heavy and unwieldy, a far cry from the maneuverable heft of the Enghan blades he had grown accustomed to carrying. The blade was deliberately forged at a short, impractical length, no longer than Einar's forearm from fingertip to elbow. He frowned, closing his hand about the hilt, and looked at the Minghan beside him, puzzled.

The Minghan seemed displeased by the proffered weapon, as well. He spared it a disdainful glance, and tossed it to the ground. The slave who had given it to him blinked, startled, and turned to the soldiers.

"Pick it up," Tullius said, slapping the Minghan across the back of the head. The Ulusian's brows pinched together and he frowned, but stooped, taking the sword back in hand.

"You draw that blade from the sheath before we tell you to, lamb, and you had best hope you know how to use it," the other guard, Falerius, said to Einar. Einar looked at him, stricken, and lowered the sword to his side, making the soldier chuckle. "Welcome to the circus, lad," he said, patting Einar on the cheek, laughing again as the boy flinched. "You had best summon some wits and mettle about you, or it will be your last."

Falerius and Tullius walked away from them, spying a pair of guards apparently known to them. Though they did not stray far from their wards, they turned their backs to Einar and the Minghan, and Einar risked glancing up at the tall Ulusian. "Circus?" he whispered.

The Ulusian did not look at him. He held his sword rigidly in both hands and nodded once, a brief, barely perceptible gesture. "Bad place," he said softly, his lips scarcely moving. "Many men go here these weeks past. Sometimes they come back."

Einar blinked, startled. "Sometimes? What happens to the others?"

“They find the spirit tree,” the Minghan replied, words that made no sense to Einar. Two more pairs of prisoners were led into the chamber: Gisli, whom Einar had seen earlier, and another from Thorir’s kyn, the Dalr, a lad named Solmund, along with their Ulusian counterparts. They all stood together, six scrawny, shivering Enghan boys and six older, well-muscled, towering Ulusian men. When the last four had been issued their swords, the bellatori closed in around them, forcing them all to move toward an arched doorway at the far end of the chamber. As they crossed through the doorway, more slaves presented them each with a long, thick-shafted spear. Beyond the threshold, they climbed a steep flight of steps carved from stone and earth. Einar raised his eyes to the top of the stairs and could see the dim glow of sunlight against the ceiling and walls of the stairwell. The further they climbed, the more he became aware of a peculiar sound, a low, muffled din that rose steadily in pitch and fervor. It sounded like people cheering; hundreds of men roaring together in overlapping, cacophonous harmony, stomping their feet and slapping their palms together to mark their rhythm.

They were being led to the surface again, but toward what Einar did not know. The soldiers called it *the circus*, and whatever it was, it was bad enough to have stoked fear even in the eyes of the Ulusian man with Einar. One by one, they were herded through an iron gateway at the top of the stairs and out into the pale midafternoon sunshine. The cheers were deafening here; Einar shied against the wall, his eyes flown wide as he reached the top landing in the stairwell. The gate stood open, and he could see beyond it now toward the steeply pitched perimeter of some sort of amphitheatre. The sloping rows of benches overlooking an expansive, empty yard were filled with spectators, crammed shoulder to shoulder with people.

“Grimnir protect us!” Einar whispered, stricken and stunned. The soldier, Falerius, drove his elbow firmly between Einar’s shoulders, forcing him to stumble forward.

“Move it, lamb,” he barked. “Out you go—give us a good show now.”

Einar clutched his sword in one hand, his spear in the other, trembling with helpless fear as he staggered out onto the amphitheatre yard. He had been in battle before; his father had let him ride among the Rekkir to attack the bellatori in Sube. He had been frightened then, the most he had thought he would ever feel in his life. He

knew as he stepped foot out onto the open ground of the amphitheatre yard that he had been sorely, woefully wrong. In the battle, he had known some comfort in riding at Eirik's side, in knowing no matter what they faced, Eirik would be with him; Eirik would do his best to keep him safe. Einar stepped out of the tunnels and into daylight with no such reassurances, no such hope. He did not know what would happen—but he knew he would be facing it alone.

Thorod and Authun hurried over to him, followed closely by Gisli, Aslak and Solmund and the six boys stood in a shivering, frightened huddle while the roar of the crowd shook the ground beneath their feet.

"What is this place?" Authun whimpered. He was a pale as hoarfrost, his shoulders shuddering uncontrollably with fear.

"It is called the circus," Einar whispered, staring about him, breathless with shock at the number of spectators around them. Most wore the bright scarlet of imperial bellatori and the galleries looked splashed with blood with them all. "The circus?" Thorod asked. "What is that? What does that mean? Gods above have mercy, what is going to happen to us?"

"I do not know," Einar said. He looked over Authun's shoulder and saw the Minghan. Like the Enghan, the Ulusians gathered together as they stepped out onto the grounds, as though seeking some semblance of comfort from their circumstances with faces at least familiar to them. The Minghan met Einar's gaze, and his brows lifted softly, nearly sorrowfully.

"But it is something terrible," Einar said, trembling against his friends. "I know that much. I think it means death."

By noon, Wen was frantic with worry. Coinin had not been returned to her chamber at all, despite Aulus' assurances that he would have the palace searched for the child. Wen had spent the night restless and alarmed, pacing before her hearth, terrified that Coinin had somehow crept out onto the grounds to follow her, and had wound up lost and frozen in the maze of cleaved pathways through the snow. When Coinin did not arrive as usual to her suite at dawn with the bevy of slaves assigned to her, Wen had been seized with despair. She had not touched her breakfast. She had

hurriedly dressed and roamed the palace, searching in vain for either Coinin or Aulus. She had returned to her suite shortly before lunch to find a plate of food waiting for her; this, too, she had sent away untouched.

Aulus had sent a note with her lunch, a correspondence cheerful in its overture, as if nothing in the bloody wide Bith was out of the ordinary, and Wen had not a care at all to occupy her heart and mind. *I would beseech the pleasure of your company this afternoon, my lady, for a bit of imperial culture and recreation I think you will find enjoyable*, he had written. *I will send for you promptly at half-past noon -- dress warmly for the occasion, my lady, and do not forget your muff.*

"Bloody bastard," Wen had hissed, balling the note in her hand and hurling it into the fire. The slave girls had blinked at her, pausing in their daily chores about the chamber, startled by her outburst. Wen had paced some more, her hands closed into fists, her eyes burning with tears. Aulus had done something to Coinin; she just knew it. She had been wrong the night before -- surely he had discovered exactly where she had gone and meant to punish her for it by taking Coinin away.

She had just sat down at a writing desk, snatching a plume in hand to write Aulus a scathing reply -- something brief but to the point, such as: *Go bugger yourself, you sick and pathetic bastard*. She jammed the tapered end of the plume into an ink well and heard the parlor door open. She looked up, and her breath tangled in her throat as the pen dropped from her fingers.

"Coinin!" she gasped.

Aulus' steward, a slave named Faustus, walked across the threshold, leading the little girl by the hand. A large grey dog walked alongside them, its broad tail wagging happily and Coinin kept her other hand coiled against the dog's unruly scruff, her fingers moving, scratching. Faustus was apparently in mid-sentence, speaking with the child, and Coinin walked while looking up at him, her eyes wide, her little mouth spread in a bright smile.

"...of course, a bird in the hand is never worth the risk," Faustus was saying. "And two in the bush are practically worthless unless you have a fairly good hound to --"

"Coinin!" Wen exclaimed again, rising from her chair, her eyes flown wide.

The little girl looked at her at her smile widened. She did not say a word, but turned loose of Faustus' hand and hurried across the room, her arms outstretched to offer Wen a hug. Wen knelt, her crinolines and skirts ballooning around her, and caught Coinin in her arms. She held her fiercely, new tears springing to her eyes. "Hoah, I have been so worried!" she said. She leaned back, taking Coinin's face between her hands. "Where have you been?"

"Forgive me, my Lady Finamur, her tardiness is my doing," Faustus said, lowering his head politely. Wen looked at him, bewildered. "I saw that she was given a proper bath this morrow, and dressed."

Wen blinked at Coinin. The little girl smelled faintly and sweetly of perfumed soap. Her dark hair had been washed and arranged in a spry tumble of curls fastened at the cap of her head. She wore a fashionable velveteen dress with underpinnings cushioning the skirt in a buoyant spread about her waist, and a matching ribbon had been tied about her little throat in a dainty bow.

"She had a story and a nap after her bath," Faustus said. "And we have only just finished our lunch in the servant's dining room."

Wen blinked again, confounded. Coinin did not say anything, and merely smiled at Wen, apparently unharmed and perfectly contented. "She...she ate lunch?" Wen asked Faustus, looking over Coinin's shoulder.

"Yes, my lady," Faustus said, nodding his head. "A spot of vegetable pottage and some bread, a glass of milk."

Wen was completely baffled. Coinin seemed fine, and Faustus spoke as though all was mundane and ordinary about the circumstance. "But she seldom eats anything unless I convince her to."

"She ate fine for me, my lady," Faustus said. His brows raised in realization. "You have worried," he said. "Forgive me, Lady Finamur. I should have sent word to you that I -- "

"Yes, you should have," Wen said sharply, rising to her feet. She was bewildered and exhausted, and more than a little short of temper. "I have been up the night through worrying for her. I told Lord Tertius to have her brought to me when she was found. I

would think his concept of common courtesy would be to at least let me know that she was alright -- given he knew how frantic I have been with worry.”

“I assure you, my lady, I did give such directive,” Aulus said as he stepped into the chamber doorway. His tone was harsh, and his brows were drawn as he glared at his steward. At his reproachful gaze, his voice, Faustus hunched his shoulders, dropping his eyes toward the floor.

“What is this, Faustus?” Aulus demanded, walking into the room. He looked past the slave to Coinin and Wen. “Are you only just now delivering the lass? Mother Almighty, it is...” He pushed aside the flap of his justicoat and fished a gold watch from the fobpocket of his breeches. He snapped back the lid on the watch, looked at the time, and glowered all the more at his steward. “It is quarter past twelve, Faustus. I dispatched you before dawn to find the girl. What in the bloody wide Bith have you been doing all of this time?”

Faustus lowered his head all the more. “My lord,” he said quietly. “Forgive my delay. I found the lass this morning in the slave quarters beneath the palace -- in the chamber that is customary for her, I was told.”

“The slave quarters?” Wen asked, startled. She looked down at Coinin. “How did you get back down there?”

“If I may, my lady, the guards told me she simply arrived late last night,” Faustus said. “She came to them, and they did not know of my lord’s arrangements to have her sleep here, in your chambers. They brought her to her room and locked her in, as is palace protocol, my lady.” He looked up from the polished toes of his shoes. “She was rather dirty,” he said. “Having spent the night, it seems, on the floor rather than the bed provided for her. I thought it would upset you to see her in such disarray. I...I took it upon myself to see to her. I apologize, my lady.”

Coinin’s smile had faded at Wen’s troubled tone of voice. She tugged against Wen’s hand and tried again now, her blue eyes bright as her mouth unfolded. *All is well*, she seemed to be trying to say. *Do not be angry. I am alright.*

“You do not take it upon yourself to do anything, Faustus,” Aulus said. He cuffed the steward roughly against the back of the head, and Faustus flinched, hunching his shoulders again. “How dare you distress my lady so? I gave you implicit directions,

Faustus -- implicit -- and trusted you to see them through.” He marched in front of his slave and seized him firmly by the chin, forcing him to look up and meet his furious gaze. Faustus gasped as Aulus’ hand crushed against his jaw and his eyes flew wide with startled alarm. “Apparently, my trust was sorely misplaced,” Aulus said to him, frowning. “You have been afforded a great many luxuries in my service, Faustus -- luxuries that I have generously granted you.”

“Yes, my lord,” Faustus said, nodding once around Aulus’ hand.

“Perhaps these, too, have been misplaced,” Aulus said, leaning close to Faustus’ face. He thrust Faustus away from him, sending the steward stumbling back a clumsy step. “You will return to your chamber. You will remain there until I come for you, and then you will be punished for this, Faustus.”

“Punished?” Wen said, softly, stricken. At Aulus’ infuriated tone, Coinin shied against her hip, trembling, her breath fluttering from her throat.

“Yes, my lord,” Faustus whispered.

“I have never whipped you,” Aulus said to him. “Never in all of these years of your servitude. Indeed, I have treated you very kindly -- more than is rightfully due any slave. You have grown insolent for it, and I have tolerated it far too long. You have caused my lady worry and trouble, and you will be beaten for it. Five lashes. Perhaps this will inspire you to remember your place in the future -- and to pay more regard to my rot damn orders.”

Faustus blinked at his toes, his face ashen, his eyes wide with fright. “Yes...yes, my lord.”

“Lord Tertius, no...” Wen said, stepping forward. She draped her hand against Aulus’ sleeve and when he turned to her, his face softened. “Please do not hurt him,” Wen said. “He meant no harm. I am sure he knew that to see Coinin dirty would have only distressed me all the more. He was only trying to help, to put my mind at ease -- and he has, Lord Tertius. Please, she looks lovely, and he has been kind to her. I am grateful to know she is safe and sound, and has been in such responsible hands all the while.”

Aulus looked at her for a long moment, his brow raised. Faustus blinked at her briefly, looking up from his shoes, surprised by her intervention.

"I am sure Faustus only acted with such kindness because he thought it would please me -- and you," Wen said to Aulus. "What you would have asked of him had you been at hand to provide directive. More than anyone else here in Kharhorin, Lord Tertius, I think that Faustus must surely understand and appreciate how your mind works -- and your heart -- and thought you would approve."

After another moment, Aulus turned from her to face his steward. He settled his jaw at a peculiar angle and when he spoke, it was through gritted teeth forced into a semblance of a kindly smile. "Faustus," he said. "I would appreciate it if in further such circumstances, you would seek my direction before undertaking any action on your own."

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said.

"You will not be beaten," Aulus told him, adding swiftly, "But you will keep to your chamber in my suite for the rest of the day unless I summon you. Your heart might have been in the right place, but you have distressed Lady Finamur nonetheless. You should give that some thought."

"I will, my lord," Faustus said, nodding. "Yes, my lord."

Aulus flapped his hand. "Go on. Get out of here." He looked down at the dog as it snuffled against his fist, offering his clenched fingers a wary lick. "And get that mutt out of here, too, before it soils one of the carpets."

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said, taking the dog by the collar.

"I bloody swear I do not know why I keep either of you around," Aulus muttered, shaking his head.

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said, turning and leading the dog to the door. He glanced over his shoulder at Wen and met her gaze for a fleeting moment, his expression bewildered but grateful.

When he was gone, Aulus smiled at Wen sheepishly. "Slaves," he said with a shrug. "Give them a modicum of free thought and they take a league."

"I...I should think it would please you to know your steward acts on his own with your best interests so obviously in mind," Wen said. Aulus seemed to give this a moment's consideration and then he smiled again. "Yes, I suppose it would," he said. "It has pleased you, at any rate, and that is enough for me."

Wen had hoped for the chance to speak to Coinin in private, to coax the child into talking. Now that she knew where Coinin had gone in the night, she also had a fairly good idea why. The person Coinin had told her about, the boy or man somewhere in the slave quarters obviously distressed the little girl. Wen suspected Coinin had returned to the slave area of the palace because she had not wanted to abandon this boy; Coinin obviously felt compassion for him and thought being near to him comforted him somehow.

However, Wen did not get this chance. Aulus had not paid simple, casual call to her suite. He had come as per his invitation, to escort her to some sort of traditional Torachan spectator event he was hosting on the palace grounds. When she had suggested Coinin accompany them, he had smiled at her crookedly.

“I do not think the circus is a proper place for one of such a tender age,” he told her.

Wen had no idea what “the circus” was; it was an unfamiliar term to her. Before agreeing to leave with Aulus, she had drawn Coinin aside and knelt before her, cupping the girl’s face between her hands. “You stay right here, in my suite, alright?” she asked, and Coinin had nodded. “You promise? I mean it, Coinin. You scared me last night. No running away again.”

Coinin looked troubled, her little brows drawing, her lips pinching, but she had nodded, albeit reluctantly. Wen had drawn on her redingdote and taken her muff, letting Aulus escort her from the palace and outside into the snow. She had not wanted to go, but was trying to keep in Aulus’ good graces and not rouse his suspicions. She had to figure out a way to find Pryce, free Einar and the Enghan and get out of Kharhorin, and though she had been wracking her brain, no feasible ideas had yet come to mind. In the meantime, the more Aulus trusted her, the less trouble might come of it, and so Wen had forced a smile on her face and a pleasant tone to her voice. She draped her hand against the crook of his proffered elbow and walked beside him, letting him guide her in genteel fashion along the grounds.

She had thought he might explain where they were going, this bit of imperial culture and recreation he had called “the circus,” but at first, he had seemed more to muse aloud.

“I have been troubled by what to do with the number of imperial prisoners I seem to be accumulating of late,” he remarked. “Most of the ones remaining in my carcer, and in quarters beneath the palace have proven ill-suited for the open slave market. I have bartered generously for those I could part with, but the Minghan, I am afraid -- the royal soldiers of the Khahl -- have proven more difficult. The traders will not touch them.” He looked at Wen. “The Minghan are eunuchs -- every one of them physically marred. No matter their prowess, the lack of those relatively vital portions of their forms make them relatively worthless commodities. And they have been trained as soldiers. No nobillisimus would trust such instilled tendencies in one of his slaves. A man who has known both freedom and the ways of a blade will use one to gain the other again -- it is an inevitability. And now the Enghan are posing a similar problem for me.”

He smiled at her. “I pondered the matter awhile before the solution occurred to me,” he said. “One I think will prove profitable to me in the end. My predecessor to this position was incompetent in his duties to the empire, but one thing he did accomplish, as per imperial mandate, was the construction of an amphitheatre on the palace grounds. It is well made, splendid to look at, I must say; a sturdy arena I have been putting to some use. For now, it serves to entertain the bellatori passing through Kharhorin on their way to Engjold. The last of the maniples are set to leave tomorrow evening, in fact -- today is a celebration of sorts for their benefit. They enjoy the games, and the spirit of the circus sets their moods for battle.” “The circus,” Wen said. “Forgive me, my lord, but I do not believe I have ever heard of such a place.” “It is not a place, precisely, my lady,” Aulus said. “It is an event, of sorts -- sporting combat. Men against men, men against beasts -- open combat to the last standing or the sun sets.”

“They kill one another?” Wen asked, startled. “But that... Lord Tertius, that is monstrous. Your people watch this for sport?”

“You make it sound uncivilized,” he said, seeming genuinely perplexed by her aghast. “A day at the circus is a grand affair for plebeian and noble families alike. It is a very ancient and favored form of entertainment in Torach -- the most popular, in fact.

The arena here seats only three hundred. I have visited the Coliseum in Cneas -- it houses nearly fifty-thousand spectators with room to spare. They even use aqueducts to flood the arena floor and stage sea battles twice each year. Between the circus and the imperial theatre, it is open nearly every day without fail. Why, the Pater Patriae himself, Tiberius Magnentius, has his own private viewing box and terraced patio, and I am told he keeps regular attendance.”

Wen stared at him, stricken by this prospect. She remembered her purpose in trying to keep in his favor and forced a smile to hook the corners of her mouth. “Mother Above,” she said, struggling to laugh as she draped her gloved hand against her bosom. “It...it certainly seems an event your citizens enjoy, then.”

“Indeed, my lady,” he said, pleased by this change in her reaction. “And by hosting local circuses here in Kharhorin for our soldiers, I can identify and maintain those among the Minghan and Enghan who shall prove suitable and lucrative fare for the southern *lanistas* -- a sort of slave-trader specializing in circus fighters -- whom I will bring to the city.”

While the others are butchered for your amusement, Wen thought, horrified. *Sweet Mother, he is mad. He is a monster.*

“In fact, I have convinced one such gentleman to pay call to Kharhorin today and he arrived only this morning from Cneas,” Aulus said. “An old friend of mine, known for many years -- Iulius Abito. He will be joining us at the arena...if that is alright with you, my lady...?”

“Of course, my lord,” Wen said, again plastering a smile on her face. “So this is where you are bringing me? A day at the circus.”

“Not the day through, my lady, only an event or two,” Aulus said, laughing. “They are already well underway. I have personally selected a group from among the Minghan and those Enghan we collected in Sube for a special round in your honor, my lady.”

He smiled at her as if presenting her with a magnificent token, just as he had when he had given Coinin to her. Wen was as horrified now as then, but tried her best not to show it. “That is very kind of you, my lord,” she said. Her pulse had just quickened to a frantic, despairing and measure and she looked up at him. “You would not fight Einar Eirikson in the circus, would you?”

Mother Above, please, she thought. Please, no, not Pryce. Aulus laughed again, shaking his head. “Hoah, no, my lady,” he said, and it was only his amused chuckle that kept her audible sigh of relief from his notice. “No, I still have some use for Einar Eirikson. He will be spared the arena for awhile longer, at least.”***

He led her along the palace grounds. For the first time, Wen had a sense in full of just how enormous the “palace” of Kharhorin was; she had visited rural villages in Tiralainn that did not equal the breadth of the palace, grounds and buildings that comprised the royal stronghold. When she remarked of this to Aulus, he had chuckled.

“It is fairly a city within a city, yes, my lady,” he said. “The Khahl have a peculiar belief that the Kagan should not be seen by Ulusians outside of those chosen to enter the palace estate. Most Kagans spend their entire lives within these walls and grounds, never stepping foot in Kharhorin proper. They had their own servants who remained here, their own soldiers and guards, and none of them ever left.”

“But you said Kagan Bokedei left,” Wen said. “With his mother.”

The corner of Aulus’ mouth hooked slightly, but his brow drew and he looked momentarily troubled. “Yes,” he said with a nod. “Yes, they left some time ago. I do not expect they will return.”

This seemed a matter that concerned him more so than yesterday. In the dragon’s shrine, he had been nearly glib in his dismissal of the Kagan and royal mother’s departure. Now the mention brought a fleeting shadow to his face, and Wen said nothing more of it. *Why did they leave?* she thought, watching that shadow of dark thought wax and wane in the consul’s face. *Where did they go? And why does it suddenly bother you so much?*

He brought her to the amphitheatre, a broad circumference of granite and marble adorned with vaulted archways and towering sculptures along the outer perimeter of the palace grounds. She could hear the sounds of the arena before she even saw it; the last of the bellatori passing through Kharhorin on their way north were in full attendance apparently, and the air trembled with the encroaching sounds of their roars and cheers. The inside of the theatre complex resembled a bowl; the sides of the amphitheatre sloped dramatically upward to accommodate rows and rows of spectator benches. The benches framed three quarters of the arena floor. The far section of the grounds was

flanked by a wall of granite blocks affixed with relief sculptures. Though the snow was thick and deep along the rest of the grounds, someone had obviously taken great pains to shovel and scrape the benches, walkways and terraces of the theatre clean. The expansive open ground of the arena yard below was likewise free of snow, cleared to the dirt floor, left sodden and muddy.

Soldiers lined the benches. Everywhere Wen looked, she saw a fluttering sea of red uniforms. Aulus led her under the escort of several bellatori who met them at one of the arena's gated entrances to a viewing box along the lowest level of the stadium's seating. Here, they would be awarded a nearly panoramic and unobstructed view of the circus. The box was modest in size, but well appointed. Large, plushly upholstered seats faced the terrace balustrades and the arena beyond. Tables loaded with a selection of food lined one of the walls. Large iron baskets filled with smoldering wood fires to provide heat had been arranged within the circumference of the box, and five slaves stood about at the ready. A man was seated in one of the chairs when they arrived. Some sort of combat was already underway in the arena, and he was sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning out over the balustrade to watch it. Wen caught sight of a pair of men out on the floor, both of them wearing only loincloths against the bitter winter air, with helmets covering their faces and panels of plate armor draped over their arms and legs. The pair fought with swords, to the obvious and uproarious delight of the crowd. One of them appeared wounded. Wen could see blood smeared starkly across his chest from a deep wound to his shoulder, and he staggered about in a limping, clumsy circle, trying to ward off his opponent's sword strikes.

Monsters, Wen thought, looking at Aulus and seeing him grin broadly as he observed the progress of the match. She glanced at the man sitting at the balustrade and saw that he, too, was grinning. His smile only broadened as one of the men below took a hit with the other's blade and cried out loudly enough to be heard over the cheering crowd. Wen lowered her eyes toward the hem of her skirts, letting the hood of her redingote hide the gruesome scene from her view. *Monsters...all of them, monsters.*

The man in the chair turned to look over his shoulder. When he saw Aulus and Wen, he laughed, rising to his feet. "Aulus Tertius!" he cried, walking briskly toward them, his arms outstretched. "You bedeviled bastard -- here you are!"

"Iulius, hullo!" Aulus exclaimed as the two men embraced warmly, clapping each other on the back. "How are you, you rot? Look at you -- fat as a sow!"

"Hoah, when a man's efforts pay well, he eats well," Iulius Abito replied, stepping back from Aulus. "And you are a fine one to talk -- look at you, a right dandy gentleman and consul of the Pater! I believe this is the first time I have ever seen you without a ledger in one hand, a quill clutched in the other while you muttered about money!"

"Being away from the treasury has served me good," Aulus said.

"Hoah, indeed," Iulius said. He turned to Wen and raised his brow appreciatively. "And who is this flower?" he asked, as his gaze wandered from her face and along the length of her form.

"This is my Lady Aelwen Fainne-Finamur," Aulus said. He reached out and hooked his fingertips sharply beneath Iulius' chin to draw his gaze, and when his friend looked up at him, he narrowed his brows slightly. "She is a noble guest and acquaintance, not an acquisition."

"Of course, Aulus," Iulius replied, his brow arched again, as though he found Aulus' thinly veiled ire amusing. He turned to Wen and smiled as he affected a slight, courteous bow for her. "How do you fare, my lady? It is a pleasure, I assure you." "My lady, may I present Lord Iulius Abito, a dear friend of mine?" Aulus said by way of introduction.

Wen nodded politely. "How do you do, my lord?"

"I do fine, my lady," Iulius said. He grinned at Aulus. "Quite well indeed. Hoah, I had my doubts when I received your correspondence, Aulus. I wondered what in the Bith had you done to peeve the Senate and be sent to this bloody rot corner of the empire." He laughed and slapped Aulus affably on the arm. "But I see now you have made the best of wretched circumstance. This is a fine little arena you have for yourself. Excellent fare."

“Thank you kindly, Iulius. I had hoped you would be pleased,” Aulus said. He escorted Wen to one of the chairs and paused politely while she lowered herself into the proffered seat.

“Tell me, Iulius, how fares life in Cneas?” Aulus asked. The two men walked away from the chairs toward the food together, nearly shoulder to shoulder as they engaged in fond conversation. Wen looked out on the arena ground; the wounded man had collapsed onto his hands and knees, bleeding profusely. He had held up his hand, as if pleading with his opponent for mercy, and the roar of the crowd grew deafening. She could see the soldiers in the tiered benches holding their fists aloft, all of them with their thumbs turned up toward the sky. She did not understand the gesture, but apparently, the warrior in the arena did, because he drew back his sword and swung it swiftly down against his maimed opponent.

Wen cried out softly in horror, wrenching her eyes away from the moment of the young man’s brutal death. Her cry -- and the man’s -- were drowned out by the approving howls of the bellatori; their voices shook the very granite foundations of the theatre beneath Wen’s feet.

Mother Above...! Wen thought, gasping, stricken. She forced herself to cant her head, to listen to Aulus and Iulius speaking, lest she turn her eyes again toward the grisly scene before her.

“It fares well enough, unless you count that bloody bastard Priam Homullus causing a stir again,” Iulius remarked. Wen watched him pluck a piece of cheese from a platter and toss it into his mouth, chewing loudly as he spoke.

“The Senator from Troia?” Aulus asked. A slave brought him a stoneware mug filled with some sort of steaming liquid, and he drew it to his mouth, blowing against the lip of the mug before taking a tentative sip. “I have heard of him.”

“He is the bloody Pater Patriae’s brother -- there are few who have not.” Iulius shook his head. “He rather fancies the philosophy that the empire has grown too broad for its benefit, does he not?” Aulus said. “He has argued against our campaigns here to the north in Engjold. He thinks the empire should focus on what lands we have already claimed, rather than expanding beyond what he claims we can reasonably control.”

“He will be the bloody death of the empire,” Iulius said. “You can mark me at that, Aulus. I would wager you on it, but I would not take your money with so little contest.”

“What has he done now?”

“He has brought his insufferable milk of human kindness upon the Senate yet again,” Iulius said. A slave brought him a mug, and he snatched it, raising the cuff of his knuckles in a threatening gesture that cowed the young, tattooed girl and seemed to amuse him to no end. “Bloody rot damn talk of dissolving the circus -- prohibiting the games. They are abhorrent in the Good Mother’s eyes, he says. Barbaric sins and blights upon the empire.”

“Troia has always been soft,” Aulus remarked as the two walked back toward Wen. The young slave Iulius had threatened brought Wen a mug, and as Wen took it between her hands, she caught a whiff of spiced fruit wine in the aromatic steam.

“Thank you, lass,” she told the girl, who simply blinked at her, as though Wen’s courtesy disconcerted her. She dropped a swift curtsey.

“Yes, my lady,” she murmured, and then scurried back for a far corner of the box.

“It is amazing to me that such a tender, weak state yielded our mighty Pater,” Aulus said as he settled himself into a chair between Wen and Iulius. “Yes, well, be amazed all the more -- Homullus has built a little consortium of conservative supporters among the Senate,” Iulius said. “His popularity grows among the people, too -- aristocrats and plebeians alike adore him with equal and mounting fervor. Hoah, yes, and therein lies the rub, Aulus. Mark me again, I tell you. A man cannot help the benefit of his kin, but the Pater would be wise to find a deep hole in which to drop Homullus. He is fond to speak against his brother’s mandates and the Pater seems fond to let him. It can only lead to trouble.”

Wen looked out at the arena. Of the apparently victorious combatant, there was no sign. A pair of slaves had taken the dead man by the arms and were in the process of dragging his lifeless form from the grounds. A third walked along behind the man’s outstretched legs, carrying his severed head by the chin strap of his helmet.

Wen whimpered and looked down at her wine. She was trembling with horror; it was only the Median complexion that was hers by the grace of birth that kept her pallor from waning ashen in her absolute dismay.

“So tell me about these others you have found for me,” Iulius said to Aulus.
“What are they? Not Minghan...Wenghan?”

“Enghan,” Aulus corrected.

“Enghan, Minghan...miney-moe...” Iulius flapped his hand dismissively. “I have read about them in the gazettes. Bloody savages are they not? Bearded wildmen from the north, raping and plundering? Marauding and murdering?” He dropped Aulus a wink. “Perfect fodder for the circus, I should think.”

“These are just boys,” Aulus said. “But their men will also be ours in short measure. We are arranging for their surrender even as we speak. The boys have just as much inherent bloodlust as their fathers -- you shall see. Rot feral dogs, the lot of them. The pups will give you a taste for what the men can bring to your stable. I think you will be pleased.”

“You have not disappointed me so far,” Iulius told him, tapping his mug against Aulus’. The crowd began to cheer again as new combatants stepped out onto the yard. Wen watched as they were brought out in pairs, tall Ulusian men and Enghan boys together. Unlike the previous combatants, these had no helmets or armor, only loincloths fastened about their hips. They each carried swords and spears, and they huddled together as they emerged through a vaulted archway, the Enghan in one cluster, the Ulusians in another. They stared around, shoulders hunched in trepidations bewilderment as the crowd roared and stomped their feet. Wen gasped in new dismay to recognize one among the Enghan.

“Einar!” she whispered, leaning forward.

He did not see her. He stood cowering among his friends, his dark eyes enormous with terror. He clutched his sword and spear with the tremulous uncertainty of one who had never held such weapons before. He looked so very small to her, swallowed by the breadth of the yard, so childlike in his apparent, poignant fear, and Wen blinked against tears, her breath fluttering in her throat.

No, please, she thought. No, not Einar. Please...please, no...!

“Here they are now,” Aulus said. “The first lot of the day. Picked them myself.”

Iulius spared the boys a moment's scrutiny and then snorted, glancing at Aulus. "Pups?" he asked. "Feral dogs? Those look like lambs to me. You would have them fight those Minghan monsters? That is not sport -- that is slaughter."

"They will not fight the Minghan," Aulus replied. "I have something more in mind. You will see. The Minghan are there to give them a chance -- at least at the first. Trust me, Iulius, there is more to those boys than first meets the eye. There is something inherent in them, these beasts we call Enghan. They will not die easily or willingly -- it is within their natures to rail against death, to fight it so that even in its inevitability, they will face it with misconceived glory. I have one of their leaders with me -- kin to their Konung. Hoah, if he were not yet of use to me, I would turn him loose if only to admire his efforts in the arena. That boy is as strong-willed and unbroken as a wild bergelmir. I laid his spine open nearly to the bone with a lash trying to get him to sign a simple letter to his uncle, the Konung, but he would not sign it. Bloody little bastard."

Wen blinked in stricken shock. *Pryce...!* she thought. *They hurt him*, Einar had told her, his dark eyes filled with anguish. *They hurt him because he told them he was me.*

He had offered no more than this, but now Wen knew, and she could hardly breathe for her heartache and shock. *Oh, Mother Above...he hurt Pryce. He beat him!*

"They are all possessed of that tenacity, I tell you," Aulus said, nodding to indicate the arena. "These are a group of savages who have fought all of their days. It is honorable to them and boys are taught to fight as soon as they first stumble upright, I am certain. You will see."

"So you keep saying," Iulius said, still looking unconvinced.

"You just said I have not disappointed you so far," Aulus reminded him pointedly. He laughed, clapping Iulius on the shoulder. "Watch, Iulius. Have some faith in your old friend."

He turned to Wen, smiling broadly. "Are you ready, my lady?" he asked. "It is about to begin and I think you will enjoy it immensely. This is the match I told you about -- the one for you and your honor. Let the Enghan answer for their offenses against you and your kin."

Wen managed to smile back at him. *You bastard*, she thought. *I will kill you, Aulus Tertius. By my breath -- by all that I have -- I will kill you for hurting Pryce.* “You flatter me, Lord Tertius.”

“I do my best, my lady,” he assured her. “I do my very best.”

Chapter Fifteen

Einar heard the soft, sudden grinding sounds of steel against steel, and with this peculiar, ominous noise, the roar of the crowd intensified to deafening crescendo. He jerked his head toward the sounds and saw a pair of archways flanking either side of the arena yard across from them. The gates were blocked with heavy iron doors that had begun to move, rising slowly along grooved tracks carved into the thick granite walls.

Whatever is going to happen...here it comes, he thought, his breath tangled in his throat.

The others saw the doors raising as well; the Ulusians suddenly drew together in a tight, defensive cluster, turning their backs to one another. They thrust their spears against the ground, lodging the tips in the mud so that the shafts waggled upright in the air, and they all jerked their swords loose from their scabbards, casting the sheaths aside.

At the sight of this, and the low grinding of the doors, the Enghan boys pressed close together in a frantic, frightened huddle. "What is that?" Authun mewled breathlessly, his eyes wide with terror.

"Do they...Grimnir above, do they mean for us to fight those men?" Solmund whimpered. "Einar, please, is that what they want?"

"I do not think so," Einar whispered, watching the doors. They had risen less than a foot from the ground and he blinked, gasping in startled fright as he saw a blur of movement dart beneath one of the edges of steel -- something large and yellow, like an enormous hand groping for the open air.

He turned, looking among his friends. A sudden realization occurred to him as he regarded their enormous eyes, their stricken expressions. They were doing more than gathering near to him; they were turning to him. He was not just the oldest among them. He was known to them as their Fylkir among the Seggr, their leader, the one they depended on for guidance. Of them all, only Einar had undergone his mannraun, the rite of passage between boyhood and manhood; the only one who had ever ridden among the Rekk. They did not turn to him as their friend; they turned to him as he had turned

to his father in battle -- as a man, someone to protect and comfort them. He was Fjolnir's heir, and they turned to him as their leader.

With this, Einar lowered his eyes to the ground, his brows drawing, his breath shuddering from him. He could not be afraid, no matter how much blind terror wanted to seize his heart and form. His friends were turning to him in their despair; any of his own would only break them, leave them helpless and trembling against whatever the empire meant to make them face.

He looked up, his brows furrowed, his mouth turned down in a frown. "Listen to me," he said softly, and the boys looked at him, their frightened voices falling silent, their terrified trembling waning. "Whatever it is, we will stand against it," Einar said, looking around, meeting each boy's gaze. He struggled to keep the warble of fear from his voice, to infuse his words with a sudden mettle and determination he did not feel. "We have weapons in hand, and we will stand against it together," Einar said. "This is our mannaun -- all of us together. Here is where we prove ourselves before the gods themselves, and mark ourselves worthy to take our places in Vanaheim among our ancestors."

Eirik had never held much faith in the religion of his people, dismissing the gods and runestones as ancient and impractical superstitions. Because he had always been eager to please his father, Einar had adopted this line of philosophy. He did not believe battle marked a boy from a man -- or saw anyone earn some place of valor and honor, but he knew that the other Seggr did. Eirik's point of view was not shared among his people, and to mention the gods, to invoke them now had precisely the effect Einar had hoped for on the boys -- it mustered some resolve within them.

"We are Enghan," Einar said. "We are the bergelmir'folk -- the a'Mithal kyns of the Sithr. If they mean for us to die here, let them bring death to us. We will face it bravely, like our ancestors, the men of the a'Mithal. We will know honor with steel in our hands and no fear in our hearts."

He spat against the ground. "Let them have our lives," he said. "Do not let them take our honor. We will fight as though our fathers stand beside us -- and our father's fathers, our kin to the beginning."

He thrust his spear down into the earth, as the Minghan had done, and he drew his sword, casting his scabbard aside. "Hreysti ok heithr," he said. *Courage and honor.*

The Enghan boys shoved their own spears into the dirt and slid their swords from their sheaths. "Hreysti ok heithr," they said together, their voices overlapping.

"Thar ek se mik fathir," Einar said, taking his spear in hand again, wrenching it from the ground. *There do I see my father.* He was reciting the Rekrk *bardagi'boen*, the battle prayer of the Herr. The other young men picked up the words, reciting along with him; there was not an Enghan boy alive who did not know the sacred implore.

"Thar ek se mik mothir," Einar said, his words blending in determined harmony with his friends'. *There do I see my mother.* He turned toward the gates, his weapons in hand. "Ok mik systira, ok mik brothira." ...*And my sisters, and my brothers.*

The other Seggr turned, positioning themselves as the Ulusians had, in a ring, nearly shoulder to shoulder. The Herr used this posture even in times of certain defeat, when they were grossly outnumbered in battle; it was the stance of men who found hope in each other -- even when there seemed none other likely.

"Thar ek se allr af mik folk," Einar said. *There do I see all of my people...* "Apt at allfyrstinn." *Back to the very first.*

Now he could see what was reaching and slapping against the ground from beneath the iron gates; he saw an enormous pair of paws thrash from beneath the steel, hooked with long, wicked claws, and a broad muzzle lined with curved, poised teeth snapping and straining as the animal beyond tried to force its way beneath the lip of the gate.

"Narsana!" Gisli whimpered, shying back a step. "Grimnir have mercy, it...it is narsana...!"

Einar turned to him, pressing the heel of his hand, yet clutching his sword against Gisli's shoulder to draw his panicked gaze. Einar nodded at his friend. "Thau kalla at mik," he said, continuing the prayer. *They call to me.* "Say it, Gisli -- thau maela koma I bland theirra." *They say to come among them...*

"I hollana af Vanaheim," Gisli whispered, his brows furrowing as he nodded back at Einar. "I hollana af Vanaheim," he said again more boldly. ...*in the halls of Vanaheim...*

“Hvar hugtakkarnir lifa ey,” Einar said, turning back to the gates. They watched as twelve narsana, the enormous, hulking marsupial lions of the Nordri foothills and Eng steppe plains, darted out from the archways and onto the arena ground. They were immense and thick with muscles, their wide mouths wrinkling open as they caught sight of their quarry. The crowd howled in delighted approval, stomping their feet against the stadium risers, shaking the very ground.

“Grimnir protect us,” Aslak whispered, shifting his sword in his hand into a ready grip.

“Hvar hugtakkarnir lifa ey,” Einar said again, and the others whispered it in refrain, as though the phrase held talismanic qualities, or some feeble semblance of hope. *Where the brave live always.*

“The most fascinating thing about narsana,” Aulus said, “is that they are as intelligent as they are vicious.”

Wen watched in helpless, breathless horror as the twelve animals -- each of them half again as large as the dead one she and Tacita had stumbled upon along the streambed in Lydia -- began stalking Einar and the other prisoners. The narsana moved slowly, deliberately, gathering their wits about them almost from the moment they bolted out of the tunnels and into the open arena yard. They crept toward the men and boys with wide strides, their heavy paws moving gracefully, purposefully against the ground. They carried their heads low to the ground, their small, pointed ears pricked, their noses wrinkling as they drew the scents of the prisoners from the air.

“They hunt in packs, sometimes as many as twenty together,” Aulus remarked. He had struck flints to a pipe and leaned his head back, letting a thin stream of smoke curl from his lips. “They have the minds of men buried in those thick skulls of theirs. They lure their prey, flush them into ambushes, toy with them for the simple pleasure of stoking bloodlust in their fellows. They are simply remarkable beasts.”

“They have prehensile thumbs,” Iulius said, wagging his own thumbs demonstratively. “Those big, fat, jointed claw on their forelimbs -- do you see?”

“They can climb trees with them,” Aulus said, nodding. “And open even the broadest throat like a hot blade through tallow. Astonishing.”

Wen did not think it was astonishing. She pressed her hand against her bosom and leaned forward, her eyes enormous with frantic alarm as the narsana drew all the more near to Einar. The Enghan and the Ulusians had separated themselves into two groups, and they stood together, back to back in defensive circumferences, presenting their spearheads toward the encroaching animals. The boys pivoted in frightened, uncertain steps as they tried to keep all of the narsana in view; the animals moved swiftly and efficiently, spreading their numbers out in a broad circle around the two groups of prisoners. Four moved toward the Ulusians, while the other eight, seeming convinced the boys would make more ready prey than the larger men, kept their glittering, yellow eyes fixed upon the Enghan.

“Narsana have grown quite popular in the *bestiaris* matches in the south,” Ilius said. “You could export them, you know, Aulus. Quite a trade for them in Cneas and --”

“Already arranged, thank you,” Aulus said, his mouth lifted in a smug little smile. “Two thousand dorotus a head.”

Ilius raised his brow, impressed. “Nicely bartered.”

Aulus knocked his mug affably against Ilius’. “Yes, I thought as much myself.”

“Bears and pit dogs, you know, have grown so mundane as to be gauche,” Ilius said. “Even the tigers and leopards they have shipped in from Galjin and Teutoni border on boredom after awhile. If you have seen one, you may as well have seen them all. Now narsana on the other hand -- one match is never the same as the next. You never know quite what is going on in those heads of theirs.” He tapped his forefinger against his brow. “They all think differently, employ different strategies.”

“The minds of men,” Aulus said again. “They will try to break them apart, get them out of those clusters. I imagine they will distract the ones they decide to be the strongest, while the others take out the weaker ones.”

“Dinner is served,” Iulius said, and he and Aulus both broke into hearty laughter, leaning together and guffawing. Neither noticed Wen, who blinked at them in aghast shock.

They are mad, she thought. Mother Above, the world has gone mad!

“They will try to separate us,” Einar said as the narsana approached. He watched the Ulusian men shove their swords beneath the knots of their loincloths to hold them against their hips and heft their spears with both hands, thrusting them out toward the animals. “All of you -- tuck your swords beneath your knots, take your spears in your hands,” he said to the Seggr.

They did, moving swiftly. They planted their feet and pivoted their hips, letting their knees flex into ready fighting stances as they held the spears poised between their hands. “They will try to charge us,” Einar said, watching four of the narsana break away from the pack, slinking toward the Ulusians. Eight of the beasts continued on toward them, spreading themselves out in a broad circumference and slowly, but efficiently boxing their huddled group in near the arena wall.

He knew of narsana; his father’s byr had been a fishing community, not livestock herders, but they had traded enough with other kyns south of the Sithr peninsula, into Enthimork and Eng to have learned of the predators. Narsana were pack hunters who favored night strikes, when the darkness afforded them extra cover. Herdsmen of sheep and cattle had to keep diligent watch against them when the sun went down, and even then, their efforts were often futile, as narsana could strike with nearly impossible speed and efficiency. They were not easily or readily intimidated by men, and they were terrifying in their patience, sometimes stalking a herd for many days before at last selecting a prime opportunity to strike.

“They will try to get us to run, to scatter,” Einar said. He glanced over either shoulder at his friends. “Stand your ground when they come at us. Do not let them separate us. We can fend them off together.”

The narsana crept closer. Einar could see the glittering ocher color of their eyes now, the mottled russet, black and gold of their fur. Their cheeks and muzzles were framed in white, and their lips wrinkled back from broad mouths in grim parodies of smiles. They were growling at the Enghan, their voices emanating from their thick, short necks in low, ominous warning. The ones in the front of the pack spread were females; the bitches were the primary hunters, leaner and faster than their male counterparts. The male narsana fanned out to the rear, keeping their distance from the prisoners,

ready to close in should one of the females tire or grow injured -- and ready to fall upon any prey that bolted for the perimeter of the pack.

Einar forced himself to stand still, even though the muscles in his legs trembled with the instinctive need to run. That was what the narsana wanted; to frighten them, panic them into fleeing, to drive them away from one another and leave them exposed, vulnerable.

One of the females paused less than ten feet from him. She lowered her head, the short, coarse hair of her hackles fanning along the wide bridge of her shoulders. She planted her paws, and Einar could see the thumb-like extension along the inner curve of each ankle; these were hinged claws, each as long as his hand from fingertip to wrist; each one hooked and sharpened, deadly. Her lips drew back from her teeth and she growled. "Far aptr!" Einar shouted at the narsana, shoving his spear at her in a threatening gesture. *Get back!* He stomped his bare foot hard against the ground, stepping toward her, and she shied back, surprised by his ferocity. "Far aptr, thik hyndla!" *Get back, you bitch!*

He glanced toward the group of Ulusians, spying the Minghan among them. The Minghan met Einar's gaze, having watched the narsana recoil at his cry, and he nodded once at Einar, either offering approval or consent. He turned his gaze to narsana nearest him and stomped his foot against the ground as Einar had done, forcing the spear point at the beast. "Ci ociqu!" he shouted out in his own tongue. "Ci ociqu!"

The Minghan moved again, stepping toward Einar. There were probably twenty feet of open space separating them, and the narsana had positioned themselves to easily cover the distance, to keep the stronger Ulusian men from the Enghan boys. The Minghan spared his men a glance, and then shouted again, driving his spear at the narsana, trying to force them out of his path. "Ci ociqu!" he cried. To his friends, he shouted, "Bide ujeku getulku ende! Ujeku ogku ibegel degere keuked! Ta yagaraqu!"

Einar did not know what he said, but he knew what the Minghan was doing -- he was trying to close the space between their two groups. He was trying to bring them together. "Move with me!" Einar cried to the Seggr. When one of the narsana came at him again, with more boldness than hesitation in its gait this time, he shoved his spear at it, his brows furrowed as he screamed. "Get back from us! Get back!"

The narsana danced, its paws skittering in the mud, hissing at Einar. For every one that approached the Ulusians or Seggr, they drove it back with shouts and readied spear points, but the narsana were getting braver, and more confident with every pass. "Move with me! Move toward the men!" Einar shouted. "Come on -- move! Move! We must keep together!"

"Turgen!" the Minghan cried, shaking his spear at a narsana, driving it back as he stepped again toward Einar. "Qamug eduge!"

The crowd did not approve of this stand-off between the narsana and their prey. This was not what they had expected; they wanted fighting, bloodshed and shrieks. They began to boo and hiss, cupping their hands around their mouths and howling their discontent. Some of the soldiers along the bottom tier of the stadium benches leaned out over the balustrades, cursing at the prisoners, snatching anything in hand they could find to hurl toward the yard.

"Fight, you bloody bastards!" someone screamed.

"This is madness," Aslak whimpered.

"It is not madness—it is Hel," Gisli said. "Surely we have died—surely this is Niflheim in Hel."

"Bloody rot cowards!" someone else shouted, seizing a crumbled piece of mortar in hand and flinging it at the young Enghan. It struck Solmund in the shoulder and the boy yelped, staggering at the blow. The crowd cheered at his cry, and more rocks began to pelt down at them. The boys tried to duck and dance around the debris. "Stand together!" Einar cried, grunting as a chunk of stone clipped him in the neck. Another whacked him in the temple with enough force to stagger him and send a sudden, dazzling spray of stars dancing before his eyes. He nearly collapsed, tripping over his own feet, and Thorod hooked his arm around him, hauling him upright again.

The narsana sprang forward, taking full advantage of the confusion brought by the raining stones. Einar caught a hint of sudden, swift movement out of the corner of his eye as one of them leaped, and he shoved against Thorod, throwing himself in the opposite direction. "Thorod, move—!" he cried.

He hit the ground hard, landing on his side, knocking the breath from himself. He felt the ground shiver beneath him as the narsana struck where he had only just been

standing, its heavy paws smacking forcefully against the earth. Einar rolled, drawing his knees beneath him, scrambling to his feet. His head was still swimming and he backpedaled clumsily, jerking his spear in front of him, leveling the tip at the narsana.

It crouched between him and Thorod, turning its head to glare between them, hissing at them. Another narsana moved behind it, leaping for Thorod and Einar heard his friend scream sharply. He had no time to think or react to the piteous sound because the first cat had settled on prey of its own—him. It lunged at Einar, moving with impossible speed for something so large and burly, and Einar cried out, dancing back.

His body reacted purely on adrenaline wrought of panic and instinct. He pivoted his hips and swung the spear, bringing the left end of the thick ash shaft around in a sharp, whistling arc. He slammed the butt of the spear into the side of the narsana's head, staggering it, sending it scabbling sideways. Before it could recover, Einar stepped forward, thrusting the right end of the spear around in another broad arc, smashing the narsana's head again.

The narsana recoiled, snarling and snapping its jaws, shaking its head and shoulders furiously. Einar spun the spear between his hands, seizing it between his fists and he rushed at the dazed cat, shoving the sharpened edge of steel at the tip deep into its broad, mottled breast. The narsana shrieked, bucking wildly, and Einar was thrown off his feet, the spear shaft wrenched loose of his hands, lodged in the animal's chest. He sprawled against the dirt, landing on his chest, smacking his chin hard enough to send a new flurry of stars across his line of sight. He flipped over, feeling the ground shake again as the narsana charged him. He got his legs beneath him just in time to dive wildly to his left, out of the narsana's path. It barreled past him, near enough for him to feel the rush of wind against him as it passed, the rustle of its fur against his bare skin, and he reached up blindly, desperately, seizing the still-impaled spear shaft between his hands. He was jerked to his feet and staggered, digging his heels into the mud, wrenching the spear tip loose from the animal's neck. He felt it jerk free and he stumbled backwards as the narsana shrieked in new pain. It whirled toward him, its hackles spread about its face in an infuriated mane, blood staining the pale fur of its breast in a growing spread.

He felt the earth beneath him tremble; a second narsana rushed him from behind. Einar planted the spearhead into the ground and kicked his legs, pivoting his hips and grasping the shaft between his hands. He leaped into the air, using the spear as a fulcrum; the narsana darted beneath him, its paws skittering in startled surprise as Einar arched his back and vaulted over it. His feet kicked against its rump as he dropped to the ground, and he seized the spear in hand, yanking it loose of the dirt as the narsana whipped about, snarling at him.

The two cats spread out to flank him and Einar danced back, spinning the spear between his hands, trying to keep both of them in sight. They moved wide, one to his left, the other to his right, both of them crouched, their footsteps light and wary, their lips drawn back from their teeth. The first one lunged at him, trying to distract him and allow the other to strike. Einar stepped forward to meet it, swinging the spear around, slamming the butt of the shaft against its head, staggering it. The other moved, darting toward him, and Einar whirled, swinging the spear around and driving the head into the nook of the narsana's jaw. The steel sank deeply and the narsana recoiled; Einar pivoted his hips and wrenched the spear loose as it scuttled backward.

The second narsana struck him from behind, plowing into his legs, sending him sprawling beneath its sudden, massive weight. Einar rolled as he hit the ground; the spear fell from his hands and he groped blindly for it. There was no time; the narsana lunged forward, snapping at his face. He jerked his head to the side, rolling onto his shoulder, screaming. He felt the hiss of the narsana's breath against his ear, his hair as its jaws slammed shut within centimeters of his head. Its paws moved, crushing against his shoulders and he screamed again as its long, hooked thumb claw tore into his left shoulder, sinking deep and ripping him open. Its head darted again, and Einar jerked; its hot breath shoved against him, its saliva spraying his face as it snapped, missing his cheek by only hairs' breadths. He reached for his sword, his fingers splayed desperately. He jerked the blade loose from his loincloth and shoved it up, sinking the length of steel beneath the crook of the narsana's forelimb. The narsana screeched, snapping at him again. Einar tried to roll out of its way, but its teeth clamped against his right shoulder, tearing through his flesh and he screamed.

He drove the sword again and again into the narsana, stabbing it wildly, burying the blade into its shoulder, breast and head. He punched the steel through its eye and it scrambled away from him, shrieking and thrashing.

Einar forced himself up, scrambling to his feet, snatching his fallen spear in hand. Both of the narsana were injured now and wary; here was not the easy, vulnerable prey they had been anticipating. They both slinked around him, bleeding and hissing, and Einar limped in a shuffling, clumsy circle, watching them. He was bleeding profusely and in terrible pain. He tried to heft the spear in his left hand, but he could only rotate his wounded shoulder so far before the pain became stabbing and excruciating, staggering him. His chest heaved as he gasped for breath, and the narsana studied him, circling him, waiting for him to exhaust himself with fear and exertion, or to grow too feeble from blood loss to fight them anymore.

I...I am not going to die here, he thought, stepping closer to the arena wall behind him, his eyes darting between the narsana. *By Donar's hammer, I am not going to die here.*

One of them stepped cautiously toward him. Its nose wriggled, drawing the scent of his blood, and its tongue darted out of its mouth in a restless, eager lap. Einar shoved the spear tip at it, gritting his teeth to stifle a moan of pain. "I...I am...not going to...die here..." he seethed.

He was grievously injured, and the narsana realized it. They kept inching forward, each in turn, drawing his gaze, making him move. He stumbled back and forth, pivoting between them, thrusting the spear or sword at them. They were toying with him, biding their time; they could sense that his strength was waning. His footsteps floundered and he staggered in place. His vision blurred and he struggled to keep his feet beneath him. "I...I am not going to die here," he whispered, swinging the spear at the cats. He shook his head to clear it and narrowed his brows, looking between the narsana. "I am not going to die here!" he cried, and he swung the spear again, cowing them.

When the narsana on his left moved, springing at him, Einar whirled, swinging the spear in his hands, sending the steel-capped end battering into its skull. Its legs sprawled and it stumbled sideways. Einar pivoted his hips, planting his feet and

swinging the other end of the spear around, bashing the opposite side of the narsana's head. It crashed onto its side, blood spewing from its nose.

"I am not going to die here!" Einar screamed, and he hoisted the spear above his head, driving the tip with all of his might through the side of the narsana's chest, into its heart. The cat screeched, its paws flailing, its jaws gnashing for a wild, desperate moment and then it fell still, its head smacking the ground, its muzzle frothed with bloody foam. The second narsana leaped at him, and Einar threw himself sideways, diving over the crumpled form of the dead cat. He had dropped his sword as he had driven his spear through its ribs; he grabbed for the sword now as the other narsana sailed over him, its paws groping vainly for purchase against his back, its claws slicing through his skin. He closed his hand about the hilt of the sword as he struck the ground and shoved his free hand against the dirt and drew his knees beneath him, scrambling to his feet.

The narsana whirled, charging him again and Einar ran. He bolted headlong for the arena wall; he could see soldiers leaning out over the balustrades to watch him, their mouths open in cheers and cries he could not hear. He could not hear anything at all except for the thunderous measure of his own heart, the hoarse, laborious rhythm of his gasping breath, the slapping of his bare feet against the ground and the heavy, rapid pounding of the narsana's paws, its pace nearly upon him.

I am not going to die here, he thought as the wall filled his view, scarce feet from him now. He buckled his knees in mid-stride and leaped at the wall, punting his leg out, planting his heel against the mortar and shoving mightily. He flipped backwards, kicking himself into a somersault, whipping heel over pate into the air. He saw the narsana dart beneath him, slamming snout-first into the wall, and then he fell, swinging his legs around again, sprawling astride the animal's back. He clamped down against the narsana with his thighs, using the strength of his legs to hold him upright as it bucked beneath him, shaking its head and haunches, dazed by the blow to the wall.

"I am not going to die here!" he screamed again, blood and spittle spraying from his lips. He drew the sword back, clutched the hilt in both hands and drove it down, lifting his hips from the narsana's back, putting all of his weight, his strength into the

blow. The blade plunged into the base of the narsana's skull; Einar felt the sides of his fists meet the fur of the cat's scruff as he buried the sword to the hilt in its brain.

The narsana collapsed, crashing to the ground, and Einar was thrown from its shoulders as it fell. He landed face-first, sprawled in the dirt, and he lay there for a long, hurting moment, panting for breath, his hands outstretched before him, his fingers splayed and scratching feebly in the mud as he struggled to rise.

He heard a low, rumbling growl and lifted his head. A narsana crouched before him, no more than ten feet away, its paws planted, its lips wrinkling back in a snarl. Einar moved his legs, trying to get his feet beneath him. It did not occur to him that he no longer had any weapons; his reason had abandoned him for simple, primal instincts. *I am not going to die here*, he thought dazedly, glaring at the narsana. *You...you are not going to take me. I am not going to die here.*

The narsana hunkered its back haunches, poised to spring at him, and the Minghan appeared, rushing into Einar's line of sight, his sword between his fists, reared back over his head. The Minghan uttered a shrill, furious shriek and leaped at the narsana, plowing into its side, plunging his blade into the animal's skull. Einar had one stunned, bewildered moment to realize the man had just saved his life, and then he collapsed, swooning.

He could not have been out long, only brief moments, because he came to groggily as the Minghan grasped him beneath the arms, dragging him, stumbling and reeling to his feet. Einar pulled weakly against his grip, shaking his head, staggering. "No..." he moaned, struggling feebly against the Minghan. "No...no, I...I am not...not going to die..."

He crumpled against the Minghan's chest, his knees failing him, his legs buckling. He felt the Minghan's arms wrap around him, supporting him, drawing him upright once more. The Minghan was bleeding; deep gashes had been gouged across his chest and shoulders. Einar stared at the bloody wounds and then blinked up at the man. "I...I am not going to die here," he whispered.

The Minghan cupped his palm against Einar's cheek and pressed his forehead against the boy's. "No," he said softly. "You are not."***

It was over. When the Minghan had driven his blade into the narsana's skull, he had killed the last of the animals turned loose in the arena. Of the twelve prisoners who had entered the yard, only seven left. Four of the Minghan and three Enghan boys had survived; although two of the Enghan had suffered such gruesome injuries that Aulus seriously doubted either would live to see the next dawn. The third, Einar Eirikson's friend, had held his own with considerable more grit than his fellows, and not only would he likely survive, Iulius was eager to acquire him for his gladiatorial stable.

"He is remarkable," Iulius declared for at least the thousandth time since the match had ended. He and Aulus had left the arena for the holding cells beneath the palace. Aelwen had retired to her chamber; she had seemed quiet and withdrawn after watching the combat, and Aulus worried that it had been too brutal for her preference. He had invited her to join him and Iulius for supper, but she had managed only a feeble smile and murmured that she thought she would prefer to sup alone in her suite that night.

Iulius knelt in a cell beside the wounded young man. An imperial surgeon had given the boy a perfunctory go-around with sutures and a needle. He had slapped some sort of foul-smelling salve on the boy's wounded shoulders and said that no irreparable damage had been done to his form. The surgeon had also forced a cupful of a sedating tonic down the young man's throat, and he slept restlessly on a pallet of coarse, wool blankets on the floor.

"Magnificent," Iulius said, brushing the cuff of his fingers against the boy's cheek. The young man turned his face at the caress, his brows lifting as he moaned softly, feebly.

"Fathir..." he whimpered, his voice hoarse and breathless. "Fathir...dugar mik...ek...ek beid...dugar..."

"What is he saying?" Iulius asked.

"How should I bloody know?" Aulus growled. He flapped his hand dismissively. "They speak some rot guttural barbarian dialect."

"Does he speak the common tongue?" Iulius asked.

"Did you not hear him screaming it out on the yard?" Aulus replied, irritably. Frankly, he was bored of the entire affair. The circus had not had the intended effect he

had hoped for on Aelwen. Yet again, his best efforts to impress had only seemed to dismay her. He was also nearly exasperated by Iulius' non-stop chatter. He had other things on his mind besides little Enghan boys and gladiatorial games, and he was anxious to return his attention in full to those matters.

Iulius smiled, unbothered by Aulus' tone. "Yes," he murmured. "I will not die here.' Such fire, such determination." He looked over his shoulder at Aulus. "Did you see him vault himself ass over elbows off the arena wall? Never in my days have I witnessed anything like that."

"Yes, I saw it," Aulus said.

"He has a pleasing face," Iulius said. "At least he did not mar it fighting. And his form is lean, nicely proportioned. Noble ladies in the south appreciate a gladiator they can cheer for, who is also easy on the eyes. He would be well-suited in Cneas, I think. How does he fare against men, rather than animals?"

"I do not know," Aulus said. "I have never fought him before today."

Iulius blinked in surprise. "This was his first time in the arena?" he asked. "Mother Above—we will definitely bring him to Cneas. He will need formal training of course, in one of my gladiatorial schools, but if he keeps that arm, I could find use for him."

"My surgeon said there is no lasting damage to him," Aulus said. He knew what Iulius was doing by dropping this little comment. Ever the lanista to the core, Iulius had just very delicately opened the bargaining negotiations.

"A lot can happen between here and Cneas," Iulius said. "It is a long trip. Infection could set in—he could yet lose the limb, or even his life." He stood, turning to Aulus. "But he is promising nonetheless. I rather admire his tenacity. How much would you part with him for?"

"Twelve-hundred," Aulus said.

Iulius laughed. "Aulus, you wound me," he said, draping his hand against the lapel of his great coat. "I thought we were friends. Twelve-hundred for a boy whose health you cannot guarantee? Who would only linger here in your carcer, moaning and occupying space unnecessarily? Who you cannot sell to venalium for household stock? Please." He raised his brow. "Eight hundred."

Aulus held Iulius' gaze. "Do not insult me," he said. "You will reap one-hundred fold that at least in the southern circuses."

"If he lives," Iulius said. "I will sweeten the deal, how is that? Eight hundred for him. You show me twenty of these lads who can hold their own in man-to-man on the yard, and I will take them from you, too, at one thousand each. Put some bloody armor on them this time, for the love of the Good Mother. You damage their forms, you depreciate their values. Give me first choice after that on their men, and I will settle right now for twelve-hundred apiece for them."

Aulus frowned and he laughed. "Come now, Aulus—what else are you going to bloody do with them? They are all unproven in the arena. You will find no better barter than mine with any other lanista, I assure you. You are running out of accommodations for all of your little guests. I am doing you a favor."

"Eight hundred for him." Aulus nodded sharply at the young man on the floor. "One thousand apiece for twenty like-bodied lads. Twelve hundred for the Enghan men of your choice—and you buy ten Minghan from me. One thousand apiece."

"I will buy twenty from you at a thousand apiece," Iulius said. "They were strong fighters in their own right. I would have paid you twelve for each."

Aulus frowned again, and Iulius laughed, clapping him on the sleeve. "Unknit your brow, you surly bastard," he said, grinning. "You should be grateful to me, not sore. Come on—we need some supper and brimague. Enough talk of business."

They had taken supper together, and then pipes and brimagues in a formal parlor afterwards. Iulius had gobbled down Aulus' food and liquor voraciously. The exactor yet within Aulus' mind had kept a running tally of the expenses his so-called friend was costing him, and the higher the debt, the more he frowned. Iulius was gone now, retired to his chamber, slap-happy drunk and having hugged Aulus good-night as though they were kin. Aulus stood alone in the parlor of his suite. He cradled a snifter of brimague against his palm and sipped at it, his brows furrowed as he looked down at the top of his desk.

Other things were on his mind besides Iulius and the Enghan boy. He had hoped to find some distraction in spending time with Aelwen that evening; she had seemed to

warm to him since the previous night, and he had planned on the chance to charm and soften her all the more. This had not come to pass, and he was sullen for it. Now there was nothing left to distract him from the problems nearest at hand -- problems he had not particularly felt like facing.

A book lay opened atop the desk. Aulus had found it among Yisun's things. At first, he had dismissed the discovery. The pages of the ancient tome were filled with drawings and paintings depicting nearly the same scenes as the murals in the dragons' shrine. It was a collection of artwork dedicated to the dragon legend, but as of yesterday, Aulus had been studying it quite a bit, and lending a bit more credence to these once-dismissed tales of yore.

Aelwen had brought about this change of opinion. She had looked up at the mural showing the Dwarf helping Duua seal the dragons in their lair, and said something that had nibbled at his mind, nagging incessantly at him ever since. She had said the Abhacan lived in Tiralainn, in a state called Tirurnua. The name had struck him as familiar when she had uttered it but it had not been until several hours later that he had realized why.

The correspondence from Quintas Vitus, propraetor of Capua, regarding the appearance of Captain Aedhir Fainne had made mention of Tirurnua: *He stated this companion is a liaison for the Crown Realms of Tiralainn and Tirurnua, an ambassador to the empire named Lord Rhyden Fabhcun.*

Aedhir Fainne had insisted that a band of Oirat had abducted Rhyden Fabhcun, and Aulus suspected Fainne had tried to pursue them and rescue his friend when he met with his unfortunate encounter with the Enghan. Aulus had still been perplexed by this seeming coincidence, however, until he had flipped through Yisun's old book of paintings and found one in particular that had troubled him.

It depicted a scene reminiscent of the mural painted on the wall of the dragon shrine. Here was Dobun and the Dwarf, both of them with wicked sneers drawn on their faces, standing before the sealed entrance of the dragons' lair. However, in this painting, rather than the pair standing on a mountainside, rolling boulders into place to seal the dragons, Dobun and the Dwarf were shown inside what appeared to be a cave. Dobun held a torch aloft while the Dwarf carved unfamiliar characters into a large stone

door. Obviously it was supposed to be the threshold of the lair, but the Dwarf's actions, and those little squiggled characters had bothered Aulus, and tugged insistently at his mind.

What if there really is a lair? he thought, frowning as he studied the illustration. Decimus Paulus had told him the Oirat were fond to retreat into the Khar mountains to avoid Khahl and imperial troops, and had likely ventured beyond the Lydian border during such efforts. *What if they found it? This door in the painting? What if it is real—and the Oirat found it?*

It sounded bloody preposterous to Aulus, and yet, somehow, it also made a certain sort of sense. If the Oirat thought they had found the dragons, they probably would have wanted to make certain. What better way to be certain than to find someone who could read the inscriptions on the doors and tell them what they said?

Someone who is familiar with the Dwarves, Aulus thought, his frown deepening. *Someone like an ambassador for their current realm of Tirurnua, this Rhyden Fabhcun.*

Aulus turned to another drawing in the book. This one showed Ulusian dragonriders and their steeds in the sky, attacking an army of spear-wielding soldiers on the ground. The dragons were huge in proportion to the men, far larger than the one mounted and stuffed beneath the shrine. As shown in the illustration, these dragons were proportionally suitable to the “saddle” in the shrine, and Aulus wondered now if he had been wrong to scoff. He had thought the saddle seemed a very elaborate ruse the Ulusians had concocted to feed their lore, detailed down to tiny nooks used to hold weapons and supplies, or the intricate harness system for the rider.

What if it was not a ruse at all? he thought. *What if they really rode dragons?*

The dragons in the illustration smashed into fortress walls. The thick, bony outcropping of their lower lips that Aulus had observed firsthand in the skull served as a very useful battering ram apparently. Ulusian archers were shown delivering a veritable rain of arrows down upon their enemies from their dragons; a closer look showed opposing fire bouncing harmlessly off of the dragons' hides, as though they had been impervious to steel. Dragons were drawn swooping down into enemy lines, battering aside horses and riders, snatching hapless enemies in their enormous rear talons, ripping them in half. If the Ulusians had once used dragons to build an empire for

themselves, Aulus could certainly appreciate the why's and how's of such efforts—he could see them plainly in this illustration. They would have been indomitable.

And Yisun is marching her bloody little ass to the Khar right now to claim them, he thought. It was ridiculous, of course; it was ludicrous to think that dragons might still remain, asleep and buried beneath the Khar Mountains. No matter if the Ulusians had once commanded such capacities as riding the beasts, conquering opposing armies and amassing an empire, it remained ancient history—something so long-since passed that it had evolved into fairy lore and stories even among the Ulusians. Thousands of years had surely passed since those days. Nothing could survive for so long beneath the ground.

“Nothing,” Aulus murmured, looking down at the book. He did not know about dragons, but the Ulusians apparently did. Yisun had kept a meticulous collection of accounts in books, paintings, murals and antiquities. She had seemed well-versed and familiar in her recounting of her people's history to him. He had dismissed this—and her departure with Targutai for the Khar—as foolishness; desperate acts and beliefs of a desperate race. Now he wondered.

What if dragons live for thousands of years? he thought. *Why would Yisun put such blind faith into something if logic told her they were dead? She must know something she did not tell me. She must know the dragons' lifespans—she must think there is yet hope they still live.*

Bears hibernated. All manner of creatures in this northern portion of the empire spent the long, harsh winter months tucked away in caves, sleeping until the spring. *What if Yisun knows the dragons are doing this—hibernating?* Aulus thought. *Their forms drawn still and tranquil, their minds asleep? What if all of this time, these millennia have been winter to the dragons? What if...Mother Above, what if the dragons are still alive and sleeping? Waiting to be roused?*

There were thousands of dragons depicted in the illustration before him. *What if they are all still alive somewhere beneath the Khar mountains?* he thought. *What if the Oirat have found them? What if they took Rhyden Fabhcun to read the inscription and know for sure?*

“And what if Yisun is simply following the Oirat?” he whispered aloud. “What if she is letting them lead her to the lair?”

When Yisun had left, he had thought she was abandoning the city because of the arrival of so many bellatori. He had thought she was slinking off rather than answer for all of her schemes and deceits. *What if she had not?* he thought, feeling a terrible dismay gnawing at his gut. *What if she left because she thought the Khahl could claim the dragons? What if she abandoned Kharhorin because she knew with the dragons, she could bloody well take it back?*

“My Lord Tertius...?” Faustus said from the doorway. Aulus looked up, startled by the steward’s soft voice. “Begging your pardon, my lord, but Praetorius Paulus has arrived, as per your instruction.”

Aulus blinked again and then nodded. “Yes,” he murmured. He flapped his hand. “Yes, Faustus, show him in, please.”

“Yes, my lord,” Faustus said, lowering his head politely. He turned to leave, but paused when Aulus called to him again.

“Hoah, and Faustus...?”

“Yes, my lord?” Faustus asked, turning. He was surly with Aulus now for having scolded him, threatened him earlier in the day with a whipping. He had slinked around Aulus all afternoon, attending to him and Iulius and being courteous in his mannerisms and words, all the while remaining sullen and somewhat wary in his regard.

“I want you to go to my Lady Finamur’s suite,” Aulus told him. “Pay her call, chat with her awhile. Make sure her supper was suitable and that she wants for nothing.”

“Yes, my lord,” Faustus said, with a nod. He looked somewhat perplexed by this request, and Aulus felt obliged to explain himself, if only to make amends in Faustus’ regard for that afternoon.

“I brought her to the circus today,” he said. “I do not think she enjoyed the spectacle as much as I might have hoped.”

Ordinarily, Faustus would have quipped something in reply, such as: *I cannot imagine why not, my lord. Men and boys slaughtering one another for the amusement of a shrieking crowd seems an afternoon of veritable mirth to me indeed, my lord.*

Faustus offered no such answer tonight, however. He merely blinked at Aulus, his hands folded neatly against the small of his back. "I want you to make sure she is alright," Aulus said, growing irritable with Faustus now for his damned rotted sullen courtesy. "Just...just bloody go and talk to her awhile. Play cards with her or something. Bring that slave brat she is so fond of a plate of biscuits for a snack. Something."

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said, nodding again. When Aulus said nothing more, he added, "Will that be all, my lord? Would you have me show Praetorius Paulus in now?"

"Yes," Aulus said, frowning. He would be making up to Faustus for a bloody week at least, apparently. Why the steward's opinion of him bloody mattered was beyond Aulus, but for some reason, it panged him to realize he had upset Faustus terribly—worse than this, he had betrayed the sort of comfortable trust that had long existed between the two. "Yes, fine. Thank you, Faustus."

"You are welcome, my lord," Faustus replied, walking away from the door.

Decimus Paulus entered the room a moment later. He, too, paused on the threshold, visibly curious by Aulus' late beckon. Aulus glanced at him, wondering if the Praetorius ever wore anything less than a meticulously arranged uniform. Decimus was fastidious about his appearance; perhaps more so than any man Aulus had ever met, and peculiarly so for a soldier who spent a majority of his time on bergelmirback in the field of battle. Decimus stood in the doorway, his scarlet justicoat, breeches and waistcoat immaculate, the folds of his cravat impeccable, his powdered wig with its dapper little tail perfectly straight upon his pate. His shoes were so well-polished that Aulus imagined even from the vantage point of Decimus' height, he could look down and see his countenance reflected in them.

"Good evening, Decimus," Aulus said, because common courtesy bid the Praetorius hold his tongue until addressed. "Come in, please. Would you like a brimague?"

"No, thank you, my lord," Decimus replied, stepping into the room. He walked with his spine and shoulders appropriately stiffened, his hands clasped against the apex of his coat tails. "Forgive the late hour of my summons," Aulus told him. He walked to a small table and refreshed his sniffer of brimague from a waiting decanter. "I would have

called for you sooner, but I have been entertaining an out-of-town guest today, an old friend from Torach.”

“At the circus, yes, my lord,” Decimus said, nodding his chin once. “I have heard.”

There was no mistaking the slightly veiled note of disapproval in Decimus’ voice, and Aulus glanced at him. No doubt the Praetorius had done more than heard of Aulus’ day spent at the circus; he likely knew about the Enghan fighting, as well. Decimus had grown a bit touchy when the matter came to the Enghan youths, as though by capturing them, he had somehow invested a stake in their well-being. He had voiced his discontent at Aulus’ flogging of Einar Eirikson and had likewise made his opinion of cutting the Enghan boy’s throat the day before apparent simply by scowling at Aulus. For a man of the sword, an officer in the imperial army, Decimus Paulus had a definite soft streak that Aulus found increasingly incensing.

“Do you think it is wise, my lord?” Decimus asked tactfully. “To engage the Enghan prisoners in such brutal spectacle? They are meant for bargaining, my lord. We cannot barter with corpses.”

Aulus frowned at him. “I think the Enghan prisoners are property of the empire, and as such within this city, under my authority, Praetorius Paulus,” he said. “I think I can do whatever I bloody damn want with them.”

Decimus simply looked at him, his expression impassive. “Yes, my lord.”

Aulus regarded the Praetorius for a long moment. “Decimus, from whom did you receive orders to attack the Enghan, to use the empire’s black powder stores to claim Einar Eirikson?”

Decimus looked somewhat surprised. “From Cneas, my lord,” he replied. “From the Pater himself. The parchment bore his seal, my lord.” He looked puzzled and troubled. “I would take no such action of my own accord, my lord, without imperial consent.”

Aulus raised his brow. “And why is that?”

Decimus blinked, caught off-guard. “I...I beg your pardon, my lord?”

“Why would you not take such action on your own, Praetorius Paulus?”

“I do not have such authority, my lord.”

The corner of Aulus' mouth hooked slightly. "But if you did have the authority, would you have exercised it in such fashion?" When Decimus still looked uneasy, Aulus laughed and flapped his hand. "Speak freely, Decimus. Come now. We are friends of a sort. There is no penalty for candor among friends."

Decimus did not look convinced. "I would not have undertaken that action, no, my lord," he said carefully, "were the matter left to my authority."

"Why not?"

Decimus cocked his head slightly, his brow lifting. "Because I find such tactics unnecessary, my lord," he said. "If I may speak freely, as you have said. The Enghan are a simple, but nonetheless proud people. We instilled resolve within them by attacking their caravan -- stealing their children. The Enghan are like dried witchgrass, my lord. My Pater's actions have hopefully not served simply as the incendiary needed to ignite a blaze we cannot contain."

"You did not agree with your orders?" Aulus asked thoughtfully. "And yet you saw them through."

"That is my job, Lord Tertius," Decimus said, meeting his gaze evenly. "Where are you from, Decimus?" Aulus asked. He pressed the rim of his glass to his mouth and tilted his head back, draining the liquor in a single swallow. "I do not believe I have ever asked."

"You have not, my lord," Decimus replied. "I am from Troia, sir."

Bloody figures, Aulus thought, with a contemptuous snort. "Though I do not quite understand what that has to do with anything, my lord," Decimus said.

Aulus laughed as he poured himself some more brimague. "It does not," he said, looking over his shoulder at Decimus. "It is called making idle conversation, Decimus. People do that on occasion when they are more than casually acquainted." He walked toward the Praetorius. "It is my understanding you have further written orders from Cneas to advance with the last of the bellatori for the Engjold border tomorrow."

"Yes, my lord," Decimus said. "At dawn."

Aulus nodded, tapping his fingertip against the rim of his snifter as he walked slowly past Decimus. "I want you to belay that order."

He heard the quiet but sharp, startled intake of Decimus' breath. "My lord...?"

“You heard me,” Aulus said, without turning to look at him. “I want you and those last maniples to remain here in Kharhorin. I also want you to send immediate word -- dispatch it this evening -- that one of the legions is to return at once from the border to the royal city.”

Decimus was silent for a long, stunned moment. “Lord Tertius,” he said at length. “Surely you cannot be serious.”

“I am very serious,” Aulus replied, turning to him. “Call them back.”

“We are under imperial order -- from the Pater himself -- to fortify the northern Ulusian border,” Decimus said. “I speak for the empire here,” Aulus said. “During times of war, I do not need Cneas’ permission to act. You will call them back.”

“My lord, the Enghan Herr have amassed within a single day’s ride from the border. Nearly eight thousand men, from our reports, my lord. To withdraw an entire legion -- three thousand soldiers -- would leave us grossly outnumbered.”

“The Enghan Herr are going to surrender,” Aulus said. “Is that not what you told me? What you wrote to me from the field? ‘Fjolnir Itreker will bend like a willow against a sharp wind,’ if he thinks harm will come to Einar Eirikson, is that not what you said?”

“I said that, yes, my lord,” Decimus said. “But there is nothing so set in stone -- not ever. The signed surrender has only just been dispatched yesterday. We do not have their agreement in hand. We cannot take such a risk, Lord Tertius. We -- ”

“I will decide which risks we do or do not take -- not you, Praetorius Paulus,” Aulus said sharply. “You are under my jurisdiction here and you will bloody damn well do as I say. The maniples within Kharhorin are to remain. You will send for a full legion to return within two days. I had best see them at the royal gates at dawn by then, or by my breath, you will personally answer for it.”

Decimus blinked at him. “This is against my counsel, my lord,” he said, his brows narrowing slightly. “And my will. If charges are levied against you by the Senate, I will tell them as much, sir.”

“Duly noted,” Aulus said, flapping his hand and turning away again. “You are dismissed, Praetorius. Kindly report to my chambers again promptly at eight tomorrow morning. I expect a report that word is on its way to the border, and you have assigned appropriate centuries throughout Kharhorin to fortify the city.”

“Fortify the city?” Decimus asked. “Against what, my lord?”

Aulus glanced over his shoulder at him. Yisun had gone hunting for a dragons’ lair -- a lair Aulus was no longer so certain was just myth. The bitch wanted a bloody empire for her people and her son. Aulus had grown to appreciate that sentiment, as he had been building his own little empire of power for himself in Kharhorin. Yisun wanted to take that away. She meant to try and take Kharhorin from him.

And I am damn well going to stop her, he thought.

“Just do it,” he said, his brows furrowing. “Question me again and I will see you spend a day in the pillory, Paulus.”

Decimus raised his brow at him. He nodded once, snide courtesy offered without pretense. “Yes, my lord,” he said, and he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Chapter Sixteen

Wen did not know who was more surprised when she opened her door, drawn by a light, beckoning rap: Wen herself to discover Faustus at the threshold, a plate of cookies in his hand, or the steward, for finding Wen answering the door instead of one of her handmaids. They blinked at one another in mutual, bewildered regard for a moment, and then Faustus lowered his face politely toward the floor.

“Good evening, my lady,” he said. “Please forgive my intrusion.”

“It is no intrusion whatsoever, Faustus,” Wen said, managing a smile. She had changed into her nightclothes, and drew the front of her linen dressing gown more securely across her bosom as she stepped aside from the door. “Would you like to come inside?”

“My lady is kind, thank you,” Faustus said, entering the chamber. She closed the door behind him and they both stood there awkwardly.

“I...I sent the maids away for the night,” Wen said, feeling some sense of obligation to break the silence, seeing as how she had extended the invitation to enter. “I thought Coinin and I could take supper together and spend some time, just the two of us. I hope that is alright.”

She glanced anxiously at Faustus, wondering if he was there because Aulus had learned of her dismissal of her attendants, and was somehow angry with her, or them. “Of course that is alright, my lady,” Faustus said. “Whatever pleases you.”

“Oh,” Wen said, nodding once, looking away from him. She spied Coinin out of the corner of her eye; the little girl had abandoned her supper plate to poke her head into the parlor, curious to see who paid call. When she saw Faustus, her mouth unfurled in a bright, delighted grin and she rushed across the room, her headful of dark ringlets bouncing.

“Hullo, little lass,” Faustus said, smiling at her. The uncertainty in his face softened, and he knelt, laughing as Coinin plowed into his chest, throwing her arms around him in an exuberant embrace. “Yes, it is nice to see you again, as well.”

“She likes you.” Wen could not help but to smile, too. Coinin warmed to so few people, it seemed in her observation, and to no man at the palace Wen had met.

Whatever Faustus had done in Coinin's company that morning had endeared him in the little girl's regard. "She seems to, yes," Faustus agreed as Coinin planted a loud, smacking kiss against his cheek. "And she has proven rather difficult to dislike herself."

Coinin was looking at the plate of cookies with sudden interest, and blinked at Faustus, her eyes round with eager anticipation. "Yes, these are for you," he said, laughing as she took the plate from his hand. Wen did not know precisely what to make of Faustus. Considering he was Aulus' personal steward, a man who had served the consul for many years, her first instinct was to mistrust him. However, Coinin seemed genuinely fond of Faustus, and because the girl extended her trust and affection so discriminately, Wen was inclined to have some faith in the child's judgment of worthwhile character.

"Coinin, why do you not finish your supper before the cookies?" Wen asked, drawing the girl's gaze. Coinin's bottom lip pinched in a disappointed pout. "You have hardly touched it. Go on now. You can have a cookie and visit with Faustus afterwards, I promise."

Coinin uttered a dejected sort of sigh, but nodded her head. She turned, trudging back toward the bed chamber, where their supper table had been set. Faustus smiled fondly as he watched her go.

"I do not think she was born a slave," he remarked, and Wen looked at him. "She does not speak to tell me, but she does not act like most children I have known to that manner born."

"Were you, Faustus?" she asked. "Born a slave, I mean."

He glanced up at Wen and his expression grew sheepish, as though she had offered admonishment for his thinking aloud. He rose to his feet, brushing his hands against the flaps of his justicoat to settle it back into proper place. "Forgive me, my lady," he said, averting his gaze to the ground. "I spoke out of turn."

"No, you did not, Faustus," Wen said. "You can speak freely here. It is alright. Were you born to it?"

He looked at her, warily, as if he anticipated some manner of trick. After a moment, he looked away toward the toes of his polished shoes again. "Yes, my lady,"

he said. "I have known slavery all of my days, as did my parents, and theirs before them."

Wen blinked at him, stricken at this.

"I...I should like to thank you, my lady," Faustus said quietly. "For your gracious intervention today with my lord. I am grateful for that."

"In my country, people do not keep slaves," Wen said. "Our servants are our employees, paid for their duties. We do not beat them, or keep them from speaking their minds—no different than any other free citizen."

Fautus glanced at her. "It sounds like a marvelous place, this Tiralainn of yours," he said softly.

He looked melancholy, and Wen felt her heart pang with sorrow for him. "It is, yes."

After a long moment, Faustus spoke again, his expression shifting into a customary, business-as-usual set. "My Lord Tertius has sent me to make sure your supper was to your liking, my lady."

"It was fine, thank you," Wen said.

"He was concerned for you, my lady," Faustus said. "He thought this afternoon's activities might have caused you some distress."

He is damn bloody right, then, Wen thought. She had never known such horrors in all of her days as the brutal spectacle of the circus. Someone, she had struggled to maintain her composure, even as she had watched in stricken, helpless aghast as Einar and his friends had fought against the narsana. She had felt tears burn her eyes, her breath escaping her throat in dismayed, horrified gasps as one of the enormous cats had pinned Einar to the ground, tearing open his shoulder with its claws. Her tears had spilled, and she had wiped at them swiftly lest they draw notice as she had listened to him screaming, his voice filled with poignant, desperate resolve: "I will not die here!"

"I have never seen such sport before, that is all," she said. She forced herself to smile, to shrug her shoulder dismissively. "Lord Tertius is kind to have worried."

Faustus met her gaze. He said nothing at first, holding his eyes fixed on her face as if he could see straight through her casual façade, and to the underlying dismay beneath. "If I may, my lady," he said, his voice so soft, it was nearly whispered. "Lord

Tertius is a sadistic and egomaniacal bastard who would butcher young boys as a gentleman of proper character might offer flowers in courtship.”

Wen blinked at him, startled. He did not avert his gaze, and when he spoke again, it was in the same hushed tone. “And if I may, my lady, he has no intention of seeing you return to Tiralainn. He has no intention of seeing you leave Kharhorin at all.”

Wen’s breath drew still in her throat. She had suspected that Aulus had not sent word to Cneas of her arrival, although he had assured her he would. She had harbored the disquieting notion all along that there was something insidious within Aulus’ character, and that he had never meant for Kierken or anyone else in Tiralainn to learn what had happened to her, or her father or anyone else from the crew of the *a’Maorga*. To hear Faustus basically admit this aloud, however, left her stricken. “Why are you telling me this?” she whispered.

“Because I think this is not something you do not already know,” he replied.

She stepped toward him, glancing over her shoulder uncertainly. “Is he watching us now? I found one of his peepholes last night. Is he there?”

“I do not believe so, my lady,” he said. “I left him as he took conference with his Praetorius, Decimus Paulus, in his chambers.”

“The boy who was injured in the arena today,” she said. “An Enghan boy with dark hair. Do you know what happened to him? Do you know where they brought him?”

“Yes, my lady,” Faustus said. “I believe I overheard my lord and his guest, Lord Abito discussing a visit with him earlier this evening. Lord Abito has agreed to purchase the lad, as is my understanding.”

She looked him in the eyes. “Can you bring me to him?” she whispered.

“I do not think that would be prudent, my lady,” he said. “As our company together to such a destination might rouse suspicion...and reach my lord’s ear.” He leaned toward her, canting his face to speak softly against her ear. “However, if you were to follow me, my lady, should I step beyond your chamber door and follow the corridor to my right, I could hardly prevent you.”

Wen looked at him and the corner of his mouth lifted briefly in a fleeting smile. “And if you should follow as I make my way through the servants’ stairwell and down into the passageways below the palace, I could hardly prevent this, either. If you

followed me along these until we reached a tunnel attended to by a pair of bellatori, I could not stop you. If, say perchance, I were to stop and speak to these bellatori, engaging them in some manner of idle but cordial discourse, I could hardly keep you from slipping past them unnoticed in the shadows and down the corridor past their post.”

He dipped his hand into his justicoat pocket. She heard the soft jangle of metal against metal and looked down, seeing that he cradled a key ring in against his palm. “I suppose if you followed this corridor, marking four iron doors along its walls to your left, and if you perchance stopped at the fourth door and inserted this key...” He sifted among the keys on the ring, pinching one between his fingertips and thumb and wiggling it slightly at her. “...I could scarcely prevent that as well.”

He was offering the keys to her, and Wen took them, closing her fingers about the ring.

“Lord Tertius has had a bit to drink this evening,” Faustus remarked. “Enjoying the company of his old and fond friend, I am sure you know. These slipped from his pocket to the parlor floor as he removed his justicoat earlier. It has likewise slipped my mind to return them to him yet.”

“I cannot leave,” she said. “I cannot leave Coinin alone here. He...” She glanced again over her shoulder, to the painted tendrils of flowers along the far wall. “He watches sometimes, and he will see I am gone.”

Faustus was quiet for a thoughtful moment, and then he nodded once. “I will be right back.”

“What?” Wen asked.

He said nothing more; merely dropped her a quick wink, turned and left the room. Wen stood in the parlor, blinking in confused disbelief. She had found an ally—at last, someone besides Coinin she could seem to trust in. She did not know if she felt more thankful or anxious by the prospect.

She went to the bed chamber doorway and peered inside. Coinin was sitting at the small table arranged before the hearth. Her supper plate was basically empty. She had eaten all of the proffered roasted pheasant and barley bread. Her boiled root vegetables remained on the plate, stirred about a bit to create the illusion of having

been sampled. Wen had not missed the wrinkling of Coinin's nose when she had first spied the vegetables, and she nearly chuckled now at the girl's efforts—it was a similar ploy Wen herself used to try against her mother at suppertime.

"You ate it all?" Wen asked, drawing Coinin's gaze. Coinin kicked her heels against the chair legs and nodded, smiling. The plateful of cookies was empty, too, and Wen's eyes widened. "And all of those cookies? You must have been hungry."

Coinin nodded again. She had not spoken all day, although Wen had tried to coax her into it. She seemed stubbornly resolute on the matter; she had not even offered a head nod or shake when Wen had tried asking her about her retreat to the slave quarters, or the boy she had gone to comfort.

"Are you ready for bed, then?" Wen asked. Coinin's expression shifted to dismay, and she opened her mouth, gasping soundlessly in protest. "Faustus had to leave for a moment," Wen told her. "He will be right back. He told me he would. Why do you not get in bed, and he can come and wish you good-night?"

Coinin blinked at her again, that bottom lip pudging forth in objection.

"Prayers first?" Wen asked, accurately deciphering the expression. Coinin nodded, and Wen clapped her hands, waving her toward the bed. "Alright, then—off you go."

She watched the little girl scamper from the table to the beside, where she promptly dropped to her knees in prostrate pose. She folded her hands against the edge of the mattress and lowered her face, her little mouth already moving in her quiet, fervent implores.

Wen heard a soft knock at the door and walked back across the parlor. She found Faustus at the threshold again, this time in the company of a young slave woman dressed in a nightdress with a dark tumble of curly hair.

"This is Minoria, my lady," Faustus said, as Wen stepped back, allowing him to usher the girl inside. Wen shut the door behind them and looked at him, curiously.

"How do you do, Minoria?" Wen asked, drawing a hesitant glance from the girl.

"I...I do quite well, my lady," Minoria said softly, averting her gaze swiftly to the floor again.

“Minoria has graciously agreed to keep with our young lass for a time,” Faustus told Wen. “If you should decide you might care of a spot of air beyond your chamber door, or the like, my lady. I have roused Minoria from her bed. I thought perhaps she might rest her head in yours for a time.”

He placed careful emphasis on the word *head*, and Wen understood. Minoria’s dark curls resembled hers enough that in the dark, with covers drawn toward her face, she could fool Aulus should he choose to look through his peephole and into the bedchamber.

“We will have to dim the lamps,” she said, looking at Faustus. “Coinin is saying her prayers, readying for bed. The light might disturb her.”

“Of course, my lady,” Faustus said, nodding politely.

The three of them walked into the bedchamber. While Faustus helped tuck Coinin in for the night, and offered introductions to Minoria, Wen reached into her wardrobe, drawing out a long, dark redingdote. She drew the folds of wool about her shoulders, hoping the dark fabric and hood would help keep her hidden from the notice of the guards as she followed Faustus through the servants’ corridors. She tucked the key ring into the hip pocket of the redingdote and kept her hand closed over it to hold the keys still and quiet.

“I should take my leave then, my lady,” Faustus told her. He had been sitting on the side of the bed, but stood now, walking toward her.

“Thank you, Faustus,” Wen whispered.

“For what, my lady?” he asked, blinking innocently.

She smiled for him and nodded. He walked past her, leaving the chamber and she looked at Coinin. “You go to sleep now.” She went to the bed and leaned over, pressing her lips against the child’s brow. “Be a good girl for Minoria. I will be back in awhile.”

Coinin nodded mutely, holding the ragdoll Wen had made tucked beneath her chin. Wen kissed her again, and glanced at Minoria. “I will be back,” she said, and the slave girl nodded.

“Yes, my lady.”

Wen ducked out of her suite and followed Faustus along the corridor to the servants' passage. She followed him down a long, narrow flight of stairs into the lower levels beneath the palace foundation. She drew the hood of her redingdote over her head, and let her feet mark a wary pace behind him, in case they met any soldiers along the way. They followed the tunnels beneath the palace for at least ten minutes, guided only by the periodic, dim glow of torches mounted along the way, and then Faustus paused ahead of her, at a place where the passage way forked in opposite directions, left and right. Wen fell still behind him, shying against the wall.

He glanced at her over his shoulder and then followed the right fork in the tunnel, his voice raised in affable good cheer. "Hoah, hullo," he called out, and she knew he was speaking to bellatori sentries. They had reached the passage leading to the cell block, then. Wen closed her hand firmly against the keys in her pocket, holding her breath. *Four doors to the left*, she told herself, remembering Faustus' instructions. *Past the guards and down the corridor, four doors on the left.*

"I say, have either of you seen a little slave girl darting about?" she heard Faustus say.

"Lost her again, have you, Faustus?" someone answered in reply, laughing.

"You will have to tie a bell 'round her neck, Faustus," laughed another. "You have not even made it twelve full hours without losing her!"

Wen crept to the junction of the tunnel. To her left, the passage continued along as a service corridor. She peeped to her right and caught a glimpse of Faustus in the company of a pair of uniformed bellatori. Just as Faustus had told her, the sentries were posted in front of a large iron gate. The gate stood open wide on its hinges, swinging inward upon a lantern-lined passageway.

Einar is down there, she thought. *The fourth door on my left.*

"I tell you, lads, if Lord Tertius learns of this, he will have me in a pinch for sure," Faustus said. He draped his arms across either of the soldiers' shoulders and drew them away from the gated threshold, deliberately turning their backs to the corridor—and Wen.

"Hoah, he has been in a rot-ass mood lately," one of the guards said.

“Lately?” the other asked, and he laughed again. “When is that bloody, pompous bastard in anything less?”

Wen hurried forward, her feet whispering silently against the ground as she darted around the corner of the passage and toward the gate.

“Do not worry for it, Faustus. We will not say a word,” one of the bellatori said, clapping him on the shoulder as Wen scurried past them and down the corridor into the cell block. Their voices faded, growing resonant and dim as she ran along the passage. She counted doors to her left as she passed them, pausing only long enough to snatch a lantern hanging from a peg along the wall, bringing it with her. When she reached the fourth door, she drew against the wall, setting the lantern down and yanking the key ring out of her pocket. She had kept her index finger tucked against the key Faustus had showed her, lest in her fear, she might forget which one was which. She pushed the key into the nook set in the heavy iron door and turned it, wincing and glancing over her shoulder toward the gate in anxious alarm as the tumblers clacked loudly. Faustus kept the soldiers distracted; she heard their laughter rolling down the corridor. Wen closed her hand against the handle of the cell door and grimaced as she hauled it open. It squalled softly in protest on its hinges, but did not attract the guards. She hefted the lantern in hand and ducked inside, drawing the door closed behind her.

She turned, raising the lantern and gasped, startled, stumbling back against the door. There was an Ulsian man in the cell—a very tall, muscular man, with long black hair worn shaved along his scalp toward the cap of his skull. He wore only a loincloth about his hips and a foreboding scowl on his face. He had been kneeling on the floor next to a young man who lay prone and motionless on a pallet of blankets.

Einar! she thought, dismayed to see her friend’s torso swathed in blood-spotted bandages.

The Ulsian stood upon her abrupt entrance, his hands closing into fists, his brows narrowing. She blinked at him, trembling and frightened. He must have been one of the Minghan warriors Aulus had forced to fight in the arena alongside the Enghan, she realized. He, too, wore heavy bandages covering wounds from the narsana’s teeth and claws. Whatever pain he might have suffered did not reflect in his face, however,

and the Minghan stepped forward, positioning himself protectively between Einar and Wen.

“Please,” Wen whispered, somewhat breathlessly. She tucked the keys back into her pocket and lowered her hood. She held out her hand in implore. “Please, it is alright. Do not be frightened.”

“You leave,” the Minghan told her, his expression not softening in the slightest. His fists tightened and his frown deepened. His voice—the soft, delicate timbre of it, sweet and melodic like a young child’s, or a woman’s—took her by surprise. His common tongue was broken and slow, as though the dialect was unaccustomed to him. “Boy is hurting. He sleeps now. His voice is still. His mind is quiet. Leave him alone.”

“I...I am his friend,” Wen said. “I was brought here with him. He knows me.” The Minghan did not look the least bit convinced and she stepped toward him, her eyes swimming with tears. “My name is Aelwen Fainne. He knows me, I swear it. Please let me see him. Please let me go to him.”

Einar moaned softly from his pallet on the floor. He turned his head, his brows lifting at the sound of Wen’s voice, and he moved weakly beneath the blankets, drawing his hands to his face.

The Minghan turned to him, and his stern expression softened. He knelt beside Einar, gently brushing the young man’s disheveled hair back from his brow. “Tere ayu sayinn,” he said quietly, words spoken in a language Wen did not understand.

“Please,” Wen said, and the Minghan looked up at her. He seemed uncertain and unhappy, but nodded once. She hurried to Einar’s side, falling onto her knees. She set the lantern aside and leaned over Einar. As she cradled his face between her hands, he moaned again, his voice feeble and tremulous.

She remembered that during their pauses along the caravan route from Lith to Elbeuf -- the day before the imperial attack against the Enghan, in fact -- Einar had approached her. It was one of the rare moments when she had actually enjoyed the chance to speak to the young man in private. Pryce had walked back to the wagon to get a waterskin, and she had been sitting on a crumbled outcrop of stone, nibbling on some flatbread and dried fish for lunch.

“Are you and Pryce in love?” he had asked her. There had been no preamble to the conversation, no words of greeting, just this simple question, and Einar’s eyes on her, bright with curiosity.

His innocent, earnest candor had caught her off-guard, and she had coughed slightly, nearly inhaling a bit of chewed bread down her windpipe. She had felt herself blush brightly, and she had managed a laugh. “I...I think we are falling in love, yes, Einar,” she had admitted. “At least, I hope we are.”

Einar had come to sit beside her, hooking his elbows over his knees. “I cannot see how he could not be,” he had remarked without looking at her. “Pryce, I mean...with you, that is.” He had glanced at her, and then down at his hands. “Is it nice?”

“I think so,” she had told him, and he had smiled.

“I imagine it must be,” he had said, looking back toward the wagon. “I remember that is how it was between Mothir and Fathir -- nice.”

“You have never been in love before, Einar?” Wen had asked him softly, drawing his gaze again.

“Oh, I liked a girl in the byr for awhile,” he had said with a shrug. “Asny Geirsdottir. She was very pretty.” He glanced at Wen and then looked away again, nearly sheepish, shy color stoking in his cheeks. “Not as pretty as you, Wen, but enough so, I suppose.”

It had dawned on her that Einar was harboring a crush on her, and she had smiled at him, touched. “What happened to her?”

He had shrugged again. “She married Heri Vigagalti, Thorir’s Styrimathr for the Dalr’kyn,” he had said. “He is much older than me. She thought he would make a more capable husband. She told me that. I have never even kissed before, though I suppose that must be nice, too.” “It is,” she had said and he had laughed, blushing more brightly. She had leaned her shoulder against his, offering him a friendly nudge. “You will see someday, Einar, when the time is right. I promise you.” Wen struggled to reconcile the memory of this earnest, sweet boy, his dark eyes bright with innocent adoration as he had looked at her, and the injured, fragile young man who lay before her in the palace cell; this young man who had been forced to abandon the naiveté of his youth for the

brutal yard of a circus arena, whose charming ingenuousness had been likely lost in full to the claws of narsana.

“Einar,” she whispered, stroking his cheek. She leaned forward, pressing her lips against his brow. “Einar, it is Wen. I am here, Einar. It is Wen.”

Einar’s eyelids fluttered at her caress, and she said his name again, softly. He jerked, coming to abruptly, his eyes flying wide as he twisted away from her touch, his breath caught in a frightened gasp. “No—!”

“Einar, it is alright,” Wen said, reaching for him again. Moving had brought him pain and he had cried out softly, hoarsely, writhing against his blankets. “It is alright,” she whispered. She said this over and over until he blinked at her, the dazed panic in his eyes waning into recognition, until his frantic, hitching breaths slowed and he trembled against her. “It is alright.”

“Wen...” he whispered. His hand brushed clumsily against her cheek. He closed his eyes wearily, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. “Heil...” he said, his voice slurred and drowsy.

“Heil,” she said softly in greeting, turning her cheek to kiss his fingers as his hand drooped away from her, falling back against his breast. She hooked her hand atop his, and he opened his eyes again, batting them sleepily at the gentle pressure of her touch.

“Fathir...said he would be right back,” he murmured. “Did...did you see him? I heard him calling, but I...”

His voice faded, and he closed his eyes, his brows pinching slightly. He gasped again, wincing as though a spasm of pain struck him, and then he looked up at Wen. “Wen,” he said, his voice hoarse, but stronger.

“I am here,” she told him, clutching at his hand. “I am here, Einar. It is me.”

“Where...?” He canted his head, grimacing again as he strained his injured shoulders. “Where is Subetei?”

She glanced at the Minghan, puzzled, wondering if this was the Ulusian man’s name. The Minghan leaned over into Einar’s line of sight, drawing a smile from the younger man as he touched his cheek. “I am here, little one,” Subetei said.

Einar nodded. “This...this is Wen,” he said. “Wen, this is Subetei.”

Wen blinked at the Minghan. “How...how do you do?”

He glanced down at his injured, bandaged torso and then at her again, raising his brow as though she had been struck daft. "Been better," he said.

Einar's fingers tightened slightly against Wen's. "Wen, they...they want us...to fight again," he said softly. "I...I heard them earlier. They...they want..."

"I will not let them," she promised. "I will talk to Aulus Tertius, Einar. He will listen to me. I will not let them -- "

"Wen," Einar said, and he winced as he tried to sit up. Wen and Subetei moved quickly to help him, and he managed to prop himself up on his elbow, leaning heavily against Subetei's shoulder. He closed his eyes and gasped for breath for a moment, and then looked at Wen again, shaking his head. "No," he said. "You do not understand. I...I want them to." She blinked at him, startled. "I want them to fight us again."

"Einar, it would kill you," Wen said, stricken. She touched his face. "You cannot fight, not like this. No, I will not let you."

He shook his head again. "Not...not me," he said. "Not Subetei. The others. Twenty others from the Seggr they took." He caught her hand and held her gaze. "They will pick them from the carcer, bring them to the arena...to a room where they keep weapons. Swords and spears...armor, helmets. Twenty Seggr could fight the guards before they even step out onto the arena yard. They could fight them, get away. It could be our chance to get out of here."

Wen's breath drew still. "You are right," Einar said. "Aulus Tertius will listen to you. Tell him you want to see the Seggr fight the Minghan." He glanced at Subetei, who nodded. "Twenty Enghan," Einar said to Wen. "Against twenty Minghan. Tell him, Wen."

"I could go to the carcer," Wen whispered. "I could go tonight, tell the others what to expect, what to do."

Einar nodded, wincing slightly, his fingertips dancing against his wounded left shoulder. "Go...go to the window where you called to me," he said. "Talk to Hagal...call for him. He is there. Tell him he must take nineteen of the strongest...get them at the front of the cells whenever Tertius comes so he will see them...pick them. Let them know. Tell them about the weapons. Tell them to fight the guards...to take their uniforms and follow the passages back above ground. Tell them to go to the carcer...free the others."

He glanced at Subetei again. "You...you will have to tell the Minghan, too. Some of them are in the carcer with the Seggr. A...a man named..."

"Bedugun," Subetei said, looking at Wen. "His name is Bedugun. You tell him same -- you tell him Subetei Kokegan sends you."

"Bedugun," Wen said, nodding. "Alright. When?"

"Whenever Tertius comes," Subetei said. "He will come -- you tell them to make ready."

"I will tell him two days," Wen said. "Give me two days -- I have Tertius' keys. I will come for you both, get you out of here. We can meet the others at the carcer." She looked at Einar, her eyes filled with sorrow. "I have not found Pryce yet," she said. "Give me two days, Einar. I will find him. I will free him. By my breath, we will all get out of here together somehow."

Einar nodded, closing his eyes again, his breath shuddering slowly from him. "Alright," he whispered, his voice fading wearily. He blinked at her, his eyes opening dazedly, and he brushed his fingers against her cheek. "Be careful, Wen," he breathed.

"Do not worry for me," Wen said. She cupped her hand against his face and leaned forward, pressing her lips against the corner of his mouth. "Worry for Aulus Tertius when I am through with him. He has a lot to answer for."

Faustus was still holding the sentries' attentions with idle conversation as Wen stole out of Einar's cell. He caught sight of her as she crept back along the corridor toward the gate, and again, he drew the soldiers' attentions, luring them to face him so that they kept their backs to the gate and were oblivious to Wen's passage.

She waited for him around the corner, shied against the wall as he offered his farewells and took his leave.

"Good luck finding the lass, Faustus," she heard one of the guards call as the sound of the steward's footsteps drew near.

"Do not forget that bell next time!" called the other, and they both laughed good-naturedly.

Faustus stepped around the corner, and Wen drew back reflexively. He glanced at her, the corner of his mouth lifted slightly, and then he continued past her, as though

they were only cordial acquaintances passing in the shadows. Wen followed him, drawing the folds of her redingote about her more securely.

“Did you find everything, my lady?” Faustus asked quietly without turning to look at her or breaking his stride in the least.

“Yes,” Wen nodded. “Yes, I did. Thank you, Faustus.” She reached out and caught him by the sleeve of his coat. He paused, looking at her. “I need you to keep the keys a bit longer,” she whispered. “Two more days. Can you distract Lord Tertius in the meantime?”

“I think I can, yes, my lady,” he said. He did not ask her why she needed the keys, and Wen was grateful. She trusted Faustus, but only to a point; he remained a relative stranger to her, and Coinin’s faith in him, and his own generous efforts that evening did not soften Wen enough to tell him about the escape plans she and Einar had just made. *Not yet*, she thought. If Faustus was trying to dupe her somehow; if he went back to Aulus and told the consul what she had been up to that night, she still had a chance of fooling him. She could try to convince Aulus she had simply gone to see Einar because she had wanted the chance to gloat over his suffering. Aulus believed the Enghan had abducted her, and that for this, Wen loathed them. It make take some doing on her part, a bit of conscientious eyelash-batting and cooing that turned her stomach to think about, but she thought she could get Aulus to believe such a tale if need be.

Wen nodded again. “Good,” she said. “Thank you, Faustus.”

He lowered his face politely. “You are welcome, my lady.”

They walked together along the narrow corridor. They had nearly reached the staircase leading to the first floor of the palace when they heard the soft pattering of rapidly approaching footsteps. Wen froze, shying against the wall, her hands darting to her face as she drew her hood further down along her brow. She saw a slim shadow dancing and bouncing along the wall, and then a small form, nearly silhouetted appeared ahead of them, dashing down the passage toward them.

It took Wen a startled moment, and then she gasped, her eyes flying wide as she stepped away from the wall. “Coinin?”

The little girl drew to a skittering halt at the sound of her name, and the apparently unexpected sight of Faustus and Wen together in the tunnel. She was

dressed in her nightgown, with only a thin linen robe lashed about her against the cold. She was barefooted, her long hair unfettered, tousled about her head in a disheveled tumble. She carried a small bundle clutched against her chest, something wrapped in what appeared to be a linen supper napkin. Her blue eyes grew very wide and round with surprise. "Wen!"

Wen stepped toward her and Coinin took a hedging, uncertain step back. "Coinin," Wen said again, reaching for her. "What are you...?"

Her voice faded abruptly, and she blinked in startled realization. She had told Coinin her name was Aelwen. No one at the palace knew she went by the shortened form, *Wen* ordinarily and certainly, no one there called her that. Although the child could have simply come up with it on her own, given her limited willingness to speak, Wen felt her heart suddenly tremble nonetheless. *She would not have thought of it on her own, she thought, breathless. She would not have -- could not have. She has heard that somewhere. That is why she kept saying it last night; over and over again, she called me 'Wen' and seemed so pleased that I answered her. It was like she had made a discovery. Like she had found someone she knew.*

"Coinin, come here," Wen said, struggling to summon her voice from the pit of her knotted stomach. Coinin shook her head, fearfully, and took another inching, wary step back. Wen walked slowly toward the girl, holding her hands outstretched. "Coinin," she said, and her voice warbled with tears. "Please. Please come here. I know where you are going."

Mother Above, she knows my name is Wen.

Coinin blinked at her and shied again, drawing the napkin-wrapped bundle fiercely against her, as if she thought Wen meant to take it. "You are going to see that boy, are you not?" Wen said. "The boy in the slave quarters?"

Coinin nodded hesitantly.

He is alone in the dark, Coinin had told her. It is scary there. Sometimes I hear him.

"They do not feed him," Coinin said quietly, clutching at the bundle. "He is hungry."

Wen realized why the little girl's supper plate had so quickly been cleaned; Coinin had not eaten the food at all. She had hidden it, along with the cookies Faustus had brought, in her napkin while Wen was not paying attention. Wen felt her heart nearly break at this.

"Who is hungry, Coinin?" she asked. She had drawn very near to the girl now, and when Coinin tried to duck past her and run away, Wen caught her by the sleeve, holding her fast. Coinin did not scream, but she opened her mouth, uttering a soundless, gasping sound as she struggled to squirm loose. Wen dropped to her knees and took her by the shoulders. "Who is hungry, Coinin? Who is down here? Did he tell you my name is Wen? Did he tell you that?"

Coinin fell still. She stared at Wen, her eyes swimming with tears. "He...he cries sometimes for you," she whispered after a long moment, and Wen's hand darted to her mouth, muffling a low, anguished cry. "Is it Pryce?" She touched Coinin's cheek, brushing her hair back. "Hoah...I...Coinin, please, I am not angry with you. I promise I am not. Please, you have to tell me. You have to. Is it Pryce? Is Pryce down here? Is he who you went to see last night?"

Coinin stared at her, and Wen thought she would not answer. She lowered her face, pressing her fingertips against her lips. Her shoulders trembled as she began to weep. "Please tell me where he is," she pleaded. "Please, Coinin. He is hurt. He needs me. Please, I...I love him so much."

She looked up at the little girl and saw tears streaming down Coinin's cheeks. "He loves you, too," the child whispered. "I heard him say that."

"Will you take me to him?" Wen asked, and when Coinin nodded, Wen drew her against her shoulder, hugging her fiercely. She looked beyond Coinin's shoulder at Faustus, her eyes filled with desperate implore.

"Her chamber is down the cell block we just left, my lady," Faustus said. "Second from the last on the right. That is where I found her this morning. I suppose we could tell the guards she abandoned a toy there, one she cannot sleep without. You were only bringing her down to fetch it." He looked up at her and smiled. "I have nothing else planned this evening, my lady," he added. "And it would seem you have need of another distraction."

“Yes,” Wen whispered, nodding, holding Coinin as the child trembled, whimpering with tears. “Yes, Faustus. Please.”

“Pryce?”

Pryce’s eyelids fluttered open in the darkness at the soft whisper of his name. He moaned softly, moving his hands. His entire body screamed in miserable protest at the motion; he had strained muscles from his shoulders to his calves in his desperate, furious -- and ultimately futile -- struggles to free himself from his chains the day before. Not that Pryce had any concept of a day in full passing him by as he lay against the cold, unyielding floor of his cell, fading restlessly in and out of dazed consciousness.

He had awoke to find the little girl gone, the narrow space in the wall separating them, and through which she had poked her fingers, empty and abandoned. He had fallen asleep listening to the soft murmur of her prayers. He had awoken sometime later, heaving up the cheese she had given him, the food he had gobbled down greedily. His poor stomach had grown unaccustomed to having anything in it. It had tolerated the cheese for as long as what must have seemed polite to it, and then he had retched violently, drawing himself onto his hands and knees and trying to reach a corner of the cell. He had cried out hoarsely, vomiting until his stomach twisted in a painful knot; even when there was nothing left of the meager rations to come up, he had retched up mouthfuls of thick, foamy bile. He had crumpled, weak and shuddering when at last his stomach had calmed, letting the cool, damp surface of the ground beneath his cheek soothe him.

His stomach still ached, like the waning soreness of a particularly nasty bruise. He pressed his palms against his belly and closed his eyes, wincing. He felt his mind being tugged gently, insistently back toward unconsciousness.

“Pryce?” he heard the girl call softly, her voice louder now, and he realized she was near the opening, her face nearly pressed to it from the sounds of it. “Pryce, are you there?”

“I am here,” he murmured, not opening his eyes. He moved his hands slowly, feebly, wanting to reach for her. “I...I am here, lass.”

He heard another voice call to him, and his eyes flew wide in the darkness, his breath drawing to a sharp and abrupt halt.

“Pryce? Pryce, please, can you hear me?”

It cannot be, he thought. He shoved his hands against the ground and forced himself to sit up. *It cannot be. If I was not imagining things before, then surely I am now. I have gone mad. I have lost my damn fool mind.*

“Pryce, please,” the voice called, and he heard a soft gasp, the flutter of a muffled sob. “Pryce, it is me -- it is Wen. I am here. Please.”

“Wen?” he whispered, stunned, trembling. He shoved the heels of his palms against his brow and shook his head. *I have gone mad*, he thought, and tears stung his eyes. *Mother Above, I have lost my mind.*

“Pryce, please...” Wen begged, and then she seemed to speak to someone else. “Why will he not answer?”

“Because you are not real,” Pryce whispered, and to prove it to himself, he crawled toward the sound of the voice. “You are not real, Wen. You are in my mind, and I have gone mad.”

“Pryce!” Wen called again, desperately, her voice choked with tears. “Pryce -- answer me! Please, please, answer me!”

He reached down, fumbling with his hands along the floor, searching for the opening. He drew back, gasping in start as his fingers brushed against something -- someone else’s fingertips, too large to be a child’s. At this brief, fleeting contact, he heard Wen utter a soft cry.

“Pryce?” Her fingertips scrabbled against the ground, clawing and straining through the small hole in the wall. He could hear her frantic motions, and his heart seized with bright, bewildered shock.

“Wen?” he gasped, reaching for her again. He found her hand, her fingers hooking against his own. “Wen!”

“Pryce!” Wen cried, and he leaned forward, lying down on his side with his cheek pressed against the ground near the opening. She was there -- she was real -- and she had apparently done the same. “Pryce, are you there?” she cried, her voice so near to him in the darkness, she might have been standing right before him. She clutched at his

hand, and he could hear her weeping, he could feel the blessed press of her breath against his face, his mouth.

“You...you are real,” he said. He felt her fingertips fumble against his face, his mouth. “You are real. You are here.”

“I am real,” she said. She caught his hand, drawing his fingers through the opening in the stone. He felt her soft, warm breath against his fingertips, her lips dancing against them, kissing them as she wept. “I promise you, Pryce. I am here.”

“Wen, are you alright?” he asked, and he felt it with his fingers as she nodded, brushing her nose against him. “Has he...has he hurt you?” he asked, softly, thinking of Aulus Tertius, and the smug contemptuous look on the consul’s face as he had spoken of Wen. *Lady Fainne-Finamur has softened, it seems...perhaps her mourning for her husband has at last waned, and she is ready for some comfort.* “Has...has that bastard...Tertius touched you?”

He felt her shake her head, and she kissed his fingertips again. “No,” she said. “No, but he hurt you.” Her voice broke, and her hands trembled as she uttered a soft, helpless sob. “He hurt you!”

“Wen...” he whispered, closing his eyes. “Please. It is alright.”

“He hurt you,” she whimpered again.

He spread his fingers slowly, feeling his fingertips brush lightly, tenderly against her lips. “It is alright,” he said softly to her.

“I love you, Pryce,” she said.

“Hoah, Wen, I love you, too,” he breathed, and he smiled, the first he had drawn to his lips in what seemed a lifespan in full to him. “I love you so much, I cannot breathe for it.”

“I am going to get you out of there,” Wen said.

“You cannot,” he said. “It is too dangerous. Tertius is too dangerous. You cannot...”

“Yes, I can,” Wen said, and he could see her in his mind as plainly as if she stood in front of him in broad daylight -- her brows drawn in a stubborn furrow, her lips drawn in a determined line. “Somehow, I am going to.”

“Please, Wen,” he said. If it was a dream, it was both the most marvelous and wonderful one he had ever known -- and the most cruel his heart had ever conceived. Either way, Pryce did not ever want to wake from it.

“I will get you out of there,” Wen said. “I promise, Pryce. I love you, and by my breath, I will get us all out of here somehow.” “I love you, too, Wen,” he whispered. He closed his eyes, feeling Wen’s breath against him, her kisses and tears against his fingertips. *Please stay with me*, he thought. *Please, Wen, do not go*.

“I promise, Pryce,” she said again, and her voice trembled. “With all that I have, I promise.”

The adventure concludes...

**Enjoy this *sneak peek* at the next and final installment,
Book of Dragons, Volume 5 Coming soon in ebook and trade
paperback from Double Dragon Publishing!**

“Rhyden Fabhcun was probably one of the most famous Gaeilge Elves who ever lived,” Odhran told Tacita as they rode. “He was a great hero in Tiralainn.”

And I helped kill him, he thought, feeling dismayed shame stoke within him. He looked away from her, directing his gaze and his thoughts toward the horizon. The dark forms were moving very fast now, as though they had sensed Odhran’s intentions to draw north, away from them, and had quickened their pace, closing the distance between them.

“Why did he live in the Morthir, then?” Tacita asked.

“Who?” Odhran asked, frowning. By his best estimation, the wingspans of whatever the creatures were averaged at least forty feet across. The closer they came, the more clearly he could see them -- and the more he realized they sure as duchan looked like giant bats to him.

“Rhyden Fabhcun,” Tacita said. “If he was a great hero among your people, why would he leave his homeland? Why would he live in Torach?”

“Maybe he did not want to be a hero anymore,” Odhran said. He turned to her. “How fast can a bergelmir run?”

She raised her brows. “I do not know. Fairly swift, I am sure. They are very fleet-footed, from what I understand.”

“Good, then,” Odhran said, nodding once and glancing at the sky again.

“Why?” she asked. She looked past him, and gasped softly, her eyes widening as she realized how near the creatures had drawn.

“Because we are going to run them,” Odhran replied. He closed his fist tightly against his reins and glanced at her. “As hard as you can,” he said. “Keep with me.”

She nodded, frightened, and when he kicked his heels against his bergelmir's ribs, spurring it into a sudden, swift lope, she followed in close step. The two weasels raced north across the Eng plains, their broad paws slapping nimbly against the frost-crusted, snow-dusted ground. The bitter wind whipped in their faces, and Odhran lowered his head, squinting as his eyes watered and his breath was snatched from his mouth. He hunkered over the weasel's scruff, clinging tightly to the reins with one hand, the pistol with his other. He could hear the galloping patter of Tacita's steed just to his right, slightly behind him, as the two bergelmirs bolted nearly alongside one another.

The bats were upon them like falcons swooping down on unsuspecting field mice. Odhran glanced over his shoulder; it was difficult to see as the bergelmir undulated and jostled beneath him, but he could see the creature approach -- he could see their broad, outstretched wings as they darted out of the sky toward them. He blinked in bewildered fright, his vision blurred with tears, jarred by the weasel's pace. *Hoah, is it just me, or are some of the damned things red and green?* he thought, imagining flashes of color behind him -- sunlight against scarlet, green and cerulean -- as the bats descended.

"Tacita! Go!" he screamed, raising the pistol, pivoting in his saddle. "Kick it hard - go! Go!"

He could not see, or hold his arm steady enough to draw aim, but he fired anyway. The an'daga roared, a belching cloud of smoke and sparks spewing from the barrel as the butt slammed against his palm. He shoved the empty pistol deep into its holster, and reached behind him, his fingers fumbling as he hurried to unfetter one of the rifles.

A dozen enormous shadows swooped over his head, low enough and fast enough to slap him with a backlash of swift wind. Odhran yelped as he hunched his shoulders, ducking. Tacita cried out in startled fright, hunkering in her saddle. "Odhran, what are they?" she screamed.

"Bats!" he cried back, sitting up in his saddle, drawing the rifle to his shoulder. "Giant bloody damn bats!"

Again, he could not see or hold steady enough to aim, but he caught a horrifying glimpse of at least twenty other gigantic, winged creatures darting over his head, with

broad wingspans that blocked the sun fleetingly in their passage, and long, whip-like tails that dragged in the air behind them. He saw black bellies and hooked rear talons -- enormous, wicked-looking claws splayed and poised, as if to grasp at them, and he closed his finger against the rifle trigger, wincing at the thunder of its discharge, feeling the brass-adorned butt kick him mightily in the joint of his shoulder.

"Keep running!" he screamed at Tacita, even as she cried out again, jerking back on her reins, drawing her bergelmir to a skittering halt. Odhran looked ahead of them and his eyes flew wide.

"Sweet Mother in frilled knickers -- !" he yelled, falling back in his saddle, drawing on the reins with all of his might. He felt the bergelmir's hindquarters scramble for uncertain purchase as it staggered to a sliding halt, cleaving deep troughs in the frozen ground with its heavy paws. The bats had landed in front of them; more than thirty had dropped to the ground, blocking their passage ahead. "Go right!" Odhran cried at Tacita, tossing his empty rifle to the ground and wrenching the other loose from his saddle. "Go right! Turn it right -- !"

He turned to the right and his voice faltered. More bats had landed here, and more still the great, hulking beasts dropped gracefully from the sky, surrounding them. Odhran jerked on his reins, turning his bergelmir in a tight, prancing circle, staring at the creatures in bright, stricken horror. There were at least seventy of them -- and hundreds more swooping and circling overhead. "Bugger me," he whispered, thrusting the rifle forward, pointing it at the beasts each in turn as his bergelmir danced and circled. *What in the duchan are these things?* he screamed within his mind. *These are not bats! These are not bloody rot damn bats!*

The creatures were indeed multicolored; it had been no trick of the sun, or his eyes. There were scarlet ones, green ones, black ones and blue, the hues of their respective hides brilliant in the bright light of the day. These were no oversized, winged rats; these creatures had no fur or feathers and their skin looked nearly pebbled in texture to Odhran's gaze. They had no front legs; their forelimbs formed their wings, while they supported their weight upon massive, powerful back haunches. Each rear foot equipped with the sets of vicious talons he had observed already. Their necks were thick and long, supporting enormous heads that were shaped almost like a horse's.

Their snouts ended with upper lips that thrust upward toward their nostrils, lending them a sort of sneering appearance. Their pates tapered, sweeping back beyond their skulls in magnificent, tubular crests.

“What...?” Odhran began, his bergelmir turning again and again. He jerked the other pistol from his hip, and he held his arms extended in opposite directions, shoving the barrels at the creatures. He blinked in new shock as one by one, the beasts began to shrug their shoulders, dropping their wings toward the ground, using heavy, hooked claws at the primary joint as forefeet. As their heads lowered to the ground, their shoulders rolling forward, Odhran could see men astride the animals -- at least two per beast -- hundreds of riders astride the massive creatures. “What in the duchan?” Odhran gasped, his throat constricted, his voice a tiny, breathless huff of air. “What...what in the duchan are they?”

Tacita was motionless in her saddle, making no move for her own weapon. Her eyes were enormous -- but with wonder, not fright. “They are dragons,” she whispered, and Odhran blinked at her, stunned. “Odhran, they are dragons!”

About the Author:

Sara Reinke lives in Kentucky with her husband and son. She is the author of *Book of Days*, the award-winning first volume in the Chronicles of Tiralainn series, *Book of Thieves* and *Book of Dragons, Volumes 1-5*. To find out more about Sara, or to read excerpts from these and other available or upcoming titles, visit online at www.sarareinke.com.