

the SONG *of the* SILVERCADES



KAREN SIMPSON NIKAKIS grew up in the alpine region of north-eastern Victoria. She spent her childhood riding horses around the surrounding countryside, developing a keen interest in landscapes.

After starting out as a teacher, Karen worked in adult migrant education, teacher education and business communications. Taking leave from work to spend time with her young children, she pursued further education, becoming interested in fantasy, mythology and Jungian theory. As well as doing a PhD on Joseph Campbell's hero path, she wrote short stories, poetry and novels during this period.

Karen lives with her family on acreage near the western edge of Melbourne and lectures in business communications at Deakin University.

Praise for *The Whisper of Leaves*

‘An impressive debut novel which combines assured writing and well-paced storytelling. K.S. Nikakis is a welcome addition to the ranks of Australian fantasy authors.’

Juliet Marillier

‘*The Whisper of Leaves* is fantasy supreme . . . an enthralling story with characters you care about.’

Van Ikin, *Sydney Morning Herald*

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Good Reading

‘Follow the lovely, vibrant Kira every step of the way in this fast-paced, epic story from a brilliant new Australian writer.’

Toowoomba Chronicle

BOOK 2 OF THE
KIRA CHRONICLES



the
SONG *of the*
SILVERCADES

K.S. NIKAKIS

ARENA
ALLEN & UNWIN

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*For Con, Chrysanthe and Andreas, Roy and Brenda,
Poppy and Terry*

First published in 2008

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Oskinas Sea

Talliel



ASHKAL PLAIN

KALIN PEAK
HELIN PEAK
MINTLIN PEAK

SILVERCADES

KESSOM

STONYCADES

REHAN SPUR

SARNIA

LEHAN SPUR

BISHALI
GROUNDS

Kito River

EAST
SARSALIN

EMBER
KEEP

BRESHLIN
FORD

The Steelwater

SARSALIN PLAIN



THE WESTLANS

TAIN LANDS

SCHARN
GRASSLANDS

GAIFEN PLAIN

THE FIERWAY

SHARDOS
AURANTIA
CAVE

AZURCADES
(BRAGHANS)

MOORTON'S
MELD

DENDORA
PLAIN

THE
GROUNDS

CASHGARS
ARTHARAN'S
CAVE

WESHARGH
LANDS

SOUSHARGH
LANDS



SOUTHERN
FORESTS

ALLOGRENIA

Shanwar River

Gronwar River

Shunawar River

The Tremen



KASHCLAN

Kiraon (Kira) – Tremen Leader and Healer

Miken – Clanleader of Kashclan
Tenerini – bondmate of Miken
Tresen – son of Miken and Healer
Mikini – daughter of Miken
Brem – Healer
Arlen – Healer
Werem – Healer
Paterek – Healer

MORCLAN

Marren – Clanleader
Kest – Protector Commander

SARCLAN

Berendash – Clanleader

TARCLAN

Kemrick – Clanleader

RENCLAN

Sanden – Clanleader
Pekrash – Protector Leader and Commander of the volunteers

KENCLAN

Tenedren – Clanleader

BARCLAN

Ketten – Clanleader

SHERCLAN

Dakresh – Clanleader
Sener – son of Dakresh

Tallien



Caledon e Saridon e Talliel
Roshai – Caledon's sister
Pisa – Roshai's youngest daughter
Mechtlin – Roshai's husband

Tain



Beris – King
Adris – Prince, son of Beris

King's Guard

Remas – Guard Leader
Ather – Second Leader
Belzen
Archorn

Troopsmen

Dorchen – Commander
Selvet – Troop Leader
Somer
Tardich
Derz

Physicks

Dumer – Physick-General
Aranz – Major Physick
Speri – lesser physick

Gatherer

Jaitich

Terak Kirillian



Rulership

Tierken – Feailner
Laryia – Tierken's sister
Darid (dec) – Tierken's uncle and previous Feailner
Poerin – Tierken's military trainer

Marken – advisers to Terak Kirillian rulership

Rosham – Farid's father
Borsten
Gelf
Milsin
Soresh
Therkash

Domain – Centre of rulership

Farid – Keeper of the Domain
Ryn – Horse Master
Mouras – Room Master
Niria – server and Marin’s wife

Domain Guard

Tharin – Guard Leader
Daril – Guard Second

Terak Kirillian Patrolmen

Marin – Commander
Jonred – Patrol Leader
Anvorn
Drinen
Shird
Vardrin
Slivkash
Jarvid

Kessomi



Eris – Darid’s mother and grandmother
to Tierken and Laryia
Thalli – childhood friend of Laryia
Leos – Thalli’s husband
Jafiel – Leos’s brother
Kira – Thalli’s baby daughter
Robrin – stable master

Shargh



Cashgar Shargh

Erboran – Chief (dec)
Palansa – join-wife of Erboran
Ersalan – baby son of Palansa – next
Chief
Arkendrin – younger brother of Erboran
Tarkenda – mother of Erboran and
Arkendrin
Ormadon – allied to Palansa
Erlken – Ormadon’s son – allied to
Palansa
Sansula – friend to Palansa
Orsron – Sansula’s baby son
Irdodun – allied to Arkendrin
Orthaken – allied to Arkendrin
Ermashin – allied to Arkendrin

Weshargh

Orbdargan – Chief
Orfedren

Soushargh

Yrshin – Chief

Ashmiri

Uthlin – Chief

*If Healer sees a setting sun
and gold meets gold, two halves are one.
Then Westerner with silver tongue
will love and lose the golden one
but bind a friendship slow begun.
If horses graze in forests deep
where trees their summer greening keep
then fire will be the flatsword's bane
and bring the dead to life again.
Deeds long past will hunt the Shargh
and funeral smoke consume the stars
until the thing that draws no breath
devours the dark that feeds on death.*



Kira sprinted the last of the way to the trees, desperate to reach the Azurcade foothills before the storm broke. Thunder boomed then rain pounded and she crawled under a bush, chest heaving. But its shelter was poor and she struggled to her knees to look for somewhere more protected.

By the 'green! There was a man at the edge of the trees. Kira dropped back to the ground, heart thrashing, and watched him closely. He didn't appear to have seen her, and she hugged herself fearfully. He wasn't Shargh, she realised with relief, but he might be just as deadly.

She remained still and the thunder finally rumbled away, the rain easing. The stranger moved restlessly around his camp, but seemed in no hurry to depart. Kira could see from the way he held himself that he was injured, and guessed it might be the reason for his delay.

But she couldn't afford to wait any longer, her journey north urgent. Careful not to make any sudden movements, she rose to her knees again. The man swung toward her in an instant, sword

in hand. Kira gasped and fumbled for her sword, even as her wits told her to run. But her cramped legs refused to move.

There was a shout behind her and Kira cringed. Then, out of the night three dark shapes raced towards the stranger. They were Shargh! The squeal of metal against metal filled the night. The stranger's sword arm flashed, skilled and agile, felling one Shargh. But two remained, and the stranger was tiring.

Conflicting thoughts hammered at Kira, holding her still. She couldn't aid the stranger by using her sword – she wasn't a barbaric Terak Kutan who took life as easily as draining a cup. But was she to sneak away and let the stranger die at the Shargh's hands? Too many of *her* people had already died at their hands. It had been a long time since she'd played at fighting with Tresen in the Warens, but his instructions came back to her: the point of the neck to aim for; a quick death, a clean death.

Kira gritted her teeth and crept forward, looking for the best angle of attack. The stranger was tiring rapidly. As one of the Shargh leapt backwards, away from a thrusting parry, Kira screwed her eyes shut and brought the blade down with all her strength. The sword sliced through flesh and bit bone. Then her arms were all but yanked from their sockets, and she was wrenched after the rolling body, landing on her back. The remaining Shargh was on her in an instant, flatsword high.

The stranger's sword struck home and the Shargh's flatsword clattered off into the bushes. There was a thud as the Shargh's body hit the ground.

'Are . . . you . . . hurt?' said the stranger, leaning over Kira and using Onespeak, low and urgent, interspersed with heaving pants. He repeated the question in a language she didn't know, then in Tremen, then in another strange tongue, but Kira was shaking too much to comprehend him.

He withdrew, then came back and pulled her to her feet. He brought a metal cup urgently to her mouth. Morning-bright

mixed with strange herbs, she realised numbly. Within a few moments heat sprang from her belly to her limbs, bringing a surge of strength. Kira leaned over, spat out the dregs and struggled to control the heave of her stomach. The stranger's hand came to her arm, steadying her.

'Where there are three Shargh, there'll be more,' he said in Onespeak, his voice still ragged with the effort of the fight. 'We must leave this place.' He hauled her upright, but Kira staggered, retched and was violently ill.

Her retching had scarcely stopped before he had her upright again.

'I must wash,' she said, dredging up the words in Onespeak.

'No time,' he replied, pulling his pack on and cleaning his sword and hers on the grass.

Nearby, the slain Shargh lay like branches felled by winter storms. Kira averted her eyes, suddenly overcome by the horror of what she'd done. She'd pushed filthy metal through another living being, sliced open his flesh and stopped his heart. She'd killed! She'd betrayed everything Kasheron had fought for, everything the Tremen believed in.

The stranger looked up at the sky, brought the back of his hand to his forehead, and spoke under his breath. Then he turned to her.

'Come,' he said.

'Do you go north?' asked Kira hoarsely.

'Yes,' he replied, handing her back her sword.

Kira hesitated. The stranger had spoken Tremen earlier, but she realised abruptly it couldn't be Tremen. It must be Terak. Maybe he was Terak Kutan, since the Tremen's northern kin would have a similar tongue. But the stranger had used other languages too. What did that tell her? That he travelled a good deal? If so, he'd know where he was going. Still, she knew nothing about him except the Shargh hated him, and that he fought well. Perhaps that was reason enough to go with him, besides the fact he was going north.

‘Come,’ he repeated, beckoning her.

Not knowing what else to do, Kira followed.

The land quickly steepened, the bushes giving way to boulders and broken stone among trees that soared to great heights. The ground was slick and the storm had unleashed a thousand scents. The frantic beat of her heart gradually slowed.

They toiled on, the cloud clearing and the fiery blaze of the stars eclipsing the moon’s wan light. Glancing behind, Kira saw the dim outline of the Dendora Plain far below, a pale sweep blotched with trees. Were the Shargh still in the foothills or sliding through the trees behind them, she wondered.

Abruptly, the stranger stopped and turned. ‘We need be careful for the next part,’ he said. ‘Shardos likes to shed his skin and the path changes with every climbing.’

Shardos? thought Kira. Was it the name of the mountain? And what did he mean by shedding its skin? Her Onespeak was unpractised, so perhaps she hadn’t understood.

The stranger moved ahead slowly now, testing the ground with a stick and gesturing to Kira to place her feet where he placed his. The trees thinned as they picked their way forward; those that remained were gnarled with splayed roots that gripped the ground like hands. There was little undergrowth, as if only the deeper-rooted trees could survive. Even in the darkness, Kira was horribly aware of the drop that had opened beside them.

The stranger edged round a series of large broken boulders that seemed to hang in space and Kira stopped. Her pack felt as if it had doubled in weight.

‘Come,’ he said, his voice gentle.

Kira willed her feet to move, but nothing happened.

‘Not far now,’ he said, reaching out his hand.

Kira crept forward. She’d only gone a few paces when a grinding noise sounded and she felt the stone under her feet move. For a single heartbeat nothing happened, then it tilted and began to slide.

The stranger's hand clamped around Kira's wrist, arresting her fall. Over the sound of the rock crashing away through the trees, his voice came to her again, calm and strong. 'Turn . . . now.'

Numbly, Kira obeyed.

'Hand on top . . . now right foot there . . . slowly, slowly.'

Step by step, Kira followed the path he spoke for her, terror clouding her sight and roaring in her ears. But she was held by his hand and his mind, and he coaxed her safely to his side. Then her legs lost all rigidity and she clung to him, his warmth and closeness like food and rest, the sweet spice scent of him comforting.

'I thank you,' she said, when she had breath enough.

'I should thank you, for you saved my life, yet I don't know your name,' he replied.

Kira hesitated, suddenly wary.

'Perhaps the debt dictates I introduce myself first,' he said. 'I am Caledon e Saridon e Talliel.'

'Caledon e Saridon e Talliel,' echoed Kira.

'In these lands, I'm called Caledon.'

'I'm Kira.'

'The Saridon are honoured,' he said, and bowed.

Kira thought it odd that he referred to himself so formally, unless she'd misunderstood him, which was possible. If only she knew more Onespeak!

'It's past the mid point of the night but we're close to a place where we can rest. Can you go on?' he said.

'Does the path continue like this?' she asked.

'I haven't journeyed here for five years and Shardos might have sent stone from above or eaten the path from below, but the ground's more solid after the sida groves,' he said, pointing to dark shapes ahead.

'We should go then,' said Kira.

The unstable stone gradually gave way to the firmness of grass and stands of small shapely trees.

The sida looked like ashaels close up, but their scent was different. Black insects buzzed in their branches though Kira could see nothing to attract them: no blooms or seeds or other small creatures they might feed off.

‘Night-hovers,’ said Caledon, noting her gaze on the insects. ‘They pierce the stems and feed on the sap. You can too, if you’re thirsty.’

Startled, she looked at him.

‘You have to be *very* thirsty. Not far now,’ he said, smiling, then starting off again.

Kira took three sips from her waterskin, a habit she’d developed to save water and sate hunger, and forced her trembling legs on. Kest had told her to eat one and a half handfuls of nutmeat every day to maintain her strength, but to do so would have meant carrying nutmeat at the expense of herbs. She had hoped to gather on the Dendora, but there had been nothing there – she’d never seen such barren land. As a result, she’d had to eat very little to make her food last the eight days it had taken her to cross the plain. Her breeches were loose no matter how much she tightened them, and her shirt flapped.

The night-hovers bounced off her face and tangled in her hair, and Kira beat at them, repelled by their nearness. Caledon slowed, then veered upwards through the sidas, and all but disappeared. Kira struggled after him through the thick leaf-fall. Why couldn’t their shelter be down the slope instead of up?

Caledon was making his way up slabs of stone that looked like huge steps, but Kira came to a stop before the last as her weary legs protested.

‘Here,’ said Caledon, offering his hand and hauling her up. He winced as he deposited her beside him.

‘I thank you,’ said Kira.

He nodded and led her into the deeper darkness ahead, a cave, dry and fragrant, the back of it filled with river sand. Caledon slipped off his pack and rolled his shoulders.

‘The Tain call this Aurantia, for the colour of the stone,’ he said. ‘At dawn you’ll see why.’

There was a clear flow of water tinkling down one side of the cave that pooled briefly before it disappeared between rocks.

Caledon went to the pool and scrubbed at his face and hands, then drank deeply. Afterwards he took a square of cloth from his pack and dried himself.

‘The sand makes a good place to sleep, softer and warmer than the ground,’ he said.

Kira’s fear of the Shargh had wiped away fear of him, but now it flooded back and she tightened her grip on her pack.

As if sensing her sudden unease, Caledon made his voice gentle. ‘Come. You need to wash the blood from your hands, Kira, then drink.’

Kira remained where she was, suspicion fighting with her wish to trust him.

He settled on the sand. ‘I’ve told you my name is Caledon e Saridon e Talliel. Saridon is my family name, and I’m called that in the north. Talliel is the port city where I live. It’s west of the Silvercades, the great mountains of the north. Do you know the north, Kira?’

‘No,’ she said, moving slowly towards the pool.

‘Talliel is a beautiful place, and a peaceful one. It’s many years since there was fighting. You don’t need to fear me,’ he went on, ‘but I understand if you do. I’ll sleep under the sidas if you wish and we can go on together at dawn. Or you can go on alone.’

‘There’s no need,’ said Kira, feeling shamed. ‘But perhaps we *should* go on. The Shargh might be close,’ she said, thinking of the Writings in the Warens that described the Shargh’s ability to quickly cover long distances on foot. It was a skill that had added to the brutal fighting triggering the Sundering.

‘I was attacked by the Cashgar Shargh,’ said Caledon. ‘Like their brothers the Soushargh, Weshargh and Ashmiri, they believe

their gods live in the sky. Climbing mountains insults their gods by drawing too near their gods' domain. The Shargh stay on the plains.'

Caledon had spoken slowly but Kira struggled to understand the Onespeak words.

'Let's eat,' he said, pulling close-wrapped packages out of his pack. 'I've got malede, cheese, biscuit, dried figs and tachil.'

'I thank you but I have food,' said Kira.

'Eat my supper and I'll eat your breakfast,' he replied.

Her hunger proved too powerful. Kira washed, then sat opposite him on the soft sand. The food was arranged on its wrappings but it was too dark to see it clearly.

'I don't know your food,' she said.

'Cheese is made from goat's milk, biscuit from maize, figs are a fruit, malede is spiced smoked meat and tachil is a ground-nut,' he said, pointing to each in turn.

Kira took a fig, some tachil and a piece of the biscuit, eating slowly and relishing every mouthful. The fig was sweeter than any fruit she'd ever tasted and the tachil had an earthy taste, nothing like red- or blacknuts. The biscuit was strange but tasty. Maize, Caledon had called it, whatever that was.

'So you know the north well?' she asked as they ate.

'Very well,' said Caledon. 'My father trades brocades and spices, and as a boy I used to travel with him all around the north.'

For a little Kira ate in silence. 'What about the Terak lands? Did you visit those?' she asked.

'Of course. They stretch from the southern Silvercades most of the way across the Sarsalin Plain,' replied Caledon, rewrapping the remains of the food and packing it away.

Kira wanted to know more about the Terak lands, and their inhabitants, but Caledon yawned noisily. Besides, if she questioned him, he was more likely to question her.

‘Kashclan thanks –’ she started, then stopped herself. ‘I thank you for the food,’ she said instead, but what she really wanted to thank him for was his kindness.

‘Sleep now,’ said Caledon. ‘We need go on at first light.’

Caledon found it difficult to follow his own advice. He loved to see the birth of a new day, but on this occasion the pain in his shoulder forced him from his ciraq at dawn.

He rose and went to the cave’s entrance, worrying about the last few days. Was it a coincidence that he had been caught by the Cashgar Shargh twice in five days? Only Weshargh herders wandered the Dendora, and yet four groups of warriors had been there, two of which had seen him and attacked. He sensed that their sudden movement didn’t augur well – and nor did the pain in his shoulder.

It was likely the wound was poisoning. It was two more days to the Pass, and three after that to Maraschin – maybe three days too far. He searched the sky for stars but the coming day had robbed them of light. He turned to consider another problem – his new companion.

The girl still slept, wrapped in what appeared to be a basic ciraq. One of her hands lay palm upward on the sand, the fingers fine like her face, but with no rings or adornment. Her hair was cut in a choppy line at jaw level and was brown, though probably fairer clean. Her shirt was brown, her jerkin a soft green. The pack under her head was rustic, with woven laces and wooden buckles. Everything he could see was coloured with plant dyes, with no leather and no metal, apart from her sword, which was of good though plain workmanship. But she was no fighter – her attack on the Shargh warrior successful only because of its suddenness.

The first rays of sunlight reached the cave and the silvery notes of an ilala sounded. Then another joined it, until the valley rang, reminding him of the bells that welcomed the sailing traders home to port.

Kira stirred and her eyes opened.

By the stars! thought Caledon. Her eyes were gold!

Kira coloured at his gaze and Caledon quickly looked back to the valley. 'You see why this place is called Aurantia now?' he said as she came to the cave's entrance.

'No.'

'Aurantia is the Tain word for flame.'

'Who are the Tain?' asked Kira.

'Peoples of the northern Azurcades. Once we start our descent, we'll be in their lands.'

'Oh,' she said, tensing.

'I have friends in their city - we have nothing to fear from the Tain.'

Her cuff slid down and exposed her bony wrist as she pushed the hair from her eyes. She'd disciplined herself to eat very little, if the meal last night was anything to go by, and that meant she'd journeyed long enough to have to ration her food. But where had she journeyed from? He knew of nothing further south but Shargh.

Her Onespeak was poor and she didn't trust him with anything else, not that he could think what *anything else* could be. She looked pure Kessomi - except for the eyes - but then why would she be so far south?

'You haven't slept,' she said, her eyes pulsing between their earlier metallic sheen and honey.

'Do I look so grim?'

'Is it a Shargh wound?' she asked.

He nodded, surprised.

'How old?'

'Three days,' he replied. Her directness was disconcerting after her earlier reticence.

'It must be salved. Undo your shirt,' she said.

He hesitated, then shrugged out of his jerkin and unbuttoned his shirt as Kira pulled wooden pots and bulging pouches from her pack, a range akin to the physick stores in the Sea-Farer's Way.

'I've salved it already,' said Caledon.

She peeled back the bandage he'd managed to apply with his left hand, releasing a stench so putrid Caledon expected her to recoil in disgust. But she leaned closer, looking at the wound, before calmly reaching for a pot of pinkish paste.

'You've slowed the rot,' she said, scooping on the cool mixture. 'What did you salve it with?'

'Kalix.'

'Is that a herb?' she asked, taking a bandage from her pack and bringing it up and over his shoulder.

'It's a mixture of . . . herbs,' he said, wincing at the sudden severity of the pain.

'You can show me later,' said Kira, tying off the bandage. 'Burning yet?'

'Yes,' he said, gulping down air as sweat started beading on his face. 'What have you done?' The fire in his shoulder and back ran like boiling water into his belly and hips, and he doubled over in an effort not to cry out. Kira supported him, her hand flat against his chest and, inexplicably, the run of pain reversed. It was like a plug being pulled out of a bath, the pain draining away under her hand.

He looked up in amazement. 'How -' he started, then saw she was ashen, her eyes the colour of sida, her expression blank. She sat down heavily. She had taken his pain, he was sure of it, and it had cost her dearly.

'I am in your debt. Again,' he said.

'There's no debt,' she replied. 'Healing is given.'

2

Kira prowled impatiently round the cave's confines while Caledon slept away the day. Though rest would aid Caledon's healing, it delayed her journey north, which she could ill afford. Even now the Shargh might be attacking Allogrenia, slaughtering her people and burning the longhouses. Still, at least this enforced stop had given her time to rest, bathe and wash her clothes. She felt much improved, having slept properly after the days and nights of fear and thirst as she crossed the Dendora Plain. And after the peril of Shardos, perhaps it was wise to have a guide.

No, it was more than having a guide, she admitted. It was no longer being alone – at least for a little while.

The cave was pleasant and had a good supply of water; Kira drank often to sate her hunger and to distract herself from thoughts about her companion. Caledon had said he was from Talliel; she went to the cave's sunny entrance, slipped out her map and studied it. There it was, on the edge of the sea, west of the Silvercades, as he'd said. Why was he so far south? What was the relationship between his people and the Terak?

She glanced over to check Caledon still slept then shifted her gaze to the sprawl of mountains near the top of the map. Nestled on the southern edge of the Silvercades was Sarnia, city of the Terak Kutan, seed of the people Kasheron had fled. Their barbarism in fighting the Shargh had split a people, but they were still kin, the blood-link making them bound to provide aid. But first she had to reach them to ask for it!

The first obstacle was the Azurcades. And then the land beyond. There were many place names at the base of the Azurcades' northern slopes: Maraschin, Gaifen Plain, Surahman, The Westlans, as well as others further afield. According to Caledon, all these places belonged to the Tain – *who were supposedly friendly*. But whether they were friendly or not, they weren't her people. Kira gazed out beyond the glittering haze of the Dendora, to where Allogrenia lay. She could almost see the cooking place at the Kashclan Longhouse, hear the laughter of playing children, smell Tenerini's nutbread. Her eyes burned but she knew that if she returned the Shargh would follow and any killing intensify. For good or ill she must go on and, at least for the next few days, with this man called Caledon, she thought.

Silver glinted in Caledon's hair but he looked curiously ageless – his face unlined and, despite everything, untroubled. His shirt was finely woven with engraved metal buttons, his jerkin of some thick, soft cloth, coloured with a dye deeper than the greenest leaves. He wore calf-length boots of a material Kira knew as *leather*. His pack was leather, too. Kira shuddered. She knew of leather from the Writings. It was animal skin, treated to stop it rotting.

She couldn't comprehend the notion of killing an animal to peel away its skin, though she knew the Northerners kept animals for that purpose, and to eat, and to use their fur for cloth, instead of plants like falzon.

Caledon e Saridon e Talliel. Who and what was he? Her head was full of questions, but it was hard to stay focused and think when she

was so hungry. Despite her careful doling out of food her supplies were almost gone. Kasheron and his followers had all but starved in the forests after they'd hunted out the silverjacks and before they'd found the nut groves. During the time she and Kest had spent searching the Writings for a cure to the Shargh wounds, she'd read of the malnourished women who'd died in childbirth. Even so, she had never understood the relentlessness of hunger – until now.

On the Dendora Plain she'd been distracted from her hunger by her need to hide from the Shargh or find water. Here she had nothing to do but think of food.

She was still sitting near the cave's entrance as the sun disappeared behind the western flank of the Azurcades. She'd seen several sunsets since she'd left Allogrenia, but their vastness still enthralled her.

It wasn't until the last fiery edge disappeared that she turned and saw that Caledon had woken.

'Aurantia gives a good view, doesn't it?' he said.

Kira nodded, suddenly ill at ease.

'And it's a glorious place to stay in,' he added, his eyes on the glowing walls.

' "Glorious?" '

'Like "beautiful", but more so,' he said, extricating himself from his ciraq and pulling on his jacket.

He took a comb from his pack and tugged it through his hair. 'Your Onespeak is unpractised. Perhaps I know your language, for I speak many tongues, and those I don't often share words with those I do. The Tain speak a tongue common among those of The Westlans and can converse with the Bishali, who are roaming people of the north-west. But if they speak with the Kessomis – who live in the Silvercades – or the Kirs or Illians, they must use Onespeak. Likewise, despite now being part of the same peoples, the Kirs and Illians cannot make their meaning clear to each other, because they once lived separately.'

So many peoples, so many tongues, so many complications, thought Kira. Caledon had used Terak after the attack and if she used Tremen now he'd guess the kin-link. Allogrenia had remained safe because no one knew of it until the Shargh stumbled across it. If she told Caledon about her people, she might bring further danger to the Tremen. Though it seemed churlish not to trust him, Kira's task was to bring aid to her people, and she daren't do anything to risk that.

'It seems we must persevere with Onespeak,' said Caledon, when she didn't reply. 'We'll practise your Onespeak in any case, since you're going north and will need it,' he said, taking food from his pack.

'Come and eat,' he said.

'I ate your food in the last night and I don't have enough to share,' confessed Kira. 'I'll need it as I journey further north.'

'I *do* have enough to share.'

Kira shook her head, 'I can't.'

'You saved my life and healed my wound; the least I can do is share my food with you,' said Caledon.

'Healing is given,' said Kira.

'Then my food is given. You'll insult me if you refuse it. Come,' he said.

This time she did, taking some tachil and a fig, but again shunning the maledé and cheese.

'You don't like my maledé or my cheese, and yet Simial cheese is prized in the north. I know several goatherds who'd be most affronted,' said Caledon, smiling.

'I would not eat cheese,' said Kira, returning his smile.

'Then at least try the maledé. It was made by my friend Folian, who is the very best of the maledis, at least according to him.'

'Meat is *prasach*.'

'*Prasach*?'

'Unclean,' said Kira.

‘Ah,’ said Caledon thoughtfully.

‘I thank you for your food,’ said Kira, luxuriating in the biscuit’s sweetness.

‘And I for your healing,’ replied Caledon.

He waited till she’d finished, then packed away the food and pulled out a silver box with shining strings. Then he pushed pieces of metal onto his fingertips, closed his eyes and played – beautiful tinkling music. Kira listened, entranced.

As the last notes died away, Caledon stretched and sighed.

‘What is it?’ asked Kira, looking at the instrument.

‘A thumbelin.’

He passed it to her and she flinched at the touch of it. ‘It’s metal!’

‘Yes. This part acts as a sound box and you can tension the wires here. The hoods are for picking.’

Kira held it as if it were hot.

‘Have you not seen one before?’

Kira shook her head.

He slid off the hoods and offered them to her. ‘Shall I teach you to play?’

‘No! I . . . I thank you.’

‘Is music *prasach* too?’ he asked.

‘No. Metal is.’

‘I see,’ said Caledon. ‘Yet you carry a sword.’

‘The Protectors may use swords to protect, and Healers may use sickles to gather . . . Though I’m a Healer, I carry a sword for protection,’ said Kira, thinking of it in the bottom of her pack. After the horror of killing the Shargh, she couldn’t imagine using it again. There was a short silence. ‘I . . . I thought your music was beautiful.’

‘Ah, I hoped you’d call it glorious.’

‘It was glorious,’ said Kira and laughed.

‘Tomorrow we will go on, if you’re willing. It’s another two days to the Pass and there are no more caves. Let’s hope the weather stays fine,’ he said.

‘I must go on regardless of the weather, but the night’s clear so it should be another sunny day,’ said Kira.

Caledon said nothing, his gaze on the stars.

They set off early, walking through mist pierced with shafts of sunlight, Caledon showing no signs of injury. Kira felt the sense of peace that came with healing, but dread at the journey ahead ate away at it. She liked Caledon and wanted to trust him, but her task as Leader was to ensure the safety of Allogrenia. She knew too little about him, and still feared that if she were to ask him questions, he would question her in return.

After a time, Caledon stopped, and as Kira drew near she heard the spill of water and glimpsed a mist-filled cleft.

‘The Aurantia Stream comes out below us,’ said Caledon, slipping off his pack. ‘It’s a pity it’s misty because the crevice is full of ferns and mosses fed by the water’s spume. When the sun’s higher, it paints the air with rainbows and the scintil moths carry the colour in their wings. It’s worth suffering Shardos’s scowls to look on them.’

Caledon’s description was beautiful and Kira felt real regret the sun wasn’t shining.

‘Hopefully I’ll pass by one day on my return journey,’ she said.

‘This is the last place on this side of Shardos where it’s sheltered enough for such things to grow,’ he went on. ‘From here, there’s only scantha and brittle-bite. It’s the last place for water too. Is your waterskin full?’

‘Nearly. How far is it to the summit?’

‘Two days. Here, I’ll fill it for you.’

Kira handed Caledon her waterskin and he scrambled into the cleft. The mist swirled round him, making him look strangely insubstantial.

‘Is the path well marked?’ she asked, the possibility of two days of sliding stone and belly-churning cliffs filling her with fear.

‘It depends which way you go. There’s an easterly route and a westerly route,’ he said, returning her waterskin and climbing from the cleft.

‘I need go north towards the Terak city of Sarnia,’ said Kira.

He looked surprised. ‘Journeying in mountains is never as simple as going north or south,’ said Caledon. ‘There are only two ways over the summit of Shardos: the Kindrin Pass many days east of here and the Draganin Pass, to which we journey. The Draganin breaches Shardos in two places, east and west of Watchman’s Wall. Some argue it’s really two passes. It’s too early to judge whether East Draganin or West Draganin is best for us.’

‘I need go the way that will take me north soonest,’ said Kira.

Caledon turned to her, the sunlight catching his clear grey eyes. ‘The most direct path is not always the quickest, or the safest,’ he said.

Caledon’s response made Kira uneasy for it seemed to avoid a direct answer, and she wondered whether she should leave him. But she dreaded returning to the awful loneliness of her trek over the Dendora.

‘Come. The day grows old,’ he said gently.

They went on, and the mist dissipated abruptly as they came round a spur. One moment they were immersed in its dim clamminess and the next, blue sky arched overhead, empty of everything but circling brown specks.

‘Dwinhir,’ said Caledon as Kira squinted up at them. ‘Hunting birds.’

‘Dwinhir,’ echoed Kira, the birds bringing to mind Kest’s chimes in the Morclan longhouse. As well as the creatures of

Allogrenia, the Morclan carvers had fashioned silverjacks, dwinhir and horses. She'd seen her first silverjacks as she'd emerged from Allogrenia, and now she'd seen a dwinhir. Perhaps she would see a horse as well before her mission was over.

3

Caledon picked the best path by habit while his thoughts ranged like the birds above. Where had Kira come from and why was she going north? And if she came from the south, why did she have Kessomi hair, a Kessomi face and a Kessomi build? And ‘*prasach*’ was a Kessomi word. Yet if she’d grown in Kessom, he’d have known. *Everyone* would have known, because of those eyes.

She’d fallen behind, intent on the dwinhir, and he stopped and waited for her.

‘Surely you’ve seen dwinhir before,’ said Caledon.

‘No,’ she replied.

‘But you’re Kessomi.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ replied Kira warily.

‘Then you’re from the forests south of the Dendora,’ said Caledon. It was the only place he could think of. He’d travelled most other places and not heard tell of a gold-eyed woman before. In fact, the only gold-eyed *woman* he’d heard of was Queen Kiraon, from years long past.

Kira nodded reluctantly.

'You're far from home then,' he observed.

'Not as far as you. Why are *you* here, Caledon?'

He hesitated, thinking how best to answer. When the stars sent dreams that told him to travel, he filled his pack and travelled. It wasn't always thus. His father had resisted his departures when he was younger, constraining his movements. But his father's acceptance had grown less grudging with time. Having a Placidien son brought him honour, though less silver than a son who dealt in brocades and spices. Luckily, his father had been fortunate in the husband Caledon's sister Roshai had chosen. Mechtlin had been more than willing to take Caledon's place in the Saridon enterprise.

All Caledon's journeys had a purpose, though they weren't always clear at the beginning. As a Placidien he accepted this blindness. His place in the greater pattern was like the star trails that blazed before winking out – the pattern vast and enduring, and his part small but necessary.

His travels this time had been long and arduous. West of the Silvercades, across the Sarsalin, round the jut of the Fierway, and east through Moorton's Meld to the Dendora.

He'd come from the west, and Kira had confirmed that she had come from the forests in the south. Yet their paths had brought them together at the precise moment of the second Shargh attack.

The understanding hit him like a blow. *She* was the reason for his journey.

Without her, he'd be dead. She had killed to save him, despite her abhorrence of swords and things metal. *And* she could take pain, a rare ability.

A sense of wonder swept over him, as bright and beautiful as the stars. He experienced a similar physical sensation whenever scattered dream images coalesced into a coherent whole. Ice melted

more swiftly when smashed with a stone, and she was that stone, the quickener of an unravelling that had troubled his dreams and sent him from the lamp-lit streets of Talliel.

The same understanding also told him that were she to journey north – where gold eyes roused violent passions – the long peace might be no more. The Shargh attacks suggested that the peace was already fracturing in any case.

He glanced back to Kira, but she seemed to have been distracted from her question, her gaze on a point to the west. The otherworldly shiver of his skin dissipated as he looked that way too. Shreds of bright cloud edged over the peaks.

‘We need go swiftly,’ he said. ‘The next part of the climb is along Shardos’s shoulder. Not a good place in a high wind.’

‘Do you think the weather worsens?’ asked Kira.

‘Shardos is known for the violence of its storms *and* the swiftness of their birth. Some say the mountain dislikes travellers and sends wind and rain to rid itself of them, but the Azurcades straddle an immense plain – Dendora to the south and the Sarsalin to the north. The clash of winds meeting from each is a more likely cause.’

They trudged on as the sky darkened and the wind picked up. It buffeted them from one side, and then the other, and Kira and Caledon were forced to wrap their capes high and pull their hoods low to ward off the grit but, even so, each gust stung like a thousand bites. Day slid to dusk and then, abruptly, into an abyss of blackness.

Blinded, Caledon stopped and shouted back to Kira, but his words were eaten by the wind. Lightning rent the sky, and thunder clashed. A sudden fierce gust forced them both to their knees.

Rain began to fall, heavy drops quickly becoming a roaring deluge, battering them and clawing the ground from beneath their feet. Caledon caught Kira’s hand and fought his way forward, pulling her after him through the shrieking wind and pounding

rain to where a darker slash opened in the night. It was a shallow crevice in the mountainside and he struggled up the slope of stone, all but dragging her. Little more than a body length in, Caledon turned, wedged his back against the rock and pulled Kira hard up against him. They lay there, gasping, while the wind roared and the rain sluiced down the mountainside.

Slowly the heat crept back into their bodies and they slid from the tossing blackness of the night into the quieter darkness of sleep.

4

There was rain south of the Cashgars, too, the Shargh welcoming it to their dry pastures. The Shargh Grounds were quiet, the sorchas on the spur shut against the rain, the ebis out on the grasslands standing stiff-legged in sleep. The warriors and their join-wives slept too.

In the highest sorcha on the spur, however, Palansa didn't sleep. She paced about with Ersalan bawling on her shoulder, Tarkenda watching. Round to the vent and back to the bed Palansa went, rubbing Ersalan's back, crooning to him, letting him suck. If only *his* eyelids were as heavy as hers, *his* muscles as slack, *his* body as weary.

The bed creaked as Tarkenda heaved herself out of it. 'Let me take him for a time. You need to sleep.'

Palansa handed Ersalan to his grandmother, then collapsed onto the bed, exhausted. The older woman rewrapped the baby's swaddlings firmly and rocked him close. Ersalan's bawling slowly wavered, turning into a series of hiccuping squawks. Tarkenda tickled his face with the end of her braid and he gurgled.

‘How *did* you do that?’ asked Palansa.

‘Erboran shrieked worse than the marwings in his first moons,’ said Tarkenda. ‘I walked him, jiggled him, suckled him, ignored him, showed him the stars, bathed him, even threatened him with the Cashgar wolves, but only this worked.’ There was a short silence broken by Ersalan’s hiccups and the creak of the sorcha under the rain. ‘He’s like Erboran in looks *and* temper. It augurs well for the Shargh.’

‘Was Arkendrin the same as a babe?’ asked Palansa, wondering yet again what had made Erboran’s brother so different to him.

‘Arkendrin was quiet. It was only as he grew that he came to believe in the strength of bluster and the power of noise,’ said Tarkenda.

‘Well he’s strong and powerful now,’ said Palansa. ‘The wound to his leg the treemen inflicted makes him roar worse than Ersalan.’

‘An injured creature’s more dangerous than a sound one,’ warned Tarkenda. ‘Arkendrin’s desire to scour Erboran’s seed from the Chief’s sorcha hasn’t lessened because he must now drag one leg behind him. A flatsword kills whether it’s in Arkendrin’s hand, or the hand of his followers.’

‘They wouldn’t dare harm Ersalan,’ said Palansa, taking back her now sleeping son and holding him protectively.

‘Now the gold-eyed creature’s left the forests, they’d dare anything.’

‘Arkendrin doesn’t *know* she’s left,’ said Palansa.

‘Arkendrin and his followers *believe* it’s so, which is the same,’ said Tarkenda. ‘You’ve heard what Ormadon says. Arkendrin speaks of enchantment and foul sorcery, the creature of the Telling using shape-shifting to slip from his grasp.’

Ersalan started whimpering again and Palansa rocked him.

‘If it weren’t for Arkendrin’s injury, he’d be out scouring the Dendora, in spite of it being Weshargh land,’ said Tarkenda. ‘He has no respect for our ways, and none for the ways of others.’

‘Instead he sends his cronies,’ said Palansa.

‘Ormadon says Arkendrin’s wound doesn’t heal. It’s rumoured the treemen use tesat on their swords, too,’ she went on, slipping Ersalan into his sleep-sling.

‘It’s also rumoured that the Sky Chiefs withhold their strength in punishment for their dishonouring,’ said Tarkenda.

‘I’ve not heard that,’ said Palansa.

‘You will,’ said Tarkenda, with a sly smile.

Both women whirled as the doorflap stirred and Ormadon appeared, palming his forehead to the sling. ‘I saw your light, Chief-wife and Chief-mother,’ he said.

Tarkenda hastened forward. ‘The night’s turned, Ormadon, and you’ve no babe to keep you wakeful. What’s happened?’

‘Orbdargan’s come. He’s with Arkendrin.’

‘Orbdargan? The Weshargh Chief?’ asked Palansa.

Tarkenda’s face was filled with puzzlement, too.

‘Orbdargan’s come to Arkendrin to share his vision of taking back the north,’ said Ormadon.

‘What does Arkendrin say?’ asked Tarkenda in dismay.

‘That’s not known. But recovering our grazing lands would give him a claim to the chiefship none could dispute.’

‘And a far greater claim than capturing the gold-eyed creature. Nor would he have to wet his hands in the blood of his brother’s son, which might foment discontent on the Grounds,’ added Tarkenda. ‘Will the Soushargh and Ashmiri join them?’ she asked, pacing the sorcha despite her limp.

‘Only time will tell, Chief-mother,’ said Ormadon.

Caledon lay still so as not to disturb Kira, who lay snug against him. It was a long time since he’d had a woman in his arms, or his bed, and his father increasingly badgered him to seek a wife. Caledon’s sister Roshai had three beautiful daughters but his father wanted *the son of a son* for the Saridon scion. Caledon knew

he was liable to disappoint his father on that score, too. The life of a Placidien was that of a wanderer, and some who set off never returned. Twice Caledon had loved deeply enough to have tried to shut the star-dreams from his life, but the dreams had proven more powerful than his will and, in the end, his love. The last woman he'd loved would never forgive him.

An ilala sang, then whistlers intruded, shouting their presence to the world. Kira jerked and stiffened, and he thought the birds had woken her. But then he realised she still slept. She jerked again, her head tossing from side to side, her anguished mutters taking on recognisable sounds.

'Kandor! No! Forgive me!' she cried, waking with a start, her face etched with terror.

'You're safe, you're safe,' he said, tightening his arms around her as she wept, her silent shaking more distressing than if she'd cried aloud. He smoothed the hair from her face and kissed the top of her head.

She'd used northern words, either Terak or the purer Kessomi from which Terak had come. 'No', 'forgive' and 'me': the dream had betrayed her. He wondered who Kandor was, and what she asked forgiveness for.

Eventually Kira calmed, then half crawled, half slid down the sloping stone into the open. Caledon followed. Shardos was beautiful at this moment, each hollow within the rocks filled with sparkling pools, as if the mountain were making amends for its behaviour of the night.

5

The travel that day was pleasant. The sky was as blue as a springleslip's egg and, away in the distance, the dwinhir circled again. It was fitting the northern lands were overseen by birds that killed, thought Kira.

At least the dwinhir gave her reason not to look down. The route Caledon followed had taken them back to the mountain's shoulder, where not much grew apart from grey thorny bushes. Kira had never travelled in so empty a place – even the Dendora had more life.

This was their third day on the mountain and Caledon had said it was another three down the northern side. She knew little of the mountains and found it hard not to think about the likelihood of the Ashmiri or Soushargh or Weshargh, or maybe *all* of them, coming round the western spur into the northern foothills. They would surely know which Pass Kira and Caledon would use, and wait for them to descend.

'Kira! Come! We'll rest and eat when we reach the Pass,' called Caledon, his voice impatient. She noticed he'd drawn further

ahead. Did he fear another storm? Or perhaps he had business to attend to somewhere. But what, and where?

The land went steadily upward and Kira's hunger and weariness grew as the light ebbed. She took to chewing scavengerleaf. Kasheron's people had eaten scavengerleaf when they'd hungered in the forests, but had discovered to their cost that you could waste away on it, even when your belly felt full.

The path wound back towards the mountain's heart and steepened. Huge rocks jutted from Shardos's skin, plunging the path into shadow. The going was difficult and Kira used the boulders to haul herself up. The sweat ran into her eyes, and on the occasions she looked up all she could see was Caledon's back moving inexorably away.

It was damp and mossy between the stones, as if the sun never reached there, and the smell reminded Kira of the Warens. She cut off the memories before they took hold. Bone-achingly weary, she forced her legs up yet more stone steps, failing to notice that Caledon had stopped.

'Welcome to West Draganin Pass,' said Caledon, steadying her as she bumped into him.

They drank from their waterskins as Kira took in her surroundings. They were on a broad backbone of open ground, the mountain running away in front and behind.

West Draganin, thought Kira, remembering Caledon's description of how the Draganin Pass twinned.

'We could stay here,' said Caledon, breaking into her thoughts, 'but the land is kinder further down, with places to shelter, though I don't think it will rain again.'

Kira groaned, exhausted. Shelter always seemed further than her legs wanted to carry her. If it weren't for her dread that the Tremem might still be under attack, she would have given up long ago.

Caledon looked up at the sky to where a single star glimmered, bright against the purpling dusk. 'Aeris, the wanderer's

star,' he said, pointing, then raised the back of his hand to his forehead and murmured something in a strange tongue.

'The night draws on, Kira. We must use the last of the light to find a good sleeping-place,' he said, setting off again, but Kira hesitated.

They were atop the great sprawl of mountains she'd first seen on a map deep in the Warens. To go on now was to put these mountains between her and Allogrenia, a barrier she had little hope of re-crossing.

'Kira?'

'If I pass these mountains, I might never see my home again,' she said miserably.

Caledon came back to her side and she smelt the sweet spice scent of him. It had become familiar now and comforting.

'Fear and longing are the price the traveller pays,' said Caledon, taking her hands. 'No traveller knows how their journey will end, whether in triumph or in death. But the stars send gifts, compensation for storms and rough sleeping, truths which can't be discovered at the comfort of a hearth, and friends unlooked for, pure in heart and spirit.'

He was very close and something in the way he looked at her reminded her of Kest.

'Come, my friend,' he said softly. 'Tonight we'll make a fire in memory of all the fires we've shared with those we love, and I'll make music to keep the dark at bay. It's just a little further.'

They went on to a small grove of trees. Caledon set the fire swiftly and laid out the food, and when they'd eaten, packed the food away and brought out his thumbelin.

Kira sat snug in her sleeping-sheet, listening to Caledon play. Orange sparks winked out against the trees. 'Rosarins', Caledon called them.

Kira's belly was full of Caledon's food again, but at least she'd provided the thornyflower tea, even if it'd been brewed in a metal pan Caledon had pulled from his pack.

Caledon played with his eyes closed, almost as if he slept, only his fingers moving as he plucked the thumbelin. First he played the same song he'd played in the Aurantia Cave. The music was like rain falling from the canopy, or the Drinkwater flowing over rocks, beautiful but infinitely sad. She was the first Tremen to hear such things, to converse with a stranger, to eat figs and tachil and biscuit, to cross the Azurcades. The knowing was overwhelming and she pulled her sleeping-sheet closer.

The music ended and Caledon sighed and opened his eyes.

'What's it called?' asked Kira.

'The Zirsa Dirge.'

'Is dirge another word for song?' she asked, pleased with her growing proficiency in Onespeak.

'It's a song played for the dead,' said Caledon, slipping off the hoods and wrapping them carefully. 'But it's not all sad. It celebrates the love felt for the dead person and all the good things they did in life.'

Talk of the dead brought visions of smoke and Kira concentrated on the sky.

'Do your people have songs for the dead?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Kira, her knuckles whitening on the sleeping-sheet.

'Of what do they speak?'

'Of the earth taking them, of the green and growing drawing up their essence, of the wind sending them back to us in the whisper of leaves,' she said, unable to look at Caledon.

'I've not journeyed to the southern forests,' said Caledon. 'What are they like?'

'I cannot speak of them.'

'Trust me, Kira,' he said in Terak.

Kira stared at him and her thoughts turned to the Tremen. They must come before her own needs and wishes.

'You ask too much,' she answered in Onespeak.

‘Perhaps I ask too *quickly* and for that I’m sorry. Time runs quicker than the waves, and often quicker than we think,’ he replied, still using Terak.

Kira said nothing and Caledon sighed.

‘We must be on our way at dawn. I bid you good dreams, Kira,’ he said.

Kira slept deeply and dreamlessly, which was a blessing, for when the recurring nightmare of Kandor’s death afflicted her, it coloured the whole day. They set off again in the predawn light, entering stands of rosarin which were swiftly joined by taller, darker trees and bushes with small yellow flowers: mallit and soldis, Caledon told her. The light showed rosarins to be pinkish, while the mallit had bark like frayed rope, hanging in untidy loops. Kira wanted to ask Caledon about them, but he seemed preoccupied, his eyes on the ground as if he sought a path.

As they walked, the rosarins dwindled, then the mallits, crowded out by pale-barked trees with leaves like severs.

‘What trees are these?’ she asked.

‘Perlwoods,’ said Caledon, looking grim.

‘Are there Shargh on this side of the mountain?’ asked Kira, tensing.

‘No.’

‘But what if the Shargh on the Dendora Plain sent a message to their kin to look out for us in case we come down the mountain here?’

‘They wouldn’t have,’ said Caledon. ‘These are Tain lands.’

‘But what if they have?’

He stopped abruptly. ‘We’re less than three days from the Tain city of Maraschin.’

Kira jerked to a stop, remembering the map. Maraschin had been *west* of the Pass. She glanced up at the sun and her heart missed a beat. Caledon had hinted they’d have to go west to cross the mountains, but the Pass was behind them and they still went west.

‘Why do you delay?’ asked Caledon, turning back.

Kira looked around her, judging the lay of the land. If she were to run he’d catch her. He was lithe and strong, and familiar with the lands, while she knew nothing, *except he’d lied*.

‘What is it?’ repeated Caledon, using Terak.

‘We go west, not north,’ said Kira, using her language also. ‘You *told* me you were going north which is why I agreed to travel with you. You lied to me,’ she said.

‘Until we neared the Pass, we *were* going north,’ said Caledon.

‘But we’re not now!’

‘No. Now I take you west to my friends in Maraschin. There we can rest and replenish our food stores for the journey north.’

‘I’m not going to Maraschin.’

‘It’s twelve days from here to the northern city of Sarnia, Kira. And you must traverse a plain with no people and little gathering. Without my food, what are you going to eat?’

‘What I ate before I met you,’ Kira retorted, furious with herself. How could she have been so gullible as to trust him?

‘I’d give you all my food for the sake of our friendship,’ said Caledon hurriedly, ‘or I’d give it in payment for my life, if that’s how you would see it. But even that wouldn’t be enough. I have friends in Maraschin,’ he repeated. ‘We can restock our food and go on together.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ cried Kira, then movement caught her eye, and she gasped in horror.

Caledon drew his sword and spun. There were men all around them, wood creaking as bows bent, barbed arrows levelling at their hearts. An order was yelled in Onespeak.

‘Drop your sword or we’ll kill her!’

6

In the Kashclan longhouse, deep in the southern forests, Miken watched his son Tresen sleep. The chimes sounded as the breeze found the window, but all else was quiet. It was ten days since Kest's patrol had returned with two of their number missing, Tresen more dead than alive, and no Kira.

Brem had been in the patrol and had looked scarcely better than Tresen, white-faced and hollow-eyed, but he'd changed Tresen's bandages before he'd rested.

'He's come all the way from the Fourth Eight. He'll not be dying now,' he'd assured Miken.

Since then, Mikini had tended her brother with Brem's help, and it was only now that the danger had all but passed that Tresen was well enough to have visitors. Miken wandered to the window, his thoughts going to Kira. The chances of her reaching the north were almost nonexistent. In fact, she might already be dead. Miken watched a tippet snatch a bark beetle and fly off into the dusk, and turned back to his ashen-faced son, contemplating how Tresen's closest clanmates – Kandor and Kira – were dead or gone.

‘Is it morning or evening?’ whispered Tresen, rousing.

‘Evening,’ said Miken. ‘Do you want a drink?’

Tresen nodded and Miken poured him a cup of sweetened water, then held it for him. Tresen grew stronger but still slept a lot of the time.

‘So tell me what’s happened in the wide world beyond the door,’ said Tresen, playing out a ritual they’d developed over the past days.

‘There’s been no sign of the Shargh, but Seri came again while you slept. She wanted me to fetch her when you awoke,’ said Miken, watching his son’s face carefully.

Tresen shook his head.

‘I thought you courted her,’ said Miken.

‘I don’t want to court anyone. It’s better not to love,’ said Tresen, his face drawn. ‘Kest shouldn’t have let Kira go,’ he went on. ‘All those days in the Warens dealing with the dead and dying, losing Kandor, losing everyone. She wasn’t thinking clearly – Kest knew that – yet he let her go. He should’ve gone himself.’

Tresen had said all this before and Brem had summed up Tresen’s antagonism succinctly. *The wounded are hurt in body and mind, but both will heal in time.*

Tresen slipped back into an uneasy sleep and Miken stooped and kissed his son’s brow. ‘At least we’ve still got you,’ he murmured, his thoughts going to the night of his son’s return.

It had been a long and difficult one for everyone, Kest included. He’d endured worse encounters with the Shargh, but this time he’d returned without the Tremen Leader. Miken had taken him to the quietest part of the hall, their mood making them drink withyweed ale, rather than eat the food Tenerini had brought them. Kest owed Miken no special favours, but he’d brought Tresen to his longhouse. With Kira gone and the Bough in ashes, the Kashclan longhouse held the strongest Healers.

Most of what Kest spoke of, Miken had heard from Clanleader Sanden at the Renclan longhouse. But he didn’t know the details

of the attack that had almost claimed his son's life. Nor did he know Kira's part in it. The sword blow that had wounded Tresen would have been followed by a second, deadlier one had Kira not thrown herself at the Shargh attacker. In turn, it was only chance *and* a pot of bruise-ease that had saved Kira. But Kest's willingness to let Kira leave the forests, after all of this, was incomprehensible to Miken.

'It's hard to believe that she'll reach the north,' Miken had said, trying to keep the accusation out of his voice. 'And she carries so much of what it means to be Tremen.'

'Kira *is* Allogrenia,' acknowledged Kest. 'The best of what we are, the best of what Kasherion intended us to be. But the *Clan-council* made her Leader, and that meant that in the end I had no authority over her. In fact, none of us did. I could have brought her back by force and claimed she was mind-sick from Kandor's death and everything else she's endured. Half the Tremen might've agreed with me. But not the other half. Where we must have unity to survive, we'd have schism. That was another thing Kira pointed out,' he said, draining his cup.

'It's ironic isn't it?' he continued. 'She became Leader in every sense of the word, proving all my doubts wrong, then used her leadership skills to leave.'

Miken said nothing.

'And if she'd stayed with the patrol?' went on Kest. 'I doubt many of us would've returned, so desperate were they to take her. We already had Tresen scarce able to walk, and Darmanin in the same state with his ankle. If the Shargh hadn't broken off the attack to tend to their Leader, we'd have lost more than Jonkesh and Saresh.'

'Do you think the Shargh might have caught her anyway?' asked Miken.

'There are things I know, Miken, and things I hope,' said Kest. 'They may be the hopes of a fool, but time will tell and, no doubt,

the Clancouncil judge. I *know* the Shargh Leader was wounded and the attack abandoned because of it. The same thing happened when they attacked the Bough and their previous Leader was killed. I don't know how badly this Leader was injured, but they were all but carrying him.

'What I *hope* is, in their haste, they wouldn't have had the time to look for Kira. What I *fear* is, they might have stumbled on her anyway. It would be an ill chance if they did, and so far chance has favoured her. I sometimes wonder -' began Kest, then broke off.

'I sometimes wonder, what?' prompted Miken.

'Whether there's some greater plan at work,' said Kest, half smiling. 'When I suggested to Kira that we come back here and I take her north with a patrol, she said a patrol would have no more chance of reaching the north than she would. Perhaps less. And, I admit, I've started to agree. Fortune *has* smiled on her, if you can call it smiling. It seems to me that chance, evil though it's been, has so far kept her safe. I hope it will continue to do so.'

'We can't live on hope, nor can we simply wait for her return,' said Miken.

'No,' agreed Kest. 'We must plan for life without her, and without help from the outside. If she is right, the Shargh will leave us in peace now. Even if they don't, we need to consider where healing is to be carried out and by whom, and think on how to protect ourselves *and* remain true to Kasheron's vision.'

'I'll call a special clancouncil to discuss whether we appoint another Leader or wait. Never before has a Leader left us, except by death,' said Miken.

There was a brief silence while both men considered the possibility that Kira was, in fact, dead.

'Now, Commander, it's time you slept,' said Miken. 'Kashclan welcomes you and would be pleased if you'd share our shelter this night.'

'Morclan thanks Kashclan,' said Kest, bowing.

7

Kira's face was frozen in terror, but the Tains' attention was focused on Caledon. For a moment he didn't move, then the order was shouted again.

'Drop your sword or we'll kill her!'

Caledon let the sword fall and the Tains swarmed over him. He wrenched his head round in time to see Kira's pack pulled off before she was dragged aside, her hands bound behind her, as were his. Caledon called out to her but the Commander bawled at him.

'Silence!'

She was several lengths away now with one of the troop leaders and his men when, without warning, he saw her pitch forward and lie motionless. Caledon tried to shrug off his captors but a sword came to his throat and he felt a sting as it cut. The Tains knelt beside Kira and one of them shouted for a physick. Caledon's anxiety rose further as he saw blood on her face. Then one of the men from the other group hurried back.

'Commander Dorchen, the female prisoner has fallen and injured herself,' the man said. 'On the physick's advice, we need to

bivouac here this night, and proceed to Maraschin on the morrow. The physick believes she'll be well enough to travel then.'

Caledon breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't more serious.

The Commander's heavy scowl deepened but he nodded assent, then barked an order for Caledon to be brought to him. Caledon was yanked forward, wincing at the jar to his wounded shoulder.

'You're in Tain lands,' the Commander said, in heavily accented Onespeak. 'Do you have leave?'

'No, I -' began Caledon in Tain.

'It's as I thought,' the Commander said, his stolid face unchanged, despite Caledon's use of his language. 'My orders are to take all trespassers to King's Hall as swiftly as possible.'

'I'm known to King Beris and Prince Adris. I've been to -'

'You've violated our bounds!' the Commander shouted, cutting him off. 'All trespassers are to be taken to King's Hall, by order of Prince Adris!'

'I'm Caledon e Saridon e Talliel, and I'm known to Prince Adris!' Caledon shouted back at him in Tain.

The troopsmen's eyes slid between him and their Commander and Caledon realised his travel-stained clothing didn't help his claim. Dorchen's face went crimson.

'Silence! Or I'll have you gagged. You're in Tain lands without leave. The Prince's orders *will* be obeyed!'

The Commander screamed more orders and Caledon was jerked into line, the pain in his shoulder redoubling as men formed up around him. With another bellow from Dorchen, they moved off quickly.

Kira didn't wake until Dorchen's troopsmen were far away. She could hear people speaking a strange tongue, but her head throbbed and she felt too nauseous to open her eyes. One side of her face was warmer than the other and she could smell woodsmoke.

There must be a fire near, she thought, the pounding in her head increasing and forcing a groan from her. She dragged open her eyes and retched. By the 'green, she felt awful.

A man crouched beside her and slid his hand under her head, lifting it. 'Drink this,' he ordered in Onespeak, bringing a metal cup to her lips. 'It will help with your headache.'

She flinched at the metal but gulped down the liquid, numbly trying to identify the herbs it contained. The last thing she remembered was the terrifying thought that she was about to be killed.

'I'm Aranz, the troop physick,' the man added, in strangely accented Onespeak. 'I'm afraid you fainted and hit your head on a rock before we could catch you.'

If they were bothering with her headache, they probably weren't going to murder her, thought Kira vaguely, resisting the urge to shut her eyes again.

'Who are you?' she managed to ask.

'My people?' asked Aranz. 'We're the Tain. You entered Tain lands when you cleared the Pass.'

The pound in Kira's head redoubled.

You have nothing to fear from the Tain, Caledon had said, yet she was a prisoner. She shouldn't be surprised that he'd lied. After all, what did she really know about him, except that he played beautiful tinkling music and killed well? Hardly enough to risk the Tremens' safety for. She could almost hear Kest's contempt: *Really, Tremens Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan. Not very leaderly behaviour!* And he would be right!

Her eyelids drooped, and this time she let them close.

Kira's second waking was less painful. The nausea had eased, the ache in her head had dulled and she could think more clearly. The Healer, or *physick*, had been kind to her in the night and she felt confident now they didn't intend to harm her.

There was a noisy yawn and the clang of metal against metal, and she opened her eyes a fraction and saw a troopsman stirring

something in a pot. Beyond him, still asleep, she recognised Aranz – the physick. The dawn showed Aranz’s hair as reddish brown, but the man who cooked had hair as bright as flames – even his facial stubble glinted red. Whatever he was cooking smelt like a sweeter version of the biscuit Caledon had given her. Hunger roused, more powerful than the pain in her head, and she sat up gingerly.

The Tain glanced up and exclaimed, jerking Aranz from his sleep. There was a smell of burnt food and Aranz said something to the red-haired man, who muttered a reply and stirred whatever was in the pot vigorously. The man then dolloped it into bowls and Aranz added honey to Kira’s and passed it to her.

‘You’ll need to eat all the sacrash you can, as we’ll be marching all day,’ he said in Onespeak. ‘Troopleader Selvet is keen to get back to his new lady-love in Maraschin,’ he added in a low tone, to the guffaws of the red-haired man.

Kira’s attention was on the bowl of fragrant mash and her mouth watered, but the bowl *and* spoon were metal. She wondered if Aranz would think her uncouth if she ate the mash with her fingers.

‘Eat it,’ repeated Aranz impatiently.

Gingerly she began to eat, trying to avoid touching the metal with her lips. The sacrash was delicious.

She’d barely finished when the troopleader gave orders in a quiet, almost mocking, manner and the bivouac broke quickly, the men forming up with Kira and Aranz in the centre. They set off at a steady pace, her headache gradually dulling, despite the movement. Scouts moved in and out from the sides and the air warmed as the sun rose higher, birds skittering in the canopy.

‘You have a liking for birds,’ said Aranz.

Kira nodded as she watched one with a brilliant red breast.

‘That’s an akai, and that one an aspri,’ said Aranz, as a snowy bird fluttered along a branch, pecking at the bark.

‘Aspri eat the barklice,’ he went on, ‘while akai favour perlwood seeds.’

‘Are there owls?’ asked Kira, wondering if the mira kiraon flew in these forests as well.

‘There are brindle-owls,’ said Aranz. ‘Why do you ask?’

Kira was silent, regretting her question. Memories of the mira kiraon brought too much sadness.

‘Brindle-owls are common around Mendor where Somer and I am from,’ said the physick, nodding towards the red-haired man in front.

‘I thought the Tain city was called Maraschin,’ said Kira.

‘It is, but Tain lands contain many smaller settlements like Mendor beyond the city’s wall.’

Aranz passed Kira his waterskin as they walked, but they didn’t stop and they didn’t eat. Nausea stirred and the ache in her head strengthened again as she tired.

It was close to dusk when a scout sprinted back, shouting a warning: ‘Shargh!’ Men threw themselves behind trees, and Aranz thrust her into a scratchy patch of undergrowth. Fitting an arrow, he sheltered behind the tree as he aimed ahead. Others in the troop edged forward from tree to tree until their greenish jackets merged with the forest.

Kira huddled lower, expecting Shargh to come screaming and slashing towards them, but the forest remained silent. After a while, one of the troop reappeared, and jerked his thumb towards Aranz who rose and went with the man, with Somer coming to her side instead. The remaining men’s hands moved, silently messaging. Kira didn’t understand their gestures any more than their words, but if a physick had been summoned, it meant wounded.

‘If there’s wounded –’ she whispered to Somer, but he silenced her with a violent cutting motion.

Frustration added to the pain in her head and she cursed the loss of her pack. Finally Selvet reappeared and the troop came back into formation. Somer wrenched her into line, and she glared at him, but everyone’s attention was on the trees ahead.

They marched on, coming to an area of smashed undergrowth. There was a dead man there, his back hacked open in several places. Some distance away, another man lay, face contorted in terror, eyes wide in death. Next to him, Aranz was busy stitching a third, whose boyish sobs cut her to the core. If Aranz closed the wound without fireweed, he'd trap the rot inside!

Kira started forward but Somer jerked her back.

'Tell your leader I can help. I'm a Healer . . . a physick,' she said urgently.

Somer called to Selvet, who was supervising the shifting of the dead, and Selvet called back, without shifting his attention from his task.

'We already have a physick,' said Somer.

A scout appeared and began his report to Selvet. Somer's attention shifted to his leader and, with a sudden twist, Kira broke his grip and rushed to Aranz's side. The wounded *was* a boy, no more than thirteen or fourteen seasons.

'You need to use fireweed or he'll die.'

Somer caught her arm, but Kira shrugged herself free again.

'You're stitching the Shargh filth in!' she cried.

Aranz's furious eyes flicked up, then strong arms seized her and rope was looped round her wrists, cutting into her skin as she struggled.

'You'll kill him!' she screamed, before being hauled away and dumped unceremoniously on the ground. She lay there, unable to get up without the use of her hands, sobbing in frustration.

It was fully dark and Kira shivered uncontrollably before Aranz helped her to the fire, set her down and unbound her hands. She refused to look at him or acknowledge his help, her anger and misery having solidified into something hard and unforgiving. It wiped away the pain in her head, her hunger and thirst, and any hope for the future.

It was quite possible that the same Shargh had attacked the troop that held Caledon and that he was now dead. And the boy Aranz had stitched was Kandor's age and would die too, killed by Aranz's ignorance as surely as the Shargh blade.

Somer was busy cooking and she could smell the sweet mash she'd breakfasted on. But even the prospect of food didn't pierce her resentment.

'Here,' said Aranz, handing her a bowl. 'Eat.'

She shook her head.

'We have another day's march to Maraschin. I don't have time to look after two patients,' he snapped.

'You won't need to. The boy will die soon.'

Aranz slammed down the bowl, the spoon bouncing into the leaves, and strode off. Somer remained, on Selvet's orders no doubt.

'How many of those with Shargh wounds has Aranz saved?' she demanded.

'Aranz is but one of the physicks,' said Somer.

'How many?'

'The goatherds and woodcutters know little of such wounds. The injured are half-dead before they reach the Sanctum,' muttered Somer.

'Tell Aranz the Shargh use poison on their blades. Tell him I can help him save lives.'

Somer gestured another troopsman over and got to his feet. 'Anything else I should tell him?'

Kira shook her head. If Somer expected her to apologise for her earlier outburst, he would be disappointed. A Healer must be open to *anything* that might cure the injured.

Somer's replacement cleaned the spoon and placed it back in the mash, then poured her a cup of water and set both by her side, smiling encouragingly.

'What's your name?' she asked in Onespeak.

‘Tardich. What’s *your* name?’

‘Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan,’ said Kira, wanting to assert not just *who she was*, but *what she was* for the first time since leaving Allogrenia. But Tardich simply looked bemused, and she sighed and tried again.

‘My name’s Kira.’

‘You’re Terak?’

‘Tremen.’

Tardich’s brow wrinkled. ‘I’ve not heard of Tremen, but it is my honour to meet you.’ He glanced at the men clustered round the other fires, and softened his voice. ‘I give you Tain sorrow that you’re a prisoner. This is not the Tain way. It’s the Shargh way.’

Because of the Shargh, deduced Kira, mustering a smile to soothe Tardich’s embarrassment. She regretted speaking of the Tremen already. How would she make it to her destination if she allowed her pride to get the better of her at every provocation?

‘Eat your sacrash,’ said Tardich. ‘Selvet goes quickly and it’s hard to go on empty legs.’

She picked up the spoon with the tips of her fingers. Empty legs *and* an empty heart, she thought, but it was no longer true. Her resentment had been undone by Tardich’s gentle kindness.

8

Caledon sat with his back against a tree and his face to the white light of dawn. Two nights and a day of forced march with few rests and little sleep had left him bruised, aching and beyond weariness. At least they'd be free of the Scharn Woodlands soon, making attack less likely, the Shargh favouring flatswords and spears, weapons that were less effective than Tain arrows in the open.

The mutterings of the troop as they'd marched told Caledon that the men were uneasy. As well as the risk of Shargh attack, the troop was troubled by the breach in their long tradition of courtesy to strangers. This change in their behaviour added to Caledon's star-thought that the old ways were unweaving.

It was the same star-thought that had caused him to take Kira west towards Maraschin, rather than north as he'd led her to believe. He'd lied to her, but as a Placidien he was bound by a greater trust, and accepted that the pattern in the stars sometimes smudged over the smaller lives of those on the ground. Still, this knowledge did nothing to assuage his sense of guilt at his deceit.

Dorchen shouted and Caledon got to his feet, his guard muttering an apology as he re-bound Caledon's hands. The light was warming, heralding a gentle day, the sky cloudless and the grass flashing with silverjacks. It would have been a pleasant journey, with Kira.

It was close to midday when Caledon heard an excited murmur among the men, and looked up to see horsemen approaching. He immediately recognised their azure capes as those of the King's Guard, and the lead rider as Adris.

The Tain prince kept his horse at a gallop until he was almost upon Dorchen, the beast rearing and spattering Dorchen with foam as Adris wrenched it to a halt. The other horses came level, but Caledon's entire attention was on Adris.

A man now, not the boy Caledon had last seen, Adris wore his hair close-cropped, accentuating the angles of his face and the power of his neck and shoulders. But his eyes were the same, almost black.

'Your men look half dead,' boomed Adris, glancing at the troop as he dismounted. 'An exhausted man's like one already speared, remember that, Commander!'

Dorchen coloured but, before he could respond, Adris continued. 'Where are the prisoners?'

Dorchen shouted an order and Caledon was marched forward.

'My Lord Caledon!' exclaimed Adris, his eyes wide in astonishment. 'By the storms of Shardos, it's good to see you! Dorchen! Haven't you the wit to recognise the King's friend? Release him!'

Dorchen's face went a deeper shade of crimson and he gestured to Caledon's guard to unbind him.

'My Lord Caledon, please accept the King's apologies!' said Adris.

'I've had worse welcomes in other lands, Prince Adris,' said Caledon, rubbing his hands to restore circulation. 'It's easily

mended. Your Commander's actions, I believe, were under orders. Given the Shargh attacks, they were understandable.'

Adris's face cleared and, signalling Caledon to walk with him, he moved away from the troop and lowered his voice. 'It's timely that you've come now, Caledon. There's much to discuss.'

Turning around, he called, 'Archorn, I'll need your horse for the Lord Caledon. Dorchen, the scouts spoke of two prisoners. Where's the second?'

'With the other part of the troop, my Lord,' said Dorchen.

'Splitting a troop's dangerous,' snapped Adris.

'It was done on the advice of the physick, after my companion was injured,' said Caledon.

'It's unlike you to travel with a companion,' said Adris in surprise. 'What is his injury?'

'*Her* injury,' corrected Caledon.

'I'll send horses for her then,' said Adris, struggling to hide his astonishment. Then, clapping Caledon on the back and smiling the boyish smile Caledon remembered from almost five years earlier, he leapt back on his horse and Caledon mounted also.

'Let us go, my Lord,' said Adris. 'A deep bath, a good meal and the best ale await us.'

The troop escorting Kira was slowed by the wounded boy. The easier pace had eased her headache again but increased her anxiety for him. She was keen to get to Maraschin to retrieve her pack and help tend him, but wondered if Aranz would allow it. He'd not spoken to her since their argument. Tardich guarded her, and made a pleasant companion, speaking of the nature of the Tain settlements and the beautiful things that could be traded at the Maraschin fairs. But it was hard to concentrate. In truth, Caledon had lied and she was a prisoner of his 'friends'.

It was past midday when there was a commotion ahead, and Tardich swivelled to face her, his eyes glittering with excitement.

‘King’s Guard,’ he said. ‘They’re stationed at King’s Hall. I wonder what brings them here.’

The troop came to a halt and Kira peered past the men in front, excited to see her first real horse. But the panting, sweating, heaving masses of flesh and hide that stomped around the troopers were nothing like the horse on the ring of rulership. Their smell was overpowering, the depths of their nostrils crimson, their eyes luminous. They were ridden by big men clad in shirts and jerkins and cloaks the colour of a summer sky.

All Kira wanted to do was to slide away among the trees and lie there until the world of greens and browns restored her to calmness. But one of the Guard was talking to Troop leader Selvet, and both looked over at her.

Selvet gestured and Tardich gently caught Kira’s arm and took her forward. Up close, the man in blue was even more imposing, his close-cut hair accentuating his chiselled features, and the roping muscles of his neck rippling along his shoulders.

Kira swallowed dryly.

‘I am Guard Leader Remas,’ he said in perfect Onespeak, before bowing to her. ‘Prince Adris sends welcome and greetings, my Lady, and has asked us to bring you to the city. The Lord Caledon also sends message that you have nothing to fear from the Tain.’

Every man’s eye fixed on Kira and her face fired.

‘I’ve not been on a horse before,’ said Kira shakily.

‘You can sit up behind Ather, if you will, Lady,’ said Remas, gesturing towards a rider, who urged his massive horse forward, thrust out his foot and offered his hand.

Kira knew the words *King*, *Queen*, *Prince*, *Lord* and *Lady* from the Writings, for Kasheron and Terak had been princes, their father a king and their mother the *Lady* or *Queen* Kiraon. This man called her *Lady* despite his gaze drifting to her ragged cape and dirt-encrusted breeches. She guessed he erred on the side of

caution in his search for a word to describe the companion of Lord Caledon. Caledon hadn't mentioned any titles before and Kira wondered why.

'You put your foot on the Guard's foot and use it as a step,' said Tardich helpfully. 'I can steady you if you wish . . . Lady.'

Kira gritted her teeth as the Guard flicked her upward, but she had barely settled behind him when the horse swung round, making her belly churn with fear.

'You hold onto the saddle-strap,' said Tardich. Kira gripped the strap at the back of the harness.

She could see Remas in conversation with Selvet. Kira dried her sweaty hands on her breeches, then carefully, for fear of falling, turned her head round to see what was happening. Remas was now speaking with Aranz and Somer.

Kira glanced at the other mounted Guard, who looked bored, then Remas came back, Tardich hurrying by his side, clearly honoured by the Guard's attention. With a final nod, Remas vaulted onto his horse, and Ather's mount swung round, causing Kira's heart to race and she clung more tightly. Aranz and Somer waited by the bearer, and their gaze was on her.

'We need to take the wounded boy,' said Kira to Ather's back.

'Our orders are to bring you,' said Ather.

'But -' began Kira.

Remas issued a command and the other horses were suddenly horrifyingly close, their hot breath on her legs, and their white-ringed eyes flashing near her elbows. The Guard moved off through the trees, maintaining their arrow-shaped formation despite the slope of the land and the interruption of bole and branch.

After a time Kira's fear eased enough for her to loosen her grip a little, and relax the rod-like stiffness of her arms and shoulders. The saddle-strap was firm and kept her steady. The movement of the horse had taken on a rhythm and it seemed sure-footed and not inclined to stumble.

She sneaked glances at the other men as they went, fascinated by their similarity. They wore their hair very short and were dressed alike. Some of the men wore metal, too, in the form of rings. Kira stared at their hands in horrified fascination. The rings were gold and silver metal, and black metal too. How could they bear to have it against their skin?

‘Our pace will quicken once we clear the trees, Lady,’ said Ather apologetically.

‘I . . . I don’t mind going slowly,’ said Kira.

‘Prince Adris orders you be brought to the city swiftly.’

Remas called something and she glimpsed grasslands ahead. Then the horse changed pace. Kira jerked up and down, her head filled with visions of herself sprawled among the tree-roots. Eventually the jerking gave way to a smoother, rolling motion as the horses began their run across the open land.

Kira clung to the saddle-strap, breathless with fear and with her eyes tightly shut. The sound of the horses was like a thousand storms and when she finally opened her eyes, she saw the extraordinary sight of galloping horses all around, like the chimes in Kest’s rooms come to life.

The plain they crossed was clad with the same scattered, spindly trees as the Dendora, the dark edge of the Azurcade forest now far behind. Then the snort and heave of the horses increased and they wheeled in a smooth arc, giving Kira a new view. She gaped at an immense sweep of yellow stone cutting the lands, too even to be natural, and beyond it, a crowd of buildings scrambled towards the sky.

The wall must have taken season upon season to build, and the houses too. They were like longhouses, but tall, as if piled on top of each other. She had never even heard tell of such a thing.

‘Maraschin, built by Kershtain the Great,’ said Ather. ‘The Tains welcome you. May your rest be easy within our walls.’

As they got closer, Kira saw that men patrolled the top of the wall. Here and there, dark slots pierced its side.

Remas's voice rang out and the horses slowed to a jerking gait, then to a walk as they approached massive wooden gates that creaked open for them to pass through.

All at once, Kira was surrounded by a cacophany of voices and a suffocating sensation of too many others too close. The smell of burnt fat reminded her of when Kest had burned the dead Shargh after the first attack, and she buried her face in Ather's cape.

The horses made their way up between the buildings, the way full of people despite darkness fast closing in. They drew back to let the Guard pass, then closed in again behind, shouting to be heard above the conversation of others. Kira kept her head down as the crowds and noise beat at her. She felt very, very tired.

'The Sanctum,' said Ather, nodding to the right as they climbed.

It was a long, single-storey stone building set in its own yard, every window ablaze. Most of the surrounding buildings were two-storeyed wooden structures.

'We follow King's Way. Not far now,' Ather added.

The houses dwindled, taking their lamplight with them, and the path darkened. The noise and the people had gone. Early stars glittered then disappeared as the riders passed into a dense grove. Kira gazed around in delighted wonder. The trees seemed incongruous after the cramped streets of the lower city.

'King's Grove,' said Ather. 'Queen Alitha had a liking for trees.'

Kira felt a surge of affection for whoever Queen Alitha was. The sheltering branches were like a balm and she let it flow over her. But soon the trees gave way and another wall appeared. It was smaller than the city wall and capped with intricate carvings. A wall within a wall, thought Kira glumly, although this one looked more decorative than protective. The gate was metal, twisted and

scrolled, and the Guard in their lamplit shelters were dressed in the same manner as her escorts.

The gates swung open then clanged behind them, making Kira jump. The buildings inside the wall were so brightly lit it seemed like day. Lamps were set in metal sconces on walls, in latticed pillars and in deep bowls glittering through foliage-swathed arches.

The buildings were grand too, the stone carved as artfully as wood but two-storeyed, like those beyond the gate. There was a storm of whinnies and the Guards' mounts responded. Then orders were shouted, and most of the Guard peeled off towards a building housing horses, leaving Kira, Ather and Remas.

Remas dismounted and came to Kira's side, his hand clasping her arm.

She wedged her foot awkwardly past Ather's back, apologising as it scuffed his cape, and Remas gently lifted her down. Kira's legs barely supported her and her back was so stiff it ached.

'It takes time to steady yourself if you've not ridden before,' said Remas, continuing to hold her up.

Kira finally straightened, but Remas's hand remained on her arm as he escorted her up a patterned path, leaving no doubt as to her status.

'The wing to your left houses the kitchens and the apartments of those who serve in King's Hall. Those,' said Remas, nodding opposite, 'are reserved for guests. My orders are to take you to the Crown Rooms where Prince Adris waits with the Lord Caledon to welcome you.'

Kira tensed, part of her yearning to be with Caledon and part of her wishing never to see him again. They went up a series of shallow stone steps, under stone archways, and then through two guarded, immense wooden doors. They were inside now, in a space many times larger than the Bough's hall had been, their footsteps echoing over a floor of polished, patterned stone.

Remas halted at a second set of doors, and knocked once. There was a curt response, then Remas opened the door.

‘I leave you now, Lady,’ he said with a bow.

‘I thank you, Guard Leader Remas,’ said Kira, before taking a deep breath and stepping inside.

9

The first thing Kira saw was her pack propped against the wall. She was so relieved to have her herbal stores back that she snatched it up and put it straight on. Then she became aware of the wash of colours in the room, the glistening fabrics and gleaming metal. And Caledon hastening towards her, his hair shining, his clothes clean and unstained, the strange mixture of youth and age in his face more striking than she remembered.

‘Did they hurt you?’ he asked gently, looking at her forehead.

‘It was an accident,’ she said, tensing as a second man approached.

‘Prince Adris, may I present Kira to you,’ said Caledon.

‘I am honoured to meet the Lord Caledon’s friend. Please accept my regrets for the manner of your arrival in my lands,’ said Adris, with a bow, the darkness of his eyes shockingly reminiscent of the Shargh’s.

Kira bowed awkwardly. The Prince of the Tains shared the same powerful build, honed features and short hair as Remas, but

his body flashed and sparkled with metal, silver even forming part of his sky-blue shirt.

‘I know you’re tired, but I wanted to see you before you went to your rooms,’ said Caledon, his face tender.

Kira blinked, feeling almost as if she’d slept while standing, then heard the door open behind her.

A woman appeared in a long black gown, her greying hair pulled back severely from her pale face.

‘The Hall’s Mistress will show you to your rooms and ensure you have all you need,’ said Adris. ‘I’d be pleased if you’d join me and Lord Caledon for breakfast, when we can talk further.’

Kira nodded uncertainly and, with a last look at Caledon, followed the woman out.

The room the woman took her to was luxurious, but Kira didn’t sleep well, despite the deep bath of warm water, a huge platter of nuts and dried fruit, and a soft bed. By the time dawn had penetrated the window, she was pacing about the room, struggling with the too-large sleeping gown, her spare clothes too grimy and ragged to change into. When she’d been alone with Caledon it hadn’t mattered how dirty she was, but it did now, she realised, as she gazed at the glittering bowls and other precious things filling the room.

Even Adris seemed to gleam in a hard sort of way, and she wondered how, as he was so unlike Caledon, he had come to be Caledon’s friend. Perhaps his hardness came from having to fight off Shargh attacks. When Kira had left Allogrenia, she’d thought the Shargh only hunted her, but since then she’d seen the result of Shargh attacks on Caledon, as well as the slain Tains that Selvet’s troop had found.

Adris had many men as strong and powerful as himself to defend the Tain and their settlements, unlike the Tremen. She needed to continue her journey north to the Terak Kutan, not waste her time here, unless . . .

She paused, staring at the crimson bed-cover, head whirring with possibilities. The Tain were under attack as the Tremen were, and might be willing to join the Tremen in a fight against their common enemy. But the Tain weren't kin-linked like the Terak Kutan, and would surely expect the Tremen Protectors to leave Allogrenia to fight alongside them in the Tain lands. Kira winced at the thought of Protectors lying dead and dying out on the Sarsalin Plain, or under strange trees in the Azurcades.

No, it would be better to continue north to the Terak Kutan, who would have fighters aplenty, and who were obligated by kin-link to drive the Shargh from Allogrenia.

A knock sounded and she started, but the Hall's Mistress was in the room before Kira had a chance to summon up the Onespeak word for 'enter'. The woman laid some gowns she carried on the bed. They were deeply scoop-necked in beautiful colours, with glittering stones or intricately shaped metal beads sewn around the neck and cuffs.

There were also two pairs of black leather ankle boots that, like the gowns, looked to be her size. Had Adris sent such things for the sake of his friendship with Caledon, or to make amends for what was, in reality, her imprisonment? Whatever the reason, the gowns would be useless in her journey north. What she needed were new shirts and breeches to replace her torn and stained ones.

Kira tried Onespeak but the woman seemed not to comprehend. Kira shook her head, pulled her crumpled clothes from her pack and pointed to them, then to herself.

The woman said something in Tain, indicating the gowns again as if Kira were slow-witted. But Kira repeated her gestures until the woman gathered up the gowns and disappeared through the door again, leaving Kira wondering whether she'd be forced to meet Adris and Caledon at breakfast dressed in dirty, crumpled clothes.

She wandered over to the platter of nuts, fruit and tachil, guessing that Caledon was responsible for the absence of meat and cheese. She was considering whether to slip the remainder into her pack for her journey, when there was another knock on the door, the woman again entering before Kira could respond, this time carrying a pile of more suitable-looking garments. Depositing her burden unceremoniously on the bed, she delivered a blur of words – Kira only recognising ‘Adris’ – and was gone. It seemed Kira would have to make her own way to breakfast, *after* she’d dressed.

Looking through the clothes, Kira found three shirts, two jerkins, two jackets, three pairs of breeches and a soft pile of underclothes, all in the greens, creams and browns the troopsmen wore. Once Kira had donned a set, she felt happier than she had for many days – the clothes were comfortable and fitted well. Now all she needed was a comb. She’d left hers in the Warens, and her hair was a mass of tangles.

There’s no excuse for slovenliness, Kiraon, her father would have rebuked her.

There had to be a comb here somewhere – there was everything else! She scanned the ornate, wooden shelves in the bathing-room: scented soaps, oils, creams, sumptuous drying cloths . . .

Stinking heartrot! There was someone there!

The figure behind the door froze too. Then, with an oozing feeling of relief, Kira realised it was no stranger intent on harm, but her reflection in one of the looking-glasses spoken of in the Writings. It was partly obscured by the door, which was why she hadn’t noticed it before.

She’d never seen her own face clearly before, but Kandor’s was graven on her heart, and she saw how alike they’d been. Tears slid down her cheeks as she reached out trembling fingers and traced his face, as wet as her own. It was Kandor’s straight brows and choppy fair hair, unkempt as usual, only the eyes were hers, almost green now, whereas his had been a soft brown.

There was a rap on the door and she wiped her face. It was a Guard, his bulk filling the doorway, his head lowering in a polite bow as he summoned her to breakfast.

‘The King’s Hall is very beautiful,’ she said, making an effort to fill the uncomfortable silence as they walked. And indeed it was. The stone was the colour of winter sunshine, as was the paving. Flat pieces had been laid to make smaller paths that formed intricate networks between the buildings. The daylight also revealed scarlet blooms on the shrubbery between the walkways, and circles and squares of short grass studded with white flowers.

‘Kershtain the Great was a man of mighty vision. It was he who built King’s Hall, bringing masons and metalwrights from beyond the Silvercades. It was also he who formed the councils, who treated with the Torsmen and Spursmen, and forged the alliance with the Terak,’ said the Guard, his gaze remaining on the imposing building ahead.

‘I haven’t met your King,’ said Kira.

‘Nor are you likely to, Lady, for King Beris has been ill these past few seasons and remains in his chambers,’ he replied, his face darkening.

They stepped into the shade of the colonnades and through the first of the wooden doors, even more imposing in the light, and continued to the second.

The Guard knocked and Kira found herself back in the room she’d visited briefly the previous night, the blues and silvers of its furniture, drapes and ornamentation extraordinary. But Kira was oblivious to their splendour as she realised that Adris was alone.

‘You slept well, I trust?’ he said, smiling graciously, his clothes the same colours as those that decorated the room.

‘Yes, I thank you,’ she replied.

Adris ushered her towards a table laden with food. There were platters of fruit and nuts, a loaf of steaming bread that smelt like

sacrash, and jugs of water with slivers of strange fruits floating in them.

He drew back a chair for her, his breath touching her neck as he pushed the chair back in, and filled her cup with water.

‘Lord Caledon is with the King and will soon join us,’ he said, sitting opposite her. ‘He speaks with him of the growing number of Shargh attacks. You saw proof of them on your journey here with the troop, I believe.’

‘Yes,’ said Kira.

‘They are just a small part of what my people suffer, and a small part of what Lord Caledon tells me might be unfolding. As a traveller, he has the benefit of much broader knowledge than I,’ said Adris.

Kira sipped the water as Adris cut the bread using a knife as sharp as a sword, the light catching the blade as it sliced to and fro.

‘So, you don’t like the gowns I sent?’ he said, giving her a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

‘No, the gowns you sent were beautiful. I . . . I thank you for thinking about such things,’ she replied, feeling the frustration of knowing too little Onespeak.

‘The gowns were beautiful but you’ve chosen to dress like a troopsman,’ he said slowly, his eyes hard upon her. ‘Do Tremen women not wear gowns or is it that a Feailner doesn’t wear gowns?’ He noticed her start of surprise but continued. ‘It’s many seasons since we’ve had ought to do with our northern neighbours, in spite of the alliance. But then your friend Lord Caledon says you’re from the south, despite having the look of a Kessomi, and using the Terak tongue. There’s not very much about you that makes sense, Kiraon of Kashclan, yet I *must* have sense.’

Kira looked away, her heart racing. There was no mistaking Adris’s anger.

‘My people are being murdered,’ he said, tightly. ‘Tell me who you are, Kiraon, and what you intend.’

‘You seem to know already,’ she choked out.

Adris pushed back his chair and came back to her side of the table, still holding the knife. ‘You’ve told Caledon none of these things. Not the behaviour, I’d have thought, of a *friend*.’

‘I’ve told no lies,’ said Kira, jumping up and putting the chair between them.

‘Except by omission,’ retorted Adris harshly.

‘There are things I can’t speak of.’

‘There are things you *must* speak of,’ hissed Adris. ‘Seven of my people have been killed so far this moon, ten last, four the moon before. And for every woodcutter or goatherd who bleeds out their life in the forests or on the plain, another three die in the Sanctum. Tell me why you go north!’

‘I can’t!’

‘You will!’ he shouted, seizing her arm. ‘I won’t bandy words with a ragged stranger while my people are slaughtered!’

Adris still held the knife, the blade pressed against her arm, the metal burning like chill fire through her shirt. Memories of Kandor’s death stormed back and she jerked away so violently that Adris’s grip was broken. Terrified, she fled to the door, straight into the arms of Caledon.

‘I’ll not stay here,’ she cried, then broke from his arms, wrenched the door open and fled.

Adris went to the door and shouted an order, then turned back to Caledon. ‘I’ve assigned a Guard to take her where she chooses within the city. She’ll come to no harm.’

‘She’s already come to harm!’ said Caledon, striding to the window to see if Kira was in view, then swinging back. ‘What possessed you to confront her after everything we discussed? Didn’t we agree to give her time to heal? To build trust with me? To build trust with the Tain? Have you forgotten *everything* I’ve told you since you were fifteen years old? By the stars, Adris, there are things beyond your bounds which cast their shadow wider

than you'll *ever* know! Things I *thought* I'd given you a sense of! Have I failed so miserably that you've not the patience to wait even a single day?'

There was a strained silence, then Adris said, 'You're right to be angered, and until Remas's report, I'd resolved to do as we agreed.'

'Remas?' Caledon countered.

'The Guard Leader. When he fetched Kira, I asked him to speak with those she'd travelled with.'

'So, what did you discover to make you break your undertakings to me?' said Caledon.

'Only one thing, and it's in Remas's report,' said Adris, going to a side chest, retrieving a scroll and handing it to Caledon.

'By the stars!' exclaimed Caledon, after he'd read it.

'More or less my sentiments.'

'*Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan*. It tells us everything and nothing.'

'What do you mean?' asked Adris.

Caledon poured himself a cup of fruited water. 'Kira told me she was from the southern forests, one of the few places I've not been to, given their impenetrability *and* distance from the north. Yet she speaks Terak or Kessomi.'

'*Feailner* is a Terak word, or at least northern,' said Adris.

'Yes,' agreed Caledon, 'and there's only ever been one Kiraon, in the north. Did you check her pack?'

'Dried herbs and their concoctions, a gathering sling and sickle such as those used in the north, a map, some very worn clothes, a waterskin made of waterproofed material, a little nutmeat.'

'What sort of nuts?' asked Caledon.

'Not a type I've seen before,' acknowledged Adris. 'Yet everything we know of her says she's Terak.'

'Or Kessomi.'

'Same thing,' said Adris with a shrug.

‘Not quite,’ said Caledon. ‘The Kessomi have remained largely separate, whereas the Terak have mixed their blood with the Kirs and Illians. But we both know she can’t be Terak *or* Kessomi, for no child could grow to womanhood in the north with eyes like that and remain unknown.’

‘Unknown to you, perhaps,’ said Adris. ‘*Everything’s* unknown to me, confined here.’

‘The time of waiting will end, Adris,’ said Caledon, rising and wandering round the room. ‘Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan. I guess from her dreams that her family’s dead.’

‘Slaughtered by the Shargh?’

‘It seems so,’ said Caledon, coming back to the table. ‘She knows how to cure Shargh wounds, Adris, which suggests she’s dealt with many. Her knowing would be useful to your physicks.’

‘If she deigns to give it,’ said Adris.

‘What do you make of *Kashclan*?’ asked Caledon, taking a handful of nuts and rolling them in his palm.

‘It’s a common enough Kir name,’ said Adris. ‘Markash, Bekash, Sorkash, Yankash, we have them all here, come Summer-end Fair. Most are metalwrights. The gates of King’s Hall are Kir work.’

‘And so where does that leave us?’ asked Caledon.

‘Perhaps she’s nothing more than a half-starved stranger forced from her lands by Shargh blades. The way things are unfolding, she won’t be the last.’

‘The stars tell me she’s far more than that,’ said Caledon.

‘I don’t believe in the speech of stars,’ said Adris with a smile. ‘But I do trust your judgement. Did the stars also tell you to bring her here?’

‘Yes.’

‘For what purpose?’ asked Adris, taken aback. ‘To aid us in some way through her physick skills?’

‘The stars are rarely so eloquent or exact.’
Adris frowned. ‘So we keep her here?’
‘For the time being,’ said Caledon.

10

Kira stormed across the yard, threw open the door to her rooms, and thrust her clothing into her pack. She grabbed a drying-cloth, wrapped up the remains of the food on the platter and stored it away also, snapping the lacings taut. Her heart raced and her thoughts boiled, as she heaved on her pack and pulled open the door.

A Guard awaited her outside. ‘The Prince commands I escort you where you would go,’ he said, his voice expressionless.

‘I go north,’ said Kira shortly.

‘The Prince commands I escort you where you would go *in the city.*’

‘Then escort me to the gates of Maraschin and I’ll go on alone from there,’ she said, pushing past him down the pathway and ignoring the blue-clad men engaged in swordplay.

The ornate metal gates swung wide and Kira set off down the King’s Way, the broad path becoming more crowded as she descended. The city was much larger than she’d guessed in the last night. It looked to hold at least three or four times the number of

people in all of Allogrenia. Passers-by fell silent and stared, and Kira continued with her head down, her anger spent and her eyes watering from the glare of sunlit stone.

The day wasn't warm but she began to sweat. The noise and closeness of the crowds, coupled with the harsh light, made her feel nauseous. She began to pant so that after a while she had to pause and lean against a wall.

'Are you ill, Lady?' said the Guard, more solicitous now.

'No,' she said, then began to slide, the wall slipping away into blackness.

When Kira woke, there was a man bending over her, grey-haired, his cool hand on her forehead. 'I'm Dumer, the Physick-General,' he said, in slow but precise Onespeak.

'Where -?' began Kira, staring beyond him at a dark curtain.

'You are in the Sanctum. You were brought here after you fainted on the King's Way. I do not think you need more than rest and nourishing food, my Lady,' he said. 'The King's Guard is waiting to help you back to King's Hall, once you're feeling more recovered. It would be best that you don't exert yourself for the next few days.'

The curtain flicked open and a young woman appeared. 'I beg your pardon, Physick-General, but you're wanted in the Receiving Room.'

'Send for Major Physick Aranz, Speri,' said Dumer, nodding to Kira and then disappearing through the curtain.

Kira had sat up and was swinging her legs off the pallet when Aranz appeared. He was garbed in the same green and gold that the young woman, Speri, wore. He looked tired but cleaner than when she had last seen him.

'I didn't expect to see you again, Lady,' he said, pouring her a cup of water and adding what looked like beesblest to it. 'Drink this,' he ordered.

Kira gulped it down. 'The boy who was wounded by the Shargh, Aranz. Does he still live?'

'Yes, he survived the journey back.'

'Can I see him?' asked Kira, relief flooding through her.

'No.'

'But -'

'Only his close kin can see him. Peace and quiet make the passing of the ill less painful.'

'But I must see him!' she said, catching his arm.

'How many times do I have to say it? He has seen a physick. There is nothing you can do.'

'A King's Guard waits for me,' she said desperately. 'If you don't let me see the boy, I'll send news of your discourtesy to Prince Adris.'

Aranz glared at her for a moment, then said, 'Come,' before striding off. Kira hurried behind him through two sets of double doors to a room that was shrouded in dimness. 'He's in there,' said Aranz, stopping and gesturing at the last alcove.

'I need you to help me.'

'I won't add to his suffering any further!'

'The Shargh killed my brother, Aranz. They're the same age. I'm begging you!'

'There's nothing you can do,' he repeated, but he turned back to the alcove, the two men sitting by the pallet moving out of the way.

Kira threw off her pack and raked through the contents. 'Unbind the wound.'

'It's pointless...'

'Unbind it!'

Taking a knife from the physick's tools on the side table, Aranz slit the bandages, the stench making the two men retch.

'Cut the stitches. I need the wound open,' said Kira, washing her hands in the water bowl.

Aranz gritted his teeth and nicked each of the stitches, leaving the wound gaping. Kira picked up an open pot of pink salve and gently smeared it on.

‘What is it?’ asked Aranz, curious in spite of himself.

‘Fireweed.’

‘What does it do?’ he asked.

‘Burns the rot from the wound.’

‘*Burns* the rot? But surely that brings pain?’

‘Yes,’ said Kira, making sure she’d covered every last piece of rancid flesh with the salve.

‘But . . . I can’t give him anything for the pain. He’s too close to death!’

Even as he watched, the boy groaned, his pallor replaced with a seeping flush. ‘By Shardos, I’ve been a fool to listen to you! I’ve traded him a peaceful death for an agonising one!’ said Aranz.

‘You’ve given him a chance at life!’ replied Kira fiercely.

‘But I can’t stop the pain!’ he said.

The boy was now deep crimson and starting to sweat, causing consternation in the two men who’d been attending him.

Aranz watched, mouth agape, as Kira put her hands over the boy’s heart, the colour draining from her face until she was as white as winter and her skin as wet as the boy’s. Slowly the boy stilled and his breathing slipped into the rhythm of sleep. It couldn’t be!

Kira swayed and Aranz grabbed her, her head lolling against his shoulder. Aranz looked round wildly, caught between her needs and the boy’s.

‘I . . . I’m sorry, Aranz. He was at the end of the path,’ gasped Kira.

Aranz hooked a chair closer with his leg and lowered Kira onto it. ‘Sit there,’ he ordered, then went to the herb store and mixed a restorative. He hastened back to where she sat, flicking her hands in an odd way, but with more colour in her face.

‘Drink all of it,’ he said, then watched to make sure she complied. He checked the boy again, shaking his head in amazement, then said, ‘Come. There’s a pleasant place to sit at the back.’

Aranz took her arm and guided her through the pallets, pushing open yet another set of doors to reveal grass and trees.

Kira stared about in amazement.

‘We made this a garden to help the ill recover,’ said Aranz, leading her to a stone seat next to a pool. The air was full of scent and the ground aflutter with dapples of sunlight and shadow. Birds called and a stream tinkled.

‘The Spursmen and Torsmen find the city oppressive and mend more quickly if they spend time here. We’ve found it’s good for physicks, too.’

After he’d lowered her, Aranz settled beside her, and for a while they sat in silence, watching the water. Leaves drifted across its surface and small winged creatures in an array of colours hovered.

‘I need to beg your pardon,’ said Aranz. ‘I’ve been wrong and it almost cost that boy’s life.’

‘I’m not good at making myself understood,’ said Kira wearily, feeling completely drained, as she always did after taking pain.

‘Your Onespeak is sparse,’ acknowledged Aranz. ‘Are you Terak?’

‘Tremen.’

‘I’ve not heard of the Tremem.’

Kira watched the sun’s spangles shift on the water. *No one* had heard of the Tremem. The obscurity that had kept them safe had turned out to be a danger as well. Why help a people you had no knowing of?

‘Do they –’ he began, then stopped, his gaze over her shoulder. ‘Your friend is here. Maybe he comes to take you back to King’s Hall.’

‘I’ll not go back,’ said Kira, beyond exhaustion now. ‘With Dumer’s permission, I’ll stay here where I can be useful to the physicks.’

‘We’d be grateful for your help, but it isn’t a very . . . grand place to stay. Not for a Lord’s friend,’ he said.

‘I’ve slept in trees and caves and holes in the ground,’ said Kira. ‘Anything warm and dry is grand indeed.’

Aranz rose and bowed, but Kira’s gaze remained on the water. She heard Aranz take his leave and smelt the peculiar sweet spice scent of Caledon as he settled beside her.

But she kept her head down, anger at his betrayal warring with her want to trust him.

The leaves whispered and the water rippled, fragmenting the reflections. ‘We need to speak,’ he said. ‘Can we speak Terak?’

‘Use it if you wish,’ retorted Kira.

‘I can understand your feelings,’ he said. ‘You trusted me and I took you to Maraschin when I said we went north. I told you the Tain were friends, but they took you prisoner, bound your hands, injured you. I told you Adris was my friend, yet he showed you no kindness. If I wore your skin, I’d be angry too.’

‘Yet you’ve come to ask me to trust you,’ she said.

‘I’ve come to tell you why these things happened. I’m not asking you to trust me. You must trust me only if you see fit.’

Caledon began to speak, and by the time he had fallen silent, the garden was bathed in the ripe sunlight of midday and Kira’s head was full of the strange things he’d spoken of. He’d told her of long journeys sung by the voice of stars; of people in many lands whose hearts strove for good; of his belief in patterns unfolding, and his certainty that he and she had been *meant* to come together in the Azurcade foothills at the precise moment of the Shargh attack.

While some of what he said was incomprehensible, Kira now understood their ‘welcome’ by the Tain, *and* Adris’s behaviour.

The Tain had been under sustained Shargh attack yet the Tain King refused to act, neither leaving his chambers nor bequeathing authority to his son, Prince Adris.

Most of what Adris did risked his father's wrath, for the King still ruled. But Adris sent out troopsmen to protect his people under the pretence of 'surveying' the quality of grazing or the state of wood supplies. He took travellers by force, because they 'trespassed', not because they might be in league with the Shargh.

Adris is in a very difficult situation. He cannot openly thwart the King, or the King's advisers. But as the Commander of the Tain forces, he can send troopsmen where he wishes. He's certainly matured in the time since I was last here, but he is impatient by nature, Caledon had said, *quick to anger and quick to forgive, but above all, Adris loves his people.*

As for Caledon, he'd made clear his passion for peace. He'd also told her of his love for his sister Roshai and her daughters. *Pisa is the youngest,* he'd said, a smile lighting his face. *Just seven years, she's never still, singing and dancing and making tales of sea creatures and cloud creatures and creatures of the wind and stars. Roshai predicts she'll be a Placidien like me when she grows up.*

There was a pause after Caledon finished speaking. His face was quiet but Kira sensed the power of him. If Adris were the roar of flames, then Caledon was the glow of coals, less obvious but more intense.

'I'll teach the Tain physicks how to treat Shargh wounds, for they have great need of that knowing, but then I'll continue north,' said Kira, rising and going to the water.

'What's started is not just about the Tremens, or the Tain, or about the peoples in between,' said Caledon. 'The Shargh went far into the south to attack your people and now they come round the western spur of the Azurcades to attack the Tain. Nor will this be the end of their greed for blood. Their hunger for war will grow, and you and I have a part to play in what is to come. This the stars

tell me. That's why I wanted to come here to rest and build our strength and prepare,' he said, going to her.

Kira stood her ground but the sweet spice smell of Caledon roused her need of him. She was in a strange city, among those who'd taken her prisoner, and Caledon was the only thing here familiar to her.

'At the base of the Azurcades you gifted me - a stranger - with my life,' he said. 'You followed me into the mountains and opened yourself to take my pain.'

'I know your heart wants to trust me, Kira, but your head warns against it,' he said softly, smoothing the knotty hair from her eyes. 'Listen to your heart, for it knows best.'

'I can't stay here more than a few days,' said Kira thickly. 'The longer I delay, the more death I might bequeath my people!'

'On the morrow I accompany Adris to The Westlans, to meet with the Tor and Spursmen there. We must put in place plans and strategies of how they're to defend themselves. It's a trek of ten nights. Stay here until my return, Kira. My way lies northward too, and I would like to journey with you.'

His fingers caressed her face, and she clung to him, then he raised her chin so that she looked at him.

'Give me ten days, Kira,' he murmured. 'Then we'll speak again.'



Orbdargan had spent nearly a moon quarter on the Shargh Grounds, but he'd had Arkendrin's measure after the first night, and what he'd learned pleased him. Arkendrin wasn't Chief in name, but he could call on enough blood-ties to serve their purposes. And, like Orbdargan, he was eager to avenge the long injustice of land theft by the northern robbers.

Orbdargan also understood Arkendrin's frustration, his own sire having been content to eke out life on the patch of Dendora they'd been left with. It had been many long seasons before Orbdargan had been able to seize the circlet of chiefship and rouse the Weshargh from their apathy.

Orbdargan saw the same servitude to the prattlings of Tellers and the slithery twists of chance among the Cashgar Shargh, but was confident he could turn Arkendrin and his people to the path they must follow to reclaim what was rightfully theirs.

As he'd told Arkendrin over a bowl of sherat, chance could be made a more obliging blood-tie to those the Sky Chiefs smiled on, and clearly the Sky Chiefs smiled on Arkendrin, for why else had

they called Arkendrin's elder brother home early, leaving behind no heir but a squalling babe of no import. It was to Arkendrin that the Sky Chiefs had bequeathed the task of restoring the northern grazing lands of the Shargh's forefathers. The only impediments to Arkendrin joining him and the Soushargh Chief, Yrshin, in leading their warriors to victory over the northern thieves, were Arkendrin's obsession with a gold-eyed girl from the south, and the suppurating wound on the back of his leg. But both obstacles could be overcome.

Orbdargan waited until evening, when they shared sherat outside Arkendrin's sorch, to broach the subject.

'All this should be mine,' muttered Arkendrin, gazing over the Grounds.

'It *is* yours, Chief Arkendrin,' said Orbdargan, smiling at him. 'You can take it any time you wish, but it would be better to take the northern grazing lands as well, just as a snake waits to strike flesh, not air.'

Arkendrin's attention was distracted by warriors returning from a hunt. His leg injury prevented Arkendrin from running, bringing back wolf-skins or fanchon, or moorhens from their nest-sites, but it didn't matter. Arkendrin's power didn't lie in his body, but in his ability to bind warriors to his will.

'The stinking gold-eyed creature watches the sunset even as we do and stops the wound from healing,' said Arkendrin.

'The wound's deep but will mend. Till it does, we can use the legs of beasts.'

'Shargh keep the earth under their feet,' snapped Arkendrin.

'The Sky Chiefs gifted the Ashmiri horses and *they* prosper,' said Orbdargan, having anticipated this objection.

'The Ashmiri trade themselves to the filthy Northerners,' countered Arkendrin.

'Uthlin's bound by his forefather's oath not to attack them, but he's tied to us,' said Orbdargan.

‘You’ve spoken with him?’

‘My warriors have. There’s much he can do to help our cause without sending arrows north.’

Arkendrin was silent, his skin shiny with sweat despite the cooling air.

‘We’ve crossed the Braghans,’ said Orbdargan softly.

‘The Sky Chiefs forbid it,’ hissed Arkendrin, palming his forehead in an automatic gesture.

‘We cross the Braghans in the low places where they join the plain, and do not offend the Sky Chiefs,’ said Orbdargan. ‘We’ve attacked woodcutters and herders and lost no warriors.’

Orbdargan’s people grazed a range that overlapped the Ashmiri’s and their occasional meetings had brought an understanding of other places, other ways of doing, and other gods. Arkendrin had no knowing of such things.

‘You fight the Tain?’ asked Arkendrin, limping up and down, his pallid face flushed by the last of the light.

‘We test their resolve,’ said Orbdargan. ‘Tain warriors have no belly for fighting, marching out only to reclaim their dead. They’re treated to the Northerners against us, but if they raise no swords to protect their own, they’ll raise no flatswords for them!’

Arkendrin’s eyes darted around feverishly as he considered Orbdargan’s words.

‘I’ve sent warriors on Ashmiri horses to raid the place the Tain call Westlans,’ continued Orbdargan. ‘On a horse, your wound won’t matter. The Ashmiri see everything. If the gold-eyed creature’s crossed the Braghans, they’ll know where it dwells.’

‘You can bring horses here?’

‘I’ll send message for my warriors to bring them. I go now to Yrshin of the Soushargh so that he can join with us in reclaiming what was stolen. I’ll return before the second moon.’

‘This cursed wound will be healed by then and I’ll have no need of horses!’ said Arkendrin.

‘Horses will bring you to the creature quickly, Chief Arkendrin, and its death will be a fitting start to the victories that await. The cirlet of chiefship will be yours, and whatever else you desire.’

Arkendrin’s gaze went to the highest sorcha on the spur. ‘I’ll be ready.’

Inside the sorcha, Palansa sat back on her bed feeding Ersalan. She wished she could suckle him outside and name the stars for him as she often did, but Arkendrin was with the Weshargh Chief, a man with strange reddish-brown hair and enough arrogance for twice his seasons. He’d strutted round the spur for nearly a moon quarter without paying his respects to the real Chief.

Better that he doesn’t, Tarkenda had said. Better he spends his time filling Arkendrin’s head with dreams of victory in the north and that Arkendrin spends his days contemplating his coming triumphs, rather than dwelling on us and the babe.

Palansa gazed down into Ersalan’s eyes, and it was as if she looked into Erboran’s eyes. Ersalan’s tiny fist pummelling her breast was the nearest she would come to Erboran’s caress. She closed her eyes, overcome by how she craved Erboran’s touch – the smell of him, the feel of him inside her, his urgency matched by her own.

Tarkenda ducked through the door.

‘Ersalan grows faster than a grahen chick in a stink-beetle swarm,’ she said approvingly. ‘He must be half as big again as Sansula’s son, and her son was born ten days before.’

‘He feeds all the time,’ said Palansa, waiting for the ache of longing to fade.

‘It’s as if he’s in a hurry,’ said Tarkenda, pouring herself a cup of water. ‘Did you know Irdodun’s shifted his sorcha further up the slope?’

‘But he’s sought no permission!’ said Palansa in astonishment, wrapping Ersalan and sliding him into his sleep-sling.

‘Irdodun palms his forehead to none but Arkendrin,’ said Tarkenda.

‘He thinks he has a Voice now, does he?’ fumed Palansa, rocking the sling gently despite her anger. ‘That his wise words will be heard at a Speak? Does he have no honour? Do the ways of his fathers mean nothing to him?’

‘Arkendrin thinks he’s clever, playing on Irdodun’s ambition, but Orbdargan plays on Arkendrin’s want for glory in the same way. It seems a wolf can be trapped with as little as a scuttle-lizard, if it’s hungry enough,’ said Tarkenda.

‘Are they still at Arkendrin’s sorch?’ asked Palansa.

‘Not when I passed by. Ormadon says that Orbdargan’s leaving on the morrow and that Arkendrin’s ordered food be prepared for his journey.’

‘Does Ormadon know where he’s going?’ said Palansa.

‘South.’

‘He goes to the Soushargh, which means Arkendrin must have agreed to take his blood-ties north,’ said Palansa.

‘Did you doubt he would?’ said Tarkenda, her voice tinged with sadness.

‘But surely it’s good for us if Arkendrin goes north to fight? It means Ersalan will be safe.’

‘No one’s safe once the fighting starts, Palansa,’ said Tarkenda, with a sigh.

Deep in the southern forests, Miken presided over a special Clancouncil. Kira was not the only person missing – Dakresh of Sherclan having sent his son Sener in his place. The council could have compelled Dakresh to attend or relinquish his clan’s leadership, but Miken knew the death of his younger son had dealt the elderly Sherclansman a terrible blow, and the meeting was sombre enough without causing further upset.

News of Kira's departure had elicited dismay *and* mutterings about Kest. As Sener had put it, 'Sherclan doesn't understand why a Protector Commander – who's sworn to protect – allowed the Tremem Leader to go to her death.'

The words may have been uttered with all the bluntness of Sener's eighteen seasons, but Miken knew the sentiments were shared by many of those gathered.

It was Sanden of Renclan who was first to rise once the opening preliminaries were complete.

'Is Commander Kest to present this council with his reasons for letting the Tremem Leader go, for it would seem that we are at least owed an explanation?'

'The Commander is beyond the Fourth Eight on patrol, but he discussed his reasons with me when he brought my son home,' said Miken.

'With respect, Clanleader Miken, you're not the council,' said Kemrick, rising.

'You're quite right, Clanleader Kemrick, but neither the council nor the Protector Commander has the authority to forbid a Leader to leave,' said Miken.

Kemrick looked thoughtful, but Berendash sprang to his feet. 'Surely the Commander should have *advised* the Leader to remain in the safety of Allogrenia.'

'You assume he didn't – and that Allogrenia is safe,' said Miken.

'Safer than wandering alone beyond its shelter,' retorted Berendash, unleashing a new wave of muttering.

Kemrick rose, waiting for the hubbub to quiet before speaking. 'Perhaps Clanleader Miken, you could deliver Commander Kest's report on his behalf.'

'By all means,' said Miken rising and trying to ignore Berendash's fingers tapping on the table. 'I'm assuming that the nature

and number of the Shargh attacks are known to everyone here, including you, Sener, from your father.'

Sener nodded.

'What the council might not have dwelt on is the *pattern* of these attacks, although I don't presume to know your private musings.'

'Just tell us what you think,' interjected Berendash.

'It's not what *I* think that matters, but what Commander Kest and Tremen Leader Kiraon thought. Each reached the same conclusions.'

'Which were?' demanded Berendash.

'Peace, Sarclan leader,' said Kemrick. 'If we're to understand the Commander's reasoning, we need to follow in his footsteps.'

'I will be as brief as possible,' said Miken. 'You will recall that, in the first attack, Kandor of Kashclan was choked unconscious but the Shargh clearly intended to kill Kiraon of Kashclan – as she was then known. At the time, I was so grateful to have my son and clan-kin safe, I didn't question this anomaly. It was Commander Kest who brought it to my attention.'

'In the second attack, at Turning, the Shargh again ignored many within sword-range to kill Leader Maxen and his family.'

'Yet Tremen Leader Kiraon escaped,' mused Berendash, following the train of thought.

'Though bearing their violent mark,' said Kemrick, his kindly face clothed in anger.

Miken gazed down at the table as if gathering his thoughts. 'The third attack was on your brother, Sener. We know that the Tremen Leader saw Bern near the Sarnia Cave, and that Commander Kest's patrol found his possessions scattered between there and where his body was found near the Fourth Eight.'

'I didn't know that,' said Sener.

'There were things not said for your father's sake,' said Miken.

‘There’s more?’ Sener’s agonised eyes held Miken’s, as Kemrick put a steadying hand on his arm.

‘I’m sorry to cause you pain but what I’m about to say explains much of why the Leader chose to leave. Bern wasn’t killed straight away. We suspect the Shargh wanted to find out where the Leader was and took Bern to the edge of the forest because they had someone there who spoke Tremen.’

‘These are guesses,’ said Berendash, glancing at Sener who sat with his head in his hands.

‘Perhaps,’ said Miken. ‘Which brings us to the fourth attack. The Leader *guessed*, as Commander Kest and I did, that the Shargh hunted *her*, and that if she remained in Allogrenia, the killing would continue. The Leader wasn’t willing to risk any more such deaths.’

‘Protector Tresen caught up with the Leader near the Fourth Eight, and they were under Shargh attack when Commander Kest’s patrol reached them. The Shargh fighter who wounded my son had the opportunity to kill the Leader, but hesitated.’

Miken paused and gulped his cup of water.

‘Why did they delay?’ asked Tenedren.

‘We *guess* because the honour of killing *our* Leader belonged to *their* Leader.’

‘And the last attack?’ prompted Kemrick.

‘Having decided to leave Allogrenia, the Leader remained hidden in the trees when Commander Kest turned his patrol for home. Protector Nandrin – who’s similar in build – wore the Leader’s braid to trick the Shargh into believing she was with the patrol. They’d gone barely fifty lengths when the Shargh attacked, showing no interest in anyone except Protector Nandrin. Again they deferred to their Leader for the honour of his death.’

Miken sat down and it was a while before anyone stirred.

Finally Kemrick rose. ‘These are guesses, as you’ve said, Clan-leader Miken, but if true, we would expect no more attacks. By my

reckoning, it's been twenty-one days since the last, and I've heard no further reports of slashed trees.'

'There's been only one full moon in that time,' said Berendash.

'The last attack on Commander Kest's patrol took place when the moon was near new,' said Kemrick.

'Opportunistic, rather than planned,' countered Berendash.

'Whatever the reason, for the first time since Kasheron brought us south, our leader is absent,' said Kemrick. 'It may be that Tremen Leader Kiraon died before leaving the forest, has been killed since, is captive of some enemy the Writings tell us nothing about, or is safe. *Unless or until* she returns, *or* sends message, we have no way of knowing what's befallen her. We may *never* know.'

Miken gulped down another cup of water, the baldness of Kemrick's summation reinforcing the magnitude of his loss. She wasn't *Tremen Leader Kiraon* to him but the child who'd played with his own children, who – like them – had run to his arms for comfort.

'I, for one, prefer to live with hope, rather than despair,' said Marren, joining the debate for the first time. 'Clanleader Kemrick's words are true and I thank him for them, and for summing up our predicament so eloquently. The choice before us now, Clanleaders, is whether to appoint a new Leader and, if so, *when* we appoint one.'

'I think we should wait,' said Sener unexpectedly, colouring as the eyes of the Clancouncillors turned to him. 'Appointing a new leader is like saying Tremen Leader Kiraon's dead and I'd prefer to think of her as alive. And if she does return, and we've got another leader, it could be embarrassing.'

Berendash guffawed and Miken grinned in spite of himself.

'I would prefer to wait also, but we cannot wait forever,' said Kemrick. 'I suggest the leadership be discussed again in three moons.'

There was a general murmur of agreement.

‘That’s well and good but it doesn’t resolve the problem of *who’s* to heal in the meantime, and from *where,*’ said Berendash.

‘Then let’s address that,’ said Kemrick. ‘Perhaps we should start by identifying the Healers who remain to us. It would seem sensible to make the longhouse where most of them dwell the place of healing, at least until the Bough is rebuilt.’

‘That means the Kashclan longhouse,’ said Berendash.

‘There’s a risk the Shargh might be drawn to any longhouse that becomes the centre of healing,’ pointed out Marren.

‘Not if Clanleader Miken’s guesses are true,’ countered Berendash.

‘Of course, any added risk could be addressed with an increased presence of Protectors, but it’s something the council should consider,’ said Marren.

‘What think you, Clanleader Miken?’ asked Kemrick.

‘I will leave the decision in the hands of the council,’ said Miken, dragging his thoughts back to the room. ‘It makes no difference which longhouse the Healers dwell in apart from the need to set up pallets and shift herbal stores.’

‘Who would you judge to be the strongest Healers?’ persevered Kemrick.

‘Brem probably, but he’s chosen a Protector’s life. Arlen, Paterek and Werem have skills, but are still learning.’

‘What of your son?’ broke in Berendash. ‘He worked closely with the Leader.’

‘He’s a gifted Healer but it will be some time before his strength returns. He’s yet to complete his Protector training, too,’ said Miken.

‘Has Kasheron’s healing blood dwindled to such an extent that we can muster only three beginner Healers?’ demanded Berendash.

‘You forget the loss the Shargh have inflicted on us,’ said Kemrick. ‘Healers Maxen, Merek, Lern and – one way or another

- Tremen Leader Kiraon. Who knows whether Kandor would have followed the same path, for Kasherion's blood ran strong in him, too. If it's three young Healers we're left with, perhaps Commander Kest will release Brem and Tresen to further their skills. Until then, we must hope that the *guesses* we've discussed are correct.'

'Hope's not much use against swords,' muttered Berendash.

12

Kira's frustration at delaying her journey north was intensified by the Sanctum's strange ways of healing that she gradually discovered over the course of the next week. Physick-General Dumer was responsible for the Sanctum's smooth running, yet went to his home each evening, not returning till morning. The lesser physicks weren't there all the time either, but worked in shifts. Major Physicks, such as Aranz, slept at the Sanctum, but like the rest of the physicks, didn't gather the herbs for their ministering. This was done by people who weren't even Healers.

Kira had never contemplated healing as something to be divvied up between different people and different times. Care of the ill or injured continued day and night, as ongoing and natural as eating and breathing. Even worse was the notion of trading it, Kira's face burning at the memory of yesterday's events when the woodcutter's son had been collected by his kin.

Dumer had sent for her and there had been much bowing and smiling by the boy's aunt and uncle, Dumer translating for her. The woman had handed her a sparkling bracelet of yellow

metal, which Dumer explained was trade for healing the boy. Her refusal of the bracelet and protestations that the healing was *given* were met with bewilderment, and confusion. Did Kira think the trade was somehow not enough? It was only the arrival of Aranz, and his curt instruction to simply accept the bracelet, that had resolved the situation.

How are the gatherers to be given trade, if we accept no trade for those we cure? Aranz had said later. And how am I to procure my food and clothing if I have nothing to trade? In your lands it may be that everything is given, but it isn't in ours. If you are not to go hungry, naked and roofless, you must have something to trade.

Earlier that day, Kira had asked Aranz to show her the Tain Writings on healing and was appalled to find there was only one sheaf. Her dismay deepened when she discovered it was written solely in Tain.

‘Of course the Chronicle’s in Tain – it’s *our* physick-knowing,’ said Aranz.

‘But it means no one else can use it, and with only one copy of everything it could easily be lost. When the Shargh attacked my people they burned our healing Writings. I rewrote the lists in Tremen and Onespeak and the other Healers made copies, so now they’re stored in different places. Is there no one here who could copy your healing into Onespeak?’

‘Speri, perhaps, if Dumer would release her,’ said Aranz, naming one of the lesser physicks. ‘She has a good knowing of Onespeak.’

‘Could you ask Dumer?’

‘He’s not likely to agree unless the request comes from Prince Adris. He’d see rewriting the Chronicle in Onespeak as time-wasting. Perhaps your friend Lord Caledon could ask the Prince for you,’ said Aranz, replacing the Chronicle on the shelf and waiting politely for Kira to exit the store where it was kept.

‘Caledon’s gone with Ad . . . *Prince* Adris to Westlans and won’t be back for another two days.’

‘*The Westlans*,’ corrected Aranz, leading the way to the alcove where they took their meals. ‘It’s where my kin live.’

‘I thought you were from Mendor,’ said Kira, settling at the table.

‘I am. Mendor, Mendor Spur, Slift Tor, Listlin Tor, The Fierway are all part of The Westlans. It’s the name for the Tain lands west of here that lie between the northern Azurcades and the Sarsalin. So I’m a Westlaner and a Spursman as well as a Tain.’

‘Would you like –’ he began, then froze as hoofs clattered outside. There were raised voices, one of them Dumer’s. Aranz half rose as a physick rushed past the alcove and backtracked as she saw them.

‘You’re to come, Major Physick Aranz. You too, my Lady. Dumer requests it,’ she panted.

Kira and Aranz hurried to where Dumer waited with a King’s Guard. The Guard turned, his face grey with exhaustion, while beyond the colonnades, his horse stood with heaving flanks.

‘You’re to prepare for wounded,’ said the Guard. ‘They’re a day and a half from the wall.’

‘How many?’ said Kira, forgetting her place as she thought of her limited fireweed supply.

‘Fifteen set out.’

‘Fifteen! We’ve never had to treat that many at once,’ said Aranz.

‘The Prince Adris requests your help especially,’ said the Guard to Kira. ‘The Lord Caledon says you’ve skills that will aid us.’

‘The Lord Caledon was attacked?’ gasped Kira.

‘No, a settlement in The Westlans,’ said the Guard wearily.

‘Which one?’ asked Aranz, paling.

‘Mendor.’

After the conversation with the Guard, Aranz disappeared and Kira spent the rest of the day filling washbowls, boiling stitchweed, preparing bandages and helping shift pallets into the last healing room – the Garden Room. She was helped by Speri, who told her that Dumer had sent Aranz to the gatherers to trade for more herbal supplies. The list included stitchweed, silverseed, white oil, mesen and burmint, most of which Kira had never come across.

All those herbs would be useless without fireweed, thought Kira. And she only had enough for about twenty wounded, less if their wounds were many. Once it was gone, the wounded would die. An added problem was that fireweed administered after a long delay brought ferocious pain, and she didn't know how many times she could take pain, or how long she must rest between. The wounded boy she'd last treated had been almost at the end of the fiery tunnel Feseren had shown her. Her heart told her death lay at the very end, and that if she went too far, there'd be no returning.

Aranz didn't come back till evening. Despite her best efforts, he remained uncommunicative. In the end, he excused himself and left. Too restless to sleep, Kira went out into the cool dusk and down the King's Way towards the wall. Windows were bright with lamps and people gathered at barrows and round fires set in metal buckets, preparing food for passers-by. Kira's belly churned at the smell of cooked meat but the sight of it raw was worse, reminding her of sword wounds.

Approaching a corner, she saw that a woman plucked a stringed instrument and a boy played something that sounded like a thumbelin. They traded their music for what passers-by chose to give, a bowl set before them glinting with metal.

Kira wandered onto the wall, surprised at the number of people who were streaming up the steep stone steps, many clutching the hands of children. Kira joined the throng, half-expecting a challenge or a heavy hand on her shoulder, but no one gave her

more than a cursory glance. The top of the wall was set with a broad walkway between chest-high sides and Kira felt none of the dizziness of Shardos.

Guards were stationed at regular intervals, with bows and full quivers, but many conversed with their comrades rather than scanning the lands. Kira looked back towards the city. There were only about a thousand people in Allogrenia, but she guessed Maraschin held three to four thousand. King's Hall glimmered above its collar of trees, and she wondered again, as she strolled along, about the queen who had brought the green and growing into the city.

There were fewer people on this part of the wall, and most were courting couples. A young man's hand drifted from a woman's face to her breast, and Kira averted her gaze and turned back, her heart quickening as her thoughts went to Caledon. She yearned for his return, but he must be several seasons older than Kest, and she wondered suddenly how many women Caledon had kissed, made love to, and left.

13

Caledon looked beyond the fire to the night-shrouded trees and flexed his bruised shoulder. He'd been more fortunate than the Spursmen, the spear glancing off and leaving him with no more than a bruise. The Spursmen had been slaughtered and their houses burned, the Shargh attack merciless and on horseback. This was no opportunistic assault on an isolated settlement – the attack on the Guard had proven that, and it added to the star-thought about Kira that had been growing since he'd left Maraschin.

Adris had brought down two horses with arrows and killed their riders in single combat. Caledon hadn't seen Adris fight since he'd helped train him nearly five years before, augmenting his Tain skills with those practised in the north. Adris's lightning reflexes were now enhanced by brutal strength and a bitter hatred of the Shargh.

'Do you think they'll be back?' asked Adris, approaching the fire. 'We're less than a day from the wall.'

'But slowed by injured, making us a tempting target,' said Caledon.

‘Let them come then. None will return home to brag of their exploits,’ exclaimed Adris.

‘Our task is to get the wounded to the Sanctum,’ Caledon reminded him.

‘I’ll not run before such filth!’

‘This is a beginning, not an ending,’ warned Caledon, catching Adris’s arm. ‘You’re no use to your people dead.’

‘I’m no use to them anyway.’

‘Waiting’s always the hardest, Adris, as I’ve said before, but my heart tells me the time’s coming to an end.’

‘Your heart or a star?’ said Adris, his eyes flashing in the firelight.

‘As you believe in neither, it doesn’t matter.’

Adris stood glaring at the fire. If he were to survive, thought Caledon, he’d have to temper his strength with wisdom. Caledon looked up at Aemis, bright with white fire, its pulse solidifying his star-thought.

‘Once the wounded are settled in the Sanctum, I’m going south,’ he said.

‘I thought you’d pledged Kira to go north with her,’ said Adris, surprised. ‘And whichever direction you travel will be dangerous. Is your need so urgent?’

‘The stars’ purpose has become clearer to me since I made that promise,’ said Caledon. ‘I must go south to find out what *Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan* actually means.’

‘It’s not like you to have your actions decided by a woman,’ said Adris irritably.

‘You may see a bedmate when you look at a woman, Adris, but not every man does,’ said Caledon icily.

There was a strained silence.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Adris finally.

‘It’s *hers* you need to beg, as I’ve said before. If you have any faith at all in my judgement, Adris, believe me when I say that

Kira is the key to what's unfolding.' Caledon lowered his voice. 'I guess that the Shargh's intention is to take back the northern lands, but they've already shown they won't let those in the south live on in peace. They are now demonstrating ruthlessness in removing the threat to their back that your people pose, once they move north. My hope is to gain Tremem swords for your cause for, under your father's rulership, we have little chance of gaining Terak swords. While I'm away Kira *must* remain within the safety of Maraschin.'

'I'll ensure she doesn't go beyond the walls. Her skills will be needed in the Sanctum in any case,' he said, and moved restlessly. 'Bring them in for me, Caledon. At first light I ride to the King.'

In the mid-morn Kira heard a horse pound up King's Way, too late to see anything more than people scattering out of its path.

'Prince Adris rides to King's Hall,' said Aranz, 'which means the wounded are close. When they arrive, the most severely injured will go to the Garden Room. I ask that you work there, if you're willing. I'll work in the Big Room with Physick-General Dumer. Once the wounds are purified, stitched and bandaged, the lesser physicks will take over and we'll rest.'

It wasn't long before the wounded arrived. Kira had no time to even greet Caledon, the Sanctum filling with weary carriers, some as blood-soaked as those they bore. There were two children on one bier, the red curls of a little boy nestled in his sister's shoulder, their faces as pale as micklefungus. The carriers took them straight to the Garden Room, Kira rushing after them, the doors cutting off Dumer's monotone. As the children were lifted onto separate pallets, the girl cried out for her brother, and Kira realised in dismay that she'd need someone to help who understood Tain. She summoned Speri to explain to the girl why her brother must be put on a different pallet, quickly unbuttoned his shirt, and froze.

His ribs were crushed, a purple sack of blood filling the space of his belly. Somewhere far away, the little girl spoke.

‘She wants to know if Jesin will get better,’ said Speri.

‘Tell her I can take away Jesin’s pain,’ said Kira slowly, her gaze on the boy’s belly.

‘She wants to know –’ began Speri.

‘I can’t save him, Speri, he’s going to die!’

‘I’ll tell her he’s going to live with Meros in the sky, then,’ said Speri.

‘Do you believe that?’ demanded Kira, glancing at her.

‘*She’ll* believe it and it will bring her comfort.’

Kira placed her hands over Jesin’s heart. He was a long way ahead of her in the tunnel, a small silhouette running towards a rage of fire. Even as she watched, he reached it, turned and smiled, then stepped into the flames.

Kira dragged her eyes open as Speri took hold of her arm.

‘I thought you were going to fall,’ she said.

Kira forced herself over to the little girl’s pallet, feeling as though her legs belonged to someone else.

‘Her name’s Jesa,’ offered Speri.

Jesa’s ribs were dark with bruising, but whatever had killed her brother had dealt her a lesser blow.

‘Ask Jesa if she has pain other than in her chest,’ said Kira.

The child shook her head at Speri’s question, her gaze on her brother.

‘Jesin said goodbye to her before he died. When you did – whatever you did – he opened his eyes, turned to his sister and said goodbye. And he smiled,’ said Speri, her eyes glistening.

Kira salved Jesa’s chest with bruise-ease and wiped her hands. ‘Don’t let his body be taken, Speri. Jesa needs time to say her goodbyes, too.’

‘That’s also a Spursman tradition,’ said Speri, then pulled the curtains closed.

The carriers were unloading many more wounded even as they spoke, and Kira moved from pallet to pallet, giving fireweed and taking pain. The burn of the tunnel was as familiar to her now as the Sanctum, but her returns were increasingly nauseating and bleak. She had no idea how much time had passed before she was able to go back to Jesa. The girl stretched her arms out to her brother, and Kira pulled the cover from his crushed body and rebuttoned his shirt. There were little silverjacks embroidered on the front.

One button, up comes the sun.

Two buttons, down goes the moon.

Three buttons, up come the stars.

Four buttons, down comes the dew.

Kira used to chant this rhyme to Kandor, when he was a toddler to get him into his shirt in the morning, and out of it at night. She lifted Jesin and gently slid him into his sister's arms. His hair was soft like Kandor's, his skin cold. Closing the curtains, Kira staggered out into the garden and slumped onto the stone bench.

The night was chill and she pulled her knees hard up against her chest and laid her head on them. She'd not held Kandor in death; walked with him as he'd journeyed to Shelter; sung at his lying to rest. She'd not grieved for him then, and she couldn't grieve for Jesa and Jesin now. The taking of pain had burned everything away.

14

After delivering the wounded, Caledon went in search of Kira. But Physick-General Dumer was adamant that Kira wouldn't be available to speak with Caledon until the initial salving, stitching and binding of wounds was complete. Reluctantly returning to King's Hall, where he bathed and ate, Caledon readied himself to return to the Sanctum. But he was waylaid by a furious Adris and had to spend most of the night pacifying him, for King Beris still refused to acknowledge the Shargh as a threat, and wouldn't authorise force against them.

'The Shargh will be *in* Maraschin before he sees fit to act!' Adris had fumed. 'And even without them, the city can't bear many more seasons of neglect. There are parts so poor now that I'm ashamed to go there.'

'Your father's illness is not of his body alone,' Caledon had reminded him.

'He forgets there is a city beyond his chamber doors, and that it needs dues and rents collected to ensure roads are paved, houses made weather-worthy and that those without trade do not

go hungry,’ spat Adris. ‘And his advisers are no better, using this time to swell their own power.

‘My father remembers what suits him or what his “advisers” bring to his attention,’ continued Adris. ‘If he remembers me at all, it’s as a child. There’s no shortage of comfort in King’s Hall or in their apartments!’

Such was Adris’s anger that it was close to dawn before Caledon was able to take his leave. When he arrived at the Sanctum, it was humming with tales of Kira’s ability to ease pain and save those even the Physick-General despaired of, but no one seemed to know where she was. Caledon searched frantically for her, before one of the lesser physicks told him she’d seen *the Lady* go into the garden.

Caledon found Kira next to the pool, her hair and clothing drenched with dew, her skin icy. By the stars! She’d been there all night!

‘You need warmth,’ said Caledon, jerking her to her feet.

‘Why do the Shargh kill children?’ she asked, oblivious to the cold.

Caledon scooped her up and strode through the Sanctum, the eyes of the lesser physicks following him. Ordering one of the women to fetch dry clothes, he swept into an alcove and deposited her on the pallet.

‘You don’t have the right to risk yourself like this!’ he said, wrenching off her boots. He’d told Adris many times that anger worked against reason, but his blood raged.

‘You sound just like our Protector Commander Kest,’ said Kira, rousing. *‘You don’t have the right to risk yourself, you hold all healing now. That gives you responsibilities! You owe the Tremens, Kira, you’re the Leader. Stay in the Warens, Kira. Stay safe!’*

‘Kest sounds like a *very* sensible person,’ said Caledon, pulling off her wet jerkin.

A lesser physick hovered with dry clothes but Caledon barely noticed.

‘Oh, you’d get along very well with Kest,’ retorted Kira. ‘You’d find *so* much to agree on!’

Caledon had started undoing Kira’s shirt, partly exposing her breasts, before the physick hissed and he recollected himself.

‘I’ll get food,’ he said, striding out of the alcove towards where the physicks prepared meals. He waited till his seething emotions had settled a little, then made a cup of metz and loaded it onto a plate with biscuit and fruit.

Caledon rarely cast control to the winds and he needed to know why he’d done so now. He’d had little sleep over the last few days and twice been forced to fight for his life, factors hardly conducive to rational thought, but there was still no excuse. He’d been in similar predicaments before.

Was his outburst star-driven then, intended to gift him some new understanding? His feelings for Kira were certainly stronger than he’d acknowledged. Finding her chilled and sodden had roused an anger born of fear, and not just for the risk posed to her part in the emerging star-pattern, but because *he* might lose her to an illness.

The exchange had also granted him the name of someone important: *Protector Commander Kest*. Useful, considering his need to deal with the Tremen. Then there was the finely carved bird and the man’s ring she wore around her neck. Considering her abhorrence of metal, the ring interested him. Was it a keepsake of her father’s – who Caledon presumed was dead – or of a lover? He needed to have a closer look at it.

The bird had been wood and of beautiful workmanship, but he hadn’t recognised the style from any fair he’d been to, or from any trader he’d seen.

A physick went past with Kira’s wet clothing, and Caledon picked up the food and went back in to her. She was sitting on the pallet, head resting against the wall, with eyes shut, though she opened them at his entrance. Setting the plate on the bed, he felt her hand. Thank Aeris it was warm.

‘Food and drink, Kira.’

‘I thank you, Caledon, but whatever metz is, I’ve never actually considered it a drink,’ she said with a smile.

He perched on the side of the pallet. ‘In Talliel we call it *cotzee*, and it has more *madris* in it. The Bishali have a version that’s almost pure honey called *mela*.’

‘Tresen would like mela,’ said Kira.

‘Tresen?’

‘My clanmate.’

Caledon picked up the plate and winced. ‘Eat, Kira.’

‘You’re hurt!’

‘Just a bruise. A badly thrown spear – fortunately.’

‘Let me see,’ said Kira, shuffling along the pallet until she faced him.

‘There’s no need,’ he said, but she was already unbuttoning his shirt. He was acutely aware of her touch and his blood fired as he looked at the place where the curve of her throat disappeared beneath her clothing. He turned his face away, but her hand came to his cheek and gently turned it back.

‘I don’t think –’ he began, but she interrupted by bringing her mouth to his.

The taste of her stirred the earlier storm of feeling and Caledon pulled her to him, kissing her hungrily then, with an immense effort, he drew back.

‘I hadn’t intended that to happen,’ said Caledon, regretting his loss of control. The second time in one night!

Dawn edged round the shutters and he wondered whether he should leave and let Kira sleep, then speak with her later. Perhaps *he* should sleep, and let his feelings settle.

‘What is it you came to say, Caledon?’ said Kira.

‘Earlier you asked me why the Shargh kill children,’ began Caledon. ‘I know it seems like a meaningless act of hate, but hate is

rarely meaningless. In Talliel we have scrolls, or Writings as some call them, that tell of a time when the Sarsalin was mainly empty. Peoples came from over the seas, and lived by herding, moving their animals across the lands as the seasons dictated.

‘The herders in the north traded with a travelling people from the far west, receiving metal and horses in return for animal hides, meats and cheese. These western horses were swift, unlike the ponies the Ashmiri still ride, and the metal could be made into swords and knives and arrowheads.

‘The northern peoples joined, finding strength and power in numbers, and building mighty cities, such as Sarnia, as monuments to their achievements. They drove those who opposed them, or who wouldn’t treaty with them, from the lands.

‘The fighting was bloody and long, but in the end, peoples such as the Shargh lost their grazing pastures.’

‘That was a great injustice,’ said Kira slowly.

‘Then, as now, justice was decided by the barbs of arrows and the blades of swords,’ said Caledon.

‘Would the Northerners consider sharing their grazing lands?’ asked Kira.

‘Would your people consider sharing Allogrenia with the Shargh?’ replied Caledon.

‘We are fewer than a thousand,’ said Kira. ‘I don’t think there would be enough food in the forests to sustain many more.’

‘It’s an argument the Terak would use also,’ said Caledon, ‘if they considered the possibility at all, which they wouldn’t. Like the Shargh, the Terak build their communities on fighting – swordsmanship and arrow skills are highly prized. Both peoples believe that the victor in a battle rightfully takes all.

‘Since that time, the Northerners and their cities have prospered, while the Shargh have remained confined in the lands the fighting left them . . . until now. When did the Shargh first attack your people, Kira?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘I wonder if it’s the same time the Weshargh attacks started on the Tain,’ said Caledon.

‘What difference would it make?’

‘Neither good nor evil happens without reason. As a Placiden, I seek the pattern of these reasons, which is why I go south to speak with your people.’

‘South? But you pledged to go north with me,’ exclaimed Kira, sitting upright. ‘Was that another lie?’

‘I made the pledge in good faith. But since then, the stars have revealed more to me.’

‘The stars!’ said Kira, swinging herself off the pallet. ‘I’ve already delayed too long, and won’t delay longer. My people might be being murdered while I wait on your *stars!*’

‘The Shargh attacks on the Tain will continue. Would you abandon the Tain wounded?’ said Caledon.

‘I owe the Tremem first!’

‘Which is why you must stay here. As Tremem Leader, you need to be here to meet with your people when they come to Maraschin to fight,’ said Caledon.

Kira gaped at him astonishment. ‘What mean you?’

Caledon took her by the shoulders. ‘What’s happening concerns not just the Tain but the Tremem as well. If the Cashgar Shargh and Weshargh are to be turned from their murderous path, the Tremem must work with the Tain to do it.’

‘I won’t have my people being butchered on the plains!’ she exclaimed, jerking away from him.

‘Then they’ll be butchered in the trees,’ said Caledon. ‘You’ve seen what the Shargh do to children. If the Shargh overwhelm the Tain, do you think they’ll let your people live on in peace?’

‘I’ll get aid from the north,’ said Kira, pacing round the alcove.

‘You’ve kin there?’

‘Yes,’ said Kira, suddenly cautious.

‘How long is it since you’ve had ought to do with these kin?’ asked Caledon.

Kira shrugged, her gaze on the wall.

‘The Tain have a treaty of mutual aid with the Terak, but there’s been no contact between King Beris and the northern leader for many years. I’ve been in the Terak lands and know the ways of the people there. The Terak aren’t troubled by the Shargh and won’t come south.’

Kira pushed the hair from her eyes and Caledon went to her, gentling his voice. ‘What I am saying is true. If the Terak have no reason to come to the Tain’s aid, they have less reason to come to yours. If your people are to survive this, they must fight with the Tain.’

Kira stood with head bowed for a long time. ‘I won’t order my people to come,’ she said finally, her face agonised.

‘If you ask them to volunteer, the choice will be theirs,’ said Caledon. There was a pause and then he drew her cautiously into his arms. ‘The Shargh move too quickly for trust to grow between us, but our hearts know what our minds don’t. I ask that you await me here. I also ask that you aid me in my journey through the trees, and give me a message to take to your people. The stars do not show my death on this journey, but sometimes their light dazzles me, blinding me to what lies ahead.’

‘Grant me seven days after the new moon that follows this. Before I go, I’ll secure a pledge from Adris to give you escort to the north should I not return.’

‘You won’t return.’

Her conviction was so powerful that Caledon’s heart missed a beat. ‘Why do you believe so?’

‘Everyone I love dies.’

‘Not this time, my beautiful gold-eyed Healer,’ he said, kissing her.

15

Three days after Caledon had gone, Jesa was shifted to the Small Room, and a few days later Aranz came to Kira's alcove with a beautifully carved wooden box.

'The Spursman child has been collected by her uncle. This is for you,' he said, handing Kira the box. 'Why don't you trade it for some clothing, or a comb? Speri will be back on the morrow and I'll ask Dumer to release her to help you,' he said.

Kira's face burned. Caledon hadn't thought she'd looked awful when he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her.

She sighed, as she considered that he would be nearing the shelterless southern slopes of the Azurcades by now, close to where she'd met him. She'd told him how to find his way through the forests and had given him a message for the Clancouncil, authorising Protectors to leave Allogrenia. It was her heart that had gifted him these things, but in the broad light of day her head could see how flimsy the reasoning of her heart had been. What if he betrayed her – again?

Snatching up her pack, she strode out of the Sanctum and up King's Way towards the green of *Queen's Grove* as she had mentally christened it. Children laughed as they rolled balls and flicked ropes, and Kira stopped at the entrance of a side street to watch them. This was how it should have been for Jesin and Jesa, carefree and safe. She noticed the odd glance of recognition, and realised word of a stranger with gold eyes must have spread.

Someone touched her arm and she started. It was a woman, her face deeply lined, her shirt and long skirt ragged at the edges. A man stood behind her, his clothes equally poor, his face grim. The woman bobbed up and down, offering Kira a crudely carved stone box.

Kira shook her head and made an open hand gesture, showing that she had nothing to trade, but the woman again offered the box.

'I have nothing,' said Kira in Onespeak.

The man stepped forward and Kira's scalp prickled, thinking she was about to be robbed but he caught hold of the woman to pull her away. The woman shrugged him off, put the box on the ground, spread her legs and brought her arms over her belly in a sweeping gesture.

Childbirth! The woman sought help for someone in childbirth, realised Kira, smiling and nodding. Kira followed the woman, reassured by the well-kept houses they passed and the clean paving, but then the woman slipped between the houses, and the paving gave way to dirt and an earthen drain filled with sludge.

The houses here were patched with scavenged wood, though some had holes big enough to see through. Kira picked her way along behind the woman, following her through a yawning doorway and up a flight of creaking wooden steps, finally entering a room so crowded that she couldn't see the woman in childbirth.

'I need space,' said Kira in Onespeak, waving her hands as if scaring birds.

No one moved.

‘And I need someone who understands Onespeak,’ she continued.

A girl stepped forward, dark-haired and heavy-browed, her face a younger version of the others. ‘I Tarki. I Onespeak little know.’

‘Tell people to go,’ said Kira, waving her hands again.

‘All go?’ questioned the girl, shocked.

‘Four stay, rest go,’ said Kira, not wanting to totally upset the customs of the birthing woman.

Tarki spoke rapidly and several of the women moved grudgingly towards the door, allowing Kira to reach the bed. The labouring woman looked scarcely older than the girl translating, and had an enormous belly and stick-like arms and legs.

‘Vinna,’ said the girl, pointing to the labouring woman.

‘She’s big,’ muttered Kira.

‘Two babes,’ said Tarki.

Kira mustered a reassuring smile and placed her hands on Vinna’s belly, intent on finding the position of the babes. Her hands warmed but she shut herself off from the fiery tunnel, concentrating on the bulge of the little bodies. One was low down, ready to be born, the other seemed to be still sitting upright. Once the first was safely born, the second should have room to turn.

‘Babe ready,’ said Kira, and paused while Tarki exchanged quick words with Vinna.

‘Vinna wait . . . for physick,’ said Tarki, gesturing to Kira.

‘First babe?’ asked Kira, knowing that if Vinna had birthed before, she’d be less frightened and more prepared.

The girl shook her head and went through the motions of rocking two babes.

‘Vinna . . . other babes?’ Kira tried again.

Tarki repeated the motions of rocking two babes, and then did something that made Kira’s blood run cold. She turned

her arms over, so that if she'd actually cradled a child, it would have fallen. Then she did it a second time. Two dead babes. Kira didn't have the words or gestures to find out the circumstances of the deaths, but she understood the older woman's desperation for a physick.

Kira put her hands over Vinna's heart. The babes were there, boys, somehow separate from the scorch of the tunnel.

'Tell Vinna to push,' said Kira to Tarki. 'Push,' she repeated to Vinna, and splayed her own legs in clumsy imitation.

Tarki spoke and the women bustled to the bedside, pulling Vinna upright and beginning to chant. Kira watched, content to let the women guide the birth for a little.

Vinna grunted and gasped, hair stringing across her forehead, and the babe's head appeared, then the rest of him in a slithery rush. There were whoops of joy, his feeding tube was cut and he was bundled away. Vinna hung panting in the arms of the women, then began to grunt again. Kira felt a wash of relief, then the feeding sack slithered out, the feeding tube of the second babe still attached. There were harsh exclamations.

'Babe die,' said Tarki darkly.

The eyes of the women swung to Kira.

'Lie Vinna down,' ordered Kira, gesturing urgently. Then she was back in the fire-filled tunnel. The babe was still sitting upright, and she wanted to shriek at him to turn but, even as the idea passed her mind, she sensed him drift deeper into the fire. Vinna's pain surged anew and Kira was back in the room, the part of her not drenched with dizziness knowing that she couldn't save the babe from *within* the fire-filled tunnel.

Shoving up her sleeve, Kira slid her hand into the warm, bloody space and groped about until her hand closed over a tiny foot.

'Vinna push,' she grunted, and as the space around her wrist spasmed, she pulled down gently.

‘Push,’ repeated Kira.

Vinna took another gasping breath and pushed.

The babe moved down and Kira’s bloodied hand emerged clasping his tiny foot. She resisted the urge to tug the little body out as, sobbing with effort, Vinna gave a final push. With a whoosh of blood, he was born.

He was a lot smaller than his brother, limp and blue. Vinna cried when she saw him and the women rocked and moaned. Kira quickly sucked the sticky mess from his mouth and nose, spat it to one side, then puffed air into him. His tiny chest rose and fell. She did it again, and his arms and legs jerked, and flushed pink. His eyes opened and for a moment she was lost in them, then he gave a long, loud bawl.

The room erupted in laughter, but Kira felt like weeping. He was only half the size of his brother, and the place where he must grow was dirty and poor.

After he was picked up and wrapped, the women crowded round Vinna, stripping away the bloodied sheets and her soiled gown. Meanwhile Kira followed Tarki to a water bucket to wash her hands and face. There wasn’t much she could do about the blood on her shirt and breeches.

Tarki gestured back to the birth room but Kira pointed down the stairs. Taking pain exhausted her, but it was a weariness usually eased by the joy of healing. Instead she felt sad, her joy extinguished by memories of the richness of King’s Hall compared with the harsh reality of life here.

Caledon had spent the night at the Aurantia Cave and now sat at its mouth as the light of the new sun crept across the land. Reaching inside his shirt to the secret pocket where he carried the things most precious to him, he pulled out the carving. In a fight he might have to abandon everything, but these things would go to the grave with him: a lock of Roshai’s hair, a crudely made

silver star Pisa had presented him with, and the delicately crafted wooden owl.

It's the mira kiraon, my namesake. Protector Commander Kest carved it, Kira had said. Morclansmen are fine woodworkers. Show it to Kest as a sign of my trust.

Kira's trust hadn't extended to a written message but what she had told him should be enough.

Caledon slipped the carving back into his pocket and rose. In fact, the owl wasn't just Kira's namesake, but that of the northern queen who'd had gold eyes too, and who'd birthed the gold-eyed twins Terak and Kasherón.

By the stars! Kashclan, *Kasherón's* clan! A gold-eyed Healer who spoke Terak, whose title of Feailner was a northern one, whose name of Kiraon came from the north, yet who wasn't of the north herself! Kasherón's seed!

Caledon was familiar with the Terak histories that told of Kasherón taking his followers *north* over the seas. But still, he reflected, the construction of truths – especially unpleasant ones – was the prerogative of those who remained. Nor were histories solid crystals of fact, but rather wax to be moulded to suit the wants and needs of the time.

After Kasherón's bitter departure from the north – the Sundering – Terak's people made up of his own blood, the Kessomis, joined with the Kirs and Illians – had triumphed in their long and bloody struggle with the Shargh, and completed the building of Sarnia. In the histories written since, Kasherón's leaving had been described as *abandonment*. Less kind histories even called it *desertion*. It was little wonder that the same histories had banished Kasherón's people to a place so distant there'd be no returning.

Kira had spoken of having kin in the north, but he hadn't guessed the potency of the link when he'd suggested the Terak wouldn't come south. The fighting had prompted the Sundering and, in turn, had finally forced the Terak, Kessomis, Kirs and

Illians to acknowledge themselves as a single people. But Caledon knew from his time in the north that blood-links remained all-powerful, and would take precedence over any treaty, and even over the antagonism Kasher's departure had generated.

The Tremens' direct kin claim would draw Terak aid south to the forests, away from the Tain lands, and it was the Tain lands where the battles would be fought and *must* be won.

Caledon turned his face to the sky and touched the back of his hand to his forehead, thanking the stars for their guidance. He'd halted Kira's northward journey and Adris had her safely behind the Maraschin walls. Caledon smiled as he hefted on his pack, better prepared now for his meeting with the Tremens.

He made his way down the steep dewy path, considering all that Kira had told him. She'd described a number of clans living separately and that each had a gathering right, known as an octad, surrounding their longhouses. She also –

Caledon's foot slipped on the dew-slicked slope and he leapt nimbly onto a broad brittle-bite-coated stone. The plant usually gave good traction, and it did now, but the stone beneath was rotten. It shattered, sending him sprawling backwards, his head cracking the rock behind him. The bright day exploded into plumes of blackness as the ground beneath him shifted and Caledon skidded towards the path's edge. Throwing his arm back, he locked it round a canthus and jerked to a stop, the pain of the tearing thorns rousing him from the spiralling pit of darkness. For a moment he lay still, vaguely aware that there was no earth under his right shoulder, then the canthus gave way and he plunged over the edge.

16

In the shadow of the Cashgars, Arkendrin gathered with his blood-ties and several of the Weshargh warriors. The Weshargh had brought Ashmiri horses with them and he glared at the odd creatures. His was black and the tallest of the four, the others the same dusty brown as the ebis. Everything about them was strange, from the metal through their mouths, to their smell and shape.

Arkendrin had no idea how to ride and no wish to find out. If only the vile suppurating gash on his leg would heal none of this would be necessary. Whatever Orbdargan said, the Sky Chiefs had never intended Shargh to ride, giving them sufficient strength in their *own* legs to run for days. Curse the gold-eyed creature who'd breathed its filthy breath into his flesh!

Irdodun, Orthaken and Ermashin stood in silence and Arkendrin limped forward, the Weshargh Orfedren jumping from his own beast and holding the black horse steady.

'A horse is mounted by putting one foot in that strap, Chief Arkendrin, and swinging the other leg up and over the back,' he said.

Arkendrin put the foot of his wounded leg in the leather loop, grasped the sweaty neck of the animal and heaved himself up. Pain spasmed through the wound and he thumped down onto the beast's back. It jerked sideways and he snapped the straps from its mouth taut, making the horse toss its head and grunt in pain. Arkendrin dragged them tighter.

'The reins are for *guiding* the horse, Chief Arkendrin,' said Orfredren, but Arkendrin seemed not to hear him.

'Get the others up, Weshargh,' grunted Arkendrin. 'If we must travel like the cursed Ashmiri, we'll start this day.'

It was some days later that Palansa ventured down to the Thanawah carrying Ersalan in a sling across her belly. The day was fine and women busy at their washing, snatches of gossip drifting up the slope – the sloth of their husbands and the faults of their sons. Palansa envied them their small concerns. Ersalan was almost two moons old but she'd yet to show him off to those he'd one day rule over. With Arkendrin on the Grounds she'd been reluctant to take Ersalan far from the sorchas, even with Ormadon or Erlken in attendance. But now Arkendrin had disappeared, and while his absence troubled Palansa it also gave her a freedom she hadn't enjoyed since Erboran's death.

Ersalan hiccuped and she patted his bottom through the sling, as she headed towards the reedbeds. There was another woman there – Irdrin's daughter Sansula – join-wife to Orsendron. Orsendron's sorchas was only midway up the slope, but he and his father, *and* Sansula's father, aligned themselves with the first-born chiefs – with Ersalan, and with Erboran before him.

'I greet you, Chief and Chief-wife,' said Sansula, touching her forehead and smiling, as Palansa approached.

'And I you,' said Palansa.

'It's a good day for our sons to see the rivers,' said Sansula politely, looking down at her own babe. 'I show Orsron the

Thanawah first, as it's the mightiest.' Sansula touched Orsron's feet in the water, making him squawk. Palansa smiled and dipped Ersalan's feet in too, his squeals adding to Orsron's. Both women laughed, and Palansa whirled Ersalan above her head, dodged the thread of spittle as he gurgled, then tucked him back in his sling.

'We should –' began Palansa, before catching sight of Erlken making his way down the bank.

'I walk Orsron whenever it's fine,' said Sansula, then touched her hand to her forehead again and moved off before Erlken reached them.

'Ormadon's come back,' said Erlken, keeping his voice low until Sansula was well along the bank. 'He has news of Arkendrin, Chief-wife.'

Palansa climbed the bank and walked along the path to her sorch, Erlken following, as his father had trained him.

A wolf might be forced to wear its eyes forward, Ormadon had once told Palansa, but it turns its ears back.

Palansa wished she had the eyes and ears of a wolf, *and* their teeth and claws. It was too much to hope Ormadon bore news of Arkendrin's death – a fall from the Ashmiri horse or a mortal wound from the treemen in the south-western forests – the Sky Chiefs had already shown themselves unlikely to grant such a boon.

Ormadon was seated at the table with Tarkenda, but rose and palmed his forehead to Ersalan. He looked tired and, for the first time, old.

'Arkendrin travels quickly now he has four legs, while I must use the two the Sky Chiefs granted me,' said Ormadon, as if guessing her thoughts.

'He insults the Sky Chiefs by leaving the earth,' said Tarkenda.

'And by crossing the Braghans,' replied Ormadon.

Tarkenda palmed skywards.

‘He’ll bring ruin to us all,’ whispered Palansa, before sitting down. Ersalan began to grizzle and, flicking open her shirt, Palansa guided his mouth to her nipple.

‘What do the Grounds say, Ormadon?’ asked Tarkenda, drawing Ormadon a bowl of sherat.

Palansa had never seen Ormadon take sherat before, but he gulped it down and Tarkenda drew him a second.

‘Arkendrin’s contempt for the Sky Chiefs has seeded much argument, Chief-mother. Even those who shun the line of first-born chiefs still palm their foreheads to the Sky Chiefs.

‘Four nights ago, word came from the Weshargh that the gold-eyed creature dwelt with the Tain.’

‘How would they know?’ demanded Palansa.

‘Ashmiri,’ said Ormadon. ‘Arkendrin packed food and left, taking Irdodun, Orthaken and Ermashin with him, and two of the Weshargh to show the way. The Weshargh were reluctant, believing Orbdargan is their Chief, not Arkendrin.’

‘Yet they went,’ muttered Tarkenda.

‘As ebis do to escape the stick. But they won’t be risking their skins for him. Like ebis, they’ll be looking for the sweeter grass the moment he takes his eyes off them,’ predicted Ormadon.

The King’s Way was crowded as usual and Kira kept her gaze on the paving as she waited outside the gatherer’s house, the fourth she’d visited with Speri. None of the gatherers so far had known of fireweed, or expressed any interest in finding out about it. Kira’s frustration had become so great that Speri had suggested she remain outside on this occasion. It wasn’t long before Speri reappeared to tell her that Jaitich had never heard of it either, and to dismay Kira with the news that he was the last of the gatherers.

Kira knew from the Writings that Kasheron had known of fireweed before he’d entered the forests, and she tried to recall

what the northern Azurcades had been like. But she had been a prisoner then, her thoughts taken up with death not herbs.

‘Shall I take you to the clothing houses now?’ asked Speri.

‘No, I thank you. But could you trade this for me, for paper and ink,’ said Kira, taking out the gold bracelet.

‘But physick Aranz said you wanted clothing and a comb,’ said Speri, doing her best not to look at Kira’s hair.

‘I’ll be journeying north again soon and fine clothes will be of no use to me, but before I go I’ll need to record some of my Heal . . . physick-knowing, so you can use it after I’ve gone.’

‘We have our own knowing in the Physick Chronicle.’

‘Not for curing Shargh wounds,’ murmured Kira. ‘Please keep my Writings safe, Speri. It’s Physick-General Dumer’s judgement whether they’re of use to you.’

‘The bracelet is more valuable than paper and ink,’ said Speri, turning it over in her hands. ‘What do you want in back-trade?’

‘Just whatever you think,’ said Kira, having no idea what *back-trade* was. ‘I’m going to King’s Hall, but I’ll be back in the Sanctum this evening.’

Speri set off and Kira turned up King’s Way, having no intention of visiting Adris, but happy to let Speri think she was. The houses came to an end and Kira turned into the muted light of the grove, caressing the foliage and scanning with Healer habit. There was little. Only silvermint, cinna and annin, and she wondered whether the gatherers came here for their herbs.

Coming to an enormous bole, Kira swung herself into the branches and climbed until the trunk tapered, then pushed aside the foliage, her vantage point affording a good view. The Azurcade foothills were to the south, and to the north the plain ran away, a circular expanse, almost enclosed by juts of land to either side. The Terak Kutan lay many days beyond and she would be there now if Caledon hadn’t delayed her here, one way or the other.

He carried news to Miken and Kest that she lived, but would also ask that Tremen volunteers came to fight with the Tain. If she'd gone straight to the Terak Kutan, she could have gained their help without risking her people. But Caledon didn't want her to go north because it was too dangerous to travel alone. She wondered abruptly whether there was another reason, that Caledon saw something in his star-visions concerning her and the Terak Kutan that he didn't want to happen. Talliel was far closer to Sarnia than Maraschin, and Caledon had been there many times. He would know a lot about the Northerners, while she knew virtually nothing.

Movement at the gate distracted her and her heart raced. Horses with biers: there'd been another attack.

In the sida groves on the southern slopes of Shardos, a broken shadow lay. Ilala called and breezes lifted Caledon's hair, drifting it gently across his bloodied skull. A silverjack grazed the weergrass, hopping past him without fear. The day faded and the moon rose, dew settling in his hair and in his open palms, then stars blazed, clothing him in their milky sheen. He didn't move.

17

By the time Kira reached the Sanctum, the injured had been distributed among the rooms. Breathless from her sprint down the mount, she rushed past physicks treating badly injured troops and skidded to a halt in the Garden Room, where Aranz was.

‘Do you have more fireweed? I’ve just finished the last pot,’ he said.

‘I’ve one more. Are they Shargh wounds?’

‘What else?’

There were two other pallets occupied, lesser physicks already in attendance.

‘You’ve missed the worst of it,’ said Aranz.

‘I went with Speri to gatherer Jaitich seeking fireweed,’ said Kira.

‘Jaitich wouldn’t know of fireweed; we’ve never traded the root.’

‘It’s more like a fungus than a root.’

‘Mesen’s a powerful purifier and can be distilled to increase its potency,’ said Aranz, tying off the bandage and washing

his hands in the bowl. 'If the watch-walk physicks carried distilled mesen, the wounded wouldn't be so ill by the time they reached us.'

'I don't think it's just a matter of using a purifier,' said Kira carefully, knowing Aranz wouldn't like her contradicting him. 'We had powerful purifiers, too, but they didn't stop the rot.'

'Speri left the paper and ink you requested next to your pallet with the back-trade,' he said, as he made his way to the alcove where they ate.

'I need to go to the Azurcades to search for fireweed,' said Kira.

'Prince Adris won't agree to that,' said Aranz.

'Speri told me that if the Sanctum's stores run low, the King or Prince Adris would provide an escort for gatherers.'

'That's true, but we have enough herbs for the moment,' said Aranz, handing her a cup of metz.

'But we need fireweed!'

'Mesen is plentiful and will suffice,' said Aranz, nodding briefly before moving away.

Kira took the metz back to her alcove. The paper sat in a neat pile next to the pallet, with two glass pots of ink, three pens and two silver bracelets. So that was back-trade! The notion that everything was traded remained repellent to Kira, and reinforced her anxiety over the lack of fireweed. She considered how to gain Adris's permission for her to seek it. Caledon had told her that Adris loved his people. She chewed on her lip as she contemplated how she might use this knowing. Her best chance of being allowed beyond the gates would be to give Adris the opportunity to *show* his love for his people, without breaking his pledge to Caledon.

She retraced her steps up the King's Way and through the grove, the massive blue-clad Guard opening the gate to King's Hall before Kira had summoned up the carefully rehearsed One-speak words.

‘Who do you seek Lady?’ asked a second Guard.

‘I request speech with Prince Adris, Guard . . . Ather,’ said Kira, pleased she’d remembered his name.

‘I will escort you.’

‘I thank you, Guard Ather,’ said Kira.

They came to the door Kira remembered from her first visit and Ather called out something. Adris responded curtly and then she was shown into the sumptuous room.

Adris pushed aside the pile of scrolls he’d been perusing and rose. ‘This is an unexpected pleasure,’ he said, gesturing her to a seat. ‘Have you eaten?’

Kira shook her head and Adris shouted an order for food through the open door.

‘I hear you’ve given valuable aid to our physicks,’ he said, coming back and settling opposite. ‘For this I thank you.’

‘It is the way of Heal . . . physicks to share what they know,’ said Kira.

There was a knock and the House Master placed a tray of food on the table. Adris offered her the plate of dried fruit and Kira took a piece.

‘The Sanctum is well resourced and well run. It is a great thing that the Tain King provides for his people,’ she said.

‘Yet you’ve left it to visit a place which, I suspect, you find far less appealing,’ said Adris.

‘I need to search for a herb in the foothills of the Azurcades,’ said Kira, taking his lead in directness.

‘You pledged Caledon to remain here until his return. Are you so careless with your pledges?’

‘I do not intend to break my pledge to Caledon, Prince Adris. I ask leave only to find this herb and return to Maraschin.’

‘The Physick-General’s said nothing about herbal supplies being low,’ said Adris, relaxing back in his seat.

‘The Sanctum is well stocked, thanks to the gatherers, and to the kindness of the King, except for one herb that I brought

with me from the south. It cures the rot Shargh blades inflict,' said Kira.

'The Physick-General's expressed no concern to me about this matter either.'

'The Physick-General and Major Physick Aranz believe there are herbs within the Sanctum that will serve the same purpose when prepared differently. *If* that's true, allowing me on your next watch-walk to the Azurcades will be an unnecessary nuisance. If it isn't true, the next group of your people injured by Shargh blades will die.'

'The gates haven't been closed on a whim, Lady,' said Adris, straightening.

'Nor do I ask that they be opened on a whim, but I've seen what Shargh blades do, Prince Adris. It only takes a scratch, and your wounded will rot with a stench worse than carrion in summer heat. It's a slow, painful death.'

'Do you know for certain this herb grows in the Azurcade foothills?' demanded Adris.

'It needs deep, dry leaf litter, with pockets of moisture. Which parts of the Azurcades are driest?'

'The Thanaval and Pelaval valleys in the west,' he said. 'What makes you think the salves we have will fail against this rot? Do you doubt the skill of our physicks?'

'I've tried to heal those dying from Shargh poison without fireweed. It's not a chance I want to take,' said Kira.

There was a brief silence then Adris said, 'Be at the gates at dawn. The King's Guard will take you to the Pelaval. Given your description, Pelaval or the Thanaval are most likely, but whether you find it or not, the Guard will return you to the city by dusk.'

'I thank you, Prince Adris,' said Kira.

Deep in the sida grove, Caledon stirred. All was dark. Was this death? No, death was nothingness and this was something.

Maybe it was a moonless, starless night. Maybe he was blind. He drifted.

It was the cold, as hard as pain, that roused him again. He was shuddering and still blind, but it didn't matter. Only warmth mattered. It was a long time before he realised his pack was on his back, and longer still until he'd struggled out of it. He rested awhile, then, with clumsy slowness, pulled out the ciraq. Somehow he managed to get most of it over him, but the effort cost him everything and he slid back into blackness.

When he woke again it was raining, and water was trickling down his face and pooling in the depression under his cheek. He let it seep into his mouth. It tasted of sida and the waterproofing oil of the ciraq. The rain thickened, sluicing off his face and adding the taste of blood. He was able to open one eye and watch the silvery light limning each droplet as it fell. He could go now, if he chose, into the mesh of liquid starlight. Then something else moved, an owl, ruffling its plumage against the rain, its golden eyes peering down at him. Caledon turned his head and brought all his strength to sucking the water from the ciraq.

It was not cold or rain that roused him next time, but pain spearing in his head, throbbing in his joints, burning the flesh of his belly and back. Caledon groaned and forced one eye open; the other eye was matted shut with something. He fumbled in his pack and found a piece of broken biscuit. His jaws still worked, but they hurt; everything hurt. When the biscuit was sufficiently moist, he swallowed. Encouraged, he repeated the process.

He must have slept, because when he opened his eye next it was dusk. Caledon's awareness was greater now. The arm that lay under him was broken and the pain in his leg was from a wound. The injuries wouldn't kill him, but hunger, thirst and lying in the damp and cold might.

He must get *off* the ground and *into* the ciraq, and he needed to find his waterskin. Caledon had strength for only one of these

things, and shelter was the most pressing. He flicked off the ciraq so that it lay flat and open between him and his pack, and when the pain from that movement had subsided, wedged himself up on his good arm and inched across. Blackness blotched his vision, but Caledon forced himself on until the ciraq was under him, then, with the last of his strength, heaved it over himself.

It was almost night when Caledon came to his senses again. His broken arm ached and the wound in his leg throbbed mercilessly. Maybe it would rain again, although he smelt no rain in the air. He must drink, and he couldn't afford to wait for another cloudburst.

He searched in his pack with his functioning arm. Everything his hand passed over was smashed: biscuit, malede, wraps of cheese, figs, tachil, pots of kalix, revivor – even the thumbelin. He pushed deeper, grunting with effort, and his fumbling fingers closed over his ruptured and empty waterskin.

What else was there? His food was dry, the juice of the figs extracted to preserve them, nor could he hear the bubble of a stream. To have survived the fall *and* landed next to a spring was asking a little too much of the stars! Darkness dragged at him but he resisted its pull, prodding his reluctant brain to keep thinking. His broken possessions suggested his pack had taken the brunt of his plummet through the sida, and he groped around, feeling twigs of sida. Then joyously, his hand closed over a branch.

He hauled the prize to his chest, pinned it there, and very carefully punctured the bark with his teeth and sucked. The sap was like the scent of the leaves distilled, but cool and sweet, and he sucked greedily, then moved his mouth along, bit and sucked again. The liquid eased his intense thirst and he felt himself drift, this time letting the darkness come.

18

Kira clung onto the saddle-strap behind Ather's flapping cape as they galloped west over the Scharn Grasslands. Out of the fifteen Guard assigned, Ather was the only Guard Kira knew. He had told her they'd be at the Pelaval Valley by mid-morning and had also told her what to do if they came under attack, and which of the Guard would look after her if he were killed.

The Guard kept well clear of the trees, and Kira was grateful, her fear of the Shargh having grown as they'd left the safety of Maraschin behind. As they neared the Azurcades, steep narrow valleys became visible, and the Guard halted. Ather asked Kira whether she preferred to eat, or search first, and Kira chose to search, keen to discover any fireweed that might be there.

Ather directed they first reconnoitre from horseback, but Kira feared the horses would destroy any fireweed present and, ignoring Ather's prohibition, slid from his horse.

'Lady!' he cried, wrenching his horse round but Kira put a tree between them.

‘Please let me gather as a gatherer should,’ demanded Kira. Ather bowed, but the muscles corded in his jaw and neck.

The ground was dry, but lacked the leafy drifts of the Kenclan octad. Kira moved deeper into the trees, testing the air for the dusty smell of rot and feeling the earth’s hardness through her soles. Ather’s horse remained so close, its breath warmed the back of her neck.

There were clumps of cinna, brenna and silvermint but no fireweed. Here and there she found thicker pockets of litter, but there were none of the tell-tale soaks that had dotted the slope below the Sarnia Cave.

Finally Ather brought his mount level tersely telling her that they must eat and water the horses. Kira reluctantly put her hand in his proffered one, and was pulled up behind him. They came back towards the valley’s mouth, to a spring, its edges muddy with prints.

‘Sirsin Spring,’ said Ather, as his horse sucked up the water. ‘It’s never been known to run dry. Even the Ashmiri divert here sometimes.’

‘You let the *Shargh* use your water?’ said Kira.

‘The Ashmiri are *kin* of the Shargh, *not* the Shargh, and they’re treated to us,’ said Adris.

‘Is this the only spring?’ asked Kira.

‘It’s the only one in the Pelaval. The Thanaval has many, as the stone’s softer there and lets the water seep up.’

It sounded just like the land below the Sarnia Cave and she was annoyed with herself that she had not thought to ask him before. ‘Where is the Thanaval?’ asked Kira quickly.

‘It’s the next valley west.’

‘I need to look there,’ said Kira.

‘Too late in the day, Lady. As soon as we’ve eaten, we return to Maraschin.’

‘I need –’

‘You’re to be back within the city by dusk,’ said Ather, his face as hard as his voice. ‘We eat, then we leave.’

When Caledon next woke, his head was clear enough for him to understand that he must get upright and start moving if he weren’t to die there. He began his careful preparations by sucking more sida sap, and wedging himself into a sitting position using his good hand. One eye was still glued shut, and a careful exploration told him it was dried blood, most probably from his head wound.

His arm was swollen and black with bruising, and he judged there were at least two breaks. He knew Aeris had been kind though, in that no bones protruded from the skin, an injury that, this far from aid, could kill him. He peeled back the ciraq and revealed the reason for the throbbing in his leg – a sida branch protruding from his thigh. Not such a good sign.

Dragging his pack closer, he laid two bandages and the kalix ready, then cut his breeches clear of the wound. The branch had gone in at right angles and was probably part of the tree that had broken his fall.

The stars had granted him the chance to live, and Caledon knew that he must do whatever it took. Taking a deep breath, he grasped the branch embedded in his thigh and jerked it out, the pain causing him to retch and his vision to blotch. When his sight had cleared, he smeared kalix in and around the wound, then bandaged it.

For a long time he dozed, resting but not letting sleep take him. Then, using the branches he’d sucked the sap from, he splinted his arm and, holding the remainder of the bandage taut with his teeth, fashioned a sling. And though he longed to sag back to the ground, he then arranged his pack to minimise the effort of accessing it.

His spare clothing, torn waterskin and thumbelin he left on the ground. Caledon kept only his physick’s kit, cape, and enough

food for the journey. His sword – still attached to his belt and about the only thing undamaged – he slid into his pack. Then he gathered all the broken sida branches he could reach, bundled and tied them to the back of his pack. He shuffled his backside off the ciraq and rolled it, then laid it loosely on the top. He knew that if he lost strength, he must be able to get to the ciraq quickly.

Still sitting, he eased the pack on, gingerly passing the straps behind the sling of his broken arm. His injuries wouldn't allow him to climb Shardos, even if he wanted to return to Maraschin. The only route was straight south, and with the Cashgar Shargh, Weshargh and Soushargh roaming beyond their usual bounds, his chances of being seen were the same whether he struck south from here, or from further west.

He struggled to his feet, and when the world had stilled and his dizziness eased, he found a straight, slender branch – another victim of his plunge through the sida – and tested its strength. When he was satisfied it would bear his weight, he used it to help him limp off down the slope.

Caledon's pain and weakness were so great that he could only reach the edge of the trees before his legs gave out. He crawled into his ciraq and slept till dawn. When he woke, he collected an armful of dew-soaked foliage and licked the moisture from it as he went, resting when he could go no further, and walking again when he was able. All of his effort went into conserving his strength for the methodical carrying out of the actions he'd devised to keep himself alive.

The sun rose and set, and stars wheeled overhead. He had no idea of the passing of time, simply thanking Aeris each night for another day lived, and for another length he crept closer to his destination.

19

Kira slapped the square of paper on top of the stack, tossed down her pen and stretched. Caledon would have been with Miken and Kest for four or five days now – if all had gone well – and she had to believe it *had*, or the wait was unbearable. What would Miken and Kest make of Caledon, and what would Caledon make of Allogrenia?

If Caledon didn't return in the meantime, she had another seventeen days to wait before she'd remind Adris of his pledge. Kira had been to King's Hall twice since the failed gathering expedition, but had got no further than the gates, Adris being away at Mendor Spur with the King's Guard. Nor could the Guard, Belzen, tell her when Adris would return.

She was beginning to feel the same dull weariness that had afflicted her in the Warens, a frustration born of inaction. At least that could be mended, she thought, picking up the pen again.

Kira worked in the Sanctum, and at her recording, as the new moon came and went and the fifth day after it dawned, grew old and ended. That night the nightmare of Kandor's death returned

to Kira's sleep, leaving her staring wide-eyed into the darkness, drenched in sweat. She hadn't dreamed of Kandor's slaying since the storm on Shardos and wondered whether the dream's return was caused by Aranz's refusal to use fireweed on the newly arrived wounded. He now rejected the 'Tremen' herb in favour of a Tain one.

Knowing sleep had fled, she rose and went to the Big Room to check on one of the wounded, a woodcutter with a reddish beard, and was surprised to discover Aranz there.

'He needs fireweed,' said Kira, as the man tossed on the pallet.

'Concentrated mesen will suffice,' countered Aranz, using wet cloths to cool his patient.

'His fever worsens. Let me fetch the fireweed,' said Kira urgently.

'The mesen's a little old, that's all, but we'll have fresh soon.'

'The King's opening the gates?' asked Kira.

'At dawn. It will take the gatherers most of the day to reach Pelaval and they'll not be back till late in the night,' said Aranz, drying his hands and moving away towards the Small Room.

Kira's heart pounded. 'Will the King –' she started, then remembered something Caledon had told her. Adris did as much as he could to protect his people, *but always at the risk of his father's wrath.*

'Will the King, what?' asked Aranz.

'Will the King send his Guard?' asked Kira, her thoughts whirring.

'Troopsmen will accompany the gatherers; the King doesn't send the Guard beyond the wall.'

The King might not, but Adris did, in spite of his father's prohibitions. He'd sent the Guard to bring her to Maraschin, *and* to take her to the Pelaval Valley. It was *Adris* who ensured she kept her pledge to Caledon, most probably because he had pledged to

Caledon that she remain here. The *King* probably didn't even know she was in Maraschin. *And now Adris was away at Mendor Spur.*

Dawn was some way off, but Kira was too excited to sleep. After preparing her pack, she put the pile of completed Writings on the shelf next to the Physick Chronicle. They didn't include all her Healer knowing, just descriptions of fireweed and its preparation, the birthing of twins, and salves and potions for ageing joints and deep-seated coughs, which the Tain physicks ministered to so poorly.

It was still dark, the houses shuttered, as Kira made her way down to the gate. Lamps set along the wall's rim curved away like miniature suns, illuminating an untidy group of gatherers and the orderly lines of a troop. Unexpectedly, King's Guard capes showed, garish in the lamplight, and Kira's heart sank, knowing they'd be aware of Adris's command to keep her confined to Maraschin.

As Kira drew closer she saw the Troop Commander was the same man who'd taken her and Caledon prisoner in the Azurcades. Between him and the King's Guard, Kira had a horrible feeling she wasn't going anywhere. She slipped in beside the gatherers as they shuffled forward and there was a dull creak as the gates opened.

'My Lady. You're not permitted to leave the city,' came Ather's voice, causing the Troop Commander to order the small procession to a halt.

'I was unaware that the *King* had issued such command,' said Kira loudly, holding Ather's gaze despite her nervousness.

Ather was nonplussed, conferring with a second Guard, whose shirt flashed and sparkled in the lamps. The second Guard beckoned her but Kira didn't move, determined to ensure that any discussion about the King's commands was conducted publicly.

'It's safer you remain in Maraschin,' the second Guard called over the heads of the waiting men.

'I am a physick and need to gather. Has the *King* forbidden me to do so?' asked Kira.

Ather whispered urgently to the second Guard, but the Guard shook his head. 'You may pass,' the second Guard said. Kira resisted the urge to smile, as her guess was proved correct. It was Adris who tried to keep her in Maraschin, not the King, and both Ather and the second Guard knew it.

Ather's eyes were hard upon Kira, but he could do nothing. As the Commander bellowed again and the troop marched out the gate, Kira went with them.

20

Tresen journeyed slowly north through the forest towards the Renclan Sentinel. Brem had said it would be another moon before he was well enough to return to the Warens to continue his Protector training, so Tresen had decided to build his strength by retracing the route Kira would have taken to leave Allogrenia. If she had been killed, he'd surely find some sign of it, and he thought even that terrible possibility was better than never knowing. There had still been no Shargh attack since she had left but he moved silently in case.

Tresen looked about as he walked, the red fallowood reminding him of how he, Kira and Kandor had competed to find the brightest leaves, and how they'd brought them to Mikini to judge. His sister had invariably chosen the half-rotted offerings of Kandor, but he and Kira hadn't minded, preferring the small injustice to a grizzling child.

It was evening when Tresen reached the place where he'd nearly died, and he set his sleeping-sling high off the ground and out of sight. But he found it hard to sleep, his head full of the

nightmarish happenings of nearly two moons ago. He'd endured a desperate, exhausting flight from the Shargh before the excruciating pain of the sword sliced through him.

Tresen rose early the next day and searched the ancient castellas to either side of the derelict fire-circle Kest had set, but found only chips from the burning-wood the Protectors had cut. He enlarged the search circle and at mid-morning saw bone glimmering through bitterberry. He raked at it with a stick and grimaced as he uncovered a coarse tangle of black hair.

It wasn't Kira, obviously, but his sense of bleakness intensified as he continued his search and uncovered two more sets of bones, or perhaps one set that had been scattered. There was leather there, and that saved him from probing further. Tresen didn't know how many Shargh had been killed in the attack when he'd been wounded, nor in the later attack that had taken Jonkesh and Saresh's lives. The dead Protectors had been laid to rest beneath a Renclan alwaysgreen, but the Shargh had been left to rot, Kest having to use all his strength to ensure the survival of his men.

For the first time, Tresen understood Kest's dilemma: either let Kira go and save his men, or force Kira to stay with the patrol and lose many men. The latter decision would certainly have cost Tresen his life. The understanding shafted like sunlight through the fog of resentment that had clouded his thoughts since that time.

He left the empty fire-circle and rotted bodies behind, and gradually the canopy thinned and the air brightened, encouraging thick stands of bitterberry and tangles of strange vines. There was birdsong he didn't recognise and the occasional flutter of blue birds, which he stared at in fascination.

But by the time Tresen reached the Sentinel at dusk, his fascination had given way to exhaustion and a longing for the safety and comfort of his bed. He rested, panting, against the gnarled trunk of the Renclan Sentinel and started as he noticed that gold

eyes stared down at him. Then the mira kiraon broke from the branches and winged away north. Its flight seemed significant, as if it followed the route his clanmate had taken.

Tresen settled wearily on the ground facing Allogrenia, using the Sentinel's bole to shelter him from the looming emptiness behind. He would have liked to set a fire and brew thornyflower tea – he'd even brought honey for the purpose – but he knew it would be foolish to risk drawing Shargh. Instead, he comforted himself with the familiarity of his mother's nutbread and riddle-berry spread.

Caledon could see the green line of forest proper that edged the Dendora soon after dawn, but it seemed to grow no closer. His head told him to maintain the steady pace that had brought him from the Azurcades, to continue to suck on the sida before the burn of thirst sent his surroundings into mist, and to rest before the danger of falling overtook the risk of stopping. Yet his heart told him to run.

He kept his eyes on a single tree, larger and darker than the others. It was most likely an alwaysgreen and, as he'd come directly south, probably what Kira had called the Sentinel. Then the tree began to smudge and Caledon cursed and came to a reluctant stop. Sliding his pack-strap past his sling, he dropped the pack from his good shoulder. Then, kneeling carefully, he pulled a branch of sida from his wilted bundle, pivoted till he was propped against the pack, and slid down so his head and shoulders rested on it. After bringing the sida to his mouth, he punctured it with his teeth, and sucked.

Once the sida had given the last of its moisture, he let it fall, and visualised the soar of fisher-birds over Talliel to send the calmness necessary for sleep. Early on his trek he'd pictured waves foaming up and down on the Tallien shore, but the image of water, even salt water, had reminded him too keenly of his thirst.

The sun had all but set when he woke, shuffled backwards, slipped his pack-strap behind his sling, the other over his uninjured shoulder, wedged his stick into the grass, and levered himself upright. The world swayed as it always did, and pain and nausea surged. Usually he waited for them to ebb, but not this time, the quiet of the coming night amplifying his gasps as he pushed himself on. Slowly the alwaysgreen grew closer, until it was only a few lengths ahead.

Suddenly a man stepped from its shadows, his face freezing in astonishment when he saw Caledon, then flashing to fear. He drew his sword, the blade gleaming as he dropped into a crouch.

Caledon stopped. He wasn't wearing his cape, so the other man, *the Tremen*, would see he was unarmed. The trees began to blur and Caledon tottered forward to be close enough to speak.

'Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan sends greetings,' he croaked in Terak; then the trees dissolved into blackness.

The Tain troop and gatherers marched westward, their shadows spidering before them as the sun rose warming their backs. The light revealed the presence of Somer and Selvet, but the rest of the troop were strangers. Mist still held the Scharn Woodlands to their left, the trees floating between earth and sky, and the troop kept well out from them.

The men spoke among themselves, as did the gatherers, but no one spoke to Kira. Jaitich didn't know Onespeak, so it was unlikely the other gatherers did, but some of the troopsmen certainly knew it. Kira wondered if they ignored her because she was a 'Lady', or because she'd imposed herself on them.

They reached the mouth of the Pelaval after midday, and the gatherers and the troopsmen who weren't guarding settled on the ground to eat. But Kira sought out the Commander, who was still on his feet morosely considering the treeline.

‘Commander,’ she said, giving a small bow. ‘What I seek doesn’t grow in the Pelaval Valley, so I go on to the Thanaval Valley. I’ll return for the journey back to Maraschin.’

‘I can’t split my troop to guard you,’ the Commander barked.

‘I don’t ask you to.’

Troopsmen nearby made no effort to hide their eavesdropping or their translations to the gatherers, and Jaitich rose and spoke. The Commander’s disgruntled expression deepened. He clicked his fingers and Somer and another trooper scrambled to their feet.

‘This is Trooper Derz,’ mumbled Somer, cramming the last of his meal into his mouth. ‘We’re to guard and translate . . . Lady.’

‘I’d prefer to gather alone,’ said Kira. The last thing she wanted was to risk others.

‘We’re under orders.’

The small group set off towards the valley mouth, finally leaving the sunlit grasses and stepping into the cool shade. It was pleasant under the trees, the air heavy with scent. Somer and Derz spoke quietly together in Tain as they pushed on through the small bushes and leaf-fall, deep into the valley.

Kira looked around for patches of lush growth, but the dense bushes made it hard to see anything at all, so she started up the slope.

‘It’s best you stay in the open,’ said Somer.

Kira ignored him, following a faint scent of rot, then squatted and trawled her hands through the detritus of leaves and twigs. Somer panted up beside her, his brow furrowed.

Kira crawled forward, her fingers skimming slime and then colliding with a spongy protuberance. Heart soaring, she eased the litter aside to reveal an upright row of dark red fingers.

‘Fireweed,’ she breathed, elated. ‘And ripe.’

But Somer's gaze was fixed on the slope above them. 'Horses!' he whispered. 'Don't move!'

Somer walked backwards away from her, knuckles white on the bow. Did he show himself to draw the Shargh's attention? she wondered.

'I think they've gone,' he said finally, gesturing violently to Derz. 'We go too, while we have the chance.'

Kira sliced the precious spongy fingers as quickly as she could, but Somer grabbed her arm and yanked her upright.

'I must –' she protested, but Somer was already hauling her down the slope.

'If they're Shargh, we'll not leave the Thanaval alive,' he hissed.

'But they saw you, and they didn't attack,' said Kira, panting from the speed of their descent.

'Too steep for horses,' said Somer, dragging her through the last of the bushes to the valley floor, oblivious to the thorns raking their cheeks. 'Ashmiri horses,' he muttered, still in Onespeak, as they went. 'Meros grant us Ashmiri riders too!'

They reached Derz and Jaitich and began a swift retreat down the valley. Kira passed two fingers of fireweed to Jaitich to increase the chances of the fireweed reaching the Sanctum. If the Shargh killed her, it might be too dangerous to retrieve her body, and the wounded woodcutters would die.

Somer and Derz directed them, their voices low and urgent, but Jaitich remained silent, his eyes everywhere, sweat staining his shirt. Kira tried to control her fear by focusing on the sweep of woodlands ahead. A hundred and fifty lengths away, she estimated.

Birds broke from the trees to their left, and Kira's heart rate doubled. A hundred lengths to go, then seventy.

Somer and Derz's speech came in harsh grabs. Fifty lengths to the Thanaval mouth now. Thirty lengths, twenty-five, twenty.

Kira wanted to run, but Somer went at the same even pace, still scanning, still passing an endless stream of messages to Derz behind. Fifteen lengths, ten.

Then they came out of the shadow into the bright light of the woodlands. Jaitich staggered sideways in relief and Derz came level to confer with Somer. Close to a hundred lengths to the east, she caught a glimpse of the Commander and two troopers, the rest of the troop probably guarding the gatherers in the Pelaval.

Somer sprinted off to report the horses they'd seen, and Derz gestured them forward, then turned, his eyes widening with horror. Kira swivelled and gasped as she saw that Somer lay prone, a spear sticking out of his back. Even from the distance, she heard the Commander's bellow, then lost sight of him as two Shargh burst from the spur in front, their gaze fixed unwaveringly on her.

Derz shouted and loosed an arrow, narrowly missing the first of them. Neither Shargh deviated from their path, and Jaitich whirled and sprinted back into the valley. Kira spun as well to see brown horses pound towards Jaitich, who skidded to a stop, half crouched and covered his head. Kira expected to see him hewn down, but the Shargh swept past him, continuing straight towards her.

There were Shargh between her and the troop, and between her and the shelter of the trees. Kira fled westward, lungs screaming, horses closing behind. Then a black horse surged from the lee of the spur ahead, Kira instantly recognising the rider. She slewed to a terrified stop, fixated by the hatred in his gaze, and the thunder behind surged over her.

By the 'green which Shelters us, let death be quick!

But there was no slash of swords, just rough hands flinging her over the horse's harness. Blood stormed in her ears as her head swung beside the horse's thrashing legs and the Shargh swept on, laughing and shouting.

Grasses were replaced by tree roots, and the horses heaved and panted as they were forced up the slopes. Finally the sickening motion ceased and there was an exchange of harsh whispers, before boots came within her line of vision. Kira was yanked from the horse, the sudden change from head-down to upright robbing her legs of strength. Then a hand caught her hair and her head was jerked back. The Shargh from the first attack loomed over her, spitting words barbed with such venom that they seemed to strike her face. His tirade came to an end and he raised his knife to her eyes.

Kira was engulfed in fear so complete that every shred of everything she'd laboriously built to protect herself from the horror of Kandor's death was torn to shreds. The Shargh was going to kill her by stabbing out her eyes.

21

Tresen still held his sword before him, long after the stranger lay motionless. He scanned the plain and the forest to either side, then advanced on the man warily. The man had spoken Tremem *and* brought news of Kira, but then Tresen realised the man must actually have spoken Terak, for no stranger knew Tremem. He must be a Terak Kutan, and as he'd known of Kira, she must have reached the north. Joy flowed through Tresen but he sobered as he looked at the stranger's injuries.

The man had an angry red gash under his hairline, a blush of bruising down his face and an eye-socket crusted with blood. His arm had been crudely bound and splinted but was horribly swollen, and the bandage on his thigh was blood-soaked.

Tresen considered how best to shift the unconscious man to the Sentinel's shelter. His own weakness meant he couldn't heave the man upright, so in the end, he used the straps of the man's pack to drag him, trying not to worsen his injuries. It was fully dark before Tresen reached the Sentinel and rolled the man onto the sleeping-sheet he'd found in the man's pack.

Then Tresen collapsed beside him, gulped down water until his heart steadied, and considered the fire he was going to have to set for light to tend by. He set it on the forest side of the Sentinel, well within the rim of its sheltering branches, hoping that the massive boughs would diffuse the smoke.

When it was well alight, Tresen unbound the man's arm, dug his fingers along the puffed up flesh and pushed the bones back into place. Both arm-bones were broken, but the breaks felt clean. Tresen searched around for straighter splints then rebound the arm with falzon bandages.

The man's thigh wound was deep and ragged, and had some sort of herbal paste on it. Tresen flushed out the dried blood and the splinters he found with warm water, bathed the wound with sorren, then bound it with the last of the falzon. He cleaned the man's head wound and laved it with sorren, then washed the blood from the man's eye.

Once he'd tended to the obvious injuries, Tresen slid his hands under the man's shirt, and felt for rib breaks. There were none and he rolled the man onto his side and pushed his shirt high. The man's back was a shocking mass of welts and bruises, and reminded him of a Writing he'd found once, that told how the Terak disciplined their patrolmen by beating. Gingerly Tresen brought his palms over the skin, finding no rib breaks there either. The man had been fortunate, Tresen thought, for he'd suffered no injuries likely to kill him. Tresen left him on his side and tucked the sleeping-sheet over him securely, then contemplated him as he drank thornyflower tea with honey.

The man didn't look barbarous, despite being a Terak Kutan. His face was narrow and shapely, unlined despite the glint of silver in his hair, and anything but brutish. The man didn't carry a sword either, but there was a clip on his belt for one. Tresen opened the stranger's pack and, though he felt like a thief, took the sword he found within and put it into his own pack. Then he stomped

on the remains of the fire and climbed into the alwaysgreen. If the stranger intended him harm, he wouldn't know where he was and, even if he guessed, the man's injuries would make climbing impossible.

Caledon came awake slowly, seeing no sign of the Tremen of the last night. His broken arm throbbed, but he gradually realised that it had been properly splinted and bound with pale bandages, and there was a clean bandage round his thigh. Had the Tremen gifted him his healing skills, then left him to his fate?

The branches stirred and Caledon looked up. The Tremen from the last night climbed down, dumped his pack near the tree, relit the fire and set water to simmer.

'How do you feel?' he asked.

'I'm very thirsty,' said Caledon.

The Tremen passed him a waterskin and steadied it while Caledon drank. 'I needed that,' Caledon said. 'I've had no water since the Azurcades.'

'How many days is that?'

'The maps say it's an eight-day journey across the Dendora, but I've no idea how long it took me,' said Caledon.

'If you drank no water, I find it hard to believe you survived,' said the Tremen.

'I drank sida sap,' said Caledon, nodding towards the sad pile of twigs still tied to his pack. 'Not the best taste in the world, but enough to keep you alive if you're desperate.'

'I've not heard of it.'

'Neither had Kira,' said Caledon. 'From what she told me, I don't believe it grows in your lands.'

'Last night you brought greetings from Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan. Do you know where she is?' said the Tremen, his gaze piercing.

'She's in Maraschin,' said Caledon.

'In the north?'

‘The northern foothills of the Azurcades.’

‘Is that near Sarnia?’

‘Sarnia’s another ten days on foot across the Sarsalin Plain,’ said Caledon.

‘But *you* are from Sarnia?’

‘I’m from Talliel, west of Sarnia. My name’s Caledon e Saridon e Talliel, which means Caledon, of the family of Saridon, of the city of Talliel. Kira found it easier to call me Caledon.’

‘But you speak Trem . . . Terak,’ said the Tremen.

‘I speak many tongues.’

The water bubbled and the Tremen took the pan off the coals, then pulled a cup from his pack. ‘Do you have a cup? I’ve only brought one,’ he said.

‘In my pack. It would be easier for me if you retrieved it.’

The Tremen lifted Caledon’s things out methodically and respectfully until he found Caledon’s cup stowed at the bottom. It was metal, and Caledon noticed the Tremen’s distaste.

‘I’ve taken your sword,’ said the Tremen. ‘I will return it to you before you leave our lands.’

‘Of course,’ said Caledon.

The Tremen added water to a swirl of herbs, unwrapped a pot of honey and added some to both cups, then handed Caledon one.

‘I thank you, and I thank you for the aid you’ve given,’ said Caledon. ‘I’ve only met two Tremen in my life, and both have had a part in its saving.’

‘Tell me of Kira. Is she well? Is she safe?’

‘Both of these things, but I would speak of her as we walk. Kira promised to delay her journey north until a little after the new moon, but my injuries have robbed me of any sense of time. How long is it to the new moon?’

‘About eight days, but I can’t allow you into the forest till I know more about you,’ said the Tremen, colouring. ‘You

may have extracted information from Kira by threat, or even murdered her.'

'Trust is a cloak, long in the weaving, as I once said to Kira,' said Caledon. 'Your Leader told me how the alwaysgreens are used for navigation, and gave me this,' he said, producing the carved owl.

'I've never seen Kira with it,' said the Tremen, staring at it without recognition.

'She told me it was a gift from Protector Commander Kest,' said Caledon, noting the Tremen's expression flick from surprise to distaste. 'She said to show it to Protector Commander Kest as a token of her trust.'

'What else did Kira say?' asked the Tremen.

'She trusted me with the names of the three people she loves most in the world . . . of those who still live. Clanleader Miken of Kashclan, his son, Tresen of Kashclan, and Protector Commander Kest.'

The Tremen rose and took several quick steps away. Caledon wondered if something were amiss.

'I'm Tresen of Kashclan,' the Tremen said hoarsely.

'Ah, you were badly wounded in the last attack.'

'I'm all but recovered, and soon to rejoin the Protectors,' said Tresen, then seemed to reach a decision. 'We'll eat and then start back. It will be a slow trip with your injuries. How did you come by them?'

'I was careless,' said Caledon. *He had taken too much for granted, including the intent of the stars.*

'It seems you paid a high price,' said Tresen, ladling what looked like jam onto bread and passing it to Caledon.

The bread was made of nutmeal and the jam concocted of strange berries, but Caledon wasn't thinking of the food. *Eight days till the new moon!* He had a bare fifteen days to convince the Tremen to send men *and* to recross the Dendora and the Azurcades. Even

were he uninjured, he couldn't do it, and now the price of his carelessness was going to be higher than wounds and broken bones: Adris's pledge to take Kira north bound him.

Caledon shut his eyes as the star-wish formed in his mind:
By the grace of Aeris, let her be safe.

22

A dawn greeter sang, and during the nights of travel through the forest owls had called: the hanaway, the frostking and the mira kiraon, Tresen had said. Caledon rested against a tree and watched sunlight paint the air a luminous green. It was the sixth dawn he'd seen in the forest, or rather *hadn't* seen. Tresen still slept, his face reminding Caledon of Kira, sharing the fine bones and build of the Kessomis who still lived in the mountains. The Terak – who'd sprung from the Kessomis – had mixed their blood with the Kirs and Illians, and tended to be darker and thicker set.

Tresen had told him many things but Caledon had learned more by watching him. The mira kiraon's call had filled Tresen's face with longing for his clanmate, but there was anger, too, at her leaving.

Later, as Tresen had spoken of growing with her, of roaming the forests, of nutting and jumping games, he'd always mentioned Kandor, the name Kira had cried in nightmare. Even when Tresen described his own wounding, which had brought him close to death, his pain was less.

In the end, Caledon asked about Kandor outright.

Kandor was the younger brother Kira raised, Tresen had said. She saw him killed by the Shargh, and blames herself for his death.

Soon after they set off that morning they met one of the patrols Kira had spoken of. Given the Cashgar Shargh were but two days north-east of the forests, Caledon had expected the Protectors to be a more obvious presence. Still, the forest was dense and he suspected patrols could pass close by others without either being the wiser.

When the Protectors appeared, Tresen had been several lengths to one side, a style of travel Tresen had adopted from their first day, despite Caledon's reliance on a stick. Suddenly there were men with raised swords all around him, making Caledon's appreciation of Tremem fighting skills instantly deeper.

Twenty, Caledon counted, plus their leader, the same configuration the Terak used. Tresen and the leader drew off to one side, while the guarding Protectors stared at Caledon's boots and pack, and where the edges of his dark green shirt were visible.

After a short while, the leader beckoned Caledon to the bole of a storm-broken tree.

'Please sit and rest your injuries,' he said.

Caledon sat without speaking, having learned long ago that a cooperative silence was a quicker way to build trust than unasked-for speech.

'I am Protector Leader Pekrash of Renclan. Protector Tresen tells me you are . . . Caledon e Saridon e Talliel.'

'A name strange to the Tremem tongue,' acknowledged Caledon. 'Your Leader, Kiraon of Kashclan, calls me Caledon.'

'Protector Tresen tells me you bring news of our Leader,' said Pekrash.

'I carry a message from her she would have me deliver to Protector Commander Kest and the council,' said Caledon, pausing to let Pekrash digest the fact that his business was official.

‘But I can tell you that Kira is safe and well in Maraschin, the Tain city on the northern edge of the Azurcade Mountains. Kira tends the injured in the Sanctum there, awaiting my return before she continues north towards Sarnia.’

‘You bring a message the Tremen have hoped for,’ said Pekrash. ‘There will be rejoicing in all the longhouses, but especially in Kashclan, where those closest to her dwell. It’s best you go there now. I can’t split my patrol to escort you, or deviate from Commander Kest’s orders,’ added Pekrash apologetically, ‘but the risk is small this close to the Arborean. I’ll send a message to the Commander to meet you there.’

Within a few moments, Caledon and Tresen were alone in the forest.

They went on, but didn’t reach the Kashclan longhouse till dawn the next day, Tresen walking with a steady hand on Caledon’s arm in recognition of the thickness of the trees.

‘The forest must remain unmarked but the longhouses have paths nearby, simply because of the numbers who pass in and out,’ explained Tresen.

Not much of a defence, thought Caledon, as a long building appeared, its roof patterned with lichen and its timber walls silvered with age. It all but blended with the dense growth behind it. No metal and no glass, noted Caledon, as they made their way towards the single heavy door, its design the same as the communal houses in Kessom.

The door opened before they reached it, revealing Clanleader Miken of Kashclan, his similarity to Tresen striking. Miken eyed Caledon shrewdly, and Caledon recalled that Kira had spoken of this man with love. That meant a bond that bound both ways.

‘Kashclan welcomes Caledon e Saridon e Talliel,’ said Miken with a solemn bow.

‘The Saridon thanks Kashclan leader Miken,’ said Caledon, bowing carefully in return.

Miken steadied him over the step into a large hall set with tables. It was warm and filled with the smell of cooking.

‘Protector Leader Pekrash’s message said you were injured, but not how severely,’ he said as they passed between the tables. ‘Please, come in and rest with us. We have a meal prepared, and it will be best if we eat before we speak,’ said Miken.

Tresen gazed beyond his father to a fair-haired man at the end of the room, and his jaw tightened.

‘Get some rest, Tresen, and we’ll speak later,’ said Miken, touching his son on the shoulder.

With a nod to Caledon, Tresen disappeared through a door opposite. If the Tremen kept to Kessomi tradition it would lead to a passageway opening on to individual apartments, guessed Caledon. Miken beckoned and he followed, Tremen staring from the nearby tables.

‘Forgive our curiosity,’ said Miken. ‘You’re the first stranger, *of goodwill*, ever to enter Allogrenia.’

At the furthest table, the fair-haired man rose to greet them, Protector Commander Kest, the carver of the owl, Caledon guessed. A strikingly handsome man, and not one Tresen liked. Kest’s gaze was that of a fighter – his piercing blue eyes coldly measuring, and it reassured Caledon. When the battles started, Caledon didn’t want Kira’s people going off naively to be slaughtered.

‘Kira gave me this to show you as a token of her trust,’ said Caledon, taking the owl from his secret pocket.

‘With respect, you could have taken it by force,’ said Kest.

‘Indeed I could, so she told me to say this: the silverjack *has* got a stubby tail and big ears, and the running horse *is* as beautiful as you said, and you were right: she should have carried more nutmeat.’

There was an immediate lessening of tension.

Miken poured cups of the same green liquid Tresen had given Caledon.

‘Thornyflower tea,’ he said, handing Caledon a cup.

Without honey, the tea had a bland, leafy taste, but was warming and reviving. Miken rose and fetched them food next, and for a time they ate without speaking. Various berries, eaten fresh, dried or in pastes; nuts eaten whole or as bread and cakes; and small quantities of dried fish. The platters were baked clay, the eating knives some sort of hardened wood. Herbing sickles and swords were the only metal allowed, Kira had told him, so everything else came from the forest. It must have been a hard learning for the Northerners, thought Caledon as he ate. Kasheron had come from a place of plenty.

It was Miken who began the questioning, wanting to know first about Kira, as Caledon guessed he would. Caledon spoke of his earlier journey, of being wounded by the Shargh and of how Kira had saved his life in the Azurcade foothills.

‘I told her I was going north, and she agreed to journey with me. But I decided to deviate to the Tain city of Maraschin where I have friends, before going on to Sarnia,’ said Caledon.

‘You told her of your change of plan?’ asked Miken.

‘No,’ said Caledon.

‘So you misled to her,’ broke in Kest.

‘Kira was half starved when I met her and it’s a six-day journey over the Azurcades to Maraschin, and another ten days on foot to Sarnia. Even if she’d taken all my food in trade for her healing of me – which she refused to do – she wouldn’t have survived the journey. The lands are grazed by herd animals and offer little gathering, nor is food given as you do here, but traded.’

‘Why would you care whether she, a stranger, survived the journey?’ pursued Kest.

‘She was a stranger who had saved my life.’

Kest’s gaze remained hard, and it was Miken who broke the silence. ‘So, you took her to your friends in Maraschin?’

‘We went to Maraschin as prisoners.’

‘But –’ said Kest.

‘I am sure we will learn more if we let our guest speak without interruption,’ said Miken, raising his hand.

‘I’ve a long friendship with the Tain King, Beris, and his son Prince Adris, but it had been nearly five years since I’d been there,’ said Caledon. ‘The Tain are under Shargh attack and the King’s worsening health means he rarely leaves his rooms. But he is *still* King, and refuses to authorise fighting with the Shargh, leaving his son faced with doing nothing, or having trespassers *detained* – including Shargh – for failing to seek leave to cross Tain territory.’

‘So he chooses the latter,’ muttered Kest.

‘Yes. Kira and I were separated and brought into Maraschin as prisoners, not something that helped her build trust in Adris, or strengthen her trust in me. When I first met Kira in the Azurcades, she used only Onespeak and revealed nothing more than the name of *Kira*, and that she was a Healer from the southern forests.

‘I learned the tongue she spoke when she called out in nightmare, and discovered that she was your Leader when she told the Tain troopsmen who held her, possibly because she believed they were going to kill her. I haven’t spent a lot of time with her in Maraschin either. I’ve been out with Prince Adris protecting those who dwell in the western Tain lands, while Kira has been in the Sanctum – the Tain place of healing – teaching their physicks her skills and healing those injured by the Shargh.

‘After I outlined to her what I believed is happening, Kira gave me the names of those she loved, the configuration of the Eights, and a message for the council.’

‘And what is it that you believe is happening?’ asked Kest.

‘The Shargh tribes who were broken in the fighting that caused the Sundering have united, and they test their strength in the Tain lands and are gratified to find a Tain response lacking.

They intend to take back the north and this will unleash a tide of blood, engulfing the Tain and Tremen alike.'

'You're saying that, if they succeed, the Shargh will not be content to let us live on in peace here?' asked Miken.

'Not when they discover you're of northern blood.'

'Did Kira tell you we were Kasherón's seed?' asked Miken.

'No, although she admitted to having kin in the north. I'd been puzzled by her looks – which are pure Kessomi – and the fact that she spoke Terak, despite coming from the south.'

'And her eyes?' asked Kest.

'Extraordinary certainly, but I knew of the northern Healer Queen Kiraon's gold eyes, and those of her sons, among others. The tale of the Sundering is well known in my lands, too, but it speaks of Kasherón taking his followers over the Oskinas Seas, not south. It wasn't until I'd begun my journey here that I realised that the *Kash* in Kashclan wasn't Kir as I'd thought, but Terak.'

'Kessomi,' corrected Miken.

'Kessomi,' acknowledged Caledon.

In the pause that followed, Caledon became aware of the woody music of chimes spiralling in an open window. Sunlight intruded, lighting the fair hair of a child at the next table.

'Kira didn't grow here, despite being kin to me,' said Miken, following his gaze. 'Her father was Tremén Leader Maxén, and the Leader's family lived in the Bough, a longhouse in the centre of our lands, a quarter day's walk from here. The Bough was the heart of healing in Allogrenia.' He paused, and went on sadly. 'The Shargh burned the Bough at Turning and murdered Kira's father, her elder brothers Merek and Lern, and her younger brother Kandor, as well as many others. Kira was the only one of her line to survive.'

There was a short silence.

'And so she became Leader,' said Caledon, struggling to overcome his shock.

'She did, but because she was the best Healer, not because

she was of the Leader's line. We do not follow the way of the Terak Kutan in the north, passing leadership on the basis of chance-birth, regardless of character.'

The Clanleader suddenly leant across the table. 'Kest and I have spent much time thinking on why the Shargh might hunt Kira. Is there anything in your travels, Caledon, or in your speech with the Tain King and Prince, which tells you the reason?'

Caledon's thoughts went to the Feailner in the north and the fact that the Ashmiri might have shared their knowing of him with the Shargh.

'The Shargh are highly superstitious, and see omens in the flights of birds and portents in the rare or unusual. Kira's eyes may well be the reason they seek her,' said Caledon finally.

23

‘I don’t think he’s being truthful,’ Kest said to Miken, as they made their way along the Drinkwater Path to the Warens.

‘I think he’s possibly being selective, which doesn’t necessarily mean dishonest,’ said Miken.

‘It does if it misleads us. He’s yet to say why any of this interests him. Talliel is well clear of any fighting.’

‘I’m not sure where half these places even are,’ said Miken. ‘Maraschin, Talliel, the Oskinas Sea . . .’

‘Yes. I only studied the maps Kira found in the Storage Cavern after she left,’ admitted Kest.

‘I might have a look at them,’ said Miken. ‘I’ve a feeling I’m going to need to know where these lands are . . . That we’re *all* going to need to know.’

‘What mean you?’ asked Kest.

‘Think of it, Kest. Our Leader’s in the Tain city of Maraschin, and now a man from the north-west has arrived. He’s the first stranger intent on good rather than harm to enter our lands.’

‘We don’t know that he *is* intent on good,’ said Kest.

‘I don’t believe he carries a Shargh heart, do you? Even if he serves his own purposes, the fact remains – we are no longer hidden. Kira has spoken of us beyond the trees, and so, too, will Caledon when he leaves. Allogrenia will be marked on the maps of others, even as our maps carry their names.

‘Regardless of whether Kira reaches the north, and whether the Terak Kutan give or refuse aid, the choice of remaining as we are is no more.’

‘Caledon will ask us to send men,’ said Kest.

‘Not Caledon; Kira. The message he carries from her to the council most likely contains a request from her. It’s hard to see why he’s come, otherwise.’

‘I can’t believe Kira would request men, unless she was forced to by someone,’ muttered Kest. ‘Has the Clancouncil the authority to send Protectors beyond the forest?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Miken honestly. ‘Like most of what’s beset us since the Shargh attacks began, the question’s never been raised. You command the Protectors, and Kasheron established them specifically to protect Allogrenia, but whether he only intended the Protectors to fight *beneath* our trees, or outside, to stop the threat *reaching* our trees . . .’ Miken shrugged.

Caledon certainly looked better at their evening meal. His colour was good, and the tension round his eyes and mouth had eased. Miken now understood more fully what Caledon had said earlier, having found the places Caledon had named on maps in the Warens. He and Kest had spent considerable time poring over them, Miken realising with astonishment the breadth of the world beyond the trees.

The Shargh Grounds lay two days to the north-east – uncomfortably close – and were backed by the Cashgar Mountains, while the Dendora Plain stretched directly north up to the Azurcades. In their northern foothills lay the Tain city of Maraschin, with Tain

settlements scattered east and west of it, then the mighty stretch of the Sarsalin Plain ran away northward to the Silvercade Mountains. The Terak Kutan city of Sarnia sat in their southern foothills, while Kessom appeared to be actually in the mountains.

North of the Silvercades was an ocean called the Oskinas, and on its shores, west of the Terak was Talliel, from whence Caledon claimed to have come. He was a long way from home, Miken thought, as he introduced him to Tenerini and Mikini, then took him to one of the farthest tables to eat.

‘How did you come to injure yourself?’ asked Miken, portioning fish.

‘I fell while crossing Shardos, the main peak in the Azurcades. The southern side is steep and shale-clad, and can give way without warning.’

‘You’ve crossed it before?’

‘Many times, but I was careless, not thinking of the dew, or the slope, but of Kira.’

‘And *what* exactly were you thinking?’ asked Miken, breaking the nutbread.

‘I was pleased I’d made Kira stay in Maraschin.’

‘*Made* her stay?’

‘It’s the only place she can be safe at the moment,’ said Caledon.

‘As the Terak Kutan’s kin, Kira would be safe with them, despite their barbarity,’ said Miken, wondering if Caledon were so arrogant that he’d actually boast to a people about imprisoning their Leader.

‘Your kin are the Terak *Kirillian*. The word *kutan* means, variously, liar or thief, and the fact you use it shows how little you know of them. But, however small your knowing, it’s greater than theirs of you. The Terak Kirillian tales tell of Kasheron’s folk, *the traitors and deserters*, going north over the Oskinas Sea. When they are spoken of, which is rare, spittle invariably follows.’

Miken struggled to control his anger, reminding himself that Caledon was intelligent and highly disciplined. The fact that he'd reached Allogrenia so badly injured was testament to that. Caledon must be aware of how offensive his words were.

'I presume your lack of manners has a purpose other than to insult the Tremeni,' gritted Miken.

'It does, and I ask that you forgive me. But it's vital you understand the reality of what lies beyond the trees. To aid you, the Terak Kirillian Leader would have to acknowledge the kin-link, and the northern peoples would be very reluctant to accept that. What they would accept more readily is a renewal of the Terak-Tain treaty that stretches back to Terak's time, but which has grown weak through too many years of Terak leaders and Tain kings seeing no reason to cross the Sarsalin Plain.'

'So, you've *made* Kira stay in the Tain city so there is no chance of her drawing the Terak *Kirillian's* aid *to* us and *away* from the Tain?'

'Essentially what you say is correct, but it's also to keep Kira safe. Going north alone would place her in enormous danger. In fact I doubt whether she'd survive the journey, even without the Shargh. The Sarsalin is harsh and dangerous, not just because of its sudden changes of weather, but because of the animals that inhabit it. The Terak Kirillian avoid traversing it alone. But even were Kira to reach the Terak city, her arrival would be a distraction to what *must* happen.'

'So you've had your friend King Beris lock her up?'

Caledon stiffened. 'Kira killed to save my life! She took my pain! She was companion to me in one of the worst storms Shardos could inflict! I would *never* have her locked up!' he exclaimed.

Caledon's passion stemmed from more than some imagined slight to his honour, thought Miken. Perhaps the real reason he wanted Kira kept safe in Maraschin was for him to return to.

'I made a trade with Kira in return for her delaying her journey,' continued Caledon more calmly. 'I pledged that if I didn't

return within seven days after the new moon, Prince Adris would provide her with an escort to the northern city.'

'It's the new moon now. Even were you to leave this day, you'd not be back in that time, if the distances are as you say,' said Miken.

'You're correct. Even were I not injured, I couldn't travel that swiftly.'

'So will the Prince provide Kira an escort?'

'His word is binding. He may delay a little, but at some point Kira will conclude I'm dead, and hold him to his pledge.'

'Maybe Kira will conclude you've simply been delayed and wait,' said Miken, pouring more tea.

'Kira didn't want me to go. She told me everyone she loves dies.'

'She has love for Tresen, and he's survived,' said Miken sharply.

'And for you. When she spoke of you and your wife, her face filled with joy.'

'My *bondmate*, not my wife. The Tremen don't marry.'

'Surely it's only a difference in name?' said Caledon, puzzled.

'Not according to what the Writings tell us of the north. Marriage is permanent, despite unhappiness. Here, if a bonding fails, the couple parts and bonds again.'

'Is repartnering common?' asked Caledon, astonished.

'No,' said Miken, enjoying disturbing Caledon's composure. 'Bonding is taken extremely seriously by the Tremen, but if it *must* be broken, there's no shame. I've always assumed Kasheran replaced marriage with bonding in recognition of our limited numbers and the constraints of clan membership.'

'The constraints of clan membership?'

'You're the first stranger to enter Allogrenia, Caledon, apart from the Shargh, and we've had to impose rules about who

can bond with whom to ensure relationships are not too close,' explained Miken, spreading nutbread with riddleberry.

'And if a woman chooses poorly, can she break the bond, or can only the man do that?' asked Caledon.

'Either can break the bond,' said Miken. 'Kasheron recognised early that if Allogrenia were to survive, it couldn't afford to have men and women locked in loveless and *childless* unions.'

Caledon's brow creased in thought.

'Kira grew up in the Bough, as I've told you, but if I'd had my way, she would have grown here with us,' said Miken more softly. 'The Tremen don't speak ill of their leaders, nor of the dead, but I will say this: Kira's father Maxen had no love for her, ignoring her from soon after her mother died until her healing rivalled his, then seeking to confine her. Kira won't tolerate being *confined* by any man.'

'I thank you for your words,' said Caledon uneasily.

24

Kest met with Miken the next day to give him a brief outline of the patrol reports. There had been no Shargh sightings and Miken wondered whether Kira had been right that the attacks would cease when she left. It was also possible that the wounding of the Shargh Leader kept the Shargh away, or that they now attacked the Tain instead, as Caledon suggested.

Kest's doubts about Caledon's veracity remained, being unconvinced by Caledon's explanation that the Shargh hunted Kira because of her gold eyes. He reminded Miken that Kira's family had been singled out and killed too. He also pointed out that Caledon was both clever and well travelled, and that his visits to, and knowledge of, the Terak lands positioned him to be highly selective in what he revealed.

But it was Caledon's relationship with Kira that irked Kest most.

'If Kira had been ready to bond, *I* would have bonded with her, if only to stop her leaving,' he said.

'I suspected as much,' said Miken, 'but trusted you'd act as you did. Kira barely thought about men before all this began,' he continued. 'She spent her days gathering, preparing her pastes and potions, and roaming the forest with Kandor and Tresen. Maxen once suggested to me that Kira could break Tremen law by taking Tresen in love, but I never had any concerns. Kira's love for Tresen was the same as her love for Kandor – the only type of love Kira knew.'

'But a lot can change in two moons. Kira left Allogrenia, survived a trek over the Dendora with the Shargh probably hunting her, and crossed a mountain range with a man she met along the way. He gave her food and shelter, and I've no doubt his knowledge of the lands they traversed helped keep her safe. It's no surprise she's developed affection for him.'

'If she has.'

'Are you letting your feelings for Kira colour your judgement of Caledon?' asked Miken.

'He must be almost old enough to be her father.'

'The father she never had,' said Miken softly.

'Do you think that's the way it is for her?' said Kest.

'Kira's seventeen, Kest, which makes her a woman with the right to bond with whom she likes, apart from Kashclansmen and Sarclansmen. Were she here, and seeking my advice, I would give it to her. But if she *didn't* seek it, I'd remain silent. Above all, I would have her happy, even if it were with a stranger old enough to be her father, for I love Kira as a daughter, and her happiness is as important to me as Mikini's.'

That evening, Caledon took his meal with Miken and Kest in the Kashclan longhouse, Miken explaining the structure and workings of the Clancouncil to him and touching on the different personalities of the councillors. Miken also outlined how the attack that had killed Kira's family had been made possible by Maxen's ill-considered actions.

Caledon knew it took little to unravel the ways of isolated peoples, having seen it with the Ashkali when sickness had afflicted their herds. The gods they'd trusted had fast been discredited, and the intricate webs of kinship and obligation broken. He now learned that the attacks on Allogrenia had caused a schism between the Tremen who protected, and those who healed, the Healer Leader wresting control from Kest's predecessor. Those who'd opposed the power shift had then continued the fracture by flouting the Leader's edict. His own intrusion would further weaken the weave of Tremen life.

'I know your ways are centred on healing,' said Caledon, when Miken had fallen silent, 'but as I said at our first meeting, the fighting that's started won't leave you be. Already you've suffered deaths and injuries, but these are a small part of what's to come. The Shargh peoples united make a formidable force, and while they might not be aided by their fourth kin, the Ashmiri, the lack of Ashmiri opposition will count as such.'

'Kasheron rejected the blood-thirst of his brother,' broke in Kest. 'It meant sacrificing everything – his right of rule of vast lands, his wealth, his kin and even, it seems, his reputation. Kasheron didn't preserve the barbarity of his brother, he created *Protectors*, not a *warrior* force. Our role is *not* to do battle on the plains beyond the trees, but to protect Allogrenia.'

'You know your own purposes, and it would be arrogant of me, a stranger, to dispute them,' said Caledon carefully. 'But this I would ask: is Allogrenia best protected by repulsing attacks that breach the trees, or by stopping these attacks before they can occur?'

'Kira left to seek help from our northern kin for this very purpose, a quest you have now curtailed,' said Kest.

'Postponed,' said Caledon. 'I understand your anger, Commander, but as I've explained to Clanleader Miken, Kira

would not have survived the journey across the Sarsalin, and she *must* survive!

‘Because you desire her?’ demanded Kest angrily.

Caledon ignored the gibe. ‘Kira’s driven by many things, but her own best interest isn’t one of them. For her sake, she needs to stay in Maraschin. When I don’t return in the time I pledged, Prince Adris *will* take her north, but she’ll go in safety,’ said Caledon.

‘But you think it will make no difference – that the Terak won’t recognise or acknowledge the link?’ said Miken.

‘No. All Kira will get in Sarnia is insults.’

‘Has Kira ordered Protectors to leave Allogrenia?’ asked Kest.

‘No, she’s requested volunteers.’

Kest and Miken looked at each other in silence. This rang true. Kira would not force men to come.

‘Requested in speech or in writing?’ pursued Kest.

‘In speech. Her request was reluctant, Commander, as you might well understand. Kira made it only because she realised that the alternative might be the loss of *all* of her people.

‘Who has ultimate command of the Protectors, Commander? You or Kira?’ asked Caledon.

‘I don’t know. It’s only been tested once, with disastrous results,’ said Kest, uncomfortable.

‘As Kira is absent, would control of the Bough now be yours as well?’ pursued Caledon.

‘I’m not a Healer and I doubt the council would allow me to act as the Tremen Leader, even were I inclined to try – which I’m not,’ said Kest.

‘Do you have laws prohibiting your people from leaving Allogrenia?’

‘Not once their Protector training is complete,’ said Miken. ‘They’re under Kest’s authority during that time, but afterwards men are held by clan-tie, or bondmate, or love of the forest.’

‘Or by a tradition of staying,’ said Caledon.

‘How many volunteers do you envisage?’ asked Kest.

‘I need one hundred and fifty trained fighting men, Commander, whose love of those in the forest is such that they’ll risk their lives for them. Kira refused to *order* men to leave, so they must be men who are willing to fight alongside others, such as the Tain, who love the same things they do – a life without fear of sword-death for themselves and their kin.’

‘A hundred and fifty,’ breathed Miken.

‘Kira tells me there are about a thousand Tremen in Allogrenia,’ said Caledon. ‘By my estimation, one hundred and fifty would still leave you with enough of a force to protect the remaining people.’

‘Barely,’ retorted Kest.

‘The fighting won’t be in Allogrenia, unless we fail in the battles beyond the trees. If that happens, we’re lost in any case,’ said Caledon.

‘*You* won’t be lost. Talliel’s a long way west,’ said Kest.

‘If the Shargh destroy the southern populations *and* the northern, they’re unlikely to stop at the Silvercades.’

‘Surely there aren’t enough Shargh to conquer everywhere,’ said Kest.

‘There are many small peoples who are *excal* – neither kin-linked nor treated, who will join the Shargh if the alternative is death. Others will join because they share the Shargh’s murderous ambitions, which is how the Terak Kirillian came into being, and why *they* were victorious – last time.’

‘And why Kasheran brought our forebears here,’ said Miken.

‘Yes, a break that all but turned the northern victory into defeat,’ said Caledon. ‘Hence the bitterness that lingers there and, if I may say so, here as well.’

25

Miken understood the councillors' reactions: joy at the news of Kira's survival, dismay at Caledon's description of the Shargh's intent, indignation at the possibility of the Terak denying them aid, and astonished anger at his request for men. Their reactions mirrored his own and Kest's, though he and the Commander had since had time to grow used to what Caledon said.

After Caledon had completed his address, he readied himself to go with Pekrash. The Protector Leader was to outline to him a little about the systems of Protector training. Kest would join them later, when the Clancouncil had ended, to convey the councillors' decision.

As soon as the longhouse door closed behind Caledon, the room erupted in a storm of debate, and such was the din it was some time before Kest was able to respond to individual questions. Miken moved round the table, refilling cups with thornyflower tea, regretting it wasn't withyweed ale. Miken felt in need of an ale, several in fact, the news being discussed no more palatable than when he'd first heard it.

Berendash denied any of it was true, Ketten and Sanden looked bewildered, and Tenedren kept repeating questions that had already been answered. Both Marren and Kemrick remained silent, as did Dakresh. Miken was surprised at Dakresh's reaction. He had expected the elderly Sherclan leader to be the most strident in his denunciation of Caledon's proposal, but he looked frail, his usual cantankerousness missing.

Losing his son had dealt Dakresh a terrible blow and Miken thought of Tresen, feeling relief rather than dread. Even if the council agreed to Kira's request for volunteers, Tresen wouldn't be free to go as he hadn't completed his Protector training.

'What think you, Miken?' asked Kemrick, startling Miken from his reverie.

'I've had time to consider what Caledon's said, and to discuss it with Commander Kest. When Caledon first spoke of these things, I must admit that my first impulse was to deny it. What need do we have, I asked myself, to send our men to their deaths? What concern is it of ours what happens to the Tain, and to other peoples beyond Allogrenia?

'The trees shelter us, the Shargh attacks have stopped, and Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan is safe. She will travel on to Sarnia, under the protection of a Tain patrol, bring our barbaric kin south, and their swords will convince the Shargh to withdraw. Then Tremen life will go on as it has for countless seasons . . .'

'And now that you've had time to consider?' prompted Kemrick.

'I agree with Commander Kest that Caledon mightn't be telling us everything he knows. But I think the thrust of what he says rings true. If it *is* true, our choices are simple. We can remain here, going on as we always have, and hope the Shargh are not victorious in the fighting outside. Or we can remain here and prepare for a triumphant enemy whose lands lie only two days

from our north-eastern border. In that situation, there will be no one left outside who is able, *or willing*, to help us, and we will live or die by the valour of our swords alone.

‘Our third choice is to comply with the request for volunteers from our Leader. According to Caledon, Kira has yet to go north but, if he speaks truthfully, Kira’s going north will make no difference to our predicament, for he suspects the Terak Kirillian will deny the link and no help will be given.

‘If help is to come, it will come from the Tain, but it must be paid for. If they are to spill their blood in our defence, we must spill ours in theirs.’

‘Kasheron wouldn’t be resting easy ’neath the ’green if he could hear such talk,’ muttered Dakresh.

‘None of those whose voices are heard in the whisper of leaves would,’ said Kemrick, ‘but I fear our long peace is at an end. I, like Clanleader Miken, think the stranger speaks the truth.’

‘One hundred and fifty men. How many would that leave for the more immediate protection of the longhouses?’ Marren asked Kest.

‘About three patrols, if some of the older men are willing to come back into Protecting.’

‘Would that be enough?’ asked Marren.

‘Only if the fighting remained outside the forest. If the previous scale of attacks resumed, we could lose a whole patrol in a single attack.’

‘There might not be one hundred and fifty men who would choose to leave, in any case,’ said Kemrick.

‘That we won’t know unless we ask,’ said Miken, rising and addressing the council formally. ‘Do we as a council agree to return to our longhouses and ask for the names of those who might go voluntarily? There can be no coercion, simply a truthful retelling of what we’ve heard at this council.’

‘Given the facts, I don’t feel we have a lot of choice. What think others?’ asked Kemrick.

There was a general mutter of agreement.

‘Can I suggest we meet again for a special council in seven days? It will give time for proper discussions to take place at the longhouses,’ said Kemrick.

Again the voices rose in agreement.

‘Seven days then, councillors,’ said Kemrick, and ended the council.

That night, Miken lay with Tenerini soft and warm in his arms, thoughts of the next council preventing sleep. If Tremem men died outside the shelter of the alwaysgreens, their bodies would remain in the alien landscapes of mountains or plains, their voices never to be heard in the whisper of leaves.

‘You should sleep,’ said Tenerini, stroking his face.

‘I wonder if there’s some other way open to us I’ve not considered,’ said Miken.

‘You’re only one of eight and you told me there was a long discussion. Marren’s no fool, nor is Kemrick. If they agreed with you, you must be right.’

Being right wouldn’t stop blood staining his hands, thought Miken, nor absolve any of them from their betrayal of Kasherom’s ideals. What they were contemplating was exactly what Kasherom had spent the strength of his seasons denying, the creation of Allogrenia costing him and his folk everything. Now it seemed Allogrenia could only survive through the very thing he’d renounced. And it mightn’t survive even if victory were won beyond the trees.

‘Tell me what you think,’ said Tenerini.

‘I don’t want to darken your days as well,’ said Miken, placing his hand over hers.

Tenerini perched up on her elbow, her eyes glimmering in the faint wash of moonlight. ‘I can bear ill news better than you holding yourself from me.’

'I would never do that,' said Miken, kissing her.

'Tell me,' she said softly.

'It's hard to imagine anyone who's fathered a child will choose to leave, there's too much holding them here. *If* men volunteer, it will be the young.'

'And?'

'It's possible none will return, and even if half return, the loss of seventy or so men who will never father even a single child, might be the ending of Allogrenia.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Tenerini in a small voice.

'I don't think the council has either. It's only come to *me* this evening.'

'Maybe . . . maybe in that case, our women will follow Kira's lead,' murmured Tenerini.

'What mean you?'

'Kira left the forest and met this man Caledon, and now she may well bond with him. If we treaty with the people called the Tain, and if our men fight together, then maybe in the end our young women will find bondmates among *them*.'

It scarcely seemed possible that young Tremen women could seek bondmates outside Allogrenia, but if Kira *did* bond with Caledon, she'd prove it was. Tremen women might leave, or strangers arrive – and settle. The thought did nothing to make sleep come and the days that followed only increased his fears.

On the night before the next Clancouncil, Kest collected the lists of volunteers from the Warens and took them to the Kashclan longhouse. Paper had been set in one of the training rooms, so that men could record their name and clan away from the gaze of others, and it was only when Kest gathered them that the clan numbers were known. Miken had a jug of ale waiting, and roasted rednuts, and he served Kest as the Commander set down the eight piles.

'One hundred and forty-two,' said Kest. 'Thirty-one from Morclan, nineteen from Sherclan, fourteen from Tarclan, eighteen

from Barclan, fifteen from Sarclan, twenty from Kenclan, nineteen from Renclan, and six from Kashclan – including your son.’

Miken’s hand jerked, spilling the ale. ‘But he *knows* he can’t go! He knows only those who’ve finished Protector training can go.’

‘He volunteers as patrol Healer,’ said Kest. ‘No other Healers have, and *at least* one’s going to be needed. There’s no Protector Leaders either, so no Commander. I’m willing to go, but that means someone else will have to assume command of the remaining Protectors.’

‘You command the Protectors of Allogrenia and, if worse comes to worst, will lead our last defence. *Your* role at least is clear.’

‘But not Tresen’s,’ said Kest, his eyes sympathetic.

Miken sighed. ‘Tresen wants back what’s been stolen from him: the life he had with Kira and Kandor. Kandor’s dead, but Kira lives. You know that’s how he came upon Caledon, don’t you? He went right to the Renclan Sentinel looking for Kira’s body.’

‘He wants to be away from me, too. It’s unusual – Protector training is normally something young men look forward to – a time of testing and growing away from their longhouses, and I *could* make Tresen stay here and complete his training. But the men who leave will have need of him; in fact, one hundred and forty-two fighting men will have need of *more* than one Healer,’ said Kest.

‘I fear that all the Healers we have won’t be enough for what’s to come,’ said Miken, his face grave.

26

Caledon spent the time of waiting either at the longhouses or in travel between them. The clans were eager to offer hospitality – keen to meet a stranger from beyond the forest – and it had given him the opportunity to talk with the men who were tempted by what lay beyond the trees, and for him to gain a deeper understanding of how the forest sustained the Tremen. He also sought out more information about Kira, adept at turning conversations in that direction, and learning much of her growing and of the desperate days after the attacks began. By the eve of the second Clancouncil, he felt confident that when the fighting was over with, and he turned west for Talliel, he had the knowing to persuade Kira to go with him.

The Clancouncil was brief and finished by midday, Caledon relieved but not surprised by the number of young men who'd volunteered. Despite the Tremen being a closed community with strong bonds holding the young to their longhouses, they shared the same restless urge to see what lay beyond their boundaries as other young men he'd encountered.

He pondered these things as he made his way to the Warens for a meeting with Kest and Miken, and passed through the charred ground in the centre of the Arborean. It seemed a potent symbol of what Kira had left to save.

Caledon and Kest's meeting was surprisingly harmonious given how prickly their earlier meetings had been, and if there were any antagonism present, it came from Miken because of his concern for Tresen. Kest and Caledon discussed the volunteers' training, how they were to cross the Dendora and the Azurcades and be supplied with food, and what they could expect when they reached Maraschin. Pekrash was to lead the force. How the injured were to be cared for was discussed at length, Caledon keen for a healing place to be established near Allogrenia's northern boundary.

'As close to as can be defended,' said Caledon, 'and I think it would be worth considering a more formal training process for your Healers. The Tain have major physicks – Healers – who deal with the most serious injuries and illnesses, but they also have lesser physicks, who bathe wounds, change dressings and watch the ill.'

'Our Healers don't differentiate between greater and lesser healing,' said Miken. 'Even after the Bough was destroyed, when the wounded were many, Kira and Tresen did all these things, with Arlen, Paterek and Werem learning from them. Kasheron didn't establish Allogrenia for healing to be doled out by the less skilled.'

'I think the idea has merit,' said Kest.

'That's because you command the Warens and not the Bough,' said Miken tartly.

'It may be, but I remember Kira taking a herb that could have killed her, so that she might keep healing when she was exhausted,' said Kest.

Miken made no reply.

‘Kira’s gone, and Tresen’s to follow, which leaves us with Brem, Werem, Arlen and Paterek, and one of them may yet choose to go with Tresen,’ continued Kest. ‘In the past, we could afford to let those with healing interests drift to Kashclan or the Bough, acquiring their skills over many seasons. We no longer have enough Healers, *or* enough time, for that to happen. With respect, Clanleader, to remain strong, healing might have to look to the methods of the Warens.’

‘What mean you?’ demanded Miken.

‘Call in all those who have *any* interest, or skill in healing: the women who assist in childbirth, those who sit by the old in their last days, those who cared for wounded after they’d left the Warens but before they were hale again. Bring them to Kashclan, or the Warens, or wherever a Haelen is to be established. Train them, day after day, from dawn to dusk. Hone their skills in gathering and herbal preparations, in stitching and salving.’

‘Knowledge of gathering – the location and harvest of herbs – is not like a sword skill that can be taught over a few nights. Healers spend most of their growing learning such things,’ said Miken. ‘But you’re right, Commander,’ he went on. ‘Things have changed, and so must we if we are to save *anything* that Kasheron gave his life to establish.’

Caledon felt an enormous sense of relief. The Tremen existence had been built on a rejection of the ways outside, *of the north*, and they’d lived in isolation for uncounted seasons, yet unlike King Beris they carried the seeds of what had made the north powerful: a willingness to face and *deal* with adversity. Despite their Healer ways, the Tremen had a lot in common with their Terak kin.

‘With your permission, I’ll remain in Allogrenia for another moon quarter, to build my strength,’ said Caledon. ‘I have knowing of the ways of both the Tain, and the Terak Kirillian, as well as of the Shargh. This knowing I can give you. When I do leave,

I should be well enough to journey quickly, and if the stars smile upon me will reach the Tain city of Maraschin within eighteen days. I'll send guides back then, to aid your men's crossing of the Azurcades.'

'And prepare Kira for the fact that her people have taken up the ways of the Terak,' added Miken.

'If my understanding is correct, Commander Kest and his men have already killed to save your people,' said Caledon evenly.

'And so the sword is to be proven mightier than healing,' said Miken.

'If things go well, the sword will *preserve* healing,' said Caledon, rising. 'Isn't that why Kira left?'

'I've asked for the volunteers to meet in the second training room,' Kest said quickly. 'We may as well begin their preparation now.'

'By all means,' said Caledon.

As their footsteps echoed away, Miken remained. What Caledon said was true, but no more palatable for its veracity. The terrible fact remained that there would be a lot of death in the saving of healing.

The days passed and the time of training drew to an end, with Caledon pleasantly surprised at the skill level of the Protectors. As the day of his departure grew closer, he asked Miken to show him more of the Tremem Writings. The store Miken took him to proved to be a testament to the tradition of meticulous record-keeping Caledon had observed in Sarnia. Here, Kasheron's followers had even developed a new sort of paper to continue the legacy.

'Commander Kest tells me the Protectors have learned much from your tutelage,' said Miken as they left the store.

'My task hasn't been hard,' replied Caledon.

'Do you still plan to set out in three days?'

'Yes. My leg's well mended, and my arm no longer pains me,

thanks to Tresen. If all goes well, I'll be back in Maraschin five days after the new moon. I'll alert Prince Adris to the imminent arrival of Commander Pekrash and the volunteers, and he will send men to guide and guard their journey over the Azurcades.'

They walked for a time in silence, Caledon's thoughts going to Kira again. By the time he returned to Maraschin, it would be almost a whole moon later than he'd promised her. His heart hoped she was still in Maraschin, but his head told him that Adris would have sent her north with an escort by now.

'What think you of Pekrash?' asked Miken.

'He's very able,' said Caledon, bringing his attention back to Miken. 'It was fortunate he volunteered, *and* the Healer Arlen. They will help ensure the safety of those who leave.'

'If such a thing is possible,' said Miken.

27

‘Chief Arkendrin!’

The downward stroke of Arkendrin’s dagger halted abruptly and he jerked round.

‘If there’s no proof its eyes are gold, the Chief-mother might say it still lives,’ said Irdodun, his voice anxious. ‘She might argue we’ve brought some other treeman back to the Grounds.’

‘My word’s proof!’ said Arkendrin, raising the dagger above the loathsome creature again.

‘But if our people *see* the unnaturalness of the thing you’ve captured, they’ll understand more *fully* your gift to them. Their gratitude, *and* loyalty, will be greater,’ said Irdodun.

Arkendrin’s knuckles whitened on the dagger. ‘It’s seen too many sunsets, spread its poisons too far. It’ll see no more!’

‘Blindfold it,’ said Irdodun, still nervous. ‘Take it to the Grounds blindfolded and then reveal it to our people, in all its filth, the bane the Last Teller foresaw. Then destroy it in *front* of them!’

Arkendrin considered Irdodun’s words awhile, then he

released the hated creature's hair, letting its head loll forward. 'Bind its eyes, and its mouth and hands. We go now, as swiftly as the horses will take us.'

'The quickest route is straight over the Braghans on foot,' put in Orfedren. 'The Ashmiri are agreeable to us loosing their horses when we have no more need of them. Chief Uthlin says Ashmiri horses seek out their own and will return.'

'Shargh don't enter the Sky Chief's realm except by death,' growled Arkendrin, sheathing his dagger and heaving on his pack. 'We return the way we came.'

'It was a journey of many days, Chief Arkendrin,' said Orfedren, aghast. 'It will be longer if the horses must bear the creature as well. There'll be risk of attack. You've told us the creature's important, and we know it's dwelt with the Tain. They'll seek it.'

'I don't fear the Tain, even if the Weshargh do!' Arkendrin shouted, hands on hips. 'Those that don't cower in the grass run like fanchon.'

'Not the blue-capes,' said the second Weshargh.

Arkendrin glared at him and Irdodun took a careful step back. 'Weshargh might run before goatherds, but not Shargh! I'm the Shargh Chief! It's *my* veins that carry the blood of the Mouth of the Last Teller, *and* the words gifted him by the Sky Chiefs. I'll not besmirch the Sky Chiefs' lands to save *my* skin!'

The second Weshargh started forward but Orfedren raised a warning hand, his gaze fixed on Arkendrin.

'We've followed different ways since the cursed Northeners robbed us of our lands, but soon Shargh, Weshargh and Soushargh will fight as one. Until then, I wish you a safe journey to your Grounds, Chief Arkendrin,' said Orfedren, palming his forehead. Then, nodding to Irdodun, Orthaken and Ermashin waiting in silence, he and the second Weshargh moved swiftly away into the trees.

*

Palansa stood outside her sorchas, too troubled to rest. Rumour held that the Weshargh Chief was returning and that Irdodun's blood-ties prepared a feast in his honour. If it were true, Arkendrin must be close too. The braggings of those on the lower slope said that he intended to meet with the Weshargh Chief and the Soushargh he'd bring with him, to plan how to retake the north.

Since Arkendrin had gone, Palansa had been free to wander along the Thanawah to collect reeds for baskets, and to let Ersalan and Orsron swat at each other among the slitweed while she relaxed with Sansula. But as the days passed, anxiety had edged back.

There was movement beyond the stone-trees and Palansa stiffened as warriors emerged from the mist. Then the grass crunched behind her and she whirled, to see Ormadon, his eyes fixed on the same point.

'Six leave and two return,' he said.

'Do you think –' began Palansa, hopefully.

'Arkendrin has a gift for losing the lives of those around him, not his own.'

Time seemed to crawl by, the sun edging higher, Shargh emerging from the sorchas on the lower slope, yawning and stretching.

'They're the Weshargh who left with Arkendrin,' said Ormadon, still staring over the Grounds.

'But why have they come back alone?' asked Palansa, shading her eyes. Perhaps they were the only survivors of an attack beyond the Braghans; perhaps Arkendrin was even now marwing-pickings . . .

'Stay here Chief-wife,' said Ormadon, then strode off.

Ersalan grizzled, and Palansa went into the sorchas, lifted him from his sling, and brought him outside to suckle. Usually Ersalan pummelled her breast, but he was quiet and intent now, as if he knew her thoughts. The notion of Arkendrin returning made her ill.

‘He’ll not have you, or me!’ said Palansa fiercely. But even as she said it, hopelessness broke over her again. The Weshargh or Soushargh wouldn’t shelter her, nor would the Ashmiri. To the south-west lay the forest people whose leaders Erboran had slain, and beyond the Braghans were others the Weshargh harried and killed. Hatred closed in about her like a ring, and those within it were more dangerous than those outside.

The sorcha flap stirred and Tarkenda came out. She’d slept badly, her dreams plagued by images akin to visions.

‘What’s happened?’ she asked, noting Palansa’s face.

‘The Weshargh have come back.’

‘Without Arkendrin?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ormadon knows?’

‘He seeks news of him,’ said Palansa.

Tarkenda looked old, the lines on her face deeply etched, but her uncompromising mouth, and those sturdy hands planted on her hips, brought Palansa comfort.

Ormadon appeared on the slope below and hurried up towards them, his agitation plain. ‘Arkendrin’s captured the gold-eyed creature,’ he panted. ‘He’s bringing her back to kill.’

Although it neared evening, Tarkenda watched as Palansa continued to pace up and down the sorcha.

‘You’ll lose your milk if you keep this up,’ warned Tarkenda.

‘What difference will it make? He’ll kill the creature, then he’ll kill Ersalan.’

‘I’ve not seen that happen,’ said Tarkenda.

‘You’ve had more visions?’ asked Palansa.

‘I’ve had dreams.’

‘And?’ demanded Palansa.

‘I’ve seen the gold-eyed creature here, and I’ve seen death. But whose death is hidden from me.’

‘Arkendrin will have to kill me first if he’s to injure Ersalan, and I’ll spill his blood along with mine,’ said Palansa, gripping the dagger under her dress.

‘You’re a fool if you believe that,’ said Tarkenda, seizing Palansa’s arm to still her pacing. ‘If we are to survive this, to survive *him*, it won’t be with *his* weapons! How many times have you thrust a flatsword through a man’s heart, Palansa? Cut his throat? *Wanted* to kill?’

‘Then what are we to do?’ cried Palansa. ‘There’s nowhere I can go! Nowhere I can hide! Nothing I can do to save Ersalan!’

‘Erboran would be shamed to hear you speak so!’ hissed Tarkenda. ‘Erboran joined with you because you were worthy of the highest sorchá, to bear his son, to *fight* for his son!’

‘But you said we can’t use flatswords . . .’

‘We use women’s weapons, women’s ways! The Sky Chiefs have granted us time and we must honour the gift.’

‘But how long do we have?’ cried Palansa.

‘The Weshargh say Arkendrin brings the creature round the Braghans. The Weshargh came over the mountains, a shorter route. We have, I guess, four or five more days.’

‘And then?’

‘From what the lower slope tells, the Weshargh Chief isn’t interested in the creature. He’s only interested in taking our warriors north.’

‘Arkendrin will kill Ersalan before he goes,’ said Palansa, slumping onto a stool.

‘To kill a babe requires neither courage nor strength. Even killing the creature is no test of a true Chief. If Arkendrin is to be the first second-born Chief of the Shargh, he must prove his worth by taking back the northern lands.’

‘Arkendrin journeys in the lands of those the Weshargh have killed. Perhaps he’ll be attacked,’ said Palansa hopefully.

‘Neither dreams nor visions show me anything of it. We must plan for Arkendrin’s arrival with the gold-eyed creature, and all that follows,’ said Tarkenda.

‘But we can still offer shillyflower and squaziseed to the Sky Chiefs?’ asked Palansa. ‘We can still beg for their favour?’

‘Yes,’ said Tarkenda. ‘We can still do that.’

28

For a long time Kira was blind, her mind empty of thought and feeling. Then the movement of the horse drew her back, making her conscious of its odour of dust and sweat. She became aware that the Shargh went in silence, and of the gag. Abruptly the only thing that mattered was getting more air. Kira worked her jaws up and down with single-minded ferocity, until the cloth slid between her lips. Then she sucked in air around the edges, the dullness in her head replaced with terror.

How long before they killed her? Part of her argued that if they wanted to kill her, they wouldn't have bothered blindfolding, gagging and putting her on a horse, but another part insisted that at any moment they'd begin their grisly task. Time went on and the terror ebbed enough for her to think more clearly. They were obviously taking her somewhere, whether to imprison or kill her, Kira didn't know.

She knew from Caledon that the Shargh didn't cross mountains, so they must be taking her round the western flank of the Azurcades. If so, they would pass The Westlans, and possibly Tain

watch-walks. It was probably why she'd been gagged. Hope flared, then guttered. The Tain fought *off* Shargh attacks, they didn't *instigate* them, nor did they have any interest in her return. Only Adris would search for her, because of his friendship with Caledon. But Adris didn't know she was gone.

The Shargh went without pause and Kira's hunger and thirst grew. She hadn't eaten or drunk anything since mid-morning of the previous day. There was food and water in her pack, which was still on her back, but unreachable.

Kira didn't know how far horses could travel without rest. On the first gathering expedition, Ather had insisted the horses drink at the spring and be rested while the men ate, but the Shargh didn't stop to rest and water the horses, instead refreshing themselves noisily as they rode. Kira became obsessed with the thought of water: the feel of it on her lips, the coolness in her mouth, the slide of it down her throat. Her craving grew until it filled every sense, even obliterating her fear of knife-death.

Overcome with weariness, she slumped forward, but then a searing blow caught her. Her scream was silenced by the gag as she jerked, then a second blow sounded and the horse lurched forward. The Shargh beat her to keep her wakeful, and the horses to keep them moving.

Her back throbbed from the blow, and then, blessedly, they came to a halt. Kira's thoughts swung to water again, but what followed was a violent argument. Kira cringed. She had no idea which of the four Shargh spoke first, but the one who'd held the knife to her eyes spoke last, and there was no mistaking the threat of his words, nor the tingling tension that followed.

They started off again, and Kira smelt the grasses of the plain, then heard the sound of beating. The horses broke into a trot, then a gallop, Kira so exhausted that she could scarcely stay mounted. Desperately she groped around behind her, her bound hands finding the saddle-strap. Then a shout sounded from afar, as if the

Shargh had separated. An urgent exchange broke out between her captors, then another shout sounded, closer this time. There was a torrent of beating and the horses picked up pace. Kira gripped as best she could, the sound of a different rhythm of hoofbeats clear above the staccato of the Ashmiri horses.

It must be the King's Guard! But then hope turned to horror as the air near her face whined. She wasn't to die by a Shargh knife after all, but by a Tain arrow! The Guard were so close now that she could hear the twang of arrows being released.

A Shargh screamed, and there was a thump, then one of the horses shrieked in pain and cannoned into hers. Her mount crashed sideways, throwing Kira over its shoulder and smashing the air from her lungs. A jumble of hoofbeats sounded to her right, with more shouts and thumps, and the squeal of swords clashing. Kira curled into a shaking ball, expecting an arrow to tear into her any moment.

A rider thumped to the ground near her and Kira cowered as a sword rasped free.

'By Meros,' the man muttered in Tremen, wrenching her upright. 'Shargh on Ashmiri horses *and* with a prisoner.'

He'd spoken Tremen! No, he'd spoken Terak! realised Kira in amazement.

Her bindings were cut, the blindfold yanked off, then the gag, but she kept her head down. Their use of Terak meant they must be Terak Kutan, but she daren't risk finding out that they loathed gold eyes too. She felt dizzy, as if she'd been too greedy for air, and shivered despite not being cold. The man holding her tightened his grip.

'Here, give me your waterskin, Slivkash; he's all but done in.'

The man lowered her to the ground and brought the waterskin to her lips. Kira gulped down the water with eyes shut, but all too soon it was taken away.

‘That’s enough for now, or you’ll be heaving your guts out on the grass,’ the man said in Onespeak. ‘You can have some more later,’ he added, hauling her upright again.

‘Slivkash, bring Frost. The Tain can go in front of you, as you’re naught but a sapling. Mind he doesn’t fall now.’

‘Yes, Commander Marin.’

The pale legs of a horse appeared in Kira’s line of vision and strong arms swung her upward, more hands depositing her in front of the rider. His arms came round her and she gasped as he pressed against her pack.

‘Are you hurt?’ he asked in Onespeak, with genuine concern.

Kira shook her head, desperate to be away from where more Shargh might lurk. Orders were shouted, then they sped off over the plain.

Tierken remained staring at Commander Marin long after he had fallen silent. He should have heard report of a routine scouting expedition, but instead Marin told of Shargh riding Ashmiri horses with a Tain troopsman as a prisoner. These things were extraordinary and neither of them augured well. The Shargh didn’t come north of the Azurcades, nor did they ride, nor did they burden themselves with captives.

‘Are you *sure* they weren’t Ashmiri,’ he asked, but knew it wasn’t possible.

Marin shook his head. ‘Shall I get Slivkash to bring the Tain to the fire?’ he asked. ‘The Tain might be able to offer explanation.’

‘Best keep him separate. Get Jarvid to set another fire and bring some cotzee and jackin,’ said Tierken, moving off.

When Tierken arrived, Slivkash stood stiffly to attention, but the Tain shook, and could barely stand at all. Slivkash’s grip on his arm was all that kept him upright. Jarvid had dug a fire-hole and was busy transferring coals from the cooking fire into it.

‘Has he said how he came to be captured?’ Tierken asked Slivkash.

‘No, Feailner. He hasn’t spoken at all.’

The Tain looked young for a trooper, or perhaps it was just that he was slightly built. His head hung forward, a tangle of hair hiding his face. He still wore his pack, Tierken noted with surprise. He’d have thought it would be the first thing the Shargh would’ve taken.

‘You’re now under Terak Kirillian protection,’ he said slowly in Onespeak.

There wasn’t even a flicker to show the Tain had heard him.

‘Did you check him for injuries?’ Tierken asked Slivkash.

‘No, Feailner.’

Jarvid had finished his fire-building and Tierken gestured for Slivkash to lower the Tain beside it. The small fire showed the Tain’s hair to be fair but still he didn’t look up and Tierken quelled his impatience. The man had been blindfolded, gagged and bound. Irid only knew what else had been done to him.

The Tain chafed his hands, probably to get the blood flowing again. There were deep rope burns on his wrists, now clear in the firelight. He had beautiful, fine-boned hands, and Tierken stiffened. Then he caught the Tain’s chin and forced his face to the firelight. The Tain clamped his eyes shut and cowered away, but Tierken had seen enough.

‘Are the Tain so short of men they send their women on patrol?’ he demanded, unsettled. What were the odds of her looking like him? Surely it was a trick of the light. She was fair, and he was dark – but maybe the Tain had Kessomi blood. He had half a mind to force her face to the light again, but she had hunched into a ball, hands gripped round her knees, shivering giving way to violent shaking.

Had the Shargh taken her for rape? Was that why she hid her face from him, recoiled from his touch, and shook like a tree

in a gale? Tierken recalled how when Laryia crashed through the Kristlin ice, the water had been freezing, but it had been shock that caused her to shake so violently she could scarcely stand. The woman shook like that now.

Tierken slipped her pack off, half expecting her to cringe away from him, but she was beyond noticing. Tain troopsmen carried sleeping-sheets like the Terak did, and he searched through her pack till he found hers. It was buried under pots and pouches of pastes and herbs. A Kessomi resemblance *and* a Kessomi Healer's kit! Still, the Tain had physicks who travelled with patrols; she was likely one of those.

Flicking the sheet open, Tierken lifted her onto it and wrapped it round her snugly, then stood with hands on hips, surveying her. He'd spent three hard seasons burying his Kessomi blood, and was loath to undo his efforts now, but her breathing was harsh and her teeth rattled. He settled on the ground with his back to his men, undid his jacket and shirt, and held her as Eris had held Laryia after the accident at the Kristlin, with her head resting against his heart.

Gradually the shaking lessened, and Tierken thought of what his grandmother had said as she'd held Laryia.

The first sound a babe hears is the beat of its mother's heart. Never underestimate the power of the heart, Tierken.

It was a Kessomi warning to a man who was to become the Terak Feailner.

After a time Tierken shifted his position so that more of the light reached the woman's face. By Irid, she *did* look Kessomi, and eerily like him! His careful plans were unravelling like a derelict dwinhir nest. Come south and make 'accidental' contact with the Tain, preferably a troop, so that his greetings could be passed on to the Tain King. It was all that was left to him after seasons of silence under his uncle's rule.

Well, he'd made contact all right – with a Kessomi-like Tain

female physick who could almost be his twin. Was Irid in a jocular mood? Or perhaps, as Tierken now travelled the plains, Meros had taken charge of his fortunes. At least the woman slept now, only the occasional tremor passing through her. Tierken eased her back so she lay on the ground, making sure the sleeping-sheet was close about her.

He wondered again how badly the Shargh had hurt her. Two dead, Marin had said, and two fled. There'd be four dead if he came across them!

29

Kira woke from the nightmare with a choking cry. A knife had been slicing towards her eyes, and it took her several moments to reassure herself that it wasn't real and that the Shargh didn't have her anymore. She still felt shivery and clenched her hands to stop them shaking. Her rescuers had lit a fire beside her, and another near where the men slept. Beyond the men, a group of massive silver horses cropped the grass, knee deep in mist.

Pushing her sleeping-sheet open, Kira rose unsteadily, the pain in her back making her groan. She rummaged around in her pack searching for bruise-ease, finding the pot at last.

Voices came towards her and she made sure to keep her head down as two sets of boots came to a halt in front of her.

'I'm Tierken, the Terak Feailner,' one of them said in Onespeak. 'As I told you last night, you are now under the protection of the Terak Kirillian. You have nothing to fear from us.'

The Terak *Kirillian*, thought Kira in confusion. Yet he called himself a 'feailner'. She had never heard of them. They must be some sort of kin of the Terak Kutan. Would they hate her gold

eyes like the Shargh did? She had no idea, for she didn't know what prompted the Shargh's loathing. Kira straightened, but was careful to keep her gaze on the ground.

'I thank you,' she replied in Onespeak.

'This is Commander Marin. He led the men who rescued you,' the voice continued.

'I thank you,' she said again, this time in the direction of the other boots.

'She's no better than last night,' Tierken muttered in Terak.

Kira tightened her grip on the bruise-ease, not daring to show her understanding of his language in case she'd need it to escape them.

'We need to speak of how you came to be with the Shargh,' Tierken went on in Onespeak, 'and how we might return you to your people. Breakfast is cooking and we can eat as we speak.'

Kira saw them settle on the ground and followed suit. Then another pair of legs appeared and a plate of cooked meat and a cup of metz was placed next to her. She could hear Marin and Tierken eating and drinking, but found even the smell of the meat repellent.

'What's your name?' Tierken asked in Onespeak.

'Kira.'

'How did you come to be a prisoner of the Shargh?'

'I gathered herbs in the Thanaval,' she answered.

'Alone?' asked Tierken in surprise.

'With Tain troopsmen.'

'So the troopsmen were attacked?' said Tierken.

'By Shargh on the *wrong side* of the Azurcades, on *Ashmiri* horses,' said Marin in Terak.

'Were the troopsmen attacked?' repeated Tierken.

Kira racked her brains for how to respond. The troopsmen *were* attacked, but only because of her.

'Do me the courtesy of looking at me when I speak to you,' said Tierken, his voice irritated.

Kira forced herself to raise her head, but kept her gaze on the ground. If only she knew more about these people called the Terak Kirillian.

‘Look at me!’ ordered Tierken.

Kira clenched her teeth and raised her eyes to see a man with eyes as gold as her own. His shock was as great as hers, as was Marin’s. They all scrambled to their feet.

‘Get the men mounted,’ Tierken ordered Marin in Terak. ‘We’re leaving.’

‘North or south, Feailner?’ asked Marin, his voice hoarse.

‘North!’

The Commander looked at Tierken in surprise, but strode away, leaving Kira and Tierken alone.

‘Who are your people?’ he demanded.

‘The Tremen,’ said Kira, and could see from his face that her answer meant nothing to him.

‘Where do they dwell?’

‘In the southern forests.’ Again he looked blank.

‘Are there others in the forests with gold eyes?’ he asked.

‘No. Are there in your lands?’ she whispered.

‘No,’ said Tierken, glancing to Marin who had returned leading two horses and carrying a small metal box.

‘Eat,’ ordered Tierken.

‘I can’t eat meat,’ she said in Onespeak.

He scowled and tossed the meat onto the grass, and the cup of metz.

Marin bowed to Tierken and handed him the box, which had a wisp of smoke coming from it.

‘Guard it well, Feailner,’ said Marin.

‘With my life,’ said Tierken, and buckled the box into a pouch on his saddle, then mounted.

‘Patrolman Slivkash,’ he bawled.

The young patrolman urged his horse out of formation.

‘You are charged with the care of Kira, our guest from the southern forests. She’s to be kept safe, and,’ Tierken raised his voice to include the remainder of his men, ‘to be shown the courtesy a woman should expect when she travels with the Terak Kirillian.’

Then he turned to Marin. ‘We spend tonight at Hazlin Spring. I’ll await you there,’ he said.

‘You go alone? It’s a long ride, Feailner.’

‘Time to test the horses and our own strength,’ replied Tierken, then rode off, letting the big stallion have his head.

Kalos’s speed scoured away Tierken’s churn of emotions and his spirits lifted as he stared at the pale sky and washed-gold of the grasses. It was the sort of perfect day the Sarsalin offered in recompense for sleet-storms, snow-storms, dirt-storms, wolves and fanchon. Silverjacks bounded out of Kalos’s path and Tierken laughed as he urged Kalos to greater speed. The plain looked smooth but appearances were deceptive, the grasses hiding silverjack holes, grahen burrows and sometimes stone. A misplaced hoof could end the lives of both horse and rider, but Tierken was content to leave the timing of his death in Irid’s hands.

The sun climbed higher and eventually Kalos slowed, his shoulders dark with sweat. Tierken kept him moving though. It was a long way from where they’d camped on the edge of the Tain lands to Hazlin Spring, and his men wouldn’t reach the spring till dark.

Since becoming Feailner, Tierken’s aim had been to show his men all the lands that were theirs, and to bind them to each other, and to him. He’d succeeded on all counts but it had come at a cost, necessitating he spend more time on the Sarsalin than in the Domain, leaving Laryia lonely.

Tierken had decided this patrol would be different, coming directly south in seven days – the shortest time man and beast could bear – to let his men experience what their forebears had endured in their battles to establish peace and plenty. His men

were far behind him now. Kalos could continue at the same pace until stars clothed the sky, but the horses his men rode couldn't, and they'd be slowed by Slivkash's mount bearing two.

A *chance-flower*, his grandmother Eris would call the woman they'd found – something beautiful that appeared unlooked-for. It was an old Kessomi phrase, but apt. Tierken remembered sitting with Eris and Laryia on the shores of the Kristlin, when an ice-encrusted azurefly, perfect in every detail, drifted to the water's surface. Had the water been warmer, or the azurefly heavier, it would have sunk without a ripple, but it remained afloat, a bright globe of blue.

The woman was beautiful like a chance-flower. But how was he meant to feel – how did *anyone* feel – who saw themselves in another's face. And her eyes! Like a window opening into everything she felt! His had once been like that, but he'd spent endless time practising in front of a looking-glass until his emotions could no longer be read in them. She had no such skill, her vulnerability almost painful to look at.

Now, as Tierken surveyed the plain, he wondered whether Irid had guided his decision to come south, in some strange way preparing him for what was to come. *Shargh on Ashmiri horses north of the Azurcades*. The Ashmiri were treated to the Terak, but kin to the Shargh, and as a boy growing in Kessom studying the histories of what might one day be *his* lands, this had seemed problematic. In the event of fighting, would the Ashmiri aid those they'd sworn oaths to, or those they shared blood with?

A flicker of movement caught Tierken's eye and he looked up at the dwinhir. He used to climb high into the Torlands behind Kessom to watch the fledglings floundering in their woody nests. In retrospect they had been happy times, but all he could think of then was whether a messenger would ride from Sarnia to say that Seren carried a child or, after her death, that Darid had taken another wife. Either would have robbed him of the feailnership,

but his uncle had loved only once and, like the dwinhir, when his mate had been lost, he had not loved again.

His thoughts came back to the woman. The Shargh believed in auguries and omens, so it was possible they'd taken her for that reason, but why had the Tain *allowed* her to be taken? Did they lack the strength to protect even a single person?

30

They had been travelling for some time before Kira managed to impose any sort of order on her thoughts, such was her turmoil and confusion. She was away from the Shargh but with the Terak *Kirillian*, not the Terak Kutan. But, given the similarity in their names, and in their language to Tremen, the two must surely be kin to each other, *and* so to her. They were led by a man who called himself *Feailner*, but as he had authority over the men *and* the patrol Commander, it was unlikely he was a Healer. In that case, the title ‘Feailner’ must mean something different in the north.

To add to Kira’s discomfort and frustration, she had been given no time to assuage her hunger by getting the food from her pack. The only thing that made the ride bearable was Slivkash’s friendliness, and the fact that they went north. Slivkash was dark like the Feailner, and unshaven, fitting her image of the unkempt Terak Kutan, but that’s where the similarity ended. Apart from being mounted, the patrol was little different to a Protector patrol or a Tain watch-walk, the men talking as they rode of the women

who came, or refused to come, to their beds, the quality and price of ale, wagers on racing horses and the flight of birds, sore backsides and the wish for a comfortable rest. Perhaps the Terak *Kirillian* were a more civilised branch of the Terak Kutan.

‘Do you have a kin called the Terak Kutan?’ Kira asked Slivkash eventually.

‘There’s no people of that name north of the Azurcades. Where did you hear tell of them?’ asked Slivkash, his voice suddenly cold.

‘In the tales of my lands,’ said Kira, surprised by his answer and his coldness. ‘Maybe I’ve confused the name,’ she added, aware that she’d somehow offended him.

‘Most likely,’ said Slivkash. ‘We’re named after the great Leader, Terak, who carved out our lands and built the mighty city of Sarnia. Terak was helped by the Kirs and Illians, and in recognition of our aid, his people – who first came from Kessom – took the herding term of ‘feailner’, as well including our peoples’ names in theirs. I’m Kir, as is Wirinkash on our left flank and Derkash behind. The Feailner is quarter Kir, for his mother was half.

‘Commander Marin is Illian, as are Farian, Ralin and Arnil on the right flank. Ayled and Serden are Kessomi, and the remainder are Terak,’ he added, warming a little and seeming keen to remove Kira’s confusion.

So the Terak Kutan and the Terak Kirillian *must* be one and the same, realised Kira, pondering how and why the name had become altered. And the Terak had originally come from Kessom.

‘Where *is* Kessom?’ she asked, wishing she could dig out the map lying crumpled in the bottom of her pack. She knew she’d seen Kessom there.

‘In the mountains, a good day’s ride from Sarnia, *if* the weather’s fair,’ said Slivkash dourly. ‘And it usually isn’t,’ he added.

They continued steadily till it was near sunset, Slivkash lowering her to the ground and Kira pulling the dried fruit and

biscuit from her pack, and cramming it unceremoniously into her mouth.

‘We’ve only stopped for a moment, in case you’ve a need to be by yourself,’ said Slivkash.

‘To be by myself?’

‘We don’t usually have women travelling with us. The Feailner commands you be treated with courtesy.’

Beyond Slivkash, many of the men had dismounted to relieve themselves.

‘I thank you, Slivkash, but I have no need to “be by myself”, though if you do, I can wait over there.’

‘No! You’re to stay with me. I’m charged with your protection.’

The sun had slipped beneath the world’s shoulder and the sky was ablaze with stars before a horse whinnied and a fire could be seen glimmering ahead. Spicy smoke hung in the air. As they drew up, Marin shouted orders, and Slivkash set her down next to a man tending a pan of roasting meat. It was the Feailner.

‘Sit on the sleeping-sheet, Kira,’ he said in Onespeak.

Kira sat, glad of the warmth of the fire.

‘There’s a spring in the trees where the horses must drink, then be settled before the men eat. We have another early start on the morrow,’ he explained.

The sizzling meat reminded Kira of the cooking-stalls in Maraschin. If Caledon had returned he’d be frantic, whereas Adris would simply be furious that she’d evaded his prohibition. If only there was a way to send a message to Caledon that she was safe – if she *were* safe, she thought, shivering.

‘Have you got something warmer in your pack?’ he asked. ‘I’ve got a jacket you can wear, but it will be big on you.’

‘I have a jacket,’ said Kira, nonplussed by his courtesy. ‘I . . . I thank you, Feailner.’

‘You can call me Tierken,’ he said, intent on cooking.

Kira stared at him and her heart raced. By the ‘green! He looked like Kandor! She’d been so shocked by his gold eyes earlier, that she’d noticed nothing else. Her eyes devoured him, knowing that in a moment he’d look up and the illusion vanish. He repositioned the pan and glanced at her, and it was still Kandor’s face. Kira knew she should break her gaze, but her hunger was too great.

‘It’s strange to see your face on someone else, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘You look like my brother,’ she said in wonder.

‘Then your brother must look like you.’

Kira remembered the looking-glass in King’s Hall, but that image had been cold and lifeless. *This* face belonged to a living man, a Terak Kutan. *A Terak Kirillian*, she corrected. Her heart beat so fast it was hard to breathe, and she was unsure whether seeing Kandor’s face on another person was comforting, or akin to having an old wound torn open.

Tierken poured two mugs of cotzee and handed her one, and her hand trembled as she took it.

‘Are you sure you’re not cold?’ he asked.

Kira shook her head dumbly.

‘Is your brother younger or older than you?’ asked Tierken, busy with a second pan.

‘He was younger.’

Marin flapped his sleeping-sheet down, and settled on it, holding his hands to the fire.

‘A cold night, Feailner, and colder to come,’ he said cheerfully in Terak.

Kira sipped her drink and kept her gaze on the fire as Tierken poured another mug of cotzee.

‘How was the journey, Commander?’ asked Tierken in Terak.

‘The usual complaints about lack of comfort, lack of ale and lack of women,’ replied Marin.

‘And our guest?’

‘No complaints from her.’

‘And the horses?’

‘No complaints from them either,’ said Marin.

‘We’ll make Shally Spring tomorrow,’ said Tierken switching back to Onespeak. ‘It’s a shorter trip.’

‘But ridgeland,’ pointed out Marin, his eyes on the pan. ‘You’ve done well with the silverjack,’ he said, as Tierken handed him a plate of meat.

‘The benefit of trees. Traps set and sprung before sunset, silverjack roasted before moonrise,’ said Tierken, pulling a second pan from the fire, and turning back to Kira.

‘And for our guest who doesn’t eat meat, we have roasted nuts,’ he said, and emptied them onto a plate.

‘Nuts aren’t forbidden too, are they?’ he asked, when she said nothing.

‘No, they’re most welcome. Kashclan thanks the Terak Kirilian,’ said Kira out of habit.

Exhaustion gave her a deep, dreamless sleep and the next day the patrol had breakfasted and was ready to leave before the sun breached the horizon. It was icy, and Kira puffed on her hands and stamped her feet as Marin put coals from the fire into the metal box and presented it to Tierken. Both men used the same words as before and Kira realised it was a ritual. Again he rode ahead and the patrol followed at a slower pace.

Slivkash had told her that ‘feailner’ was a herding word, and suddenly everything made sense. Herders moved constantly and it would be more convenient to have fire readily available than to have to constantly strike it from flints. Thus, as Feailner, Tierken literally ‘took’ the fire, whereas the Tremem used the word to mean the taking of pain, which felt like being burned. A sense of wonder flowed through her as she contemplated whether Caledon’s belief

- that the stars intended particular things to happen - could possibly be true.

Here she was on the Sarsalin Plain, with a man of her long-lost kin, the Terak Kirillian, who shared her eyes and face and who was also called Feailner. He outranked Marin but perhaps his position was akin to Kest's. Kest served as a Protector Leader, when he was in sole command of a patrol, but he was also Protector Commander of all the Protectors and their Leaders.

Then an even more startling thought occurred to her. If Tierken were a quarter Kir, as Slivkash had said, his resemblance to her and Kandor could be explained if the rest of his blood was of Terak's line. If that were the case, he would actually be her kin, as much her blood as Tresen was. It seemed wildly improbable but she could think of no other explanation.

Kira was so overwhelmed by what was unfolding that she had to make a conscious effort to calm herself by concentrating on the land they passed. She had imagined that the Sarsalin would be flat and treeless, but it was apt to dip suddenly, revealing dense groves of trees, springs, outcrops of stone, or lush bogs. From one rise she saw dark animals grazing off to the west, but the patrol didn't deviate or slow.

'Ebis,' said Slivkash, over his shoulder. 'Ashmiri herd animals.'

The Shargh who had taken her had ridden Ashmiri horses, even though Ather had told her the Ashmiri were treated to the Tain. If the Ashmiri aided the Shargh in their attacks, Kira couldn't see any point in a treaty, unless treaties worked in some odd way she knew nothing about. Regardless, she was glad when they left the ebis far behind.

They stopped for a short while around midday, to eat maizen bread and to give her some time to 'be by herself', for which she was grateful. Slivkash briefly turned his back but remained nearby, despite the land being clear for many lengths on either side.

The smooth sweep of the plain gave way to a series of stony crests running east-west, and the plain's grasses thinned, interspersed with herbs. Kira scanned the ground excitedly, seeing serewort and redwort, silversalve, icemint, cinna and stitchweed. But, much to her frustration, Slivkash told her the patrol wouldn't be stopping till Shally Spring.

It was fully dark by the time they reached the spring, the patrol setting two fires. Kira sat with Slivkash and the other Kirs at one, and the other men sat with Tierken at theirs. Slivkash made polite conversation in Onespeak, but Kira barely listened, her thoughts taken up with the fact that the surrounding lands had herbs, and that her herbal supplies were dangerously low. Finally, when she could bear it no longer, she scrambled to her feet. Slivkash rose hastily and grabbed his bow and quiver.

'Do you wish time alone?' he asked.

Kira nodded, striding off towards the rise behind their camp.

'The trees are better,' said Slivkash, hurrying to keep pace.

'I prefer this way,' said Kira, puffing up the slope.

'No further,' ordered Slivkash, gripping her arm.

'Just over the other side, or I'll be seen. I'll be quick,' she added, disengaging herself.

Kira stopped a short way down the southern slope, waited until Slivkash turned his back, then scanned rapidly. The sheen of starlight revealed blotches of dark growth among the stones, the slope more kindly to herbs than the northward one. If she came before dawn, she could gather *and* return before she was missed.

Kira clambered back up to Slivkash, pausing as if to neaten her clothing, but using her vantage point to check the run of ridges. Then she heard voices.

'Men,' she hissed, clutching Slivkash without realising it.

'Herders, singing. Come.'

The swell of music ebbed, but before it died away, song broke out from close by, Slivkash's rich voice joining the melody. Kira

listened enthralled as singers slipped in and out, their voices weaving a song as pure as the starry air, until one by one each singer fell silent, Slivkash's resonant voice stretching out in a last, haunting note. Faint in the east, other voices began.

'The song lives on,' murmured Kira, in wonder.

'It's a good place for lay-links – the valleys carry the music like river-wash,' said Slivkash, helping her down the last of the way.

'You sing so beautifully,' said Kira, and saw the flash of Slivkash's teeth as he smiled.

31

It was pitch black and bitterly cold when Kira slipped from her sleeping-sheet close to dawn, pulled on her jacket and gathering-sling – which she'd laid ready – and crept away. Kira had no idea if Tierken set guards, but if he did, she'd pretend she needed some 'time alone'.

She made her way up the first ridge, down the other side, and up the next. If she went to the fourth or fifth ridge, she could gather her way back along the southern faces as dawn approached.

After the fifth rise Kira turned west, straining into the darkness and sifting the air for scents. She gathered annin, silver-salve and icemint, then recrossed the ridge as the darkness began to fade. Sickleseed and a great patch of morning-bright loomed ahead, and sorren! Kira harvested quickly, relieved to have replenished her supply of the purifier.

Dawn was close, but further west she could see a stand of bruise-ease. Kira's sickle flashed swiftly, but by the time she'd harvested it was too late to slip back unseen. She'd just have to put up with Slivkash's reprimand, she thought, turning back to camp.

Kira went quickly, feet imprinting the hoarfrost, the sky streaked with fiery cloud, surprised to see the men already mounted, as if about to leave. They weren't in formation, but shouting to each other and riding this way and that – searching for *her*, Kira realised in mortification.

One of the men saw her, raised his fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly. Hoofs clashed on stone as a horse sped down the ridge to her right, rearing as it slewed to a halt in front of her.

The horse was massive, the sun reducing the rider to a silhouette, but there was no disguising his voice, or his anger.

'Where in Irid's name have you been?'

'I'm sorry to have caused you trouble, Feailner,' said Kira, bowing as his men did.

'Where . . . have . . . you . . . been?'

Each word punched the air like a fist through ice and any thought of lying fled.

'I've been gathering.'

'Gathering?'

'I'm a Healer. I need to gather herbs to heal,' said Kira.

The troop had formed a loose circle round her and Kira took a couple of steps towards the camp, but Tierken spurred his mount forward, blocking her way.

'I gave you *no leave* to gather. You will stay within the fire-circle unless *I* give you permission to leave.'

Permission! A Terak telling her she'd need *his* permission to gather.

Kira's head came up. 'I'm a Tremen Healer, not a Terak patrolman. I don't need your permission to gather!'

The men were absolutely silent as Tierken dismounted, his face furious and his eyes blazing. Catching hold of her arm, he dragged her to one side, releasing her with a savage shake.

'While you're under my protection, you will obey my orders,' he hissed.

‘I’m not “*under your protection*”, I’m your prisoner!’

‘You’re under my protection and *will* obey my orders!’ shouted Tierken, stepping forward.

‘Tremen healing doesn’t bow before Terak swords!’ retorted Kira, refusing to yield ground.

‘What –’ he began, but at that moment a patrolman appeared with the container of coals and Tierken’s mount.

‘Almost ready to leave, Feailner,’ said the man, presenting the container with the usual words.

Beyond the mounted men, Kira saw Slivkash and Marin walk towards the trees, Marin carrying a stick with a thong at one end.

‘Patrolman Slivkash has failed in his duties,’ said Tierken, following her gaze. ‘You’ll ride with Patrol Leader Jonred on Storm.’

Kira stood fixated on Slivkash, who now rested his arms on a bole as Marin swung the stick back.

‘You can’t . . .’ began Kira, horrified. ‘You can’t . . .’

The stick descended on Slivkash’s back with a sickening thud. ‘It was my fault,’ said Kira. ‘You can’t beat Slivkash for something that was my fault!’

Tierken had mounted and sat looking down at her. ‘Patrolman Slivkash was charged with your protection. He accepts his punishment, as all my men do.’

There was another thud and Kira remembered every brutal and barbaric thing she’d ever read, heard or thought about the Terak.

‘Get on the horse, Kira,’ ordered Tierken. ‘The patrol waits.’ There was no anger now, just confident authority.

The Patrol Leader, Jonred, offered his hand, but Kira didn’t move, her attention still on Slivkash, whose face was pale as he stumbled back and swung himself onto his horse. Welts of blood were seeping through his shirt.

Kira stepped backwards. 'I've made a mistake. I thought . . . I thought there was nothing worse than death, but I was wrong. I won't betray everything the Tremen have fought for. I won't embrace your swords and filthy metal. I won't go north. I'd rather die at the Shargh's stinking hands than live by yours.'

With that, she turned and fled back towards the ridgelands, reaching them, and beginning a swift ascent. Tierken's horse followed but she was in such turmoil that she kept going. When she reached the sixth ridge she was forced to stop though, to catch her breath. Tierken sat on his horse watching her, and she turned on him angrily.

'Why do you follow me south when your city lies to the north?' she demanded.

'Five days by horse but at least eight on foot, to be precise,' said Tierken, almost conversationally. 'Whereas Maraschin is two days by horse and almost four on foot. But you're not from Maraschin are you? How far is it to your lands, Kira?'

'By horse or foot?' she asked sarcastically.

'You're on foot.'

'Many days,' she said, suddenly cautious.

'Many days? And you have barely any food.'

'I'll get some in Maraschin,' snapped Kira.

'Which is almost four days away on foot,' he replied, his voice calm.

Kira said nothing.

'You've had no breakfast. Nor have I. We can eat here, it's a pleasant enough place,' said Tierken, dismounting, and pulling small bundles out of his pack. 'Maizen bread, cheese, russetnuts,' he said, setting them down on the stone.

'I know you eat maizen bread and russetnuts. Do you eat cheese?' he asked.

'No.'

‘Is that forbidden too?’ he said, then smiled a smile that was achingly like Kandor’s.

‘We keep no animals, so it’s not eaten,’ replied Kira.

Tierken broke the small loaf and offered it to her. She took it reluctantly, nodding her thanks.

‘I can see why you wanted to gather,’ said Tierken, peering down the slope. ‘Icemint, annin, bluemint and bruise-ease.’

‘You know herbs?’ asked Kira, surprised.

‘My grandmother, Eris, is a Healer in Kessom. We’ll visit her after we reach Sarnia, if you wish. I know Healers like to exchange their knowing. The wind’s changed,’ he added abruptly.

He quickly packed away the food and mounted Kalos. ‘Come,’ he said, holding out his hand.

Kira didn’t move and Tierken urged Kalos forward. ‘No one travels the Sarsalin alone. If you were a Kir herder, or an Illian, or a Terak, or even an Ashmiri, I’d take you with me. There are fanchon and wolves and storms that kill, even in summer, and you’ve only seen the pleasant face of the plain so far. There’s also the matter of protection.

‘When Marin took you from the Shargh, you came under ours. I am *obliged* to take you to a place of safety. You can come willingly, or unwillingly, but you *will* come.’

Kira had no choice, both her mission *and* Tierken demanding she mount the horse. Feeling resentful, she put her hand in Tierken’s and he pulled her up behind him. The stallion felt different to Slivkash’s horse, as if its strength were barely contained by its hide, and she’d hardly settled before they were galloping at full tilt down the slope. Kira clamped her eyes shut, expecting the horse to crash to the ground and fling them to their deaths, but it reached the bottom safely, its powerful haunches driving it up the next slope and down again.

Was Tierken scaring her in revenge for the trouble she’d caused him? she wondered. Then the horse reached the plain and

pounded over the grass in a hard gallop. Tierken crouched low and she hunched down behind him, the air slicing through her jacket. Dark clouds boiled ahead, reminding Kira of when she'd run before the storm towards the Azurcades, and of stumbling on Caledon. But Tierken didn't run *before* the storm, he ran *towards* it.

They streaked across the plain, wind driving grit into their faces, thunder clashing. In Allogrenia, such storms tore trees in half, but there were no trees here, and no shelter. Lightning slashed and rain hurled against them, hard as stones. Then, without warning, Tierken veered left, plunging down into a shallow run of land towards a dark tunnel-like opening.

He slewed to a stop at the tunnel entrance and leapt to the ground, wrenching Kira after him in a single action. Not faltering in his headlong flight, he hauled her and the horse into the tunnel. The horse snorted and blew, the smell of its hot sweat filling the confined space. Beyond the silhouette of its ears, thunder roared and lightning shattered the murky sky.

'What . . . is this . . . place?' gasped Kira, breathless from their flight.

'A storm-safe. They've been built by herders over many seasons and are scattered over the Sarsalin. I thought we'd beat the storm here, but the Sarsalin had other plans.'

It must have been a massive task to dig out the soil and rock, thought Kira. The walls had been lined with blocks of stone.

'You should change into some dry clothes,' said Tierken, wrenching off his sodden jacket and shirt, and pulling another shirt from his pack. In the garish light, the criss-cross of scars on his back was clear.

'Your back!' exclaimed Kira.

'Do you think I expect my men to bear what I haven't?'

'It's barbaric!'

He still held his shirt, the skin of his chest and torso golden, with dark hair curled across it.

‘Pain’s a powerful teacher,’ said Tierken, slipping on his shirt. ‘Do the Tremen not train their men to fight?’

‘To protect.’

‘And when they’re disobedient, or careless, or learn their lessons poorly, how are they taught to remember?’

‘Not by beating!’

‘Ah, well that probably explains why you ended up in Shargh hands,’ he said.

‘The fault wasn’t theirs!’ exclaimed Kira. ‘They would have sacrificed every one of themselves, right down to the last man, to protect me!’

‘Then why didn’t they?’

‘Do you think I want people to die because of *me*? To have them killed or so badly slashed that it takes half the night to stitch them up? To have my family –’ she choked to a stop.

‘Properly trained men prevent such things,’ said Tierken.

‘They *are* properly trained,’ cried Kira. ‘But we live by healing, not by killing, not like the Terak Kutan!’

Tierken froze. ‘What did you call us?’

‘The Terak Kutan,’ said Kira reluctantly, recalling too late Slivkash’s reaction to the word.

Tierken seized her by the shoulders and brought his face to hers, his eyes burning with fury. ‘Be grateful that the Terak *Kiril-lian* do not raise their hands to women,’ he said, his grip tightening so that she winced. ‘Don’t *ever* use that phrase again in my hearing.’ Releasing her, he strode to the tunnel entrance and stood staring out at the rain.

Kira settled on the ground, resting her head against the tunnel wall and rubbing her bruised arms. Her task was to go north and beg help from the Terak king, not alienate his men by spitting the insults the Tremen had used since the Sundering. The more Kira thought about it, the more ashamed she grew. She was the Tremen Leader, not a thwarted child.

The rain finally eased and Tierken readied his horse. ‘Time to go,’ he said.

Outside, the ground was sodden and the sky open, a washed gold mirroring the sweep of the plain. Kira couldn’t bring herself to apologise, but she resolved not to cause Tierken any further trouble.

They went on at a gentler pace, but Tierken remained silent, still angry. It was close to dusk when they reached camp. It was set between two small rises, the one at the back steep, with the Terak shelters hard up against it.

Tierken stopped next to one of the shelters, which looked like a large sleeping-sheet strung over a rope between two poles. They had probably been set because of the rain, thought Kira.

‘This is your *gifan*,’ he said, helping Kira dismount.

‘I thank you, do you –’ began Kira, but Tierken had ridden on and was now in conversation with Marin, the word ‘Ashmiri’ floating back before they were out of ear-shot.

The men were gathered some distance away, and Kira scanned the group for Jonred, but couldn’t see him. She’d resolved to avoid irritating Tierken, so turned to the gifan. Her sleeping-sheet was inside and she pulled off her boots and crawled into it, her exhaustion greater than her hunger. Curling into a ball, she slept.

32

Tierken hadn't expected to share Cover-cape Crest with the Ashmiri, but when Marin told him they were nearby he realised it provided him with a timely opportunity to deliver Terak greetings, and remind these Ashmiri of the oath Ashmiridin had sworn, many seasons past. It was unlikely Chief Uthlin would be here, for there were half a dozen Ashmiri groups spread out between the Silver and Azurcades.

The Ashmiri had aided Shargh attacks by lending them horses, and if things turned bad, the Crest would give good protection, being too steep for the horseback fighting the Ashmiri preferred. The ground was slick from the storm too, and the moon near full, so there could be no surprise attack.

'How many are there?' Tierken asked Marin.

'Nine sorchas and about three hundred ebis,' said Marin.

'It could be Uthlin then,' said Tierken thoughtfully.

Ashmiri wealth was measured by ebis; so many herd animals and so few sorchas meant wealthy *and* influential Ashmiri. Perhaps the storm had granted him more than a hard ride and a violent

argument with his guest. Tierken ordered the horses be resaddled, and outlined a course of action in case they were attacked.

‘You plan to visit them?’ said Marin.

‘They’ll know I’m here. It would be an insult *not* to present my compliments. We’ll go on foot: me, you, Jonred, Drinen and Shird.’

‘On foot, Feailner? Do you think that’s wise?’ said Marin.

‘Are you suggesting our Ashmiri oath-swearers are also oath-breakers?’

‘The Shargh ride Ashmiri horses.’

‘Not something I’ve forgotten; nor should we forget that while the Ashmiri are tied to us, they’re kin to the Shargh. It’s unwise to force men to choose between blood and words, Marin. It’s better to remind them of honour. In the Ashmiri’s case, it’s stronger than both.’

‘And are we to go weaponless as well, Feailner?’ asked Marin, not much placated.

‘Of course not, nor would they expect it. We’ll take knives in case we must fight up close and swords to maintain *our* honour, and we’ll take arrows to fire over our shoulders in case we must run,’ said Tierken.

‘Meros grant it doesn’t come to that,’ grumbled Marin.

The small group assembled and Tierken led them up the Crest, the near-full moon painting the Ashmiri sorchas as bright as snow. Soon the Ashmiri would take their ebis south, leaving the northern grazing to the hardier goats of the Kirs and Illians. As Tierken expected, they were met some distance out, for the Ashmiri always set watchers. Tierken and Marin exchanged glances after the Ashmiri gave a brief bow, rather than the usual gesture of respect, then their escort led them to the highest sorchas on the slope. Gesturing them to wait, he disappeared through a door-flap, and Tierken signalled to Shird, Jonred and Drinen, who stepped back and took up defensive positions. They could hear

speech, the language harsh to Tierken's ears; Kir and Illian had seemed the same before he'd mastered them.

Apart from Marin, who was Illian, Tierken had chosen Terak to accompany him, the Terak having a bent for thoughtful action, unlike the Kirs, who were all dash. It was a difference forcibly pointed out to him by Poerin, who had done all he could to thrash Tierken's Kir tendencies out of him over the hard seasons in Kessom.

The escort reappeared, palmed his forehead and waved them in, the gesture of respect either an encouraging sign or a trap, thought Tierken. It was warm in the sorcha, and luxurious compared with the patrol's conditions of travel. The floor was covered with wolf-skins, and lamps hung from the roof struts, their intricate metal-work and stained glass throwing gloriously patterned light onto the hide walls. A fire burned beneath the smoke vent, metal pots and pans gleaming on the coals.

Uthlin was positioned on the other side, easy to identify because of the single black dots tattooed on his cheekbones. Warriors sat beside him, their cheeks similarly patterned with single dots in white, green, red, blue or yellow. Their swords and knives were at their belts, their spears on the skins behind them, noted Tierken as he bowed. Even when invited to enter the sorcha, Tierken must lower his head first, 'giving way' to Uthlin. Ashmiri mores were another thing Poerin's 'gentle guidance' had burned into his mind.

Uthlin palmed his forehead, and gestured Tierken to sit, Marin settling at Tierken's right hand, Jonred at his left, Shird and Drinen to either side of them. Tierken's men would not be introduced or acknowledged, except by their status, which, like the Ashmiri's, was determined by their position in relation to him. Nor would Uthlin's warriors palm their foreheads to him, their presence at this meeting introduction enough.

Even without gold eyes, Uthlin would know who he was. Dwinhir, some called the Ashmiri – for their ability to see whatever moved on the plain – but others called them skin-hovers, after the plain’s scavenger birds.

‘The Ashmiri greet the Feailner of the Terak, Kirs and Illians. May your time be blessed with rich pastures and many sons,’ said Uthlin, in good Onespeak.

‘The Feailner of the Terak, Kirs and Illians thanks you and is honoured to sit in the sorcha of a people whose friendship has endured from the time of Terak himself,’ replied Tierken.

Uthlin’s eyes glittered as he dipped his head, and Tierken wondered if he’d been too hasty in reminding Uthlin of his forebear’s oath. There was an edginess about the Ashmiri Chief, as if he were about to spring from the hides.

‘The Sky Chiefs send their storms early,’ said Uthlin, filling an ornate metal cup from the pan on the fire, and passing it to Tierken.

The offer of drink – spiced sherat – and the small talk, suggested that Uthlin had taken no offence, but the Ashmiri Chief was definitely ill at ease. Tierken took a careful sip. Only a fool dulled their reflexes when sitting in the sorcha of the Shargh’s kin.

‘The Sarsalin has many moods,’ he acknowledged politely, the sherat moving through his bones like liquid fire.

‘We know the Sarsalin well,’ responded Uthlin tersely.

Tierken gazed down at the sherat, as if considering its merits. Poerin had taught him that silence spoke louder than words with the Ashmiri.

‘But there’s a place where the wind and rain might enter even the best-set sorcha,’ added Uthlin.

It was the Ashmiri way of saying they’d suffered misfortune, but Tierken still held his silence.

‘A warrior has been burned by the storm and we wait to see if the Sky Chiefs claim him,’ said Uthlin.

Under the terms of Ashmiridin's oath to Terak, the Ashmiri were free to travel and set camp when and where they wanted, without explanation or excuse to the Terak. Even if one of their kind were struck by lightning, they wouldn't necessarily set sorchas, the giving and taking of life the prerogatives of the Sky Chiefs.

The fact that Uthlin *had* stopped, *and* told Tierken the reason, could only mean that the injured man was important, and that Uthlin was asking for help. Tierken took another sip of the sherat, knowing it was acceptable to delay his response. If the man were badly burned, Uthlin knew he would die. So the man must be capable of being saved.

Tierken's thoughts went from Marin – whose skill lay mainly in setting bones – to Kira. If she could save the man, it would generate much goodwill, and if the Shargh continued their inclination for warfare, he was going to need all the Ashmiri goodwill he could muster. But if Kira failed to save the man, or caused him further suffering, the result could be the opposite.

'A Healer travels with us –' began Tierken.

'Our Hals are skilled,' interrupted Uthlin, breaking protocol. It was a sign, Tierken decided, of his distress over the injured man.

'The Healer is not Terak, Kir or Illian,' said Tierken carefully. 'Nor is she of the Kessomi people, but of a people in the far south, beyond the Azurcades.'

The Healer is a stranger to us both. If she fails, the failure will not be Terak, nor the debt for her efforts Ashmiri.

Uthlin nodded briefly and Tierken gestured to Shird, who rose and left. Kira didn't know Shird, but Tierken couldn't send Marin or Jonred on an errand, nor did he want to be left without his best fighters.

'How grow the pastures south of the ridgelands?' asked Uthlin, topping up his cup and moving on to more mundane things.

Tierken started to describe the grasses, soil moisture and spring levels of the lands they'd passed, an exchange of information expected among grazing peoples, and Uthlin's tension seemed to ease. In contrast, Tierken's muscles knotted as he considered how little he actually knew of Kira. It was possible that he'd just made the worst mistake of his life.

33

There was movement behind him and Tierken broke off his description to Uthlin and turned to see that Shird, and the escort who'd met them earlier, had come back. There was no sign of Kira, which meant she probably waited outside. He hoped Shird had reassured her that the Ashmiri weren't the Shargh. She was unlikely to be of use if she were frozen with fear. The escort spoke to Uthlin, and Uthlin murmured something to the warrior next to him, who rose and left. Tierken's heart raced and he whispered to Marin to follow.

Uthlin continued his questions about grazing matters, but now Tierken found it all but impossible to concentrate. The fact that Uthlin had sent out the warrior *at his right hand*, presumably to oversee Kira's healing, could mean only one thing: the injured man was a member of Uthlin's own family.

Outside in the icy night, Kira was feeling increasingly anxious. A strange patrolmen had wrenched her from her sleep and insisted she come, and now she was alone in the midst of the Shargh's kin, surrounded by skin houses and the bellows of the Ashmiri herd

animals. The patrolman who'd fetched her had disappeared inside with the young Ashmiri with dots on his face. She peered around shivering, then the young Ashmiri reappeared, making her jump, with Marin and an older, ferocious-looking Ashmiri. The man looked so like a Shargh that Kira's heart lurched, not even Marin's presence reassuring her.

'Did Shird tell you what's happened?' whispered Marin, as they accompanied the Ashmiri through the icy night.

'No. Who's Shird?'

Marin cursed in Terak, but before he could speak again, the Ashmiri ducked into another of the round houses and they reluctantly followed.

The first thing Kira noticed as she straightened was the glorious warmth, then the groans of agony. A young man lay on his side, naked on a sheet, his cheek, shoulder, arm, torso, hip and thigh blistered, even the hair on the side of his head burned off. The raw flesh had been covered with a greenish paste, its scent suggesting a mix of silversalve, sorren, bruise-ease and honey – as good a salve as any for burns. A young woman held the man on his uninjured side, and various Ashmiri moved in and out of the sorcha.

Kira knelt down and the fierce-looking Ashmiri settled beside her, so close he almost touched her.

'He was struck by lightning,' said Marin, his gaze on the injured man.

Kira knew from the Protectors that young men hid pain, but this young man was so consumed by it that such deception was impossible.

'Was he on a horse?' asked Kira in Onespeak.

The Ashmiri next to her nodded.

'I need him on his back,' said Kira, wondering if, having fallen from a horse, the man might be bleeding inside.

The Ashmiri beside her said something to the young woman, and she clenched her teeth and eased him over.

The man screamed and a heated argument broke out between the young woman and the warrior beside Kira. It stopped as suddenly as it began, but Kira's scalp prickled as she thought of the knives the warrior carried at his belt. The tension in the sorcha was palpable and she feared the warrior would stab her if she touched the injured man. But she had no choice.

She took a steadying breath.

'Don't let me fall on him,' Kira whispered to Marin, as she brought her hands down over the man's heart. She didn't need to touch him, the severity of his pain plunging her into the fire-filled tunnel. What she saw was the boiling core of pain and injury in his lower back.

Kira pulled back, nauseous, and Marin gripped her arm. The sorcha was absolutely silent, the injured man no longer groaning, his eyes fixed on her. He had a black dot on one cheek but the other had been burned off.

'I need him on his side again,' said Kira.

The young woman turned him without argument, and Kira ran her hand down his back, then carefully flattened her palms against his spine and pushed, the man grunting as the bones slipped back. The young woman cried out in relief and Marin caught Kira's arm and helped her up, pulling her after the older Ashmiri, who'd already hurried out.

'What did you do?' whispered Marin as they followed their escort.

'I put his back in,' said Kira, still light-headed.

'No, before that. What did -'

Their escort entered the sorcha ahead and Marin was forced to save his question for later.

Tierken watched Uthlin's right-hand warrior stride across the hides to his Chief and whisper something in his ear. Uthlin shut his eyes momentarily and bowed his head, Tierken realising that Uthlin's kin was either cured or killed. The escort followed,

then Kira, ashen-faced, helped by Marin, who set her down next to Tierken, inadvertently giving her his own position. It was not something Uthlin missed, his shrewd gaze darting between them.

‘You have cured my son,’ said Uthlin. ‘What would you ask?’

Tierken’s relief was tempered by the fear that Kira would insult Uthlin by demanding something inappropriate.

‘I am a Healer from the southern forests,’ she said. ‘In my lands, it is the custom to give healing.’

It was an answer Tierken’s grandmother would be proud of, both generous and non-judgemental of those who either traded or sold their skill.

Uthlin’s face remained expressionless but he straightened.

‘Healer of the southern forests,’ he said solemnly. ‘You are a long way from your home, and tread a plain unforgiving of the stranger. I, Chief Uthlin of the Ashmiri, grant you the protection of my people.’

Tierken struggled to keep his face composed. Within the next few days, every Ashmiri, no matter where they roamed, would know what Kira looked like, and of their obligation to protect her. Uthlin’s pledge was as binding as Ashmiridin’s had been, in seasons past.

‘We eat now,’ announced Uthlin, and the tension broke.

‘I thank you,’ said Kira, whether for the food or for his protection was unclear.

Some of the warriors rose as women appeared with platters of steaming food. *Loti* – a type of spicy sausage, *sahin* – slivers of meat fried, and *misil* – smoked cheese. There was nothing there Kira would choose to eat, but eat she must if she wasn’t to offend Uthlin.

‘You *must* eat,’ whispered Tierken, as bowls were passed around. Kira nodded but her pallor increased, as if she were going to be sick at the sight of it.

'I'll serve it for you,' muttered Tierken, so he could limit the amount she must consume.

The platter was offered to him first, as the most important guest, and Tierken put a small chunk of each of the foods in Kira's bowl. Serving her first could be construed as respect for the service she'd rendered the Terak Feailner – in fulfilling his reciprocal obligations to the Ashmiri – or it could be seen as acknowledgement of her as his mate. Tierken suspected the Ashmiri would see it as the latter, given their physical similarity, and her position at his right hand.

The talk was more general now, and there was an air of celebration. The high voices of the women mixed with the men's as they ate. Tierken saw Kira wince as she swallowed chunks of food without chewing. He gobbled down his own meal, then rose and signalled to Marin to help Kira up. She looked as though she would barely be able to stand.

It was expected that Tierken not stay late – courteous words had been exchanged and food shared. People who must journey all day did not carouse deep into the night like those in Sarnia.

'I wish you fine weather and fair travel,' said Tierken, giving the customary farewell of herders.

'To you and yours also,' echoed Uthlin.

They came back out into the freezing night and set off in silence, aware that there would be Ashmiri watchers nearby who knew a little Terak. Marin walked by his side and Tierken sensed his impatience to speak, but his thoughts were on Kira, who walked with Jonred behind.

'Can they still see us?' she whispered.

'They –' began Jonred, but before he could finish Kira fell to her knees and was violently ill.

Jonred crouched beside her, but Tierken ordered him up. 'Jonred, Drinen and Shird, go on ahead and settle the horses for

the night. Marin, set a fire near Kira's gifan. I'll bring her when she's feeling better.'

The men set off briskly, but Marin loitered.

'The Ashmiri don't murder those they've just shared meat with,' said Tierken, pre-empting his objections. 'I'll hear your report at camp.'

'Yes, Feailner,' said Marin, then strode off after the others.

'You've a waterskin in your pack?' asked Tierken, as Kira's vomiting became dry-retching.

She nodded and he slipped the pack off, rummaging around till he found it. Gently he washed her face.

'That was the meat?' he asked.

'That and an empty belly,' she said.

'Didn't you eat with the men?'

'You said I had to stay with Jonred and he wasn't there.'

'I didn't mean you had to go without food, if he was with me,' said Tierken, exasperated.

Kira sat awhile on the wet grass, her eyes closed.

'I'm sorry I insulted you in the storm-safe. I . . . I didn't know what the word meant,' she said, once she'd gathered herself.

'What word?'

'Kutan.'

'Did you learn it in Maraschin?' asked Tierken, wondering if the Tain used it to describe the Terak.

'No. I lived in the Sanctum most of the time, and the Hea . . . physicks only spoke of gathering, or herbs or curing. I wasn't in King's Hall with Ad . . . *Prince* Adris and Caledon.'

'*Prince* Adris? King Beris's son?' said Tierken.

Kira nodded.

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-five, twenty-six seasons,' she said.

'You've met him?'

'Yes,' said Kira and looked away.

‘You don’t like him?’ asked Tierken shrewdly.

‘It’s not really Adris’s fault he’s like he is. Caledon told me his father’s been ill for many seasons, and Adris is frustrated because he can’t do much about the Shargh attacks. Anything he does do, like send out the King’s Guard, he must do without his father’s knowledge or permission.’

‘I see,’ said Tierken, noting that Kira called him ‘Adris’ not *Prince* Adris, implying a level of familiarity beyond what he’d expect from a Healer who’d worked in the city.

‘This man Caledon. He’s a friend of Prince Adris?’ asked Tierken.

‘Yes.’

‘He’s a Tain?’

‘No, he’s from Talliel.’

‘Talliel?’ said Tierken in surprise. ‘He’s a long way from home.’

‘He journeys a great deal,’ said Kira, her expression gentling.

‘Is this Caledon in Maraschin now?’ asked Tierken. If there were feeling between them, why in Irid’s name had he allowed her to endanger her life by gathering?

‘I don’t know.’

The answer was evasive but Tierken bit back his next question. A Tallien called Caledon might wait for Kira in Maraschin, but this woman who shared his eyes and face was now under his protection and on her way to his city. And at this moment, he could see no reason why she would ever return.

34

It was late when Kira woke, sun penetrating the gifan, which was now pleasantly warm. She thought of the burned Ashmiri and felt a surge of gladness that the power of healing had released him from his agony. Pushing the tangled hair from her eyes with grubby fingers, she thought longingly of a bath, clean clothes and even a comb. She could hear the voices of the patrolmen, but not close, Tierken having set her gifan apart. He'd become solicitous of her, roasting a bowl of nuts and brewing metz – or cotzee as he called it – for her last night, and taking care that she have sufficient privacy.

Yet for all his courtesy, Tierken practised the brutality of the Terak, her arms carrying the imprints of his fingers where he'd shaken her. He'd had Slivkash beaten and his own back bore the scars of beatings, too. She'd be a fool to forget that Tierken was Terak, with everything that implied, and yet . . .

He had her eyes and Kandor's face. Any other face, of all she had ever seen, would have been more bearable. And why not have brown eyes, or grey eyes like Caledon's? It made being with Tierken both joyful and disturbing.

‘Kira? Come and eat.’

She jumped, wondering if her thoughts had somehow drawn him.

Outside, the sun was well up, the sky brilliant blue and wispy with cloud. Tierken smiled at her, as he had last night and she smiled back. He was pleased she’d healed the Ashmiri, and she’d overheard Marin say it made the treaty stronger.

And he had roasted another large bowl of nuts for her.

‘I can’t eat all those,’ protested Kira.

‘If all you’ll eat are nuts, you’re going to have to eat more of them. You’re little more than bones.’

‘I eat other things as well,’ she mumbled, with bulging cheeks. The nuts were sweeter than those in the forest and very good.

‘Such as?’

‘Riddleberries, mundleberries, sour-ripe, osken, beggar leaves, scavengerleaf, pitchie seeds, sweetfish, feathergrass tubers, honey,’ listed off Kira.

‘That’s the food of the southern forests?’

Kira nodded.

‘It’s not much. Are the rest of your people thin too?’

‘No,’ said Kira defensively, swallowing in a painful gulp. ‘The forest Shelters us. I didn’t take enough food with me when I left, that’s all. I thought I’d gather on the Dendora Plain, but there was little to be had.’

‘The Dendora’s Shargh grazing, and even before the long drought, offered only sparse gathering. The Sarsalin’s the same. How long were you in Maraschin?’

‘About two and a half moons.’

‘Obviously, there wasn’t enough food there either,’ said Tierken.

‘There’s plenty of everything, including food, in Maraschin, *if* you have something to trade,’ said Kira, failing to hide her bitterness. ‘But I didn’t need to trade as I healed in the Sanctum

with the Tain physicks, and King Beris provides the Sanctum with food.'

'What else does the King do?' asked Tierken, pouring her some cotzee.

'I don't know,' said Kira, 'he isn't much seen. Most things, like the King's Guard being sent out to The Westlans, seem to be at Adris's command.'

She finished eating and wiped her fingers on her breeches. 'Kashclan thanks the Terak Kirillian,' she said, passing the remainder of the nuts back to him. 'Is there somewhere I can wash?'

'You can wash at the grove. I'll take you,' he said, rising and leading the way.

Kira was aware of the men's gazes following them, but focused on the dark trees ahead.

'After you wash, you can have a riding lesson,' said Tierken.

'A riding lesson?'

'If you're to spend time in the north, you'll need to be able to ride. You can start off on Slivkash's mount, Frost, who's quieter than Kalos.'

'Won't Slivkash mind?' asked Kira, painfully aware that Slivkash had been beaten because of her.

'The Kirs are horse-people. He won't mind.'

They drew closer to the grove and Kira stopped, open-mouthed.

'What is it?' asked Tierken, his sword already in his hand.

'They're alwaysgreens,' exclaimed Kira.

'Allogrenias,' corrected Tierken. 'The southernmost stand on the Sarsalin. Smaller than usual because of the harsh conditions.'

Allogrenias? Had the word turned into 'alwaysgreens' in the same way as Kirillian had turned into Kutan, wondered Kira. Or had Kasherion chosen to differentiate the tree from the name of his settlement? It didn't matter. The spicy scent was the same, as

was the deep peace and Shelter of their broad spreading boughs. Kira ran to them, embracing a bole with wide-flung arms, then resting her forehead against it. Tears slid down her cheeks as she imagined her palms were flattened against the warm skin of Esogren or Enogren or Nogren.

‘Kira?’ said Tierken, his voice gentle as he put his hands on her shoulders.

‘I need to wash,’ she muttered, feeling foolish, and sleeveing the wetness from her face.

‘The spring’s a little further,’ said Tierken, taking her hand, and leading her deeper into the trees.

It was a perfect circle, the water seeping too slowly to ripple and only the occasional spark of sunlight glancing off the surface as a breeze disturbed the canopy. Kira sluiced water over her face and arms, but could do no more without undressing. Tierken stripped off his jacket and shirt, and Kira winced at the scars on his back, wanting to take away the evidence of season upon season of beatings.

‘I’ll turn away if you want to wash more thoroughly,’ said Tierken.

‘Your back. Does it still pain you?’ she asked, her voice hesitant.

‘No.’

‘Can I . . . can I examine it?’

‘I’ve told you there’s no pain.’

‘Yes, but I *need* to know . . .’ she trailed off. Her need was overwhelming, as if she reassured herself that Kandor didn’t suffer.

Tierken shrugged and turned his back.

‘No, from the front.’

He turned round and Kira laid her hands over his heart. She had never done this with someone who was whole and uninjured, and instead of a fire-filled tunnel, she found a place of warmth, safety and love. Abruptly, she was back in the cooler air of the

grove, but with none of the churning nausea that usually accompanied her return. Kira looked up at Tierken in wonder, and even in the emerald-coloured air, she could see his eyes had lightened.

Tierken slowly brought his mouth to hers, giving her time to step away, but Kira remained in his arms, her palms feeling the beat of his heart quicken in time with her own as she answered each kiss, feeling his body against hers, under the broad Shelter of the alwaysgreens.

Finally he pulled away, and she opened her eyes, as if awakening from a sweet and languorous dream.

‘You’re under my protection,’ said Tierken.

‘I feel completely safe, and I haven’t felt so for many, many moons. I thank you,’ she murmured.

Tierken raised his hand, as if to caress her face, but let it fall. ‘If you’ve finished washing, we’ll go back.’

Kira nodded and followed him, the sense of peace not dissipating until she moved out into the harsh sunshine of the plain again.

35

Tierken strode along, angry that he'd given in to the urge he'd felt since Kira had raised her face and looked at him with eyes as gold as his own. He knew he should have taken her back to Maraschin then, as did Marin, his reaction clearly telling him so. Marin was no fool and had an honesty that was useful, if not always comfortable.

But the woman they'd taken from the Shargh had his eyes and his face, and was beautiful, with fine slender hands, and a spirit every bit as fiery as Kalos. She'd stood toe to toe with him, unbowed in her defiance, then healed in the same selfless way as his grandmother.

I'd thought the Ashmiri for the next world for sure, when I first saw him, Marin had reported. The man was in the sort of agony where death is as sweet as a feather bed. But then she puts her hands over his heart and, by Meros, he stops groaning and starts looking round.

If anyone but Marin had said it he'd have dismissed it, but Marin was the patrol bone-setter and knew about pain.

Maybe in kissing him Kira had simply sought comfort after being distressed by the trees and the memories they evoked, thought Tierken. There was also the fact that she'd been away from her people for so long.

He'd humoured her by letting her touch him, the scars old and no longer tender, but her proximity had fired every sense in his body. It had taken all of his self control to give her the opportunity to refuse him, but her need had been as great as his. The sweet sensation oozed over him again and he scowled to mask it.

His men watched them and Tierken lengthened his stride, so that Kira clearly followed behind. He'd prefer his men to think he'd argued with his guest, rather than that he'd found a toy to play with on the journey home. Reaching the camp, he jerked his thumb to Marin and they walked off together.

Kira settled near Jonred, who was part of a circle of men intent on some sort of game. She hugged her knees, trying to focus on the puzzle of Kasheron's naming of the Tremen place and the alwaysgreens, her mouth still tingling. Kissing Tierken had given her a sense of peace and safety, and she couldn't bring herself to feel any regret.

The men in front of her erupted and there was much laughing and hooting, and clapping of backs, as the circle broke and some headed off towards the spring. Jonred and a patrolman Kira didn't know remained, speaking in Terak, which told her the man was either Terak or Kessomi.

'I'll wager you ten traders I'll have Mesia by Mid-market Day,' boasted the man.

'You do, and I'll wager you ten more you'll be married by the next one,' replied Jonred.

'I'll not be marrying her,' the man said, lounging back on the grass. 'There's other men she's spread her legs for.'

Kira's face warmed and she broke off a stalk, and looked down at it as if she'd never seen seeded-grass before.

‘Her father won’t view it like that. You’d be better advised to spend your traders in the Caru Quarter. Hand them over, and take your pleasure with no complications,’ said Jonred.

‘I don’t waste traders on what I can get for free,’ the man said.

Kira turned the grass over in her hands, glad the man had stopped speaking. He made her feel ill at ease. Maybe she should tell Jonred she needed ‘some time alone’ to get away from him.

‘What about the Feailner and our gold-eyed guest,’ the man continued, glancing across at her. ‘Want to wager he’ll have *her* before we see the city walls?’

‘She’s under our protection,’ said Jonred curtly.

Kira jerked another grassstalk from the ground, digging her thumbnail into the stem, and watching the clear juice ooze out.

‘She’s exeal, and it’s been a long time for him. Must be tempting,’ the man said softly.

‘She’s under our protection,’ repeated Jonred. ‘You insult the Feailner.’

‘No insult intended,’ the man replied, rising. ‘I’m off for a game of sweep-seven. Coming?’

‘No. I’ve got other duties.’

Kira gazed at the grass sightlessly, wondering what *exeal* meant. Tierken had broken some sort of rule in kissing her, he’d said so himself, and he’d been angry with himself afterwards. But apparently he *could* kiss her, and more, because she was exeal.

‘Are you recovered from your sickness of last night?’ asked Jonred courteously.

‘I am well this day. I thank you.’

Jonred’s eyes narrowed, and she looked away, wondering if her face showed her feelings.

Then Tierken approached, leading a horse. ‘Ready for your first riding lesson?’ he asked cheerfully.

She nodded, standing up and brushing the grass from her

breeches, then following him to where the steep crest of land merged back into the plain. The Ashmiri houses had gone.

‘Do you fear horses?’ asked Tierken, noting that she was subdued.

‘They’re strange to me. Before I went to the Tain lands, I’d only ever seen the running horse chimes we hang in our houses,’ said Kira.

‘They like chimes in Kessom, too,’ said Tierken, busy with the harness, ‘though not in Sarnia. Kessom chimes are wood, Sarnia’s mainly stone, but you can trade for metal and glass chimes at Mid-market.’

‘Metal’s forbidden,’ she said automatically.

‘Ah yes, but it tinkles beautifully,’ he said with a smile, finishing adjusting the harness.

He began the lesson in the same way he’d been taught: the position of the saddle rug, the parts of the saddle, how to adjust the stirrups, how to ensure the girth was the right tightness, the parts of the bridle, how to put the bridle on, the importance of not injuring the horse’s mouth. He got Kira to undo the girth, shift the saddle, redo the girth, take the bridle off, put the bridle on. Her slightness made all the tasks difficult. A typical Kessomi, he thought, then caught himself. *Tremen*, he corrected, whatever that was.

At least she didn’t show any fear, and Frost was at ease with her, snuffing at her face as she struggled with the bridle strap, making her laugh.

‘Frost likes you,’ said Tierken, his resolve not to pursue her evaporating like cotzee dregs on coals.

‘And I like Frost. He’s very beautiful.’

‘Not as beautiful as you,’ said Tierken softly.

‘Don’t tease me.’

‘Tease you?’

She shrugged, her gaze fixed on Frost, who now cropped the grass. ‘I don’t like being called beautiful.’

‘Why? Who’s called you that?’

‘Kest,’ said Kira reluctantly.

‘And Kest is?’

‘Protector Commander Kest of Morclan.’

‘He’s in charge of the Tremen fighters?’ asked Tierken.

‘The *Protectors*.’

‘What about the Tallien in Maraschin. Did he call you beautiful as well?’

‘I’ve been teased by many people,’ said Kira, still watching Frost. ‘Do you like having gold eyes, Tierken?’ she asked suddenly.

‘No,’ he said honestly.

‘Neither do I. I was never “Maxen’s daughter” or “Merek’s sister” or “a member of Kashclan”; it was as if my eyes were more important than me. I was even named for them.’

‘What? Kira?’ asked Tierken.

‘There’s a gold-eyed owl in the forests called the *mira kiraon*. Kira’s short for *Kiraon*.’

Tierken did his best to mask his surprise but his guts churned. She had his face and eyes, and Kessomi healing skills. Now she had the same name as the Terak’s most revered queen. It was hard to believe it was simply chance.

Too many chances, Tierken, make up facts. Face them or face the consequences. The former is usually harder, but less deadly, he could hear Poerin say.

Harder *and* more complicated, thought Tierken, and he didn’t want any more complications to his rule in Sarnia. It would be more difficult for Kira, too, if those in Sarnia must deal with a woman who used Queen Kiraon’s name, as well as being a Healer.

‘Kiraon was the mother of the man who founded our peoples, and greatly loved,’ said Tierken. ‘Out of respect, her name’s not been given again, so I suggest you continue to call yourself Kira among the Terak.’

Kira nodded. 'I don't want to cause upset in your lands,' she said, and paused. 'What does the word "exeal" mean?'

'Exeal?' She'd used the Terak word. 'Where did you hear that?'

'One of your men said it when he looked at me.'

'Which one?' demanded Tierken.

'I don't know his name. What does it mean?'

'An outsider, not kin-linked or treated. Once all the inhabitants of these lands were wanderers, single families or families linked by blood, like the Bishali, a people who still roam the north-west. Then bloodlines formed into groups – bound together by treaty, alliance and marriage – and these into what we are today. The coming together of the Terak, Kessomis, Kirs and Illians made us one people, kin to each other. As the Terak Kirillian, we're treated to the Tain and the Ashmiri, but we've no obligation to those who are exeal.'

'So the Terak Kirillian must aid peoples who are *kin-linked* or whom you have a treaty with?'

'Yes, although treaties and alliances vary. Our treaty with the Ashmiri only obliges us to allow them to graze where they wish and for them to refrain from attacking us, whereas our treaty with the Tain obliges us to come to each other's aid in war. Why do you ask?'

'The Tain are under Shargh attack.'

'They haven't requested aid,' said Tierken.

'But if the Tain *did* request it, or a kin-linked people, would you give aid?'

'We're obliged,' said Tierken, attaching a longer rein to the bridle. 'Now, it's time to learn how to mount.'

36

Getting on and off Frost was a struggle, and Tierken made Kira do it over and over again. Then it was moving in rhythm with Frost's trotting, then cantering, bringing him to a halt, turning him, making him trot and canter again, then walk. Kira felt like she couldn't do a single thing right. She sat too heavily, jerked Frost's mouth, '*which you should never do*', held the reins too loosely, too tightly, unevenly, failed to grip well, almost fell off – and so on.

When Tierken finally called a halt, she slithered off Frost and had to hang on to his neck till her legs could support her.

'Kashclan thanks Frost,' she muttered.

'Doesn't Kashclan thank the Terak Kirillian?' Tierken asked her.

'Not until my backside stops hurting.'

He laughed then, his good mood lasting back to camp, and even through the meal, where he insisted she eat more nuts and drink cotzee, before he allowed her to crawl into her sleeping-sheet. She'd slept solidly and without dreams, until Jonred's

hand shook her awake, telling her they must soon be on their way.

They breakfasted quickly and the last stars faded as the horses cleared Cover-cape Crest and picked up speed. Kira was glad to be behind Jonred, whose broad back sheltered her from the freezing wind. As daylight grew the wind dropped, but she noticed the men increasingly looking up at an even sheet of yellow-tinged cloud. The colour was almost oppressive.

‘Snow clouds,’ Jonred told her over his shoulder. ‘We’ll be fortunate to make the Breshlin before it starts. *And still one cursed day to winter,*’ he added in Terak.

Kira spent the journey considering what she must do once she reached Sarnia. She would have to seek an audience with the King as soon as possible, perhaps pretending to the King’s advisers that she was acquainted with King Beris to gain it. She would also need to be careful in how she revealed the kin-link, and tactful in the way she requested he honour his obligation to her people. The thought of men like those she travelled with being wounded or killed was abhorrent, but the Terak presence might be enough to dissuade the Shargh from their murderous attacks. Kira had reluctantly authorised Caledon to seek Tremen volunteers, but if she gained Terak help quickly her own people could remain in the forests.

Something floated across her face like ash, settled on her cape and dissolved into a spot of wet. Kira roused and looked up in wonder. The air was full of drift. Snow was unusual in the forest, the little which fell dropping in clumps from the canopy. Kira hadn’t realised it floated like lissium blossom, and laughed in delight.

‘Snow this early isn’t amusing,’ said Jonred.

‘We go to Ember Keep,’ said Tierken to Jonred, bringing Kalos alongside him.

‘Yes, Feailner.’

‘We’re turning north-west, to a place called Ember Keep,’ explained Tierken to Kira in Onespeak. ‘There’s good shelter there. The snow will probably delay us a day.’

They began to gallop and the snow thickened until the sky seemed to join the earth, riders emerging out of the flurries, then disappearing again. Jonred eased Storm back to a canter, then a trot. Kira still found the snow beautiful, but she was tired, and sore from her riding lesson, her hands red and tingling where she gripped the saddle-strap.

It was drawing into evening when a long howl cut the silence and Kira cringed instinctively. It died away, then another followed, then several more.

‘Sarsalin wolves,’ muttered Jonred, spitting over Storm’s shoulder. ‘Snow *and* wolves! Meros *is* in a nasty mood.’

Marin appeared out of the murk, his eyebrows and beard stiff with snow.

‘The Feailner’s taken the Kirs and Illians west. If the pack hunts east of the Finewater, there’s likely Kir herders in need of help. You’re to go direct to the Keep and use the east approach. We’ll join you there.’

‘The east approach?’ said Jonred in surprise.

‘The east,’ repeated Marin.

‘Yes, Commander.’

Marin vanished into the moving wall of snow and another patrolman appeared.

‘Let the men know we’re to use The Steps, Vardrin,’ said Jonred.

‘The Steps? In this weather?’

‘You forget the safety of our guest,’ said Jonred.

Vardrin’s eyes flicked to Kira. ‘I’ll tell the men,’ he said, and spurred away.

‘The Keep’s near, but the way we go is steep,’ said Jonred, turning in the saddle. ‘You need to hold on tightly, and if I tell you

to dismount, *keep hold of my cape*. It's the safer of the two ways, but if we do come under wolf attack, do exactly as I say *immediately*. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Kira, heart beginning an uneven thump.

The other men moved closer, carrying their bows with arrows set, as the ground rose with surprising suddenness. Kira blinked the snow from her eyes, not daring to let go the saddle-strap to use her hand. The climb became ever steeper, and Storm snorted as he climbed, his sweat hot in the air.

'Ware rocks!' exclaimed Vardrin from behind.

Kira tightened her numb fingers even more. There was nothing beautiful about the snow now.

'Time to walk,' shouted Vardrin, a while later.

'Not yet -' began Jonred, but the snow gave way under Storm's haunches. There was a violent jolt that broke Kira's wooden grip and she slipped off Storm's sharply tilted back and landed on the edge of the path. Then the snow-crust crumbled away, and she slid into darkness.

37

Kira slid faster and faster, spreadeagled across the slope, gouging with both hands in an effort to slow herself. Then her boots struck something solid and she jerked to a stop. The slope was so steep she was almost upright. Her breath heaved and her scraped hands and belly burned, but she daren't move, lest she plunge further.

The men screamed her name, but the pain was too great to scream back. After a time, Jonred bellowed for quiet and Kira summoned up all her willpower and took a deep breath.

'Jonred,' she called, trying not to move.

'Kira!'

'Down here. Something's stopped me.' It was hard to shout with her chest flat against the slope.

'Stay where you are! Don't move! *Don't move, Kira!*' shouted Jonred, his voice frantic.

Kira guessed the drop below was very deep. She had no idea what had stopped her; a jut of rock, she hoped, not a log, ready to

roll. There was a shrub several lengths to her right – out of reach – but nothing else, just blackness and the swirling snow.

‘I’m coming down,’ came Jonred’s voice again. ‘*Don’t move!* Just call out so I can find you.’

‘All right,’ she yelled back.

It became very quiet, the snow falling over her like a blanket, and Kira had the terrifying fear that the patrol had gone on and left her.

But Jonred’s booming voice came out of the blackness ‘Call me, Kira.’

‘Jonred,’ she called.

‘*Keep calling,*’ he ordered.

Kira couldn’t see or hear any movement above her, but she called his name, paused, then called once more.

‘Call me again,’ he shouted, a blotch appearing to her right.

‘Jonred,’ she bawled.

‘I can see you. *Don’t move.* I need to get you secured.’

He manoeuvred closer, passing a rope under her arms and about her chest, pulling it tight and fastening it to his waist.

‘The best way up is for you to put your arms round my neck and hook your legs about me,’ he said.

Kira winced as she gripped her good wrist with her skinned hand, and they began their slow and painful ascent. She was shivering uncontrollably, both from shock and the cold. It was a long way back to the top, and a cheer of relief greeted them when they finally reached it. Jonred undid the rope and stowed it in his pack, but didn’t let go of her nor mount his horse again. Vardrin took Storm, and Jonred took her, and the whole party went forward on foot.

‘It’s not much further, then we’ll get the fires going and some hot food into you. Meros must have looked after you. If you’d kept going . . .’ Jonred cleared his throat. ‘It was my mistake for not having walked earlier.’

‘It wasn’t your mistake, it was *my* fault for not holding on properly. You *told* me to hold on. It was *my* fault,’ repeated Kira, thinking of Slivkash.

Jonred said nothing, gripping Kira’s arm as they walked.

‘In any case, there’s no harm done,’ she said. ‘There’s no need for it to be discussed further.’

They went on, finally coming to the lip of a massive cave. It was open at the front, where most of the roof had fallen in, but the back still provided a large area of good shelter. The eastern part of the Keep was harder to reach than the western part, being sheer rock on all sides, except for the ‘steps’ they had climbed in by. In the dark and snow, it was a treacherous climb for the men and horses, and for anything else that sought entry.

Four fires were set at intervals along the front of the cavern, built from the pile of windfall stacked against the back wall. Kira guessed they were for protection against wolves or other creatures as much as for warmth and cooking.

The raw flesh on her belly stuck to her shirt and she winced, knowing she needed to wash it and then salve it. Jonred had told her there was water in the western part of the Keep, but also ordered she remain by the fire.

The men gathered at the other fires, bows on their shoulders, the horses tethered deeper in the cavern. Jonred handed Kira a bowl of nuts and a mug of cotzee and Kira ate, her gaze on the flickering curtain of snow falling beyond the cave’s entrance. The food and fire made her drowsy and she rested her head on her arms, careful to keep her skinned palms clear of her breeches.

She dozed until a hand on her arm brought her awake, and she stared around, disoriented. It was Tierken, his face weary. ‘You should be in your sleeping-sheet. It’s no way to rest, sitting up,’ he said, settling beside her.

Kira's neck was stiff, and she rubbed it with the back of her hand. The other fires were surrounded by sleeping men, despite a cacophony like a thousand tippets.

'What's that noise?' she asked.

'The goats in the west Keep. We've brought what's left of them in for the night. They've lost five to wolf attack – which is a lot to a Kir herder.'

'Do wolves often attack the herds?' asked Kira.

'Wolves are opportunistic. These snows are unseasonal and the herders were caught out, away from shelter. A bad combination,' he said, his voice thickened by exhaustion. 'How did you find the journey?'

'Very cold. I've never seen snow like this before.'

'Nothing else?'

'No. Just cold,' she said, eyes on the fire.

'Jonred reports you fell from Storm and came within a length of dying,' said Tierken, his hand turning her face to his. 'Don't lie to me, Kira. I won't tolerate deceit.'

'I don't want Jonred beaten for something that wasn't his fault.'

'He told me it was his lack of judgement.'

'It was *my* fault,' said Kira, jerking her face free. 'He told me to hold on tight and I didn't. Beat me if you need to beat someone!'

'Jonred also told me you escaped injury,' said Tierken, ignoring her challenge.

'I've just grazed myself, that's all. I need to wash, so I can use salve.'

'I'll take you now,' said Tierken, holding out his hand, and grimacing when Kira made no move to take it.

'It's not you,' said Kira quickly, turning her palm so he could see it.

'By Irid! Are the rest as bad?' he asked, taking her elbow and helping her up.

‘No. The others are just grazes.’

‘It’s dark in the tunnelway,’ said Tierken, selecting a piece of wood from the fire and leading her to an opening barred with sturdy branches at the cave’s back.

‘The barrier’s to stop wolves or fanchon coming up from the west Keep,’ he explained, as they made their way down the narrow tunnel. The smell of stone gave way to the odour of wet animal hair and dung, and a storm of bleatings. Beyond the goats, the herders gathered round a single fire. There was an older man with silvery hair, three younger men, several women – one nursing a child – and some small shapes that looked like sleeping children. A white horse loomed out of the darkness.

‘Kalos,’ said Kira in surprise.

‘It would have taken too long to come all the way round to The Steps,’ said Tierken tiredly. ‘Here’s the water.’

Kira pulled off her cape, but the buttons of her jacket proved more difficult with her raw palms.

‘Let me,’ said Tierken, propping the burning wood against the stone.

His nearness destroyed all thought and Kira concentrated on the fire-gilded water.

‘It was my mistake sending my men by The Steps. I thought it would be safer,’ he said, bringing the back of his fingers to her cheek. The thought of how close she’d come to death still made him sweat.

‘There’s no harm done,’ she said quickly.

‘Someone as young as you shouldn’t be so far from home,’ he said in frustration.

‘I’m not young. I’m seventeen. In my lands I –’

‘Are you injured back or front?’ he interrupted.

‘Front.’

‘Let’s see.’

Kira hesitated and Tierken impatiently pushed up her shirt and laved water over the scrapes. She winced and then a Kir child coughed.

‘I need to see that child,’ said Kira.

‘Herders’ children always cough. Time for sleep,’ said Tierken. He picked up the torch and, taking her arm, drew her back towards the tunnelway.

Kira tried to break free from his grip but his fingers tightened. ‘Leave it,’ he ordered, keeping his voice low.

‘I’m a Healer, Tierken.’

‘You need to rest.’

‘I’m a *Healer*. If you understand *nothing* else about me, understand that!’

Tierken made no reply, just marched her back to the fire and stood over her while she salved her wounds and crawled into her sleeping-sheet. Then he got into his, for once sleeping beside her.

Between the soft bleats of goats, and Tierken’s breathing, she could hear the child coughing. It was a wet cough, in need of soothing. It took a long time for sleep to come.

38

Kira waited at the cave's entrance, inhaling the ice-bright air, shivering even though she'd donned her spare shirt, jacket and cape. Each dawn took her closer to Sarnia, and the time she must bend her knee to the Terak King and beg aid. From what Tierken had said, there was no doubt it would be granted. But what frightened her most was inadvertently insulting the King by using the wrong words. She'd been awkward at her first Clancouncil, and she didn't want to be clumsy again. She was, after all, the Tremen Leader.

'The first day of winter and a full moon,' said Tierken coming to her side.

'The Shargh attacked the Tremen at the full moon,' said Kira, her thoughts on her people, wishing them safe.

'How many attacks did the Tremen suffer?'

'Five.'

'Over how long?' asked Tierken.

'Five moons.'

‘Starting when?’

‘Spring.’

‘And before then?’ he asked.

‘Nothing. We’d had season upon season of peace.’ *How little she’d appreciated it; how much she’d taken for granted. Now each day was a gift, to be taken with no expectation of another.*

Jonred appeared with the ornate container of coals, presenting it with a bow and the customary, ‘Guard it well, Fealner.’

‘With my life,’ responded Tierken.

Kira turned to follow Jonred but Tierken stopped her. ‘You will ride with me during the first part of the journey.’

Like the patrolmen, the Kir herders were ready to leave, their heavy packs on their backs, even the children carrying bundles. Tierken saddled Kalos and pulled the girth tight, Slivkash and the other Kirs likewise busy but keeping up a shouted conversation with the herders. The Kir child still coughed and Kira strode off through the goats. They looked at her with their strange white and blue eyes as they shuffled aside.

‘Kira!’ shouted Tierken, irritated, but she’d reached the small group of Kirs, and was already raking around in her pack for the pouch of annin leaves.

‘We don’t have time for this,’ hissed Tierken, coming to her side.

‘Tell the mother to break the leaves up and mix them with boiling water and honey,’ Kira said to Tierken, handing over the annin leaves. ‘The child should sip the mixture for the cough.’

Tierken translated, and there was much bowing and smiling from the group as Tierken took Kira’s arm and propelled her back to the horses.

‘I told you last night to leave it,’ he said, mounting and offering his hand.

‘And I told you I was a Healer.’

‘Your wrist, not your hand. You don’t want to do yourself more damage,’ said Tierken impatiently, pulling her up behind him. ‘We’ve a long day ahead, too long for unnecessary delays.’

‘Stopping a child’s cough is not an *unnecessary delay*,’ retorted Kira. ‘Would the Terak King want you to deny his people healing?’

‘We have Feailners not Kings.’

‘Well, would the Terak *Feailner* deny his people healing?’

‘He would if it delayed his patrol’s return,’ said Tierken, as they made their way down the snowy slope.

‘Then I’m glad I’m not Terak,’ said Kira.

‘No, you’re exéal,’ said Tierken.

They reached the bottom of the slope and cantered round the front of the Keep in a broad loop, the silence between them as icy as the ground. From the plain the caverns looked like gaping eyes, while ahead the land fell away in a massive blue fold in the snow. Tierken brought Kalos to a halt well south of it, waiting for Jonred’s group to finish their careful descent.

‘Ember Chasm’s probably another collapsed cave like the east and west Keep,’ he said. ‘It’s thought to be about a hundred lengths deep, but no one knows. It claims quite a few goats, and I’ve seen wolves go over when they’re pack-hunting and unaware. Men have died in it as well. You’re the first person I’ve known to survive it,’ he added, reaching back and touching her leg gently.

It was a peace offering but Kira didn’t trust herself to respond, still struggling with her anger over Tierken’s willingness to deny the Kir child healing.

They set off, the day staying fine. Kira would have enjoyed the journey had her hands not been so sore, her grip on the saddle-strap rubbing off the newly formed scabs. Tierken kept Kalos’s pace steady, despite his earlier ill temper at their delay, and it was close to midday when they came to the end of the snow, the edge as sharp as a knife-cut.

‘If you’re going to get early snow, it will be between Cover-cape Crest and Breshlin,’ said Tierken over his shoulder.

‘Is that snow ahead too?’ asked Kira, peering at a shining strip of white above the plain.

‘That’s the Silvercades,’ replied Tierken. ‘They’re snowy always.’

Another name from the map! Kira’s heart quickened, for she knew that nestled at the feet of the Silvercades was Sarnia. The end to her quest was in sight at last.

‘How much further to Sarnia?’ she asked.

‘Two days from Breshlin Ford, which we’ll reach by dusk. Whether we set camp there or go on, depends.’

Two days! Soon she would be standing before the Terak King – no, the Terak *Feailner*. It was odd *and* confusing that both Tierken and the man who ruled over all the Terak bore the title ‘Feailner’. Perhaps the Terak ruler had another part to his title that set him apart. In Allogrenia there were Clanleaders and Protector Leaders, as well as the Tremen Leader. In her own case, she was ‘Tremen Leader Feailner’ in recognition of her ability to take pain. Perhaps Tierken’s title ‘Feailner’ recognised his special role of carrying the fire, as well as his status as a Leader or Commander.

The northern titles were complicated, but what made her most anxious was that Tierken had no knowing of the Tremen and, given that he outranked Marin, he should. And if *he* had no knowing, it was likely the northern ruler wouldn’t either.

Kira groped about for something to reassure herself with.

The Tain hadn’t known anything about the Tremen, and their lands were a lot closer, she recalled. But if she was going to have to convince the northern ruler of the Tremen’s existence *before* begging aid, it was going to make her task horribly difficult.

‘What distresses you?’ asked Tierken, turning.

‘Nothing,’ muttered Kira, not meeting his eyes.

‘I can feel your agitation. Are you in pain?’

'My hands hurt.'

'Is that all?' said Tierken, staring at her shrewdly.

Kira could think of nothing acceptable to say that was also true, so remained silent.

'We'll be at the Breshlin soon and you can tell me then,' he said.

39

The Breshlin River appeared with its usual surprising suddenness, for its shallow banks allowed it to merge into the plain. Tierken peered up its gleaming flow towards the Silvercades as he splashed through the ford's broad shallows. The waters carried the tang of the Kessomi forests, the sweetest taste in all his lands, Tierken thought, as he lowered Kira to the ground.

It was a long time since breakfast at the Keep, and if they went on it would be deep into the night before they ate again. Either Ges Grove or The Ials would suit, but The Ials would take them further east than he wanted. Or they could spend the night here in the sparse shelter of the therinwoods, meaning the Marken would have to wait another day for his return, as would Laryia, unfortunately.

'Should we stay here or go on to Ges?' Tierken asked Marin, as his Commander came level.

'I don't think Meros is going to send us another nasty dump of snow, but it'll be a cold night,' said Marin, peering west. 'There's probably a bit more shelter in the Ges, Feailner.'

It would mean a lot of travel in the dark, increasing the risk of falls despite the full moon, but if they went on they'd reach Sarnia the day after next – in daylight. He considered the advantages *and* disadvantages of that briefly, frowning as he thought of Kira's likely reception.

'A quick meal, Marin, then we'll go to Ges.'

'Yes, Feailner.'

Marin moved off and issued orders while Tierken extricated his waterskin from his pack and went back to the river. Kira stood fidgeting on its banks, her eyes like sunlight on metal, as they darted between the mountains and the horses.

'Tell me what troubles you,' he said, crouching on the bank to fill his waterskin.

'It's something you said before about Feailners, which I don't understand . . .'

'What don't you understand?' said Tierken, searching his mind for what might have distressed her.

'You said the Terak have Feailners, not Kings, but you're called Feailner. Do the Terak use the title "Feailner" for leaders of patrols as well as for the ruler of all the Terak people?'

'No,' said Tierken. 'There's only one Feailner.'

Kira gaped at him, the truth dawning. And then the understanding hit her. 'But . . . you don't know the Tremem,' she blurted in horror, in Terak.

Tierken's astonishment flashed to anger as he realised she'd understood his speech all along.

'Of all the deceitful . . .' he exclaimed, seizing her arm and dragging her off along the bank until they were out of the men's earshot. 'You speak Terak! What are you – a spy? Everything you've told me since we've been together's been a lie!' he hissed, shaking her savagely before releasing her.

'I've told you no lies!' retorted Kira, rubbing her arms but unbowed by his fury. 'I speak Tremem!'

Tierken could hear Poerin's acerbic words above the thunder of his blood. *Uncomfortable facts, Tierken! Face them now or rue you didn't in the future!*

'It's the same language,' she said more quietly.

'Similar it might be, the same it isn't!' spat Tierken. 'It was pure deceit to eavesdrop on everything we said. What else you've lied about we'll discover in Sarnia *and* the reasons for your falsehoods. I want nothing more to do with you. You'll ride with Jonred.'

Tierken strode off fuming, but Kira remained where she was, realising miserably that she couldn't have made a poorer beginning with the Terak Feailner. And she could see why he was upset. But by the time she'd become confident that the men really *did* mean to protect her – rather than kill her like the Shargh – it had been too late to reveal her understanding of their tongue. And it would have raised too many questions, the answers to which were for the northern ruler's ears alone – Tierken's, as it turned out.

The patrol ate quickly – maizen bread and cotzee – then the fires were quenched and they were on their way. They spoke openly of the Feailner's clash with their 'guest', but when Jonred spoke to Kira, he did so courteously in Onespeak. Kira replied in Onespeak also, wondering why Tierken hadn't announced her 'deceit' to the entire patrol. It was a relief that he hadn't.

Tierken's guts roiled as he rode and it took him till nightfall to be able to think dispassionately again. He told himself that all that had really happened was that he'd taken a patrol to the edge of the Tain lands, his men had rescued a woman from the Shargh, and he had given her protection as he was obliged to do. Because he had to return to Sarnia in time for the Feailmark, his protection of the woman meant that she must accompany them north, his generosity rewarded by the goodwill she'd garnered for his people from the Ashmiri. All in all, he reassured himself, it had been a highly successful patrol.

Except he'd lost the ability to differentiate lies from truth, had broken the tenets of protection by kissing Kira and, despite her lies, could think of no explanation for her eyes and face and tongue. She had definitely spoken Terak, but surely she couldn't be Terak *or* Kessomi?

In the end, he gave up trying to solve the puzzle, having to concentrate on finding the safest route over the darkened ground instead. And despite the anger that lingered at her deceit, he couldn't bring himself to regret that she was coming to Sarnia.

40

Ges Grove was composed entirely of alwaysgreens, and the patrolmen set camp deep within their fragrant darkness. Jonred had gone with the horses and left Kira with Marin. But Kira was too restless to sit, going to the tree nearest Marin's fire, and beginning to climb. She needed to be within the tree's deep shelter, to let the cocoon of cool spiciness help her plan how to win back Tierken's trust. The task seemed impossible, but so had crossing the Dendora once, Kira comforted herself.

Tierken ensured the camp was fully ordered before going to Marin's fire, in no rush to confront his gold-eyed guest again. But Marin was alone.

'Our *guest* sleeps?' he asked, as Marin passed him cotzee.

'Up that tree.'

'You let her climb -' started Tierken, his residual anger replaced by alarm.

'She's from a forest, she knows trees,' said Marin, offering Tierken a plate of warmed jackin and maizen bread.

'She's under our protection,' said Tierken, taking the food.

‘It didn’t look like it at the Breshlin.’

Tierken grunted and began to eat. ‘She speaks Terak,’ he said, after a while.

Marin’s eyebrows rose in surprise. ‘Have you asked her how it’s so?’

‘She says it’s Tremen.’

‘They’re the same language?’

‘So she claims. But we both know they can’t be,’ said Tierken.

‘She has your eyes and face, and now speaks your tongue,’ said Marin. ‘It would be wise to find out why.’ He looked up at the rustling branches of the tree Kira had climbed.

‘The Sarsalin stops at Sarnia gate,’ Marin continued, picking up his plate and mug and joining the men at the other fire.

Tierken stared after him. Marin was reminding Tierken that those in Sarnia could use Kira against him.

There was a soft plop as Kira’s pack dropped to the forest floor, then Kira plummeted through the branches, curled her shoulder into a roll and came back up and onto her feet.

‘By Irid!’ exclaimed Tierken, leaping up thinking she’d fallen. ‘We need to talk,’ he said, his heart still racing, as she calmly brushed the leaves from her breeches.

Kira came back to the fire and sat where he gestured, eyeing him warily.

‘Tell me of your family,’ he ordered, deciding to start with the easy things.

‘My father was Maxen of Kashclan, my mother was Fasarini of Sarclan, my brothers were Merek, Lern and Kandor.’

So much for ‘easy’ things. ‘Your family were killed by the Shargh?’ guessed Tierken, forcing himself on.

‘Apart from my mother, who died when I was young.’

Kira’s answers were businesslike, but her hands were clenched. The language *was* the same, even down to the Kessomi lilt and

phrasing, like his grandmother spoke. She *had* to be Kessomi or Terak!

‘I know you’re Kashclan. What are the other clans called?’ asked Tierken.

‘Sarclan, Tarclan, Morclan, Renclan, Kenclan, Barclan and Sherclan.’

The names told him nothing. ‘Do they have their own lands?’

‘The longhouses are a half day’s walk apart and each clan has gathering rights within a fixed boundary around them. Allogrenia’s like the spokes of a wheel, with the longhouses and their octads fanning out from the Bough in the centre.’

‘Your settlement’s called *Allogrenia*? Like these trees?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s the Bough?’ asked Tierken, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to ease his tension.

‘It was the most beautiful building in Allogrenia, as befits a place of healing,’ said Kira, eyes fluorescing. ‘Kasheron built it.’

Tierken stared at her, wondering if he’d misheard.

‘Kasheron and his followers established a place of healing in the forests, after they’d left behind the warring ways of the north,’ continued Kira, eyes brighter than the flames.

Of all the things Tierken feared Kira might say, the ludicrous impossibility of her assertion was a relief. Kasheron and his followers had fled north beyond the Oskinas Sea, and here was a woman claiming he’d gone in the opposite direction, into the forests, of all places! Tierken threw back his head and laughed, and it was a moment before he realised she actually believed what she said.

‘Kasheron took his cowardly skin, and those of his followers, north, over the Oskinas,’ he said, sobering. ‘They deserted, leaving Terak to fight alone. If it weren’t for Terak’s bravery, *and* the loyalty of the Kirs and Illians who fought with him, the Shargh would be doing to the rest of us what they’ve already done to you!’

Her eyes were the lightest he'd ever seen, and she was breathing as if she'd been running.

He softened his voice. 'It's late,' he said, rising. 'We'll speak more on this in Sarnia.'

'I was journeying to Sarnia when Caledon confined me in Maraschin,' she said, scrambling to her feet.

'Confined?' said Tierken sharply.

'I was going there to seek aid from our kin – from you.'

'Kasheron went north over the seas,' repeated Tierken.

'As Terak Feailner, I call upon you to honour the kin-tie and aid the Tremen against the Shargh attacks.'

'There *is* no kin-tie!'

'I carry Kasheron's ring, the ring of both our peoples,' said Kira, drawing out something from under her shirt.

'Whose ever it is, it's not Kasheron's, unless you've also lied about being from the southern forests instead of beyond the Oskinas,' said Tierken, his attention on pushing an errant coal back into the fire-hole. 'We've an early start, Kira. I suggest you get some sleep,' he added, not wanting to argue with her again.

'So the Terak Feailner refuses his *obligation* to aid his kin?' pursued Kira.

Tierken sighed. 'You're neither blood-tied nor treated,' he said, keeping his temper in check by reminding himself that given Kira's belief, her reaction was predictable. And as she wasn't Kessomi, Terak or Kasheron's blood, only one explanation remained.

'Your people must have entered the forests when all peoples wandered in solitary groups,' he said, as gently as he could. 'For reasons known only to themselves, they've concocted a history centred on Prince Kasheron who lived later. Small peoples do that sometimes, seeking the glory of other peoples' histories. I know this must be difficult for you to accept, but all I can suggest is that if your people need help, they should treaty with the Tain, who are at least close. I bid you goodnight, Kira.'

41

Kira lay sleepless in her gifan, endlessly replaying their words together. If she'd said things *differently*, *not* said things, led into the topic more *slowly*, more *quickly*, been *more* forceful, *less* forceful, actually thrust the ring under Tierken's nose and made him look at it . . . would any of it have made a difference? According to the Terak, Kasheran had *deserted* and gone over the seas.

Tierken was young but he was the Feailner, and if he believed it, everyone else probably did too, including any older advisers, *and* those in Sarnia with the best knowing of Terak histories. She had the ring of rulership that Kasheran had taken as firstborn, but the Terak had most likely had another one forged. There was also her northern sword and herbing sickle, but she'd seen similar ones in Maraschin, so they wouldn't serve as proof. The most compelling evidence for her claim was in their shared eyes, looks and tongue, but Tierken had dismissed these as coming from a time *before* Kasheran. It was a convenient way of keeping the Tremen exeat, thought Kira bitterly. Even his suggestion that

the Tremen make a treaty with the Tain was something that Caledon already intended.

Kira finally gave up on sleep and crawled out of her gifan, surprised to see Marin sitting near the fire.

‘Jonred’s on guard duty. Do you need time alone?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Kira, settling beside him.

‘Dawn’s close,’ said Marin, putting a pan of water on to heat.

‘Do you know how a treaty is made, Commander Marin?’

‘Treaties or alliances are pledges exchanged by leaders of peoples who have known each other in friendship for many seasons,’ said Marin.

Kira said nothing, thinking of Kasheran. He had broken all friendships at the Sundering, and the isolation of the forest had sustained the breach. She’d never seen the Sundering in this light before. It was as if she were on the outside of the trees looking in, rather than on the inside looking out.

‘One more night and we’ll be in Sarnia,’ said Marin.

Kira swallowed nervously, thinking of the tales of the barbarous city of metal and dead stone.

‘There’s nothing to fear in Sarnia,’ said Marin softly, pouring water into cups and adding spices.

‘You . . . you have a bondm . . . *wife* there?’ asked Kira.

‘I do indeed, and a daughter about your age and a son of thirteen seasons,’ said Marin with a smile. ‘Tisia is soon to be married, but Stinian insists on following in my footsteps, despite me warning him he’d be better working wood or metal,’ said Marin, his pride plain.

‘Now, as Jonred’s busy, you’ll have to put up with my cooking. We’ll travel all day, so you’ll need something to stick to those ribs of yours.’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘You look hungry, but I’m not sure for what,’ he said, handing her a cup of cotzee.

Kira flushed, but Marin's gaze shifted to a point over her shoulder, and he poured another cup of cotzee, set it next to the fire and moved away.

'You're up early,' said Tierken in Terak, sitting beside her.

'So are you,' said Kira, resisting the urge to use Onespeak. Continuing their argument from last night wasn't going to be useful in achieving her quest.

'I must have spread my sleeping-sheet on a root,' said Tierken lightly. 'Not conducive to a good night's sleep. We've just one more night on the plain,' he went on. 'I've sent scouts ahead to inform the Domain of your arrival. Laryia will prepare rooms for you, clean clothing, and anything else you need.'

'Is Laryia your wife?'

'Do you think I would have kissed you if I were married?' said Tierken, looking shocked.

'Well, your men speak of the women they can get by trickery or subterfuge and how they can hide their conquests from their wives.'

'There are faithless men *and* women in most lands,' said Tierken, 'even in the forests, I suspect. Aren't there?'

'Probably,' said Kira, keeping her eyes on her cotzee.

There was a short silence.

'I understand why you're upset, Kira,' he said gently. 'When we get to Sarnia, and you've had a chance to rest, and eat properly, and feel safe, we will talk again. Then you will understand.'

The patrol had breakfasted and were on the move again by dawn. Kira rode with Jonred all day, keeping her gaze on the Silvercades while she listened to the men discussing what they would do on their return: the wagering, the alehouses and the women of the Caru Quarter. They said nothing of use in her mission to gain help from the Terak, and Kira felt increasingly weary from searching her own mind for things she might do.

She wondered sourly whether if Kest had made the kinship claim Tierken would have accepted it, as he was a fighter like the Terak. But Kest was far away in the southern forests.

The sun began to sink, and Marin shouted orders, the patrol wheeling east towards a scattering of trees emerging from a dip, their growth too sparse to be a grove. There was no spring, just a series of shallow puddles, as if a stream ran just beneath the ground. Jonred set her down and rode off, and Kira watched men collect windfall for the fires, take the horses to drink, and pitch gifans – a sign it was going to be a cold night. Two or three rode away on scout, looking for wolves or Shargh, or grazing people, pasture growth or stream flow.

Kira looked at the trees, her thoughts on Allogrenia. There were groves of ashaels and castellas there, chrysens and fallowoods, steep stony places, streams and springs; places alive with birds and brightwings; quiet places full of emerald light, and Shelter. Here the sky stretched from horizon to horizon, ungentled by leaf-shadow.

Tierken approached on Kalos and halted in front of her, and Kira stroked Kalos's muzzle, comforted by his beauty. His muzzle was the colour of storm clouds, and she was surprised at how soft it was. How could Kasheron have turned his back on these glorious creatures, walked deep into the trees and never returned?

'Kira, come,' said Tierken. 'I want to show you something.'

Reluctantly Kira took Tierken's hand and he pulled her up behind him, turning Kalos and urging him to a canter.

They went east, the land rising steadily, then dipping. A steep-sided hill erupted, from the plain set with a massive tor that sparkled in the setting sun. Kalos's powerful haunches propelled them up the near-vertical slope and on to the small circle of flat land on the top. Tierken brought him to a stop and lowered Kira down.

'The Terak call this Terak's Tor, but the Kessomis call it Helin's Twin,' said Tierken. 'It's due south of Helin Peak, the

highest point in the Silvercades and made of similar stone. To the Kirs, it's *Mindolin* – the spear; to the Illians, *Fleam* – the sword.'

The stone was set with chips of crystal like the stone in the Warens, reminding Kira of waking there after the Shargh attack, and knowing everything was gone.

'What think you?' asked Tierken.

'That it's very unusual,' said Kira, not wanting to speak of that time.

'I didn't bring you here to show you Terak's Tor. Come, or you'll miss it,' said Tierken. He led her to the northern side of the tor and, leaning back onto the stone, he turned her so her back rested against him, then folded his arms round her shoulders.

'Watch,' he said softly, his gaze on the mountains.

The sun slipped to the horizon and the Silvercades burned with golden fire. Then, as the sun dipped lower, they washed to an intense pink, then a gentler rose. The beauty dissolved Kira's residue of resentment, and awareness of Tierken's nearness flooded her senses, her need of him suddenly overpowering.

She turned and drew his mouth to hers, his surprise momentary, then his kisses as intense as hers. The smell and feel of him was intoxicating, and it was Tierken who eventually pulled away, leaving her dazed by the sudden lack of him.

'You're under my protection,' he said, his eyes as bright as the sunset.

'There's only *now*,' said Kira, trying to come back to his arms.

'I'll make it so you'll be happy in Sarnia,' said Tierken, holding her shoulders.'

Kira jerked away. How could she possibly be happy with a people who, by insisting Kasheron went over the seas, denied her very existence?

The Silvercades were a chill blue now, bleak and lonely looking.

‘Time to go,’ said Tierken.

They rode back to camp. Only one fire had been set, but it was large, with all the men gathered round it. Their eyes were curious as they watched Kira and Tierken approach.

‘Stay with Marin,’ said Tierken, as he set her down.

Kira intended to sit behind the Commander, but Marin shifted sideways and she settled beside him.

‘How did you like Terak’s Tor?’ he asked, his words carrying to the men, as if he were trying to protect her and Tierken from their gossip.

‘It’s big,’ she said.

Marin laughed. ‘The Teraks, Kirs and Illians, would agree with you, but not the Kessomis. The Kessomis have even been known to call Terak’s Tor a pebble.

‘Eat up,’ he went on, passing her a mug of cotzee and a plate of roasted nuts. ‘It’s your last meal of the plain’s food. You’ll eat better on the morrow’s night in Sarnia, where there’s a vast array of foods. The land in the Rehan Valley is rich, and traders bring other things from the ports.’

‘I’ll look forward to that,’ said Kira, wanting to please him.

‘Niria will have a rare feast waiting to welcome me home,’ he said, sighing contentedly.

‘Is Niria your wife?’

‘Of course. I’m not like some here.’

‘Doesn’t she miss you when you’re gone?’ asked Kira, sipping her cotzee.

‘We’ve been a long time together. Niria knows what it is to be married to a patrolman.’

‘How often do patrols go out?’ asked Kira.

‘The Feailner’s been in Sarnia three seasons and in that time he’s been out about once a moon. This patrol’s been short. Some last fourteen or fifteen days.’

‘That must be hard for your wife.’

‘There are other Commanders,’ said Marin. ‘I don’t always come.’

‘Why does the Feailner patrol so often?’

‘To remind the Terak, Kirs, Illians and Kessomis that they’re one people, and to train them in horsemanship and fighting. If fighting comes, they’ll need to know all of their lands, not just their favourite corners, and they’ll need to know *what* they’re fighting for, too.’

Marin settled back with his mug of cotzee. ‘It’s also true that *young* men with time on their hands are likely to turn it to ill purpose. The patrols put their energies to good use.’

The talk around the fire ebbed and after a time Slivkash began to sing, his pure voice joined by the other Kirs.

‘Are there herders nearby?’ whispered Kira.

‘Not according to the scouts. On the final night of a patrol, we sing of the time spent together under the stars,’ murmured Marin. ‘It’s a time of thanking Meros and Irid for the true hearts of our fellow travellers and for ensuring our safety. Kirs sing with Kirs, and they usually begin, for they’ve fine singing voices – it’s where the Feailner got his. The Teraks go next, then the Illians, then the Kessomis and back to the Kirs. We make our own lay-link.’

The Kirs’ voices softened, drawing out the last note, Tierken singing with them. Before the music died, Jonred, Shird, Vardrin and the other Teraks started, Tierken singing again. He would sing with all of them, Kira realised, for they were his people.

Their singing reminded Kira of her status as an outsider, of not being part of Tierken’s song, but also of the music played at Turning, and she scrambled away from the fire.

‘Do you wish time alone?’ asked Marin following her.

‘I *am* alone, Marin, whether I wish it or not,’ she said, and Marin’s face softened.

‘Show me my gifan, and I’ll remain there,’ she managed to say.

Marin pointed to a gifan and she crawled into it, Marin watching until the flap fell back into place. The singing was clear through the gifan's walls and Kira wrapped her head in her arms and wept.

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The next day Jonred was off on scout and Kira rode behind Marin, the Commander far more verbose than Jonred, and keeping up a constant commentary on the lands about them. The juts of land to each side were the Rehan and Lehan Spurs; the land they traversed, the Rehan Valley; the river glinting to the west – the Rehan; to the east – the Steelwater.

Kira took the opportunity to ask Marin about those who helped Tierken rule, and learned of the Marken and a man called the Keeper of the Domain. The Marken were a group of men who had advised the previous Feailner, Darid, and Kira gained the impression that they weren't well disposed towards Tierken – or he to them. She was reminded of Adris chafing under King Beris's rule, and wondered whether, in the event of her convincing the Marken of the kin-link, Tierken would accept their advice in any case.

The Keeper of the Domain seemed a more promising possibility, for Marin's words suggested that there was friendship between him and Tierken. The Keeper of the Domain was also the son of

one of the Marken, and Kira wondered if she could make use of this link.

The day drew on and Kira grew increasingly anxious. The lands they now rode through were as alien as the stone city, filled with fruiting trees, lush plants in rows, goats contained by fences, animals that bellowed and fat birds pecking the earth. There were short longhouses, and people working among the greenery who bowed low as the patrol passed. Kira's heart quickened and she turned her face away. She didn't feel strong enough to bear the stares, and she was painfully aware of how dirty and unkempt she was.

The city had domed roofs, Marin was saying, as Terak had brought stone-smiths from afar, who'd built in the manner of their own country. Kira found it increasingly hard to concentrate on his words. The city wall was clearly visible, the stone buildings marching up the foothills like a clutch of shattered eggs. All the tales that Tremen children told to frighten each other, and themselves, came back to her, making her sweat. None of them were true, Kira told herself: the patrolmen had treated her with kindness and courtesy, Marin had a family there he loved, and Tierken had pledged to care for her.

It was no use. She was trembling now, and nauseous. 'I need time alone,' she choked, clutching Marin's arm.

Marin shouted an order and slowed but Kira slid to the ground before he'd stopped and took several unsteady steps away.

'Marin said you needed time alone,' said Tierken, coming to her side.

'I do, but not in the way he means,' said Kira, trying to still her breathing.

'What troubles you?' asked Tierken.

'In my lands . . .' She took a shuddering breath. 'In my lands we tell many tales of Sarnia, and none of them good,' she said, with her gaze on the ground, feeling foolish.

‘You will be safe in Sarnia, Kira. Will you trust me in this?’ he asked, his fingers lifting her face to his.

She flushed, aware that they were in full view of the patrol, but Tierken waited for her answer. He was Terak and kin, despite his denial. She nodded, unable to speak. He smiled then, and taking her hand led her back to where Marin held Kalos. Irid seemed to have intervened again, thought Tierken. When he’d decided to time his return to Sarnia in daylight, he’d half considered riding into his city with Kira in front of him on Kalos.

It would give the Sarnian gossips a rare bone to gnaw on, but the idea had seemed less sensible the closer he drew to the city. Now Kira’s fear seemed to require that he continue his plan.

‘I’ll take her up front with me,’ he said to Marin.

‘Do you think that’s wise, Feailner?’

‘She’s under my protection.’

‘That’s not how the city will see it, not on top of the talk that’s run before us,’ said Marin, keeping his voice low.

‘And how will they see it, Commander?’ said Tierken, making no effort to quieten his voice.

‘That you bring a bride back to Sarnia.’

‘Let the city think that, if it gives them pleasure,’ said Tierken.

The patrol watched in silence as Marin lifted Kira up onto Kalos. They went on at a gentle pace, a wash of tinkling music distracting her from the appalling nearness of the gate.

‘Why is there music?’ she asked after a while.

‘Sarnia uses bells to welcome the Feailner home. They’re also rung when a Feailner is born, marries and dies,’ said Tierken.

There were people on the wall and an excited hubbub all but drowned out the bells.

‘Patrols usually return at night, so they’re enjoying the novelty,’ explained Tierken.

Kira kept her eyes on Kalos's ears until the patrol had passed through the gate, and Tierken had issued orders to Marin. The men turned their horses towards stables set in the wall's shadow, Kalos tossing his head, keen to follow. Tierken kept him still. The crowd remained, too, quieter now, and gathered a respectful distance away. Kira saw a broad paved path running in a straight line up the slope to another wall and set of gates. The Domain, she presumed, from what Tierken and Marin had said earlier. The path was paved with rough stones, quite different to the smooth paving on either side. She could see nothing that resembled a Haelen.

After a few moments the gates opened and two silver horses emerged and galloped down the path towards them, the crowd watching excitedly. The pace seemed too fast for the slope but neither horse slipped, the black-clad riders halting beside them.

The men reminded Kira of the King's Guard, having the same honed fighting quality, the same uncompromising faces – now examining her impassively – and the same glint of metal on their clothing.

'These are the Domain Guard,' said Tierken. 'They are sworn to protect the Feailner and his family. They will accompany you wherever you go.'

'This is my guest – the Lady Kira of the Tremen,' Tierken said loudly to the Guard, who bowed their heads towards her.

He'd told the crowd who she was and given her a title he'd never used before. But Kira didn't want to be 'the Lady Kira' here any more than in Maraschin.

'This is Guard Leader Tharin and Guard Second Daril,' continued Tierken, then gestured to the Guard who brought their horses behind, as Tierken at last turned Kalos up the path, keeping him to a walk. Kira would have been happy with a flat gallop at that moment, to escape the eyes of the gathering.

The Domain wall was high and the gates solid, with black-clad Guards arrayed either side. Beyond lay a massive courtyard, and Kira shrank back into Tierken's arms without realising it.

'You're safe here,' he reiterated.

A storm of whinnying broke out, further jangling her nerves, then Kalos responded, making Tierken laugh. He lifted Kira lightly down, then dismounted as a grey-haired man appeared.

Tierken went forward to greet him, the older man looking towards Kira and nodding at regular intervals. At last Tierken handed him Kalos's reins, and with a final clap on his horse's neck, came back.

'Horse Master Ryn's in charge of the Domain Stables and will continue your riding lessons after you've settled and things are more familiar,' he said.

Tierken spoke as if she'd be here for moons, Kira thought anxiously, as she followed him towards an immense domed building many times bigger than the Crown Room at King's Hall.

'That's the Meeting Hall and the rooms from where the city and the Terak lands are administered,' said Tierken. 'The left wing is Rehan, where the Marken stay during the Feailmark. The rooms where you will reside are in the right wing, the Lehan, where my family lives.'

Kira barely listened, fixated by an immense fiery window set high in the building's dome.

'It's coloured glass,' said Tierken, noticing her gaze. 'By all accounts, it took nearly two seasons to finish and cost a bag of gold traders. It looks well enough when the sun's on it.'

'It's got the alwaysgreen and the running horse,' gasped Kira.

'The allogrenia and the galloping horse are the sign of my people,' explained Tierken.

'I know, it's on the ring,' she replied, catching Tierken's hands and staring at them. None of his fingers bore a ring of that design. 'Didn't Terak have another one made?' she asked in mystification.

‘What?’

‘After Kasheron took the ring, didn’t –’

‘Tierken!’ came a cry of pure delight, and a young woman in a gown of brilliant red dashed from behind the colonnades, across the open paving, and threw herself into Tierken’s arms.

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Kira couldn't see the woman's face, for it was buried in Tierken's shoulder. Then a man hurried across the courtyard, smiling broadly.

Tierken released the woman and embraced the man, who looked like a younger Marin, but with darker, wider-set eyes. The woman laughed, dark-eyed and dark-haired like the man, but with flawless creamy skin.

Finally Tierken turned back to Kira. 'Kira, this is my sister Laryia, and my friend Farid, who administers the city while I'm on patrol.'

The man bowed but Kira lost sight of him as she was enfolded in Laryia's arms, her sweet scent and glossy braids reminding Kira of her own unwashed state.

'You are most welcome, Kira,' said Laryia warmly. 'And you're so like to my brother! When the scouts said they were bringing a gold-eyed woman whose face was a looking-glass of the Feailner's, I didn't believe them!' Laryia laughed, her eyes darting between Kira and Tierken.

'I'll be taken up with the Feailmark for the next few days,' Tierken said to Kira, 'so Laryia will look after your needs and show you the sights of Sarnia. Mid-market's soon, and I know you'll find that enjoyable. I'll be free after that for us to speak again.'

Kira said nothing, wondering what, if anything, she could do in the meantime that would gain Tierken's acceptance of the kin-tie.

A tense silence ensued and Laryia's smile became less certain.

'Come,' she said at last, linking her arm through Kira's. 'You've had a long ride and men are not the most caring of creatures when it comes to washing and clean clothes. I'll show you your rooms and you can bathe. Then we'll eat.'

Tierken moved off, his arm draped over Farid's shoulders, his whole demeanour different to that of the plains. He was home and clearly well content with how he'd arranged things.

Laryia shared little of her face with Tierken, except her smile, which was genuine and welcoming as she led Kira across the courtyard.

'I've had a room prepared for you. You'll be able to look out on the Silvercades,' said Laryia, as they passed through colonnades towards stone steps.

'The rooms here belong to the Domain servers,' she continued, gesturing at the doors they passed. 'They prepare the Domain meals, clean the rooms and the courtyards and order the records. Mouras, the Room Master, will assign a server to look after your needs.'

'My needs?' asked Kira.

'Keep your clothes, clean your rooms, dress your hair . . .'

Laryia, avoiding looking at Kira's hair.

'I'm happy to do these things myself,' said Kira.

Laryia laughed, as they climbed the stairs. 'That's what I said when we first came from Kessom. In Kessom you do everything

for yourself, but here servers are part of *the dignity and respect of the Domain*,' she mocked.

'So is Farid a server?' asked Kira, as they turned along the balcony.

'By Irid, no! He's Tierken's closest friend and Keeper of the Domain, overseeing the city while Tierken's on patrol. And he's Rosham's son, of all people.'

Laryia clearly disliked Rosham, but Kira was too overwhelmed to ask for more information. The balcony gave a good view of the symmetrical pattern of paving and paths extending from the Domain gates, and of a circular pool set directly below. It was stone-edged, with a tree made from stone at its centre, water bubbling up through its trunk and cascading from its branches.

'That's the Owl Fountain, put there by Queen Kiraon,' said Laryia. 'The branches have little owls carved in them - for Queen Kiraon loved owls - but you can't see them from here. These are Tierken's rooms,' she said, brushing her fingers over a heavily carved timber door, 'but Tierken doesn't use them much. He usually sleeps and eats in the Meeting Hall - when he's here, that is. These are my rooms, and these will be yours.'

The three sets of doors looked identical.

Laryia turned the heavy metal key in Kira's door, pushing it open to reveal a large room with an ornate table, carved chairs, chests of pale wood and shelves fixed to the walls holding lamps, and ornaments of wood and stone.

'It's a little plain,' said Laryia apologetically. 'I might have misunderstood, but the scout told me to take anything metal out. Unfortunately there's still some in the bathing-room and in the lamps, but you'll need the lamps at night. I can bring the bowls and candle holders back if you wish; they're Kir work but enamelled, and will brighten things up.'

'No, I thank you,' said Kira.

‘Your sleeping-room’s through here,’ said Laryia, leading the way through more doors into a large airy room with three windows along the wall, and an enormous bed positioned under them. The bed was covered with a rich green cloth embroidered with dark swirling leaves, and the plush floor rug had the same design.

‘The scout said your home was in a forest so I tried to find things you might like,’ said Laryia.

‘They’re very beautiful,’ said Kira, touched by Laryia’s thoughtfulness.

‘You can see Helin Peak,’ said Laryia, peering out the window. ‘The smaller one to the left is Kalin, and the one to the right, Mintlin. Kessom is south of Mintlin but you can’t see it from here.’

‘Tierken told me you grew up there,’ said Kira.

‘Yes, with our grandmother Eris, who took us there after our mother died.’

‘Didn’t your father want you here?’

‘He drowned only a few moons later in snowmelt floods. I don’t remember either my mother or my father, but Tierken does. Perhaps that’s why . . .’ Laryia shrugged. ‘Anyway, after his death, the Feailner – my father’s elder brother, Darid – was more than happy for Tierken and me to go to Kessom. Darid didn’t want Tierken in the Domain, hoping for his own *brown-eyed* son,’ said Laryia.

‘But Terak had gold eyes,’ said Kira, puzzled.

‘Yes, I know – it makes no sense. Terak built Sarnia, and his mother, Queen Kiraon – who also had gold eyes – was greatly loved. But after Kasheron deserted, gold eyes took on the stain of faithlessness as well,’ she said, then coloured, as she looked at Kira’s eyes.

‘Even after Darid’s wife died, Darid refused to send for Tierken,’ Laryia rushed on. ‘But Eris made sure Tierken was

trained for the feailnership even more rigorously than if he'd been raised as a Feailner's son.'

'Does Eris come to the Domain often?' asked Kira.

'Sleep in a city of stone?' snorted Laryia. 'Not Eris. She wouldn't even come for Tierken's rites of rulership, despite how much it meant to her.'

'That must have been hard for Tierken,' said Kira.

'Not nearly as difficult as not being able to see Eris since we've been here.'

'Why in the 'green not?' asked Kira.

'We had to . . . Tierken had to break from Kessom, because Kessom's a place of healing and Kasherom was a Healer. The taint was doubled. Eris understands.'

'But Tierken said he'd take me to Kessom,' said Kira, wondering if the promise was no more than a bribe.

'To Kessom?' said Laryia in astonishment.

'To meet your grandmother. I'm a Healer and Tierken said he understands that Healers exchange their knowing.'

'*You're* a Healer?' said Laryia, staring at Kira wide-eyed, before collecting herself. 'Forgive me. You've had a hard ride and have yet to bathe and eat. Come, I'll show you to the bathing-room.'

A deep bath of smooth, pink stone was the centrepiece of the bathing-room, and there was a large metal hand-washing bowl with different sorts of fish engraved on it. There was also a low seat with a lid, which Laryia explained was a latrine, with pipes that ran away beyond the city's walls. Metal spouts above the bath delivered hot and cold water, which Laryia demonstrated to an awe-struck Kira.

Catching sight of herself in a large looking-glass, Kira was taken aback by the sharp contrast between her shabby thinness and Laryia's gleaming hair and bright gown.

'I've chosen some gowns for you but I think they'll be too large,' said Laryia, eyeing Kira kindly.

‘I thank you for your trouble but I don’t wear gowns,’ said Kira.

‘But . . . Tierken asked for them especially. It’s the way Terak women dress in Sarnia.’

‘I’m not Terak,’ said Kira, eyes sparking.

Laryia grinned. ‘I haven’t seen Tierken’s eyes do that in many seasons,’ she said. ‘I have clothes I brought with me from Kessom when I was younger, which might fit. Kessomi women wear a hip-length tunic with breeches underneath. I’m not sure Tierken will be happy, but . . . would you like that better?’

‘Yes, I thank you,’ said Kira, grateful. ‘There’s no need to stay, Laryia. I’m sure you miss Tierken when he’s gone, as he misses you.’

‘You’re our guest, I can’t just leave you. Besides, you haven’t eaten.’

‘If you bring some food, I’ll eat later. What I really need is some time alone to write, that is, if I can have some paper and ink,’ said Kira.

‘Write? Yes, of course I can get you paper and ink, but . . .’

‘Please go to Tierken, Laryia. Then on the morrow, I’d love to see Sarnia with you. I might have a bath now,’ said Kira, slipping off her pack.

Laryia hovered, uncertain. ‘My rooms are next door, remember. If you need anything, even in the middle of the night, you are to come.’

Kira waited till the door shut, then breathed a sigh of relief. She needed time without the gaze of others upon her. She shrugged off her jacket and shirt. There were angry red scrapes all over her belly from her slide into Ember Chasm, and the looking-glass revealed the bruise the Shargh blow had left. The injuries told the story of her journey, but her father’s ring lying between her breasts told a different tale, the scar under her cheekbone – where the ring had cut as her father had struck her – still visible.

Kira stepped carefully into the water, for a long time simply luxuriating in it, then searched the wooden pots on the shelf above until she found a potion that smelt like Laryia's hair, scrubbed it into her own, rinsed, and scrubbed again.

When she was finished, she wrapped herself in one of the enormous drying cloths, and tossed all her dirty clothes into the water to soak. The clothes Laryia had brought were in neat piles on the bed, almost identical to those she'd worn in Allogrenia. Laryia had left a wooden comb, too, intricately carved with owls in flight. The clothes fitted well and, feeling happier than she had for many days, Kira began the painful task of untangling her hair.

When she opened the door to the other room she was pleased to see paper and ink on the table, along with a beautifully arranged platter of nuts, fruit, fine maizen bread, and small crusty balls of what smelt like sweetfish. There was also a jug of water with rounds of orange and yellow fruit floating in it, the jug, cups and platter all of fine clay.

Kira dipped her pen in the ink. She would write while she ate. If Sarnia shunned healing, as Laryia suggested, there would be great need of her Healer knowing. There would be need of a Haelen too, but she could do nothing about that yet. She smiled suddenly, imagining that Kasheron had somehow slipped stealthily back into Terak's city – bringing his Healer's kit with him.

Kira wrote steadily, engrossed in her task and oblivious to the sun blazing on the Silvercades, to the snow turning pink, and finally, to the slow slide of stars into the sky.

Tierken stretched his feet to the fire, comforted by Farid's summation of Sarnia's affairs in his absence. There shouldn't be much to annoy or alarm the Marken, although Rosham would find some minute point, and infect Borsten and Gelf with his antagonism.

'So tell me of our Tremen guest,' said Farid.

'I'm sure you know all there is to know already,' said Tierken. 'We rescued Lady Kira of the Tremen from the Shargh, and I intend to make her my bride.'

'Her similarity to you is remarkable,' said Farid, refusing to be drawn, 'but I've not heard of the Tremen. Where do they dwell?'

'In the southern forests beyond the Azurcades. I guess her people share Kessomi blood, and entered the forests when peoples were exeat.'

'But you came across her on the Sarsalin, I understand. How came she so far from home?'

'She'd been with the Tain after the Shargh attacked the Tremen. Apparently she left Maraschin to gather herbs – for she's a Healer – when the Shargh took her.'

‘Do you think they intended to use her against you?’ asked Farid.

‘What mean you?’ asked Tierken, straightening.

‘Well, she looks every part your kin, and if the Shargh believed her to be so she’d be a precious prize indeed.’

Tierken’s blood ran cold. The idea had a terrible logic, and provided yet another reason why Kira must remain safely in the north.

‘So, these Tremen are in Maraschin?’ asked Farid.

‘Not that I’m aware of,’ said Tierken, for Kira had spoken only of the Tallien and Beris’s son Adris.

‘So she travelled from the forests alone?’ pursued Farid.

Tierken shrugged, annoyed he’d neglected to ask.

‘You don’t seem to know much about your –’ said Farid lightly, breaking off as the door opened and Laryia appeared.

Farid drained his mug and rose. ‘The Meeting Hall’s prepared and the Marken know of your return, Feailner,’ he said formally. ‘They’ll be in attendance at dawn.’

‘I thank you, Keeper,’ said Tierken, as Farid went out.

‘Is Kira sleeping?’ Tierken asked Laryia.

‘No,’ said Laryia, settling opposite, and selecting some redfruit. ‘She asked to be left alone to write.’

‘Write what?’

‘She didn’t say, just asked for paper and ink, *and* breeches and tunics. Tremen women seem to dress the same as Kessomi women.’

‘She’s not in the forests now – or Kessom – and will dress as Terak women do.’ Kira’s wilfulness showed no signs of abating, thought Tierken in irritation.

‘I’ll watch while you tell her that,’ said Laryia, smiling. ‘I’d forgotten how interesting it is to see gold eyes catch fire. Is it true the Shargh had her?’

‘Yes.’

‘How horrible,’ said Laryia. ‘What of her family? They must be frantic.’

‘They were murdered by the Shargh. After that, Kira went to Maraschin where she lived before the Shargh captured her.’

‘But this is terrible,’ cried Laryia. ‘Why didn’t you take her back to Maraschin? The scouts said you found her on the edge of The Westlans.’

‘That’s correct,’ said Tierken.

‘Then you should have taken her to Maraschin.’

‘You’re telling the Feailner what he *should* do, Lady Laryia?’

‘I’m wondering if the gossips are right, *my Lord*.’

‘They’ve had you married to Farid at least a dozen times, Laryia, *and* me to every husbandless woman in Sarnia. I brought Kira north because she was under my protection and I was coming north.’

‘Is that the only reason?’ asked Laryia, watching for his reaction.

Tierken rose and wandered to the window. He wondered whether it was the only reason too. The Domain was in darkness except for a dim sheen of lamplight from the Lehan Wing.

‘Kira’s safest here,’ he said, turning back. ‘The Shargh hunt her and the Tain have proven they can’t protect her. She’s only seventeen seasons, Laryia, and she’s seen a lot of death. I want her to be happy and safe, and this is the best place for both things.’

‘Is that what Kira wants, too?’

‘Kira needs time to settle, that’s all, and I want you to help her do that. Show her the city, and take her round Mid-market. Once her horsemanship is better, you can take her out on your favourite rides. I’m hoping you’ll be friends.’

‘I hope so too,’ said Laryia, yawning. ‘I bid you a good night Tierken,’ she said, and went to her rooms.

Tierken remained, knowing he should be sleeping, but the sinews at the back of his neck were crawling as they did before

every Feailmark. The records of the dues each dwelling paid were in order, the receipts from the traders who paid the Domain Guard complete, the tributes the stall-holders at Mid-market gave now fully recorded, and the lists and tabs all as they should be. All thanks to Farid.

When Rosham had suggested his son for the role of Keeper of the Domain, Tierken's first instinct had been to refuse; the last thing he wanted was Rosham's spy reporting his every movement. But Farid had made it plain from the start that his loyalty would be to him as Feailner, and Tierken was confident that Farid never spoke of him outside the Domain, except in the most general terms.

The Marken were only advisers, but their power had grown over the long seasons of Darid's failing rule. Now that Tierken had the patrolmen behind him, he could dispense with their 'advice' altogether if he wished, but he was loath to cause discord. The Marken were linked to the powerful trading families of the city, and his rule would be smoother with their approval than without it. Poerin had taught him the value of patience, and of small victories, and while Tierken sat courteously through the Marken's interminable discussions, and their thinly veiled complaints, there were fewer and fewer things he actually changed.

Glancing through the window, Tierken saw that the lamplight he'd noticed earlier actually came from Kira's rooms. By Irid! She should be sleeping. He strode from the Meeting Hall, down the steps and along the balcony, knocking but barely pausing before entering her rooms. She *was* sleeping, at the table, face resting on her arms, ink-stained fingers still clutching her pen. He gazed at her face for a moment, bathed in the gentle glow of lamplight, and the sense of wonder he'd felt on the plain came back to him.

Queen Kiraon and her sons Terak and Kasheron had had gold eyes, but there had been no others in the north till him. Yet in

the south, growing to womanhood in the forests, there had been another – who bore Queen Kiraon’s name and who claimed to be the seed of her other son.

It simply wasn’t possible, and over the coming weeks he must convince Kira of the fact. He leaned over and carefully extricated the pen from her grasp.

Kira jerked awake immediately, cowering like a cornered fanchon before recognising him.

‘I’m sorry I startled you,’ said Tierken, feeling shocked himself. It was one thing to tell Laryia Kira’s family had been murdered, another to see such terror etched in her face. How little he really knew of what she thought and felt beneath the calm facade now reasserting itself.

He glanced down at the neat writing in Onespeak and Terak. Not only did Kira wear Kessomi garb, she recorded her knowing like a good Kessomi Healer.

‘Why are you recording healing when you should be sleeping?’ he asked, his irritation returning.

‘My healing comes from those who went before me, so I must leave it for those who follow.’

‘There are no Healers in Sarnia, so you’re wasting your time,’ said Tierken.

‘I’m only wasting my time if you destroy my work,’ challenged Kira.

‘Of course I won’t destroy your work,’ he said with a shrug.

Kira made no reply, staring down at her Writings.

‘Do you like your rooms?’ he asked, lightening his voice.

‘They’re big.’

‘And rather empty. You can choose some more things at Mid-market. You’re sure to see something you like there.’

‘There’s no need; I won’t be staying long,’ said Kira.

‘You’ve been here less than a day. Is it so awful?’

‘No, Laryia has been most kind – as you have. But while I delay here, the Shargh might still be murdering my people. Since you refuse aid, I must seek it from the Tain,’ said Kira.

‘The Tains might not aid you,’ pointed out Tierken.

‘Adris will be glad of the men Caledon brings from Allogrenia,’ said Kira.

The Tallien again! ‘You trusted this man Caledon to go to your lands and ask for men?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is he your lover?’

‘My lover?’ said Kira in surprise. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Are you so unworldly that you don’t understand why one man would ask you that question about another man?’

Kira still hadn’t answered the question, but her breathing had quickened, mirroring the pulse of his own blood. The lamp-light gilded her face and turned her hair to spun gold. He wanted to run his fingers through it and down the curve of her throat.

‘Do you want me, Kira?’ he asked softly.

Kira coloured. ‘I want you to look at the ring I carry,’ she said.

‘Show me then,’ he said, realising he was going too fast for her.

Kira took it from round her neck and handed it to him, holding her breath as he peered at it in the lamplight. Tierken could see that it was very old, the edges worn and with the dullness common in silver forged before the silverwrights had perfected their art. He handed it back.

‘The allogrenia and galloping horse is a common design in the north,’ he said. ‘You’ll see it on rings, necklets and bracelets at Mid-market.’

‘It’s not a common design in the south, Tierken,’ she said. ‘In my lands there has only ever been one ring, held by the Tremem Leader, and passed down from Kasherom himself.’

Tierken froze. 'Are you saying you're the Tremen Leader?'

'Yes.'

'But that's not possible!'

A girl of seventeen seasons, without Guard, far from home . . . By Irid! He didn't want yet another complication.

Her chin had come up and he pushed his hand through his hair. It was late and on the morrow he must match wits with Rosham again.

'We'll speak again after the Feailmark,' he said. 'In the meantime, I wish you pleasant dreams on your first night in my city.'

45

Caledon moved swiftly over the Dendora, clad in his darkest cape to shield him from Shargh eyes. He was near where Kira had come to his aid, but he'd seen no sign of the Shargh or their herd animals.

A breeze woke and, as the trees swayed, a man stepped from the shadows. Caledon froze but the man had seen him, an arrow already set. Caledon thought of his knife, but as the man advanced, two more men emerged behind him. A knife was a poor weapon against one arrow and useless against many. Then the breeze strengthened and the cloud shredded.

'Lord Caledon! Praise be to Meros!' the man exclaimed.

'Guard Archorn,' said Caledon in relief.

'We've been here ten days, and would have waited another two,' said Archorn. Caledon could now see seven men behind him, all King's Guard, despite their dark capes and breeches.

'I've been much delayed,' said Caledon.

'With your leave, we'll journey on to the Aurantia Cave this night,' said Archorn. 'We've seen no Shargh, but it's best we

quit their lands as soon as we can. Prince Adris is anxious for your return.'

'By all means. But tell me, is the Lady Kira still in Maraschin?'

'No, my Lord.'

'Then Prince Adris provided her with an escort north?' said Caledon, trying to hide his disappointment.

'It's best you speak with Prince Adris,' said Archorn.

Caledon gripped Archorn's arm in alarm. 'Tell me what's happened.'

'The Lady Kira left to gather and was taken by the Shargh,' said Archorn reluctantly.

Something inside Caledon drained away, leaving him as empty as a husk. It was a long time before he could speak.

'When?'

'Almost a moon ago,' said Archorn. 'But there's still hope.'

Caledon looked at him numbly. 'Dead horses were found near The Westlans,' said Archorn softly.

'Dead horses?'

'The Lady Kira was taken by Weshargh and Cashgar Shargh on horses. *Ashmiri* horses. Two dead Ashmiri horses were found near The Westlans.'

'How were they killed?' asked Caledon.

'By the time Prince Adris returned to Maraschin, and we set out on search, the wolves had been at them,' said Archorn, glancing at the trees uneasily. 'We need to start back, Lord Caledon. Prince Adris awaits.'

Caledon remembered little of the journey. He knew he must have traversed the slip and slide of the path that had all but claimed his life, passed through the sida grove and slept the first night in the Aurantia Cave. It was more than likely they'd bivouacked near where he and Kira had sheltered from the storm. When they

reached the rosarin groves he was aware that he'd once played the thumbelin for her there, and watched the flames light her face. But even the thunderous ride across the Grasslands to the Maraschin gates failed to rouse him from the darkness. Only when he stepped into the Crown Room and Adris's haggard face swam into view, did he become fully aware of his surroundings.

'I'd lost all hope of seeing you again, my friend,' said Adris, embracing him. 'Come, sit and eat. The scouts tell me you're hurt.'

'Old injuries,' said Caledon, slumping into a chair.

'How . . . ?'

'A fall from Shardos,' he said. 'I was careless, Adris, as you were with Kira.'

'Kira wanted to find a herb she said cured Shargh wounds,' said Adris and explained Kira's subterfuge and the Shargh attack.

'Archorn said you found horses.'

'What was left of them, but there was something else, something only I and Guard Leader Remas know about.'

Adris retrieved something from one of the wall-chests and laid it on the table in front of Caledon. It was an arrow, the haft dark with blood.

'I don't see -' started Caledon.

'It is made from allogrenia.'

'A Terak arrow,' hissed Caledon, the mist abruptly clearing from his mind. 'The Shargh were attacked by the Terak!'

'The Shargh may have got Kira away,' cautioned Adris. 'If the Terak had rescued her, they would surely have brought her here.'

'Not necessarily,' said Caledon, starting to feel relieved.

'They were virtually within our bounds,' said Adris, his voice hard-edged.

'What do you know of the new Terak Feailner, Adris?'

'He's the old Feailner's nephew and was raised in Kessom. Like most Kessomis, he's a good horseman. He spends more time

out of the city than in it and wasn't favoured by Darid as his heir, but there was no one else,' listed off Adris.

'Do you know why he wasn't favoured?'

'Darid hoped for a son of his own.'

'That may be so, but it's not the main reason. Darid's nephew carries the taint of something most Terak would prefer to forget – he has gold eyes.'

Adris stared at him in amazement. 'You think the Terak would have taken Kira north for that reason?'

'If the Terak Feailner led the patrol, I'm certain of it.'

'He still should have brought her here,' protested Adris.

'Perhaps the stars decided otherwise,' murmured Caledon. 'Perhaps they intended the two to come together after all.'

'Or the Shargh to kill her.'

Caledon looked up, noticing Adris's weariness for the first time. 'How goes it with the King?' he asked.

'The King has sunk into a sleep from which there is no awakening.'

'Forgive me,' said Caledon, rising and going to him. 'My thoughts were of Kira.'

'There's nothing to forgive, my friend,' said Adris, gripping Caledon's shoulder. 'I hardly know what to feel myself. Part of me grieves, while another part feels only relief.'

There was a silence, then Caledon said, 'I need to go north.'

'Yes, it's time. If the Tain cannot send greetings from the Tain King, they must at least send them from the Tain Prince. Give me two days to prepare, Caledon, then you'll go well protected. I don't want to lose you as well.'

Tarkenda made her way back to her sorch, well pleased with her morning's work. The idea that Arkendrin's right to the chiefship depended on him leading the Shargh to glory in the north had taken root easily, fed by the excitement of the Weshargh Chief's

return, and helped by word of the Soushargh's willingness to share in the triumph. Even those whose allegiances lay with the first-born chiefs had been caught up in it, the babblings of Orsendron's blood-ties Ertheren and Irmiron as shrill as those of Arkendrin's cronies.

How short memories were and how little regarded were the tales – *and lessons* – of the past, thought Tarkenda, looking out over the Grounds. The recent rains had brought lush pastures, a surfeit of grahen eggs and plump silverjacks. The ebis were wellfleshed, their milk creamy, the cheeses ripe and flavoursome. Children shouted at play on the lower slope and people slept without fear in their sorchas.

But it wasn't enough for the Weshargh Chief Orbdargan, or the Soushargh Chief Yrshin, and it certainly wasn't enough for Arkendrin. And though Arkendrin must be close to the Grounds now, her fear was less. The thoughts of the Shargh warriors had turned north, away from the creature of the Last Telling, and such was the prize Orbdargan and Yrshin dangled like blackfish bait, the warriors' thoughts were unlikely to turn back.

It was deep in the night when Tarkenda was woken by a wailing that set her heart pounding.

'Can it be . . . ?' gasped Palansa, sitting up.

Tarkenda shook her head. Her visions had shown fighting, and if Arkendrin were dead, there'd be none. Nor would the gold-eyed creature come to the Grounds as her dreams suggested. But someone had died, and Ormadon's words came back to her: *Arkendrin has a gift for losing the lives of those around him, not his own.*

Footsteps sounded and Tarkenda heaved herself up. The fact that the wailing was confined to the lower slope indicated Arkendrin still lived.

'Chief-mother?'

'Enter, Ormadon,' said Tarkenda, pulling a jacket over her shirt.

‘What has happened?’ demanded Palansa.

‘Arkendrin and Irdodun have returned.’

‘But not Ermashin and Orthaken?’ asked Tarkenda.

‘And the gold-eyed creature?’ broke in Palansa. ‘Did they bring her?’

‘No, Chief-wife. They were attacked by Northerners.’

‘Praise be to the Sky Chiefs,’ said Palansa, shutting her eyes.

‘So the Northerners killed Ermashin and Orthaken and took the creature?’ asked Tarkenda.

‘They killed Ermashin and Orthaken. It’s unclear what’s become of the creature, but it’s likely they took her.’

‘What else have you heard?’

‘The Soushargh share their southern grazing with the Ashmiri, and the Ashmiri know what happens beyond the Braghans.’

‘And?’ said Tarkenda.

‘They claim the Chief of the Northerners has gold eyes too.’

Tarkenda paled and collapsed onto a chair. No vision or dream had told her that! And then a more dreadful thought came to her.

‘What is it?’ asked Palansa, her gaze flicking between Ormaddon’s blank face and Tarkenda’s stricken one.

‘Don’t you see?’ asked Tarkenda hoarsely.

‘See what?’ said Palansa.

‘Gold meets gold, two halves are one.’

‘The Last Telling,’ breathed Palansa. ‘But surely –’

Tarkenda cradled her head in her hands. ‘It’s begun.’

46



The Silvercades were hidden by blue-black clouds, and everything between Kira's window and the mountains was smudged by rain. She paced back to the table set with her healing records, but was too restless to take up her pen. She was secretly relieved that the rain had forced the cancellation of more sight-seeing with Laryia, having no wish to endure the gaze of strangers again. What she really wanted was to speak to Farid about his knowing of Terak histories, and whether there was anything in Sarnia remotely like a Haelen or a Sanctum, but he was taken up with the Feailmark.

She opened the door and went out into the cool, water-drenched air of the balcony. The rain made the owl fountain gleam, and pocked the water of its pool. Kira wandered along the balcony fascinated by the water sluicing along the guttering at the edge of the paths like miniature rivers.

Tierken watched her from the Meeting Hall while he sipped his cotzee. He was too far away to see Kira's expression, but he could see she was restless. The Marken had paused in their discus-

sions to eat, and were gathered round the plates of food the servers had brought. There was a rumble of informal discussion behind him and Rosham's voice rose above the others. Tierken grimaced.

'Good weather for redfruit,' said Milsin at his shoulder.

'But not for herders,' said Tierken, moving away from the window.

'Good pasture growth and full springs,' said Milsin, his smile revealing gappy teeth. 'Not too much to complain about there.'

'Unlike here,' said Tierken, under his breath.

Milsin's good-natured face became thoughtful. 'A bird is happiest when it's allowed to sing,' he said softly.

Tierken looked at him in surprise. 'Well, there are many happy birds in the Domain today.'

Milsin nodded gently.

The day wore on and the light waned, Kira interrupting her writing to find a lamp. It was still wet, the view out of the window now obscured by a gloomy dusk. She was searching for flints when there was a knock. Kira opened the door to a woman she had never seen before, her face broad and unlined despite the grey in her hair.

'Good evening, Lady. Mouras has sent me,' she said in Onespeak.

'Mouras?' repeated Kira.

'Room Master Mouras directs the servers. I am here to see to your needs, Lady.'

'I don't need anything. I thank you . . . ?'

'Niria,' the woman supplied helpfully.

'Niria?' repeated Kira, knowing she'd heard the name before.

'You're acquainted with my husband, Lady.'

'Your husband?' queried Kira, feeling like a half-wit.

'Commander Marin. He rode with the Feailner in the last patrol and gave you escort to Sarnia.'

Kira smiled in delight. ‘Marin spoke of you, and was most kind to me. I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye to him.’

‘It would be a great pleasure to be your server, Lady.’

‘I’m well used to doing things for myself,’ said Kira, her face warming.

‘Servers are part of the Domain,’ said Niria, with quiet dignity.

‘I . . . Come in then,’ said Kira. ‘I’m having trouble lighting the lamp. If you know where the flints are . . .’

‘I’ll light the lamps, make up your bed and ensure the bathing-room is clean. I work quietly and won’t disturb you,’ added Niria, looking over at Kira’s recordings.

‘I thank you,’ said Kira, still slightly uncomfortable, as she settled again and pushed the hair out of her eyes.

‘I can braid your hair for you, Lady,’ said Niria. ‘That way you’ll find it less of a nuisance.’

‘It’s too short.’

‘When my daughter was just a wisp, she cut off her braid and we had tears worse than the rain outside. I know a way to braid short hair.’

‘Very well,’ said Kira.

Niria fetched the comb and settled on a chair in front of her, the slight tug and pull reminding Kira of Tena dressing her hair before Turning.

‘Marin tells me you’re from Tremen lands. Is it the fashion there for women to wear their hair short?’

‘No. Tremen women wear their hair the same way as Terak women,’ said Kira, struggling to steady as memories of Turning swept over her.

‘It’s very fair, Lady,’ said Niria, too polite to ask why Kira’s hair was so short. ‘Are the Tremen a fair people?’

‘Generally. Some clans are fairer than others, and in Morclan

some have hair as bright as snow, and eyes as blue as the sky,' said Kira, her throat tightening again as she thought of Kest.

Niria set a braid round the edge of Kira's face. 'It suits you, Lady,' she said when she was finished. 'I'll dress it like this for the banquet, if you wish. With hairlets, it will look very well.'

'What banquet?'

'When a Feailmark coincides with a Mid-market, the Domain holds a banquet to celebrate the Feailmark's ending. The trade leaders and their ladies attend and the Marken and their ladies, as well as those highly placed in the city. It's held in the Meeting Hall and is very grand indeed. I know the Lady Laryia intends to trade for a new gown at Mid-market.'

Hopefully she wouldn't have to attend, thought Kira, the idea of being confined in a crowd of strangers repellent. But at least the ending of the Feailmark would mean that Farid wouldn't be as busy. There would also be time for another attempt at convincing Tierken of the kin-link.

Niria bustled out, but Kira had only just started work again when she reappeared.

'Horse Master Ryn sends message you're to start your riding lessons on the morrow – at dawn. Let's hope the weather's kinder,' she added.

The rain drifted away during the night, giving Kira a clear sky as she made her way down to the stables the next morning. Ryn led out a horse that was already bridled and saddled.

'The Feailner tells me he's made a beginning,' he said, by way of greeting, 'and had this mare brought from Kessom for you to continue.'

Kira nodded and looked at the horse, which was the colour of storm clouds, though mottled more lightly on its shoulders and haunches.

'She's three seasons, and her coat will lighten in time, but it won't be silver like her brother, the Feailner's mount,' said Ryn.

‘The Lady Laryia’s mount’s a full sister, too, though she’s but a season behind the Feailner’s mount.’

‘It’s kind of the Feailner to let me ride her,’ said Kira. ‘What’s she called?’

‘That you’ll have to ask the Feailner. Now, show me how you mount.’

Ryn didn’t bawl instructions at Kira like Tierken, but his piercing gaze missed nothing.

By the time the sun was well up and he called a halt, Kira felt even less competent than after her first lesson.

‘I’ll see you at dawn on the morrow,’ said Ryn, as he led the mare away.

Kira had bathed and changed, and started on the platter of fruit that had appeared in her rooms, when Laryia arrived, dressed in a dark brown gown that picked up the colour of her eyes and hair, and showed off her creamy skin. Laryia smiled cheerfully as she settled opposite and selected a piece of sweet yellow fruit.

‘Your hair looks beautiful like that, Kira. Did Niria dress it for you?’

Kira nodded.

‘Niria’s lovely. I’m glad Mouras appointed her,’ said Laryia. ‘I thought we’d go to the North Wall gate today, as it gives a good view over Sarnia and towards Kessom. Then we can come back through the Kir Quarter and trade for *quatar*. That’s sugared fruit in the Kir tongue.’

They made their way out of the Domain via a gate at the back of the Meeting Hall – the North Domain gate – Laryia said, with two black-clad Guard falling into step behind them. Laryia didn’t acknowledge them nor interrupt her description of the way Sarnia was laid out and, after a while, Kira forgot they were there too.

Terak had planned the city in quarters but the divisions had blurred over time. The Kirs still mainly lived in the western half of Sarnia, alongside the Illians, whereas the eastern quarter was set

aside for Terak and Kessomis, though most Kessomis preferred to remain in Kessom.

‘And the fourth quarter?’ asked Kira, looking at the buildings they passed. They were of uniform stone, and in good repair, the paving clean and smooth, but there was nothing green. Even Maraschin had had the *Queen’s Grove*.

‘The fourth quarter’s become known as the Caru Quarter, and has lots of gambling and alehouses but not many dwellings. The Sarnia Guard are kept busy, what with the drunkenness and resulting fights,’ said Laryia, pointing over to the two Guard, who had hold of a staggering patrolman.

‘Some of the younger patrolmen drink too much too quickly when they come in from patrol, then get into fights. Or they get into fights over slide-stone, or over women in the Caru Quarter. The Sarnia Guard keep them in the cells until they’re sober.’

‘Then what happens?’ asked Kira.

‘They can be fined or expelled from Sarnia for a time or, if they’re in the cells when their patrol’s due to set out, they’re handed over to the Patrol Commander for punishment. How do the Tremem punish their wrong-doers?’ asked Laryia.

Kira had grown up away from the longhouses, but she couldn’t recall her father or Merek speaking of any fighting. Kashclan elders sometimes commented on the wildness of Morclan, or the occasional recklessness of their own young men, but there was a high level of tolerance for such behaviour. It was believed that the young, like saplings, became more stable as they grew.

‘The Tremem live in much smaller groups than here and there’s much love and respect between them,’ said Kira.

‘It sounds like Kessom. But I don’t understand . . .’

‘You don’t understand what?’ asked Kira, dragging her thoughts from Allogrenia.

‘Anything! Everything!’ said Laryia with a laugh. ‘How is it you speak Terak?’

‘I’m speaking Tremen.’

‘But you speak it just like someone who’s spent their entire life in Kessom,’ said Laryia. ‘I want to understand you, Kira. I want us to be friends and to make your time in Sarnia happy.’

‘Hasn’t Tierken told you about me?’

‘He said your people are called the Tremen and live in the southern forests. He explained that they went there in the days before peoples such as us came into being, and have been hidden there ever since. He said your people were attacked by the Shargh and . . . you left. You went to Maraschin and worked as a Healer. That the Shargh took you when you went gathering.’

‘My people *are* the Tremen and we *do* live in the southern forests, but we came from the north, *after* your peoples were formed. That’s why I speak like a Kessomi.’

‘But . . . but how is that possible? Who were your leaders?’

‘Ask your brother.’

‘You’ve told Tierken?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’ve argued over this?’ asked Laryia, searching Kira’s face.

‘Yes.’

Laryia looked troubled and Kira patted her arm. ‘Tierken was kind to me on the journey here, and continues to be kind, as you do,’ she said. ‘Come, I’m looking forward to the quatar,’ she added.

As they went on, Laryia described the buildings they passed, the trade each carried out, and the role of the Marken in administering Sarnia.

‘Do they have knowing of the histories of your people and of treaties?’ asked Kira.

‘Their knowing isn’t as great as Tierken’s, and his is less than Farid’s. As Keeper, Farid’s duties include overseeing the Writings Store so he knows what’s there. Why do you ask?’

‘We keep Writings of our histories in the forests, too. Where is the Writing Store?’

‘At the end of the balcony where our rooms are,’ said Laryia.

‘Do you think I could see what’s kept there? I’m interested in finding out more about Sarnia,’ said Kira.

‘It’s rather disordered, so you’d need Farid with you,’ said Laryia. ‘I’m sure after the Feailmark he’d be happy to show it to you.’

47



The time she'd spent with Kira puzzled Laryia greatly. She waited until the Marken had retired for the night before seeking out Tierken in the Meeting Hall. She'd been thinking about Kira most of the day, and there were more questions than answers in her head. Kira said she spoke Tremen, not Terak, but whatever she insisted on calling the language, she spoke it in exactly the same way as Eris. Only the older Kessomis had the strong lilt and intonation that Eris used, and Laryia could think of no explanation for Kira sharing it.

Her brother's behaviour was curious, too, as if he were now deliberately goading those he'd spent the last three seasons placating. He'd spent time with no woman since he'd become Feailner, but now he'd brought Kira into the city. Laryia found Tierken lounging at the table, half-heartedly perusing a list of dues.

'I recognise that look in your eye, Laryia,' said Tierken lightly. 'How have I offended you?'

'You haven't offended me, you've puzzled me,' said Laryia.

'How so?'

'I went down to the stables to see Chime today and found you'd brought a full sister mare from Kessom for Kira. If you want to add more fuel to the gossip fire, you're certainly going the right way about it, Tierken. Everyone in Sarnia knows that bloodline doesn't leave our family.'

'Is that your only concern?'

'No. I want to know why Kira speaks Terak like Eris but has never been to Kessom, why she looks more like you than I do, why you brought her here when you should've taken her to Maraschin, and what exactly you've argued about.'

'A lot of questions, Laryia, and some of them better suited to the loose tongues on the street.'

'Given your similarity, I'm sure the "loose tongues" will want to know who her forebears were, as well,' said Laryia.

'I've already told you.'

'Tell me who *she* said they were,' said Laryia in exasperation.

'Kasheron.'

Laryia's eyes widened. 'Oh.'

'Exactly,' said Tierken. '*Kasheron who fled the warring peoples of the north to establish the healing community of Allogrenia in the southern forests.* More or less her words, not mine.'

'Her settlement's called Allogrenia?' whispered Laryia.

Tierken nodded. 'If she tells the truth, we have as our "guest", Kiraon of Kashclan – Kasheron's clan that is – Healer of Allogrenia, seed of the great, gold-eyed Healer Prince Kasheron himself. Hardly news to make the Marken roll in their seats in mirth.'

'But is it possible?'

'Drunken men have seen horses fly, so I suppose it's possible. Kira certainly believes it, but I believe her people concocted the tale to add glory to their otherwise humble origins. They obviously shared blood with those who became Kessomis, and while the only gold eyes we know of in that line were Kiraon and her sons, there might have been gold-eyed people in the past who never

came north. Kira's and my similarity in that case wouldn't be that unusual, especially considering the Tremen have kept their blood unmixed.'

'But what if Kira's correct?' asked Laryia.

'You mean, what if every tale told and every history recorded in the Writing Store is untrue? That everything I've been taught is false? That the knowing of those highest placed in Sarnia, those who squabble in the streets and those herding out on the plain, is wrong? You would think in all these seasons, that at least one of Kasheron's kin would have been tempted to leave the trees and seek us out. But there's been no one.' Tierken shrugged. 'And you know as well as I do that small peoples tend to embellish their histories. Apparently the Bishali trace their blood to Tallien princes, even though the Talliens tend to be tall and fair and the Bishali short and dark.'

'So, there are more gold-eyed people in the south?' said Laryia.

'Not according to Kira.'

'But you are so alike! I find it hard to believe that, given everything you've told me, all this is pure chance,' said Laryia.

'We both know Irid has a sense of humour,' said Tierken. Either that, he thought, or his previous difficulties with the Marken and trader leaders were going to seem as trifling as grit in a boot.

Laryia gazed at the table, deep in thought. 'Kira's called on the kin-link to claim Terak aid for her people, hasn't she?' she said suddenly.

'Yes.'

'And you've refused?'

'You know Terak law as well as I do.'

'So, when are you going to provide her with an escort south?'

'Never.'

'But -' started Laryia, in shock.

‘As I’ve already explained, the Shargh hunt her and the Tain have shown they can’t protect her. She’ll remain here.’

Tierken rose and eased his shoulders. ‘It’s late and I have another long day on the morrow in Rosham’s company. Don’t fret about Kira, Laryia. She needs time, that’s all.’

The rain returned the next day and, despite wearing an oiled cape, Kira was soaked to the skin by the end of her riding lesson. She dripped along the balcony and was almost to her rooms when Laryia’s door opened and Tierken came out in conversation with his sister. Kira caught something about tables and seating, before they saw her.

‘You’re drenched, Kira,’ said Laryia. ‘Best get dry. This rain’s not helping me organise the banquet either,’ she said, and hurried away.

Kira dragged off the cape and shook it.

‘Ryn tells me you have a good seat and a light touch,’ said Tierken, following her through to the bathing-room.

‘Ryn hasn’t told *me* that,’ said Kira, drying herself.

‘Horse Master Ryn is a man of few words. How do you like the mare?’

‘She’s beautiful,’ said Kira, smiling.

‘What have you named her?’

Kira looked at him in bewilderment.

‘It’s the prerogative of the owner to name their mount,’ explained Tierken.

‘She’s mine? But I’m not staying,’ said Kira.

‘She’ll remain yours wherever you are, my gift to you,’ said Tierken tenderly, bringing the backs of his fingers to her cheek. Then he sighed and dropped his hand. ‘I must return to the Marken. It’s a shame it’s so wet, however my weather-wise herding friends tell me it will be fine for Mid-market.’

*

Tierken took his seat and the Feailmark resumed. It was not long before he was concentrating on keeping his face neutral as Rosham held forth on his favourite topic – opening up the Wastes. The city was crowded, and it made sense to use available land within Sarnia rather than extending the wall. There was also the issue of the unregulated occupation of the Wastes, namely the Caru Quarter, where most of the trouble in the city originated.

Last Feailmark, Tierken had come close to agreeing, but had hesitated, despite acknowledging Rosham's claim that the Wastes had become a dumping ground for refuse, and a haven for alehouses happy to serve drunks, gambling houses with little regard for fairness and women who sold themselves like trinkets at Mid-market. It was probably only his dislike of Rosham that had stopped his consent.

As Rosham reiterated his arguments from the last Feailmark, Tierken's thoughts turned to the Healer Queen, Kiraon. Heart-broken at the loss of her eldest son, Kasheron, she'd persuaded her younger son, Terak, to set aside a Quarter of Sarnia in case he should return. It seemed a strange chance that Kira should appear at a time when he could choose to accept what the Healer Queen had never accepted: that her elder son, and his heirs, were lost forever.

Rosham finished his speech and eyed him confidently. Tierken dragged his thoughts back from the time of the Sundering.

'I thank you for your views, Marken Rosham; as usual, they were well-considered and forthright. I will think on them until the next Feailmark,' said Tierken.

Rosham's smile faltered. 'With respect, Feailner, that's what you said last Feailmark.'

'And I may well say it *next* Feailmark. Terak left that Quarter vacant for a reason,' said Tierken.

'Surely you don't expect Kasheron's line to return, Feailner,' said Rosham.

‘I was thinking of future treaties. There might come a time when others settle in Sarnia. It would be useful to have land available.’

‘What “others” would they be? The people of your guest perhaps?’

‘My guest?’ questioned Tierken, as the Meeting Hall stilled.

‘The Lady Kira. It’s said her people share our tongue and might follow her north, but I would suggest to you, Feailner, that Sarnian land should go to Sarnians before strangers.’

‘I’m surprised you heed the idle gossip of the streets, Marken Rosham.’

‘With respect, Feailner, anything that affects the city is of interest to the Marken.’

‘The Wastes will remain as they are then. If Kasheron’s heirs return, I’ll give them leave to build there, as was the intention of Terak himself. If we treaty with others in the future, they will be accommodated by extending the wall. Does that please the Marken?’

‘It’s not the Marken who must be pleased, but the people of Sarnia,’ said Rosham, his voice cold.

‘Then I’ll leave it up to you to ascertain their feelings, as I have neither the time nor the inclination to join in their gossip,’ said Tierken, rising. ‘I thank you once more, Marken, for your diligence and advice this Feailmark,’ he said crisply. ‘I wish you a pleasant day at Mid-market on the morrow and look forward to welcoming you as my guests to the banquet on Mid-market night.’

Then, with a brief nod, he strode from the room.

Mid-market was held on the grassy slopes outside the city walls, with round huts like Ashmiri shelters set in rows and crowds churning the land between. The huts were hung with things that glittered or jingled or flapped brightly, and the air was heavy with perfume, the smell of cooking and the scent of spices.

There were horse-traders from the Bishali Plain, Naswali puppeteers, Tallien cloth-cutters and Kir metal-workers, Laryia told Kira, as four Domain Guard rather than the usual two followed at their heels. There were so many strangely dressed people, and so many strange tongues being spoken, that for once Kira didn't feel out of place.

'This way,' said Laryia, ducking into the side flap of one of the huts, and pulling Kira after her. The Guard followed and Kira edged forward to give them room.

The interior was filled with rolls of glittering cloth and Laryia exchanged greetings with the cloth-cutter, who was tall like Caledon, but much fairer, his sandy brows low over his eyes as he appraised Kira.

He took a number of gowns off a rack and Laryia smiled delightedly. ‘You have the loveliest gowns, Warilin, and the best eye for fit. Come Kira, which would you choose?’

The gowns were scoop-necked, long-sleeved, and crusted in metal beads, and Kira hesitated, aware of the bored shufflings of the Guard behind.

‘I can’t wear a dress with metal on it,’ said Kira awkwardly.

Laryia’s smile faltered, but she quickly reclaimed it as Warilin turned back to the rack.

‘I don’t want to put you to this trouble,’ said Kira. ‘I don’t mind if I don’t come to the banquet.’

‘Of course you’re to come. If Warilin hasn’t a gown for you, there are three more cloth-cutters we can visit.’

One of the Guard suppressed a sigh as Warilin all but disappeared into the rack, eventually extricating a dark green gown with gold metal buttons down the front.

‘The buttons are easily removed,’ he said.

‘But it would be very plain,’ said Laryia doubtfully. ‘Do you like it Kira?’

‘It’s very pretty,’ said Kira.

Laryia nodded and Warilin beamed. Laryia selected a blue dress for herself, and Kira edged towards the door as traders were exchanged.

‘Warilin will have the gowns brought to the Domain before the banquet,’ said Laryia, as they wandered on. ‘There will be dancing tonight. Do you like to dance, Kira?’

Kira nodded.

‘The banquet’s very important for Tierken and I must host with him to ensure our guests are treated with honour and that everything runs smoothly. I’ve arranged for Farid to partner you,’ said Laryia.

Kira’s heart sank as she realised she’d have to make polite conversation with someone she scarcely knew, but then she

realised it would be an excellent opportunity to ask him about Terak histories.

‘The Naswari puppet-masters,’ exclaimed Laryia abruptly, seizing Kira’s hand and starting forward. ‘Quick, they’re about to begin.’

Tierken was also at Mid-market, enjoying the freedom of having come without the Guard. The Domain black he wore had less ornamentation than a Guard Leader’s, allowing him a refreshing degree of anonymity, especially after the formality of the Feailmark.

Now it was over, he’d have more time to talk to Kira about Maraschin and Prince Adris, for he was keen to learn of those the Terak were allied to, if only tenuously. And by the time he returned from his next patrol she’d be more settled in Sarnia and her riding skills strong enough for him to take her to some of his favourite haunts. *A natural, like all Kessomis*, Ryn had said. Given Kira’s looks and insistence on Kessomi clothes, Ryn’s slip was understandable.

In the end she would have to dress like a Terak to ensure she was fully accepted in Sarnia, but Tierken was willing to put the issue of her clothing aside for the time being. Going from a small community under trees to a large one in a city must be a hard transition to make, he knew.

Laughter ahead suggested a Naswali puppet show, and Laryia’s love of puppets made it likely she and Kira would be there. Puppets were one of the few things Laryia had pined for when Eris had taken them to Kessom, for the puppet-masters earned enough trade without undertaking the hard journey into the mountains of Kessom. Sure enough, Laryia stood near the front with Kira beside her. Tierken edged round the periphery of the crowd, till he had a good view of them.

Kira laughed as much as those around her, her face radiant. Tierken’s blood quickened, her happiness reassuring him that he’d made the right decision in bringing her north.

The show ended and the crowd cheered, tossing traders into the proffered bowls before wandering away. Tierken stayed at the back of the throng, guessing Laryia would go to the Kir metal-workers next. She loved their scrolled rings, bracelets and tinkling chimes.

As Tierken expected, Laryia stopped at a chime-trader, Kira waiting beside her for a moment, then moving to the next metal-worker's hut. The man handed Kira something, and Tierken was surprised that, given the object was metal, she took it. Intrigued, he wandered over.

The metal-worker bowed low to Tierken and Kira glanced up, her eyes suffusing to the soft honey that reassured Tierken about her feelings for him. He took the silver bracelet from her and turned it over. It was highly polished, the front beautifully engraved with the allogrenia and the galloping horse, a design popular with Kessomis. The bracelet was small too, the metal-worker obviously having the finer-boned Kessomis in mind.

The metal-worker started extolling the bracelet's virtues in Kir, his asking price high, as expected. As Tierken bargained and Kira tried to protest, Laryia came to his side and a crowd formed, as people noticed the Feailner, the Feailner's sister and the Feailner's *bride* together. Finally Tierken and the Kir reached agreement, and slapped hands before Tierken handed over the traders. The bracelet was expensive, but it was the best workmanship he'd seen in many a season.

Kira's colour was high, clearly uncomfortable with the attention they were receiving, but Tierken felt curiously happy. He raised Kira's left hand and, with a small bow, slipped the bracelet onto her wrist. A gasp ran round the gathering, not least from Laryia beside him, but Tierken ignored it. If he were Kessomi, he would have just pledged, and they'd soon be married. In contrast, the Terak used the right wrist to pledge. Tierken gave another small bow and moved away. Let the Sarnian gossips chew over the meaning of that for the next moon!

The metal was cold and heavy, but Kira wore the bracelet for the rest of the day, not wanting to offend Tierken or Laryia by taking it off. But it was the first thing she discarded when she returned to her rooms. She bathed and changed into the green gown, and Niria arrived to dress her hair. The dark green gown fitted Kira well but it *did* look plain, and Niria had twice asked her what necklets Kira was to wear, as she dressed her hair, tutting when Kira said none. Niria had all but finished Kira's hair when Laryia appeared with a carved wooden box.

'Ah,' said Niria, in satisfaction, then bowed. 'Is there ought else you need me to do?'

'No, I thank you,' said Kira, wondering if the box was the cause of Laryia's discomfort, or something else.

'You look lovely,' said Kira. The gown Laryia had traded was now ornamented with blue stones set in silver necklets and rings, stones glittering in her hair as well.

'Tierken sends these for you,' said Laryia, opening the box and placing the necklets and rings on the table.

'Tierken knows metal's forbidden,' said Kira recoiling. She wondered whether he'd sent it to test her obedience, or because he wanted her to turn into a Terak, not just wearing gowns but metal too. Surely her having worn the bracelet was enough to please him? She didn't want to anger Tierken, but she wouldn't bow before him either.

'Can't you wear it just this once?' pleaded Laryia.

'No!'

'I'm not sure how it is in your lands,' said Laryia haltingly, 'but if you go without the accoutrements of a Lady, the guests will think you're Tierken's *woman*.'

Kira looked at her in bewilderment, wondering whether it was akin to being exeat. Laryia's face was swiftly becoming a deep scarlet.

‘Like the women in the Caru Quarter,’ said Laryia, barely able to meet Kira’s eyes.

Kira didn’t fully understand Laryia’s distress but she sensed that attending the banquet without being decked out in metal would dishonour both her *and* Tierken. In turn, that was hardly likely to make him amenable to her kinship claim. On the other hand, wearing it would dishonour Kasheron. Laryia looked like she was about to cry and Kira relented, offering up a silent apology to her forebear.

‘I’ll wear metal to please *you*, Laryia, because you love your brother, and if *he’s* upset, *you’re* upset,’ said Kira reluctantly. ‘But *never* ask me to wear it again.’

‘I thank you,’ said Laryia, enclosing Kira in an intense hug. ‘Do you want me to help you?’

‘No, I can manage.’

‘Farid will be here soon to escort you across. You *will* have an enjoyable time, Kira.’

Farid appeared a short time later and they walked into the Meeting Hall arm in arm. He was a surprisingly pleasant companion, telling Kira amusing stories about his early days in the Domain, describing the peculiarities of particular guests, and making her completely oblivious to the curious looks of those around her. He wore the Domain black with silver trim, like Tierken, and when he smiled or laughed, which he did often, his whole face lit up. After a while, Kira realised that the women sitting near her looked at him as much as her.

The Meeting Hall had been set with a table running along its head, where Tierken and Laryia sat with the Marken and their wives, and with the wealthy of Sarnia, including the trader leaders, to either side. Two other tables abutted these at right angles, with Kira and Farid sitting at the end closest to Tierken’s table, and lesser traders and influential members of the city taking up the rest of the places.

Platters of food were passed along the tables by the bevy of servers, and the Hall hummed with the sound of voices, the chink of glasses, and the scrape of metal against fine clay platters. The food dishes were being cleared and the players taking up their positions when Kira readied herself to turn the conversation to the Writings Store and the histories stored there. But at that moment Domain Guards made their way over. Farid excused himself and exchanged a few quick words with them.

‘A dispute I must attend to,’ said Farid, turning back to her. ‘Why is it *always* the Bishali horse-traders?’ he muttered. ‘I’ll return shortly.’

Disappointed, Kira watched him leave.

The Hall quieted as Tierken rose and delivered a short speech of welcome. Then the music began and Tierken led Laryia onto the floor to dance. After a little, Tierken and Laryia were joined by the others from their table, the players finishing to polite applause, then starting up again. This time it was thread-the-leaves, and guests swarmed onto the floor, the tables emptying rapidly until only Kira and an elderly woman with a stick remained.

The next dance was strange, but it didn’t matter, as no one asked Kira to dance. Then the players began the weave dance, which was followed by thread-the-leaves again, virtually everyone in the Hall dancing. Tierken remained at the top table, conversing with each of his guests in turn, but Laryia was partnered by Rosham, Kira aware of her concerned glances as she whirled past. Thread-the-leaves ended and Laryia said something to Tierken, who barely interrupted the conversation he was having with a finely dressed, silver-haired man. Laryia was still staring at Kira worriedly as she was led back onto the floor by one of the trader leaders.

Kira tried to keep her face expressionless but her throat was so tight she could scarcely breathe. Why was she sitting here in this loathsome stone city, bedecked in metal, betraying the

Tremen *and* everything Kasheron had fought for! A small part of her argued that her abandonment wasn't some vindictive act by Tierken, but she felt completely humiliated. Why insist she come to the banquet if he weren't to have even one dance with her?

The music came to an end, but the dancers remained on the floor as the first strains of another familiar melody filled the air. A horrible feeling of desperate fear welled up inside her and Kira gripped the table. It was the song Kandor had played for her at Turning, before the Shargh attack, his last song . . .

Overcome, she stumbled from the room, and as the sense of urgency grew sprinted down the stone steps, all but tripping on her gown as she fled across the courtyard, oblivious to the person who called her name and pounded after her.

Figures stepped from the darkness and Kira cannoned into them, their arms constraining and confining her. 'You cannot pass, Lady.'

'You have no right!' cried Kira, struggling with them. 'You have no right . . .' She felt as though she could hardly breathe.

'Kira! You're disrupting the banquet and making a scene. What's got into you?' came Tierken's voice in her ear.

'I'm leaving your stinking city,' she shrieked. 'I'm -' Tierken gripped her arm and Kira cried out, pain stifling further speech.

'The Lady's unwell,' said Tierken tersely. 'I thank you for your assistance, Guard.'

His fingers gouged the bone of her arm as he all but dragged her back across the courtyard, up the steps, and along the balcony to her rooms. The pain and panic mixed with anger at Tierken's bullying.

'I'm not staying,' panted Kira, trying to jerk herself free.

'I must return to my guests, but you'll remain here. You've caused enough disruption for one evening. We'll speak later,' he snapped, thrusting her through the door and turning the key in the lock.

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Kira shook the handle and beat on the door with her fists, then tore off the necklets and rings and flung them across the room, the metal pinging and clanging against the floor and walls. Then she dragged the dress over her head and pulled on her shirt, jacket, breeches and the ring of rulership. She must have been insane to believe that this man – this *Terak* – would have the wit or intelligence to accept her claim. And if he thought he could confine her, he could add delusion to the rest of his flaws! She thrust her cape into her pack, her waterskin and the rest of her breakfast biscuit and nuts, wrenched open the window, and dropped her pack out.

Then she clambered onto the sill and crouched for a moment as the freezing air washed over her. A voice in her head said *'Don't!'* but Kira jumped. It was no greater distance than she'd jumped before, but the landing wasn't leaf litter. The jarring shock when she landed was so great that Kira remained curled on the frozen ground, forcing herself not to cry out. It was a long time before she could sit up, and longer still until she could stand. Shuddering

with the cold and the pain, she finally limped away across the yard to an old stable, which backed onto a wall.

It was little more than a shed, the broken roof giving way as Kira tried to climb. Finally, she heaved herself up, and from it clambered painfully onto the small wall, hanging by her hands before dropping to the other side. The pain of her landing was awful, but anger drove her on. She headed north, knowing she needed to avoid the Guard stationed at the Domain gate.

The way was rough, but there were buildings ahead, light spilling between them from lamps set in the street beyond. Kira stopped in the lee of a building and peered out. Noise flowed from a building across the street. As she watched, its door opened, slashing the ground with a shaft of coloured light.

A man staggered out, cursed as he collided with a low fence, and wove his way up the street towards a woman, standing in a dress that left her shoulders exposed despite the freezing air. The man came to an uneven stop in front of her. Kira tensed but the woman didn't appear frightened, holding out her hand and waiting. There was a chink of traders, and she heaved the man's arm over her shoulders, staggering with him up to another door, and disappearing inside.

Kira leaned back against the building, hugging herself, the braggings of the patrolmen suddenly making sense. She stayed where she was for a long time, thinking of the wealth and poorness of Maraschin, the paving of the Domain and the mud here, and of the forests. Allogrenia had none of the beautiful things she'd seen at Mid-market, but it had none of the ugliness of Sarnia either.

Her anger was spent, her back racked with pain, and she was cold and weary. The sensible thing would be to go back to the Domain gate and beg admittance. *Please, Domain Guard, let me return to my nice warm bed – and forget every thing I've ever held dear.*

Her father had confined her with fear, and now Tierken had used a lock and key. She wouldn't go back. Scanning the street

quickly, she limped across into the shadows between the buildings opposite, then stopped, peering ahead in astonishment. There were no buildings, but rather bushes, straggly vines, clumps of grass and the smell of rot – where rinds and cores of fruit had been dumped. But there was also the scent of silvermint. And the land ran down steeply, which explained why she'd seen no green or growing from her rooms.

Almost obscured by the dense growth, Kira could see that a series of terraces had been carved out in concentric rings. For want of something better to do, she made her way down through thick weeds, wincing with every step, glimpsing cinna and the remnants of serewort before she came to the bottom. Set in the middle of the small central ring was a tree stump encircled by a broken seat. Shivering, Kira eased herself down and ran her fingers over what remained of the tree's bark. It was rucked with savage cuts and too old to retain its spicy scent, but she knew what it was. Longing for Allogrenia swept back and she laid her head on the wood and wept.

It was early in the morning when Tierken farewelled the last of his guests and made his way along the balcony with Laryia. He'd managed to salvage the success of the banquet by telling those who enquired that Kira had been taken ill, and by flattering every wealthy, important or influential man there, *and* charming their wives, all the while hiding his anger. He had no need to hide it now though, and he began to rehearse the biting speech he was about to deliver.

'Tierken –' said Laryia.

'It's late. Go to bed.'

'Kira was upset. You're not going to make things worse, are you?'

Tierken kissed her cheek. 'Good dreams, Laryia.'

Laryia stopped with her hand on her doorhandle, watching him.

‘Good dreams, Laryia,’ he repeated.

‘And to you, Tierken,’ she said, closing her door behind her.

Tierken turned the key in the third door and thrust it open.
‘Kira?’

It was dim inside, the single lamp on the table all but out. Something crunched under his foot and he cursed and held the lamp aloft. The light picked up the glint of necklets and rings littering the floor.

Scowling, he made his way through to the sleeping-room.

‘Kira?’

The room was chill, the shutters wide, the bed untouched. Clothes spilled out of an open chest and there was no sign of her pack. He strode through to the bathing-room, then came back, took a deep breath and looked out the window. He expected to see her lying broken on the stones below, but there was nothing.

The Domain wall didn’t extend below this small section of the Lehan Wing because the wing had once abutted a yard that housed the Domain Guard and their horses. The Guard had been relocated after Terak’s time, but the breach in the wall had never been mended. All that stood between the yard wall and the Caru Quarter was a stretch of open muddy land.

It was the only way Kira could have gone to avoid being seen by the Domain Guard at the gates. It was also the very worst place in the city for a lone woman to be at night.

Tierken hastened back to his rooms and collected his sword and knives, then made his way quickly through the freezing night to the Caru Quarter, stopping at the end of the alehouses. It was quiet, unsurprising given the lateness. He scanned the street, his gaze lingering on the building at the end where Caru women lived. Drunk men were poor judges of a woman’s willingness to take them, he knew, and his sword arm tensed, wondering if Kira had been accosted.

Kira disliked crowds. *If* she'd come this way, she would have avoided other people. It would be better to search the open Wastes first.

Tierken crossed the street and made his way between the buildings to where the waist-high weeds began. His first step landed him in foul-smelling slop, and he cursed viciously as he struggled on. Rosham was right. It *was* time the Wastes were cleaned up.

The stench gradually gave way to the scent of herbs, and he felt more hopeful that Kira might have come this way because of them. He followed the land down, in parts having to hack a path with his sword, and straining into the gloom to see. There was something at the bottom of the dip – just a tree stump, he thought at first. No, Kira was there too. Relief flooded him.

'This is not a good place to be,' he said, keeping his sword unsheathed as he scanned the darkness.

Kira made no response, her head resting on the stump, her gaze on him. 'Have you hurt yourself?' he tried again.

Still nothing.

'Come. We'll go back to the Domain where it's warm.'

'You cut down the alwaysgreen,' she said.

'It's an allogrenia,' said Tierken. 'It was before my time.'

'The Terak cut healing from their hearts.'

'Come back to the Domain, Kira. We need to talk.'

'You deny me. There's no point in talk.'

'I've never denied *you*,' said Tierken.

'You deny *me*. You deny *healing*. You deny the *Tremen*. I'm not going anywhere with you.'

'You can't stay here,' he said.

'Why not? It's where you dump the things you don't want, isn't it?'

'I want you, Kira. I've always wanted you. From that moment on the plain, when you raised your head and looked at me with my own face, I've wanted you.'

‘But you don’t want what I *am*, Tierken. I’m Kasheron’s seed.’

He sat down beside her. ‘All our tales and all our histories tell that Kasheron took his followers north over the seas,’ he said. ‘I have no reason to believe any of them are false, but the Writing Store hasn’t been ordered for many seasons and, in truth, I don’t have absolute knowing of *everything* it contains. I will ask Farid to order it, and put aside anything that speaks of Kasheron and the Sundering. Would that please you?’

‘Yes. I thank you,’ she said.

‘Come then,’ he said in relief, putting his hand under her elbow and appalled to discover she could barely stand. ‘You’ve hurt yourself?’

‘I’ve jarred my back.’

‘I’ll carry you.’

‘No. It will be better for my back if I walk.’

Tierken brought his arm round her and they made their way up the slope in silence. It took a long time to reach the Domain, and when they came to the steps up to the balcony, Tierken picked her up and she didn’t protest.

He pushed open the door and lowered her onto her bed. Her rooms were chill, for the shutters were still open and he pulled them closed. The lamp had gone out and he needed to set a fire, too. Kira sat huddled on the bed, the feel of Tierken’s arms as he’d carried her, and the sense of loss as he’d put her down, bequeathing her the same desperate need for him as she’d felt at Terak’s Tor.

‘I’ll run a hot bath for you. It will ease your muscles,’ said Tierken.

‘No.’

‘Well, I’ll salve your back.’

‘No.’

‘Kira . . .’

‘I want you,’ she said, wincing as she stood.

‘This is not a good time,’ said Tierken, thinking that of all the countless occasions he’d imagined having her, none of them included a violent argument followed by a desperate search for her, nor her being injured.

‘There’s only now.’

Kira had said that at Terak’s Tor, but all thoughts as to what it might mean were swept away by her first kiss.

Tierken was slow and infinitely gentle, his warmth and scent and tenderness an ecstasy. Afterwards, Kira slept curled about him, snug beneath the covering, drawing her breath in rhythm with his. His touch was like a healing balm, soothing away her anger, and fear and hurt, and she wanted to stay as she was forever.

He rose as soon as first light found the window and she watched him dress, delighting in the line of his shoulder and flank, and the soft shine of his hair.

‘You should have that hot bath,’ he said, clipping on his sword before slipping his knives back into his belt. He perched on the side of the bed, and Kira reached for him again. His warm mouth came to hers, then he caught sight of the ring on the chest next to the bed and drew away.

Tierken turned it over in the light, this time not looking at the allogrenia and galloping horse, but at the metal again. Its obvious age disturbed him. An old ring made in the old way and carried by a woman who claimed to be a Leader. He frowned, recalling something Kira had said earlier.

‘You’ve told me you’re the Tremen Leader, but before you told me Kest was,’ he said.

‘I told you Kest was the *Protector Commander*. I lead the Tremen.’

‘No people can have two leaders,’ he said, thinking uncomfortably of Terak and Kasheran.

Kira grimaced as she sat up, keeping the covering round herself; she wished she was dressed.

‘Kasheron understood the need to keep the sword, and established the Protectors, but the Leader of the Bough – the centre of healing – is the Leader of the Tremen.’

‘So, when your father and brothers were killed, you became Leader?’

‘Leadership of the Bough goes to the best Healer, not to the son or daughter of the last Leader.’

The light in the room was strengthening and Tierken turned to the door. ‘I have matters to attend to this morning, but we need to speak further,’ he said. ‘Join me in the Meeting Hall at midday, Kira.’

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Farid waited, the records of Mid-market stacked in neat piles in front of him, while Tierken prowled round the Meeting Hall. He felt increasingly as if he were on a sheet of Kristlin ice that had begun to crack. He'd spent the time since leaving Kira's bed thinking about the ring. The design of the allogrenia and galloping horse was popular, but it hadn't come into being until King Elrin had wed the gold-eyed Kessomi Healer, Kiraon. Such was Elrin's passion for his new queen that he added the allogrenia – the tree beloved of Kessomis – to his insignia of the galloping horse.

It was also around that time that the silverwrights had perfected the purification of the ore they used, so that the bowls and candle holders in his rooms – which dated from Terak's time – were not dull like Kira's ring. All this pointed to the discomfiting fact that the ring must have been forged after Elrin had married Kiraon, but before silver was purified – namely the period of Terak *and* Kasheron's pryncedom.

Other things added to the roil in his guts. It struck him that he was about to repeat his forebear's actions, for he too was enam-

oured of a gold-eyed Healer called Kiraon. But there had been less antagonism to Kessom in Elrin's time. It was the failure of the Healer-centred Kessom to support the war against the Shargh, and the final betrayal of the Healer twin Kasheron – in severely weakening his brother's forces by taking his own followers north – that had seeded the bitterness.

Given what had transpired in the past, it was odd that some of the conversations he'd shared at the banquet could only be described as conciliatory. More than one of the powerful and influential trader leaders – whose views the Marken subtly or not so subtly expressed each Feailmark – contained oblique gestures of support. It had been Mirina, wife of the wealthy glass-trader Jaklin, who had been plainest in her speech. After congratulating Tierken on his three seasons of rulership, she had commented on the happiness that Sarnia felt now that Laryia's gentle presence had been added to. *The Domain was a better place when it contained the womenfolk of the Feailners – and their children*, Mirina had said. Tierken suspected that after the long uncertainty of Darid's childless rule, Sarnia was less concerned about where his bride came from than the birth of an heir.

'You're distracted this day, Feailner,' said Farid eventually.

'Forgive me,' said Tierken, coming back to the table.

'As I said last night, the Bishali horse-traders continue to believe their treatment is more ill than every other trader,' said Farid.

'Did you offer them the usual choice?' said Tierken, forcing his attention to Farid.

'Trade leader Udrun chose as he usually does, to be levied on the number of horses he traded, rather than on their value. I also offered him a flat rate on the land his traders occupied, as you suggested. He declined.' Farid selected a brecon nut and began to shell it. 'He's not going to be happy whatever he chooses.'

'No,' said Tierken.

There was a long pause before Farid spoke again. ‘My father tells me that quite a few of the guests noticed Kira was upset at the banquet. I beg your pardon, Feailner, that I had to leave.’

‘She was not distressed by you, and the fault wasn’t yours that you had to go. Udrun’s never been quick to pacify, and the fact that you were able to soothe his imagined injuries at all is testament to your skills.’

There was a pause and Tierken wandered back to the window. ‘The Writings Store, Farid,’ he said. ‘Have you sorted through everything there?’

‘When I first became Keeper I went through the records of Darid’s time, but I haven’t gone any further back. Most of them are in disarray.’

‘Now that the Feailmark is over and you have a little more time, I’d be obliged if you could order them,’ said Tierken. ‘Get Mouras to assign you some servers, and put aside anything that refers to the Sundering, Kasheron and the families who left with him, the ring he took, and the Caru Quarter.’

‘Are you thinking of releasing the Wastes for building?’ asked Farid.

‘Your father would certainly like me to,’ said Tierken.

There was a knock and Tierken turned. ‘Come in, Kira. We’ve just finished.’

‘Would you prefer I tally the dues, Feailner, or wait for those from the Quarters?’ asked Farid, rising.

‘Whichever you wish,’ said Tierken, his attention already on Kira.

Servers bustled in with platters of food and Farid bowed and followed the servers out, as Kira carefully lowered herself into a chair. Her back throbbed, despite the fact she’d spent most of the morning in a hot bath. If they had Healers in Sarnia she’d be better by now. Tierken poured her a cup of water, the round of pink fruit giving it a sweet tang.

‘I didn’t get the chance to tell you how beautiful you looked at the banquet,’ said Tierken.

‘That probably explains why no one asked me to dance,’ replied Kira, the humiliation of the evening still galling her.

‘That wasn’t the reason. It was because no man there wanted to offend me,’ said Tierken, breaking fresh maizen bread.

‘How could dancing with me offend you?’

‘It’s widely believed I’ve brought you to Sarnia to marry.’

Kira burst into laughter, but choked to a stop as she noticed Tierken’s gravity.

‘Is the idea so ridiculous?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. You’re more familiar with Terak customs than I am,’ she said. Her heart quickened as she thought of the implications of the last night. To take Tierken in love had been a joy, gifting her peace and a dreamless sleep, but it didn’t undo her quest. If Caledon had returned, there would be Protectors in Maraschin, and as Leader she must at least speak with them, whether or not Tierken eventually granted aid.

Kira took a steady breath. ‘I’ve come to the Meeting Hall at midday as you requested. What would you have me do?’

‘Tell me about the Tain,’ he said, passing her a plate of food, ‘and eat.’

‘I thought you knew about them already,’ said Kira.

‘I’ve no recent knowing,’ said Tierken. And, he thought, if the Tain were under attack, they would surely soon call on the alliance. ‘There’s been no contact with them since early in my uncle’s rulership,’ he added.

Caledon had said as much, Kira recalled, when he’d told her that the Terak would be unlikely to come south.

Tierken began his questioning, wanting to know everything Kira knew: the health of King Beris, the doings of Prince Adris, the

ordering of Maraschin, the frequency and nature of watch-walks, the role and command of the King's Guard, the use of physicks and the functioning of the Sanctum, the Shargh attacks and the King's response, the doings of woodcutters and herders, gatherers and physicks.

He probed and questioned, his brows drawn in concentration, challenging every seeming contradiction, demanding more and more detail.

Kira's pain and weariness were great by the time the light had mellowed and servers came in to set the fire and bring food for the evening meal. Tierken's questioning had taken her back to the Sanctum, the rhythm of healing, the garden where she'd sat after Jesin's death, and Caledon.

'Did you like Maraschin?' asked Tierken, relaxing back after their meal.

'There's a lot of stone there like here, and noise, and the smell of cooked flesh.'

'What of Caledon? The Tallien who's Prince Adris's friend?'

Kira gazed at the fire, thinking of Caledon playing the thum-belin on Shardos, and holding her close while the storm howled and raged about them. She recalled the sweet spice smell of him and the feel of his mouth.

'Is he your lover?' demanded Tierken, no longer lounging in his seat.

'You asked me that before,' said Kira, irritated by Tierken's demand.

'You didn't give me an answer.'

'Caledon loves the stars,' said Kira, her heart quickening as Tierken rose and came to her. He scooped her up and carried her over to the soft rug in front of the fire. Then he undressed her slowly, so that the fire-warmth was as delicious on her skin as his touch. His caresses starved and sated her in turn, until her hunger

for him coalesced into a surge of potent sweetness. Afterwards, Kira lay beside him watching his face, wanting to imprint his beauty into her memory, even as he'd imprinted her with the hot essence of himself.

She felt as she had last night, at ease, safe and happy.

Tierken's eyes were shut as he caressed her breast, then his fingers touched the ring. Kira felt him tense, then he gathered his clothes and dressed quickly. Kira regretted the loss of him. She began to dress, slower, self-conscious suddenly, and aware again of her painful back.

'You can tell me about the Tremen on the morrow,' said Tierken, 'but after that I'll be taken up with preparation for the next patrol. When I return, I want to take you to Kessom.'

He began to collect the records Farid had left on the table, his thoughts on Eris and Poerin, not noticing Kira's dismay. He needed advice from both on Kira's claim, though he knew it was unlikely to bring him peace of mind.

'I can't delay here,' said Kira, coming to the table as she buttoned her shirt.

'Is that how you see our time together? As a *delay*?' he said.

'No, I see it as short,' said Kira. 'But if you're to go on patrol then it's even shorter than I thought.'

'Farid's begun to order the Writings on our histories, as I pledged you. It will take some time so we'll discuss anything of relevance he might find on my return.'

'If he finds something that says Kasheran went south, will you accept the kin-link and grant my people aid?' asked Kira.

'Such a find would be highly unlikely,' said Tierken, his attention on the records.

As Kira watched him, the understanding that he wouldn't aid her, no matter what the Writing Store held, settled over her. A sense of desperation woke. 'I must go south to Maraschin, Tierken, to speak with my people.'

She wondered whether he'd heard her, for he completed his ordering of the records before looking up. 'It's late, Kira. Your back needs rest to mend.'

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Kira was at the stables before dawn the next day. It was increasingly clear that Tierken was content that she remain in the north. In contrast, she felt more and more agitated with every new day. The quickest and safest way of going south was by horse, but the plain was more hazardous than the flat surface of the yard. Her riding skills must be many times better than at present.

Ryn only appeared some time after their lesson was due to have started and was surprised to see her.

‘The Feailner said you’d injured your back and wouldn’t ride for a time,’ he said.

‘I missed her,’ said Kira, as if her only concern were the mare’s beauty.

‘No name yet?’ asked Ryn.

Kira shook her head. There seemed no point in naming something she must leave behind when she returned to Allogrenia.

Ryn briskly listed the names of horses he’d known or owned, and common Kir and Illian horse names and their meanings. Kira nodded as if considering them, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

‘I’d like to ride outside the city,’ she said, keeping her attention on straightening the saddle rug. ‘Laryia says there are good rides to the north. Do you think my skills are good enough?’

‘They’re good enough.’

‘Laryia said that her mare Chime, Tierken’s mount Kalos, and this mare are faster and stronger than the horses the Domain Guard ride. I know little of horses, is that true?’

‘It is,’ said Ryn. Kira bent and stroked the mare’s muzzle. Ryn took a cape from a hook and handed it to her. ‘It’ll rain before the sun clears the Sarsalin. You know how to rub the mare down when you’ve finished.’

Ryn’s prediction about the weather proved true, and Kira was wet and her back spasming by the time she trudged back up the steps to the balcony. At the far end, she could see Farid talking to somebody loaded with sheafs, and Kira hobbled as quickly as she could along the balcony. She intended to ask Farid about the Writings, but by the time she got to the door he’d disappeared.

The Writing Store was as large as the Storage Cavern in the Warens and she scanned the shelves excitedly, forgetting the pain in her back. There were two servers seated at a table, flicking through Writings and placing them in piles, the untouched Writings so disordered it looked as though the shelves had been upended.

‘Is there ought we can help you with, Lady?’ asked one, looking up. He was completely bald, reminding Kira of a Drink-water pebble.

She wanted to sit and read all the Writings, but her most immediate need was a map. It was suddenly useful that Farid *had* disappeared.

‘I’m a stranger to Sarnia,’ said Kira hurriedly, glancing nervously around for Farid. ‘Do you have any maps of the lands all about? Of the Sarsalin?’

The server nodded, then sorted through the Writings with maddening slowness, and finally pulled out a sheaf.

‘May I take it?’ asked Kira. ‘I’ll bring it back by nightfall.’

‘Of course, Lady,’ he said, presenting it to her with a bow.

Kira tucked it under her cape and made her way to her room, locking the door behind her. The first few maps in the sheaf were of the lands north of the Silvercades, the city of Talliel prominent, then there were smaller papers showing the forested tracts of the Silvercade foothills. Flicking to the next sheet, she saw it showed the lands between the southern Silvercades and the northern Azurcades. She crouched over it, searching for the springs of their journey north, so absorbed she barely heard Laryia’s call at the door.

The door handle rattled.

‘Kira?’ said Laryia again.

Kira sprang up and thrust the map under her clothes in the storage chest.

‘You’re soaked,’ said Laryia, as she came into the room. ‘Surely you haven’t ridden in this?’

‘It wasn’t as heavy when I started,’ said Kira.

‘And there’s no need to lock your door,’ said Laryia, staring at the uneaten breakfast. ‘The Domain’s quite safe, with plenty of Guard and servers about.’

Kira nodded, and pulled off the cape, shivering as drips ran down her neck.

‘I’ll run a hot bath for you,’ said Laryia. ‘We don’t want you ill.’

Steam billowed as water gushed from the taps, and perfume filled the air as Laryia emptied a handful of pink crystals into the water.

‘Tierken waits for you in the Meeting Hall,’ she said, looking up. ‘He’s told me who you claim to be.’

‘He doesn’t believe me.’

‘Tierken doesn’t believe your *histories*. There’s a difference,’ said Laryia, swirling her hand through the water to mix the crystals.

‘Tierken’s happiness is the most important thing in the world to me, Kira. I think he could be happy with you.’

‘I have to go south again, Laryia.’

‘Tierken believes he’s very different to Darid, the last Feailner,’ continued Laryia, as if Kira hadn’t spoken. ‘In many ways he is, but Darid only loved once, and even after Seren died, didn’t take another wife. Darid could have fathered an heir to supplant Tierken, but Seren was too precious to him. I think Tierken will only love once too.’

‘I *have* to go south again, Laryia, to speak with my people. I don’t have any choice,’ repeated Kira.

‘There are always choices, Kira,’ said Laryia, and smiled. ‘I think Tierken’s chosen well,’ she added, enclosing Kira in a hug.

Tierken’s questioning about the Tremen was as methodical and unrelenting as his questioning about the Tain: the relative authority of the Tremen Leader, the Protector Commander, the Clancouncil and the Clanleaders, the nature and frequency of patrols, the training and discipline of the Protectors, the relationship of each clan to the others, gathering and trading rights, the seasonal variation in food and forage.

He was particularly interested in the lack of metal, for it seemed so odd to him.

‘So only swords and herbing sickles. Does that mean Tremen men are bearded?’ asked Tierken.

‘No, they use clear-root, a plant that takes off hair.’

‘No jewellery either. Laryia would be most displeased,’ said Tierken with a smile.

‘There’s wooden jewellery and beads made from tree sap.’

‘Tell me of your growing,’ continued Tierken.

‘I lived in the Bough, as I’ve said. My mother died after my younger brother Kandor was born. Helpers came in to clean, cook and sew cloth for us.’ Kira shrugged. ‘That’s all.’

‘How did you occupy your days?’ asked Tierken.

‘I gathered, foraged with Tresen and Kandor, played at the Kashclan longhouse.’

‘Who’s Tresen?’

‘My clanmate,’ replied Kira, her eyes darkening.

‘Did the Shargh kill him, too?’ asked Tierken, wondering at the change.

‘Nearly, and it was my fault.’

‘How so?’ asked Tierken sharply.

‘When . . . I realised that the bloodshed in Allogrenia was because the Shargh hunted *me*, I decided to leave. I knew Kest wouldn’t agree . . . so I went secretly, but Tresen knew me too well, catching up with me just as I had stumbled into Shargh. Tresen drew them away, but they caught him before Kest’s patrol arrived. He was terribly wounded.’

‘Why *do* the Shargh hunt you?’ asked Tierken, fearing that Farid’s guess was correct.

‘They hate my eyes. When they had me –’ she started, then stopped, the colour draining from her face.

Tierken took her in his arms. ‘They’re never going to have you again, Kira. You’re here now, safe.’

‘I’m the Tremen *Leader*. I need go south.’

‘If this Tallien – Caledon – *does* bring Tremen from the forests, they’ll be led by Kest, *not by you*. You are a Healer, not a Protector. And if the Shargh capture you again, they’ll use you *against* your people, trading your life for their acquiescence. Then, once they’ve destroyed Allogrenia, they’ll kill you. You’ll stay here.’

‘You don’t have the right to keep me here,’ cried Kira in frustration, breaking from his arms. ‘You’ve told me the Terak Kirillian have no obligation to the Tremen. That means what happens to them, *or me*, is nothing to do with you!’

‘Is that how you see our time together? Something to be dispensed with, like this!’ He snapped his fingers. ‘I’m

beginning to think Tremen women are as faithless as those in the Caru Quarter!’

Kira flushed crimson and stepped back.

‘I didn’t mean –’ he began.

‘In the forest, love is a gift given without thought of reward,’ she choked out. ‘I realise that things are different in the north, that here, *everything’s* traded. You’ve given me love, and sleep without dreams, for that, I thank you, Feailner. If you’ve also found pleasure in the moment, I consider the trade fair.’

‘Kira!’

She was already at the door. ‘I don’t have anything to trade for your rescue of me, or for my food and clothes. I can only thank you for them. I hope that’s sufficient!’

The door slammed and Tierken cursed.

A short time later, there was a tentative knock.

‘Enter!’ bawled Tierken.

Farid came in, carrying a Writing. ‘I’ve been ordering the Writing Store as you asked and I’ve found something of interest.’

‘What? That Kasheran had a daughter, who had a daughter, who had a daughter, who had a daughter, who had a daughter called Kira?’

‘Is that what she’s claimed? That she’s Kasheran’s seed?’ asked Farid in amazement. ‘But it’s not possible, is it?’

‘It contradicts everything we know, but it’s not impossible. Our histories could be completely wrong and Kira’s completely right. Your father may even think me the best Feailner since Terak himself. What have you found?’

‘When Kasheran and his followers left, they took Kessomi horses,’ said Farid.

‘A sore point,’ snapped Tierken. ‘Kasheran abandoned the horses when he sailed away and Terak had to trade every single one of them back. It cost him dearly. But this is well known.’

‘Terak traded them back from the Ashmiri, I believe.’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Tierken. ‘The Ashmiri mounts are poor and Terak knew they’d be a lot more dangerous on Kessomi horses.’

‘When did Kasheron and his followers leave?’

‘At the beginning of summer. The desertion of Kasheron weakened Terak’s defences, and the dry earth advantaged the Shargh, who fought on foot. Despite the desperation of his predicament, Terak recovered all of the horses by the end of summer.’

‘That’s my understanding too,’ said Farid, laying the Writing on the table, ‘but it’s not what this says.’

‘What does it say?’

‘Basically the same thing, except that Kasheron left at the start of *winter*, and that Terak had his precious horses back by the *end* of winter.’

Tierken shrugged. ‘It’s a small difference.’

‘Where do the Ashmiri graze in winter?’

Tierken stared at him, then leapt to his feet and strode up and down, turned to Farid as if to speak, strode on and stopped again.

‘It’s not possible,’ he said hoarsely.

‘You’ve just told me that it’s not *impossible*,’ said Farid. ‘And this is written by Terak. Terak was a meticulous record-keeper. If this Writing is true, Terak had all his horses back, *traded from the Ashmiri*, by the end of winter. As the Ashmiri graze their animals *east* of the Azurcades in winter, the horses must have been traded from the *south*, not the *north*.’

‘One Writing that contradicts everything,’ breathed Tierken. ‘It could be wrong or our histories could be wrong.’

‘It’s hard to judge, without going through everything else in the Writing Store,’ said Farid.

‘Do that, Farid, and get more servers to help you.’

52

Horses stamped and harness jingled behind Caledon, as dawn light ate the last of the stars. There were ten riders in all, chosen from the most experienced of the King's Guard. The Guard murmured among themselves, but fell silent at the sound of a horse on King's Way, the recklessness of its descent meaning it could only be Adris.

The horse appeared at full gallop, not wrenched to a stop until it was almost on them. Adris jumped to the paving and strode forward carrying a leather cylinder.

'I will deliver greetings from the Tain Prince to the Terak Feailner,' said Caledon, taking it with a bow.

'My father died this night,' said Adris, his face weary. 'You may deliver greetings from the Tain *King* to the Terak Feailner.'

Caledon dropped to his knee. 'Then I honour the Tain King. May his reign be long and wise.'

'There will be no bending of knees between us,' said Adris, raising him. 'Our friendship is one of equals. I will send Guard

over the Azurcades to wait for the Tremen, even as the Guard waited for you. Billets have been prepared.'

'I thank you,' said Caledon.

'May Meros guide your way,' said Adris, embracing Caledon.

'I prefer the stars,' said Caledon, smiling.

Further south, in the shadow of the Cashgars, the rising sun lit a scene so extraordinary that Tarkenda had to remind herself that she wasn't experiencing a vision. The whole lower slope was completely covered with sorchas. The Weshargh and Soushargh warriors had begun arriving in the night, and their singing and shouting had kept both her and Palansa wakeful. They were quieter now – the bravery the sherat had gifted them had given way to snores.

Tarkenda wondered how much food they carried. No Shargh in the Grounds went hungry, even those on the lower slope, but there was little left over for storage.

What they had brought with them was too much hot blood and too much wild talk, the stench of what was to come hanging in the air like a summer storm. The only small comfort Tarkenda could draw was that the struggle to protect Ersalan would be less once the hatred of Arkendrin and his followers went north with them.

Kira started upright from her chair as the door to her room was flung open and the silhouette in the doorway resolved into Laryia. She wore breeches and a jerkin, rather than her usual gown.

'You haven't slept,' said Laryia, 'and we've a long day ahead.'

'What?' said Kira, wondering if she dreamed.

'We're going to Kessom, we're going to see Eris,' said Laryia, dancing across the room.

'Tierken's postponed the patrol, and is at the stables, readying the horses. I've packed fur jackets and fleece shirts for you because it's freezing in Kessom this time of season, but so lovely! The snow

glitters, and the Kristlin glows like a blue gem. Oh, how I long to see Eris and Thalli and Jafiel . . .’

Kira looked at her in bewilderment, and Laryia took her hands. ‘I’m probably not making sense, but Tierken said to let you sleep as long as possible. He came to my rooms a while ago and told me we’re going.’

‘But why?’

‘He says he needs to speak with Poerin, but I know he wants to see Eris as much as I do. Oh, I can’t wait! Come Kira and dress. I know Niria put some warmer things in one of these chests for you,’ said Laryia, darting towards one.

‘I’ll get them,’ said Kira quickly.

Laryia stopped and Kira smiled. ‘I’m sorry, I’m still half asleep. I’ll dress in the warmest things there are and meet you at the stables.’

‘I’ve got hats and gloves, Kira, but you won’t need those till we clear the Tiar Forests. We’ll breakfast there. Don’t be long. It’s going to be so wonderful. You’re going to love Kessom, *and* Eris. I know Eris is going to love you too.’

Kira dressed and made her way down to the stables, wondering at this turn of events. She didn’t know whether to feel disappointed at yet another delay to her journey south, or excited at the prospect of Kessom. Eris was a Healer, and Kira was looking forward to speaking with her and of learning new healing ways. There was also the possibility that Eris knew the truth of her claim, or that others in Kessom would. Perhaps she wouldn’t need to ride south alone after all.

Tierken led the way into the foothills, with Laryia and Kira next and two Domain Guard bringing up the rear. Laryia kept up a constant chatter on everything from the Silver Falls – which were the most striking in the Terak lands – to the dwinhir hatchlings in the Torlands behind Kessom. In contrast, Tierken had said nothing all day, his greeting at the stables no more than a nod.

As the scattered trees came together to form a dense grove, Laryia fell silent, the thick leaf-fall reducing the horses' hoofbeats to soft thuds and filling the air with resinous scent. There was no undergrowth, just trunk upon trunk stretching away on either side.

'The Tiar Forests are always dim,' said Laryia, 'but we'll be through them soon.'

'They're beautiful,' said Kira.

'I forgot your lands were forested,' said Laryia smiling. 'You're going to feel at home in the Frost Groves, and the allogrenia stands in Kessom.'

They emerged into the crisp morning air again, the path narrowing and steepening, forcing them into single file until the slope levelled off.

'This is the Tiar Lookround, where we'll breakfast,' said Laryia.

They dismounted and the horses were tethered. From the Lookround it was easy to see why the area had been so named, the Silvercades climbing at their back and a sweeping view opening up to the front and sides. Beyond the dark crowns of the Tiar Forest, wintry sunshine lit the stonework of Sarnia, the city confined by the perfect circle of its wall. Beyond Sarnia, the Sarsalin glimmered in a golden mist, and Kira watched birds appearing and disappearing from the haze.

'Courting dwinhir,' said Tierken, coming to her side.

The intricate pattern of their flight was different to what Kira had seen previously.

'In winter, the male bird seeks a mate,' explained Tierken. 'The female flies like that to test his strength and resolve, and to see if he's in accord with her.'

'It doesn't seem very fair,' said Kira, her eyes on the birds.

'Oh, he gets his reward. If she chooses him, she'll choose no other and he'll have a mate for life. In Kessom, it's called the dance

of the dwinhir, but some Terak call it the disappointment of the dwinhir, because the female bird doesn't always accept the male.'

Tierken glanced over to where the Guard had set a fire and Laryia was busy with the food. 'I need to beg your pardon for my words in the last night. They were ill-considered and untrue,' he said.

'I wasn't much better,' muttered Kira.

Tierken's fingers under her chin brought her face round to his. 'Are we in accord?' he asked softly.

'I don't think the Terak and Tremen will ever be in accord.'

'The dance isn't over yet,' he said, and kissed her.

'The cotzee's brewed and the nuts are roasted,' called Laryia cheerfully. 'Time to eat!'

Their meal was brief and they continued along the narrow top of the ridge, the day remaining fine with only a gentle breeze. Kira guessed that the journey would be very different in a high wind. There were no sheltering trees, the nearest growth being squat bushes some way down the slope. It was near midday when the land flattened again and they crossed a broad, fast-flowing river, gashing white where it broke against rocks. There was a roar, too, out of proportion to the river's flow.

'This is the Silver River and what you can hear are the Silver Falls,' said Tierken, raising his voice to be heard above the noise. 'We'll stop soon to eat. There's a good view of the Falls from further ahead.'

The track divided on the other side of the river and they turned north-east, the ridge broadening, allowing trees to crowd closer. A short way further, Tierken led them off the main track along an overgrown path, silvery foliage brushing against them as they ducked under branches, the path ending in a small clearing.

'I'll show you the Falls,' said Tierken, taking Kira's hand and leading her through tangled bushes. 'We need to take care, the land drops away suddenly.'

The words had scarcely left his mouth when his grip tightened and he brought her to a stop, water plunging down the sheer rock of a yawning gulf. Rainbows flickered, flung into space by the water's spume, reminding Kira of Caledon and the stream below the Aurantia Cave.

'Irid's sign,' said Tierken softly, looking at her rather than the rainbows.

There was no slow arousal, just an instant and fierce want of him. Kira forgot the Falls, the silvery plants, the crisp air sharp against her skin, becoming conscious of them again only after the sweet ecstasy had ebbed away.

She lay in his arms, knowing it might be the last time making it all the more precious.

'Laryia will come to look for us in a moment,' murmured Tierken, easing down her shirt and lacing her breeches, then pulling his own clothes into place. He helped her up, staring at her, curiously intent.

'Marry me, Kira.'

The words only slowly entered Kira's consciousness, and she had no time to react before Laryia appeared, her gaze darting between them.

'I waited for you to come back and eat, and the food's cold now. At this rate it'll be dark before we clear the gorge,' she said, alternately irritated and intrigued.

'You're right, Laryia,' said Tierken. 'It's getting late. We must go on.'

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Tierken's last words to her ran through Kira's head over and over again as they rode, making no more sense than before. From what she'd heard on patrol and in Sarnia, kinship and treaty were paramount in the north. It was implausible that a Feailner would tie himself to a woman who was exel. She must have somehow mistaken his intent.

The land soared upward all around them now, and once the sun dipped below the peaks the air chilled rapidly. Laryia pulled out a thick fleece hat, gloves and cape, Kira taking them gratefully and pulling the hat low over her frozen ears.

'The last part of a night journey to Kessom is cool in summer but icy in winter,' said Laryia. 'But the winter skies make up for being frozen, their fire Kessom's special welcome to the traveller. It's not far now, though. Soon we'll be warming ourselves in Eris's cooking place.'

Kira gazed up at the starry brilliance.

'The Kessomis call them star-storms,' said Tierken. 'It's said few Kessomis leave Kessom because they're star-bound to the Silvercades.'

‘You left,’ said Kira.

‘I was going home. Laryia and I were born in Sarnia.’

‘But raised in Kessom,’ said Kira. ‘Where does your heart lie now?’

‘You of all people should know that,’ he said quietly.

‘It lies in Kessom, of course!’ interjected Laryia, as a scatter of lamps emerged from the darkness. ‘We’re home!’

A low building became visible next, then the pale wood of yards. A horse neighed, and Kalos, Chime and Kira’s mare answered.

‘Kessomi horses know their own,’ said Tierken.

A door slammed and a lamp bobbed towards them.

‘A good night to you, Robrin,’ said Tierken.

‘By the mists of Mintlin! It’s you, Tierken, *and* Laryia. Ah, this is a happy night for Kessom.’

Tierken and Laryia dismounted and were enveloped in hugs.

‘This is our guest Kira,’ said Tierken, helping Kira down.

Kira went to bow but found herself hugged by Robrin as well. ‘You’re very welcome,’ he said. ‘We’ve heard tell of your “twin”,’ Robrin said to Tierken, ‘and for once the tattle-tongues were right.’

‘You’ve room in the stables?’ asked Tierken.

‘By all means, by all means,’ said Robrin, taking their reins.

‘And someone to help?’ asked Laryia.

‘Plenty of that too, Laryia. Go on off to Eris. We’ll be seeing you in a few days, no doubt, for a proper welcome,’ said Robrin, before heading towards the stables with their mounts in tow.

Tierken spoke to the Guard, who followed Robrin, then took Kira’s hand, as Laryia danced on ahead. The path led steadily upward, disappearing into the deeper darkness of trees, their spicy scent unmistakable.

‘Alwaysgreens,’ said Kira, slowing.

‘Tomorrow,’ said Tierken, pulling her after him.

Lamps glimmered in the darkness, seeming to hang in the air where the houses were set on higher ground. They crossed a small wooden bridge with dark water gurgling beneath.

‘The Zinaidi,’ said Tierken, without pausing.

More alwaysgreens crowded forward, their glorious scent washing over Kira, and a house appeared, set close to the path. Laryia stood motionless in front of it.

‘Everything looks the same. Even the freylin still grows,’ murmured Laryia, touching the leafless, gnarled bush overhanging the doorway.

Tierken knocked and waited. After a while, the door opened and a wedge of yellow light spilled out, illuminating a small hunched figure, who cried out in joy. Tierken bent low and Eris kissed him on each cheek, then did the same with Laryia, the welcome curiously formal after the stableman’s. Kira came forward reluctantly and Eris kissed her on each cheek too, holding her face cradled as she stared at her intently.

‘It’s good that you’ve come to Kessom,’ said Eris. ‘It was time.’

They shared a small meal and the excited chatter ebbed, replaced by weariness. Laryia took Kira to her childhood sleeping-room, leaving Eris and Tierken alone.

Eris watched Tierken heft another piece of wood onto the fire. His face was harder, the strange golden eyes warier, her grandson resembling Merench more now, despite having inherited Lyess’s colouring. Eris put aside the herb she’d been grinding and rested her hands on her knees. They looked very old, even to her.

‘It’s good to be here,’ said Tierken with a sigh.

‘Don’t you like being Feailner?’ asked Eris.

‘What man wouldn’t like being Feailner?’ asked Tierken. ‘Life on the Sarsalin is good, but Sarnia? Nothing’s simple there.’

‘You knew the Marken wouldn’t welcome you,’ said Eris. ‘What of the traders?’

‘The traders are happy if the city is administered well – which it is, thanks mainly to Farid,’ said Tierken.

‘Your patrols ensure that all is secure so that he *can* administer well,’ Eris pointed out. ‘But you obviously didn’t visit to speak of Farid. So tell me about Kira.’

‘I thought you’d know everything already,’ said Tierken.

‘The Kessomi patrolmen report what’s said on patrol and in Sarnia, but I presume you’ve come to tell me the truth.’

‘Well, I didn’t come to please Rosham,’ said Tierken dryly. ‘Kira claims to be Kasheron’s seed; that Kasheron didn’t go north, but to the southern forests, establishing a healing community there. Her people, the Tremen, are now under Shargh attack and she’s called on the kin-link to gain aid.’

‘Which you’ve refused?’

‘She can’t be kin.’

‘Why not?’ asked Eris. ‘She’s certainly similar enough to you, *and* speaks like a Kessomi.’

‘You know Terak histories as well as I do.’

‘I also know Terak prejudices, such as their dislike of anything Kessomi, including healing. So, you deny her people, but still she looks upon you with love.’

Tierken’s eyes flashed to hers, brilliant in the firelight, a change she hadn’t seen since he was a small boy.

‘It’s a strange thing to find the other half of yourself,’ he said.

‘But not comfortable – for either of you.’

‘We’ve had our share of arguments,’ acknowledged Tierken. ‘Her people have a long hatred for the Terak *Kutan*, as they call us, and for the metal we carry, their way being to heal. Their most powerful Healer becomes their Leader.’ He paused. ‘Kira says she’s the Tremen Leader.’

‘The fact that she’s from a healing community further supports her claim. And if she’s Leader, she’d have a thorough knowing of her histories,’ replied Eris.

‘A thorough knowing of histories that contradict most of ours,’ said Tierken. ‘One set of Writings is wrong, and I don’t believe it’s the Terak’s. Most of what else she claims is explicable by her people entering the forests when we were all exiled.’

‘So what do you intend, Tierken?’

‘To marry her.’

Eris wasn’t surprised, thinking of her first son Darid, sitting in this room telling her he was to marry Seren. There had been the same absolute certainty.

‘But if Kira’s the Leader of a people you’ve denied aid to, Tierken, a people under attack, do you think she will stay? If you were her, would you stay here or go back to them?’

‘The Shargh have captured her once and still hunt her. Kira will remain in the safety of the north.’

‘Whether she wants to or not?’ said Eris. When Tierken said nothing, she added, ‘Is it a wife you desire, or a prisoner?’

‘That’s not how it is,’ said Tierken, ‘she just needs time to grow used to the city. It was the same with Laryia and me.’ He yawned. ‘We’ll speak of it again in a few days. I’ve an early start to Poerin’s on the morrow, so I’ll wish you a good night.’

Eris caught his hand, looking at him intently. ‘Will you ask Poerin’s advice about Kira?’

Tierken nodded.

‘And will you take it?’

‘I’ll listen to him as I’ve listened to you,’ said Tierken, bringing her hand to his lips.

Eris remained where she was after Tierken had gone to his room, remembering his long wait for the feailnership. Tierken needed certainty – in that he hadn’t changed – and she feared it drove his reluctance to accept Kira’s claim as much as his reluctance to upset the Sarnians. The next few days would show what drove Kira.

*

Eris watched Laryia as they breakfasted together the next morning. Three seasons had turned her into a beautiful young woman, thought Eris proudly. Laryia shared Tierken's determination too, but had the advantage of being a woman, the Marken yet to suspect her strength. Laryia had much affection for Kira, though Kira didn't seem comforted by it, remaining tense and silent. In the daylight, Kira's resemblance to Tierken was even more striking, as were her eyes, and Eris found their shifting colour reassuring. Tierken had learned to hide his feelings, but Kira's eyes hid nothing.

'Does Tierken still sleep?' asked Laryia.

'He's gone to Poerin,' said Eris.

'I thought he'd at least stay a day,' exclaimed Laryia, surprised. 'It's been *three seasons* since he's seen you.'

'He saw me last night,' said Eris with a smile. 'That's enough for a young man.'

'Poerin trained Tierken in fighting and horsemanship,' said Laryia to Kira, 'and chooses to live where only dwinhir frequent. It's a hard trip which must be taken on foot and Tierken will be gone at least four days.'

There was a knock and Laryia set the herbed bread on the table and disappeared down the passageway, a squeal of delight floating back.

'It must be Thalli,' said Eris to Kira. 'It doesn't take news long to spread in Kessom. Laryia and Thalli were very close as children.'

Laryia appeared with her arm round a sandy-haired woman who was so heavy with child she looked about to birth.

'Kira, this is Thalli,' said Laryia.

Thalli kissed Kira on the cheek but her attention was all for Laryia.

'Take breakfast with us,' said Laryia.

'I thank you, but Leos and Jafiel will soon be back from the

Torlands where they've been collecting tanich for dye. Why don't you come . . .' began Thalli, then stopped, glancing at Eris.

'Go, Laryia,' said Eris. 'Kira and I have healing to discuss.'

'I'll come back early and take you to see all my favourite places, Kira,' said Laryia, by way of farewell.

The outer door closed and Eris turned to Kira. 'Tierken told me you're a Healer,' she said.

'Yes. When Kasheron founded the Tremen, he instilled a love of healing,' said Kira, her eyes sheening as if expecting a challenge.

'Kasheron gained his healing skills from here,' said Eris. 'Kessom has long been the heart of healing.'

'In the north,' said Kira.

'In the north,' acknowledged Eris, noting Kira's clenched hands. 'Tierken has told me your kinship claim is false. What will you do?'

Kira's eyes fluoresced, and her distress and anger reminded Eris of Tierken, when Lyess, then Merench had died.

'I'd hoped he would change his mind, but as he hasn't . . . As Leader, it's now my duty to go south and treaty with the Tain. Caledon says that if the Shargh are victorious, they'll leave no one in peace.'

'Caledon e Saridon e Talliel?' asked Eris.

'You know of him?' asked Kira, her expression softening.

'He's been here several times over the seasons,' said Eris, watching Kira closely.

'But . . . then Tierken must know him.'

'No. Caledon calls himself "Saridon" in the north, and Tierken was away with Poerin when Saridon visited. How is it *you* know Saridon?' asked Eris, breaking more bread for Kira.

'I met him after I'd left my people, and I journeyed to Maraschin with him. He took a message from me to my people, but while he was gone I was caught by the Shargh. Then Tierken's

patrol rescued me and took me to Sarnia. I don't know if Caledon's returned to Maraschin. He might be dead, for all I know.'

Kira rose and paced, something else she shared with Tierken, thought Eris.

'If Caledon lives, he'll think *I'm* dead, and if he brings Tremem from the forests, I must be there!'

Kira looked so distressed that Eris thought she might simply flee. 'I need to gather herbs this day,' she said. 'Will you help?'

'Yes, yes of course,' said Kira, running her hand through her hair distractedly. 'I'll get my sling and sickle.'

Eris collected her sling, sickle and steady-stick, then waited outside under the freylin, caressing its barren wood. 'Your last season - like mine,' she murmured.

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Eris could only walk very slowly, leaning on her stick and stopping now and then to gather, or to ask Kira to scramble down to less accessible growths. She and Kira spoke of the herbs they used and the distillations, brews and pastes they made. Eris spoke of the Healers in Kessom as well. There were many skilled in childbirth, bone-setting, soothing coughs, stitching and salving wounds, she said, but the strongest healing ran in Kiraon's line.

'Both my sons were inclined to healing, but Darid stifled it, for healing has no place in Sarnia. Merench drowned in a storm-flood while gathering. Healing's in Tierken and Laryia too, but strongest in Laryia.'

'Why is there no healing in Sarnia?' asked Kira.

'It's a rejection rooted in the Sundering,' said Eris, as she harvested shoots of silversalve, breathing heavily as she straightened. 'But no place is ever totally bereft of Healers, despite the contempt of Feailners and Markens, and the absence of a Haelen. There are birthing women in Sarnia, makers of syrups for coughs and oils for aches – but skills kept behind closed doors wither,

growing poorer with the passing of time. Here there's a sharing and celebration of that which gives life, and so healing stays strong.

'Isn't it so in the forests?' asked Eris with a smile.

'Yes. We thank the green and growing, and honour what it gives us.'

They continued up the path, the houses behind them hidden by sweeps of alwaysgreens, while in front the brilliant snow-capped Silvercades soared. Then there was a shout and Laryia appeared on the path below, clearly distressed and hurrying up.

'There's been an accident,' panted Laryia, as she reached them. 'I've been to half the houses in Kessom looking for you. Jafiel's fallen in the Torlands and broken his ankle. The bone's through the skin. Leos had to carry him back, and Thalli's distraught. I think she's begun to birth.'

'You go,' said Eris to Kira. 'Laryia run back and get sickleseed, sorren, bandages and splints.'

'Which house?' asked Kira.

'The second one on the next path left,' said Laryia, pointing.

Kira sprinted away through the alwaysgreens, and before long was beating on the door of the second house. The haggard man who opened it seemed to know who she was.

Loud groans greeted Kira as she hastened after the man to where Jafiel lay, the bone of his shattered ankle stark against his bloodied flesh.

'You've got sickleseed?' asked the man anxiously, but Kira was busy unbuttoning Jafiel's shirt.

The fire-filled tunnel was ferocious. But when she came back into the cool air of the room, Kira was surprised to still hear groaning.

'Who?' asked Kira, bewildered.

'My wife . . . our first child . . .' said the man, pointing towards the nearest door.

‘I need to wash my hands,’ said Kira, breathing deeply to still the nausea. ‘I’ll set the ankle and when Laryia arrives we’ll bind him up and give him something to make him sleep.’

A woman took Kira to a bathing-room and then Kira came back and eased the bone back into place, the break ragged, but not the worst she’d dealt with. Eris arrived, and then Laryia, but neither spoke till Kira had finished.

‘Did you have sickleseed with you?’ asked Laryia in surprise, laying the sorren, splints and bandages on the bed.

‘No,’ said Kira, opening the sorren pot.

‘But how –’

‘I’ll splint the ankle,’ interrupted Eris, ‘if you could reassure Thalli her brother’s on the mend, Kira, and get Leos to rest or we’ll have a third patient. You go too, Laryia, Thalli needs you.’

Laryia held Thalli’s hand while Kira checked all was well, and a short time later Eris arrived and took Kira’s position next to the bed. Kira curled in a chair and watched, the tiredness that taking pain bequeathed her making it difficult to keep her eyes open. There was really no need for Kira to be there, for Eris was highly skilled, and the birth was progressing well. The babe would likely be born before nightfall, which would be quick for a first child, not that Thalli was likely to appreciate the fact. Thalli was in pain, as birthing women always were.

The woman who had opened the door to Kira – Samari – mother to Leos and Jafiel, came and went, offering honey cakes, cotzee and biscuit bursting with fruit. Eris and Laryia ate, but Kira was too queasy. Kira dozed and the sky was filled with star-fire by the time Thalli’s daughter slithered onto the bed, sandy-haired like Thalli, with a perfect, serene little face.

‘A good birth,’ said Eris, placing the babe in Thalli’s arms, ‘and a beautiful girl like her mother,’ she added, smoothing Thalli’s hair back and kissing her forehead.

‘Shall I wake Leos?’ asked Laryia.

‘No, let him rest,’ murmured Thalli, her gaze on her daughter. ‘Leos has had a terrible two days, but it’s ended well,’ she added, yawning, eyelids wavering.

‘Sleep,’ said Laryia, giving her a hug. ‘I’ll see you both on the morrow.’

They went slowly back to Eris’s house and Kira also slept, not waking till past noon, and to quietness, Eris and Laryia nowhere to be found. Putting on her jacket, she set off up the path, passing others who nodded to her pleasantly but too restless to do other than nod back. The sight of Thalli holding her new daughter, surrounded by Eris and Laryia, who loved her, amplified Kira’s sense of aloneness. There had been no tenderness from her father, and certainly no love.

She turned into a grove of alwaysgreens, searching for the biggest bole and climbing, but for once the alwaysgreen brought no comfort. She’d found comfort in Tierken’s arms, and had allowed it to dupe her into believing he would accept the kin-link. Eris’s blunt words had now destroyed the delusion. All she was doing here, and in Sarnia, was wasting time.

Kira made her way slowly back to Eris’s house, Laryia jumping up as Kira entered the cooking place but Eris continued her grinding.

‘I was concerned for you,’ said Laryia. ‘It’s fully dark outside. Where have you been?’

‘There’s no reason to be concerned. In the forests I journeyed many days alone,’ said Kira, holding her numb hands to the fire.

‘Have you eaten?’ said Laryia. ‘Tierken says you need to eat more.’

‘Tierken’s not here,’ said Kira. ‘Don’t fret about me, Laryia.’

‘Well, at least have some cotzee,’ said Laryia, subdued.

Laryia went to their sleeping-room soon after, but Kira remained, watching Eris work. The cooking place was warm and smelt of maizen bread and herbs. Eris worked in silence,

the silvermint she ground releasing a pungent smell that finally soothed Kira's restlessness.

'Do you have a herb in Kessom called fireweed?' asked Kira.

'No. I don't know the name.'

Kira described it but Eris shook her head, and Kira wondered whether there were little valleys like the Thanaval hidden higher in the Silvercades. She was unlikely to find out, she thought glumly.

'Leos told me what you did,' said Eris, 'though he didn't understand it. Are you the only Healer in the southern forests who can take pain?'

'There have been two others,' said Kira, rousing. 'Tremen Leader Feailner Sinarki, and her daughter, Tremen Leader Feailner Tesrina. It's rumoured the first Kiraon could too.'

'The *first* Kiraon?' questioned Eris, stopping her grinding.

'Kasheron's and Terak's mother,' said Kira, puzzled by Eris's ignorance.

'Who's the *second* Kiraon?'

Kira realised her mistake but was reluctant to lie. 'I'm the second - Kira's short for Kiraon. Tierken said not to use Kiraon in the north.'

'He had no right to say that. It's your name,' said Eris.

'It doesn't matter,' said Kira, not wanting to cause upset. 'I realise it would make difficulties for him in Sarnia. I was only called Kiraon by the Clancouncil on formal occasions, and by my father when I was in trouble.'

'Were you in trouble often?' asked Eris.

'Yes.'

'You weren't in accord with your father?'

'No.'

'What of your mother?'

'She died after my brother was born.'

'So your clan-kin raised you?'

'My father was the Tremem Leader, so we lived apart from

them. I was four seasons when my mother died, so I didn't need anyone to raise me.'

'Then who looked after your younger brother?'

'I did.'

'That's a big task for a child of four seasons,' said Eris.

'It was no hardship. Kandor was beautiful. He -' Kira faltered, struggling with the sense of suffocation.

Eventually she became aware of the room again, and saw that Eris's papery hands enclosed hers.

'I'm sorry,' she muttered.

'There's no shame in showing grief and no healing without doing so,' said Eris.

'I don't have time,' said Kira, self-consciously withdrawing her hands.

'What of Tierken?'

'I don't have time for him, either, since he's denied my people,' said Kira.

'Yet you love him.'

Kira blushed. 'I've allowed myself this little time of happiness, Eris, something the Shargh can't steal from me,' she said. 'But it's only a little time.'

'That's not what Tierken believes.'

'I've told Tierken who I am and *what* I am. I've told him what my histories say and I've shown him Kasheron's ring. That's all I can do,' said Kira, rising. 'Your place is beautiful, Eris, and you're fortunate it's a long way from the Shargh. I look forward to seeing more of it on the morrow.'

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Tierken journeyed steadily, choosing the best route through habit, while he considered his time with Poerin. The old warrior had been as irascible as ever, and just as blunt.

Rosham and his ilk are an enemy just as dangerous as the Shargh, their tongues as apt to injure you as swords. Either force the Marken to bow before you, or one day be prepared to bow before them.

Then there was Kira's kinship claim.

A woman with your face and your tongue, claiming to be Kasher's seed, is more likely to be who she says she is than a joke by Irid. When you've a choice between the works of gods, and the works of men, the latter's more likely.

And on marriage.

If you want to satisfy your lusts, go to the Caru Quarter. If you want to build alliances, get Rosham to choose your bride. If you want to follow your heart, be prepared for it to take you where your head would never choose to go.

So much for that! Still, Tierken had enjoyed his time with Poerin, even though he'd had to chop a winter's supply of wood,

and cart enough water to last the old man for a full season. He'd sat and drank with Poerin in front of a crackling fire, listened to his tales as he had as a boy, and felt Poerin's love surround him as thick and silent as Silvercades' snow. Poerin had farewelled Tierken gruffly, but his embrace had been that of an old man who knows it might be his last.

It was deep into the night before Tierken reached the slopes above Kessom, the clear night giving glorious star-storms but also icy air. He wore his fleece cape, but left his ears bare, not wanting to dull his hearing. It was movement, not sound though, which caused him to halt and draw his sword. There was someone ahead and, given the lateness of the night, it was hard to think of an innocent reason for them to be abroad. Tierken made no effort to mask his steps and the figure whirled, turning Tierken's wariness to astonishment. It was Kira.

'What in Irid's name are you doing here?' he demanded.

'Gathering.'

'Where are the Guard?'

'Eris didn't say I needed them,' she replied.

'You do if you wander about at night!'

'I'm not *wandering*. Sorren's best gathered in the night, as is morning-bright,' said Kira, standing with her chin up, as she always did when she challenged him. Her proximity roused memories of their last encounter, and Tierken reached for her, gratified when she came to his arms, her need as great as his. They stumbled deeper into the trees, Tierken tossing his cape on the ground and his jacket over them both, sliding off her clothes under its warmth, even as she undressed him. Kira lay atop as Tierken cupped her breasts to his mouth, running his hands down the curve of her back and buttocks, caressing and parting her so that she took him in.

Kira's body was in perfect harmony with his, her tongue within him as he was within her, her need riding the same rage

of blood as his. Even after the crest of longing had ebbed, her lips moved over his face, and his fingers explored her.

‘I missed you,’ said Tierken softly.

‘You didn’t say goodbye.’

‘I wanted to let you sleep.’

Kira didn’t reply.

‘What have you been doing?’ asked Tierken.

‘Gathering, working with Eris, preparing herbs, exploring Kessom with Laryia.’

‘Do you like Kessom?’

‘Kessom’s beautiful.’

‘Is it like Allogrenia?’

Kira slid into the crook of his shoulder, and lay there, a perfect fit.

‘It *feels* like Allogrenia, but Allogrenia has no mountains and no breaks in the trees, apart from the Arborean,’ said Kira. An owl sounded and she sat up.

‘The mira kiraon,’ she whispered.

‘It’s a grenia owl,’ said Tierken. ‘They favour the allogrenia, hence the name.’

Kira said nothing and he ran his hand down her back. ‘Lie down, you’ll get cold.’

Still Kira didn’t speak.

He sat up, the air ice on his skin. ‘What is it?’

‘I’ve been gone from Allogrenia almost four moons,’ said Kira sadly.

‘I missed Kessom when I first went to Sarnia but it’s more pleasant now,’ said Tierken.

Kira started to dress and Tierken followed suit, flicking the leaves from his cape and leading Kira back onto the path.

‘On the morrow’s night, all of Kessom will gather in the Keshall to welcome us,’ said Tierken. ‘There will be music and dancing. You’ll enjoy it.’

'I didn't last time,' said Kira.

'You will this,' said Tierken, bringing his arm round her. 'And so will I.'

The gathering in the Keshall was nothing like the banquet in Sarnia. There were only a few chairs set for the older Kessomis to rest their bones and everybody else formed a noisy, constantly moving throng. Few called Tierken *Feailner*, or showed any particular respect, except for some of the young men who were patrolmen.

Tierken and Laryia were greeted with hugs and kisses, as was Kira, who was regaled with stories of Tierken's youthful misdemeanours. She'd only been there a short time before she knew that Tierken had been knocked unconscious when he'd been thrown from a stallion Robrin had forbidden him to ride, *and* received a thrashing for his trouble when he'd recovered. Then there was the time he'd been lost for three days beyond the Kristlin after going off in search of dwinhir nests. And he'd once eaten so many roscakes at a Keshall welcome, he'd been ill for a week.

'I've not eaten roscakes since,' admitted Tierken ruefully.

Kira laughed, enjoying Tierken's discomfort.

'I'll wager you've an equally long list of indiscretions, *Lady Kira*,' said Tierken, as another group of Kessomis approached.

'Ah, you'll have to come to Allogrenia to find out.'

'That's not very likely,' said Tierken, as a woman with a long grey braid embraced him.

Kira smiled as the woman kissed her formally on each cheek, but Tierken's words stung. Laryia appeared with Thalli and Leos, Thalli's babe snug in a sling.

'She's beautiful,' said Kira, as Thalli handed the babe to her.

'Two Kiras together,' said Thalli. When Kira looked at her in surprise, Thalli said, 'We've named her for you, for what you did for Jafiel.'

‘There’s no need –’

‘There is,’ said Thalli firmly, settling the babe back into the sling. ‘It’s fitting that *our* Kira knows what you did for her uncle on the day she was born.’

‘What *did* you do?’ asked Tierken, after Thalli, Leos and Laryia had moved away.

‘I helped Jafiel with the pain of his broken ankle.’

‘With sickleseed?’

‘No. I think the music’s about to begin,’ said Kira.

‘Then how?’

‘I’m a Feailner, Tierken, and in Allogrenia that means a taker of pain, not a carrier of fire like you on patrol. I take the pain inside me.’

‘But that must injure you. You’re not to do it.’

‘I’m a Healer, Tierken.’

Tierken took her by the shoulders and Kira glanced round uncomfortably. ‘You’re not to –’

But Laryia had twirled to their side and grabbed Tierken’s arm. The music had started.

‘I claim the first dance with my brother. You can have all the rest, Kira,’ she added with a smile, hauling Tierken away.

As it happened, Kira danced many dances before Tierken returned. Thread-the-leaves, the weave dance, then something like a wreath dance, with four steps back and to the side where Kira least expected them. She flushed in mortification as she destroyed the pattern of the entire row, and those around her laughed good-naturedly.

‘I’ll get Laryia to teach you the wreath dance,’ said Tierken afterwards, as they caught their breath and sipped fruited water.

‘I *know* the wreath dance,’ said Kira, still smarting. ‘The Kessomi version must have changed after Kasheron took the original version south,’ she couldn’t resist adding.

Tierken's lips thinned, then the first notes of the pipe rang out. *Not that song, not that!* thought Kira in panic, struggling to resist the urge to sprint off. But it was no use. As the melody swelled the darkness closed in, the imperative to run to Kandor's aid swamped her and she turned and fled.

Kira had no idea how long she spent under the alwaysgreens before she came to her senses, but she was frozen by the time she made her way back to Eris's house. Eris seemed surprised that she'd come back alone, and her gaze was piercing.

'You've argued with Tierken?' she asked.

'Yes, no . . . it was something else,' said Kira, trying to steady. She felt as though she could trust Eris, a fellow Healer, so she took a deep breath, and went on.

'The night the Shargh killed my family,' she started, 'my brother, the one I looked after, played a song for me . . . on his pipe. He'd practised it for many days. Now . . . if . . . *when* I hear that song it's like I'm there again, with the Bough burning. There was thick smoke, and I was too late to save him. I know I'm not there now . . . but I can't breathe, and the need to run is unbearable.'

Kira glanced at Eris, expecting to see pity but the old Healer contemplated her steadily.

'Do you dream of that time, too?' asked Eris.

Kira nodded.

'When I was a young Healer, there was fighting between the Terak and Bishali,' said Eris. 'It didn't last long, but some of the wounded Terak were brought here. The Bishali would beat metal as they went into battle, and the clash of a cooking pot lid was enough to make the injured shake. People are wounded by many things, Kira. As a child, Laryia nearly drowned in the Kristlin, and her fear of water remains.'

Eris's bony hand closed over hers. 'Give yourself time to heal.'

‘Time’s one thing I don’t have.’

The door sounded and Tierken came in, nodding to them briefly as he went to his rooms.

‘I might go to my bed, too,’ said Kira uncomfortably. ‘I thank you for your words, Eris.’

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Laryia was upset by the news that they were to return to Sarnia the following dawn. But Kira was happy, for it took her a day's journey closer to Maraschin. It did mean that she had only one day left to search the surrounding lands for fireweed, though. Laryia had told her there was deep leaf litter to the west of the track they'd entered Kessom by and Kira was keen to forage there. She knew Laryia would want to spend her last day with Thalli, and persuaded Laryia that she was happy to spend the day exploring Kessom alone. But as Kira came out of Eris's house, the two Guard fell into step behind her.

Why must she be guarded when Laryia and Eris had the freedom to go where they pleased in privacy? she wondered in irritation. To make matters worse, the sunny sky quickly filled with heavy dark cloud - and they had left their capes behind.

'How far do you go, Lady?' one asked, looking at the sky.

Kira shrugged, annoyance with Tierken robbing her of her usual politeness.

'It will rain soon,' he said.

‘I’ve been wet before,’ said Kira.

The wind freshened and ragged veils of rain gusted through the trees, the chill dampness penetrating her shirt. Kira peered down the slope, and seeing that the leaf litter had thickened, began her descent.

‘It’s too steep!’ exclaimed a Guard.

‘It’s not,’ retorted Kira, ‘as long as –’

Her foot slipped in the wetness and she slid several lengths on her backside, stopping against a rotted trunk. Kira repressed a giggle as the Guard scrambled after her, their horrified gaze on her leg.

A branch had snagged her breeches, tearing them from ankle to knee, and leaving a shallow scratch that nevertheless bled copiously. Ignoring the blood, Kira continued her exploration, the Guards’ disapproval palpable. When the slope gentled, she knelt and trawled through the deepest drifts of litter, finding nothing but managing to add more grime to her clothes. Kira went on, scrambling up and down small gullies and pushing through scrubby bushes, and not climbing back up to the track until it was dark. It was raining steadily, and the chill wind made the long trudge back miserable, the three of them remaining silent till they reached Eris’s house.

‘We leave you now, Lady,’ said one of the Guard, and they bowed.

Kira pulled off her boots at the door, and padded through to the cooking place. Eris wasn’t there, but Tierken and Laryia were, Tierken prowling about the room, his gaze taking in her torn breeches and bleeding leg in one sweep.

‘Where in Irid’s name have you been?’

‘Ask your Guard,’ said Kira, going to pass him.

‘I’m asking you!’ said Tierken, seizing her arm.

‘Tierken,’ said Laryia rising. ‘I think –’

‘Keep out of it,’ snapped Tierken, his furious gaze on Kira.
‘Answer me!’

‘I won’t!’

‘You will!’ said Tierken, giving her a shake.

‘Tierken!’ cried Laryia.

‘Our guest needs to learn that she can’t just rush off from celebrations held in *her* honour or wander away as the whim takes her,’ said Tierken, jerking Kira closer. ‘That she owes explanation, that basic manners dictate she answer the questions of her host!’ His voice dropped. ‘I know our guest is only seventeen, and that perhaps in her lands politeness is unimportant, but she lives with us now and it’s time she learned courtesy.’

A string of possible insults tumbled through Kira’s head, but she bit her tongue, stilling her breathing and staring Tierken in the eye.

‘Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan requests the Feailner of the Terak Kirillian takes his hands off her,’ she said as calmly as she could.

Tierken’s eyes blazed, but he released her. Kira pushed past him into the bathing-room, and a few moments later Laryia appeared with buckets of warm water. There were no pipes of hot water in Kessom.

‘Kira . . .’ began Laryia tentatively.

‘Leave me be, Laryia,’ said Kira, peeling off her soggy shirt.

‘Kira, you need to understand something about Tierken.’

‘I don’t need to understand *anything* about him,’ said Kira, still fuming. Her torn and stained breeches followed her shirt to the floor. Her underwear was drenched too.

‘Tierken spent his growing not knowing if he’d become Feailner. It’s a hard way to live, but he’s sure about that now. He needs to be sure about you, too,’ said Laryia.

Their evening meal was taken in strained silence, as was their breakfast, the first light of dawn tinting the Silvercades as Eris farewelled them. The sky was clear, promising a cool, fine day for their journey.

‘Give yourself kindness and time,’ said Eris softly to Kira, kissing her cheek. ‘You know where I am if you need me.’

Kira nodded, her throat too tight to speak, and followed Tierken and Laryia to the stables. The Guard were already mounted and Robrin waved them off, Tierken leading, and Laryia pointing out plants or interesting vistas that they’d missed in the darkness of the northward journey.

They cleared Glass Gorge and stopped at the Frost Glades to eat, Tierken handing Kira a cup of cotzee, and Kira thanking him with careful formality. Let him complain about her manners now! They went on, Laryia’s attempts at conversation dwindling with the light, and it was fully dark before they approached the Tiar Forest and looked down on the twinkling lamps of Sarnia.

‘Sarnia is a beautiful sight,’ said Tierken, bringing Kalos level with Kira’s mare.

‘To a Sarnian,’ said Kira, still smarting from the last night.

‘Is there nothing in the north you like?’

‘The stars, the horses, the deep silence of snow, the always-green groves, the dwinhir, your grandmother and sister.’

‘But not the Terak Feailner?’ said Tierken, his eyes glittering.

Kira looked away and made no response. Whatever Laryia said, Tierken’s denial of her left her with no choice but to go south. And if he wasn’t going to give her people aid then the sooner she was gone from him the better.

They completed the rest of the ride in silence.

Kira went straight to her rooms on their return and Tierken ate with Farid in the Meeting Hall. He felt glad to be back, which made him realise that he’d truly settled in Sarnia. As he sipped his ale, the fire at the end of the room reminded him of how he’d lain with Kira on the rug. He lounged back in the chair, easing the sudden tension in his groin.

‘The Writing Store’s ordered,’ said Farid, ‘and the records on Kasheron and his followers separated, as you requested.’

‘Any more Writings on the Sundering or on the ring?’ asked Tierken.

‘Nothing on the ring apart from what we already know. As for the Sundering, none mention the specific time Kasherón left, apart from the one we’ve discussed,’ said Farid. ‘It’s odd that the tales tell of Kasherón going *north*, but not the Writings. What did Eris say?’

‘That it’s likely Kira’s telling the truth,’ said Tierken.

‘And Poerin?’

‘The same.’

Farid’s eyebrows rose.

‘Poerin has more belief in the machinations of men than gods,’ added Tierken.

‘And so?’ said Farid tentatively.

‘All the tales tell of Kasherón going over the Oskinas and I’d wager you’d not find a single Terak, Illian, Kir or even a Kessomi who’d disagree. My uncle believed it, and the Feailners before him. The traders and the Marken believe it. Only a single Writing disputes the time and, by implication, the direction of Kasherón’s travel.’

‘And what Kira says,’ added Farid.

‘I intend to leave things as they are for the time being. Apart from anything else, it’s too dangerous for Kira to be anywhere but here. On my return from patrol, I’ll discuss with her the Writing you’ve found and other matters that have come to my attention. But for me to recognise the Tremén as kin, and for Sarnia and the rest of the Terak to *accept* the Tremén as kin – and everything such recognition entails – such as opening up the Wastes to them – I’m going to need more substantial proof.’

‘Are you saying that you now believe Kira’s version of events?’ said Farid in astonishment.

‘No.’

Farid looked at him quizzically, wondering how to interpret the answer, but silence stretched and in the end Farid cleared his throat. 'How does Eris?' he asked.

'Frail but still gathering in all weathers.'

'What did Eris think of Kira?' asked Farid.

'Healers usually like each other, and it was so this time.'

'Did Kira like Kessom?'

'Kira liked it better than Sarnia, but that's not saying a great deal,' said Tierken. 'She's been used to going off where and when she pleases and, given the Shargh threat, that has to end. I know she's not going to enjoy having her freedoms curtailed, but she'll become settled here, as Laryia has. Now, we need to discuss the provisioning of the patrol.'

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Arkendrin marched at the front of his warriors, almost two hundred, strung out behind him. His spears he carried over his shoulder, and his flatswords and daggers at his side. One more day and they'd gain the western flank of the Braghans and turn east. The Sky Chiefs had granted him healing for his leg wound, and though the muscles still pained him Arkendrin had spurned the horses some Weshargh rode, refusing to repay the Sky Chiefs' benevolence with further insult.

The Sky Chiefs had delivered the gold-eyed creature into his hands, then snatched her back, and Arkendrin would give them no cause to punish him a second time by lifting his feet from the earth. He pondered whether such slights risked the withdrawal of the Sky Chiefs' favour from their greater mission. Certainly Erboran's death meant the Sky Chiefs intended him to both rid the Shargh of the creature of the Telling and reclaim their stolen lands. But he wondered whether the Sky Chiefs smiled on Orbdargan and Yrshin.

Orbdargan's herds had grown too large for their present pastures but Yrshin sought lands only to silence the discontent of those who wanted a Chief who could still run and hunt. His quest was hardly likely to have the Sky Chiefs' approval. To add to the danger of rousing the Sky Chiefs' anger, Orbdargan and Yrshin continued to mock the Sky Chiefs by climbing into the mountains with their warriors. It was only the fact that the Braghans were too steep for horses that meant the Soushargh and Weshargh who'd chosen to ride trailed at the back of his men with their horses and provisions.

Arkendrin spat as he considered the possibility of their proximity tainting his fortunes as well. He'd argued that there would be plenty of the herders' and woodcutters' food in the northern foothills of the Braghans, without burdening themselves with still more horses. But Yrshin had been worried his fat belly would shrink and Orbdargan had sided with the old Soushargh Chief – again.

Kira wandered along the top of the wall. Her mind was made up. Tierken's patrol would leave in two days, and she would leave on the third. Since their return from Kessom, Kira had managed to avoid Tierken completely, which was no mean feat. She rode very early and pretended to be asleep whenever he knocked. Her locked door kept him from entering, and maintained his irritation with her. It hadn't made leaving him any easier though, and her anxiety at crossing the Sarsalin alone had roused the nightmares again. Or maybe it was hunger that had caused their return.

Kira had disguised her theft of food for the journey by eating less, and now her pack bulged with nuts and dried fruit. Nights of studying the map she'd copied meant the lands had become familiar to her, but she would have to outrun the Domain Guard in order to use her newfound knowledge.

She came down from the wall and made her way back to the Domain, stopping at the owl fountain and perching on its edge.

The first Kiraon had put it here, with its tree of stone and little carved owls. What had that Kiraon been like, and Alitha, who'd planted the grove in Maraschin? Both had bonded with Kings, shared their bodies with rulers of vast lands, birthed.

'A good evening to the *Lady Kira*,' said a male voice, startling her out of her reverie.

Kira stood. 'Good evening . . .' returned Kira. Though she had no idea who he was, the bearing of the man approaching told her he wasn't a server.

'Marken Rosham,' he said, coming so close Kira had to resist the urge to step back. Rosham was only a little taller than her, but thickset, his hair the same silver as swords.

'I wouldn't expect the *Lady Kira* to know me, given her lands are far away – and somewhat rustic, I hear.'

Rosham's contempt was plain and Kira searched her memory for what she knew of him. Laryia had rolled her eyes when she'd spoken of Rosham, but he was Farid's father, and Kira liked Farid.

'How does the *Lady Kira* occupy her time in the Domain, when she's not keeping company with the Feailner?'

'I ride and record my Healer knowing,' said Kira reluctantly.

'Healer knowing? Of course. I had forgotten you dabble in those things that play to men's weaknesses. How did you enjoy your jaunt to Kessom?' he asked, before she could respond to his insult.

'Kessom is beautiful,' said Kira defiantly.

'Yes, I thought it might suit you,' said Rosham, his gaze moving over her slowly. 'Things are laxer there than here, perhaps like the place you're from, a point the Feailner sometimes forgets.' His mouth bent in a smile. 'I wish you a good night, *Lady Kira*.'

Kira stared after his receding back, trying to summon up anger to dispel the hurt he'd inflicted. Was that how she was seen in Sarnia? Like a Caru woman? Laryia had alluded to it when she'd

insisted Kira wear metal at the banquet. And during one of their arguments, Tierken had too. *I'm beginning to think Tremen women are as faithless as those in the Caru Quarter.* He'd apologised later, but Kira suspected the words reflected his true fears.

She went slowly up the stairs to the balcony, wondering if Merek and Kesilini had shared a bed before they'd bonded. As the Leader's daughter, she'd seen countless bonding ceremonies at Turning, but had never thought about what came before, too busy at her gathering, and drying, and making of pastes. She'd noticed nothing and known nothing – until Caledon.

Kira entered her rooms and rested her head back against the door, eyes shut, hoping Merek and Kesilini *had* known the sweetness she'd discovered with Tierken. Its briefness didn't make it less worthy, nor did the fact that they were unbonded, as Rosham implied.

'Are you tired, Kira?' said Tierken, causing Kira to start violently. 'I beg your pardon for invading your privacy, but I decided it might be the only way to see you,' said Tierken, rising from the table.

'You need to take care, Feailner, that you're not seen as being as lax as those in Kessom,' said Kira, her heart still skittering with fright.

'Whose words are they?' he said, his brows drawing.

'Does it matter?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Well, it doesn't to me. I don't mind being compared to a Caru woman, for at least they're honest, taking traders for their bodies with no one pretending anything else is being exchanged. I don't mind being called a "dabbler" in things that pander to men's "weaknesses" either, because I know it's untrue. I *know* how to set bones so that a man might walk without a limp; and I *know* how to bring babes into the world without them losing their mothers.'

'Who said these things?' demanded Tierken.

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s how Sarnia thinks, isn’t it?’

Tierken made no reply, which was answer enough, and Kira stepped round him, took off her cape and sat down at her recordings. But her thoughts were in such turmoil that she had no idea what she’d last written or what she should write next. So much for having made up her mind to leave!

‘What is it you wanted to see me about, Feailner?’ she asked finally.

‘Before I go on patrol, I’d like an answer to the question I asked in the Frost Glades.’

Kira looked at him with bewilderment.

‘Did it mean so little to you that you can’t recall it?’ he asked.

‘I thought I’d mistaken your words.’

‘How can you mistake the words “Marry me, Kira”?’ said Tierken.

Kira stared down at the paper. ‘You mean marry like the Tain marry? Wear metal and stay together even if love fails?’

‘Look at me, Kira,’ said Tierken, taking her hands.

She raised her eyes to his reluctantly.

‘I love you and want you with me until the end of my days. In Sarnia, the pledge of this is a bracelet, worn on the right wrist until the marriage takes place. Then, at the time of the couple’s choosing, usually within three moons of pledging, they’ll come before the Marken, who witness their words of commitment. The commitment is binding. Usually the woman continues to wear the bracelet, but you needn’t as I know metal is unpleasant to you.’

He reached into his pocket and brought out a beautifully scrolled silver bracelet. ‘This is the bracelet my father pledged to my mother. Retrieving it was one of the reasons I went to Kessom.’

He pulled her gently to her feet and took her right hand.

‘Will you marry me, Kira?’

Thoughts of the leadership, the need to treaty with the Tain, and the fighting to come, tumbled through Kira's head, struggling with her desire for him. 'I can't marry you,' she said miserably.

'Because of Caledon?' asked Tierken.

'Caledon?'

'I've asked you before whether you're lovers, a question you've never answered.'

'You *know* I'm the Tremen Leader, you *know* I need to go south. When . . . when I've seen the Tremen Protectors at Maraschin, and spoken with King Beris, I'll come back here,' said Kira, scarcely able to breathe at the thought of leaving Allogrenia forever but torn by the look in his eyes. 'I'll come back . . . and stay with you here, Tierken. I'll bond with you, if that's what you want.'

'But not marry me?'

'The Tremen way is to bond. We pledge before those important to us, but there's no metal, and the bond can be broken if there's unhappiness.'

'If there's *unhappiness*?' said Tierken, dropping her hand. 'So, you can just wander off with another lover as the whim takes you?'

'Bonding's not broken lightly!'

'But it can be broken?' asked Tierken, slipping the bracelet back into his pocket.

'Yes.'

'And that's all you'll offer me? An arrangement you can "break" when it suits you?'

'It's not like that!'

'It obviously is,' he said with a curt bow. 'I'm sorry I mistook your feelings for my own, Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan. I can assure you, it's not a mistake I'll make again.'

Kira sat at the table, staring into space, trying to subdue her thoughts sufficiently to write. To have Tierken had always meant not having Allogrenia, Miken, Tresen, Kest, Tenerini, Mikini and all the others there she loved. Some small part of her had known that. Her problem was that she'd been greedy for happiness, and had pushed all thoughts of its consequences away. In any case, the *choice* as to whether to stay in the north with Tierken, or go back to Allogrenia was dependent on winning the battles still to come. And for *that* to happen, she must first go to Maraschin. She ran her hand through her hair as the complications multiplied.

Well at least part of her dilemma had been resolved by Tierken's refusal of the bonding. She should be grateful to him, rather than feel that her heart had been torn to shreds. There was now no reason to remain in Sarnia. A knock sounded, but before she could rise Laryia strode in, clearly upset. Kira groaned inwardly.

'I thought I'd told you how it is with Tierken. I thought you understood what it was like for him growing in Kessom knowing

Sarnia didn't want him, that Darid might father an heir to supplant him; of the harsh winters training with Poerin; of the Marken's snide animosity; of leading the patrols on the Sarsalin, fighting windstorms and snowstorms, wolf attack and fanchon strike, to earn the patrolmen's loyalty. I thought you understood and cared. I thought you loved him!

Laryia dashed her tears away, but Kira said nothing.

'Well?' demanded Laryia.

'You seem to know everything already,' said Kira, as calmly as she could. 'Maybe you've talked to Rosham. He knows everything too.'

'What's Rosham said to you?'

Kira shrugged.

'Take no notice of him, Kira, that man's poison. How he ever produced a son as wonderful as Farid is beyond me,' said Laryia, taking a seat next to Kira. 'Tell me you don't love Tierken, Kira.'

Kira said nothing and Laryia caught her hands. 'Then why won't you marry him?'

'The Tremen don't marry. They bond. I explained what that meant to Tierken and he refused it.'

'Perhaps he didn't understand. Tell me,' said Laryia.

Kira sighed, wondering how many more times she must explain it. 'We have a ceremony at Turning, which is once a season, where those wanting to bond do so by publicly pledging before the Tremen Leader. Most Tremen remain with their bondmates for life. But people can break the bond if it turns out ill.'

'Surely the difference between marriage and bonding is not an insurmountable obstacle between you and Tierken,' said Laryia. 'He loves you, Kira, and you love him. I can see it in your eyes.'

'I loved Kandor, too, but it wasn't enough to save him,' said Kira. 'You haven't seen what the Shargh did to Allogrenia, might *still* be doing. I left my lands to come here to gain help from *you*, from the *Terak Kirillian*. I've told Tierken the truth, and every

question he's asked me about Allogrenia, the Tremen and the Tain, I've answered honestly. But still he refuses aid. There's going to be awful, bloody fighting, Laryia, and one way or the other my people won't escape it. I *must* get help for them.'

In the silence that followed, the sound of horses came from the courtyard below.

'That's odd,' said Laryia, going to the door. 'The Domain Guard never ride past the stables.'

Caledon looked up at the magnificent building ahead of him as he rode into the Domain. It had a massive dome crowning its central part, and directly below it the largest coloured-glass window he'd ever seen. It was circular, holding the mark of both the Tremen and the Terak Kirillian, and blazing in the last rays of the sun. Two vast double-storey wings lined with colonnaded balconies splayed out on either side cradling the intricately paved courtyard.

Their Domain Guard escorts called a halt, before one disappeared through large double doors directly ahead, the other Guard remaining with their backs to the building, their attention firmly on Caledon and his party. Such was the honour afforded the Tain by Sarnia, they had been allowed to remain mounted. But honour didn't replace trust – Caledon and the Tains were outnumbered two to one by heavily armed Guard.

The doors opened and two men appeared, both dressed in black with silver trim. There was no mistaking the Terak Feailner, though, his Kessomi blood giving him a lighter build and his Kir blood darker skin.

Caledon turned to the King's Guard behind him.

'Dismount, kneel and put your weapons on the ground,' he said in Tain. They complied as Caledon dismounted, putting his own sword and knives down, before kneeling and offering the Feailner a leather message cylinder with both hands.

‘I ride for King Adris, of the Tain city of Maraschin and northern lands of the Azurcades, The Westlans, the Spur and Torlands,’ said Caledon in Terak. ‘King Adris sends greetings to the Feailner of the Terak Kirillian, and to the Terak Kirillian people who have long been friends to the Tain.’

As the Feailner took the cylinder and opened it, Caledon looked up at a masculine, darker version of Kira, and had to draw on years of self-discipline to hide his shock. He sifted his breath through his teeth and scanned the courtyard. It was deserted, apart from two young women on the balcony, one dressed in a gown of crimson, the other in Kessomi garb.

‘By the grace of Aeris!’ exclaimed Caledon, as Kira saw him and raced along the balcony, disappeared, then emerged from behind the colonnades and sped towards him. Caledon was barely aware of the Feailner having turned, before she was in his arms. Though he’d broken protocol by rising, all he could think of was the veracity of the stars.

‘Beyond all hope . . .’ muttered Caledon, holding her close. ‘Beyond all hope you’re safe.’

Kira raised her head and Caledon wiped her tears away.

‘You’re hurt,’ she said, touching the bindings on his arm.

‘Almost mended, thanks to Tresen,’ said Caledon, turning back to the Terak Feailner. Animosity radiated from him like heat from a fire, and Caledon released Kira and bowed low.

‘Forgive my breach of manners, Feailner,’ he said. ‘The Tain believed Kira dead. There will be rejoicing in Maraschin to know the Terak Kirillian have secured her safety. King Adris is in your debt.’

‘And you are?’ demanded the Feailner.

‘Caledon e Saridon e Talliel. I am honoured to have been a friend to the late King Beris, and to his son, Adris, the new King.’

‘Beris is dead?’ asked Kira in wonder.

Caledon nodded, while keeping his eyes on the Feailner.

‘I’ve heard of you, Saridon, and I thank you for your journey. Farid here, the Keeper of the Domain, will arrange food and rooms for you and the Tain Guard. It’s a weary journey across the Sarsalin. We’ll speak at length on the morrow.’

‘Tell me of the Tremen, Caledon,’ said Kira eagerly. ‘Tell me –’

Caledon raised his hand. ‘Later,’ he said, without looking at her. Then bowing to the Feailner once more, he followed the Keeper of the Domain.

Kira watched in frustration as Caledon disappeared under the colonnades. He’d been with Tresen! She wanted time with him to hear of his journey, of Allogrenia, of how he’d been injured and of how Tresen had healed him. So Kest had got the patrol back safely, or at least some of them, she thought, then recognised Remas among the crowd of blue-clad men.

The courtyard emptied, stablemen taking the horses, the Domain Guard carrying the Tains’ weapons away. Even from a distance, Kira saw that Laryia’s expression was cold – she’d obviously done something wrong again – but none of it mattered. Caledon brought news of her people, of Miken and Tresen and Kest, and now she would be able to go to Maraschin with *him*.

‘I would have speech with you,’ said Tierken, striding off towards the Meeting Hall. Kira resisted the urge to decline, knowing that exacerbating Tierken’s anger wouldn’t help her quest to journey with Caledon and treaty with the Tain. Tierken was waiting at the window of the Meeting Hall, hands on hips, when she entered.

‘I’ll ask you this question a third time,’ he said. ‘Is this Westerner, this Tallien, your lover?’

Despite her best intentions, Kira’s anger roused. What right did this man – who didn’t recognise her people – have to ask such questions? ‘I’ve loved a lot of men, Tierken. Caledon’s one of the few who’s still alive.’

‘That’s not what I asked!’

‘How many women have you shared *your* body with, Tierken?’

His hand slammed down on the table. ‘We’re talking about *you*!’

‘No we’re not! This is about *your* lack of trust. You think I’ve gone from Caledon’s bed to yours, and that I’ll go from yours to someone else’s! I see your point. After all, I’ve lied about everything else. I’m not Kasheron’s seed, my people don’t live in the southern forests, I’m not the Tremem Leader.’

‘I need to be sure of you!’ Tierken shouted.

‘There is no surety! Allogrenia was breached, the Bough burned, my family murdered. Wounds that should have healed, didn’t. Truth became lies, healing killing! I’m going south with Caledon to meet with my people, whether you will it or not! I’ll return when I can to heal here. The north won’t escape the coming fighting, Tierken. Sarnia *must* have healing!’

There was a knock and Farid appeared. ‘I beg your pardon . . .’ he said, stopping in the doorway.

‘There’s no need,’ said Kira, striding past him. ‘The Feailner and I have finished our conversation.’

Caledon was shown into the Meeting Hall the next morning by the Domain Keeper. Tierken acknowledged his bow, then poured him steaming cotzee before breaking a small loaf of maizen bread and handing it to him on a platter. It was a ritual welcome practised by the wandering Bishali and Ashkals, who passed the bread directly to the guest’s hand.

Caledon sensed none of the anger Kira’s welcome had generated in the last evening, but there was no warmth either. The Feailner had chosen to meet him alone – interesting, given that the manner of the Domain Keeper who’d brought him here suggested friendship between the two.

Caledon had spent much of the night considering the stars' intent, the symmetry of what had unfolded breathtaking in its beauty, but not its clarity. The blood-thirst of the Shargh had brought together the long-sundered seed of Kasherion and Terak, both Leaders carrying the title of Feailner, and sharing the same face and eyes. To add to the stars' design, the Terak Leader's passion for his southern kin was obvious.

But what of Kira's feelings? Caledon daren't meet with her to find out until he'd gained the Feailner's trust. Even then, he must be extremely careful. The star-pattern suggested her place was with Tierken, her task to make the two peoples whole. If that *were* the case, he must put his own feelings aside.

But it was also possible the stars had other purposes, yet to be revealed.

'Tell me about the happenings in the Tain lands,' said Tierken.

Caledon began a methodical description of the Shargh attacks, what he thought they portended, and the effects of Beris's long illness and recent death. He spoke candidly in his outline of the difficulties the Prince had faced prior to his father's death, and still faced with the Shargh.

'The Shargh seek the destruction of the Tain, partly because their demise will weaken you. With the Tain impotent, the Shargh will be able to focus their strength further north, without fear for their backs. The destruction of the Tain will also serve as a potent warning to other small peoples whose support, or at least acquiescence, the Shargh will need.'

'King Adris doesn't call on the alliance,' said Tierken.

'There's been a long silence between your peoples,' acknowledged Caledon. 'No king wants to use a declaration of need to break it.'

'If what you say is true, the Tain will need our aid.'

'Certainly,' said Caledon, ignoring Tierken's qualification, 'but the Tremen send nearly a hundred and fifty men who will strengthen the Tain defences.'

‘Healers?’ said Tierken, his contempt plain.

‘I’m unsure what Kira has told you of her people, or of herself,’ said Caledon cautiously. ‘When Kasherón established Allogrenia, he didn’t entirely abandon his brother’s warrior skills, but created a force of fighting men called Protectors. They’re already skilled at fighting in the forest and I spent time teaching them the techniques they’ll need to fight in the open.’

‘Our histories say Kasherón went north.’

‘I know of your histories,’ said Caledon, ‘and I admit that, when I first met Kira, she puzzled me greatly. A gold-eyed Healer who spoke Terak with the lilt of a Kessomi, who had their fineness and passion for healing. And Kira’s slowness to trust didn’t help. I was on my way to the Tremen lands before I realised that the name of her clan, *Kashclan*, wasn’t a Kir word, but from Kasherón’s name, and what I saw in the Tremen settlement confirmed my guess.’

‘Such as?’ demanded Tierken, leaning across the table.

‘The Tremen have a hatred of metal and smelt none, yet they have an abundance of northern swords and herbing sickles. They have a vast store of Writings, too, recording their time in the trees.’

‘They could be false,’ interrupted Tierken.

‘Yes, except the early ones are written on paper made from scartch, which doesn’t grow in the south, and the later ones are on paper made from patchet weed, which does. I’ve been to Kessom a number of times, as you might be aware, and seen the healing Writings there, recorded by Kasherón himself. He had a distinctive hand. I’ve seen the same hand in the Writings the Tremen keep deep in their storage caverns.’

‘Kira also carries the ring of rulership that Kasherón took with him,’ Caledon continued.

‘I’ve seen it,’ said Tierken.

‘Then you will know it carries the same design as the glass

window outside,' said Caledon evenly. 'There are other reasons I believe Kira's people are the seed of Kasheron and his followers. Their hatred of metal, yet acceptance of herbing sickles and swords, is nonsensical, and a sign of a people who've lived a long time alone, constructing their own beliefs and ways of doing. The perversion extends to how they remember their northern kin.'

'They call us the Terak Kutan?' asked Tierken.

Caledon nodded.

'Do you know why the Shargh hunt Kira?' asked Tierken.

'No, but the Shargh are superstitious. They would believe gold eyes to be ill-omened, a belief strengthened by the knowing that the Leader of the hated Northerners also has gold eyes.'

'So they go to war because of gold eyes,' muttered Tierken.

'War is rarely that simple,' said Caledon. 'It's been many years since the loss of their northern grazing lands, long enough for hatred to fester, and for the next growth of Shargh to forget the bloodiness of their defeat.'

Caledon paused. The Feailner's eyes didn't change like Kira's, which made him harder to read. His movements were also controlled and his words considered, surprising given his youth, and a stark contrast to Adris's explosions of speech and energy.

'Kira wants to go south with you to Maraschin,' said Tierken. 'I'll deny her permission.'

Caledon considered him calmly, but his thoughts whirred. *She wants to come with you but I'm keeping her with me.* Tierken probably suspected Caledon and Kira were lovers. He hadn't asked Caledon outright, nor would he, but it would affect all their dealings together. Allowing the suspicion to remain might serve the stars' purposes, or destroy them, depending on whether the stars intended Kira to be with him, or the northern Leader.

'I spoke with many in the southern forests who love Kira,' said Caledon, 'and on one thing they agreed: Kira will go her own way.'

‘Not this time.’

Caledon smiled to ease what he was about to say. ‘Protector Commander Kest attempted to keep her in Allogrenia for her own safety. He failed. Had he not, I would now be dead, for Kira killed to save me. Adris and I tried to keep her in Maraschin for her own safety; *we* failed.’

‘Because of *your* failure, the Shargh caught her,’ interrupted Tierken. ‘Because of *your* failure, she screams in her sleep.’

‘Our failure meant that she came north – *to you*, perhaps as the stars ordained.’

‘I’m aware of the Placidien’s belief in the benevolence of stars,’ said Tierken, ‘but I don’t share it. Kira’s paid a heavy price for their benevolence.’

‘Kira’s arrival in the north opens up the possibility of your peoples being one again,’ said Caledon.

‘My people *are* one: the Terak, the Illians, the Kirs and the Kessomis,’ said Tierken, angered by Caledon’s presumption.

Caledon bowed, acknowledging the Feailner’s correction, and realising he’d misjudged the northern ruler’s capacity for, or willingness to, accept change. Silence stretched and Tierken rose.

‘I thank you for your words, Lord Caledon. I need think on them and take advice. I’d be pleased if the Leader of the Guard and you will join me for this evening’s meal.’

Caledon rose and bowed. ‘I look forward to it, Feailner,’ he said.

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Kira sat on the edge of the owl fountain, the splash of water seeming loud now Caledon had fallen silent. His words had woken an unbearable longing to be with Miken and Tenerini and Tresen, to walk among the gold-green trees, to hear the whisper of leaves.

‘So, there have been no more attacks,’ she said finally.

‘No.’

‘I delayed too long. If I’d left earlier . . .’

‘The Shargh attack the Tain, and you’re not there. I’ve told you before, Kira, this is not just about you and the Tremeni.’

‘How many of my people who’ve come will live to go home again, Caledon?’

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Caledon.

‘They could all be killed.’

‘Yes.’

‘That will be the ending of Allogrenia.’

‘*Your* Allogrenia ended the day the Shargh found you,’ said Caledon gently.

The shadow of the Rehan Wing crept slowly towards them and Kira stood, easing her cramped legs.

‘Come to my rooms, Caledon. It’s warmer there.’

‘I don’t think that would be wise.’

Kira followed his gaze to the Meeting Hall. ‘He doesn’t believe Kasheron went south, or that I carry his blood.’

‘You ask the Terak Feailner to declare his peoples’ histories wrong, and *publicly* acknowledge a blood link that’s long been despised. Your people call his the Terak Kutan, and his have sent yours out of memory and time. Don’t underestimate the gulf that lies between the Tremen and the Terak, Kira.’

‘Are you saying that Tierken will never accept who the Tremen are? Who *I* am?’

‘I think it could take more time than has been given.’

Kira watched the fountain numbly.

‘I could be wrong. I’ve been wrong before,’ said Caledon, wincing as he moved his arm.

‘Let me see,’ said Kira, unbinding the arm and probing along the bones.

‘Nice and clean,’ she said, rebinding it. ‘Tresen’s done well.’

‘Did you doubt it?’ asked Caledon with a smile.

‘What other injuries did you suffer?’

‘Just my leg, all healed,’ he said, ‘and I gashed my forehead.’

Kira pushed his hair back and peered at the wound, his sweet spice smell rousing memories of their time together. She’d forgotten the clear grey of his eyes and the comforting sense of him.

‘All healed too,’ he said, then his gaze jerked to a point over her shoulder and he rose hurriedly.

‘Forgive my interruption, Lord Caledon,’ said Tierken. ‘I require speech with Kira.’

Caledon bowed, and turned towards the Rehan Wing.

‘We’ll speak in my rooms,’ said Tierken to Kira.

Kira followed him up the stone steps and along the balcony,

surprised that he hadn't suggested the Meeting Hall. The configuration of his rooms was the same as hers, with a fire roaring in the room's large fireplace, pots and bowls of burnished metal winking in its light. The table was set with lamps and there was a platter of fruit, a jug and two beautifully patterned cups.

'You don't look very happy,' said Tierken, pouring her some fruit-sweetened water. 'I thought the arrival of your friend, the Lord Caledon, would have alleviated the hardship of living in the stone city. What did you and your *friend* discuss?'

'We discussed you - among other things.'

'May I ask what exactly?' said Tierken.

'That it's unlikely you'll ever accept my histories and the Tremen, and because of that, accept me for what I am.'

'That's not what I said to him!'

'Not in those words, perhaps, but it's true, isn't it? I've come to realise it's not your fault, though. There have been too many seasons of separation and bitterness between Terak and Kasher-on's seed for us to mend it. And it's not a convenient truth. I think our peoples *will* come together one day, but after our time. In the meantime, I go south with Caledon.'

'You'll remain within the safety of Sarnia, Kira.'

'I've explained to you why I can't stay here, Tierken,' she said, and took a deep breath. 'I am the Feailner of my people, and I need to go to them. If you lock me in my room, I'll not eat. If you lock me in the city, I'll remain at the gate until hunger and cold claim me. If you let me out of the city, I'll ride south alone. But if you allow me to go south with Caledon and the King's Guard, after I've seen my people, I'll return here. You'll have no need of locks and keys, and no fear that your *woman* will embarrass you by dying at the gate.'

'I don't want you as my *woman*, I want you as my wife! But you're not going to offer me that, are you, as part of this trade?'

Kira's hand went to the faint scar on her cheek where her father had struck her, and she straightened. 'I'm willing to bond with you in the Tremen way. That's all I can offer you as a Tremen.'

'So, what does the *Tremen* offer the Tallien?' asked Tierken, sneeringly. 'The same trade or something else?'

'It's not what I offer him, but what he offers me,' said Kira. 'He offers me trust, Tierken, something you refuse.'

Tresen marched beside Arlen in the formation the King's Guard had ordered, under trees that were both familiar and alien, escorted by men who weren't Tremen. None of it seemed real, but in another night he'd be in the Tain city of Maraschin with Kira, and it would all have been worthwhile.

This thought had comforted him in the trek over the awful emptiness of the Dendora. They had journeyed at night with little speech, and no fires, despite the hard, frosty mornings. Even wearing all of the clothes he carried, Tresen had been cold in his sleeping-sheet, shivering and endlessly rehearsing Pekrash's instructions on what to do if they came under attack. But he'd done none of them when the Guard had stepped from the shadows.

Tresen was the only Protector who knew more than a few words of Onespeak and this had continued to cause difficulties. When they'd reached Shardos, the Tains had insisted they follow each other rather than spread out through the trees, for good reason. But the order caused confusion, and made Tresen wonder how many other misunderstandings would arise.

They were nearing the edge of the trees when one of the scouts hastened back, grim-faced, and it was only when they came out onto the grasslands that Tresen saw the cause of the man's upset. The sky to the west was smudged by a pall of smoke.

'The Westlans burn,' said the leading Guard. 'The battle's begun.'

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It was very late and Kira was sitting at her recordings when there was a brief knock and Tierken came in. She braced herself for another argument, but he appeared calm.

‘I’ve reconsidered the trade you offered,’ he said, ‘and have decided to accept it. You can journey to Maraschin to see your people, then return here to Sarnia, where you will remain in safety. You will travel with the Lord Caledon and the Tain Guard, as well as a Terak patrol led by Commander Marin. You will spend seventeen days beyond Sarnia’s gates: seven in travel south, three in Maraschin to rest the horses and for you to speak with the Tremem Commander, and seven to return. Are the terms agreed?’

‘Yes,’ said Kira, struggling to take them in, but heart tumbling at the thought of going to Maraschin.

‘Then smack hands,’ said Tierken.

Kira raised her hand and Tierken’s slapped it briskly. ‘You’ll need to prepare your pack and take warm clothes and a cape. Then try to get some sleep. You’ll be leaving at dawn.

‘Oh, and I’ll be travelling with you,’ he added.

Kira was kept wakeful by excitement and by the wind whining over the Domain. Chill rain had joined it by the time she arrived at the stables. Most of the men were already mounted but it was hard to distinguish who was who because of their capes. Kalos was easy to pick, though.

Then Marin came to her side.

‘Your presence is good news,’ said Kira.

‘Yes, Lady,’ he said with a small bow, ‘but we have a foul start. It’s a bad time of season for travel on the Sarsalin.’

‘The Feailner’s granted me three days to meet with my people in Maraschin, but I have no choice about the timing. Perhaps the weather will improve as we go south.’

‘Or worsen,’ said Marin, arranging his cape over the saddle.

The wind continued to blow steadily from the north, straight off the icy Silvercades, driving the rain into their backs. Despite the cape, the reins were slippery in Kira’s frozen hands and her backside soaked from the rain dribbling down the saddle. Kira caught the words *Ges Grove* among the patrolmen’s mutter, her heart lifting as she remembered the dense trees. However, it was fully night before they reached there.

Kira copied Jonred in how he unsaddled his mount, stowed the harness and attached the tether rope, and was halfway to the fires when Tierken ordered her back.

‘Tether her like that and she could tangle and burn her legs.’

‘I thank you for your help, Feailner,’ she muttered, forcing her numb fingers to undo the rope and shorten it, before hurrying back to where Caledon sat.

‘Always he wants his own way,’ said Kira.

‘A Terak Feailner must always be that in front of his men,’ said Caledon. ‘At least he’s let you come south, which surprised me.’

Kira said nothing, thinking of the trade, and Caledon handed

her some roasted nuts. 'Eat, Kira, we've a long day ahead on the morrow.'

They were on their way before dawn, Kira's request to search for fireweed amid the deeper leaf-fall of Ges Grove refused. She hadn't noticed any soaks in the Grove, Kira comforted herself, so it was unlikely fireweed would grow there in any case.

Their second camp was at Breshlin Ford, and Kira unharnessed the mare, rubbing her down and letting her drink, then tethering her next to Jonred's mount.

'A much improved effort, Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan,' said Tierken, before moving off to the fire.

Tierken had barely spoken to her since they'd set out, not even sharing her fire as they ate. He was angry because she'd given him no choice but to allow her to come. Caledon had hinted that Tierken would brook no challenges to his authority on the trip, and Kira had no intention of being anything but compliant. She spent her time before sleep came, and while they travelled the next day, considering what she must do once she reached Maraschin, and how she was to acquire supplies of fireweed for the north.

Everything she had seen and heard tell of the Shargh told her that they would pursue their enemies wherever their enemies went. And that meant, inevitably, Sarnia would receive wounded. She *must* procure fireweed to take back.

'Ashmiri,' muttered Jonred, jolting Kira from her reverie. She could see nothing, but the men rode with their bows unclipped for the rest of the day, not stowing them again until the first stars were in the sky, and the party zigzagged down the steep, grassy slope of Cover-cape Crest.

'I'll take the mare,' said Marin, as they came to a stop.

'There's no need. I'll -'

'The Feailner's orders,' he cut in, taking her mount, along with Jonred's and Vardrin's.

'This way, Lady,' said Jonred.

Kira followed him, realising with a sinking heart that she wasn't going to be able to search for fireweed here either. Some of the Guard built fires and Jonred pitched her gifan close to one, but most of the Terak remained on their feet. Kira sat by the fire, an ache in her belly she hadn't felt for many moons.

'I need some time alone,' she said to Jonred.

'You're to remain here until the Feailner returns.'

Beyond the fire-glow, the guards kept a constant patrol, and Kira wearily rested her head on her knees. Then frosted grass crunched and she started.

'Jonred says you need some time alone,' said Tierken. 'Come.'

She struggled up and followed him into the grove.

'Here will do,' said Tierken. 'I'll turn my back.'

'I need to go to the spring to wash.'

'It's too cold. You'll have to accept being grimy for a while.'

'It's not because I'm grimy, but because . . .' By the 'green. Must she beg Tierken's permission for everything?

'No further,' he said, hands coming to his hips.

Kira sat down and pulled off her boots.

'What in Irid's name are you doing?'

'I need to change my underclothes. To do that, I have to take off my boots and breeches.'

'There's no reason . . .' he began tersely.

'I bleed, Tierken,' she said.

'Kira, I -' he started, comprehending.

'Just turn your back.'

It was dark again before they reached their next stop at Shally Spring. This was where Kira had gathered on the northward journey and where there was the greatest chance of finding fireweed. She also knew that simply asking Tierken for time would be met with refusal. So Kira waited till the fires were set and the men had eaten before approaching him.

'I would have speech with you, Feailner,' she said.

He rose and came a little way from the fire. 'What is it?'

'I need time to look along the ridges for fireweed.'

He shook his head. 'The trade was a southward journey of seven days, I'm not extending it to eight.'

'I'll trade you for the time between dawn and midday.'

His eyes flashed in the drift of firelight. 'What are you offering, Kira?'

'The mare.'

'She was a gift!'

'So mine to trade,' said Kira steadily.

'I thought you had affection for her, but obviously I was wrong. You don't seem to have affection for anything . . . or anyone.'

'I need time, Tierken. If you won't give it, I must trade for it.'

He rubbed his jaw and when he finally spoke, the anger had gone from his voice.

'Have your time, Kira, but you'll have the patrol with you. And keep the mare, she's yours.'

61

Despite being aided by the patrolmen, Kira's search for fireweed elicited nothing more than sorren, silvermint and frost-burned tagenwort. By midday they were on their way again, Kira scanning her surroundings with increasing desperation as she rode. The Tain gatherers might have gathered more fireweed since she'd been gone, but if the fighting went as Caledon predicted, there would end up being wounded in Sarnia.

That night they camped without shelter and without water, for it was still half a day's ride to Barrow Soak, Jonred told her. The horses would have to wait till then. No one said it, but Kira knew she'd delayed the patrol at Shally Spring for nothing.

Cloud rolled in overnight, making the morning grey and misty. They watered the horses at Barrow Soak, and went on. It was drawing on to dusk when the cold silver of the plain darkened in the distance.

'The edge of the Tain lands,' said Vardrin.

'We'll reach Maraschin this night?' asked Kira, impatient to see Tresen.

Vardrin shook his head. 'We'll camp at Mendor Soak but that won't be till the night's turned, then pass east of Mendor Spur and cross the Baia Plain. We'll not reach the Tain city till the morrow's night.'

It began to rain, a fine veil of chill droplets, the waning moon smothered by cloud. Both men and horses were tired, and Kira thinking of her gifan, when there was a cry ahead, the effect on the patrol immediate. Orders were bawled, and the King's Guard spurred off into the gloom with Tierken and Caledon alongside. Fear surged through Kira as Kalos disappeared into the murk.

The patrol rode on grim-faced, with arrows set. The screams in the night grew louder, making Kira want to run for the safety of the north.

Tierken galloped beside Caledon, the attack ahead now plain. Shargh – against herders. A spear whistled past but he kept Kalos at a hard gallop as the Tains split. Caledon shouted orders in Tain and Onespeak, and in the confusion that followed Kalos's mighty chest slammed into an Ashmiri horse. Tierken slashed down with his sword and spurred on, hacking a swathe through the mounted Shargh, before wrenching Kalos round. The Guard drove forward, slowed by the use of swords – arrows being too great a risk to the herders trapped in the centre of the mêlée.

As the battle raged, the Shargh grew more intent on breaking out of the tightening ring of Tains than killing. Spears flew, and one of the Guard's horses went down, the Shargh hacking at the rider. Tains surged to their comrade's aid, breaking the circle and the Shargh stormed through. They were followed by a volley of Tain arrows, felling two, their riderless mounts disappearing into the night.

Tierken and Caledon set off in pursuit, the Shargh stringing out, their Ashmiri ponies no match for the speed of Kalos and Caledon's mount.

Shargh favoured spears and flatswords, not bows, and Tierken suspected they'd spent their spear supply. He galloped parallel

with the trailing Shargh in unspoken cooperation with Caledon, galloping on the other side. The Shargh could neither evade nor outpace them. Tierken dispatched him with a single stroke, then he and Caledon increased their pace, hemming in and killing two more Shargh and their horses, before halting.

‘They’ve had the wit to separate,’ said Caledon into the sudden quiet.

‘I counted seven, four remain,’ said Tierken.

‘They won’t have gone far,’ said Caledon. ‘They’ll be watching us.’

‘You’ve fought the Shargh often?’ asked Tierken.

‘Too many times lately. With your leave, Feailner, we should return to the herders. There might be some who can still be saved.’

By the time they got back, fires had been set, and Marin and Kira were tending the wounded. Patrolmen piled up the dead Shargh, and the four dead herders were laid out respectfully. Tierken issued orders to Jonred, then made his way to where Marin stitched Remas, his chest and arms covered in blood. Another Guard lay next to him, apparently unconscious. Caledon spread a sheet for the third man. Tierken gasped when he saw it was Kanil, one of his own men, whose breath wheezed hoarsely, his back slashed.

Kira turned him so he lay on the wound. Her shirt-sleeves and breeches were bloodstained, her face almost as pale as Remas’s as she unbuttoned Kanil’s jacket and shirt, shut her eyes and laid her hands on his chest. Even in the firelight, Tierken saw her blanch, turn her head and retch.

‘Kira. Are you ill?’

‘Bring my pack, will you,’ she said.

Tierken hurriedly retrieved it from beside Marin.

‘Help me turn him,’ she said, her voice as dull as her eyes.

Kanil’s eyes were open and he no longer panted.

‘You took his pain,’ said Tierken, remembering what she’d done for Thalli’s brother in Kessom, and what it meant.

Kira didn’t reply, busy cutting Kanil’s jacket and shirt away from the wound and laving on a paste with a strange scent.

‘What is it?’ asked Tierken.

‘Fireweed. It burns away the filth the Shargh put on their swords. Without fireweed, men die.’

Kira recapped the pot, wiped her hands on her breeches and pulled out a length of stitchweed. The second wounded Guard groaned and Kira glanced at him anxiously.

‘That’s what you searched for at Shally Spring?’ asked Tierken, nonplussed that Kira would trade the mare for a herb.

Kira nodded. ‘I looked in Kessom but could find none. Laryia tells me there’s no dense leaf-fall and soaks around Sarnia, so it’s unlikely to be there. I fear it mightn’t be in the north at all,’ she said, ashen-faced. ‘I *must* have it, Tierken.’

The second Guard’s agonised groans interrupted further talk.

‘Can you stitch?’ asked Kira.

Tierken nodded. Eris had insisted he and Laryia learn.

‘You’re not going to take pain again, are you?’ he asked, as Kira started on the second Guard.

Kira ignored him, unbuttoning the Guard’s shirt and jacket, and placing her hands on his chest. Her face contorted and she swayed.

‘I’ll finish that, Feailner,’ said Marin, coming to Tierken’s side and taking the stitchweed from him.

Tierken helped Kira away from the fire. ‘I told you in Kessom you’re not to take pain,’ he said, handing her his waterskin.

‘Tremen Healing doesn’t bow before Terak swords,’ replied Kira ironically.

‘I’ve never asked you to bow before me,’ said Tierken.

‘Not in so many words.’

‘Have you the fireweed, Lady?’ asked Marin.

Kira nodded and went back to the fire and Tierken turned his attention to his men. For all Poerin’s training, until this night Tierken had never actually had to fight for his life. Caledon had, and for a Placidien who charted his life by the stars he’d done so with brutal efficiency. He was a man Tierken could learn much from, if he chose.

The Cashgar Shargh were scattered east of Slift's Tor in The Westlans. They were well protected from the worsening weather, in the abandoned wooden sorchas, unlike the Weshargh and Soushargh who were further north. Warriors moved between the groups, and Arkendrin knew that one of the attacks on herders by Orbdargan's and Yrshin's warriors had been thwarted by the unexpected arrival of northern fighters. To Arkendrin, the ill chance of the meeting seemed a clear indication of the Sky Chiefs' lack of favour.

The Ashmiri, who missed nothing that moved on the plain, had reported that the party of Northerners contained no less than the Northern Chief, and the gold-eyed creature - to which the Ashmiri had granted protection.

Whether the Ashmiri had granted it protection or not was of no concern to Arkendrin, for he knew that only the Sky Chiefs determined what lived or died. They had delivered the creature into his hands before, and he was confident they would do so again.

The group of Northerners occupying Arkendrin's thoughts now moved with excruciating slowness, their progress impeded by the wounded they carried. Tierken knew they would be an easy target, but there was little he could do to speed their travel. The plain was open here, which made a surprise attack impossible, but it would be a different tale when night fell, and his anxiety over Kira grew.

Herder children rode atop the horses, the surviving adults having gone in search of their scattered animals, despite the remonstrations of Belzen, the new Leader of the Guard. The herders risked death by the hands of the Shargh, or death by the loss of their herds – a cruel choice, thought Tierken, glancing at the grubby, bloodstained children.

Slowing Kalos, Tierken waited for Caledon to come level as the patrol passed between the jut of Mendor Spur and Task Tor.

'Twenty-eight to protect eight,' said Caledon, as if picking up Tierken's thoughts.

'It will be enough,' said Tierken.

'If the Shargh haven't increased *their* numbers by coming together into bigger groups of marauders, and *if* they're unaware Kira's with us,' said Caledon. 'The Tremen told me the Shargh attacks were marked by a desperation to take Kira, the honour of her death reserved for the Shargh Leader.'

'If they know she's with us, their attack will be very precise,' said Tierken, watching the slide of shadow from Mendor Spur.

'And ruthless. Kest – the Leader of the Tremen Protectors – said they drove straight through his men to capture Kira, with complete disregard for their own lives.'

'We've got children and wounded.'

'Yes. The Shargh know we won't sacrifice them,' said Caledon. 'The Shargh's intention might be to take, not kill, as before. If they *do* know she's with us, with *you*, they'll judge her more useful alive

than dead.’ He paused. ‘After all, what would the Terak Feailner *not* give to get her back?’

Tierken’s eyes fired, but his voice remained calm. ‘And what would the Placidien Caledon e Saridon e Talliel not give?’

‘Caledon e Saridon e Talliel would give everything, including the stars,’ he replied, meeting Tierken’s eyes.

The light dwindled and they struck camp soon after sunset, reasoning that it would be easier to defend a well-planned camp lit by firelight than a strung-out group, including children and wounded, in darkness. The fires were set close to each other, with just enough room between for those not guarding to warm themselves.

Tierken placed Kira, the wounded and the children round the central fire, knowing that the Shargh would have to fight through the mounted guard and the rest of the men to reach her. But Caledon had warned him that the Shargh had used fire as a weapon in Allogrenia.

Although it went against all his instincts to protect her, Tierken knew Kira would be safer away from him, and he took Jonred, Vardrin and Anvorn aside, issuing orders in a low voice. If things went ill, they were to abandon the camp and take Kira straight to Maraschin, the Terak horses having the speed and stamina to outrun anything the Shargh rode. But his plans could still go awry if Kira argued and delayed his men.

Tierken waited until she’d finished changing Remas’s bandages and had washed her hands, before taking her as far as he dared from the fires.

‘Do you think the Shargh know I’m here?’ she asked, after he repeated what he’d said to his men.

‘I don’t know whether they do *now*, but if they attack, they will. And if they do seek you, we can expect attacks all the way to Maraschin.’

‘I’ve often wondered why I, a Healer, cause so much death,’ said Kira, looking back towards the camp.

‘The Shargh are a brutal people. The fault’s not yours,’ said Tierken. He wanted to take her in his arms, but was mindful of the closeness of his men.

‘So I’ve been told,’ said Kira, ‘yet still death follows me.’

‘Kira, I want your pledge that you’ll obey Jonred, Vardrin or Anvorn’s orders exactly and *immediately* if we’re attacked.’

‘My pledge? Something I can break if the whim takes me? I didn’t think that was good enough for you.’

‘I need your pledge, Kira,’ repeated Tierken, ignoring her allusion to bonding.

Kira sighed. ‘Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan pledges the Feailner of the Terak Kirillian that, should we come under attack, she’ll not risk his men’s lives by arguing with them.’

Her tone was both formal and ironic, but Tierken had what he wanted.

‘The Terak Feailner thanks the Tremem Feailner,’ he said with a bow.

The night passed uneventfully, and by dawn most of the men were breakfasting. Kira still slept and Tierken was glad. He glanced at her as he drank cotzee with Caledon, having forgotten how beautiful her hands were, and how bare. No rings or bracelets, nothing to show she was his.

‘There was much I didn’t understand about Kira until I went to the southern forests,’ said Caledon, keeping his voice low so it didn’t carry to the next fire. ‘I didn’t understand why she had so little regard for her own safety.’

‘The young don’t look beyond the moment,’ said Tierken with a shrug, resenting the intrusion to his thoughts.

‘She grew without a mother.’

‘Hardly unusual,’ said Tierken. ‘My own mother died when I was less than five seasons.’

'I understand you and your sister were raised by your grandmother,' acknowledged Caledon. 'Forgive me, Feailner, if I intrude, but I understand you were raised with love. From what the Leader of Kira's clan told me, this wasn't the case with her. Kira was left to her own devices, her father only taking an interest when her healing rivalled his, then seeking to suppress it. Kira poured her affection into her younger brother, Kandor. When he was killed, there was nothing to hold her to Allogrenia.'

'Why tell me this?'

'To help keep her safe.'

'I need no help keeping her safe,' said Tierken. He rose, tossed his cotzee dregs into the fire and strode away.

They pushed on, the rain starting again after midday and increasing as the light faded to a thick dusk, low cloud preventing them from seeing more than fifteen lengths in any direction. Kira was wet despite her cape and her misery was exacerbated by her anxiety for the wounded, especially Remas. If the rain didn't ease, there'd be no fires tonight to help her tending.

She was absorbed in her thoughts when suddenly Kira's mare flung up her head and danced sideways, and a Guard screamed warning. Before she knew at least twenty horses pounded out of the murk, coming from every side. The herder children shrieked as orders were shouted, and horses surged around Kira. Then Tierken's voice rang out.

'We go!' screamed Jonred.

Kira threw herself down as a spear arced over her head, and urged her mare to a gallop. Jonred raced beside her, Vardrin and Anvorn thundering behind. Gradually the screams of battle faded, replaced with the pound and snort of their horses. They went on and on at the same relentless pace, the acrid odour of horse sweat mixing with the smell of wet earth.

Rain sheeted down and it was so dark Kira could barely see a

length in front. She was terrified one of the horses would fall, and then, horrifyingly, there was a sickening crash and Jonred was no longer beside her. Vardrin shouted but Kira wrenched her mare round. The abrupt change in direction caused the mare to pitch forward and Kira hit the ground, pain exploding through her ribs. The sound of Shargh battle chants was all around and the clash of metal. Vardrin shouted again, close now, then Anvorn, and a horse stomped near her face.

Kira struggled to her knees, and rough hands seized her and hauled her upwards.

‘I have you, Lady,’ panted Anvorn, then Kira was forced to clutch at the saddle-strap as Anvorn abruptly released her. He fended off a flatsword, then spurred away and they were at a flat gallop again. Kira clung on as best she could, the pain in her chest roaring. But behind her she could hear the pound of another horse drawing closer. Then the pursuers shouted, and she was almost sick with relief. It was Vardrin, with Jonred mounted behind. They were still galloping hard when mounted men appeared from the gloom, coming towards them at speed.

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The Shargh screamed their war cries, the attack relentless. There were well over twenty in the group and Tierken parried and thrust, feeling curiously calm, Poerin's gruff voice directing his hand, almost as if the old Terak fighter stood at his shoulder instead of Caledon. Tierken was aware of the solid circle of men to his left and right, though he had no sense of how long they fought. After a while, he became aware that the night was empty of everything except the harsh pants of his men, and the sobs of the herder children.

His chest heaved, and spit scalded his throat. Five Shargh lay unmoving, another two dragged themselves further into the darkness. One of his men was on his knees, Marin beside him. The others were cleaning their swords on the grass.

Tierken sucked in a deep breath and ordered the guard back into position.

'We need . . . to keep . . . moving,' panted Caledon, sleeveing the rain from his eyes. 'There'll be no . . . safety in making . . . camp.'

'No, you're right. I thank you for your help, Lord Caledon.'

‘There’s no need of thanks . . . Feailner. We fight . . . for the same things.’

They moved off as quickly as possible, everybody tense.

The rain slowly eased and dawn was close when there was the unmistakable sound of hoofs once more. Tierken yelled orders and the men formed a protective ring. No one moved, then Kalos raised his head and gave voice. A lone horse cantered towards them, reins trailing. There was a shocked silence and the patrolmen looked to Tierken as they realised it was Kira’s mare.

Marin strode forward and caught her. ‘She’s been down, Feailner.’

The mare’s shoulder and knees were covered in mud and Tierken found his gaze drawn unwillingly to Caledon, the Tallien looking as grim as he felt. But there was nothing to do but go on, the growing light revealing the tracks of Jonred’s party. The prints were full of muddy water and deep cut, a sign of swift travel.

The patrol stopped briefly to eat, but there was little conversation, Tierken unable to choke down any food at all.

‘What’s done is done, Feailner,’ said Marin, handing him cotzee. ‘If she’d stayed with us, we’d have had a far bloodier battle, and they might have breached our defences.’

‘They still might,’ said Tierken.

Further south, Anvorn cursed, and he and Vardrin jerked their horses to a halt. The other horsemen stopped too, and set arrows.

King’s Guard, Kira saw in relief. ‘I greet you . . . Guard Ather,’ she called, from behind Anvorn’s back.

‘My Lady. I didn’t recognise you,’ said Ather, in astonishment.

‘We’ve had a hard trip . . . and request your aid,’ Kira struggled on, finding speaking harder than breathing. ‘May I present . . . Terak Kirillian patrolmen Anvorn, Vardrin and Jonred . . . without whom I would now . . . be dead. The Lord

Caledon and your men . . . are behind us, escorting wounded. With them . . . are more Terak, and . . . the Terak Feailner.'

The King's Guard broke into excited speech and Ather called for quiet, conferring with the lead rider before turning back to Kira.

'Archorn will give you escort to Maraschin, and my men will seek the rest of your troop, Lady,' said Ather. Nodding to Anvorn and Vardrin, Ather shouted an order and the Guard galloped onward.

Archorn led Kira's party back to Maraschin and as they passed through the gate, he came alongside. 'Your people are billeted in King's Hall,' he said. 'We go there now.'

Kira was desperate to see Tresen, but the pain in her ribs was unrelenting. 'I need . . . to go to the Sanctum.'

'Are you injured, Lady?' asked Archorn, looking at her closely for the first time.

'I've cracked some ribs. But . . . Physick Aranz . . . will fix me.'

They came to the Sanctum and Archorn lifted Kira carefully down.

'Go with Guard . . . Archorn,' she said to Jonred. 'I'll join . . . you later.'

'We stay with you, Lady.'

Kira didn't have the strength to argue, the fire in her ribs now raging. Jonred helped her into the Receiving Room, where Dumer stood in his usual spot, giving Kira the wild idea that he hadn't moved since she'd last seen him. He talked to a troopsman dressed like a Protector, and Kira blinked and swayed.

'Tresen,' she mumbled, and fainted.

Out on the Baia Plain, Tierken, Marin and Caledon contemplated Jonred's slain mount, the ground about so muddied it was impossible to say how many horses had been there. Marin walked on, his gaze on the ground.

‘Two horses went on southward,’ he said.

There was a warning yell as more horses approached and Tierken leapt back onto Kalos, shouting at his men to adopt defensive positions.

But Caledon remained on the ground. ‘King’s Guard from Maraschin,’ he said, his gaze fixed on them.

Tierken watched their approach. Twenty riders, clad in the blue he’d heard tell marked the King’s House, and coming to a halt a little way off. Caledon spoke with their Leader, then brought him back.

‘I present Guard Leader Ather to the Feailner of the Terak Kirillian,’ said Caledon formally.

The Tain bowed low and Tierken nodded.

‘Guard Leader Ather has word of those we seek,’ said Caledon.

‘Your men and the Lady Kira arrived in Maraschin a little after dawn, my Lord,’ said Ather.

Tierken briefly shut his eyes. ‘I thank you for your news, Guard Leader Ather.’

Tresen sat beside Kira’s pallet, watching her sleep. Her arrival, even with cracked ribs, was the only good thing that had happened since he’d left Allogrenia. They’d come out of the Azurcade forests to see the Tain Westlans burning, and arrived in Maraschin to discover Kira had been captured by the Shargh over a moon earlier. Since then they’d endured a desperate battle to save the constant flood of wounded men, women and children; their slaughter apparently indiscriminate and total.

If it hadn’t been for the fireweed supply Kira had discovered on the day she was taken, the number of dead would have been devastating. There had been so many injured that the help he and Arlen gave to the physicks meant he’d had very little sleep in the almost half-moon since he’d been here.

Tresen stroked Kira's hair from her forehead. One of the lesser physicks had washed the mud off, then Tresen had dosed her with sickleseed – or silverseed as they called it here – and bound up her ribs. He'd also dressed the deep score on the arm of one of the men who'd brought her in – Jonred, he thought his name was.

The men were Terak's seed, he told himself again, but it seemed no more credible now, in the ripe light of midday, than it had at dawn. They were tall and muscular, like King's Guard, and sat grim-faced in the Receiving Room. Archorn had invited them to bathe and eat, but they remained there, muddy and exhausted, their orders to guard Kira, one of them said.

The men had told Tresen that it had been their patrol that had originally rescued Kira from the Shargh and taken her north, and Tresen was immensely grateful. And the fact that Kira had come back with Terak guards suggested that she'd treated with the northern Feailner, despite what Caledon had warned.

More horses sounded outside and Tresen groaned inwardly, listening for a summons. The Physick-General would call him if the lesser physicks were unable to deal with the new arrivals.

There was no summons, but after a while footsteps came towards the alcove and the curtain was swept back by Dumer, who was accompanied by two men liberally coated in dried mud and blood. Tresen recognised the Lord Caledon, but gasped as he looked more closely at his companion. The man had black hair, but Kandor's face and Kira's eyes.

Dumer nodded and withdrew, but the black-haired man was oblivious to all but Kira, laying the back of his fingers on her cheek. The gesture was so tender, and familiar, that Tresen looked at Caledon in shock. Miken had told him Kira was likely to bond with Caledon, but it didn't look likely now.

'Healer Tresen, I'm glad to see you've made the journey safely,' said Caledon calmly, causing Tresen to wonder if Miken had misunderstood Caledon's intentions towards Kira.

‘I present Healer Tresen of Kashclan – Kira’s clanmate – to the Feailner of the Terak Kirillian,’ said Caledon, to his black-haired companion.

Tresen used a deep bow to mask his astonishment. The Leader of the Terak Kutan!

‘Kira’s spoken of you,’ the Feailner said, his gaze still on Kira.

‘King Adris awaits,’ prompted Caledon.

Finally the Feailner’s eyes came to Tresen’s, the gold extraordinary against his darker skin. ‘We’ll speak again, Tresen of Kashclan,’ he said.

Irdodun hunched next to the fire, trying to ease his throbbing foot. One of the Northerner’s horses had trodden on it in the muddy darkness, after Irdodun’s spear had brought another of the horses down. All Arkendrin had to do was kill the rider and take the creature, but the Northerners had killed Irdodun’s blood-tie Irstonin and fled.

Arkendrin had cursed them solidly ever since, *and* muttered about Orbdargan and Yrshin’s warriors, whose attacks had prompted the Northerners’ flight. But Irdodun was beginning to wonder just who was cursed. If the Sky Chiefs punished the Weshargh and Soushargh for their dishonour, why was it Arkendrin’s warriors who suffered? Orbdargan and Yrshin’s men traversed the lands close to the Sky Chiefs, and traded their feet for the tread of beasts, yet it was Urgundin, Urpalin, Orthaken, Ermashin and now Irstonin – as well as a host of lesser blood-ties – who dwelt with the Sky Chiefs.

Irdodun pulled his jacket close. The thought that it might be Arkendrin who bequeathed them ill fortune was dangerous, and he pushed it from his mind. The Sky Chiefs’ realm might be always sunny, but he was in no hurry to visit it.

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Caledon remained with Adris long after Tierken had been escorted to his rooms, the meeting between Adris and the Terak Feailner having gone better than Caledon dared hope. Adris had been unusually restrained, the Feailner had been wary but courteous, and there had been a willingness by both to mend the long silence between their peoples without apportioning blame. They had agreed to meet again more formally on the morrow, to plan for what was to come.

Caledon spoke with Adris of the escalation of the Shargh attacks on The Westlans, his journey north, and his dealings with Tierken.

‘He’s a skilful fighter, for all his Kessomi upbringing,’ he said. ‘And his men have lost none of the battle prowess that made Terak famed in years past.’

‘We’re going to need every bit of it,’ said Adris.

‘He’s spent the three years of his feailnership bringing his men behind him, and has their loyalty, but I believe there’s still some difficulty with his uncle’s former advisers in Sarnia.’

‘He has my sympathy,’ said Adris.

‘The old dislike giving way to the young, and the young dislike taking the advice of the old,’ said Caledon wryly.

‘Still, things have turned better than I dared hope a moon ago,’ said Adris, rubbing weary eyes. ‘We have a steady supply of the herb Kira discovered to stop the rot of the Shargh wounds, the alliance has been renewed and we have Tremen – who Archorn assures me can fight – to aid our cause. And you have Kira back.’

Caledon shook his head. ‘The Terak Feailner has Kira – at this moment.’

There was a brief silence, then Adris said cautiously, ‘I noticed their resemblance, of course.’

‘Yes, the seed of Terak meets the seed of Kasheron; a man and a woman united by a bitter history and by gold eyes. The stars’ patterns are rarely so perfect.’

Adris said nothing and Caledon continued. ‘You wonder whether I accept the stars’ design or would undo it? You wonder whether I’ll relinquish Kira to the Terak Feailner without so much as a murmur? There’s more to love than the sharing of flesh, Adris, there’s trust and acceptance. The Terak Feailner gives neither, and I don’t believe that will be enough for Kira. Whether that’s what the stars intend is yet to be seen.’

It was dark in the Sanctum when Kira woke, and she was so heavy-headed she had no idea whether it was the time before dawn or the time after dusk. A figure rose from beside the pallet and held a cup to her lips, and Kira savoured the cool slide of water down her throat.

It was too dark to see who tended her but she knew the sense of him. ‘Tresen. I thought I must’ve dreamed you. Have Tierken and Caledon and the rest of the men arrived safely?’

‘Who’s Tierken?’ asked Tresen.

‘The Terak Feailner.’

‘They’re both here. I don’t know about the rest of the men you travelled with though,’ said Tresen, opening the shutters, a silvery light revealing his smile. ‘It’s so good to see you, Kira, and to know you’re safe.’

‘As it is you, clanmate. Tell me how things are in Allogrenia.’

‘Things are well there,’ said Tresen. ‘There have been no attacks since you left.’

Kira sighed in relief. ‘Is it near morning or night?’

‘Near morning. You’ve slept an entire day,’ he said.

‘An entire day,’ said Kira in dismay. ‘You shouldn’t have given me sickleseed.’

‘You don’t need me to tell you there must be sleep to heal,’ said Tresen, taking her hand.

‘I don’t have time to sleep. Tierken’s only granted me three days, then we go north again.’

‘You let the Leader of the Terak dictate when you can come and go?’ exclaimed Tresen. ‘What right has he?’

‘I pledged him to spend no more than three days here,’ said Kira yawning. ‘He fears for my safety, and breaking my pledges to him isn’t going to help if we must fight together.’

‘So Caledon was wrong?’

‘Wrong?’ asked Kira, struggling with an urge to slip back into sleep.

‘He said the Terak wouldn’t accept the kin-link.’

‘No, he wasn’t wrong. The Terak insist Kasherion went over the seas.’

‘So, this Northerner calls us liars, does he?’ demanded Tresen, his grip on Kira’s hand tightening.

‘He calls our histories lies.’

‘He came here, you know, with Caledon, while you slept. Caledon led us to believe *he* was going to bond with you, but it looked more like the Terak Leader was.’

Kira said nothing and Tresen leaned across the pallet. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’ asked Kira, having trouble focusing on his speech. Curse the slow-headedness of sickleseed.

‘Did Caledon lie to us? Did he pretend love for you to help convince us to send men? Or, in Caledon’s absence, did you turn to the Leader of the northern swordsmen, to this man who now denies us?’

‘It’s not as simple as that,’ said Kira, wincing as her ribs burned.

‘Whether you bow before the man who denies our very existence *is* simple, Kira!’

‘He refused to bond with me, if that’s any comfort,’ she mumbled.

‘Refused? You *wanted* to bond with him? You’re the Tremen Leader, Kira. To stay with him would mean to leave Allogrenia, and to leave *us*! Does Allogrenia mean so little to you that you would give it all away for the scion of the brute Kasheran fled?’

Tierken flicked the curtain back and Tresen froze, then strode past him out of the alcove.

‘So *would* you give Allogrenia away for the *scion of the brute Kasheran fled*?’ asked Tierken.

‘Tresen thinks like I once did. Our stories lie about you, just as yours lie about us,’ said Kira.

‘That’s not an answer to the question.’

‘I traded Allogrenia away for just three days here, remember, and I’ve already wasted one in sleep.’ But even speaking was an effort, and Kira didn’t want to spend her strength on it.

‘For three days here but not for me?’

‘It was you who refused the bonding, Tierken,’ she whispered, her eyes closing as she started to drift.

‘I didn’t understand what it meant,’ said Tierken. ‘I still don’t.’ He bent and kissed her, but she was asleep.

Caledon sat in the Crown Rooms with Adris and Beris’s advisers, watching the Terak Feailner carefully. He was more closed than in

the first meeting, and Caledon wondered if the presence of Soltin, Borzan and Tharoul had undermined the tenuous trust of the last night, or whether something else was at play. The old King's advisers had insisted on joining the meeting, and it was difficult for the new King to refuse.

'We should summon the Commander of the Tremen fighters, if we're to discuss our strategies,' said Borzan.

'I've spoken with their physick, who's the only one of the Tremen with any Onespeak,' said Tharoul. 'He tells me the female physick who was here before commands the Tremen.'

'A female physick commanding men?' said Soltin. *If that's so, we should postpone this meeting until she's more recovered.*

'The Terak alliance is with the Tain, not the Tremen,' said Tierken.

'That's true, but if we're to fight as three peoples, we must plan together,' said Borzen. 'We need either Pekrash or the female physick here.'

'Certainly how the third people, the Tremen, are to fight with you must be resolved, but not at this meeting,' said Caledon. 'The Westlans burn and the Cashgar Shargh, Weshargh and Soushargh have joined, riding Ashmiri horses and crossing the Azurcades. But this evil seeds some good, as evil sometimes does, for the long tradition of friendship between the great peoples of the north and south has now been rekindled. Our task is to decide how this friendship can be made the tool of the Shargh's destruction.'

'What are your troopers' latest reports, King Adris?' asked Caledon.

Adris outlined the most recent Shargh sightings and attacks, the responses of his men, and the strategies he had in place to protect woodcutters and herders. As he did so, Caledon felt the tension in the room lessen. After a little, Adris and Tierken discussed how and where their fighters would be deployed. There were times when Caledon intervened to ease moments of

difficulty, but these occasions became less as the morning drew on, and by the time they'd paused to take their midday meal, Caledon felt confident enough in their accord to excuse himself.

He made his way through the wintry sunshine down to the Sanctum, wanting to see Kira and speak with Tresen and Pekrash. Kira still slept, with Tresen dozing on a chair beside her pallet, reminding Caledon of the closeness he'd heard tell of in Allogrenia.

But as he turned to go, Tresen roused, and requested speech. They went out into the garden to the stone seat next to the pool. Caledon sat but Tresen stood, everything about him reeking distrust. Caledon was weary from the journey and the fighting, and from bringing Adris and Tierken together, but now it seemed he must soothe the ruffled feelings of Kira's clanmate.

'You're wondering, I suppose, whether I lied to your people about my feelings for your Leader, and about my intentions,' he began without ceremony.

'Yes,' said Tresen.

'There are times when I must lie, Tresen, and those are determined by the greater pattern of the stars. But I didn't lie to the Tremes about my feelings for your Leader. I love Kira and would have her with me on whatever terms she desires. That was how it was when I left to come to your lands, and that is how it remains for me.'

'Yet she speaks of staying with the Leader of the Terak, of all people,' said Tresen, exasperated. 'He hasn't even got the grace to accept that we exist, but she'd give up Allogrenia for that man. I don't understand her at all.'

'Your father told me that Kira's driven by healing,' said Caledon. 'There's no healing in the north, Tresen, and I know she intends to go back and establish it, for it *will* be needed. The coming fighting will be bloody, but when it's over with, there won't be that need for Kira to stay in the north. It will be a truer test, then, of her intentions.'

‘You think she’ll come back to you?’

‘Eventually. The stars have taught me many things, Tresen, and patience is one of them. I’m prepared to wait.’

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Kira went slowly up the winding path to King's Hall, head held high, hand enclosed in Tresen's. For once she wasn't a lone stranger in an alien land. She was the Tremen Leader, walking with her clanmate to meet those of her people who'd taken the agonising decision to turn aside from Kasherón's teachings, and fight for their land. What was she to say to all the young men who'd left Allogrenia, she wondered, her nervousness increasing. Forget everything good you ever believed about Kasherón, it was really his brother we should have followed? You'll find more trust among the Tain, who are strangers, than among the Terak who are kin? Thank you for coming to die?

'You're tense,' said Tresen.

'Yes.'

'There's no need to be,' he said, squeezing her hand. 'The men look forward to seeing you very much. You'll be greeted only with joy.'

'I can't bear the thought of us fighting out on the plain, of killing and being killed. And I can't even stay here to heal, for they

already have a Sanctum and physicks. I must return north, where there is nothing to aid the wounded.'

'Caledon says you must go as the need there will be desperate,' said Tresen. 'But he believes when the fighting's over, you'll come back . . . to him.'

Kira kept her gaze on King's Hall, finding it difficult to think beyond establishing a Haelen in the north. It was possible that *none* of them would survive the fighting. Tresen, Tierken and Caledon could all be killed by the Shargh, and her as well. She might even die as a result of the continuous taking of pain. The Feailners Sinarki and her daughter Tesrina - who took pain - had both died young.

The Tremen were assembled next to the King's Hall stables, Pekrash at their head. But Kira was appalled to see first Adris then Caledon, Tierken, the King's Guard and the Terak patrolmen lined up behind them. She'd planned to speak to her men alone, but it seemed there were to be many witnesses.

Tresen embraced her, joining the Protectors as Adris came forward. He looked indefinably different - more confident, more self-assured, more content.

Kira bowed, careful to not hurt her ribs, and Adris raised her, kissing her on each cheek.

'The Tain people welcome back Tremen Leader Feailner Kiraon of Kashclan, and rejoice in your safe return.'

'I thank you for your welcome,' said Kira, struggling to meet his black eyes. 'The Tremen offer you our best wishes for a long and wise kingship,' she added, hoping the spirit of her words was acceptable, if not their actual form.

Adris nodded graciously. 'I know you are keen to speak with your people, but after you've done so, I invite you and Commander Pekrash to join myself, the Terak Feailner and Lord Caledon in celebration of your safe return.'

'I thank you,' said Kira.

Adris nodded again and Kira turned to the Tremen, sliding the ring of rulership from around her neck, and holding it aloft.

‘I, Kiraon of Kashclan, daughter of Maxen and Fasarini, sister of Merek, Lern and Kandor, Leader of the Tremen by virtue of healing, thank you for offering your service in the protection of Allogrenia, the healing place that Kasherion, his followers and their heirs established, countless seasons past.’

A mutter broke out among the Terak patrolmen behind her, but it was quickly silenced.

Kira continued addressing her people, refusing to deny Kasherion or his legacy. Tierken might not believe it, but it didn’t alter its truth. ‘We have lived always by healing, by the strength of the green and growing, by the ways of life and of living. These ways have served us well – *Kasherion’s* ways have served us well!’

Tresen’s eyes burned into hers but she forced herself to scan all the faces of the men.

‘Healing gives life, mends bones, eases the old on their final journey, but it can’t turn aside the sword. Only metal can defeat metal. If we are to have Shelter again, to reclaim Allogrenia, to live without fear for those we love and for ourselves, we must use the weapons of those who seek to destroy us. We must either fight for Allogrenia, for what Kasherion built, or surrender it.

‘This is a bitter realisation, I know, and one I’ve struggled with. But we are not alone. The hatred of those who would destroy us is directed at others as well. We do not fight just for ourselves but for them, and they fight for us.

‘You’ve been welcomed to the Tain lands by King Adris, whose people suffer as we do, and will fight with the Tain troopsmen. The Tain have a long treaty of friendship and aid with the Terak *Kirillian*. The Terak *Kirillian*, whose lands lie in the north, will also fight.

‘The Terak Feailner’s men rescued me from the Shargh, and the northern city of Sarnia has been *generous* in its hospitality

towards me. The Terak Feailner and his men have given me safe escort south so that I could meet with you.'

A wave of speech erupted among the Tremen. Those who hadn't noticed Tierken before now stared at him and the patrolmen openly. The Tremen were unskilled in hiding their feelings, their faces showing astonishment at his likeness to her, anger and distrust.

Kira waited for the hubbub to die down then continued. 'Shortly, the Terak Feailner, King Adris, Lord Caledon – whose wisdom has guided our path so far – Commander Pekrash and I, will discuss what is to come. Then I will return north, for the northern city has need of a Haelen to heal those who'll suffer injury in the coming fighting.'

Kira looked at each Tremen face in turn, imprinting them in her memory.

'I thank Commander Pekrash for leading you out of the southern forests, and I thank him for his part in what is to come. May the alwaysgreen Shelter you and guide your way; may its shadow bring you home again, lest . . .'

Kira faltered. How could the alwaysgreen protect them against swords?

Pekrash filled the silence by shouting orders, and feet scuffed the paving as they moved off. The King's Guard and Terak patrolmen dispersed also, Marin's gruff voice issuing curt instructions.

'I'll go back to the Sanctum and relieve Arlen,' said Tresen, coming to her side. 'The Tain Guard who came south with you isn't any better.'

'Remas?' asked Kira, appalled that she'd neglected to tend him. 'I should have –'

'Taken his pain? You've got enough of your own,' said Tresen.

'But –'

Tresen raised his hand. 'You don't need to do *everything*, Kira,

as I've often said. The Tain King now awaits you. You spoke well,' he added softly, kissing her cheek.

Despite Adris's suggestion that the meal was to celebrate Kira's return, most of the conversation concentrated on the attacks, the movement of the Shargh, and how their own men would be deployed, supplied with food and the horses cared for. Caledon translated for Pekrash and, despite this, Pekrash was better informed and more skilled in all of the areas under discussion than Kira. Her thoughts increasingly went to Remas as she picked at her food.

Finally the serving man replaced the empty platters with the fruit and ale that marked the end of a Tain meal and Kira stood carefully so as not to jar her ribs.

'I thank you for the honour you've accorded me, King Adris,' she said. 'I beg leave to return to the Sanctum to tend Guard Leader Remas and others who were injured on the journey south.'

'By all means,' said Adris.

'Please excuse me for a moment also,' said Tierken, pushing back his chair. 'I need speech with the Tremem Leader.'

Tierken followed Kira out, the room silent as he pulled the door closed behind them.

'I've not authorised the building of any Haelen in Sarnia, Kira.'

'I'm not *building* one. I'll convert the abandoned stable near the gate,' she said.

'Sarnia has no need of healing, nor welcomes it.'

'Sarnia won't welcome its young men dying either, Tierken. Where are you going to send the wounded? Kessom? How's a bier to traverse the Tiar Lookround?'

'The fighting will remain on the southern Sarsalin, and the wounded be brought here.'

'That's not what Caledon believes,' said Kira.

'Lord Caledon doesn't know everything.'

‘Neither do you, Tierken,’ said Kira. ‘If *he’s* wrong, you’ll have a very clean stable. If *you’re* wrong, your men will die. Which would you prefer?’

‘The Terak won’t accept a Haelen on top of the news that –’

‘I won’t sit idle and watch people die!’ interrupted Kira, moving off.

‘Kira!’

She forced herself to stop and Tierken came to her side. ‘I must return to the meeting, but there are things we must speak of later.’ He cursed suddenly. ‘We never seem to have time to say what’s important, and now’s not the right time or place either! This meeting’s likely to last the rest of the day. In the meantime, don’t do anything that will worsen your pain,’ he added softly. He touched her face briefly before turning back to the Crown Rooms.

Kira watched him go. His need to simply have time together echoed her own longing, and the fact that he had voiced it reassured her.

Marin and his men were at the stables, a number of the Terak horses saddled, the patrolmen wearing packs as they clipped waterskins to their harness. Kira stopped.

‘I’m glad to see you out of your bed, Lady,’ said Marin.

‘Are you going on scout?’

‘No. We return to Sarnia.’

‘Tierken’s going too?’ asked Kira, glancing back to the Crown Rooms in confusion.

‘The Feailner remains here. We go back to Sarnia to send patrols south.’

‘Then I must come with you!’

This time it was Marin who looked towards the Crown Rooms. ‘We travel with just half a patrol, and very fast. I doubt your ribs will take it.’

‘They are cracked, not broken, and I have herbs to dull the pain,’ said Kira, knowing she couldn’t take sickleseed *and* sit

a horse. 'You know the Feailner commands that I return to the north within three days. Today is the third. Will you bring my mare to the gate?'

Marin still looked uncertain. 'I need speak with the Feailner first', he said.

Kira's thoughts raced. It was unlikely that Tierken would grant her permission to go north with only half a patrol, but if Caledon were right about the fighting, it was urgent she return there to make a Haelen. And while neither Tierken nor Adris had the power to stop the *Tremen Leader* from departing – especially since her men were in the city – they could still make it difficult for her.

'As you have need of speed, I'll collect my mare now,' she said to Marin. 'I must visit the Sanctum first but then I'll await you out on the plain.'

Marin nodded and strode off towards the Crown Rooms, while Kira retrieved her mare from the stable and led her down King's Way as quickly as her ribs allowed. When she reached the Sanctum she found that every pallet in the Garden Room was occupied, but eerily quiet, the groans of the injured quelled by unconsciousness.

Aranz looked up from his stitching and nodded, the blood from the wounded man he tended dripping from the pallet to the floor. Tresen was in the alcove nearest the end, and at first Kira thought he tended an elderly man, but it was Remas, as hollow as a stickspider shell and beyond anything she could offer.

'He's not in pain. We've given him a good death,' said Tresen. 'And the other wounded will recover, thanks to the fireweed and the knowing you've passed to the physicks.'

'Do you have spare fireweed?' asked Kira. 'I go north.'

'You can't ride with those ribs,' said Tresen, handing her a single pot from his pack. 'That's all I can give you,' he said apologetically. 'The Shargh make it hazardous to harvest.'

‘It’s the third day, and my ribs are feeling better. I have to leave,’ said Kira, carefully stowing the pot.

‘You don’t need to do *anything* the Terak Feailner says.’

‘I’ve made an agreement, Tresen. Would you have the Terak Feailner call the Tremem Feailner faithless?’

‘He denies us, and he denies you!’ said Tresen, taking her by the shoulders. ‘Free yourself from him, Kira.’

‘He has Kandor’s face.’

‘But not his heart!’

‘I love him, Tresen. And I must go north to make a Haelen, whether he allows it or not. Healing will win, despite the sword,’ said Kira, and gave Tresen a sad smile. ‘Farewell Tresen, and take care.’

‘I’d thought this parting would be easier than the last, but it isn’t,’ he said, and straightened. ‘May the alwaysgreen Shelter you and guide your way; may its shadow bring you home again, lest you stray.’ Then he hugged Kira’s shoulders, careful not to touch her chest. ‘Stay safe, clanmate,’ he whispered.

Marin cursed silently as he stared at the impassive face of the blue-clad Guard. He was the third Marin had spoken to, and Marin was still none the wiser as to his Feailner’s whereabouts.

King Adris, the Lord Caledon, Commander Pekrash and the Terak Feailner are no longer in the Crown Rooms, the Guard had told him.

Knowing where they *weren’t* was hardly useful, thought Marin in frustration. Time was slipping away and he glanced over to the stables, where his increasingly restless men waited. The fact that the Lady Kira was beyond the gates weighed on him, too.

If he’d had his wits about him, he should have insisted she stay within the city, but even as the thought crossed his mind he realised that he didn’t have the authority to insist on anything. She was the Leader of the Tremem—not even his Feailner had authority over her.

The understanding helped him come to a decision. He had his orders and could delay no longer in carrying them out. Going back to his men, he vaulted onto his horse. Then they set off towards the gate as fast as the crowded street allowed.

Kira kept her mare to a canter, wanting to be far enough from the wall not to tempt Marin to return her, but not so far that his patrol wouldn't catch her before dusk. The mare's gait was just bearable, unlike when she had trotted. That had been agony. At a canter, the bruise-ease and bindings Tresen had applied to her chest reduced the pain to a constant throb. Kira had a good supply of bruise-ease with her, and could apply more as they journeyed. She just hoped it would be enough to allow her to reach Sarnia.

Arkendrin stood at the edge of the forest, his men waiting silently behind him. The massive wooden gate of the Tain wall was made small by distance, but it wasn't so far away that he couldn't see who came and went. A single rider had come out and some time later, a group of filthy northern horsemen had followed. Even had it been night he would have known the rider was the creature of the Telling. The Sky Chiefs had gifted him the ability to sense its foul presence, and to predict its movements.

It went north, using the legs of a beast, but it didn't escape him. Soon his scattered warriors would come together with Orbdargan and Yrshin's warriors, who now tested their strength in small, swiftly moving packs. United they would sweep the stinking northern robbers away. Then the creature would be his, and the highest sorcha on the Grounds, and all else he desired. His eyes glittered as he palmed skywards, thanking the Sky Chiefs for their beneficence. Then, beckoning his men, he turned north.