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For readers who like timelines and worldbuilding details, here's the webpage for this story, with all kinds of links: [www.sherwoodsmith.net/inda.html](http://www.sherwoodsmith.net/inda.html)

## Chapter One

AFTER nine years of exile, Inda was going home.

The still-wintery wind sent the scout craft *Vixen* scudding down the coast of Iasca Leror. Four crew and four passengers crowded the small craft, the passengers on watch as they drifted past tall bluffs of sedimentary stone. Above the cliffs occasional conical roofs were visible but seldom any living thing other than wheeling, diving sea birds. At night signal fires twinkled with a ruddy, sinister glow along the highest bluffs, beacons tended day and night, kept ready for any sighting of Venn raiders.

Inda was not alone. Three of his companions would go with him.

Inda fretted over the way the Venn Dag Signi had taken to standing at the rail, staring up at those forbidding cliffs, her hands clasped tightly together. The only way he could think of to break that silent, white-knuckled tension was to attempt a joke. "How often does a fellow fall in love with the world's most wanted woman? Maybe we should help the balladeers along. Make up some good verses about us."

Signi shifted her gaze from the horizon to Inda's hopeful face. The gulf between twenty and thirty-two had never seemed wider. What could she say? *You are notorious throughout the world, but you are coming home. I am renegade only to my people, and nothing to the world. There is no home for me.* No. If he did not see the difference, why cause him pain?

He said, "Don't your people have a lot of songs about evil villains or great heroes? Mine do. In ours, you Venn are always the villains strewing blood and death everywhere—and I'm sure we Marlovans are the same in yours."

Inda flashed a smile aft at Tau, lounging at the taffrail next to Jeje, who had insisted on handling the tiller until they reached land. "Tau," Inda called into the wind. "This is more your skill. Make up a ballad? A heroic one." He smacked his chest, then indicated Signi with his thumb. "About us."

"You want a hero's song?" Taumad's manner was languid as he covertly studied the two forward: the small, spare Venn mage with her hands gripped together, and Inda, not much taller, broad and strong through the chest, golden hoops affixed with rubies glittering at his ears. His face had been scarred in battle, making him seem older than his twenty years. He was a sinister figure, except for his expression. His worry was as evident as her tension.

Tau flicked a glance between them again, and guessed with typical accuracy at Inda's motive. Tau had been trained to sing as well as to observe, and making up verses was an old game for him.

*"Scar-faced Inda riding the wind,  
His fleet a scout craft. Surrounded closely*

*By powerful mates, standing beside him,  
Oath-sworn and loyal, to guard Inda's ass—*

“Hey,” Inda protested. “It’s supposed to be about *my* greatness.”

“But there isn’t any,” Tau retorted.

The banter sparked chuckles from a pair of brothers crewing for Jeje, and a deep, husky laugh from her. For a moment a smile eased Dag Signi’s expression. She raised a hand, the gesture—like all her movements—stylized with trained poise. She said something in a low voice; Inda bent his head to touch hers as they talked privately.

Jeje muttered, “She’s got to be scared now that we’re close to land.”

“I would be.” Tau hitched himself up onto the rail. “A Venn, landing in a kingdom that’s been under Venn attack—or Venn-directed pirate attack—for five or six years?” He shook his head. “Does anyone besides me appreciate the irony that she, an enemy, has more recent news about what’s going on in our homeland than the three of us?”

Jeje scowled landward. “I suppose it’s stupid to say that Inda will make everything all right when he doesn’t know what kind of a welcome *he*’s gonna get after all these years.”

“His boyhood friend is now king,” Tau reminded her.

But she just flipped up the back of her hand. “Kings,” she uttered in disgust.

Tau and Jeje had been with Inda for the entirety of his exile. They’d met as deck rats on an old trader. During those nine years—as they’d followed him from the trader to the Freedom Islands to become marine defenders, been taken as pirates, and escaped just to turn around and take on the worst pirates of all—Inda had told them absolutely nothing about his past. When he announced a few days ago to his fleet that he was going to return to his homeland to warn them of imminent invasion by the Venn, everyone had assumed it an act of madness. He’d be killed! Thrown into a dungeon! Thrown into a dungeon *then* killed!

Jeje leaned into the tiller as the *Vixen* sped closer and closer to the coastline; Tau lounged forward to help the brother on day watch shift the tall, curved mainsail.

The contrast between the two secretly entertained Jeje, though she had long known better than to comment to Tau. He was astonishingly beautiful—well made, golden-eyed, with silver-touched hair the color of ripened wheat. Her young crewman, who towered over Tau, was gangly and knot-limbed, with a beaky nose exceeded only by that of his brother. Not that they were bad-looking fellows—it’s just that everybody looked a little rough and unfinished next to Tau. *Especially me*, Jeje thought with an inward laugh.

Inda stayed at the rail, sea glass at his eye, his body leaning toward the shore as if doing so would get him there faster.

They did not want to be seen by Venn spies up near the peninsula, so they had sailed round the curve of land bulking out to the west that encompassed Khani-Vayir, then dove in eastward toward one of the great rivers that flowed seaward from the eastern border of the kingdom. Inda had chosen this landing place after days of sailing past cliff-lined shores that looked pretty much the same.

Earlier, Jeje, who had spent her childhood on the shore they first passed, had said, “We ought to bring in some catch as a peace-gift, so they don’t shoot us from the shore. People here know one another. If the Venn have been trying to land spies as well as invade, not to mention burning their fishing boats whenever they catch ’em, they’re going to really hate strangers.” Inda had agreed.

Now, as they loosened sail, Inda said, “Leave the talking to me.”

Jeje was surprised. After all, they didn’t look the least like Venn. Even Signi looked anonymous. And though they were far south of Jeje’s village, the people were pretty much the same mixture of old Iascan and Marlovan that she’d known from babyhood.

But as the sun slanted behind them toward the western horizon and they drifted into a cove, suspicious villagers lined the shore. The people did not hide their ready weapons—even when they could clearly see the nets of fish that the *Vixen* trailed behind. The villagers watched the four climb down into the rowboat, attach the nets, and row for shore. By the time they jumped out and brought the boat ashore, Jeje was thoroughly intimidated and felt no desire to speak.

Inda called out formal greetings in Iascan. His accent seemed to calm the people enough for them not to kill the newcomers outright, as the villagers came down to help haul in the net of fish. But no one, they all noted, let go of their grip on their spears and knives, despite the peace-gift.

The Fisher brothers and the wakened night crew sailed the *Vixen* away, hoping they would be able to catch the rest of the fleet, now commanded by Inda's second, known to them only as Fox.

Jeje forced herself to watch the *Vixen* slant toward the setting sun, though it felt like her heart was pulled thinner with every surging wave. Then she turned her back. It was her choice to be here.

They were brought to the central house of the small coastal village, a round structure made of heavy, thick stone. The door was on the east, a custom inherited from their ancient Venn ancestors, who'd come from the north where wintry winds and storms blustered and howled in from the west, over the sea. The floor was covered by bright, thick rugs, woven in patterns of running animals: foxes, deer, wolves, horses. Later they would discover that the rugs covered trap doors, connecting tunnels built for escape against the Venn and pirate incursions of the past five or six years.

The people dressed like those in Jeje's village had when she was small: tunics sashed or belted at the waist, leggings or loose trousers, everything with some embroidery at the edges. The people themselves were the usual mix of Marlovan and Iascan—dark people like Jeje among blond heads, and all shades between. "It's a good day's catch you give us," said a man, entering the roundhouse.

"The fish are a gift," Inda said. "The boat is trade."

All deferred to the man, whose attention stayed on Inda. He was older, his blond hair gone gray. "What do you want in trade?"

"The loan of mounts for our journey, as far as we need until we can arrange for our own. Then we will send them back."

"Where do you go?"

A young man, strong of arm and gripping a knife, said, "How can you prove you are not Venn spies?"

Inda pointed eastward. "I am first going into Marlo-Vayir land, where I have allies. And then to the royal city, with news that will not wait."

Quick looks. "Who's your ally?" the headman asked, not hiding his suspicion.

Inda attributed that suspicion to the years of war. He had no idea his accent was an anomaly: he sounded like an aristocrat, but he looked like a brigand off the sea.

"Cherry-Stripe—uh, that is, Landred-Dal Marlo-Vayir," Inda said. "And if you are going to try to trick me with questions about his personal life, you will find out quickly that I haven't seen him in years."

"Your name being?" the headwoman asked, her suspicion far less hostile since the stumble over the private name of Landred Marlo-Vayir.

But then Inda hesitated, and suspicion narrowed eyes and tightened shoulders again as he wrestled with that old memory, the orders from the King's Runner, Captain Sindan, when he was eleven years old: *You must find another name, another life.*

So Tau spoke up from where he lounged against the wall: "He is Indevan-Dal Algara-Vayir of Choraed Elgaer."

Tau's accent was a perfect mirror to Inda's. Eyes turned his way, observing the long, hard body below the watchful face that brought to mind the old goldstone carvings of ancient kings. They observed the presence of three visible weapons near his hands. Those who knew about such things saw instantly that from his position in the room, he could take out the three most important adults before anyone could reach him.

Jeje bit her lip. Beside her Signi breathed softly, slowly, but the older woman kept her gaze lowered, her hands folded.

Jeje winced, remembering the danger Signi was in. No. She was a mage—what the Venn called a sea dag. Supposedly, that meant she could gabble some spell or other and transfer away in a poof of air.

What Signi had to be feeling was fear of discovery, and Jeje considered what it must mean for her to be a renegade, wanted by both sides once the Marlovans found out who she was. "Wanted" not in welcome, but the opposite.

Jeje flicked a look Signi's way, unsettled by how the woman made herself unobtrusive. Not by magic. It

was the way she moved, subtleties of posture that you couldn't really put words to, but the overall effect was unmistakable: Signi was adept at vanishing in plain sight.

A coltish young girl announced, "I know *all* the Jarl families, including in Choraed Elgaer. My tutor made us learn them. There is no Indevan-Dal in Choraed Elgaer."

"Yes, there was," said the headwoman, finally. "I remember the stories from some ten years ago, though most of that was deemed mere rumor. I also heard other stories, from the Queen's Runners—so more believable—that Indevan-Dal had gone to sea under another name, a name associated with the defeat of the pirates belonging to the Brotherhood of Blood two years ago."

Jeje hooked her thumb in Inda's direction as she said proudly, "Elgar the Fox."

"Ah," said the headman, and smiled.

Later, as they sat in a circle and listened to local stories of pirate and Venn attacks and burnings, Jeje leaned over and whispered to Tau, "Why didn't Inda come out with his own name?"

Tau whispered, "Later. When we're alone."

Jeje quieted. These people unnerved her, and they were coast folk: Iascans, like her own family. The inlanders might well be much stranger because they would all be Marlovans.

## Chapter Two

"I GAVE orders for a castle attack."

Tdor Marth-Davan stiffened at the sound of Branid Algara-Vayir's voice.

This was just about the time Inda and the *Vixen* parted with the Fox Banner fleet. Dawn had brought the first clear spring day to the beleaguered principality of Choraed Elgaer. The warmer breezes coming through the castle's open windows had carried the smells of loam and budding greenery. People rose with strengthened will, and laughed again. There was a pervasive, heart-lifting sense of renewal, and of possibility.

Tdor had gone with the castle folk to begin the spring planting in the rich fields lying east of the outer wall. She did not really need to be there, but it felt right to see them choose this year's soil and hook up the oxen to the plow.

Her good mood vanished the moment she heard Branid's voice. She closed her eyes and made certain her own voice was even. "A castle attack can wait. It's the first good day. We have to get the plowing and harrowing done."

"It's our *tradition* to have a war game on the first good day of spring," Branid retorted, as if Tdor hadn't spent most of her almost twenty-two years in this castle.

He was always going to remind her that she was "just" a Marth-Davan because he wanted the authority she already had. She knew it. She'd grown up knowing it. But it was always a struggle to speak to him as if his words deserved consideration, to grant him the dignity he never granted her.

"The Iofre said we must get the plowing and harrowing finished first."

Here comes the insult, Tdor thought.

"That old woman!" Branid scoffed. "She squats in that tower of hers with her nose in her stupid scrolls. If she knew anything about defense, which my grandmother says she never did—"

A slight noise behind Tdor reminded her of the tall, solid woman standing there. Head of the fielders, she'd worked under Fareas-Iofre since she was a girl.

The field boss glared at Branid. His lack of respect for the princess infuriated her. Tdor sensed that fury in the woman's audible breathing, the way she shifted on the muddy ground. But she would not speak, so Tdor had to.

"Branid. All of us would love a game. We've been closed in the castle far too long."

His face tightened in the familiar frown of fretful anger. How could he not be aware of the mood of the people around him? They so needed a sense of hope, of control over one small aspect of life. The old prince, Jarend-Adaluin, was weakening by degrees; the long sorrow of the princess, Fareas-Iofre, whose

elder son, Tanrid, had been murdered and whose younger, Inda, had been sent from home nine years ago; the fading of the magic spells that eased daily life because the distant Mage Council saw Iasca Leror as a kingdom of warmongers; the years of pirate raids on the Iasca harbors culminating in deliberate destruction by powerful Venn warships—all had steadily ground away spirit as well as strength and resource. So when Castle Tenthen's people woke with spring's clear light at last, they did not need any reminders of war.

Branid frowned down at her, uneasy because she seemed to be agreeing but hadn't actually acknowledged his order. His authority. Which he should have by right!

The two women watched him with practiced patience—big, muscular Branid-Dal, so angry and anxious he wearied everyone within earshot, as if his steaming, boiling emotions drained everyone else's. He balled his hands into fists, then he swiped one hand over his fair hair, which was bound up in a warrior's horsetail.

"*Someone*," Branid stated, "has to care for our defense while Whipstick Noth is doing the prince's border patrol. You've had your nose in the scrolls, too. We haven't had what *I* would call a full drill yet this year. We're soft from winter, and when the Venn come they aren't going to send a messenger to ask if we're ready."

Tdor breathed slowly. Out, in. His sarcasm flew wide of the mark; he always talked like that, like his words were arrows and she was a target.

"I know that," Tdor said, fighting to maintain her even tone. The years had taught her a hard lesson in dealing with Branid: he never tired of sneakery, sensing slights, escalating arguments. "We all know it. But we simply have to get the seeds in."

"And have them washed away by another rain? What if we get another three weeks of storm weather?"

"We don't know that we will. What we do know is that the growing season is on us. As soon as the planting is done, you and the Riders should be ready to attack us. We'll drill as long as you think. How's that?"

It sounded like a compromise, didn't it? She tried so hard, but she never knew how he'd hear her words. Branid snaked a furtive glance to gauge the reaction of the field boss. Did she think Tdor could order him around?

But she was only watching the slow-plodding oxen in the fields. Probably just waiting for orders.

Tdor pitied Branid too strongly to sustain hatred. He had to live every day with his horrible grandmother, who never opened her mouth without complaining, demanding, deriding. As long as she lived, she would never cease trying to shame and vex Branid into forcing his way into the heirship.

Branid's gaze flickered to her face, then down her trim form. Some said she was too tall and plank-shaped to be attractive, but he liked long legs, and though she was only a Marth-Davan, he knew the castle folk all listened to her.

She wasn't the beauty Joret Dei was. By rights he should be married to Joret now, but she'd been whisked over the mountain to marry some prince. So here was Tdor, and if he married her, he'd have his hold on Castle Tenthen. His spies all reported she seldom went down to the town pleasure house, and everyone knew that no sex made you sour. Yes, he could sweeten that tongue! And if she were in his bed, she wouldn't be so quick to speak against him, would she?

Branid gave a small nod. Tdor was not to think he was subordinate. She was the subordinate, a Marth-Davan here on sufferance, and he was the Algara-Vayir. Out of kindness he wanted to have her to wife, not drive her away, and she did do a fine job seeing to house defense. But the Riders must belong to *him*. "Very well, then. Carry on. But when you go back upstairs to your archives, my grandmother says it is past time to find the heir's owl clasp and give it to me." He flicked his horsetail then marched away, chain mail jingling.

Tdor and her companion waited until he vanished around the stable wing of the castle. In the fields the oxen plodded steadily on, and those who tended the plows and harrows sang the old planting songs, in three part syncopations, the fast tripled grade notes rising like birdsong on the brisk air.

Then the field boss said in a low voice, "It's the young who listen to him, who want to be playing at war-gaming instead of real drill." She spoke in Iasca, the language of the people the Marlovans had

conquered several generations before, and with whom they now lived. Iascan was the language of everyday life; Marlovan was for war. "And also those who fear threats from his granddam Marend-Edli." Marend-Edli made war in her own home, and all the servants and field workers knew it.

"Tell them this," Tdor said, in Iascan. "Whatever Branid-Dal says or does, it is the prince who pays them their ten flims a month, and his wife who runs the castle. The princess wishes the planting done. And games *after* Shield Arm Noth returns from patrol."

The speaker smiled, struck her hand over her heart, and they parted, the field boss to oversee the people driving the slow-moving oxen, and Tdor to tramp back to the castle through sludgy mud and fast-growing thistle-weeds. She was glad of the cool wind, carrying the scents of sedge and sweetgrass. Maybe the ground would dry out enough for a good seeding.

Seeds. In front of her boot two lines of insects marched, some going one way carrying seeds, the others bearing nothing. She leaned her hands on her thighs and bent down. *I have to look where I step*, she thought. *I almost didn't see you. Do you see us? Are we great, terrible beasts?* She touched her forefinger gently beside the stream of insects climbing over loam and new-sprouted grass; the insects scrambled round her finger and moved on.

She straightened up. Branid? There. Fresh prints—an extra-long stride. He'd stepped over the insects. She ran all the way back, and because there was time before her next chore, she sat down at her desk. There lay her ongoing letter to Joret. Now that the weather had cleared, she could send it over the mountains.

But should she? She skimmed it rapidly, frowning. What a dreary thing to receive! Mostly descriptions of the long winter, punctuated by reports of Venn attacks far in the north. And at home the make-do inventions forced on them by the gradual fading of the magic spells that were such a part of daily life.

Spells she grew up taking advantage of, and never thought much about—until they began to fade.

That was the outside trouble. The inside turmoil was caused by Marend-Edli, who wanted her grandson Branid declared the heir so that she could become principal woman. What a horrible thought.

Tdor frowned at her closely written pages. Paper was so expensive, but she wondered if she should toss it all into the fire. Strange, that her foster-sister, Joret, would someday be a queen like their other foster-sister, Hadand. Only Hadand was a Marlovan queen. Tdor could write anything to Hadand because home business was also her business. Joret had been born and raised Marlovan, but she'd married an Adrani prince. Where was her first loyalty now?

Joret was now a princess in a land where apparently the women didn't do any defense whatsoever.

Instead, they danced, and ordered new gowns when the fashions changed, and listened to music from foreign lands, and ate things like cream cakes and delicacies cooked in the Sartoran manner.

Tdor couldn't imagine what "fashion" meant. Oh, she knew that it had something to do with making new clothes, or having them made, and changing things on them. But why? What difference did it make if you wore sleeves with ribbons, or embroidery, or silk instead of velvet? Weren't you the same person underneath all that weaving and stitch-work?

She picked up her letter, her fingers poised to pitch it into the fire. She hated the idea of some Adrani servant nosing into Joret's papers and reading private Algara-Vayir family business. Yet, to destroy the letter and write cheerful, inconsequential natter was to cut off real communication from someone with whom she had shared her childhood—

A knock at the door interrupted this unpleasant inner debate. With some relief she said, "Enter."

Fareas-Iofre herself walked in, her wide-spaced brown eyes marked with exhaustion.

Tdor seldom spent much time in her own room. She was usually too busy. But today most of the castle inmates were employed out in the fields.

Fareas-Iofre sat in the only other chair, her hands in her sleeves. "Tdor, this is the time of the year when I can best spare you."

Tdor gazed in surprise. "Iofre?"

"Branid's claims are a problem we cannot solve. I know that many of the younger men listen to him because he promises them anything, in particular freedom from work if they play follower to his commander. But he is not a good commander, despite Whipstick Noth's attempts to teach him."

Tdor opened her hand in understanding, and the Iofre went on, "So we are now presented with a difficulty that is dividing our people. I would like you to ride to the royal city. Tell our problems to Hadand. And then, if she believes it to be a good idea, ask the king to officially appoint an heir." Chill prickled the backs of Tdor's arms, the nape of her neck. "You mean you are giving up on Inda?" Fareas-Iofre turned her face to the window. Tears gathered the light along her lower lids, but did not fall. She was a thin, strong woman, someone who had never seemed to age all the years Tdor was growing up. Until this last year, when her brown hair showed shocks of gray, and the lines in her face did not smooth out in the saving grace of candlelight. "I never 'give up' on my children," she said to the window in a low voice. "But it will be ten years come summer, so I think it fair to assume he will not be home again. We must do what we can to ensure peace here because there is so little peace elsewhere in the kingdom." Tdor bowed her head. "Very well," she said, the chill grown to a ball of ice behind her ribs. But she would not complain, or indeed show any emotion. She knew Inda's mother had to be feeling far worse. "I will leave today."

### Chapter Three

JEJE encountered her first inland Marlovans after a long, hard, increasingly painful day of travel. At first, seeing the others on horses was funny. No, not horses—ponies. As if there were any difference, except maybe these beasts were hairier. Oh, they were also shorter.

Shorter was good. Before they'd lost sight of the village, Tau managed to slip off the skimpy quilted saddle twice, just by looking around when the beast shifted its weight. The boy who accompanied them to an inn shook with laughter, his face crimson as Tau picked himself up, cursing vilely, and climbed back on.

To Jeje's eyes Inda rode like a prince. He sat tall in the saddle, riding with an easy assurance that he previously had exhibited only in fighting practice.

Inda was scarcely aware of the muscle strain of riding again. The sounds, the smells, even the way the light fell across the stubby green grass shoots on the sloping plains all brought back his childhood with an intensity that made him answer the others' questions somewhat at random.

And at first Tau and Jeje asked lots of questions about birds, plants, hills that they passed. Inda sometimes answered, though when he gazed off at a hawk on the wing, his mind distant, the boy answered.

By midday no one spoke. Tau winced at every jolt of the horse. At sundown, when the road brought them to an inn at the edge of a small riverside trade town, Tau dismounted and his knees nearly gave out. He clutched the stirrups of Jeje's saddle and whispered, "My balls are crushed. No wonder Marlovans fight all the time. They can't possibly have sex."

She snorted and scrambled down. They followed the others into a courtyard, where the village boy took over the ponies. There seemed to be more room for horses than for people, Jeje thought, looking around. Three sides were stables. The structure was built largely of a warm, honey-colored stone that she was to discover all over the interior of Iasca Leror, instead of the ubiquitous gray stone of most other castles.

A lookout, bow to hand, sat in a tiny window under the peak of the baked tile roof. They'd reached Marlovan land, all right.

Inda's party walked inside as the sun touched the horizon in the west. A land horizon, not the sea, Jeje thought, resisting the sense of being stifled. *I chose to be here.*

The inn was crowded inside. The people dressed pretty much alike, fitted tunics and riding trousers on the men, long robes over riding trousers on the women. The children dressed much like ship rats: shapeless smocks, few of them dyed, and baggy trousers gathered at the knee. They wore woolen stockings and flat-weave mocs, which reminded Jeje of her childhood on shore. The shoes would be

kicked off on the first nice day and not worn again until the first day of frost when the sun had bent north again for winter.

The main difference was their speech, so quick with sharp consonants, very different from the northern slur. She'd always thought of this as "Inda's accent"—one of those personal quirks, like a twitching eye, as she'd never heard anyone else use it. She'd learned after meeting Fox and Barend on the pirate ship *Coco* that this was actually the Marlovan accent.

Inda's head jerked up, his eyes wide at the soft, sinister sound of hand drums. Jeje's neck prickled.

"You'll join us for Restday drum?" the innkeeper, an old woman, asked.

Inda's mouth had gone dry at the first *tap-tap-tap*. He opened his hand in assent and walked numbly into the common room, where the drummers gathered one another with little nods and shoulder shifts as they settled into a rhythm. Three established the beat, and the rest added a counterpoint. The galloping tempo resonated with Inda's childhood memories, shaking loose emotions he had worked so hard to shut away.

Over by the fireplace a group of young children sang songs that were familiar to Jeje; familiar, too, were the rye pan biscuits passed around by the women. Everyone sent uneasy looks at the three newcomers, as if evil intent was woven into their eastern-style long jacket-vests, wide-sleeved linen shirts, deck trousers, and mocs. Or maybe it was the bloodred glitter of rubies in their golden hoop earrings. *Pirate earrings.*

Would these people know that the rubies attached to their hoops signified pirate ship kills and not the destruction of traders? Jeje wondered, and then answered herself: of course they wouldn't. Marlovans had no fleet. They knew nothing about ships.

Tau took the rye biscuit handed to him by the innkeeper: the outer crust crispy, the inner bread heavy and nut-flavored. His memory shot back to his mother's house in Parayid Harbor and the elegant little cakes she always served on Restday as her senior worker poured the expensive Gyrman wine. Restday had been an easy day on the Pim ships, which Tau joined in his mid-teens, before pirates destroyed that life. Pirates did not keep ritual days except at a captain's pleasure. Inda's fleet had gotten out of the habit. Signi took the bread in her hands, closing herself inside her private grief.

A squirt of wine for each, brought by the innkeeper's son, and Jeje felt the wine burn pleasantly through her, assuaging some of the ache in her thighs and butt, the intensifying stiffness of muscles she had not known she had.

Inda had gone distant as he participated in the ritual; only Signi was aware of the trembling of his fingers. Inda breathed in the scent of the rye bread, his eyes blurring with tears. He'd gotten used to those. He closed his eyes as he ate and drank, thinking over and over, *I am truly home.*

After a filling supper, accompanied by more of the drumming and chanted songs—mostly in Marlovan and thus unintelligible—Jeje began sliding toward sleep right where she sat. She rarely drank, but Tau had called for mulled wine. It was served in curiously shallow, flat round cups that required two hands to hold. The mulled wine here was more tart than sweet, mixed with huckleberry and spices rather than the cloves and the citrus common elsewhere. Jeje found it delicious, and lapped at it, her chin dipping toward the table, until her eyelids started drifting down.

She roused at the sound of Inda's voice. "... two beds? That will be fine."

Jeje sat up, her sleep-thick boredom banished by the question of who would be sharing with whom. Jeje had assumed she'd bunk with the dag, leaving Tau and Inda as bunkmates. Signi murmured something and Inda smiled at her, whispering back, then he slid his arm around her. Signi glanced back at the Restday singers with a look that seemed melancholy to Jeje.

They vanished in the direction of the rooms, leaving Jeje thoroughly awake and unready to consider the prospect of sharing a bed with Tau. She said, "Inda never took a lover all the years we knew him. I like her—don't think I don't—but I don't see how he ended up with her. Why not Gillor or someone our own age?"



Tau leaned toward her, his smile pensive. “He has been lost for nine years. She is now lost. I think it was inevitable they would find one another.”

Jeje sighed. She liked Tau better than anyone alive—when she was younger she had struggled against an awful passion for him—but there were times he simply did not make sense. “Lost? Her, maybe. But he’s going home!”

“Yes. Home. Think about that, Jeje.” Tau ran his fingers lightly around the rim of the shallow wine cup.

“No, think about this. Until very recently, do you remember ever hearing Inda laugh?”

“Of course! Well—oh, I don’t know.” She sat upright on the bench, her entire body expressive of protest. “What are you getting at? That Inda’s a stick?”

Tau flickered his fingers. “No. No. Let me try another way. Why are we along to protect him? No, think first. He’s got a rep—earned as one of the most dangerous men in the entire southern half of the world.

He may or may not be able to beat Fox, but you and me?”

“I know.” Jeje snorted softly. “Dead in three heartbeats.”

“Probably at the same time. And yet here we are, changing our lives yet again, because we felt he needed protection. Why?”

Jeje felt the urge to protest, argue, deny. But as she considered his words the instinct to protest weakened, then vanished. “It *is* odd,” she admitted. “All right, so tell me why we did it. All I know is I thought he needed protection. Yes, his old friend is a king, but is that a good thing? The only thing I am certain about with kings is that they can order their killing done easy as a sneeze.”

Tau laughed soundlessly, then sobered. “I think the reason we want to protect him is that until a few weeks ago Inda remained the boy we’ve known for nine years. I don’t mean physically, but here.” He touched his heart. “And in some ways, here, too.” He touched his head. “That seems to have changed when he was a prisoner in Ymar, and changed again when he neared home, then decided the time had come to end his exile. But part of our impulse to come along is that we think he needs watching over.”

Jeje pushed her cup between her fingers back and forth along the rough table. “All right. Maybe. But the other reason I’m here is because I don’t trust these Marlovans. Or this king, old friend or not. What’s your other reason?”

Tau thought, *Because of you.*

What if she took it the wrong way? Sentiment could be so sickening. So provoking of false expectations, which destroyed the clean, uncluttered bond of friendship.

But he couldn’t lie to Jeje.

Jeje watched his profile, outlined against the roaring fire on the other side of the inn room. Gradually the sounds of other merrymakers intruded into her awareness: the clink of crockery, the soft tap of drums and chanting voices punctuated by laughter. The smells of spiced wine, of the peppered vinegar that the locals put on their fried fish, the sweetish scent of brown onion simmering somewhere to be mixed into the steamed cabbage and rice balls.

“I . . . I think we need to make certain his past hasn’t turned lethal.” Tau raised his voice as someone nearby began another of those galloping drumbeats, this time accompanied by a syncopated cymbal. “He believes this king is a friend.”

A song began, sung by women—a jolly, rollicking tune.

“Aha! You don’t trust him either.”

Tau raised a hand. “I don’t mistrust him because he’s become a king. What I mistrust is how things might have changed in nine years. Inda says he knows everything might be different, but I don’t think he believes it. Because in so many ways he hasn’t changed in nine years. That clearer?”

Jeje nodded. “Bringing us to that past. Let’s have that business about Inda using his right name.”

“How much do you remember about Inda?” Tau tipped his head, ducking out of the way of a young woman’s elbow as she danced by, her embroidered robe swaying.

“His name isn’t Inda Elgar, it’s Indavun Algraveer, or whatever it was you said back on the coast.” Jeje jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “I remember that much. And I remember what you said about his father being a prince, and some scandal or other, hoola hoola hoola. But he’s home, so why not speak up and use his name?”

The dancing women whirled near.

“Because.” Tau leaned toward Jeje. “One thing that’s fairly clear about Marlovans—besides their rep for conquering—is their notion of honor. That seems to include very long memories for old troubles.”

He scooted up next to her, their thighs touching, as two or three young women danced very close to their table, hands clapping to one side then the other, point and counterpoint, hips swaying. The top of one’s hand brushed against the back of Tau’s head, lingering on his silky hair.

Jeje scowled at the table, finger drawing the *Vixen*’s long, elegant shape in the moisture ring from her mug as she tried not to be aware of the warm press of his leg against hers.

So she’d think about Inda. Old troubles, yes, like a thirty-year-old murder in the previous generation.

Like Inda and Barend—an old shipmate and a Marlovan. Upon discovering that Barend’s father had hired people to kill Inda’s father’s first family all of thirty years ago, Inda had acted like it happened three days ago.

At the sight of her straight black brows lowered in a line across her forehead, Tau said, “Whatever it was that Inda did as a boy to get him exiled, it might not make sense to us. But what happened matters to Inda.”

“And so if he walks right into trouble, thinking he deserves it, we’ll haul him out if we can.” Jeje huffed.

No use in complaining about the crazy ways of Marlovans. She’d forced herself on this quest of Inda’s, which meant she had no right to complain.

So she turned her attention outward again; it sure had gotten noisy and crowded all of a sudden.

Then she laughed. It was mainly noisy right in their corner: the young women gathered for their Restday socializing seemed to be aiming their songs and dancing at Tau. They sang in his direction, as the boldest danced as close to him as they could get, despite the jumble of tables and shoved-back chairs they had to navigate around.

He smiled absently when one bumped her hip into his shoulder then leaned down to apologize. He opened his hand in polite salute, but no invitation. She withdrew, hips rolling, and glanced back once, but he wasn’t watching. Jeje was. She met the woman’s eyes and the woman gave her a rueful grin. Jeje grinned back.

Tau whispered to Jeje, “We’re being crowded out. Let’s get some sleep. You know Inda—we’ll be riding before the sun rises.”

They rose together; as the innkeeper handed Tau a candle in a ceramic holder Jeje looked back at the women to encounter several appreciative glances directed at Tau’s backside and long legs, outlined as they were in the deck trousers—narrow at the hips, gradually widening down. The same woman as before gave Jeje a flick of fingers to heart in respect.

*If only you knew he thinks of me as a sister,* Jeje thought with an inward flutter of laughter as she followed Tau to the room the innkeeper had pointed out. *No, more like a little brother.*

The door shut and they were alone.

It was a small room, smaller than the one she’d had to live in for that long harbor stay in Bren, and no sound of the sea. The room smelled of wood, and faintly of mildew, and herb-laced leddas-wax candles; it had only a tiny table next to a bed. There were hooks on the wall for clothes. The air was sharply cold after the warmth of the inn’s main room.

Tau set the candle on the table and moved to the window to look out. While his back was turned she flung off her tunic, kicked off her trousers, stockings, and shoes, then climbed hastily under the quilt and lay straight, and as close to the edge of the bed as possible. Tau sighed, “Ooh, I’m sore,” as he yanked the laces free on his shirt and pulled it up over his head.

Jeje had conquered her old girlhood passion, thoroughly and competently. Yes, she had. What she struggled against now was a young woman’s awareness of candlelit golden hair; a long, lean form with hard muscle moving under smooth, golden-brown skin; the smell of male—a compound with sea brine and sweat and a faint whiff of horse. Unexciting smells when considered separately, but combined, emanating from Tau’s flesh, they evoked all the old passion and desire. And so she pulled the quilt to her nose, sniffing in its faint aroma of mildew, and resolutely shut her eyes. Though she was acutely aware of the soft sounds of shifting cloth as Tau finished undressing and neatly hung up his clothes.

Then he puffed, and the red light on her lids went out. The bed shifted, and she fell inward as Tau's weight settled beside her. The aged mattress—stuffed with old horse blankets—promptly slid her toward the middle. She arched away, hoping he wouldn't think she was encroaching.

The bed shifted, and Tau said, "My ass aches."

She dared the smallest peek. In the cool blue moonlight from the tiny window he was barely visible lying back, arms crossed behind his head. She caught herself wanting to sniff more deeply of his scent, and pressed the quilt firmly over her nose. "Ump."

Tau exhaled softly. "All right. Let's sleep."

And—she almost could have counted his breaths—he soon was. His breathing slowed to a light snore that she found amazingly endearing, until he turned to the side and his breathing quieted.

She lay there staring upward, her emotions midway between laughter and exasperation. Much deeper, her young self wailed over what might have been, and she wondered how many years this night would last. But tiredness conquered awareness at last, and she dropped gradually into a jumble of restless dreams.

When she woke, the blue light of impending dawn diffused the shadows in the dingy little room. The air on her face was chilly.

She was at once aware of a warm back pressed against her side. Tau! She eased away, her inner thighs sending white-hot lightning bolts of pain to prickle tears in her eyes.

"You awake?" came a drowsy, husky voice. "How do you feel?"

"Sore." She was not going to say where.

"Me, too. How can these people do that every day, all day? Though I guess they could say the same about us. I remember when I first came aboard the *Ryala*, and Fassun set me to the hardest ropes until my hands bled. Kodl thrashed him for it. Remember Fassun? How long ago that seems!"

Jeje said in a gruff voice, "I hope Testhy is all right."

"He would be. He's like me, always seeks comfort first."

Jeje snorted.

"You don't believe me?" Tau shifted to face her, raising himself up on an elbow, hand supporting his head. His eyes were clear and smiling, his hair loose and spilling across the pillow; the end of a lock almost touched her.

Once—after they'd been captured by the pirate Gaffer Walic—he'd cut his hair off with a sword and thrown it into the sea, just because the pirate's woman Coco had loved playing with it. It had nearly grown out to its old length again.

Jeje gritted her teeth, her arms crossed across her middle, her hands balled into fists.

Tau's brows came together. "Are you in that much pain?"

A way out of this impossible situation? "Yes."

"Oh, well, then, turn over. Let me work on you."

"Don't be ridiculous." And, because he not only looked surprised but a little hurt, she added, somewhat desperately, "I know you hate being touched. That means you must hate touching other people."

His long lashes lifted. "That's not true."

"I've seen you when people grab at you. Caresses. Fingering. Coco, and others. How disgusted you were. They couldn't see it, but I did."

The curve of Tau's mouth thinned to a white line for a moment. "That's not touch, that's possession. It's true, I hated being regarded as someone's pet lapdog, and I have always wondered if dogs feel the same. It's why I never wanted a pet. But you've never done that to me, tried to make me a possession. You've never made any move toward me at all."

"Well, then, I'm glad to be of service."

Tau was puzzled by her flush. Anger? Her voice, so deep—she'd had the deepest voice of all until the boys crossed the threshold of puberty—was like the rough, chesty growl of a big feline.

He laughed. "Jeje, you are impossible to understand at times. Will you, or will you not, permit me to use some of my trained trickery on you? Inda has asked me often enough, when his wounds trouble him. I believe we survived the encounters."

Jeje flumped over, her arms stiff at her sides. She knew her shift was awry, her drawers twisted, but she wouldn't fumble at her clothes. Wouldn't move.

Fingers traced lightly along her back muscles, leaving tiny trails of warm prickles. She shut her eyes and clenched her teeth harder. Tau's fingers expertly found the knots and kneaded deeply, a rhythmic, soothing sensation that really did ease the aches gathered all along her lower back—aches she hadn't even been aware of because of the worse ones down below.

Despite her control her breathing eased as the pain faded, leaving the warmth of . . . no. No! But when his fingers moved to her legs, and he worked his way along her pain-stiffened thigh muscles, the easement, and the attendant crescendo of building desire, made her unable to resist when he gently tugged at her to turn over. She kept her eyes shut, but her flesh and nerves tingled with expectancy. "Ah," Tau breathed. "Ah." And his hands drifted up her body, so gently, so softly, she didn't even realize he'd lifted her shift until the cold morning air touched her charged flesh.

He chuckled, the sound sending another flare of insistence through her.

She opened her dark brown eyes. He gazed down, enjoying very much the confusion he saw in her usually capable, closed face. Jeje the wise, the considerate, the cool hand with bow and arrow who sailed through the worst fire-fights, and there were two, no, three, arrow scars to prove it. Not that she had ever complained, or even let anyone see them.

He saw them now, and bent to kiss each. Long, soft kisses, and he sniffed her warm, slightly salty scent, and then bent to kiss her brow, and when her breathing altered, the tip of her nose, and then her parted lips.

She growled, the jagged purr of a mountain cat.

Now thoroughly enchanted, Tau pressed soft kisses on her collarbones, and she lay with her hands open, eyelashes fluttering on her cheeks as he, with infinite care, moved downward—

A thud on the door startled them.

"Sunup! You awake?" Inda yelled through the flimsy wood.

"No," Tau called, and grinned down at Jeje, a laughing grin that brought an even deeper flush to her cheeks, and her own rare, endearing grin in return. "We're busy."

"Well, hurry up!" And, diminishing down the hall, Inda's plaintive addition, "Why didn't they think of that last night?"

"Should we go?" Jeje asked.

Tau was delighted to see his own want reflected in her steady dark eyes. "Let them linger over their breakfast," he suggested, and she laughed.

## Chapter Four

CHERRY-STRIPE Marlo-Vayir and his brother, Buck, watched from the dining chamber windows as their father limped across the courtyard below toward the stable. When old Hasta was out of sight, his thin gray-white horsetail flopping on his broad back, Cherry-Stripe elbowed Buck. "See that? He's like a boy again."

Their father had returned for a short time from the enormous horse stud the Marlo-Vayirs maintained in their plains, a day's ride to the north. He had begun this past winter brooding and quiet. Though no one referred to it, they could not forget that shortly after the previous New Year's Convocation, Hasta had been drawn into Mad Gallop Yvana-Vayir's conspiracy, which had led to a royal bloodbath.

When it came time to depart for the royal city for this winter's Convocation, as all Jarls had to do each New Year's in order to renew their oaths, Hasta had insisted on his elder son going to make his vows to the king as the new Jarl of Marlo-Vayir. "Young kings need young Jarls," he had said. His son obeyed—but he'd been afraid he'd return and find his father dead.

Instead, old Hasta had retired to the horse stud, where he seemed happier than he'd been for years. He came back only to consult with Buck about the crop rotation and arrange for some supplies, then he was

off again.

Buck shook his head in silent amazement, then grabbed a last bread roll from the plate on the table.

“Cama up yet?”

“I don’t think so,” Cherry-Stripe replied, rolling his eyes as he dropped down onto his seating mat before the long, low table his ancestors had had put in generations ago, when Marlovans had first taken over the Iascan castles.

Buck snickered. “Mran?”

Cherry-Stripe groaned. “Wailing like balladeers.”

Who could have predicted that little buck-toothed Mran, Cherry-Stripe’s practical, quiet, efficient twig of a wife, a daughter of the ancient and efficient Cassads, would conceive the grandest of passions for the handsome one-eyed Camarend Tya-Vayir? No, that was to be expected. All the females seemed to lust after Cama. What was strange was that he—the handsomest man in the kingdom and once the lover of the handsomest woman, Joret Dei—had fallen for Mran just as passionately.

Buck found the absurdity hugely entertaining. He laughed as he loped down the stairs to begin the day. But Cherry-Stripe lounged on his mat, one elbow on the table as he slurped down a last cup of steeped mountain-leaf. He scowled at the prospect of facing the icy air. Wasn’t winter supposed to end *some* day?

His sour mood received an unexpected diversion, the quick step of his First Runner. The man ran in, amazement widening his eyes. “Word from the outer perimeter Riders.”

“Attack?” Cherry-Stripe leaped to his feet.

“No. They encountered a party on the west road at sunset, about to camp. Two men, two women, all dressed in outlandish garb. Four horses from the south—river lending stock. One of the men says to tell you, and the words are these.” His expression smoothed into the studied neutrality of formal mode, approximating the tone of the verbal message as close as was humanly possible, “Tell Cherry-Stripe Inda is here.”

“Inda,” Cherry-Stripe repeated, at first thinking of his old academy mate Noddy’s newborn baby, and then he grabbed the Runner by the tunic laces and yelped, “*Inda?*”

The man’s head rocked. “Yes,” he wheezed, eyes bulging.

Cherry-Stripe let go, threw back his head, and yipped the ancient cry of Marlovans on the charge.

From far below came his brother’s voice, *Yip! Yip! Yip!* And then from the guest rooms above came a faint answer: *Yip! Yip! Yip!*

All over the castle servants, Runners, armsmen, bakers, brewers, weavers stopped what they were doing and exchanged wondering glances.

It was inevitable the first one they noticed was Tau.

Buck, Cama, and Cherry-Stripe drew rein on a grassy bluff above the curve of the road. As the newcomers rode sedately around the bend below, accompanied by a pair of Marlo-Vayir perimeter riders, the three surveyed them: two men, two women, all in outlandish garb. One, a scar-faced fellow, medium height and broad through the chest and shoulders, the other fellow, tall, fair-haired, and striking. Cherry-Stripe muttered in amazement, “Is *that* Inda?”

“Nooo,” Cama drew the word out, expressive of disgust. His breath clouded in the cold air. “Inda wouldn’t ride like an old sack of bran.”

Buck smothered a crack of laughter, and they studied the party more closely, bypassing the short, solid woman with the chin-length, flyaway dark hair and a glittering ruby at one ear. The tall man wore one as well. The other woman was even more nondescript. No earring. The husky scar-faced fellow wore a long brown sailor braid down his back. Same outlandish attire—his long shirt-tunic was sashed with pirate purple, old and stained as it was. And he wore *two* rubies, one in each of the gold hoops in his ears. But at least—unlike the others—he knew how to sit a horse. He rode easily, his head bent as he listened to one of the others jabbering—and when he turned his thumb up, that gesture resonated down

nine years of memory.

“Inda?” Cherry-Stripe said in disbelief, and then howled, “Inda!”

Who jerked his head up, hands snapping to the knives strapped to his forearms inside his loose sleeves. He peered up at the three silhouettes on the hill. The diffuse sunlight glared from behind them, but he could make out some details: two blonds and a black-haired young man with an eye patch.

Inda’s heart drummed when he saw that eye patch. “Cama?” Then one of those blond men had to be—“Cherry-Stripe!”

Signi flinched as the three on the hill uttered high, harsh cries like some predatory beast on the run. Their horses seemed to leap down the hill, raising a spectacular cloud of dust. The rising wind sent it swirling as the three circled Inda, laughing and shouting questions that no one could listen to because they all spoke at once.

Then Cherry-Stripe yelled in a field-command voice, “Weather’s on the way! Come on, let’s ride for home!”

Buck yipped again, taking the lead. Cama and Cherry-Stripe were after him like arrows from a bow. Inda started to follow, then kned his horse to a prancing, snorting stop as he called over his shoulder, “Come on, Tau, Jeje. Signi?”

Tau waved. “Ride on, we’ll catch up.”

Inda sent an inquiring look to Signi, who understood at once that he was torn by concern for her and longing to be with the friends he had not seen since childhood. She lifted her hand toward them; he smiled, wheeled the horse, and was gone in a cloud of dust.

Jeje cocked an eye at Tau. He lifted his chin. Jeje and he parted, and with some determined knee-nudging and tugs on the reins, got their horses to jounce forward to either side of the Venn dag.

The storm Cherry-Stripe had seen on the horizon was sending sleet pounding against the windows as the party sat on mats in the Marlo-Vayirs’ dining room.

Since their arrival they’d been barking questions at one another. The servants coming and going stared at the exotic dress of the newcomers. None of the old academy mates noticed. Jeje stayed by Signi, who never made an unnecessary movement at any time; she seemed smaller, almost invisible again.

“I can’t hear anyone. Let’s ask questions in round,” Buck said. “Me first. Inda! D’you really command a pirate fleet?”

Cherry-Stripe leaned over the table, ignoring his brother. “Barend said it really was you, scragging those soul-sucking pirates two winters back. How’d you come to fighting pirates?”

“Didn’t Barend tell you?” Inda replied, turning from one to the other. “What’s happened to Noddy? Flash?” And to Buck, “We were building a fleet in the east, when—”

“Flash is a great man now—Flash-Laef, no, what’s his real name?”

“Tlennen.” Cama snickered. “Now Tlennen-Laef. Imagine calling Flash Tlennen.”

“His mother must.” Cherry-Stripe whacked Cama. “Quiet. Inda, Flash is now Laef of Olara, his father being Jarl. Brother died leading an attack against the damned red sails on the Idayagan coast—”

“—and Noddy married a year back, because his cousin never did get an heir, and Noddy’s dad being Randael before he died at—”

“—ho, Evred told us we all needed to marry early. On account of the war—”

Inda’s head jerked back and forth as he tried to keep up his end of the question-answer cross-shoot.

“—and took his raffee, then we netted us a couple of trysails—”

“What’s a raffee?”

“—and Noddy’s wife had a baby over winter. Did you know he named him after you?”

“Barend Montrei-Vayir stopped here before he went north, and he said you were goin’ after the Venn up on the north coast—”

“What’s a raffee?”

The voices got louder and louder until Buck smacked his hand flat on the table. “Quiet! All of you!”

The guests fell silent. Cherry-Stripe made a rude noise.

"I can't hear, and worse, no one can hear me." Buck scowled down the table.

Cama was laughing silently; Cherry-Stripe flipped up the back of his hand at his brother, at which Buck's wife Fnor made a scandalized hiss, tipping her head meaningfully toward the guests. Mran quietly made certain everyone got some hot cider to drink.

Buck hooked his thumbs toward his chest. "First me, since I'm the Jarl here." And over his brother's even louder rude noise, "What is a raffee?"

"It's a capital ship, named after its foresail, which—"

Buck smacked his palm on the table again. "What's a foresail?"

"On the foremast you have—"

"What's a foremast?"

Cama was laughing so hard his face was crimson, which made Buck and his wife begin to laugh. Even Mran chuckled, a sound not unlike boiling water.

Cherry-Stripe now smacked the table, making the dishes clatter. "That's enough with the boats. Nobody wants to hear about boats. Not until we see one, which we never will. Inda. Your turn to ask a question." Inda said, "How did Sponge come to be king?"

## Chapter Five

THE humor vanished as quick as the sun that morning, as all three of Inda's old academy mates reacted typically: Buck busied himself with unnecessary gestures to the servants now bringing in the meal, and waited for his brother to speak, Cherry-Stripe having been Inda's scrub mate. Cherry-Stripe grimaced at Cama, waiting for the others to broach the subject, knowing it was craven, but sometimes he just had to rabbit out of a nasty duty. He wasn't any good with words anyway, he told himself.

Cama, who was on the wrong side to see Cherry-Stripe's not-so-subtle glances and surreptitious jabs of the chin in Inda's direction, glowered down at the table through his one good eye while the food was served, thinking about how to word the bleak story.

A servant offered Inda the rice-and-cabbage balls that were so familiar from his childhood. That sight, and the long-missed aromas of the food and the fresh-baked rye biscuits made his eyes sting. He had to get used to that, how joy and pain together would fountain up inside him until it splashed out in tears. He dashed his sleeve impatiently across his eyes.

Cherry-Stripe gawked at the tear-stains gleaming on Inda's scarred cheek. "Something amiss with the spoon?" he asked in a tentative voice.

"It's good to eat with a spoon again." Inda held up the plain, carved-wood implement with its wide, shallow bowl. "A Marlovan spoon. No more forks."

Buck and Cherry-Stripe turned to the other for clues, just to find mirrored perplexity.

Cama said, "Forks are useless. You have to stab things. Imagine stabbing rice. Especially with one eye. I remember that from when I was a boy, and got taken to the healer down south. They eat Sartoran-style there. I thought I'd starve!"

Fnor had also noticed the spring of emotion in their scar-faced guest as he turned the spoon over and over in his hands. She, like Cherry-Stripe, was nonplussed at Inda's reaction, but she could try to be a good host. "I remember those forks, when we girls had to do duty up in the queen's room. Just think, the girls now get to eat with Hadand, and not sit there with those funny dishes, listening to the tootle and footle music."

Mran said, "Woodwinds and strings. Like in Sartor."

Fnor waved a hand in a circle. "Wheedle-deedle is what it sounded like. Nothing like a good strong beat, or a melody you can sing a ballad to. Well, no more!"

Buck moved impatiently, and sent a scornful glance at his brother and Cama for their cowardice, but one was busy studying his spoon, the other the walls. "Back of my hand to music! Inda, you should by rights

talk to Evred-Harvaldar. Better, your sister—”

“Hadand-Gunvaer defended the throne herself,” Fnor put in, and Mran signified agreement and approval with a flick of her thumb upward. They had been in the queen’s training with Inda’s sister, had liked her then, and respected her now as a proven fighting queen, young as she was.

Buck said, “Evred or Hadand, they can tell you the details. The gist is this: the king was killed. It was a conspiracy started by Hawkeye’s dad. Only Hawkeye wasn’t in on it. But the three of us were there at the end, see, on account of Mad Gallop Yvana-Vayir dragging our father into it blind.”

Now that Buck had broached the subject, Cherry-Stripe leaned forward. “Noddy was there, too.”

“King’s room full of blood, all his Runners killed—” Cama put in grimly.

“But he died in the Sierlaef’s room. Opened his arms to the blade,” Buck put in.

“Yvana-Vayir killed him. King wasn’t even armed!”

“Yvana-Vayir went down to try to take the throne, and your sister headed him off. And when he tried to ride her down and grab the throne—” Cherry-Stripe mimed a side-cut and thrust from a sword “—she took him down. Only wounded him, because his son was there. Later she said she should have finished him.”

“—execution in the parade court, because he wouldn’t take a knife and do it himself.” Cama’s husky voice was even rougher with disgust. “Of course they had to put all his captains against the wall. Even the ones who claimed not to know anything about the plans.”

Inda turned his palm up, remembering talk from childhood, exciting at the time: a commander who led his men into treasonous action took all his captains down with him. But they weren’t flogged to death, being under orders. The thought of it actually happening made his gut tighten.

“The rest of the royal family was killed by some of the Jarl’s men,” Cherry-Stripe said. They had fallen back into Marlovan, the language of their ancestors. “Four more sent to kill Evred, but he escaped.”

“What?” Inda exclaimed. “Evred—you mean Sponge, right? Wait, wait. The rest of the family, including the queen, and Barend’s mother? Why? Surely they didn’t blame her for the Harskialdna’s plots?”

Fnor consciously switched back to Iascan, though she would have rather the guests had gone away. It didn’t seem decent, to talk of these things in front of strangers. “Not the queen. She being an outsider, no one noticed her. As for Barend’s mother, Hadand thinks that the Harskialdna knifed her, and not the Yvana-Vayir men.”

The king’s brother killed his own wife? “I don’t know which is worse.” Inda rubbed the scar on his jaw.

“And Sponge? I mean, you said Yvana-Vayir sent—”

“—four of his riding captains north to assassinate him. Evred was in command in the north, see, while his brother was riding around in the south. But Evred dressed as a Runner so they couldn’t find him, and Captain Sindan routed the assassins until backup could get there. Died in the process,” Cherry-Stripe said.

Inda whooshed out his breath. “This sounds worse than us fighting pirates, if you ask me.”

Buck turned his thumb up in agreement. He was about to go on when he remembered the rest of that terrible day, and sidled a glance at his brother.

Cherry-Stripe made surreptitious motions that Buck couldn’t make out, but when Inda glanced his way he yanked his hands down, thumping the table. Fnor repressed a sigh as she righted a spilled pepper dish. Cama’s head turned sharply as he tried to keep everyone in the view of his one eye.

“So Evred and Hadand had to marry. Did that on Midsummer Night, and Evred officially took everyone’s oaths as king.” Buck hastily shifted to a description of the coronation, joined in relief by the other two. They spoke in Iascan, but they may as well have stayed with Marlovan. Their words were so quick, their accent so strange, and their Iascan so full of Marlovan slang, that Tau, Jeje, and especially Signi found it difficult to follow.

The Marlovans had all been trained by the same masters in giving a report; Inda had given and received enough since then to know when he was being hustled past details the speakers did not want to address. That was all right. Like Buck said, he could ask his sister or Sponge—now the king. Even after a few weeks, he still couldn’t get used to that idea.

Inda listened, assimilating most of what they said, but his attention was on his old friends and how they



had changed. Except for Buck being seven years senior, they all were pretty much of an age. But in Inda's memory they had drifted through the years as scrubs of eleven and twelve, dressed in academy smocks as they played war games through the eternal sunshine.

Cama's sudden, white-flashing grin, Cherry-Stripe's waving hands, his laugh—the same laugh as in boyhood, only deeper—sparked recognition yet caused those cherished memory-images, sharp for so long, to blur and evanesce.

The account of the coronation and Evred's first Convocation fumbled to a close in a morass of mutual interruptions and half-finished gossip, until Buck cast a quick look around as if spies had crept into his own citadel. "Is it true you were really sailing with the Montredavan-An heir?"

Inda's first impulse was to laugh, but Buck's uneasiness reminded him of the historical context. Every Marlovan grew up knowing that the Montredavan-Ans had been exiled by Evred's own ancestors to their land for ten generations when the throne had changed hands. If they crossed their border except to go to and from the sea they would be killed as treaty-breakers. This was why Fox had gone to sea in the first place—not stepping over the border included not being permitted to train at the academy with the other Marlovan heirs.

"Yes, I did," Inda said. "He saved my life."

As soon as the words were out Inda regretted the impulse—which he couldn't really explain.

Sure enough, they all looked surprised, and Cherry-Stripe said, "What happened?"

Inda loathed any reminder of the days of torture at the hands of the Ymaran Count Wafri. Either he explained it all—which he had no intention of doing—or he skipped over the complicated story about how the Ymaran count had pretended to be a Venn ally but wasn't. His old friends wouldn't care anyway. Inda suspected that to them, Venn and Ymar and Everon were all alike. So he said, "Stupid plan went wrong. Fox Montredavan-An put it right. Here's the fun part. On our way out, we set fire to the enemy's castle."

Sure enough, that worked to divert them. Cherry-Stripe crowed, Buck laughed, Cama demanded the story.

"It was the biggest sting I've ever done," Inda said, and gave them a fast description, mostly of the chaotic aftermath—chickens squawking, people running around yelling and throwing buckets of water at one another, the furious hand-motions of some guards who each thought the others should try to storm the wall as he and Fox sat there alone, holding off the entire garrison with their bows and arrows.

Cherry-Stripe led the laughter, and launched into boyhood memories of stings—safe territory. Or so it seemed at first.

"Remember that first call over? We thought Gand was going to thump us right there!"

"The first flag run?"

"The first overnight? The horsetails stuck us with cook drudge!"

The cider, well laced with distilled rye, had caused their speech to slow, making it easier for Tau and Jeje, if not for Signi, to follow. For the first time in the nine years they had known Inda, they were hearing his boyhood memories—explored with the boys who had shared them.

Inda laughed, and laughed again to rediscover laughter. At the sight of Inda's shaking merriment, Cama and Cherry-Stripe batted reminiscence between them; by now all that was required were a few words.

"The horse piss in the bunks?"

"Th-the bread pills?"

"Spying out the pigtails when they tried to—"

"—shoeing at the Games—"

"Oh! Oh! When Basna took bets on beetle races?"

"How he howled when Gand measured his shoulder blades with King Willow," Cama exclaimed, flipping up his eye patch to mop his eyes with his sleeve; Jeje quickly looked away from the purple scarring round the bad one.

Inda whooped for breath. "Basna squawking *gambling? That's gambling? Nobody ever told me that!* None of the beaks believed him."

"That's Basna all over." Cherry-Stripe thumped the table again. "Invents gambling just to get himself

dusted and gated.”

“Remember when Flash—”

“—Fijirad and Tuft had that fight over—”

“—tried to get Noddy to laugh?”

As the memories slid past those first two years into the summers after Inda had gone, Fnor kept smothering yawn after yawn of boredom. But she was Jarlan now—Buck and Cherry-Stripe’s mother had moved back to live with her own mother, and while Fnor knew little (and cared less) about the minutiae of the fellows’ academy history, manners were manners. The Algara-Vayir name required that, as did the presence of outland guests—a rarity, after all these years of pirate and Venn-enforced embargo. Not that Tau and Jeje were strictly outlanders. Both said they had been born on the coast of Iasca Leror, one in the north and one in the south, but to the inland Marlovans they may as well as been as foreign as . . . where was the sandy-haired woman from? Fnor smothered another yawn, longing for bed. Her day always began well before sunup.

“Remember the shearing, when you got us a month’s gag?” Inda leaned toward Cherry-Stripe.

“Ah, I’d forgotten. It was fun, wasn’t it, until Lassad made it sour? D’ya know he’s a hero now?”

“Smartlip Lassad? You set him and the rest onto us,” Inda said, pointing at Buck. “We always thought the Sierlaef was behind it.”

“Of course he was. We thought he wanted Sponge toughened up.” Buck Marlo-Vayir scratched his nose. “It was fun, watching our little brothers busy shying rocks and scragging beds and the like, all of ’em dead serious. You scrubs were better than anything for laughs. We didn’t think it really meant anything. Nothing did. Except winning.”

Mran sat beside Cama, her hazel eyes wide, wondering when she could break into the old memories and ask Inda to go back to talking about the sea. She wanted to hear what it was like, being on the ocean that she’d glimpsed just once.

Jeje listened at first, but couldn’t make sense of much. Her interest shifted, as did Tau’s, to the astonishing change in Inda as he ranged freely among these old memories, to which he had never once referred during all their nine years together. He looked like a ship rat again, despite the scars—younger than his twenty years. *Do you remember ever hearing Inda laugh?* He laughed now, more than she had ever seen.

“—and our very first Restday, and Dogpiss’ story about the Egg Dance?” Cherry-Stripe wiped his eyes, thinking *Dogpiss, everything was funnier with Dogpiss* —and then his thoughts galloped off the road.

“Oh, shit. Oh, damn. Inda, that was what ditched you, wasn’t it? What happened to Dogpiss?”

Tau’s heartbeat quickened. In one conversation they were learning everything about Inda’s past that they’d spent nine years speculating on; Jeje sat there, food forgotten, her lips parted as she tried to catch the quick words.

“Dogpiss,” Inda repeated softly. The pirate commander was back with that narrow, direct gaze, the jut of his jaw and thinned lips. His words were slow and reluctant. “I tried to stop Dogpiss from running that sting in the prisoner-of-war camp.”

*Prisoner-of-war camp?* Jeje sent a questioning look at Tau: *Weren’t they just boys?* He flicked his hands outward in question.

Cama said, “All I remember is you reminding him of banner-game rules. No stings. So me ’n’ Flash, we rolled up. Remember how tired we were, the horsetails running us all night long? Slept in a heartbeat.”

“Night? Nights!” Cherry-Stripe protested.

“We talked about it for a long time, after,” Cherry-Stripe said. “Tried to figure it out. What happened? What did Dogpiss do?”

“Argued. Then slipped out when I was half asleep, and I went after him. Hawkeye jumped up. Took us by surprise. Dogpiss slipped on that big rock, I tried to catch him—almost got his wrist. But he fell. You know the rest. Hit his head.” Inda pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I saw him like that in dreams. Still do. If that rock hadn’t been there—if I’d gotten his wrist—”

Buck said in a low voice, “He also broke his neck.”

Inda laid his hands on the table. “Noddy was on guard, he saw the most, and I told him everything

afterward. Why wouldn't the Harskialdna listen to him?"

"Partly Keba's lies. Then Keba's father called in old promises. Ruse to get rank out of the Harskialdna, and it worked." Cherry-Stripe spread his hands wide. "But we didn't find that out until a lot later."

"A Harskialdna is a Royal Shield Arm," Jeje whispered behind her hand to Signi. "It's the king's brother. I mean, if he has a brother."

Signi gave a sober nod—of politeness, not of sudden comprehension. Jeje suspected that the Venn mage probably knew more about the Marlovans than she did, and blushed. But Signi's grateful smile made her feel slightly less stupid.

The escape to the past was now over, they all sensed it. In the Marlovans' minds these past events connected directly with the threats of the present.

"We called that one the Summer Without a Banner," Cherry-Stripe said.

## Chapter Six

"THE Summer Without a Banner," Cama repeated, his rough voice quarry-deep with regret.

"That summer changed a lot of things, though we didn't see it at the time. We were just boys." Buck gazed into the fire.

"And we were only Tveis," Cherry-Stripe said.

Later on Tau learned what that meant—second sons, defenders and spare heirs. Inda and his friends had been among the first class of brothers brought to the academy to be trained under the Harskialdna instead of by their families, as was traditional.

"What about Sponge?" Inda's expression was troubled. "Did he say nothing?"

"After you disappeared he cried himself to sleep every night," Cherry-Stripe said, grimacing as he scratched under his horsetail clasp. "Heyo, most of us blubbed. Dogpiss dead, you gone, and no one would say where. Ev—Sponge—we call him Evred now, y'see. He talked among *us*—Noddy, Flash, Rat—"

"Rat?" Inda interrupted. "Rattooth Cassad?"

"Yep. We call him Rat now. And Cama—" A gesture toward Cama, who turned his thumb up, firelight gleaming in his good eye.

"His Sier Danas." Cama swept one hand in a circle. "May's well call ourselves that. No strut, not anymore. Not when Evred said it at his coronation."

Cherry-Stripe grinned. "We arranged a nine-times-nine drum corps. He was only going to have the second-son-inherits nine."

"We had so many volunteers, it was hard to keep 'em to just eighty-one." Cherry-Stripe rocked back on his mat, grinning with pride.

"Good." Inda radiated pleasure on behalf of Sponge, they all felt it.

It was so odd, having Inda back. Especially looking like he did, with nearly ten years of unimaginable experience evidenced on his face, and in his strange clothes.

"You should have seen Horsebutt when Evred called us the Sier Danas," Cherry-Stripe gloated. "Like he'd bit into a berry and found a worm."

Inda said, momentarily distracted, "What does being official mean? I remember that the Sier Danas in our day were just you horsetails with the Sierlaef." He indicated Buck. "I don't mean translating the words into Iascan. I know that: King's Companions. But the real meaning. At the academy, you were the heir's allies. You could strut around, break some academy rules even, and no one touched you."

Buck turned his palms up in silent agreement.

Cama said, "What it means for me is, I can leave Tya-Vayir on King's Business, even though I'm a Randael. But the king's order comes first. And since Horsebutt never lets me do anything at home anyway, I'm under what you could say is permanent order from Evred."

"And if there's war, we'd be his first choice for commanders." Cherry-Stripe thumped his chest,

laughing. “Anyway, that summer he talked a lot about justice, but we all knew there wasn’t going to be any. The strangest thing is, the Harskialdna wanted my Ain here—” He indicated his brother with a thumb. “—to be the Sierlaef’s Harskialdna someday. Not Sponge. We never did know why.”

“I know why,” Buck said, and everyone turned his way. “It was because Evred *thinks*. I never did. Not in those days, anyway. I believe the Harskialdna thought he’d be alive forever, commanding Aldren-Sierlaef when he became king instead of t’other way around.”

“Isn’t that—no, I guess it isn’t treason.” Inda’s elbows thumped onto the table, hands pressed over his face as he tried to impose all these new notions onto his old understanding of his homeland.

“Not as the Harskialdna saw it,” Buck said. “He saw it as protecting the kingdom, but it all had to be done his way. The Tveis had to be trained his way, so everyone would obey him if war came to us. I think Evred scared his uncle, so he had to be kept down, for everyone’s good. ‘Good’ being everyone thinking like Anderle-Harskialdna.”

Everyone considered the Harskialdna, the only sound the flutter and snap of the fire.

Buck shook his head, bright blond horsetail swinging. “I never said anything. No use. But I was beginning to see I didn’t want that.”

“As for us, we banded together, us against everyone.” Cherry-Stripe wound his rough-palmed hand in a circle. “We used your plans, over and over, Evred building on ’em. And we won. All the time, though for years no one noticed. The Sierlaef was out of the academy, see, and started chasing your brother’s Joret all over the kingdom, then there was war against the north—and, well, the short of it is, when the Harskialdna did finally notice we’d become real Sier Danas, he broke us up fast, sent us home, and Evred off to the war.”

Cama said, “But it was too late. Evred saw us as his Sier Danas, and he never forgot you. He always brought your name up, wondered where you were.”

Awash in rye-spiked reminiscence, Cherry-Stripe stumbled over the first hurdle he’d earlier scouted around. “Tanrid’s man told us once that Evred was going to have someone search the ports for you, the word having spread you’d been put to sea.”

“Tanrid? He promised Tanrid?”

Cama sent Cherry-Stripe a one-eyed glare.

“Your brother was sent north as his commander,” Buck said reluctantly.

Inda straightened up. “He was? But Tanrid’s good with command, isn’t he? That brings me to my next question, may I borrow a Runner to send word to him—”

An indrawn breath from Cama caused Inda’s gaze to snap to the three. He found shock, anger, dismay. “What? No, he can’t be—”

Buck cast a look of distrust, almost of dislike, at Inda’s visitors, wishing he could shove them out of the room. They were outsiders, not fit to hear personal tidings. But they sat there, uncomprehending, and he was honor-bound to show them hospitality. “You must first know that he died with honor. In an ambush. Took most of them first. As to who set it, well, he too is now dead.”

“The Harskialdna,” Inda whispered, all the old pain back again, strong as ever. “He always hated my brother. That much I could see. Though I couldn’t see why.”

“Actually, it was the Sierlaef,” Cherry-Stripe said, and then the two exchanged glances. On his brother’s slight nod, Cherry-Stripe added, “Look, you’re here for what, better horses and some gear, right?”

Inda had his hands pressed to his eyes. His last memory of Tanrid was so vivid, there in the guard cells: Tanrid looking so old and tough, his fingers tousling Inda’s hair behind his ears—

Strange, how grief hurt far more than a sword cut. But now was not the time to sit and bleed. He was here for—

The reminder of the Venn wrenched his mind to the immediate. “Yes. Yes! I came back because the Venn are coming. To take word to Sp—to Evred.” He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes again. *Tanrid is dead.*

Cherry-Stripe grimaced; Cama was the first to comprehend Inda’s news. “Venn? When? And where?” “Venn?” Buck and Cherry-Stripe said together.

Inda looked up. “Soon as the winds change. Maybe sooner, though I doubt it. But they have to suspect

when I broke their line up north that I'd come here to warn the king."

Cherry-Stripe's mouth dropped open. "You mean they're really *coming*?"

Buck added, "After all these years?"

"The army's other side of the strait, the ships maneuvering. We slipped past the whole southern war fleet."

"Then we'll need to get you on your way," Buck said. "I'll send a Runner tonight to warn Evred. What should I say? Prepare for invasion?"

Inda raised a hand. "No. That is, tell him I'm coming, but not why. Better if I'm there to explain it. That way rumor doesn't start traveling around, getting crazier with every new person shoving their opinion in as fact."

"Right," Buck said, grinning. "Coming and news it is."

"And you better get some rest," Cherry-Stripe said.

"But first Baukid has to string you." Buck went to the door, and sent his Runner to summon the tailor to measure Inda. Trying to recapture their earlier good feeling, he added, "And I'll find you a hair clasp. You're going off to the royal city looking proper, not like something the Venn dug out of a pirate's port." Inda glanced down impatiently at his shirt, vest, and the deck trousers below. They were terrible to ride in. "No," he admitted. "I guess you are right. There's been nothing proper in my life so long I've forgotten what proper *is*."

"Don't ask me," Buck said, smiling faintly as he thought of the events of the previous year. "But you'll have a proper coat come morning." He appraised Inda. "Baukid can remake my old first-year horsetail coat. You're no taller than I was at seventeen. Shorter. But you're a whole lot broader here." He smacked his own chest. "Do you have a decent sash?"

Mran showed the guests their bedchambers, and the Marlovans parted as soon as the tailor had measured Inda.

Fnor, giving in to her yawns at last, said to her husband, "Who *is* that piece of art Inda brought? If I thought all pirates were that pretty I'd go to sea tomorrow."

"No you won't," Buck replied, kissing her on the neck.

Cherry-Stripe, Mran, and Cama wandered down the hall the other way. "That was bad, having to tell him about Tanrid," Cherry-Stripe said low-voiced across Mran to Cama. "And after we were so careful not to tell him that his father was there that day. Should we tell him the details?"

"You leave that to Evred," Cama replied. "Now, who's sleeping where?"

Mran slipped her hand into Cama's; Cama turned his eye to Cherry-Stripe, who returned a comical grimace. He considered going over to the pleasure house, where he had five current favorites. But no, he did not want to risk oversleeping and missing Inda before he left for the royal city. So he retired alone—for once.

"Did you understand any of that?" Jeje asked Tau when they stopped outside the row of rooms Mran had showed them.

"Some," Tau began.

"Was *that* Inda's big secret? Somebody slipped and died? At first I couldn't figure out if Dogpiss was a little boy or a horse," Jeje said.

"They were all little boys," Tau reminded her. "Sounds like the older people used them in their own games. Makes it worse, somehow. And explains a lot about Inda."

Jeje stretched. "You'll have to tell me how, but later. Who would ever call himself 'Cherry-stripe'? What can that possibly mean?"

Tau yawned. "No idea. I didn't really follow what the little one said just now. Do we get the same room, I hope?"

Jeje grinned. "I thought your balls were crushed?"

"Let's find out, shall we?"

“What are you thinking?” Inda asked Signi, as he closed the guest room door behind him. She sorted through her impressions of the great, imposing castle, the short light-haired people with martial comportment, so like the Venn and yet so unlike, and shook her head. She had not comprehended much, except how they’d said the word *Venn* at the end with attitudes of hatred. She was worried what would happen when they found out who, and what, she was. Inda seemed too overwhelmed by emotion at being in his homeland again to have considered this. She would not disturb him now. “They are fine friends, these brothers,” she said.

“And to think old Cherry-Stripe was once my worst enemy in the world,” Inda said, laughing silently.

“Oh, to have life that easy again.”

“But it was not easy at the time.”

“No. All our little matters were just that: little matters. Though we thought ’em life and—” He grimaced.

“Yes?”

“Mmm. I was going to say that at least they didn’t touch others’ lives, but even that turned out not to be true.” They were silent as they climbed into bed, and then she heard him say softly, “Oh, Tanrid.” Shortly followed by the compressed, shuddering breath of grief.

She slid her arms around him and held him until at last, at last, he slid into sleep.

## Chapter Seven

INDA’S former fleet drifted into Parayid Harbor on the tidal flood, stripped to fighting sail, armed crew hidden along the rails.

Fox, at the helm of the middle ship, the knife-lean, black-sided trysail *Death*, knew very well how sinister they must look from the harbor. He did not order signal flags raised. No one would believe them anyway. They drifted in slowly.

Nobody wanted a fight, but the last time any of them had seen Parayid, just after they’d defeated Marshig’s pirate federation, the Brotherhood of Blood, Inda’s fleet had been mostly driven off by people fearful that the victors would be as merciless as the Brotherhood had been.

Fox Montredavan-An had begun his command by thrashing anyone who started a sentence with *But Inda always did it this way*, or *Inda always says*.

He had two claims to that command. First, Inda had handed the fleet off to him, before the eyes of all. Second, he could wipe the foredeck with anyone in the fleet in hand-to-hand fighting—including Inda. Otherwise, instinct had prompted him to avoid having to explain himself over and over to a fleet made up of independents, privateers, and even outright pirates, most of whom had joined to follow Inda because he always won, and not because they shared Inda’s ideal of dispensing rough justice against pirates. So Fox had kept control, but that didn’t mean they were his crew. At most they were Inda’s crew, prudently (or sullenly) putting up with him until either Inda popped up again on Parayid’s long dock or until someone organized a mutiny, whichever happened first.

What Fox needed, he knew, was a battle—and victory.

But not against these locals, he thought as he steered the trysail in under a lowering sky, flanked by his two capital ships, Dasta’s *Cocodu* and Eflis’ magnificent schooner *Sable* gliding on either side of the *Death*.

The harbormaster’s tower, half rebuilt, sent up flags. Fox could just make out the yellow over black-and-red, meaning: *Warning! We regard you as pirates*, and below that, the green-striped flag for *Anchor in the road*.

Pilvig, fifteen, and on duty as flag mid, bounced lightly on her toes, anxiously watching Fox. She knew every single glass in the harbor was on them. On *her*.

“You can answer,” Fox said lazily, hands loose on the helm. “Will comply. Parley and supplies.”

He also knew every glass was trained on them, but that he, not the girl, was the focus.

He snapped out his glass and gave the harbor one quick sweep; the dozen or so big fishers upwind had people on them, but they were not about to launch out against the tide.

So he said, "Anchor."

Fibi the Delf, his sail captain, yelled in her unlovely squawk, "Flash!"

The sails thundered briefly, the wind spilled, then came smoothly to rest; the fight teams along the rail straightened up, still holding their weapons.

From the long dock a single small boat tacked bravely against the choppy sea, two lanky young men pulling hard, and what appeared to be a skinny lad leaning out, tending the sail one-handed.

As the boat fought its way toward the *Death*, the harbor's denizens slowly appeared, lining the dock and the quay, even crowding into small boats. These stayed close to shore, glasses leveled steadily on Fox's fleet.

A wash of rain on a strong offshore gust of wind skimmed the boat closer, and the lad's awkwardness was explained: he had only one arm, and further, he was not a lad, but a lanky girl with a head full of unruly butter-colored curls.

A high, shrill screech made him wince.

That was Pilvig, the flag mid. "*Nug-get!*"

"*Pil-vig!*" Nugget shrilled from the water, bouncing up and down so hard she almost capsized the boat.

There were snorts of laughter, which caused Nugget, once one of Inda's crew, to grin and preen a little.

As the boat thumped alongside on the choppy waves, she called up to Fox, "Some of Marshig's pirates just left day before yesterday. Are you here to chase them?"

The rain lifted briefly as a row of supply boats slid down Parayid Harbor's ebb tide to the pirate ships alone at their anchorage. Three times fishing smacks returning to shore appeared on the horizon, took one look then sheered off, vanishing beyond the land rise to the north. No one wanted to risk the harbor, not with those infamous and sinister ships brooding in the middle of the bay.

Pilvig and Nugget sat side by side in the mid's bunk area in the *Death*'s narrow forepeak, the hull slanting sharply in overhead.

They had just finished a delicious hot meal, cooked by Lorm, who'd been a chef in Sarendan before he was forced aboard a pirate ship.

"I *missed* his cooking. Mmmm." Nugget licked her fingers.

"We haven't eaten that good for ages," Pilvig said. "We didn't dare stop for any supplies. Venn were after us, and then we were passing by the Marlovan land. Where they let Inda off."

Nugget's thin face pinched up. "Inda gone? Where did he go?"

Pilvig sat back on her elbows, the expression in her round, flat-cheeked Chwahir features difficult to make out in the guttering light of their swinging candle-stub. "Dunno, really." She jerked one shoulder up. "Something about the Venn attacking the Marlovans. When anyone mentions either Venn or Marlovans, tempers get hot and I stay out of the way."

The two girls brooded, Nugget remembering how much fun they'd had in the two weeks they'd sailed the Land Bridge before the Brotherhood attack. They'd talked all day and all night, Nugget showing Pilvig everything, introducing everyone. Offering to teach her Inda's fighting. *Those pirates won't have a chance*, she remembered saying right before the battle, when Pilvig's already pale face had gone chalky.

But it wasn't Pilvig who'd nearly died, and Pilvig had spent the two years since with Inda and the crew. Now Pilvig knew everybody better than Nugget did. Nugget didn't even know who captained that big schooner except that the captain was a tall, handsome woman with fair hair.

"I was stupid," Nugget admitted, and saw in Pilvig's black eyes no comforting denial, but a silent agreement.

Nugget flushed, but couldn't get mad. For months she'd had nightmares about the pirate who'd almost

killed her, laughing the while. Stabbing her and then laughing while she shrieked and begged for her life as she tried to protect her half-severed arm. Torture had been sport to him.

She was only alive because the fighting had shifted, and somebody stabbed the pirate in the back. He fell dead across her, and she'd had just enough wit and awareness to lie still and pretend to also be dead.

"Did any of our other rats get it?" she asked.

Inda had been firm about the ship rats under sixteen staying out of the main fight, remaining under Jeje's command in the support boats. They'd had a real job—attacking pirate sail crew with arrows, so they'd have trouble guiding their ships—but Nugget had not thought that exciting and heroic enough.

She'd gone into the battle thinking it sport, but not because she liked killing. She'd just wanted to be a hero. She wanted people to admire her. She'd never believed that *she* was in any danger, because even if others got massacred, heroes never did.

"No," Pilvig said. "We all made it. Except you."

"Because I went with Tau, but we got separated. The Iascan fishers who saved me said he was alive.

They said a golden-haired pirate threw money onto the beach and yelled something, as if gold coins could be traded anywhere. Anyway, the fellow they described had to be Tau."

"Jeje ordered us to stay on the scouts. So I did." Pilvig jerked her shoulder again. Her life on the sea had begun as a ship's girl aboard a merchant. Sharl the Brainsmasher took the ship, killed most of the crew, keeping her because he'd killed his last cabin rat in a fit of anger and he needed a new one. She'd had to learn fast that when he sat in *this* chair, he wanted food. If he sat in *that* one, he wanted his charts. If he smashed his fist on the table, he wanted a messenger. Or his latest favorite. If Pilvig wasn't right there, no matter what time of day or night, and fetching whatever he wanted, he beat her.

Then, when that mysterious Ramis of the *Knife* killed Sharl and his worst mates, the locals had killed most of the rest of the pirates but left her alone because she was young, and promised she'd not joined Sharl of her own will. They'd spared her life, but never trusted her.

Nugget's showing off had been a pleasure compared to life under Sharl, and the begrudged existence in the Pirate Island orphanage. Pilvig said, "It's past. You'll know better. Come with us."

"I don't know if I can fight," Nugget admitted, her voice going high, and hot tears burned down her cheeks.

Pilvig chewed her lip. "You don't mean with one arm. You mean at all."

Nugget ducked her head, gulping on a sob.

In Chwahir'sland you never admitted to cowardice. Nugget's soft words, her muffled sobs made Pilvig's arms tingle with some complex emotion she could not define—something between pity and warning.

She set aside her wooden mess plate and put her arms around Nugget, hugging her tight. There weren't any words that seemed right.

Nugget sobbed, sniffed, then leaned against Pilvig. "They kept me alive, but they didn't want me. Didn't trust me. Called me Pirate Girl. Counted the spoons after I left a room, and wouldn't let me go ashore because they said I wanted to signal pirates! All I wanted was to light a candle and sing the 'Leahan Anaer.' For you, and Inda, and Jeje, and the rest. Because I thought you were lost, going to Ghost Island and you'd sail forever as ghosts."

Pilvig gnawed the inside of her cheek. Ship-to-ship battle could be bad. Well, she'd seen it. But everyone was afraid of sailing into the deeps and never being found. The old lament "Leahan Anaer"—"the ship without sails"—was reserved for mates who'd sailed away never to return.

Nugget gave a short sigh. "They said all I was good for was sheep tending." She gulped. "If Inda was here, I'd go. I think he'd understand. But that Fox?"

"Some—the ones who came on since we left the east—like him better than Inda," Pilvig said. "They say he looks like a commander. They thought Inda was crazy. Because he would yell in his nightmares."

"He did? Why?"

"Well, we don't know. But we do know he got caught by the Venn and Fox rescued him. Jug was on one of the schooners when it happened."

Jug was their age, so he was to be believed.

A quick rap outside the cabin, and Mutt stuck his face in. He looked taller and older than



Nugget—seventeen or eighteen, almost grown up.

“How’s that arm?” he asked, pointing to her empty sleeve tucked in her sash. She hated the thought of sewing the sleeve close to the stump; she wanted two sleeves, even if she couldn’t have two arms.

“It’s all right. But I feel it in cold.”

“Was it disgusting, when they took it off?”

“Wasn’t awake.” Nugget made a face, and the others twitched, Mutt rubbing his shoulder. “Just as glad,” she added, and no one gainsaid her.

“So, ye comin’ back aboard us?” he asked, his ruby glinting against his bony jaw.

Oh, it was so good to hear Dock Talk again!

But the joy was followed by another wave of anguish. Nugget sent a keep-silent look at Pilvig, who returned a I-don’t-blab chin lift, and Nugget sat up, wiping her nose on her sleeve. Nugget had had to get rid of her own ruby when she was among the lands-people, but they’d called her Pirate Girl anyway.

She fingered her ear, wondering if the hole had grown shut; she’d tugged her curls down to hide her ears.

“Can I get another ruby?” she asked, feeling her way.

Mutt laughed. “Course! But right now, Fox is finally done with them harbor folk, and he sent me to fetch you. He wants to hear more about this pirate.”

Nugget scrambled up. “Don’t know much, only that she comes from Khanerenth. Just like me. There’s rumor she was sister to the old king, before he got turfed.”

Mutt whistled.

“They took the island where I was staying. The fisher people got all of us young ones over here to the harbor last year, but they took a lot of other people hostage. They’d kill them one by one if they didn’t get what they wanted. The pirates stayed on the island a whole year—it was horrible—but they left as soon as a report came that the Land Bridge ice broke. The rumor was, there’s some Marlovan Jarl, Fera-Vayir, who was raising a big army to come down and attack them soon’s the snow cleared.”

Mutt said, “What have they got?”

“About sixteen schooners, a few capital ships. I never saw them.”

“That it?” Mutt asked.

Nugget nodded. “Fox’s going after the pirate?”

Mutt grinned, his ruby sparking against his lean cheek. “He says we need the practice.” His smile faded.

“Are you coming with us?”

Pilvig scrambled over to sit next to her. Her black eyes were anxious under her broad, puckered brow. Nugget glanced down at her arm, then up, uncertain.

“We’ve got two single-armers,” Mutt said coaxingly. “Well, one’s missing a hand, not an arm, but still. They fight good, and Sock isn’t any bigger’n you.” He added in a mumble, “Your brother misses you. *We miss you.*”

Nugget drew in a deep breath. The salt water, the rocking of the ship, her old friends—so much older now—the two years on land, learning all about wool, seemed part of a long strange dream that had begun as a nightmare.

She glared at her damp palm and shaking fingers. Fear, well, that happened anywhere. Fighting? She could think about it later.

The feeling that she couldn’t get over—didn’t want to get over—that felt like wine inside, like the first time you hear a wonderful song, was *belonging*.

“Let’s go talk to Fox,” she said.

## Chapter Eight

THE sounds and smells of home reached down into childhood habit and woke Inda before dawn. He had a slight headache, but carried his clothes down to the baths at the lowest level of the castle. He splashed about, enjoying a Marlovan bath again, though it seemed to smell more dank than he

remembered his home being. Maybe it was just this castle.

When he emerged, the familiar cadenced sounds of drill drew him out to the enormous courtyard between the stable against the castle walls and the long line of the Marlo-Vayirs' castle.

There he found Buck and the other two in the front line as the Marlo-Vayir riders performed morning drill under the steady rain. Inda was stiff from the days of riding after so much time away from horses, and his head still ached from the combination of rye cider and powerful emotions.

Glad for a chance to stretch, he took a position at the back. As he worked through the drills, remembering old patterns from childhood, he wondered why they seemed so slow, the combinations clumsy. He recognized that the drills all benefited the man on horseback, slashing with the curve-tipped sword. The close-in work, he saw with experienced eyes, was intended mostly for finishing off an enemy, not for foot engagement.

At the end he followed Cherry-Stripe and Cama inside to the roaring fire, where hot steeped leaf was waiting.

The old arms master who'd led the drill stopped Buck. "That one in the vest. That's the Algara-Vayir laef?"

Buck opened his hand. "So?"

The arms master rubbed his jaw. "From the look o' him, he ought to be runnin' drill."

Buck whistled softly. "What, was he strutting back there?"

A shake of a grizzled head. "No. Held himself back, all proper. But the others move heavy, he moves like an arrow through the air, especially with the knife, and the other hand, too. You get him to run us once, if he stays, we all learn something."

Buck grunted, remembering what Inda had said about the Venn coming in summer. *We'd better learn everything we can.* Winter was barely over. Surely one day wouldn't make a difference. "I'll do that." He walked in, absently wringing the rain from his hair, mentally rehearsing what to say.

Upstairs, Signi woke at the sounds of steel clashing, and found herself alone. Alone in a huge room. She rose and performed a full *visan varec*—the strenuous set of stretches and exercises the hel dancers of the Venn performed each day. She'd not been able to do the complete routine for many days, confined as she'd been on the little scout ship *Vixen*, and then in the small chambers shared with Inda whom she might disturb. As yet she had never let anyone see her do the exercises, nor had she danced; now she could no longer bear to hide her first self away, and so, accompanied by the sound of the rain, she danced out the complicated emotions of the last weeks.

Her muscles were warm, smoothed of the knots of passion, anger, regret, and grief, her blood flowed with the quiet of contentment when she had finished, leaving her mind clear. She bathed and made her way to the dining room, where she was relieved to find that Tau and Jeje had arrived ahead of her.

Despite the rain the windows were all wide open. Everything here smelled of horse, grass, and wildflowers.

When the yellow-haired Jarl appeared in the doorway to join them for breakfast, the man with him looked at first like another tough Marlovan rider. Then Tau, Jeje, and Signi saw the ruby earrings and recognized familiar brown eyes. It was with difficulty that their minds inscribed a palimpsest of their Inda over this strange warrior. His sun-streaked brown hair, usually escaping in curls from his neglected sailor's queue, had been pulled up tight into a horsetail, which emphasized the hard bones of his face.

He wore one of those fitted coats of severe lines that splendidly graced shoulders and chest, but it seemed to separate him into another identity—except for the sight of those earrings, which Tau and Jeje knew were emblems of the terrible cost he'd paid as a commander fighting pirates.

Then he trod into the room, wincing at each step. Reality, so often absurd and thereby curiously steadying, reasserted itself.

"No kicking the boots off," Cherry-Stripe warned as he followed Inda into the dining room. "Your feet'll get used to 'em in a day or two."

Buck sat down. "Eat. You may as well wait until tomorrow, unless you're all good at riding into a storm that smells like it's gonna drop some snow."

Cherry-Stripe rubbed his hands vigorously. "Roads are getting worse. Everyone's been west fighting

pirates. Wait until the day after tomorrow unless you want to swim. You can leave before dawn next day. We'll send you with Runners, so you can take our post horses. Better, use the king's, because if you aren't on King's Business, then I'm a Venn." He grinned. "So this morning, you run the drill, pirate style." Inda snorted. Then saw by the intensity of the brothers' gazes that they were serious. "All right."

"Good." Buck clapped his hands and rubbed them. "Now, first things first. Me an' the boys talked this morn. You can guess that becoming king didn't make all Evred's problems go away." Inda opened his hand, and Buck went on. "We think you should know some of what he's facing."

The brothers deferred to Cama, who said, "Besides the embargo, the wreckage of the coast, the army spread too thin. Oh, and the lack of magic renewals."

Inda grimaced, not telling them that Iasca Leror's problems had been gloated over elsewhere in the world. "Go on."

"There's trouble at home. My brother Horsebutt at the head." Cama's voice sharpened with derision; Stalgrid Tya-Vayir was one of the few who hated his academy nickname, but everyone used it when not in his presence. Especially Cama, after enduring a lifetime of bullying. "He's using the excuse of lack of trade to pressure Evred into revoking the royal portion of guild taxes during wartime, since the guilds are already sending warriors."

Inda said, "But isn't the guild portion traditional?"

"'Traditional' since we moved into castles and figured out what guilds were," Mran Cassad observed wryly.

Buck flicked up the back of his hand. "That's what Horsebutt gives for tradition—unless it serves him. He also knows the king can't take over paying warriors in the field, unless he gets money. But he thinks because Evred is young that he's weak, that he'll give in and the Jarls will get concessions that make them stronger. And Inda, there isn't a single jarl family that doesn't have a flight or more of riders out there somewhere, helping with the defense, so the question of who's going to pay for their food and fodder concerns everyone."

"But can't Barend belay that? Or Hawkeye, if he's doing some of the Harskialdna work?"

Belay? The Marlovans looked puzzled, but let it pass. "Barend doesn't command anyone's loyalty. They don't know him," Buck said.

Inda scratched his scalp. Binding his hair up hurt his scalp fiercely, though he wouldn't tell the others that. "Why is Horsebutt doing it? What can he think he's going to get?"

Cama said, "A future crown."

Inda understood at last: marriage negotiations over future daughters and Evred's firstborn son. Those were usually settled by treaty a generation or even two generations before birth. But if there had been so many attacks and deaths—like in his own family—

*Tanrid.* Inda remembered his brother's warm fingers ruffling his hair over his ear. *How* that memory hurt.

Cherry-Stripe said, "People are talking about future babies and alliances because Evred says with the war and everything so uncertain we Tveis ought to marry, and the Ains ought to get heirs born right away. Not to wait until we're forty like usual. Imagine being forty!"

"We might not make it to forty," Cama muttered.

Cherry-Stripe snorted. "That seems a real enough possibility. Especially after Inda's news."

## Chapter Nine

HADAND gripped Tdor's shoulders. "What would you say, Tdor," she breathed, her eyes bright, glittery, full of tears. "What would you say if I told you that Inda is coming home?"

Tdor's nerves flared, then chilled to snowmelt. She had arrived in the royal city that day from the long ride north, having spent most of it rehearsing what she'd say.

And in the space of a single breath, the weight of painful choices was gone, flown like a caged bird tossed into the air.

Hadand laughed now, an unsteady laugh as the unheeded tears spilled over. She smeared them away with her palms, and then hugged Tdor. “He’s coming home, he’s coming *here*. He’s probably a day or so to the north. Maybe less. Can you believe it? After all these years!”

Tdor gulped down a sob. “D’you know what brings him?” she managed, her voice high and squeaky. Not that she cared.

Hadand sniffed and wiped her eyes again. “The Marlo-Vayir Runner only said that Inda has news for the king. Oh, Tdor. I’ll send one of my own Runners back to Choraed Elgaer, as soon as we actually see Inda, to tell my mother. You must stay here and greet him. Mother will be so happy!”

The two embraced again, laughing and crying.

Hadand had received Tdor alone in her own rooms, and now waited for Tdor—who looked about from window to door to table as if she had never seen such objects before—to recover.

Tdor could not yet believe she was being given back what she had wanted all her life. She felt light as a bird as they shared a quick meal, and then she accompanied Hadand up to the sentry walk, where the wind had died down, leaving a clear sky.

The early-spring slant of the sun was not nearly strong enough yet to be hot; it felt good on the backs of their shoulders as they sat easily on crenellations watching the girls of the queen’s training at knife practice below, as Hadand caught Tdor up on kingdom news.

“. . . and *guess* whose daughter Horsebutt is trying to force us to take as future wife to our son?”

Tdor shook her head. “Wasn’t all that set out in treaty before any of *us* were born?”

Hadand looked grim. “Yes. But you don’t realize how many of those careful marriage treaties have been disrupted by war deaths.” She twiddled her fingers. “The next queen was supposed to be descended from the Ola-Vayir heir, but he died defending the coast. And his brother wasn’t to have children. They want to change that, to get a connection to us, but Horsebutt wants to prevent the Ola-Vayirs from gaining any extra influence that he might gain himself.”

Tdor pushed her palm away, a gesture of warding. “Who? Horsebutt can’t possibly be trying to break his own family treaties, or he’d have trouble with the clans. So—oh, ugh, *not* Mudface?”

Dannor Tya-Vayir, Horsebutt’s sister and wife to Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir, had been the most unpopular girl in the queen’s training, even more disliked than Cama’s wife, Starand Ola-Vayir.

Tdor rested her chin on her hand. “But didn’t Hawkeye’s family have their generation’s children all promised?”

“Yes, but some rescinded after the conspiracy. Mad Gallop Yvana-Vayir died the death of treason, which can undo all his treaties if the other side wants. It’s accepted custom.”

Tdor’s brow puckered. “Wait. You said the next generation. Wasn’t your future son to marry outside the country, like Evred’s father did?”

“Yes, but there’s no treaty. Evred’s father had approached the Idayagans, thinking it a peace gesture.

That horse won’t run, because we’re evil conquerors, despite how the Cassads made a success of marrying our ancestors. So. What with all the other changes, it’s I who must settle it all.”

Tdor huffed a sort of laugh. “How strange! I was so involved in my own worries—wondering who you and Evred would pick for me to marry—I never considered that it would fall to you to choose for our children. Or is the treaty with the Montredavan-Ans to hold?”

Hadand smiled. “I promised Shen that she would still raise Inda’s and your daughter. If Inda came home.”

Tdor turned her palms up. She’d grown up knowing that Inda and she were supposed to have a daughter, who was promised to the Montredavan-Ans. A son would have been the future Algara-Vayir Rider captain. It was a prospect that had always seemed impossibly remote.

Hadand grinned wryly. “And now Inda *is* coming home! We must arrange the marriage as soon as possible.”

Tdor’s euphoria damped: Inda was yet to arrive, and what if he did not want to return to Choraed Elgaer after almost ten years?

Hadand went on. “Back to Horsebutt. He thinks he can get a Tya-Vayir in the royal family one day. He’s using every political weapon he can contrive to force Evred into accepting Dannor’s daughter.” She

mimed an exaggerated shiver. “Can you imagine how horrible it would be if Dannon’s daughter is like her?”

Tdor turned her thumb up, stray impressions flitting through her tired mind, distracting moth-wing thoughts that she tried to banish: how strange it was to be back here, a grown woman, how careworn Hadand looked, how shabby the clean, much-mended tunics on the girls appeared. Even Hadand’s fine-woven cotton-wool robe was not new, its yellow dye faded along the shoulders, the seams worn, and Tdor laughed inside, thinking of the mad scramble back at Castle Tenth the night before she left, stitching her frayed cuffs and carefully turning the hem to her robe to wear in the royal city, so she wouldn’t bring shame on Choraed Elgaer by looking threadbare.

She faced Hadand. “Surely Starand has to be fighting that. After all, she’s an Ola-Vayir. I’m surprised she doesn’t want to put forward her own future daughter and break whatever treaty they have.”

“Starand.” Hadand shuddered. “Why is it the two men Evred needed most as interim Harskialdnas have impossible wives? Poor Hawkeye! Poor Cama!”

“Starand would *hate* Dannon getting a daughter married to a future king. Why isn’t she interfering in Horsebutt’s plot?”

Hadand frowned. “I don’t think she knows. Horsebutt is trying to keep it secret. Imand avoids Starand, and though she despises gossip, she thought I’d better know about Horsebutt’s plan for the kingdom’s sake. Starand really would hate that, wouldn’t she?”

Tdor said, “Beyond anything.”

“So . . . if Imand lets her know, then the trouble shifts between Starand and Dannon, each pulling Horsebutt’s arms in opposite directions, so he’s too busy to plot.” Hadand whistled the chords of a cavalry lance charge. “I call that good for the kingdom!”

“The only things Starand and Dannon loathe more than not having precedence and power is one another. You can make a vow on it.”

Hadand was still smiling when she brought Tdor to the dining room where she and Evred usually met. It was a room with pleasing proportions, windows down the west side, the balcony outside, the old raptor table and chairs, it all reminded Tdor of the nursery room that she’d seen once. She wondered briefly if one’s notions of comfort and appeal arose from warm memories of childhood joy and safety.

“Sit down, we can begin. Evred will get here when he gets here,” Hadand said.

Tdor dropped cross-legged onto her mat and took up the broad, flat wine cup in her hands. They’d drunk some of the good sweet wine when the door opened, and Tdor saw Evred for the first time since her single meeting with him in his mother’s chamber, years ago. He had changed from the shy, skinny red-haired boy with the bobbing throat-knuckle; his high-pulled hair had darkened to a reddish-highlighted auburn. He was tall and well-built, with the austere, hawk-nosed look of his forebears.

He touched his hand to his heart and held it out to Hadand; they brushed their fingers together. Then Evred sat down, turning Tdor’s way with an air of puzzled courtesy. He did not recognize her. That was obvious.

“Tdor is joining us,” Hadand said, as Tdor saluted, hand flat to her heart.

Evred’s brows lifted. “Tdor Marth-Davan?”

“Yes. My mother sent her to ask who the next heir should be.” Hadand chuckled. “So I asked her to stay. Who better to be here to welcome Inda, after all these years?”

“Who better indeed?” Evred said, the faint aloofness gone. Now he seemed merely a quiet, rather reserved young man. “Welcome, Tdor. I confess I hadn’t expected to see you here, but Hadand is right. I am sorry about your father,” he added.

Tdor murmured her thanks, not saying that she’d never really known him, that her reaction, on hearing of his death the year before, had been sorrow on her mother’s behalf, but not her own. Even on her yearly visits, which had stopped when she was in her mid-teens, her father had paid no attention to her

whatsoever. She scarcely remembered his features except for a glaring frown. He had been too bitter that he had not had a son. "My mother writes that Cousin Ander, uh, Mouse, is a good Jarl," Tdor said. Evred's polite smile broadened to real warmth. "Mouse Marth-Davan was with me in the academy, did you know that?"

"Yes. Whipstick says that during his academy days he became proud of being called Mouse, though I confess I do not see why." Tdor laughed, a rich, soft chuckle, her smile transforming her plain face. "But then I've never understood how Whipstick could abide his own nickname. I didn't even find out he had a given name until he'd been living with us several years."

Hadand put her chin in her hands, pleased at her husband's relaxed face and Tdor's happiness, which seemed to radiate summer warmth in her smile, her eyes, even in her voice. "I never even thought of that. Like his father Horsepiss. Somehow those Noths wouldn't have ordinary names. What's Whipstick's?" "Senrid."

"Oh, how boringly everyday. I'd hoped it was something more awe-inspiring, like Adamas—for Adamas Blacksword of the Deis—or Savarend, which has the mystery of former kings plus the appeal of the forbidden." Hadand laughed.

Evred gave Tdor a rueful smile.

Tdor smiled back, wondering if Evred knew that the Montredavan-An heir, using the name Fox, had been one of Inda's companions out on the sea. And would Fox be coming back with Inda? If so, his sister Shendan, so loyal all these years, would want to know. Should she bring it up?

Not knowing how Evred felt about his family's history with the Montredavan-Ans—which felt unsettlingly current, like the question of marriage treaties—Tdor shifted the subject. "Whipstick says if he hears 'Senrid' he thinks his mother is angry with him, and he insists she's even tougher than Captain Noth." Hadand whooped and this time Evred chuckled as servants passed round dishes of spiced rice well laced with cabbage and slow-cooked chicken.

Then Tdor said, "Whipstick rode all the way to Marth-Davan to hear the details of that last pirate battle. You can imagine how many songs there are about it in the south."

"I shall have to hear some," Evred said. "What tidings of Jarend-Adaluin bring you? And Fareas-Iofre?" Tdor made a business of helping herself to the rice while she considered what to say about Hadand and Inda's parents. She sent a quick glance at Hadand, who gestured palm up.

"Jarend-Adaluin does not do well in winters," Tdor said. "We think his mind wanders endlessly in the past. Fareas-Iofre is well, and bade me carry her best greetings. She cherishes those copies of Old Sartoran texts you made her when you were up north. They give her much—" she avoided the word "comfort" and settled on "—pleasure."

Evred lifted a hand in acknowledgment and the talk slid easily to her journey, and thence to defense preparations at Castle Tenth against possible invasion.

Hadand watched the last of the too-habitual tension ease from Evred's brow, and smiled at Tdor in gratitude. She always knew what to say and do, she had a gift that way.

As for Evred, he did not remember having met Tdor, and had scarcely given her much thought, but he found this tall, thin, sober-browed young woman quiet, knowledgeable, and interesting. She had a low, pleasing voice, quiet yet brisk. She would make an excellent wife for Inda, now that he was coming home.

Inda was coming home.

The potential joy was like the feel of the summer sun after what had seemed an endless winter storm, and yet there was the instinctive question, the readiness to disbelieve. There had been too many disappointments in the past.

With the ease of practice he shut away his emotions and bent his attention on Tdor, but she sensed that the meal was over.

They parted amicably, promising to meet for breakfast, which Hadand assured her later was rare on Evred's part.

"He's worried about the north," she said. "He's received word from his Runner there that no Venn warships at all are in sight, and the people have been dancing victory dances. Should we call Barend and

the forces on the north coast back home, as soon as the weather holds good? Especially with all this trouble over who pays to support them?”

“If he calls them back, who defends the north?”

“That’s exactly the question. I hope Inda brings an answer, because we do not have one.” Hadand sounded tired and tense. “Who defends the north?”

## Chapter Ten

EVRED woke at a touch.

His room was dark. He smelled the mingled sweat of horse and man, heard a quick step. The guards would only let a Runner past—

Runner? His heart thumped.

“It is I, Evred-Harvaldar,” came the familiar voice of Kened, the Runner he had been expecting. “I just arrived. Indevan-Laef is half a morning’s ride west.”

“Thank you.” Evred’s mouth was dry. “You met him?”

“Yes. As you instructed.”

“Does he ride with banners flying?”

“No.” Kened chuckled as he thought about the scar-faced young fellow, barely older than the academy horsetails by the look of him, who rode barefoot, hair hanging down in a scruffy round braid. His gaze was keen for all that. “He wants to come in quiet. No noise, is what he said,” Kened finished.

“Good. Then quiet it shall be. Go get some rest.”

If Inda had wanted a formal welcome, Evred would have roused the city to give it, complete to an audience in the throne room, bone-chilly from the long winter. He felt his family owed that to Inda. A short time later Evred, bathed and dressed, stood at his window gazing out into the night-black west. They would probably be up and riding by now. Evred had glimpsed Inda once, right after the defeat of the Brotherhood of Blood, though Inda did not know that. No one did. Inda had been dressed like a pirate, not like a Marlovan. Evred wondered if he still dressed like a pirate. Well, such things no longer mattered.

But Inda knew what was due to his old scrub mate.

At drill that morning they wore the old clothes they’d slept in, as usual. Then they retreated to the tents to change and pack for the last ride to the royal city.

Tau was surprised when Inda emerged with his hair bound up, and his new coat smooth and buttoned instead of hanging open, the green sash Mran Cassad had managed to find (the proper green of Algara-Vayir) neatly tied around his waist. The biggest surprise was those boots Inda had gotten from Cherry-Stripe Marlo-Vayir. They’d given him terrible blisters the second morning when at Buck’s heavy-handed invitation Inda had commanded all the castle males, from Jarl to the youngest runner-in-training, in one of Fox’s drills.

Inda had used a single knife. Marlovans thought of the left arm as the shield arm. Only women used two knives, their feet, and above all, balance and the power of motion. What little Inda showed them of Fox’s style of fighting had puzzled most, and inspired some—Cama most of all. Drill had been protracted that day; halfway through the morning Inda had kicked off the boots and finished his routine barefoot, leaving pink smudges of blood on the courtyard flagstones from where the boots had rubbed him raw. His feet were not yet healed after their hard ride southeast to the royal city.

Inda minced with meticulous care. “I put two pairs of socks on,” he complained. “Can’t believe those blisters still hurt.” He twitched his brows, then shook his head. “While I’m whining, may’s well get it all out: it hurts my scalp, my hair tied up like this. I wonder if the horsetails ever noticed at seventeen.”

“What, you’re an old geezer at twenty?” Jeje laughed.

“He’s only twenty?” One of the Marlo-Vayir Runners sent as guides said to the other, as they saddled the horses.

The second Runner pursed his lips. He was surprised too. It wasn’t just the scars, it was the way Inda moved; he was too stiff in the early morning, and too powerful when he got warmed up. More like a man of experience.

Tau said, “At seventeen you’ll do anything to look tough. Like pierce your ears and hang golden hoops through ’em.”

Inda cracked a laugh, flicking his rubies with his fingers. “Still don’t know if it was a good idea or a stupid one.”

“Oh, it was a good one.” Tau’s mouth quirked with irony. “We stood out. It was swagger without us having to say a word. We’re going to stand out here, too. Whether that is good or bad, you’ll have to tell me.”

“We’re about to find out.” Jeje waved a hand at their tent, which was still standing. “*If you ever stop blabbing and help me pack that thing so we can go.*”

A low band of gray rain clouds wept a sleety mizzle, darkening stone and clothing and the wood of wagons, so that Tau’s first view of Inda’s royal city was dreary indeed. The city was surrounded by a vast high wall whose line was broken only by intimidating towers. In sunlight the stone of the walls and towers glowed a warm honey color, but in the gloom and wetness of rain it had darkened to a flat dun. The gate was massive, giving Tau and Jeje the sense that once it closed there was no possibility of escape.

Surmounting gate and walls were gray-coated armsmen, some standing, others moving, all with weapons at the ready, all alert. On the inner walls prowled gray-robed women, equally armed, equally alert. They had bows strapped across their backs, making Jeje wonder what the men did in times of trouble. Maybe they scrambled down to fight hand-to-hand, while the women shot anyone crazy enough to attack a Marlovan castle, from their vantage point. It figured the women would have the position that made the most sense.

All those Marlovan eyes watched Inda’s small party join the traffic at the gate, peaceably following carts and other riders. Jeje hated being stared at by so many people bristling with weapons, whatever their gender, and glowered at her horse’s ears.

The interior of the city was equally unnerving to Tau, who marveled at how alike these people dressed and acted. But he did not see the fear nor the servile attitudes that he expected to find in such grim surroundings after years of hearing slander against the Marlovans.

Tau mocked himself, ending that thought trail. He knew better than to assume Marlovans were any more of an indistinguishable “they” than any other body of people. He met gazes, not hiding his interest anymore than others did theirs. The range of expressions was what one would expect anywhere: curiosity, wry glances at their exotic clothing, soberness, and glances of frank appreciation from some of the strong-looking robed women either standing guard on walls or driving wagons in the streets.

Tau turned his attention to his companions. Jeje scowled at her horse’s head. Signi’s brow and hands subtly betrayed her strain. Inda was oblivious to the mage’s distress. He slewed back and forth in his saddle with an intensity Tau had rarely seen in him, his breathing audible as he tried to take everything in at once.

Inda was overwhelmed. There were two places he loved most in the world: the academy and his home in Chored Elgaer. After nine years of resisting the stubborn homing spirit, he was approaching one of those places: the royal city was home to the academy.

The Marlo-Vayir guides led them a short way into the broad street beyond the gate and then up a slightly narrower street to the left.

Just inside another set of gates, the courtyard traffic cleared, deferring to the three people who emerged



from a tower archway, a tall man and a short woman in the lead.

Inda uttered an incoherent cry and vaulted from his horse. His companions watched him hurl himself at the short woman, who closely resembled him. He picked her up into the air, kissed her smackingly, and then took in the tall red-haired young man just beyond her. "Sponge!"

Laughter rose from guards and armsmen around and above them, and a curious crowd gathered by ones and twos outside the gate.

Inda thumped Hadand onto her feet again, and faced Evred. He clapped his right fist over his heart, then opened his hand to indicate the other three. "Signi, Jeje, and Tau." Inda's voice was high, almost unrecognizable. "We stopped over a day at Marlo-Vayir, rain making the roads into rivers . . ."

While Inda gabbled a disjointed summary of their journey, all attention was focused on him, with two exceptions.

Tau was one. Tdor was the other.

She had walked out with Hadand, but on the approach of the newcomers, she had stepped deferentially aside so as not to hinder the royal pair. After her first glimpse of her childhood companion, Inda, now all grown up, and scarred, and dizzyingly alien and familiar at the same time, Tdor turned to Evred for her cue to step forward and be noticed.

So she and Tau were the only ones who caught Evred's intense gaze, and bloodless, compressed lips, the passion that for a long breath the guarded young king could not mask.

Two heartbeats only, then he regained his self-possession. Inda paused for breath, and everyone began talking at once.

As word spread outward (a passing carter having asked the Marlo-Vayir Runners who the foreigners were) that the one with the earrings was in truth Elgar the Fox, Tau stayed back, holding the reins of his and Inda's horses. He observed how with two swift gestures this king got everyone moving. In the midst of orderly chaos he separated Inda from the rest and they promptly vanished into the crowd.

After Signi and Jeje took their gear from the saddle straps, a couple of stable hands led the women's animals away. The short woman who looked like Inda made inviting gestures to Jeje and Signi; the tall one stood at her side, staring bemusedly into space.

A pair of stable hands approached Tau, their manner expectant. What was *he* supposed to do?

One held out his hand for the reins to Inda's horse, the other waited for Tau's reins. Tau relinquished the reins, but then the men just stood there. Waiting for? Was Tau supposed to remove his own and Inda's gear?

One of the stable hands made a motion toward the saddlebags, and the two helpfully steadied the animals. Ah. So he was now a servant. With a rueful smile, Tau unloaded the bags and hefted them over his shoulders. The animals were taken away, leaving him standing there alone.

Inda's sister was conducting Jeje and Signi toward the entrance to the tower looming over them. He decided to follow the women.

Hadand and Tdor stopped just inside the tower entrance. Tdor closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her nerves tingled. Shock pooled inside her; her mind refused to work, senses walling off color, smells, noise, until Hadand stepped close beside her, giving a watery chuckle. "Can you believe that?"

"Believe?" Tdor tensed.

Hadand flicked her hand outward. "Evred and Inda slinking off like a pair of scrubs scamping wand-duty!" A quick look back at the two strange women who stared upward at the winding stone stairway of the tower, shafts of light angling down from the slit windows. "I don't know what to do with Inda's people. I guess take them upstairs and give them something to eat until Evred brings Inda back." And she gave quick orders to her personal Runner in a whisper.

As Tesar sped up the stairs ahead of them, Hadand gestured to the women. "Come with me," she said in Iascan, and to her relief, both signified agreement. Good. They spoke a language Hadand knew!

Tdor trailed after Hadand and the two strange women, peripherally aware of the tall young man with the golden hair falling in behind her, burdened with a double load of travel gear. Her insides now cramped, her knees had gone watery. She did not see the stairs or hear Hadand's determinedly polite questions. She could not reconcile her own reaction to seeing Inda again with the vivid memory of Evred's wide,

hungry gaze. She found herself relieved that Evred took Inda away too fast for her to be noticed. She couldn't define any of her emotions—she needed time to think.

Deeply withdrawn, she walked uncomprehending past Vedrid, Evred's First Runner, who stood very still on the first landing.

Kened had reported to Evred only that Inda traveled with two women and a man he'd defined as a Runner. Evred had issued orders to Vedrid to get Inda's Runner situated once they arrived; he'd been on the guard-side, at the far end of the long castle, when the wall sentries had signaled the arrival.

So he'd come at a run, but when he looked past Hadand-Gunvaer and the other women to find a familiar golden-haired man, he froze, wit-flown.

Tau also stopped, surprised at this Marlovan blocking his path, whose face had blanched almost as pale as his hair.

"Angel," Vedrid whispered as the women vanished up the stairwell leading to the royal wing.

Tau's mild surprise sharpened. *Angel?* That's what they'd called him in Bren. A series of rapid memory images: a tall, thin man with pale hair almost kicked to death on the floor of an abandoned building, mistaken for a Venn spy. His whispered words a mumble because of a broken jaw.

"I remember you," Tau said. Yes, it was the same man, now buttoned into one of those blue Marlovan coats, his pale hair skinned back into a squirt at the nape of his neck "In Bren, was it not? Aren't you the Runner those sailors jumped?"

"Vedrid Basna. King's First Runner. You saved my life," Vedrid said slowly, his eyes wide and staring.

"I thought I'd dreamed—" He made a visible effort to gather his wits. "If you are Indevan-Laef's First Runner, I am to show you the chamber set aside for him."

*I did not know what a Runner was—or for which king,* Tau thought, his perspective shifting. Now he comprehended the questioning looks, the hesitations. All these Marlovans, including Evred, were trying to define his relationship to Inda. In the Marlovan world, everyone had a specific place.

Well, why not go along? He was used to playing roles. And it was clear that the personal Runners—whatever those might be—had the inside line of communication. "Yes," he said. "I'm Inda's First Runner."

And Vedrid's brow cleared. "Please. I owe you my life. I was charged to assist you, but it would be my privilege."

Inside line indeed. Tau opened his hand for Vedrid to lead the way.

Inda and Evred had forgotten them all.

As they passed through the gates and into the street, Evred talked at random, even laughed, merry and free, body, mind, and heart afire with joy. Inda laughed as well, cast back in time to the happy days of boyhood: his welcome had extinguished in a heartbeat the last shadows of homesick betrayal.

It was inevitable that the random questions would settle first on the circumstances of their last meeting. ". . . and so Cherry-Stripe told me what little they knew," Inda was saying.

Was that anger or a wince tightening the corner of Inda's eye? Inda's voice was husky as the words tumbled out. "Why didn't the Harskialdna believe me? He had decided against me before I spoke a word. I figured that much out, sick as I was. Cherry-Stripe and Buck say it's because of a promise made to the Kepri-Davans, but that sounds too easy."

"Right. Underneath that was a lifelong jealousy," Evred said; the word *jealousy* taunting him with an image of that tall, golden-haired young man in the courtyard. Evred was sure he was the same one with Inda at Lindeth Harbor that terrible day.

Inda tipped his head in question, the same way he had as a boy of ten. The gesture, so well-remembered, was curiously painful.

"Lifelong jealousy?" Inda repeated. "Lifelong. Then you can't just mean at the academy. Over what, my father's first wife, Joret? I know she was as beautiful as the Joret we grew up with. Everyone seemed to want her. Did that include your uncle, then? Is that it?"

Inda grimaced again, almost a flinch. Evred frowned, disturbed that he could not interpret Inda's reaction.

"Wait." Inda flung out a hand, whirling to stand in the middle of the street, oblivious to traffic. "Your uncle was only a year older than my Uncle Indevan—ten. Aunt Joret would have been almost done with the queen's training, and my father had to have been nineteen or twenty, because their class started a couple years late on account of the war up north. So your uncle can't have wanted either Joret *or* my father. Not at ten. That dog won't run."

"Not the jealousy of thwarted desire, but of my father's notice."

"Huh." Inda's brows rose, as if such a concept was blindly new. "Wait!" He patted the air with his hands, neither of them aware of wagons rolling past laden with sacks of rice, a young boy hawking fresh-baked pies, a trio of stone-layers trundling by some new-shaped honey-colored stone. "Wait," Inda said again.

Evred braced himself for the shock of Inda's wide brown gaze, still guileless in spite of the years and their unknown burdens.

Then Inda made an impatient movement, flipping his fingers up, another remembered gesture. "But you can't say 'Oh, everything he did was because he wanted his brother's attention.' Too easy. Nobody acts on a single cause except in the old heroic ballads."

They started walking again—neither aware of it, anymore than they were aware of the unconscious pull of very old habits—in the direction of the academy.

"Can we ever define exactly what shapes an individual's character and perception of events?" Evred answered. It was like the old days, their endless debates in the summer sunshine while pitching hay, or tending horses, or repairing tack, or drilling over and over; he shivered inside, then coughed to clear his throat, to force his voice to normal. "My uncle wanted two things. He wanted to be first to my father and he wanted to keep the kingdom safe. How he exerted himself to get these things is shaped by these other matters."

"But that doesn't explain why he blamed me for Dogpiss' death," Inda said. Then he cast a furtive look behind him, which surprised Evred. No one was following them—he'd made that order clear.

Evred was further surprised when Inda abruptly shifted the subject.

"This might seem an odd question, but was there any mention in all those records of a fellow . . . named Dun?"

"Do you mean Hened Dunrend?" Evred asked, surprised at this sudden, completely unrelated turn of subjects.

Inda whistled, long and low. So far, only Signi knew about the ghost riding at his shoulder. Inda couldn't see him, but he knew the ghost was real, because he'd felt a weird prod inside his head during battle, ever since Dun's death, when Inda woke up a prisoner of pirates. It—he—had saved his life repeatedly with those unmistakable internal warnings.

Should he tell Evred? No, better to wait; a lot of people didn't like talk of ghosts, and wasn't there something nasty about one of Evred's ancestors and a ghost? So he said, "I knew him as Dun the Carpenter's Mate. He signed on with me that first day, when Captain Sindan first brought me to Lindeth Harbor. Afterward, well, I noticed things. He talked like the northerners, except some of his words reminded me of Marlovan. And he was really, really good at staff fighting, far better than any sailor. But then it was too late to ask. He died when we were first taken by pirates."

Evred said, "He was one of the King's Runners; I don't know if you remember, but they have their own training. I discovered in my father's papers that he sent Dunrend to run shield for you, though you were never to know it. If you came back—and I think my father wanted you to, but events got in the way—you could thus never reveal that he'd interfered in my uncle's decisions. Sindan met with him, after your first journey, and that's how we found out that you were alive. Did you ever ask him any questions?"

"No. And he didn't ask me, either. Typical Marlovans, eh?" Inda laughed, the long white scar on his temple creasing. That scar hadn't been there when Evred saw Inda in Lindeth. "Hoo! Look where we are."

They stood directly across from Daggers Drawn, the tavern belonging exclusively to the academy boys. There was the weather-worn fox sign with its oddly raptorish face, the same face on Inda's fleet foresails: the academy fox banner.

"It's strange," Evred said, expelling his breath in a not-quite-laugh, "but I have never looked inside that place."

Inda acted on impulse. "Then you shall now."

## Chapter Eleven

THE custom in those days was for boys new to the academy to be introduced to Daggers Drawn by their fathers. In the cases of boys invited as a result of superior service on their fathers' part, they were introduced by the nearest relative of the Jarl in whose territory they lived. When Inda came to the academy, it was the first year younger brothers were invited, so older brothers (or cousins) were expected to introduce the newcomers.

Aldren-Sierlaef, Evred's brother, had so resented this change in tradition he had refused to introduce his brother, and no one else had dared to bring Evred, or to prompt the king, who never thought of it, as he'd had no interest in the place when he was young.

Inda hadn't thought about Daggers Drawn since he was a homesick sea rat on the *Pim Ryala*, but now, as he looked at the worn sign with the fading fox face, all the emotions of those days crowded back into his mind.

"I'll introduce you." Inda took Evred's arm. The muscle tensed under his fingers. Puzzled, Inda said, "It's all right." Though he had been long away from the customs of home he didn't make the mistake of pointing out that Evred was king, that the entire city obeyed his will. "You haven't a father now, or a brother, except me, through marriage. Let's see if old Mun's still alive. I was only there once, as it happens. The day Tanrid introduced me."

"I know. I saw how you and the others never went."

"You did? But we were so careful not to say anything. Well, and it wasn't like a great vow or anything. We, that is, some of us didn't want to be all gone and you alone in the scrub pit. Did they all stay with it, then, after I was taken away?"

*As if I hadn't noticed*, Evred thought, and the memory of their innocence, their uncalculating good will, was a knife-strike of bittersweet anguish.

Aware of the stiffness of his hands, Evred clasped them tightly behind his back. "Oh, more or less," he said. "Kepa sneaked over whenever he thought the others didn't notice, usually taking Lassad. But the others, I think, never got into the habit. We made our own secret meeting places. And when we got older, I could always bring food. Nobody was going to punish us for that."

Inda plunged across the street, moving with a slight stiffness in his walk that made Evred wonder if he carried more severe wounds not visible to the eye.

Inda paused outside the Daggers door. "I don't hear boys."

"No, the scrubs would be in the stable picking hooves, the pigtails out with the scout dogs, now that the weather's finally broken—" Evred shook his head. "Never mind."

But Inda looked surprised and delighted. "*Yourun* 'em all now, right?" He sniffed the air. "And a very late spring. Those pits must be pret-ty chilly." He grinned in remembrance, using the old slang word, pit, for barracks.

"Winter was reluctant to let go this year. The boys have been shivering here for a month, and the last snow melted scarcely a week ago."

Inda gave one of those "Hah!" laughs of memory as he swung inside the tavern, his head barely clearing the low door. Evred ducked his head and followed.

"Mun! You here? Maybe you won't remember me—"

"I do. Indevan-Laef." Kethan Mundavan was the proprietor, a retired lancer the boys were privileged to

address by his academy name, Mun. He was grayer, stiffer, but very much alive, his eyes alert as he and his grand-nephew polished glasses. “You’ve got a look of your brother.”

Was every reminder of Tanrid going to hurt like stepping on glass? Inda opened his hand. “I’m here to present my brother-by-marriage, Evred-Harvaldar Montrei-Vayir.”

Tau might have smiled; Jeje would have laughed, believing them to be participating in an elaborate joke, but to the Marlovans everything was as it should be. The city answered to the king, yet this little tavern within the city was Mun’s kingdom, and they were there by his leave.

Mun indicated a table with his gnarled hand, and the two sat down by the fire, at the table reserved for the teenage horsetails, top of the academy ranks. Though neither had actually ridden as a horsetail, he made it plain that in his view they had earned that right.

“Tell me about Tanrid,” Inda said, aware of Mun’s presence; the man made no pretence of not listening as Evred unlocked the memory of Tanrid’s death. He described everything he had seen, heard, thought. And what he had promised at the last.

Inda had thought he’d wept out his grief back at the Marlo-Vayir castle that first night. Elation and sorrow chased through him now, choking up in his throat. He could so clearly see Tanrid at the end, there, saying “Inda” with his last breath.

He rocked on his bench, deep in memory—regret—renewed grief, unaware of the lengthening silence, until the thump of two mugs of clear amber ale on the table startled him back to the present.

Evred had fallen into watchful silence.

Inda’s first sip caused a sudden, indrawn breath—this time of pleasure. The grief began to recede.

“Bad ale?” Evred asked.

“No. Good.” Inda closed his eyes, then opened them; the bright sheen of unshed tears reminded Evred of Hadand at rare, unexpected times.

Inda set the mug down with a sigh. “So good. But why is it tastes and smells and sounds gravel you harder than sight? My scrub memories are back, and kicking like a wild colt.”

“All the ancient Sartoran records maintain that where you experienced the most pain, or joy, plants the deepest memories.” Evred gripped his hands together under the table. He found the emotions that Inda expressed so easily impossible to ward, so that sounds were too distinct, the light sharp, his skin hurt.

Mun carried a tray of glasses into the back, and they had the room to themselves: an old, somewhat stuffy room, smelling of boys and old drink, with its knife-scarred tables and the atmosphere of boyish presence. Both their fathers had once sat here.

Inda said, “The last time I saw Tanrid, he came in his horsetail coat—all dressed for parade—and begged me to take that beating. I thought he was going to thrash me, sick as I was. For family honor, you see.” Inda’s gaze went diffuse as he stared into the past. “I didn’t really know him. Too busy trying to avoid his discipline. Is it right, what we have brothers do to brothers?”

He glanced up, and Evred turned his own gaze to the fire. “I vowed to myself on my long ride home from the north that I would change everything. I would raise my own sons so they would not see me only as a distant figure to be saluted but never spoken to about things that matter. So they would not see one another as enemies.” He smiled briefly. “Barend warned me that if I expected him to raise any boys I might have, he’ll send them to sea.”

“I was so glad to find out Barend’s alive,” Inda said. “He left us right after the pirate battle. We’d found out about his father hiring those pirates—well, you know all that, of course,” Inda finished awkwardly, remembering the quiet determination in Evred’s cousin Barend, who was usually easygoing. Barend had left Inda’s fleet determined to confront his father about this treachery that cast dishonor on the family name: Inda found out only recently that Barend’s quest touched off the Conspiracy at Hesea Springs and the deaths of nearly everyone in Barend’s family.

“Barend nearly killed himself, trying to get back up to Lindeth to rejoin you. He’ll be glad to find out you are back home. As for raising sons, when will I do it? I understand my father a lot better now: you can rise earlier than your cooks, and go to sleep with the night watch, but you never quite stay the pace of duty.”

The Marlovan verb *understand* carried connotations of *forgive*. But there wasn’t time to consider

Evred's boyhood with the king. Kings were too far beyond Inda's experience. Brothers were not.

"We talked about it, Cherry-Stripe and Cama and I, before I left. They won't change anything, they said, much as we used to whine and moan. How else to get tough enough to face the constant wars?"

"Wars." Evred fingered his mug, frowning into its glinting amber depths. Then he glanced up. "So you did not know about Tanrid's or my father's deaths before you left your ships and the sea. What brought you back?"

Inda shook his head, his smile rueful. "Forgot, soon's I saw you again. Can you believe that? Got one thump too many. The Venn are coming, Sponge. I think they'll launch as soon as the winds make the summer change."

"The Venn," Evred breathed.

"Here's what's bad: they've been training in the plains of Ymar. I saw them a year ago. And they've had spies here for several years."

Before Inda's eyes his old friend hardened into someone else. Already taller than Inda, he now seemed even larger, his countenance as cold and remote as his brother's ever had been. He leaned forward.

"Then I take it you did not defeat their fleet, as everyone in the north is claiming."

Inda snorted. "Defeat? There wasn't even a battle. If there had been, we would have been sunk. We were a handful against eighty-one big Venn warships."

"Eighty-one," Evred repeated.

"And that's only the primary warships. Each has seekers and raiders attached."

"You can explain what that means later. So what happened?"

Inda flicked his fingers out, palms up. "Nothing! We slipped between their lines. They sailed away, and I came south." Inda's mug clunked to the table, empty. "We didn't land at Lindeth—we picked an empty cove west of Marlo-Vayir. But I don't think that'll fool the Venn spies. They've got to figure I'd come to you."

"What do the Venn know about your past?"

"Everything," Inda admitted. "Got caught in Ymar. Under kinthus I yapped out everything I've done. I'd be there yet, or dead, if Fox Montredavan-An hadn't got me out."

*Fox.* Evred's lips shaped the word. Brown eyes met hazel; for Evred the sensation was like staring into the sun, and he shifted his gaze to his ale, scarcely touched.

Inda had been looking for a sign of invitation to speak further about Fox. Though he didn't see it, he spoke anyway. "Is there any chance of setting aside that damned treaty?" And he was about to add, *Let me tell you what really happened all those years ago*, but then he remembered that the villain of the real story was Evred's own ancestor.

And to Inda's dismay, Evred's features tightened in anger. Within a moment he'd schooled his face again, but Inda had seen that first reaction. And Evred saw to his undisguised shock that Inda had seen it. Evred toyed with the glass in his hand, fighting to regain control. He despised himself for his weakness, for revealing the most loathsome and petty of all emotions: jealousy.

Long habit enabled him to regain an appearance of calm, of neutrality. "This is not the time to be revoking treaties—not when we're facing the war we've been bracing against for years. The only thing I have to rely on with everything else slowly disintegrating is the . . . expectation, let's call it. The expectation of tradition."

And Inda thought, *You were right, Fox. Though Sponge is right, too*. He regretted his first impulse—it was not only stupid but the worst sort of strut to expect his old scrub mate to wave away four generations of unfairness just because Inda asked him to.

Inda made a last effort, trying to be practical. "We could probably use their men."

"If the Venn make it this far south, the Montredavan-Ans will need their own men, who are limited in number by treaty. They will have to defend their own land, because again, by treaty we cannot do it."

And, to get away from the subject altogether, "What does 'as soon as the winds change' mean? I understood you put up various sails to counter winds."

Inda drummed his fingers on the initial-carved tabletop, considering his words. "I take it Barend didn't explain currents and winds and points of sail to you?"

“He did, but I comprehended only a little, and don’t remember any of it now. Though I do remember that the Venn have ships more seaworthy than everyone else’s. Larger.”

“All true, but they don’t sail as close to the wind as we do. Anyway, my guess is we’ll see them after summer shifts the winds into a steady stream, out of the north by northwest. Need it right on the beam.” Evred looked blank; Inda smacked his outer thigh. “Beam. It’ll give them the push they need with ships crammed to the captain’s deck with men and horses.”

“And then what?”

“All I have for that part is guesses. I never could get close enough to see much beyond maneuvering, but I do know Rajnir is throwing everything he has against us.” The old gestures were there, the enthusiasm for a plan.

Evred forced his attention away from Inda himself and onto his words. “We had better leave now.” He stood, felt his pockets. His face changed. “I don’t carry coins. I’ll have to send a Runner—”

Mun reappeared. “Your brothers left plenty on their shots.”

Inda and Evred started, wondering what he’d heard. Probably everything, Inda thought, trying not to laugh.

Evred controlled his annoyance. Already he had accustomed himself to the privacy requisite to his royal rank. But he knew that Mun, an old dragoon lancer, would say nothing, and a wise king would therefore not breach his trust by commanding him to do so.

It was, in short, their own fault for discussing the kingdom’s affairs in a tavern set aside for boys. But it had seemed right at the time.

“There is much to be done,” Evred said only, and he saluted Mun, who saluted him back, fist to heart.

And then, with equal deliberation, Mun saluted Inda. Inda returned the salute—a gesture he’d had to fight against using for nine years. It felt good down to his bones to have the right to use it again.

They left. Inda matched Evred’s quick pace, but there was that wince again.

Evred’s mind, given free rein, was galloping ahead: invasion, the magical communications locket, Nightingale in exactly the right position. Barend on the north coast to oversee defense of the harbors.

Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir holding down the headquarters at Ala Larkadhe. All of them courageous and reliable within their limits, but not a one to defend the land against the Venn . . .

Unknown spies—information—map—Barend, who cannot lead an army—

—Mun’s salute to Inda—to a commander—

—to a Harskialdna—

*Harskialdna.*

Which of them had shifted the subject away from Evred’s uncle’s actions nine years ago? Sustained through all these ideas skirmishing for precedence was guilt, intensified by the faint grimace that occasionally narrowed Inda’s eyes as they walked: Evred attributed it to the nine years of his unkept promise of justice.

He said, speaking low and rapid, his heartbeat loud in his own ears, “You have the right to demand justice of me.” The answer was clear, as clear and right as sun and wind and life. “My uncle ruined you because you were loyal. My brother killed yours. It is right, it is just, that you shall lead the army against the invaders.”

Inda jerked round to face him.

There. The words were spoken, Evred could not call them back. Not that he wished to. His sudden joy, the dizzying sense of rightness, was far too intense for that. A glance. There was no answering joy in Inda’s face—

*You have the right to demand justice . . .* Inda stared back, stunned. That wasn’t justice, it was something so different he could not define it, or even express his reaction. Yet Sponge stood there in the street, his hazel eyes wide, unblinking, awaiting an answer.

Inda tried to gauge him, why he’d done that, and discovered that he couldn’t really gauge Sponge. He’d never been able to. He’d never had to, when they were boys. Sponge had talked so freely about everything, excepting only his family, and his feelings. Now “Sponge” was Evred-Harvaldar, and wasn’t it treason to gainsay a king?

“It was your uncle, not you, who denied me justice,” Inda began slowly. “And your brother who had Tanrid murdered.”

Evred flushed. “But I was the one who made a vow.”

Inda realized that Evred felt *guilty*. Why? He had done his best for Tanrid and Inda both, Inda could see that. If only Cherry-Stripe’s damned boots didn’t rub the damned blisters so!

“We will ride north together. You will command the defense. Who better to fight the Venn than one who has already fought them?”

Evred’s voice took on authority in Inda’s ears; Evred himself was only aware of the overwhelming sense of rightness that Inda ride at his side to defend their homeland.

Inda expelled his breath. “If Barend agrees.”

“He will.”

Evred spoke with conviction; Inda heard a royal order.

And so he struck his fist against his heart, and Evred laughed with pleasure, and said again, “There is much to be done.” Adding, “We will do it together.”

## Chapter Twelve

THE yip-yip of boys echoed through the open windows of the tower the women ascended before entering the residence portion of the castle. To Signi it was a barbaric, horrible sound, like foxes on the hunt, only more horrible because of the intelligence and anticipation shaping those shrill voices.

She followed the Marlovan women upstairs and along a narrow hallway, her hands folded on her bag, eyes downcast, her posture one of deference, though her muscles were tense as a humming string. Inda was gone, leaving her alone among enemies in this bewildering castle, and she could not understand more than occasional words or phrases of the quick, strange-accented Marlovan, their shared Venn roots notwithstanding.

She was not angry with Inda. She had seen in the tautness of his body as they approached this city, and in his joyful welcome of those he had loved longest, that at that moment there was no room in his mind for anyone, or anything, else.

Inda was like a river, sometimes slow and tranquil on the surface. When he fought he was fast and dangerous as river rapids. At all times he flowed toward the single goal: home. Like a river, there was no pretence, no hiding his nature.

She did feel anger, and fear, and her wrists would have trembled if she had not learned control.

She was angriest with herself. After all her years, all her hard-won experience and oft-repeated lessons, how had she—despite all her careful thought—succumbed like the most shallow youngster to the illogic of lust, wherein reason is reduced to making excuses for the actions of the beloved?

She closed her eyes, trusting to her senses to guide her as she sought the inward way to Ydrasal, the right and true road to honor. It was sometimes called the Golden Tree, because in the realm of the spirit, it shone with golden light, and the same luminosity shimmered around Inda when he was most intense.

Her path at this moment did cleave with his path. That her inner vision had insisted, even before she knew Inda except as the terrible murderer Elgar the Fox.

She must be here. She did not know why, not anymore than she knew why Inda, a war leader, should shine with the golden light—unless it was his ghost companion, who, though mostly a blur of light, was sometimes clear and distinct. No, that was a different aura.

What she did know was that the Golden Tree was not easy to perceive, and sometimes the way toward it was fraught with danger. But she must walk the path.

She opened her eyes, breathing the dancer’s long breaths of calm and serenity.

While she concentrated on clearing her mind of conflicting emotions, down the hall in the area reserved for the Runners, Vedrid was talking quickly, half a dozen other Runners listening. From their attitudes, Tau suspected they’d heard Vedrid’s version of their encounter in Bren.



“You’ll need a blue coat,” Vedrid explained, turning back to Tau. “If you dress as a Runner, then you have more access than if you wear what you have on now. And no one stops you because they expect Runners to be about their business. A foreigner in these times—” He turned his palms up, and Tau could easily imagine these ubiquitous armed sentries stopping him for questioning every single time he ventured out.

“I have no objection to adopting your dress,” Tau said.

Vedrid looked relieved. “Then we’ll get you a coat at once. And teach you the Runner signs and signals as well as our own accesses through the castle. What would you like first?”

He set his and Inda’s gear bags down in the room assigned to Inda. “I’ll admit the first thing I’d like is a tour of this castle. I lost all sense of where the stable was while just following you up the stairs.”

While Tau was measured and then taken on his tour, Hadand finished the long walk to her public interview room.

The windows opened onto a view of the women’s outer court. The voices of young women rose on the warm summer air as the guests entered, their manner uncertain. Behind them, Tdor glanced from object to object with the distraction of the seeker of a lost key. *She’s been my sister in all but blood since we were small. Does she feel brother-love for Inda, or am I seeing a different emotion? Surely not, after nine years apart!*

So said reason. *But who knows better than I that reason very seldom communicates with the heart?* Hadand thought with self-mockery. *Very well, leave Tdor to her thoughts.*

Hadand needed to find out, first of all, who these women were. Easy and polite questions—Hungry? Thirsty? How was the journey?—on the long walk had elicited equally polite, monosyllabic responses from the dark-haired one. Each woman carried her own bag, which argued for similar status. The dark one appeared wary and ill-at-ease. The sandy-haired one was as devoid of expression as a wind-worn statue.

Outside the cadenced voices rose and fell amid the clash of weapons, proof that Marlovan women really did fight, as rumor had it. Signi had glimpsed a boot sheath as they’d walked in, before the woman took up her station guarding the door. The woman outside the door wore a wrist sheath beneath those long-sleeved blue robes. Blue! The color mages wore in the Land of the Venn. But here there were no mages. Blue here apparently meant fighters, or fighting servants.

Hadand shut the door, leaving Tesar watching outside. She faced her exasperating guests, thinking, *You’re a queen, you can ask questions. What can they do back?*

She turned her attention midway between the two women, and asked what for a Marlovan was a reasonable question: “So, why did you come with my brother?”

Jeje flicked a glance at Signi. As she expected, no help there. And Inda had gone off on his own with that king. So much for protecting him!

She said in her best Iascan, “I’m the captain of Inda’s scout cutter—” Then paused. The two women waited, polite but blank.

Maybe she was supposed to say *Lord Indevan*. Or put *dal* in there somewhere? Neither of the Marlovans seemed angry, though. More puzzled. So she plunged on ahead. “And Signi over there is his lover.” There, that was innocuous enough. Except why did the short one look so startled, and the other go stiff? “And you are?”

Hadand was indeed startled—it’d seemed impossible that her little brother could have a lover. Oh, he was no longer the small boy she’d seen in memory all these years, she had proof of that outside in the courtyard. He was twenty, so a lover wasn’t surprising. What surprised her was that the lover was the old one rather than the young.

*Of course he’d have a lover,* Tdor thought. *And —firmly— I’m glad.*

“I am Hadand-Gunvaer. This is Tdor-Edli Marth-Davan, my foster-sister. Who is the blond man?”

How to define Tau? Jeje smothered a laugh and stated, “He’s my lover. And we came along in case, well, Inda needed, um, help.”

Hadand smiled, and Tdor raised her brows and rounded her lips in appreciation. Then, in a valiant effort to keep some sort of conversation limping along, “What is a scout cutter?”

Jeje suspected these women had exactly as much interest in ships as they had knowledge—which would be none—nevertheless, she resolutely picked up her cue and launched into a definition of types of ships and numbers of masts, broadening (on their encouraging nods) into trade ships versus pirate ships versus warships. She was slogging grimly and bravely into the intricacies of fore-and-aft rigging (as opposed to the Venn's square) when a door opened.

In came people in gray smocks and baggy trousers with crimson piping. They carried platters of rye biscuits with toasted cheese on top. Jeje hadn't eaten since long before dawn. These were pan biscuits instead of the baked ones she'd had in childhood but they smelled good. Her stomach rumbled as the platters were set on the low table.

Everyone settled on the mats. But before they could begin to eat, an authoritative thump at the outer door stopped the talk. A tall woman in a blue robe entered and made a sign to Hadand and a heartbeat later a new woman strode in.

The newcomer was dressed like other female Runners, her blue robe splashed with mud up to her thighs and curls the color of ripened wheat escaped from her braid. Her manner was definitely not that of a Runner as her wide, intense brown eyes searched the room. Familiar eyes, though Jeje had never seen her before.

"Shen!" Hadand exclaimed. Then, in a more cautious voice, "How did *you* get here?"

"A Runner rode through Darchelde." Shendan Montredavan-An thumped her fists on her hips. "Said Indevan Algara-Vayir was in Marlo-Vayir territory, coming here. We know Foxy sails with him. I took my Runner's robe, which got me across the border. Marend didn't come only because we were afraid the border guards would balk at two of us." She flung back her hair. "As for your Evred, as long as he doesn't see me, he can pretend I'm not here."

*Your Evred.* Hadand let it go by. She'd come to realize that nothing was going to mend the resentment between the Montrei-Vayirs and the Montredavan-Ans, at least not until something was done about that exile treaty. For the rest, as usual, Shendan was right. Evred knew that she was Hadand's friend, so although he had to know that she was in the castle, he wouldn't interfere unless forced to.

Shen said, "And I'll be gone as soon as one of you gives me news of my brother."

Jeje had her placed now. That broad brow, the sardonic eyes, the sharp-cut bones: Fox's sister! Jeje set down her untasted biscuit. "I think I can help you there."

Except for the brief roughness in the road when Fox's name was introduced, Inda's and Evred's minds galloped parallel, so free and effortless neither was prepared to hit the stone fence of divided boundary. As they walked back, Inda talked fast, describing what he'd seen on the Ymaran plains. Evred's two years of hard-won experience in the north enabled him to follow the swift stream of Inda's thoughts and to ask questions. "What kind of horse bears those tall men? How fast? Have they changed to our swords, or do they rely on ax and straight sword? Do they use the composite bow now? They were known for their great longbows, with the tremendous reach."

Inda dipped his chin at each point. "I couldn't see much, only distant movement. I did see some horsemen, but there was always dust. Looked like they kept trying charges, but they always had to pull up short. From what we—I—saw, it looked like their favorite defense is these squares. Big men in front. Curving rectangle shields instead of the round ones. Longbows in back, and on flanks, and the old ax and straight sword at front."

"How did they handle their horses?"

Inda wriggled his shoulders, then tipped a hand as he searched for the right word. "Heavy." He stumbled over a loose stone in the street, making a face at the ground. "I will ride with you to the north, but I don't mind going as your Runner, or as a scout, or as anything, really. Don't you have *any* commanders?"

"The best of the older commanders are dead, except for the Jarl of Cassad, and he can no longer sit a horse. And he never faced the Venn. None of us have, young or old. Don't you remember the speculation when we were boys?"

“But what about Gand?” Inda exclaimed. “I can’t believe Master— *Captain*Gand—couldn’t lead them. Ho, Sponge, everything I ever did right was because I had a memory of Gand’s voice in my head. *You’ll learn as much as we can teach you because the more you know, the fewer signals needed.* Didn’t that turn out to be true! ’Course I don’t know if signals can foul as easily on land as on sea—oh, listen to me yap. Don’t tell me Gand is dead?”

“No, I called him in, almost my first command once I got back here. He runs the academy. Told me he can’t command, which was why he never made it above captain. He said—and you tell me how this makes sense, I just accepted it because I didn’t dare not—he said that he only sees the shape of individuals, not the shape of battle.”

Inda tipped his head back. “Oh, yes. I see. Tau’s that way, too. Funny, how you remember someone being all-knowing. Gand! He sure was good with us!”

“He’s good with the academy now.”

“Hoo, that was well thought. So what about everyone our age? They’ve all seen action against pirates, haven’t they? Your cousin Hawkeye—that’s who I was trying to remember! Didn’t he run command at the front under you in the north? He was your Harskialdna, wasn’t he?”

“He can’t command,” Evred said slowly. “Oh, he’s dashing at the lead in skirmishes. No one would question his courage. But his idea of command is to lead whoever’s around him straight at the biggest mass of enemies. That worked fairly well against pirates, but will it against Venn?”

“No,” Inda said, remembering those big men and the heavy rectangular shields held edge to edge.

“They’ll hold. Then use those shields to shove, and the swords between ’em to spike our horses or us if we’re on foot. I could see that much.”

“Then we lose lives to no purpose, except added verses to the tragic ballads. Hawkeye will take orders from you if I make it clear that is my will. He certainly understands chain of command. We’ve all been raised to it.”

Inda said slowly, “One thing I’ve learned since I left is that chain of command might look like a ladder on paper, but you really get twists and bends. I could make the plans, but won’t the rest of the Vayirs expect to see him riding beside you, right behind your banner?”

“You forget his father’s disgrace.”

“Oh.” Inda’s eyes were so candid and earnest—and so painful to meet. “Don’t misunderstand.” Inda opened his hands, palm up. “I want to ride as your Royal Shield Arm for this battle. Very much! But it seems wrong somehow. Frost. Like there’s no one else in all Iasca Leror.”

*Frost* in the old academy slang of boyhood meant arrogance, the assumed superiority of rank. Evred said, “Inda, you have forgotten my uncle, and what he did to those who showed command ability.”

Inda drew in a sharp breath. “Then I wasn’t the only one?”

“You were the only academy boy exiled, and I do believe that was actually my father’s idea, or maybe Sindan’s. I saw my uncle’s papers after he died. Most of those he found a way to shift out of the possibility of command accepted disgrace, or their families accepted for them. You were the only one who stuck it out—and your father apparently was willing to back you.”

“I never knew that,” Inda said, and sighed. “How could I?”

“I would not say it before anyone else, because we must seem united, but it comes so clear in my uncle’s writings. He had a reason for everything he did because he trusted no one but himself and my father. The shadow of the assassin’s knife haunted him all his life, worsening when my grandfather died. Some said under suspicious circumstances, others believed it was a riding accident.”

“Your uncle thought it was conspiracy?”

“Oh, yes. Then he really did believe, or talk himself into believing, that any Vayir with the gift of command who didn’t fall right in behind him was a future danger to my father, to my brother. And so the best left the academy early—heaped with praise—to go home to guard, or if they were not Vayirs they were promoted—heaped with praise and promises—and sent to the borders. And to the coast.”

“Against the Brotherhood?”

“Yes. A few died in action, because his orders were always clear: we ride like our ancestors, commanders in the lead. Others died under circumstances that their personal Runners could not

explain—the Runners who survived, and too often they all died too. Mysteries we might have solved if my uncle’s personal Runner, Retren Waldan, had lived, because apparently Waldan’s orders were never written. But he himself was assassinated after Yvana-Vayir’s Conspiracy. I don’t know by whom. Another mystery.”

“No one knows any of what you’re telling me?” Inda asked, grimacing.

“Only Hadand. And Barend, somewhat. He didn’t want to know the details, as his own father was behind them. Here’s what I am sure of. The only one who really understood command in the strategic sense, I believe, was Captain Sindan. When I look back, his suggestions to me were not just sensible, but far-reaching. And it was his grasp of Idayagan territory and tactics that turned the Battle of Ghael Hills from a terrible massacre into victory. But he is dead.”

Inda pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes in the old, remembered gesture, then came the snort of decision, the outward flick of his hands. “All right. I’m just going to have to learn on the run. Well, I’ve done that all along.”

Tension released its grip on Evred’s skull.

Inda thumped his fist on a barrel top as they turned the corner outside a tavern. “Here’s what I’m thinking. I haven’t seen Marlovans drill for battle since I was a boy, and I’ve never seen them fight. You know I barely started training to fight on horseback, and isn’t that what we do?”

“We will drill on the march north. Every day.”

“Yes. Yes.” Inda turned his thumb up. “That to start. But Sponge,” a sudden turn, sidestepping a pack of tail-waving dogs being chased by laughing children, “what kind of battleground are we looking at? What can you tell me about the Idayagan terrain?”

“I know it well.”

“And you saw *our* limitations, which is a place to start.” Inda took a wider step to avoid another loose stone—where was all the road guild? Off defending the coast, probably. He grimaced. “Damn these boots anyway.”

“Boots?” Evred was bewildered.

“Cherry-Stripe’s old ones. He said they were soft as butter, but when you go barefoot most of the year—” A shrug. “What I need to know first is the exact terrain of the pass.”

“I’ll give you that. But we in turn need to know more about the Venn. If only you had gotten more detail from your source!”

“Well, we can ask,” Inda stated, and that was when they hit the stone wall.

“What? A Venn? Here?”

“Dag Signi. With the women.” Inda opened his hand toward the castle towering over them.

Evred’s face blanched. “You brought a Venn spy into my castle?”

“She’s not a spy, she’s a mage.”

“She’s a *what*?”

Inda stopped, looking up at the castle tower without seeing it. They were surrounded by haywains being brought from the storage sheds to the great stable yard, amid shouts and clopping hooves, and the smells of summer and horse and sweat, but Inda had gone blind and deaf.

Evred stilled, his rage visible to the men and women on the walls, who watched uneasily, some reaching for weapons.

Inda brought his chin down, his expression perplexed. “A mage, but on parole,” he said as he rubbed his eyes. “She can’t go back, they’d kill her.”

“All that could be a ruse. How do you know it’s true?”

Evred’s sharp voice caused Inda to swing around and crash head-on into the wall of Evred’s white anger. “I—I trust her.” He groped with one hand, a gesture of appeal. “I *love* her.” As if that explained everything.

Evred’s face had hardened, reminding Inda of Evred’s older brother, the Sierlaef: angry hazel eyes, the rigid stillness that threatened violence. “So pirates think with their prick?”

Inda stepped back abruptly, his earrings winking bloodred.

But Inda’s reaction was not nearly as intense as Evred’s own self-loathing: thinking with his own prick,

wasn't he, with all that agonizing over the angel-faced fellow he'd dismissed with the women? Who mounted the wrong horse first?

"As do Marlovans," Evred said, breathing out hard. All the tension went out of his manner; he forced his voice to neutrality. "And probably Venn as well. Tell me about this woman. Why you brought her."

Inda groped for words. "Signi can't be a spy—her life is forfeit if she ever goes back. You know about their deep water navigation, right?"

"I remember Barend speaking of it." Evred's heart was beating fast.

"Well, she was on her way to Sartor to offer that knowledge to the Sartoran Mage Council, who in turn could give it to the world. Level things up on the sea. And circumvent Prince Rajnir's plans. He's the Venn heir, you know. He doesn't just want us, he wants our entire continent."

"So your mage is a traitor to her own people?"

Inda shook his head. "It's not betrayal, don't you see? It's a greater cause. She was chosen, by one of their own, and lost everything in trying to see it through. Because I caught her. And then, well, by the time I learned all that, events brought us here."

Evred now stood with his hands clasped behind his back, as he studied the weatherworn stones of the street. Reassured that the king was not in danger, the wall sentries turned their attention away and resumed their pacing.

Evred's thoughts, accustomed now to the never-ending pressure of kingship, picked up the race yet again. He scouted ahead of Inda, because he must, but the first unreasoning rush of joy had been muted.

"I see that there is far more here than I assumed, but we will have the time to explain. And your other woman? Is she also a mage?"

Inda laughed. "Jeje! No, Jeje came along to protect me against the wiles of kings." Inda's delight was the old transparent Inda—he expected his academy mate to share the jest.

Evred forced a smile. "I see! Behold me rabbiting with fear. Listen, Inda. I need to give some orders. Rearrange the day's events so that we can discuss our plans, and you must watch the horsetail drills. You must also," he added, "speak to Tdor."

They had reached the great gate, where the next watch's perimeter patrol riders reined in at the unexpected sight of the king, some stroking the tossing heads of their impatient horses.

Inda stopped to let them ride past, but they waited. Evred walked past, head bent and expression absorbed—another reminder that Inda was back among Marlovans, where everyone had a rank and a place.

"Tdor," Inda repeated as he followed. "Is she here?"

"You did not see her? She was there with Hadand and me."

Inda's smile was rueful. "I saw Hadand, and you, and next thing I knew we were at Daggers."

"You will see her anon," Evred said, his plans now made. "Come, let's go through to the academy. I have business that cannot wait, but I will give you an escort, and rejoin you the moment I can."

### Chapter Thirteen

SIGNI had begun to compose herself for the inevitable. Jeje answered Shendan's rapid questions, which switched to Marlovan and back again like stormy wind shifts at sea. Jeje had picked up a lot of Marlovan on the ride from Cherry-Stripe's. While she talked, she watched Signi, who seemed more and more still and silent.

Jeje finished with, "Finally there was the mystery rescue. Inda got captured when scouting the Venn in Ymar, and Fox went in alone and got him out. By the time the news got to Bren, before the Venn cut off anyone leaving Ymar, the gossip was that the two of 'em set fire to half the kingdom."

"Good," Shen stated, and then gave a fierce laugh. "I hope they burned it all down."

Signi pressed her hands together; Tdor felt a wave of compassion when she saw tension in Signi's fingers.

Jeje shrugged. “Dunno. All we know is the Venn are coming.”

“Coming after Inda and Fox?” Shen asked.

“More like after all of us. Marlovans, too. Invasion.”

“What exactly happened in Ymar? Before they torched it, I mean?”

“Inda won’t say.” Jeje’s voice was unexpectedly deep. “Anyone who dares ask Fox gets a nasty ‘Convince me it’s your business first’ for their pains.”

Shen laughed again. “That’s my brother! So what is Foxy doing now? Why didn’t he come home?”

Jeje turned a helpless look Signi’s way, struggling to find diplomatic words.

Shen flung up a hand to forestall her. “Never mind. I can see the shuffle coming. Save your breath for your soup. I will ask Inda himself.”

Dread tightened Signi’s neck at the casual reference to impending war. Her own chief Dag, Brit Valda, had said years ago, *It is a shame when we must regard a people as an enemy. It is a shame and a regret when the two peoples share so much. And it is a shame, a regret, and a tragedy when those peoples meet as individuals and find much to admire*. Signi knew that if Inda were to meet Fulla Durasnir, the commander of the Southern Fleet, they would probably become fast friends. If they could meet anywhere but in battle, that is, when they would do their best to kill one another because duty to king and country and honor required it.

Signi no longer regarded the Marlovans as enemies. So she cherished the spring-green glow around Hadand when she observed her with the *Yaga Ydrasal*, the Inward Eye of the Golden Tree. Green was good, it was the new life of the bud; so too was the rich tree-bark brown of Tdor’s spirit. These were good women, Signi could see it in their spirits, even if she could not yet understand many of their words to one another.

Shendan had just asked where Inda was when another of the women in blue entered. She spoke softly to Hadand, with a fast, revealing peek Signi’s way.

*Comes my trial*, Signi thought. Here was the first hard rock in her road, as inevitable as rain.

Tdor watched uneasily as Signi rose in a swift, dignified manner, put her palms together, and followed Tesar out.

Hadand observed Signi’s resignation, and wondered how much she’d understood, despite Jeje’s assurance that Signi did not comprehend Marlovan. Was it possible she was a spy?

As soon as the door shut behind Tesar and Signi, Hadand took a deep breath. “It seems that she is a Venn.” And turned a questioning look Jeje’s way.

Jeje said, “Inda trusts her. Well, she’s the one who got us free o’ the Venn, there, when we fumbled into the whole soul-sucking fleet. She’s a renegade. Inda can tell you more. Or I guess she’s going to tell you herself, right? Is there some kind of trouble here?”

Hadand’s hands vanished into her sleeves. “Trouble, not necessarily, but questions, yes. I will attend. If Inda trusts her, then I owe it to him.” She turned to Tdor. “First, Evred requests you to finish showing Inda around. Give him news of home. He’s at the academy now. He might want to see . . . other things. Jeje, Shen, please feel free to rest here before we all meet at dinner.” She left.

*He might want to see other things—but not Evred questioning his mage*, Jeje thought.

Shen put out a hand to stop Tdor, saying in Marlovan, “I will not be stabled here like an old mare. You and I are going to find Inda together.”

Tdor signified agreement, and they left.

Jeje turned to the untouched food. Over her years of sea-roaming she’d learned that, just as you could not command the wind, you never pass up a good meal, much less a chance to catch a nap. You never know what the next watch will bring.

Evred met Vedrid on his way inside. Vedrid reported that Inda’s Runner was getting a tour. Evred spared a heartbeat to mock himself for his earlier heart-gnawings. The golden-haired fellow was Inda’s First Runner, not his lover. Proof again that emotions were not only useless, but dangerous.

He sent Vedrid to show Inda the academy.

He sent another Runner to summon the mage.

He chose his study over his more formal (and formidable) rooms in an attempt to mitigate the circumstances, which Signi took as a well-meant gesture, though it failed its purpose. He might as well have summoned her to the throne room amid armed guards, for she saw in the great raptor furnishings, the crimson-as-blood rug worked with golden-winged predator birds, the silence and shut door, mute testimony to kingly supremacy.

But she was not powerless. She had her brains and her magic.

Evred studied the small, sandy-haired older woman walking with smooth grace between two of his most trusted armymen, Hadand just catching up. This was Inda's lover? His inward vision of a tall, pale-haired version of the staggeringly beautiful Joret Dei vanished, leaving him puzzled indeed. The mage had to be ten years older than Evred himself, who had two years on Inda. She was ordinary in all ways, except in the manner she moved, neat and curiously compelling as she stepped forward, hands pressing together then opening. She bowed her head gravely.

He beckoned to Hadand, then dismissed the men.

"I would like the benefit of your eyes and ears," he murmured to his wife. "She's not just Venn, but a mage."

Hadand hid her consternation. A *mage*? So that's what Jeje meant!

Evred sat down in the great carved raptor chair one of his ancestors had taken from the Montredavan-Ans after their defeat. "Who are you?" he asked in slow, clear Iascan.

Signi stood before him, outwardly composed. Evred, whose keen gaze missed little, noted the fast pulse at the side of her temple. The cause of tension could be anything from simple human fear to deviousness, but it meant that her mind would run fast.

Well, so could his.

"My name doth be Jazsha Signi Sofar, second daughter of Jazsha Fafna Sofar, Hel Dancer to the Venn. My life-place doth be Sea Dag of the third rank, though outward be that place."

Outward be . . . She was using, with great care, the outdated verb forms of Iascan that related most closely to Sartoran. Evred switched languages to Sartoran—"Does that mean you have a public rank and a secret rank?"—and saw her eyelids lift in surprise.

So Marlovan kings spoke Sartoran! Rumor persisted in the far north that they did not even know how to read. Prince Rajnir had been told by the well-traveled Dag Erkrick that they were ignorant in all things except war.

This king's accent was the elegant court accent of two generations ago; she had no idea it was the Sartoran the Adrani king had brought home after his service in Sartor and taught to his daughter Wisthia, who brought it west when she married Evred's father. In Signi's world Sartoran was the language of magic and scholarship. This king spoke like a scholar. He was subtle, the shimmer around him was the deep blue of midnight that blends with and hides the presence of other colors. A blue deep and vast enough to house the distant stars. Blue was the color of knowledge, magic, the eternity of sea and sky. Deep blue was blue made dangerous: the red of anger and malice was easy to comprehend because its motive was so single-minded, it did not take you by surprise. The motivations of midnight blue could not be predicted.

"I do," she replied.

"Is this doubling of ranks customary?"

"No."

"Tell me," he said, "how came you to meet Inda."

The questions were strange. She had expected a military interrogation, or demands for magic spells: again she saw the shimmer of midnight all around him.

A young man sat in a corner, writing fast. He was a herald, surely. The Venn had been taught that Marlovans had no written records, only the boasting war songs of warriors.

A brief spurt of humor prompted her to begin at the very beginning. "I was born in the Land of the Venn, in service to the family Durasnir. When a child I was trained to be a . . . a hel-dancer. It translates as hall

dancer, but you could say a court dancer. It is the ritual of the King's Hall . . ." She frowned; the Sartoran and Venn courts were such very different concepts. And she was not at all certain that Marlovans had a court at all.

The king returned to what interested him. "How did you become a mage?"

Signi gazed down the years, flickers of emotion-laden images running rapidly through her mind, evoking all the hopes, anxious competitions, determined training. All for that one goal. To be told at the last level of training but one, when she'd reached an age where most had already begun their life's work, *You will never attain the Hel-Dance*. "I was not good enough to be a hel-dancer," she admitted.

Not for her the far easier life of the play or pleasure house performer. Dance was art, art was truth, truth was dance, the triune concept so drilled into her that it was impossible to adapt to the notion of dance as mere entertainment or enticement. So she had stopped using the name Jazsha that she shared with her furious mother. She became Signi, and faced the necessity of learning an entirely different way of life, memories not relevant to this moment, definitely irrelevant to these people.

"I was adept with what we call the small magics as part of the dance. I professed an interest in magic knowledge. And so the Skalt—the person in charge of our training—took me to the House of Blue, where dags are trained, and I learned very rapidly."

Rapidly indeed, but that was to be expected when one is surrounded by children half one's age who think that two bells' time is a strenuous workday, and she had come from a life wherein two bells of warm-up exercise was the daily regimen before one even had breakfast.

Evred leaned forward. "Learned what, exactly?" He gave her a near smile. "Do not be afraid that too much detail will bore me."

## Chapter Fourteen

IT amazed Vedrid to be pacing side-by-side at last with the infamous Elgar the Fox. His reputation was not as real to Vedrid as the memories of the small, scruffy boy who vanished in disgrace from the academy years ago, or as the terrible memory of the more recent long, difficult, and nearly mortal search in Bren.

But he must no longer think of him with the foreign name. Elgar the Fox was gone. No, he had come home. He was once again Indevan-Dal Algara-Vayir, Laef of Choraed Elgaer.

Indevan-Laef chose the pace—slow—and paused often, sometimes staring into empty courts or at jumbles of worn willow-swords and old gear, sometimes listening to the childish voices through the open windows of the barracks. Once or twice he stopped without looking at anything; he shut his eyes and breathed deeply. Clearly Vedrid would not have to exert himself to keep this exile-returned-home occupied. Indevan-Laef's own memories did that.

The first court with activity contained pigtails at staff practice. Inda halted outside the narrow archway, watching from an angle that kept the thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys from noticing him.

The preliminary drills were the same, right down to the remembered drum cadences. But the boys looked slow, their movements sloppy. Without focus. The sights, the smells, brought back memories of slouching through drill, especially when it was raining and cold after a night of short sleep.

The boys paired off. Again, as in Cherry-Stripe's castle drill, they were so slow, so clumsy, not at all like Inda had remembered the older boys looking to his ten-year-old eyes. During training sessions on Freedom Island—first with Dun and then later with Fox—he'd exhorted the crew to speed up, to think ahead, to refine skills and measure up to remembered standards.

He had to laugh at himself. His recollection of the older boys' skills had obviously receded like a mirage. No matter how good he got, he always saw them as far better. That was before Fox Montredavan-An took over the training. Fox really was superlative. His boys and girls of similar age back on the deck of the *Death* were much faster, stronger, and more skilled than these pigtails. But then they also had been seeing action.



“What are the horsetails doing?” Inda asked Vedrid.

“Lance practice.”

“Take me there.”

They crossed to the side of the academy Inda had only glimpsed as a boy: the senior riding field, where the horsetails were doing lance evolutions.

Inda peered under his hand, blocking the sun, and trying to see past the clods of mud kicked up by the horses’ hooves. The lances were warlike, but seemed worthless except for a charge. Or did you use them like a boom? From horseback?

The boys’ riding was as good as he remembered. Inda had adapted his early training in riding and shooting to riding the upper masts and shooting at sea. Could he readapt fast enough? More to the point, could he adapt his shipboard tactics to horse?

A familiar voice broke his thoughts. It was a man’s voice, but he recognized the intonations.

A lean fellow his own age, wearing the academy masters’ plain coat over riding trousers and boots, led boys toward the stable. Inda’s gaze scarcely touched on the boys, who shoved and poked and scuffled like groups of boys the world over. The man turned his head to see who they were. A narrow, snub-nosed, fire-scarred face and familiar eyes.

“Lassad?”

It was! It was Smartlip Lassad! A master? Oh, hadn’t Cherry-Stripe said something—

“Olin is waiting,” Lassad said to his charges. “Run.”

They ran.

Lassad said slowly, “Algara-Vayir?”

Inda opened his hands. Lassad’s gaze flickered over him: earrings, scruffy old boots, weapons, back to Inda’s face, searching, searching. Waiting. Though he no longer hunched his shoulders, or slunk, Inda saw the apprehensive Lassad of old who had lived for others’ approval.

“You saw some action,” Inda observed.

Lassad flushed. “Pirates. Fire arrows, here and here.” He indicated his jaw and the top of one shoulder. His constantly moving gaze flickered toward Vedrid again. “They said you’d become one. A pirate, I mean. Went up against the Brotherhood.”

“I never thought of myself as a pirate, but I took some pirate ships. Rest is true enough as well,” Inda said. “You’re a master.”

Lassad’s shoulders hitched tighter. He was defensive, though Inda couldn’t imagine why. He assented with an open hand, then whipped the hand behind his back.

“Sponge sent me to observe. He wants me to relearn the old ways,” Inda said.

Lassad’s expression changed. Eased. “This is my first year. Most of the old masters had to go back in the saddle. For defense.”

Inda turned his palm up. Lassad began talking fast, describing the academy’s changes over nine years, his tone of pride gradually becoming more strident. And when Inda did not answer, he shifted to his experiences on the coast.

At first the details were precise and vivid. Inda listened, envisioning with the ease of experience the shoreline battles, as he and Lassad paced through the academy.

Just as they reached the senior barracks, Inda, deluged by memory, found the pieces of Lassad’s stories increasingly difficult to put together.

The bells rang for the midday meal. Beyond high walls rose the gull-shrill voices of stampeding boys. Inda was surprised to discover the old wariness and hunger back in Lassad’s gaze.

Inda had wanted to see the senior barracks, but now he just wanted to get away. “I’d better go. Sponge will be looking for me.”

Lassad mouthed the word *Sponge*, then flicked his fingers to his tunic, an inadvertent gesture.

Inda returned it and started back. The details did not fit. Just as in the old days, Lassad had been strutting, maybe outright lying. Perhaps not at the beginning, but certainly toward the end.

When he and Vedrid reached the archway connecting the academy to the castle, two women emerged. Inda looked up.

“Tdor?” He jolted to a stop. She was taller, older, but he knew that face better than he knew his own. “Tdor-Edli,” Vedrid said, saluting. The other one in Runner blue he did not introduce, though he was aware of her sardonic smile.

“I’ll take him,” Tdor said, and Vedrid ran off to report to the king.

“You’re . . . tall,” Inda managed, and then his face heated. What a stupid thing to say!

Tdor chuckled, that same wonderful sound, like the whuff of a pup, that he’d cherished in memory through all his years at sea. “You’re not tall.”

They laughed; seeing one another again made them both feel giddy and awkward, their minds filled with nine years of questions and nowhere to begin.

Then Inda put together the clues at last. Midway between amusement and irritation, he said, “I suppose Sponge is grilling Signi.”

“She’s a Venn,” Tdor answered with a sober look. “You brought her here. We’ve been at war for years, and the Venn have been behind it.”

Her voice, it was just the same, but lower. His scalp itched, his clothes pulled at him; a flicker of memory, of Tdor’s hands smoothing out his unruly hair and pulling his shirt laces right. He shook his head, trying to gather his wits. Signi was in trouble—with Sponge. “I wouldn’t bring an enemy.”

Tdor turned a palm up. Her hand was still square, but bigger than he remembered, hard from years of bow and knife work. “I suspect he knows. But he cannot afford to be wrong.” Her hand swept to one side. Inda finally perceived Tdor’s companion.

“Inda,” the blonde woman exclaimed. Inda had only peripherally been aware of the short blonde in mud-splashed Runner blue next to Tdor. He flicked a questioning glance her way. The sardonic quirk to her dark, wide-set eyes was familiar. “Remember me?”

“Sh—Shendan?” Inda asked, amazed. He laughed. “Last time I saw you, I was ten.”

“Yes.” She crossed her arms the same way Fox did when he was in his nastiest mood. “I rode all the way here, and you are to tell me where Fox is, and why he did not come home.”

“He is with the fleet. He’s my—the commander now,” Inda said. “As for why he didn’t come—”

“Don’t feed me any bran mash,” Shen cut in. “I’m not sick. Or old. Or weak. I want the truth.”

As Inda squinted up at the sky, Tdor’s emotions swooped. Despite the years, and the scars on his face, she still knew what he was thinking: he wished he were anywhere else.

But instead of slouching off as he might have as a boy, he said very quietly, “He doesn’t want to come home.”

Shen drew in a breath. “All right. Tell me this. Is it us? Mother and me, and Marend? Or . . .”

“No. It’s the treaty. Mostly. And I think your father as well.” Inda considered, then added with a tentative air, “He hasn’t said. But, well, you travel a lot with someone, you learn to hear the words they ride around. If he comes home, it’ll be later. After your father—”

“Drinks himself to death,” Shen stated in a hard voice. “Yes.” She swiped at her eyes. “Thank you for the truth.” Without a word she swung around and vanished after Vedrid up the short tunnel.

Inda whistled. Then shook his head. “I could have done that better. Though I don’t know how, with no warning.”

“That’s why she waylaid you. So there wouldn’t be any well-considered speeches.” Tdor thought back to the single visit from the Sartoran mage all those years ago, and how she’d used diplomacy to deny them magic. Because they were Marlovans, that had been the real reason for all the compliments and diplomatic assurances, making her refusal much worse to bear—as if they were dangerous animals to be coaxed and praised back into their loose-boxes. She turned his way, wondering how to explain when she saw by his expression that he’d guessed.

Her chest went cold, her skin rough. *Inda was here.*

The world around her had gone awry, like the pieces of a dropped cup fitted badly together. She was the splattered drink. She couldn’t fit the world back together until she understood why she felt this way. But there wasn’t time to think.

As always, duty funneled her back into motion. Tdor withdrew her hands from her sleeves and held out a heavy silver owl hair ornament. Once Tanrid’s. “Your mother desired me to bring this along. So that

Branid would not rampage through the castle to find it and start wearing it, calling himself the heir.” She studied the mossy stones arching overhead, the dusty, scuffed toes of Cherry-Stripe’s boots on Inda’s feet. “I had come to ask the king to decide who will be heir to Choraed Elgaer.”

Inda pressed his heels to his eyes.

“Inda?” she asked, concerned.

“Too much, too hard, too soon.” His face burned again. “Well. Nine years. I guess I’m to catch it all up in a month.”

She held out the clasp, and when he extended his palm she dropped the heavy ornament onto it. Her fingers trembled slightly before vanishing back into her sleeves.

He searched her face. “Tdor?”

“It’s good that you are back.” She swung around and started up the tunnel with long strides. “You are needed at home.”

“I’m glad to see you,” he said, walking sideways. Still with that searching gaze. She could feel it. “Tell me of home.”

“Let’s go inside.” She indicated the flagged path ahead. For once she was relieved that the castle was enormous. She needed the time. “Hadand will let us use her rooms.”

Inda fingered the heavy ornament that he had last seen in his brother’s hair, right before Captain Sindan took Inda to the coast. He tried to think—he needed to think—but he was distracted by the long corridors, the guarded stairwells, the occasional Runners of both sexes who stared at him with expectant faces, but most of all by Tdor striding next to him, her head a little bent, her brow tense.

Tdor led him into a small room with a Fire Stick burning low on the grate, and Marlovan furnishings, so familiar from childhood.

Tdor shut the door and stood with her back to it. “Your father has aged terribly. Your mother has been waiting so long in hopes of seeing you.” She shook her head. “Did you know about Tanrid?”

Inda’s grimace was almost a flinch. “Evred told me.”

Tdor lifted a hand, dropped it to her side. “Will you be coming home?”

“Don’t know. I hadn’t thought ahead, except to warn Sp—Evred about the Venn. I hadn’t even known he was king, at first. The embargo has kept news from getting out, d’you see? All I could think of was, would the Harskialdna put me against the wall for breaking exile. But it was my duty to bring the news even so.” He felt he was making excuses, that he needed to apologize, yet there was no accusation at all in her face, voice, or manner. “Sponge. Evred, that is—he wants me to command the defense.” Now that they’d started to talk, the impulse to speak was almost overwhelming. It had always been this way. He could tell Tdor everything, and she would make sense of the world.

Her eyes widened. “And you agreed?”

Inda held his hands out. “I’m used to command. And Evred seems to want me to do it.”

“Yes,” she said. “I can see why.”

“Can you? I can’t. Is Hawkeye really so bad? Or is his father’s conspiracy held against him? I have never even seen a land battle. I haven’t shot from horseback since I was eleven. I have no idea what they do with those damned lances once they charge. The idea seemed right and true when we were sitting in Daggers, and Evred seems convinced, but when I’m away from him it seems crazy.”

“Doesn’t most of your life seem crazy?” Tdor asked. “I mean, *pirates*?”

He sent her a startled look, saw her wry smile, and laughed. “Last time I saw you,” she said, “I called you a haywit. And wished for nine years that you could get home just so I could unsay it. All right. Choraed Elgaer can wait.” Tdor made an attempt at a smile; Inda could feel her effort. “Hadand is so very glad to have you safely back—”

A tap at the door caused her to whirl. She opened the door, spoke to someone outside, then shut it again and faced Inda. “Your—Mage Signi is with Evred in the map room right now. We’re to join them.”

Inda was relieved and annoyed. Relieved because he could not define why this conversation with Tdor did not feel right: it had started fine, but then blew off course somehow. And he was annoyed at having been deflected from whatever had happened between Evred and Signi.

But he dismissed that reaction. He’d been his own master too long, he had not thought ahead of the rights

and wrongs of bringing Signi into Evred's kingdom. Of course Evred had to interrogate her, and Inda could not be there.

But Tdor knew all that.

He studied her, truly uneasy now.

She said quickly, reaching toward him, "It's all right, Inda. It's all right. They found common ground, there is nothing to fear."

"Then why are we here?"

Her cheeks colored, and she turned toward the window as though the answer lay there. The hand she had stretched out to him withdrew into her sleeve. "It was Evred's idea. To give us time alone," she said to the window, and then she faced him resolutely. He could feel her effort. She did not want to be here having this conversation. Why? "You have to remember that tradition is important here. More so now than ever. It gives a sense of stability that we really don't have."

He still did not understand.

She fingered her cuff, brushed a total absence of lint from her robe, then yanked the door open and walked out in her characteristic long stride.

Inda followed, disagreeably aware that he had missed an important cue, or clue. He had that sickening sense that he was entering action blind. Except he was surrounded by people he loved, so the danger couldn't be here—and yet, so far, not a single encounter had been even remotely like he had expected. The map room was a relatively short walk. Armed guards parted, and they entered a room with a huge carved table, covered by an exquisitely drawn map.

All three were there, the women back by the windows: Evred watchful, Hadand quiet, Signi tired but composed. Inda was relieved, not that he'd expected his old friend to fling Signi up against the wall for execution just because she was Venn. The Harskialdna, Evred's uncle, wouldn't have hesitated, but Inda would never have brought her if *he* were still here.

At a subtle gesture from Evred, Hadand invited Signi to accompany her to get some refreshment, and they left. With a questioning look at Inda before she soundlessly shut the door, Tdor moved to the window, out of the way but within view of the map.

*What?* Inda asked her silently, but their childhood understanding seemed to have vanished.

So he shifted to his own questions. "Lassad," Inda said to Evred, jerking his thumb toward the west window, overlooking the academy. "A master?"

"You have an objection to his promotion?" Evred asked, his voice neutral.

Inda opened his hand. "How would I know? He told me about his action." He did not want to say: *He lied to me. How much has he lied to you?*

Evred said even more neutrally, "Dag Signi has told me a little about Prince Rajnir of the Venn. We will have to find out more."

Inda flicked his hand toward the door through which Hadand had taken Signi. "We can do that on the road, can't we? We've got weeks ahead of us."

*She'll be locked in a windowless cell where she cannot harm us with magic or messages to her masters,* Evred thought, but said only, "She says that there is no family continuity as we define it, in their kings."

Inda rubbed his jaw. "All I know is that they are coming." He studied the map. "I see the mountains dividing us from Idayago. The only land route to Idayago is through this pass, right?"

"Andahi Pass, yes."

"Whose are these castles at the north and south ends of the pass?"

Evred said, "Ala Larkadhe is this one, at the south end. It's an easy watch's ride from Lindeth Harbor. The castle guarding the north end was called Sala Varadhe by the Idayagans. We've taken to calling it Castle Andahi, after the pass. The middle harbor's castle is Trad Varadhe, and the eastern one, its harbor too small for capital ships, is at Ghael."

Inda said, "Flash's dad is the Jarl at Castle Andahi, isn't he? Has he changed his name to Andahi-Vayir? I remember that except for us, names had to match land."

"He's been resisting." Evred smiled briefly. "Says he should be Idayago-Tradheval-Andahi-Vayir, which

sounds ridiculous, so that point has not been settled.”

Inda studied the map, whispering the names to himself to get them firmly in mind.

Evred went remote again, assuming what Inda was beginning to think of as his king face. “If Prince Rajnir has spies living among us, he has to know where most of our forces are. What do you see as his plan of attack?”

Inda remembered what he’d said to Fox so casually, what seemed a hundred years ago, when he lay under an Ymaran oak recovering from Wafri’s torture. “Raids along the north coast first stage, to bring our defenses there.”

“Which is where Barend is now. And the Venn have been raiding, according to his report. Our people have been fighting them off, with sporadic cooperation from the Idayagans,” Evred added with a wry smile. He thought of Nightingale, his Runner in the north, and his hand twitched toward the locket hanging inside his shirt.

He yanked his fingers away again, though the Venn mage was no longer present. A surge of hatred tightened his muscles: a *mage*. A Venn! How could Inda be so simple? She was old—at least thirty—and as plain as a corn husk. She must have ensnared Inda by some magical trickery, at least to preserve her life. At most to spy.

He dropped his hand to his side. She was probably far more dangerous left behind—could even his walls guard against the wiles of a mage?—than going along as a prisoner under his own eye. In which case he didn’t have to figure out some ruse to get her locked up when he took Inda north.

Inda went right on, fingers tracing over the map. “Since we have no navy, they know we’re forced to go through the Andahi Pass to defend the north. But they have to come down through the pass if they want to attack by land. They have to figure we’ll be on the watch for an attack through the pass, so they’ll also come round by sea.”

Evred looked at the long coast of Halia, now held by Iasca Leror. “They have enough men and ships to attack the entire coast?” he asked, sick with horror.

Inda smacked his hand on the map. “No. That is, I don’t know what they might have next year, but this year they have eighty-one warships and their attached raiders and scouts. Say thirty-five hundred men per, all told. Eighty-one times over, give or take because they’ll have to find room for horses, and because some stay on board to handle the ships.”

Evred’s eyes narrowed as he calculated, then he opened his hand. “Go on.”

“The big Venn warships can’t get in close enough to land a lot of horses, even if they had them trained like ours. A big force needs the draft of a deep harbor in order to offload animals and heavy equipment. They’d have that at the Nob, of course, but then they’d be forced to march all the way down the peninsula. Is that practical?”

“No,” Evred said with the conviction of experience. “You can ride in pairs at best. It would take them a month or more. But they can land men on a beach?”

“Well, only just south of Lindeth. Boats, through the breakers. The coast of Ola-Vayir is rotten landing. Saw that when I was coming home. From near Lindeth on down it’s pretty much steep palisade above rocky beaches. Good defense, bad offense. So if they want to land in force anywhere along the coast from Ola-Vayir down to Parayid, it’ll have to be through a deep-water harbor.”

“Harbors we can cover. We may have no navy,” Evred said grimly, “but we did learn how to defend harbors after all those pirate attacks.”

“Which they have to know.” Inda thumped his fist down. “Where was I? Right. I think they’ll land a second force here at Lindeth Harbor, soon’s they know we’re up the pass, and bottle us up from behind.” He jerked his head up. “Didn’t Cherry-Stripe say the Arveases are doing well at the north end of the pass?”

Evred said, “Yes. What cooperation there is has been best at that end of Idayago. I will be dispatching certain orders to Barend before we take horse. We do have a last, somewhat desperate defense if needed. It wouldn’t stop the Venn, but it might slow them.”

Inda rapped his knuckles lightly on the map. “It might come to desperate defenses, if we don’t have those kinds of numbers.”

Evred shook his head. “No. We never have. Our people live spread out. This is our only large city, and my mother once told me there are much larger ones. The Venn have twenty times the population we have. Maybe more.”

Inda said, “So we’ve never depended on numbers.”

“No. Speed and skill. Sudden strikes, hard, so the Idayagans find it easier to surrender and walk away with their lives.”

Inda thought of pirate fighting, and thumped his fist on the table, *bump, bump, bump*. “That many men squeezed down into a trail in the pass, that won’t be any hit and ride.”

“I know. What do we do?”

Inda scowled at the map. “We’ve got to throw everyone we can at the north, because we have got to hold that pass.”

Evred stared down at the map, hardly seeming to breathe. Then, “Tell me what you expect.”

“They have to get a hold on the north coast. That means take Idayago, then they have all the resources of Idayago at hand.”

“I perceive that much.”

“Well, that’s the first stage. They grab the north, push as far south as they can, then dig in over winter. Their king sends more men. They land fresh occupation forces along the north coast over fall and winter, ready themselves for next spring’s big launch into the Marlovan homeland. Then they not only come down the pass like thunder, they can send the entire fleet against our coast. They hammer the harbors in force, land, and march up from the south and the west. Three fronts, not just two.”

Evred said slowly, “I am already near the end of the oath-levies. My father called four times for a decade’s one out of nine, and last year I called for one from all the northern Jarls. We used second decade men in rotation to the harbors when the pirate attacks were the worst.”

Inda reached back into childhood, remembered the decade system: each Jarl, when called, owed the king one of nine Riders between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. Second decade was for men between thirty-five and forty-five. A Jarl could choose to send men, or ride himself. When a Jarl had been called four times, it meant four out of every nine of his younger men was away serving the king.

“Though the treasury is nearly empty, I will do what must be done. But Inda, when you say ‘everyone,’ I can only realistically raise all men once.”

Inda felt like someone had gripped his skull in a vise. For the first time, he considered what raising an army meant in human terms. Out on the ocean, he’d always had more volunteers than he needed or wanted, for whatever reason. They were usually pirates, or independents who sailed mighty close to outright piracy. They weren’t Marlovans with homes, families, and land to take care of.

He’d always thought of a newly hired sailor killed on board as a sailor replaced at the next hiring. A Marlovan killed left a hole in the work of home, to say nothing of the hole in his family. He could be replaced only with the gradual reweaving of time.

Evred spoke to the map. “We cannot get the south up there fast enough, not for the start of summer. It’s going to be difficult enough to raise the north.”

Inda said, “I thought our people were supposed to be fast? Cherry-Stripe mentioned something about your Runner making it all the way to the north in a couple of weeks? Said the fellow’s become a legend.”

Evred smiled. “Vedrid nearly killed himself doing it. But he was one Runner, with access to fresh horses along his route, and the ability—and determination—to sleep in the saddle. He slept for a week after that ride. You cannot raise and race an army like that. Even if the roads were good, which they won’t be, how can you expect them to fight at the end of such a journey?”

Inda whistled, and Evred’s smile vanished. “I will have to call for a double decade out of the north. Heretofore I’ve avoided pressing Ola-Vayir, which is by far the largest jarlate. He had dispensation due to some leftover treaty business with my grandfather, and I said nothing last year. He thinks this is because I’m weak, but I’ve been holding them in reserve. I can raise his entire land if I must. Nine for nine.”

Inda rubbed his scar. “But that still won’t give us numbers to match theirs?”

“No, but it’s as close as we can come short of raising the entire kingdom. That must be only a final

resort.”

A bleak image: fields and castles abandoned except for women, the old, children, left to defend if the enemy smashed through the men. “Right,” Inda said, his throat constricted.

“Will that suffice?”

“We’ll make it suffice.”

“Done,” Evred said.

An almost sickening thrill buzzed through Inda’s nerves. *Done*, just like that. Evred was the king, he said *Done* and people’s lives changed. Inda struggled against the instinct to shout, *Wait! Wait! What if I am wrong?*

Evred straightened up and crossed his arms. “I’d first planned to make you my commander at the celebration. Mark the transfer of power for the coming battle to every Jarl we could draw within a month. Let the word spread. But when I consider the distances, and what you say, we don’t have time. I’m going to strip this city of warriors, a double decade. I’ll handle the other levies in person on the way north. We’ll ride out at dawn.”

“‘Celebration’?” Inda asked. There it was again, that sense that he’d missed something obvious and important.

Evred opened his hand toward Tdor, standing so straight at the opposite wall as he said gently, “Taking your place formally as heir to Choraed Elgaer—and getting married.”

## Chapter Fifteen

TINY flakes of snow stippled the little scene in the middle of Five Points Parade, the broad flagged expanse below Pirate Island’s chalky cliffs where the isle’s only five roads came together.

“I’ve had a very bad couple of years,” Captain Scarf said to the three islanders kneeling before her, as a circle of pirates waited for the fun to begin. “Very bad,” she repeated, though no one had moved or spoken.

A rising wind fretted with clothing, hair, and the long silken fringes of Scarf’s beautiful embroidered kerchief. Pirates did not have gray hair, but she dared not land where there was a healer-mage who changed hair color, so she’d become Captain Scarf.

Pirates circled the three, some with weapons readied.

The harbormaster, who’d been a privateer before one wound too many kept him off ships, stared forward with an air of stolid stupidity. It had been his best weapon when the island was taken by surprise almost fifteen years ago, by the previous set of pirates.

At his right, Captain Swift, another grizzled middle-aged privateer, tried to hide the lancinating pain in his knees that kept him from hearing much of what the pirate was saying.

“If any of you were with that soul-sucker Elgar the Fox two winters ago,” she added, “you are going to wish you weren’t.” Scarf’d been past forty when Khanerenth had lost its former king, and she’d lost land and rank and power with her royal brother. She’d been taking revenge on the world ever since.

“Why are people so impossible?” Scarf mourned, turning toward the third victim, the only woman.

Mistress Svanith was the youngest, at forty. She owned one of Pirate Island’s two chief inns, and a great deal of the waterfront besides. She did not make the mistake of thinking that Scarf actually wanted her question answered—she just waited patiently.

Scarf waved a negligent hand toward the small scout craft moored along the dock. Several of her crew were busy cleaning blood off the sides and deck. “I hate rules,” she said. “Never obeyed ’em when I was growing up. Princesses make rules for others to obey.”

She frowned down at three impassive faces. “You’re probably thinking that I’m no longer a princess.” Her pirates laughed appreciatively. None of them had ever been within a month’s journey of any royal court, but they’d managed to learn the primary survival skill of the successful courtier: laugh at the royal jokes.

"I know I'm no longer a princess," she said, with another of her languid, courtly gestures. She felt a speech coming on: why not educate them about power? She had a good quote ready, from none other than Elian Dei of Sartor, who (if you read closely) had apparently been a bit of a pirate herself.

But first: "I'm reasonable, so I try to give out as few rules as possible. My single rule was that you people give us what we want. We just want a modicum of comfort after a long, starving year on that damn coast off that damned Iascan land. So why are you sending messengers?"

The harbormaster couldn't resist. He knew he was in trouble anyway, so he said, "Wasn't against your rule."

She sighed, half turned, then lashed out with her iron-shod boot, kicking him in the face. He fell back, hands over his mashed, bleeding nose. "Now, that's just common sense. I guess I have to teach you common sense. You don't like to see your girls and boys dead? Then—"

Scarf was just settling in for her lecture when the sound of laughter echoed from the old warehouses on the quay.

Annoyed, she peered at the rowdy crew on the dock. Leading them was her only remaining nephew, young Falthum. She smiled at the sight of him—tall, strong, mean, handsome, and none too smart. Her sister's smart ones were all dead. She'd kindly taken and raised them after her sister died in that damned revolution. The result? The smart, educated one tried to lead a mutiny. The stupid, educated one had tried earnestly to talk her pirates into going back and turning themselves over to the law. She hadn't made the mistake of educating the youngest one. The result? He loved his work. She contemplated that sometimes, mourning that no one around her had the wit to discourse on the irony.

"Ho, Auntie," he called. "Running battle comin' in on the wind. Betting is already up in the hundreds. Come see!"

She lifted her gaze to the skyline behind the warehouses and shops along the strand. Indeed, smoke billowed and tumbled on the wintry wind; the current through the Bridge was still a southward flow. Which was good. Let her get a tight hold on this damn island before the seasonal shift in current. No one besides her (and she'd taken three weeks) was crazy enough to come south with the ice still breaking up. And it had been a bad journey, damaging several of her fleet.

So where did these ships come from?

She vaulted over the harbormaster, leaving behind Mistress Svanith and Captain Swift, who bent to help him.

Despite her years, and the bulk she'd put on since her abduction of a royal chef during a raid on a Damondaen prince's yacht, she was in good shape; she ran to the dock where she could see past the warehouses, grabbed her glass from her coat pocket, snapped it out, and pressed it to her eye.

The wind had tangled the smoke into an uneven white bar across the green and choppy seas, but just above it she could make out the tiny pinpoints of fire arrows arcing back and forth. A heavy gust of wind cleared the smoke just long enough for her to descry two schooners running side-by-side. Behind, ghostly and tenuous, the predator: a bigger, beautifully lean and elegant schooner—

She laughed. So someone was behind the times. How fun! Both hunter and quarry obviously thought Pirate Island open. Well, she could use all three ships.

Another brief flaw in the wind revealed more detail, but smoke billowed from one of the smaller schooners, hiding them again. That must be some fight! "The big schooner has a hand on the foresail—no, I think it was a leaf." She turned to her crew in question. "Anyone familiar with that?" Falthum just shrugged, but she expected nothing out of him. She sifted the crowd for the balding head of her efficient first mate, remembered he was on watch aboard the flag. "Damn."

"Oh, I know who that is," exclaimed one of the younger pirates, new crew just before they'd sailed east to join Marshig for the disastrous Brotherhood of Blood battle. "That's the *Sable*, once out of Khanerenth."

Another refugee-turned-pirate from home! Scarf gave a snort of amusement. Then—quick to suspect a trick—"Not part of Elgar the Fox's rabble?"

"No." Shake of the head. "Captain Eflis wanted to join the Brotherhood, but she never pulled off any raids good enough."



“Won’t now, either,” Scarf said, and the others laughed, some of them resuming the betting. The embattled ships were coming in fast, both predator and prey. Her own fleet lined the narrow harbor. Old habit made Scarf wary, but what could one ship do? Even two, supposing the little schooners started fighting everybody? Damn the smoke anyway, couldn’t those idiots even put out their own— Pause, and her heart quickened its beat. “Fires?” she said aloud, and the anomaly resolved: all three ships afire, but no pumps going? “Signal the fleet, fighting stations.”

Falthum gaped, then ran, the others stampeding after him. Her signal boy pounded down the dock to the harbormaster’s to use the flagpole there. She held her breath as the ships came on, faster and faster—she cursed the snow—

A bigger gust of wind thinned the smoke into swirling ribbons of mist just long enough for her to make out the three fighting ships. And they were followed by launches full of—

“Blood and death! It’s an attack!” she screamed, leaping down into her gig. “Row, row! I’ll flay the backs off every one of you soul-eating . . .”

Her voice was the faintest screech, no louder than the raucous cry of a seabird to those crouched along the rail of the *Skimit* and the *Rippler*, weapons to hand.

“Fox is cutting it close,” one muttered to another, gripping his cutlass tightly.

His mate returned with mordant humor, “Guess he wants to sail us right up the dock—”

A screamer arrow whirtled weirdly overhead, and teenage Mutt, commanding the first schooner, howled, “Hard over!” His voice cracked into a squeak. He flushed, but nothing could long diminish the excitement of his first command in battle. Gripping the wheel, he hopped on his toes, his brown sailor braid thumping his bony back as he trembled with anticipation and fierce joy.

Drift, drift, and then they were in the middle of the pirates, and what had begun as a brisk, entertaining ruse through the quiet, snow-stippled seas turned into a fast, hard battle against far too many ships—but they had taken the pirates utterly by surprise.

Arrows hissed across Mutt’s deck. A pirate schooner slanted round, boarding crew ready to leap over. Mutt swept his glass across those faces, the ready weapons, the puffs of breath as the pirates laughed in anticipation.

“Fox? Where are you?” he breathed through clenched teeth.

The plan was simple. Gillor and Dasta said they’d used it when Fox and Inda were in Ymar. Fox hated whatever-it-was that kept him from seeing battle on a large scale the way Inda could. This plan was already more complicated than he liked, and the attack had yet to begin.

Smoke swirled, some of it damped down by the snow turning to sleet on the rising wind.

Ahead of him, Eflis brought her big schooner hard over, aiming straight between two raffles—the entire bay was converging on the schooners, just as they’d hoped.

Time for the surprise.

“Signal fleet attack,” Fox called. Adding to his motionless crew, “Fighting sail. Let’s not miss the fun.”

Scarf smashed one of her own small craft in her determination to get clear of the smoke and the battle—only three ships, but they were fierce, driving skillfully between hers, maneuvering brilliantly as they shot from both sides. She had to get upwind of the schooner so she could—

“Arrrrraah!” the wail rose to a pitch that caused her neck to prickle.

“What? What?”

That was her first mate, the toughest man on her crew, pointing, his eyes distended.

She whirled, peering through the dissipating smoke, scarcely aware of the numbing sting of sleet

as—impossible, *impossible*. From the ghostly gray vapors emerged a sinister black trysail, masts raked back, sails flashing in thrilling precision. That knife-lean predator was famous the world over as the flagship of Boruin Death-Hand.

Who was burned to death by Elgar the Fox.

Scarf's crew erupted into a frenzy of anger, accusation, shouts screamed at one another—demands that no one heard, all of it the result of gut-gnawing fear.

She pounded down the length of her deck, whacking people with her sword. Her first mate pulled himself together to follow and deal out similar blows, as she screamed for their attention. But even while screaming, she watched—they all watched—the trysail begin its running attack.

Impossible, her brain wailed, but there it was, Elgar's flagship, last seen two years ago, riding in the middle of the sea of burning wreckage of Marshig's fleet. Though she outnumbered Elgar, she knew her crew was already falling apart. The single thing all pirates agreed on was that no one could beat Elgar the Fox on the sea. Even Norsunder obeyed his command—they'd all seen that rip between sky and sea at the end of the battle just as the sun was coming up, a sky-high rift opening onto an eternal night into which Marshig and his favorites had sailed, and vanished.

All right, when battle doesn't work, treachery does.

"Signal for a parley," she bellowed. "Every ship—truce and parley flags. *Now!*"

## Chapter Sixteen

AFTER his castle tour, Tau decided to explore the city. He had to ask directions to get out of the castle. Every person he approached regarded him with puzzlement until he added, "I am Indevan Algara-Vayir's First Runner, and I'm lost." Inda's real name cleared their faces like sunshine through clouds, and their manner was invariably interested, often friendly, as they offered detailed directions.

When the sunset watch change bells tolled in all the towers, the massive, brassy bongs echoing along the stone streets and off the heavy walls, he fumbled his way back to the guest chambers.

His shipmates were gathered in Inda's room, Jeje at one end staring out the window at one of the many courtyards, and Inda and Signi huddled together near the fire, intent on a low-voiced conversation.

Biscuits, wine, and ale had been set out in shallow ceramic bowls. Tau poured wine into the strange flat cup that one had to use with two hands, then Jeje summoned Tau with a jerk of her chin. "We're waiting for the king to finish kinging, then we're to have dinner with them."

"What happened?" Tau asked, watching Signi shake her head and raise a hand as if warding something.

Inda twined his fingers through hers, and Tau heard a brief, "Evred would never hurt you. Try not to see them as enemies." Then Inda's voice dropped to an indistinct rumble.

"She got grilled by the king. Then Fox's sister showed up. *She* grilled everybody she could catch—including Signi—then rode off into the sunset."

"Fox has a sister?"

Jeje snorted. "From all he's ever told us about his family, I thought he'd hatched out of the ground."

"Hatched? From the ground?" Tau repeated, brows aslant.

Jeje waved a hand dismissively. "Last, the king booted everyone out. When I woke up from my nap, someone brought me here, and I found these two. I think Signi wants to renew spells. I guess they haven't had mages here in ages. But that king of Inda's made it real clear he doesn't trust her far's he can spit into the wind."

"Who's the tall woman who was standing with the queen on our arrival?"

Jeje made sure Inda and Signi were busy with their low talk, and turned her back on them. "Tdor. Inda's future wife. I got that out of Inda's sister. They've been promised since she was two and he was born. That's the way they do marriage here. With the rankers, anyway. You don't choose someone to share your hearth and home and children, it is done for you, by treaty, before you're born."

Tau whistled soundlessly.

“Tau! You’re back!” Inda reached for an ale cup. “Where’d you go?”

“I am now your personal Runner. Whatever that means.” Tau raised a hand toward the window. “So I went exploring in order to learn where to run. As much as I could in a city that seems to have yet to discover the benefits of street signs. Do the streets actually have names?”

Inda grinned. “Yes, but they change around. When we took over the royal city from the Iascans, the king had all the old names changed, which meant taking down their markers. But then he decided it was better for defense never to put any up. So there aren’t any. It’s not like a lot of foreigners come visiting.”

*We, Jeje thought. Nine years away, and he says “we.”*

“All right. So there’s a reason, even if it seems slightly demented. Second question: why are the bells so loud here? Is it that the entire city is made of stone with those extra high walls?”

Inda looked tense, though he was obviously trying for lightness. “The bells have to be audible on the plains below the city. When ringing alarms, not just watch changes. What else did you find?”

Tau observed Signi’s strained expression, the smudges under her eyes as he said, “That there are no fan-makers or ribbon-makers, that musical instruments other than drums and reed-pipes seem yet to be discovered, that most of the business one sees relates to horses in some way. Horses, food, and war gear.”

“Well, in a harbor, everything relates to the sea.” Jeje shrugged. “Outside of trade goods going inland.”

“Anyone who wants instant wealth has only to draw the meanest set of traveling players over the mountains and set up a theater. There is no such thing here, can you imagine?”

Inda sat back, one arm round Signi’s shoulders. She leaned into him, her eyes closed. Tau’s gaze shifted to the flush along Inda’s cheeks that indicated he’d been drinking. A rarity; the last time Tau remembered seeing Inda downing anything potent was the night before the Brotherhood battle at The Narrows.

“We read ancient Sartoran plays when we’re tutored,” Inda mused. “I didn’t know people did other things than read ’em.”

“Plays,” Tau struck a pose, “are meant to be performed.”

“Maybe they wouldn’t like that here.” Jeje yawned, not because she was tired, but because she was restless. It had been a stupid idea to come here. “Unless you’ve got some about battles and horses.”

Tau wondering why Inda was drinking, why his free hand traced round and round the top of his cup. He was home at last, where he’d wanted to be for almost ten years, and the trouble that had kept him away appeared to have been summarily banished by his friend, the king.

Ah, yes, the king. Had Inda understood that look of hunger? Did he even see it? More to the point, what was the responsibility of the friend who had definitely seen it?

But the subject was plays. “Anyplace you can walk into the meanest inn and hear people singing twenty verse ballads, unerring, with carters and hay-pitchers correcting the slightest omission, sneering at the tiniest fumble in cadence, you’ve an audience waiting to discover the joys of the stage.”

“You can stay and try it, or ride with us tomorrow,” Inda said.

“Ah. Am I to hear the reason why we have to renew our just-healing butt blisters? I confess I assumed we were to stay in this royal castle more than a day. Unless they decided we’re pirates after all, and are about to come in force to toss us out?”

A distant bell rang, and Inda got to his feet. He looked strange with his hair pulled up high. Binding his hair up was something new, a heavy, ornate silver hair clasp fashioned in the shape of an owl in flight.

“I’ll explain on the way to supper,” Inda said, and did.

Dinner was in a room down the hall, with low tables and more of those flat wine cups. The same three people who had come to greet them were there. During the interim Hadand and Evred had worked feverishly hard to set in motion the enormous chore of equipping an army overnight; Tdor had shown Inda and Signi the way to Inda’s room.

There she had endured an uncomfortable stretch as they all made painstaking conversation in Iascan, which Signi barely understood. Tdor’s heart had wrung at how hard all three of them tried to find

something of interest to the others.

Tdor did not know how long that excruciatingly boring conversation about horses would have limped along until Inda muttered something that caught Signi by surprise. The dag turned her head, her trembling fingers just touched his, and his hand tightened round hers as they leaned into one another. It was only a moment, but it was so profound a withdrawal from the world, a cleaving to one another that left Tdor out at the same moment she had been wondering if she could sniff his hair—did he still smell like a puppy?—she wanted to touch the scar by his eyes—

No, she wanted to kiss it.

Just then the two caught themselves up—they remembered her—and consciously pulled away from one another. Signi asked a polite question while Inda poured out three cups of wine that no one wanted. All well-meaning, all consciously including her. But she had found herself business elsewhere as soon as she decently could, and went to walk in the cool air until she heard the bell for dinner.

Tau lingered at the back as everyone filed into the dining room. He wondered what the role of Runner was supposed to be.

He watched Evred-Harvaldar for clues. The king's hazel gaze brushed past Tau with no invitation, but no rejection, so he followed Jeje in. And on impulse Tau threaded himself expertly through the where-should-I-sit shuffle to a place next to the tall, brown-haired Tdor, Inda's affianced wife, who had effaced herself so quietly that morning.

"We can all speak Sartoran, I trust?" Evred-Harvaldar opened a hand toward Signi.

His reward for making it clear she was not to be shut out was Inda's sudden, wholehearted smile.

Servants brought the food in, setting it out for everyone to help themselves. Evred spoke to one; the servants touched hand to heart, but there was no bowing, and at no time did Tau ever hear the customary honorifics such as "Your Majesty" that were common elsewhere. The servants then left.

Conversation skimmed the surface with scarcely a splash: the ride from

Marlo-Vayir—food—harvest—food in port cities—worst food ever eaten. Jeje sparked the first laugh with her scathing portrayal of the terrible food at Freedom Harbor's pretentious Colendi eatery.

Everyone laughed but Signi, whose head ached from the demands of this exceedingly long day. For now she would listen. These Marlovans all spoke the quaint Sartoran of generations ago, soothing to the ear.

Evred laughed, but absently, and gradually withdrew into watchful silence; the weight of enormous preparation for riding out pressed on him and he longed to take Inda and be about it. But his mother was an Adrani, she had raised him to be aware of outland expectations due to guests. He would not be perceived as a barbarian.

"... I'm chief mate of *Vixen*, like I said. Scout crafts don't have captains. And Tau didn't want to be a captain," Jeje was saying to Hadand.

Jeje's Sartoran was difficult for the Marlovans, a blend of Inda's accent and something flat and odd—Chwahir, in fact, though the Marlovans did not know it. Jeje had learned the language from a former crewmate who had sailed back to Chwahirland after the pirate defeat.

Sensitive to the subtlest motion of hand or eye, Tau became aware of a furtive but persistent scrutiny. He glanced up once to meet the steady brown eyes of the queen.

Hadand flushed and concentrated on Jeje talking about Inda's fleet, leaving Tau to study her with interest. Hadand's wide brown gaze was unexpectedly like Inda's. He was intrigued by the slight tension in her shoulders, the nearly imperceptible flare of her nostrils that revealed her awareness of his attention. She appeared to be about his own age.

"... and that's the last of 'em now," Jeje finished.

Evred forced himself to speak. "You say they have sailed to the south, then? Away from us?"

"That was the plan," Jeje said warily.

Inda said, "Even if we hadn't lost most of Eflis' tail of small craft in the sail west—they were worthless anyway—we couldn't take on the Venn's southeastern fleet."

Evred said, "I understand that. Your former ships won't turn on us, then? That's my only concern."

"No," Inda said.

"No," Jeje stated, now glaring a challenge.

Inda sent her a mild look of reproach. She flushed, her black eyebrows an unbroken scowl-line across her forehead, and busied herself with her food. At Tdor's prompt, Inda described Freedom Islands. Of the Marlovans, only Hadand had been beyond the borders, and she remained silent. Tau shifted smoothly to the royal city, and his appreciation of the local music. Tdor showed her good nature by talking determinedly about old ballads, as if anyone cared. With Tdor the center of attention, Tau sat back, turned his head—and there were Hadand's light brown eyes again. This time he sustained her gaze.

Tdor was thinking: *Is it beauty creating a universal resemblance, a high art of human structure, or does he really resemble Joret?*

Hadand was thinking: *those eyes really are gold . . . yellow-flecked light brown that blends into gold, surrounded by long, curling lashes . . .* perhaps she should stop drinking wine. She was staring. And the room seemed far too warm.

Then he raised his cup in salute. He had beautiful hands. Strong and graceful, slender wrists emerging from the cuffs of a fine linen shirt that, though he'd worn it all day, was not rumpled like Inda's clothes. It fitted in a smooth line over his well-shaped shoulders and the contours of strong arms—

Warmth rushed through her veins, leaving the tingle of possibility as she raised her own cup. And she braced herself to meet again those amazing eyes, touched with gleams of light reflected from the candles.

"Ah, it's good to eat home food again," Inda said into the protracted silence that he hadn't even noticed. He reached over to help himself to more rice-and-cabbage balls.

"What do you eat on your ships?" Tdor asked, exasperated. *No one cares about songs. Let's do food again.*

Inda grinned at her. "Don't be imagining shipboard food is bad. Not on the *Death*. Lorm is a great cook. Trained in Sarendan. They use a lot more spices, and cream in a lot of things."

"Like the Adranis," Hadand said.

"Lorm—our cook—couldn't often get cream, but the spices he had in bunches all over the galley, and even growing right on the ship, in pots, during the warmer seasons. Since nobody but me likes our food—they think it too plain—" He wagged a hand. "The spices were popular. Especially on long cruises when there isn't much of a change."

"What's the best food you ever had?" Hadand asked, turning politely to Jeje.

"Colendi. The real stuff." Jeje jerked a thumb at Tau. "He showed me where to get it, when we were grounded in Bren."

Hadand turned Tau's way again, and he enjoyed the tingle of anticipation that burned along his nerves at the impact of her gaze. Laughter flared behind his ribs at the unexpected: he never thought to sit at a table flirting with a queen under her king's nose. But marriage was different for the likes of kings, not just here but in most places. Royal marriage was often a dynastic or diplomatic requirement—you needed heirs, you needed one of each of the two sexes as symbolic heads—it seldom had much to do with the heart.

"Tell me about Colendi cooking," Hadand said.

"Typical of Colendi life. The senses must all be in harmony, including sight. You could therefore say that in Colend, food is an art . . ." He brought his discourse to a smooth close, with reference to the Colendi penchant for music and illusory art in their plays.

"They have Colendi plays in Anaeran-Adrani," Hadand said, elbows on the table, chin on her laced fingers. "Even though I couldn't hope to catch all the references, I came to enjoy them very much. Once I learned how to watch a play."

Tau savored the curve of her lips, the hint of rueful humor there. Inda's sister! How much of his attraction stemmed from his long friendship with Inda? She did not have any of the grace, style, or perfection of feature of the Comet, his lover in Bren, but he found her far more compelling just from one day's acquaintance. Comet was too artful, too much like Tau himself. This Hadand seemed to have Inda's total lack of guile, though she was not as open.

". . . what I want to know is, what are magic's limitations?" Evred asked, rapping his knuckles gently against his still-full wine cup.

Tau and Hadand forced their attention away from each another.

“Is your context that of battle?” Signi spoke for the first time. “Magic is not a weapon.” She said the words, yet knew them for a lie. Because the Dag Erkríc, once the head of the Venn mages in the south, had been courting Norsunder in search of exactly such magic: that to be used as a weapon. This was in part why Signi sat here now, an anomalous prisoner.

The path of Ydrasal had led her steps here. She met the young king’s watchful gaze and said, “Magic moves, mends, heals. It serves, it does not conquer.”

Inda flicked his fingers. “Magic isn’t used for the military. I know you can’t make swords fight on their own or enemies burst into flame.” Then he turned to her, struck by a thought he’d never followed before—never had time to follow. “How about art? Do mages live in fabulous palaces and whenever they want a change, they do a spell?”

“No. It takes as much labor to make a thing by magic as it does by hand, it is just a different kind of labor.”

“Can you make art?” Hadand asked, resisting the impulse to ogle Tau. She felt his presence like the warmth of the summer sun: even when not looking up at the sky, her body always knows precisely where it is. “Artists talk so about their own limitations, about vision being greater than execution.”

Signi smiled. “There is no spell for beauty, not outside of illusion. You can create illusion, but it changes nothing material.”

“Is art illusion?” Tau asked.

Signi’s serious face turned his way. “How do you mean?”

“It can’t be,” Inda said. Now he was rocking back and forth on his mat. “I don’t remember exactly, but I think my mother once read me something about art being truth.” He laughed. “And you talked me out of it, Sponge, remember? Oh, the yapping we did while wandering out the stables. We took ourselves so seriously. And the masters must have laughed themselves hoarse.”

The red-haired king smiled, the tension momentarily gone from his face. Tau heard a short intake of breath from Tdor.

Evred’s nerves tingled. Inda’s enthusiasm was exactly the same, despite the scars, despite the years. He cleared his throat, long habit controlling his voice. “I remember now. I asked you something my father had recently had read to me. Is art truth, or beauty? I do not see a mirror, or art which reproduces the effect of a mirror, as art. Just so truth is not art.”

“Then it *is* illusion,” Tau said, to keep the conversation going. “Hah.”

“Contrary.” Evred’s smile was easy, even friendly in a detached way. It was not the sudden, unthinking beam of inward elation that he gave Inda, and Inda only.

Hadand, in her determination not to be staring at Tau at table, turned her attention to her husband to discover the merry, free smile of their days in the schoolroom together, when the Sierlaef was safely far away. Surprised, delighted, she thought: *Inda’s return has brought his boyhood back again.*

Evred said, “It was Adamas Dei of the Black Sword who wrote that art is harmony of all things perceivable, our finite attempt to express the sublime—the infinite. True art strives to break the bonds of the finite, and the effect of art makes us part of that harmony, for a time.”

Signi pressed her hands together then opened them outward, a stylized gesture of grace. “Art transcends.”

Tau waved a hand to and fro. One of his conversational skills was the ability to pose as antagonist to bring the others together, if only to argue with him. “Most art demands wealth. Art separates the leaders of style from those who want to be perceived as stylish; it enhances prestige. Or the pretence of prestige.” *Is Hadand impressed with my pomposity?* “I can’t think of towering pastries that look like castles and cost a gold coin apiece as art but merely as ostentation.”

“It’s art to the pastry-maker,” Tdor observed. “There is beauty in all things to those who perceive it.”

Signi’s lips moved as she translated, then she smiled, lips parted.

Tau made a gesture of deference. “But then you are saying that art is beauty. Is beauty therefore art?”

Inda rose to his feet, surprising them all. “What I want to know is, is art necessary to magic?” Without waiting for an answer, he loped out, wincing at every step.

## Chapter Seventeen

HADAND frowned. *We will not come back to war, we are not barbarians*. “Magic is necessary to life. We have been learning again what our ancestors knew, as our magics begin to fade.”

Signi said, “I know. I have seen. I will do what I can.”

Hadand’s expression eased. Her husband’s remained inscrutable.

Inda reappeared then, and set on the table eight slim golden cases. Six of them were paired, each pair covered with matching images in very fine scrollwork: leaves, ribbons, poppies. One had roses—Jeje recognized that as the mate to the one she had in her gear—and one, the mate to the box he’d given Fox, was carved with stylized flames.

“Tau there knows what they are; he got ’em for me. Only one is missing—staying aboard my flagship.” He avoided Fox’s name. “T’other missing one Jeje has. They’re made as art, but my use was intended to be military. Your Rajnir must use ’em, right?” He turned to Signi, who bowed her head in assent. “Well, my first question is, must they be in gold with all the artwork, and second, how does he manage with eighty-one pairs in order to talk to his captains?”

Signi said, “Eighty-one pairs? I do not comprehend.”

Inda turned on Tau. “You said they only came in pairs.”

“So the mage told me.”

“Ah.” Signi’s brow cleared. “It is a misapprehension. You do not have to have them in pairs. Perhaps your mage thought that was what you required?”

As Tau assented, Signi observed tension in both men. She remembered the rueful conversation by the Marlo-Vayir people about the lack of mages for spell renewal. Here was yet another fraught question: magic. Would they accept the magic renewal so badly needed if offered by a Venn?

She forced her thoughts back to the subject at hand. “You can make them talk with as many others as you wish, but the cost is greater because each must be spelled to match each of the others in turn. Every possible exchange requires another layer of spells.”

“So that’s how it works.” Inda dropped the one he’d been holding. “Too bad they’re worthless on the sea.” He turned Evred’s way. “I’d thought we could put together a semblance of the Venn communication, but you need line of sight. There are no landmarks beyond the horizon to give your position in reference to anyone else.” He turned back to Signi. “Your navigation is like a net laid over the world, right? And only your captains know the system of knots.”

“True.” She inclined her head. “As for your first question, gold is merely the conduit. Those in power have always preferred gold. My chief dag said it was the way of the powerful—whether in governing or in trade—to secure this tool to themselves, for who else can afford so much gold?”

Tau added, “So there’s truth in the assertion about ostentation. The paired ones are called lovers’ golds in Sartor. When I bought these I told the mage they were for a popular player in Bren. For her dalliances and as gifts to favored admirers. It was the only thing I could think of to deflect any interest in why I wanted ’em. In case mages duplicate messages for some political reason.”

“You cannot do that.” Signi leaned forward. “You cannot make two sheets of paper out of one, except like this.” She mimed tearing. “But you can divert a message, often without the correspondents knowing. And then restore it.”

Evred’s brow puckered in doubt, then he walked out. He was gone only a very short time, returning with a golden locket suspended from a chain. Everyone except Hadand looked at it in surprise.

“Have you ever diverted anyone’s messages without them knowing?” Inda asked, turning back to Signi.

“Not I,” Signi said, scrupulous as always. “But my . . . my mistress had begun to try, yes. To Dag Erkrick. To do so is very, very dangerous,” she added.

Evred had been toying with the locket, his ambivalence obvious to Hadand and to the observant Tau. With a sudden movement he cast the locket onto the table before Signi. “Can messages sent inside of these be diverted?”

Signi touched it with a tentative finger. It was warm, as if it had been just taken off; she was startled, but hid her reaction. “This is old-fashioned,” she said. “It is a court love locket, from Sartor, very common the generation before us. They usually come in pairs.”

Evred said, “It is not a single artifact. Can its messages be diverted and read?”

“No. No one would think to divert them: the magic transfers love tokens from one locket to the other, and it would take the presence of both before they could be re-spelled to cause a third party to receive their tokens first.”

Evred retrieved his locket, ran his fingers through the chain as if to lift it, then he dropped the whole into his pocket.

Signi was astonished. That old-fashioned, quaint ornament—intended for the idle times of wealthy Sartoran city dwellers—functioned as a communications device for this king. Were they truly so devoid of magical aid here? She wondered if she should have told young Shendan, who had taken her by surprise after the king had sent her and Hadand away from the map room, what she had about basic magery and how to find books on learning. Yet knowledge was to be shared—that was what her own secret order had sworn.

As the meal ended and talk became general again, Signi came to a decision. She whispered it to Inda. Evred’s head turned sharply at the sound of her soft voice, but he said only, “Inda. We must get you equipped, and see to the last of the preparations.”

He leaned down to speak to Hadand. She rose, and together they went out, talking rapidly in low voices. “Do it,” Inda said to Signi, pointing with his chin in the direction Evred and Hadand had gone. “From the sound of it, we’ll be busy a watch, maybe more. And you’re right, it will be a while before he trusts you. Go ask Hadand. I think she’d welcome your help.”

Evred was going to keep Inda busy most of the night with preparations to ride. Signi would have the night to herself in this vast, martial castle. She would use it to do some good for those whose patient faces turned their king’s way—and Inda’s—with such hope.

## Chapter Eighteen

MARLOVAN women had been required to defend their camps back in the plains riding days. Their defenses had been adapted to castles ever since the Marlovans had taken Iasca Leror. And so Hadand and Evred swiftly arranged the shift of certain of his duties from him to her on the walk to their royal suites across the hall from each other. Each was matter of fact, terse in speech because each understood the other so well. There would not be another chance to speak; Evred’s mind was clearly racing ahead to the north.

He left her after this short colloquy and she summoned her captains, issuing orders for new patrol patterns to be given out. Among their new duties the women would take to horse, defending the city’s perimeter. The girls here for training would combine with the men over fifty and the boys in the academy under eighteen for sentry and gate duty.

When the women left she discovered that she had a headache. And so she retired to her inner room, because she would rise early indeed. The men would not depart in silence.

\* \* \*

Tau retreated to the high sentry walk between the towers, and strolled along in the cold, rye-scented evening air, studying everything and everyone. The entire city smelled of baking bread.

He stopped at the east tower. Below, the vast stable yards were lit by torchlight, smaller hand torches being carried in and out of side buildings so that the whole resembled a great beehive filled with orderly activity picked out in golden pinpoints of light. Once or twice he caught sight of Evred striding hither and yon, always with Inda by his side. There was no indication Inda needed Tau, so he was content to observe.

A quiet step behind brought Tau round, one hand brushing over his wrist, touching the handle of the knife



strapped to the inside of his forearm. Tdor recognized the gesture. It was strange to see a man mirror what she was used to in women on guard.

She stopped, hands out. "May I talk to you?" she asked, her manner hesitant, even contrite. As if she expected rebuff.

He was intrigued at once. "Please do."

"I am here on behalf of Hadand," Tdor said, without any coy preamble. "She doesn't know I'm here. I thought perhaps you were interested in her."

"Mmmm." Tau gave the sound an interrogative rise at the end.

"Well, if you could see your way to visiting her," Tdor gestured downward. "She's alone now. She shouldn't be."

Her profile, lit by the ruddy light from below, was troubled. Kind, and Tau sensed that rarity, the generous nature that expects no gain. "No one should be," he said. "Unless they prefer to sleep alone." His tone was ambiguous. Tdor sent him a quick look, then stepped back, and gave a half laugh, awkward, troubled, sad, and Tau, on impulse, said, "Your king is . . . enamored of Inda, did you see that?"

"Yes." She breathed the word, looking away. "I didn't know anyone else saw it. Hadand didn't." Tdor gripped her elbows. "She only saw her brother. Back again." Then, quickly, "Only how could he be in love with Inda, after only a day? Is that love?" Her tone made Tau wonder how many shadows that question cast.

"From the little I've heard today, it sounds like all his brother love went to Inda when they were boys. And remained steadfast all these nine years." Tau remembered his mother's discourses on love, scarcely understood when he was small. But remembered, as she had intended. "At some point that changed to something else. Despite the poets' praise for such steadfast love, it's not always good. That is, if it's unreturned, it can become . . . consuming."

"You mean a craze." Tdor's gaze was unwavering. "Those are common in his family. His father, Tlennen-Harvaldar, had one for Captain Sindan. That one was good because it was two ways. They were mates. Evred's brother had one for Joret Dei, who was to marry Inda's brother. That one was bad, because she didn't want him. So it brought about many deaths, beginning with Inda's brother Tanrid, and ending with the Sierlaef himself."

Tau grimaced. "Princely passions can be dangerous."

Tdor said soberly, "I don't know what to think, except to be afraid for them."

"If your king doesn't act on it, Inda may never see it." Tau stepped closer, lowering his voice. "You knew Inda when he was a boy. I've known him since. My guess is he was surrounded by love back then."

"Yes." Tdor sighed. "His mother, Hadand, Joret. Me. The castle children—" *Except Branid. No, even he in a twisted way, but then everything in his life is twisted.* "—the servants, they all loved him, hugged him, kissed him, wrestled with him, laughed with him, retied his sash when he forgot. His father, from a distance. I once thought his brother didn't love him, but since then I have changed my mind. Tanrid loved Inda the way he knew best—the way he loved the castle dogs. Who adored him." Her eyes lifted skyward, her voice dropping to a whisper with the depth of long-suppressed feeling. "And it seems to have been the same when Inda went to the academy."

"So love was Inda's natural state. Love—loyalty—was like air to him. And though I believe his ability to love was frozen up with his memories of his home for nine years, his loyalty wasn't. He is loyal to us all. That's part of his appeal as a captain."

Tdor let her breath out. What an extraordinary conversation, with an extraordinary person. He resembled a painting of an impossible hero in one of the ancient scrolls, haloed as he was by the torches beating with ruddy light above and around them as they cast a glow onto the courts busy with the preparations for war. But she had grown up with a girl whose beauty had brought her more grief than pleasure and in a sense Tdor was inured to the effect. What intrigued her was the shape of his features and the subtlety of his mind.

Still. The conversation had turned intimate of a sudden, and that made her uneasy. Life this day had taken

so very many peculiar turns. She would expose no one's secrets any further.

She struck her hand over her heart, and said, "I thank you."

She left without saying what for.

Tau lingered, thinking, thinking, and at last made his way back down, and to the room where Jeje had retreated. "I shall probably not be back tonight," he said, in apology. His expression, not his tone, asked a question.

Jeje understood the question. She regarded him for a long breath, half lit through the reflected glow in the open window, tall, graceful. Truth was, she was disappointed, but then she had never expected to hold him to her anymore than one holds the sun that warms you and then leaves at night.

But the sun always returns. Instinct said he was telling her because he would always come back, if she would have him, like the sun greets the world each day.

"It's the queen, isn't it?" she asked, her husky voice low. "I saw the way she looked at you at supper. Though she was trying not to."

"Are you displeased?"

"No," Jeje said, looking inward and finding it was so. "I like her. She's a good person, like Inda. Well, she's Inda's sister." She snorted a laugh. "Go on, give her a night to remember."

He blew her an airy kiss and slipped out, running downstairs to one of the old parlors where he'd seen a lute, set aside after the former queen left and forgotten since. He stopped long enough to tune it, and then trod down the hall to Hadand's rooms.

Two women guards stopped him. He brandished the lute. "I came to offer some foreign tunes for the queen's amusement."

The female guards exchanged glances; one smiled at him with grim approval as the other slipped inside.

The queen came herself and opened the door, looking up at Tau in mute question.

The guard stepped out and took up her stance, facing out.

Tau walked into an austere room that smelled of summer grasses and wildflowers and baking bread; all the windows stood open, despite the cold air. Candles burned at the far end of the room, where they would not worry her eyes.

"Shall I play?" Tau asked, studying Hadand's wide brown gaze. "I'm deemed very good. Or," he said, not quite touching her brow, "I can get rid of that headache. I'm very good at that, too."

"Please," she said, too distressed to ask how he knew she had a headache.

At his gesture she lay down right before the fire, and he knelt beside her. And as heels clattered and horses clopped and steel rang in the courtyards below, he hummed softly, his strong fingers polishing one by one all the knots and splinters of her neck and shoulders and back into smoothly cambered silk.

At the last she exhaled deeply. "You *are* good."

He laughed, and bent and kissed the lovely curve of her neck. She sighed again—a deep, pain-free breath—and turned over, stretching out on her back.

The invitation was there in her smile, her welcoming posture. But—he bent and sniffed again, identifying the distinctive, slightly bitter herbal smell of—

"Are you using birth-herb?" he asked.

"My moon-cycle ended not two days ago," she responded, and, her lower eyelids crinkling just the way Inda's did at inward pain, she added, "I won't be drinking it tomorrow. Or the day after."

Of course not, with her king riding off to war. Tau sat back on his heels for a long moment, appreciating those wide eyes so like Inda's, and yet so unlike, and then with a deliberation that caused her to tingle he admired the enticing curves that her parting night-robe did not hide. "You are beautiful," he whispered, as passion radiated up through him, echoed back in her breathing, blazing into incandescence.

She made a sound midway between a laugh and a sob, but then his lips met hers, and the only sounds were those of love, and the music of the night birds outside, and beyond them the noise of preparation for war.

Jeje, left alone, prowled around the room once, twice, and then gave up. She'd napped all afternoon when the others had been whisked away. It had seemed a good idea at the time. But now she couldn't sleep.

So she decided to take a walk from one end of the castle to the other. She'd see if she could make it without getting lost, and maybe it would tire her body enough to catch some rest before yet another horrible all-day ride.

She slipped out. No one in sight. Not surprising. It was late. But when she reached the tower with the spiral stairway there was a bright glow in the slit windows. She stood on tiptoe. Below lay an enormous court full of men in gray tunics and long-skirted coats checking horses' feet, adjusting saddles and gear, carrying loads this way and that.

The rhythmic hiss of slipped feet coming up the stairs caught her attention. It was Tdor. She probably had a room on the same hall.

She gave Jeje a tentative smile, and Jeje blurted, "Are you really going to marry Inda?"

Tdor halted midway on the stair, and then resumed her climb. One, two, three steps, and then she reached the landing. "I don't know," she said finally. Her accent in Iascan was exactly like Inda's. Until recently, only Fox and Barend had Inda's accent. Now Jeje heard it all around her. "That is, I expect so, once he returns from the north." She raised a hand to tuck a loose strand of hair back behind her ear. Her sleeve fell back, and there was the glint of a polished black knife hilt. Her smile was bleak. "If he returns from the north."

*She doesn't just mean if he's dead.*

Tdor opened the door to her own chamber, and made an inviting gesture. "Do you want to come inside? Or am I keeping you from something else?"

Jeje stepped into the room. "I was wandering around trying to get tired enough to sleep."

Tdor's chamber was furnished exactly like all the others. Jeje plopped down onto a mat.

Tdor sat more slowly. "Tell me about Taumad. Where does he come from? His accent is not northern Iascan, like yours. It's more like ours in the south."

"That's because he grew up in Parayid Harbor. His mother runs—*rana* pleasure house. He didn't want to work there, so he went to sea. He pretended he was fourteen, which is the oldest most traders will take on new ship rats. But he was older. Though at that time he was short and skinny. He started getting his growth as soon as he got on board."

"Do you know his family background?"

"No. His mother changes their name every few years."

"He seems very well-spoken. More so than any pleasure house person I've ever met."

"Oh, he is. Inda told me once he thinks Tau probably got more learning than he did, he just hides it.

Except when he needs it. Maybe a different education. He doesn't know Old Sartoran—you know, the ancient script where they write up and down, not sideways. But he sure knows the modern kind. His mother made him read lots of poems and plays so he'd learn to speak properly." Jeje added with a quick grin, "If you're warm for him, well—"

Tdor laughed, raising her hands. "Not the least. Oh, he's a handsome fellow. Very. And kindly spoken as well. He reminds me of someone I grew up with. I wondered if the resemblance was merely in their, oh, their refined looks. If that kind of beauty creates similarity in features? Does that sound foolish?"

Another surprise. Midnight was nigh—how many more surprises lay ahead to hit her broadside on before the day-change bell? Jeje pulled her knees up under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"Tell me more," she said.

## Chapter Nineteen

EVRED-HARVALDAR'S people took heart from the sight of their king moving tirelessly through the chaos of preparation. There was a lift to his chin, a sense of assurance in his manner, even joy: he did not

seem to believe defeat was possible.

The news spreading outward that Evred-Harvaldar would ride himself to the kingdom's greatest threat surprised no one. After all he had no real Harskialdna, though everyone hastened to give Barend-Dal credit for his valiant attempt to learn what he should have been taught over a lifetime. So he would ride, and beside him would be the infamous pirate-fighter Elgar the Fox, who really was a Marlovan after all. When dawn bleached the torchlight, after a night of almost overwhelming effort, the great parade court was filled with ridings of men and horses, talking, shifting, checking and rechecking gear, their breath and the horses' clouding and mingling.

In the adjacent academy parade court, the boys lined up, their high voices shrill, shivering with excitement more than the bitter cold to witness history in the making.

\* \* \*

The window was a square of weak blue light when Hadand woke Tau. "Inda is riding out at sunup." She gave him a lingering kiss. "Thank you." Another. "Watch out for him, will you?"

"Inda? Or your Evred?" Tau asked. For between the tides of passion there had been the intense talk that sometimes happens at the prospect of imminent parting. Tau understood a lot more about the royal pair's complicated relationship, which was built on love and respect. But the flame of ardency only burned in one.

"Watch out for them both," Hadand said.

"I'll do my best."

He stopped in the men's baths briefly, then returned to the guest chamber to discover Jeje waiting at the window, her gear bag over her shoulder. She gave him a searching gaze. "The king wasn't in with her, was he?" She did not make it a question.

"No." He packed in a few brief moves.

*Now I've got it, she thought. Tau, who can have anyone he wants, likes to be needed. So he becomes what they need. I want him but I don't need him like the others do, so with me he can just be Tau.*

He straightened up, his head canted in question. She gave a short nod of satisfaction, his expression cleared, and they walked out together.

Halfway down the stairs they met Vedrid. "Indevan-Laef sent me to fetch you," he said.

Fugue shrouded Evred's mind during the predawn scramble as an endless stream of Runners converged on him, all with emergencies to be instantly resolved. He spoke automatically then randomly as his feet carried him steadily home.

Not the castle. Home—though never consciously defined as such—was the academy.

When his conscious mind brought him back to his surroundings he found himself facing rows of boys lined up, elbowing one another surreptitiously. Memory: the first day he'd come down from the castle to take his place among his fellow scrubs, all nudging, wriggling, staring around. Where he'd first seen Inda, looking lost.

"... before the signal to mount up?" Headmaster Gand was saying.

Gand. Waiting. For what?

The sudden return to consciousness struck Evred with a sickening conviction unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Not before battle, not after. Not when he came home to a crown after assassination and murder.

They were waiting for him to make a speech.

Speeches were traditional before important occasions. This departure was desperately important. Good speeches had been turned into songs, and sometimes even written down in the records, because they had successfully lifted men's hearts, inspired their minds to courage and duty. But great speeches were made by great heroes. Not by ordinary second sons who found themselves yoked to kingship, before a battle

that—

He snapped his attention away before so terrible, so treasonous a thought could finish itself, and swept his gaze round the court full of waiting faces.

Disoriented, unsettled, Evred hesitated, his manner appearing cold and remote to all who watched him so expectantly. The boys, thinking the king displeased, stopped fidgeting, and stood as straight as fence posts.

He loathed the idea of himself uttering pompous words about courage and duty.

But he had to speak.

And so he cleared his throat. The exhaustion he'd escaped all night pressed on his skull. He forced his voice to parade-ground pitch. "You know the orders. Boys under eighteen to remain, and men over fifty. This is traditional. If we do not hold the north against the Venn, it is your task to hold the royal city. And to carry on. Because if we lose the north, it means not one of us is coming back." He drew a cold breath deep into his lungs, and his heart drummed. *Don't end with defeat.* "We intend to come back in victory, knowing that you will make certain we have homes to come back to."

Master Gand struck his fist to his chest, and the boys cried out, "Evred-Harvaldar!"

And, from behind, the men's deeper voices shouted so loud the echoes bounced back from the high walls of the castle.

"Evred-Harvaldar Sigun!"

Evred drew breath. The nausea had transformed into giddiness; his nerves tingled with ice, then as abruptly flared sun-bright. He had nearly forgotten the oldest of traditions.

But Gand hadn't. Here were two boys, appointed ahead of time, who blushing brought forward two swords. And the senior boys now stepped forward with their hand drums at the ready.

Evred took the swords and swung them while restlessly scanning the crowd for Vedrid. It wasn't right. He should not be alone. They had to see—

But here was Vedrid, and right behind him Inda, his coat brushed and neat, his hair smoothed up on his head, the silver owl clasp glinting. His jaw tightened at every step, but when he spied Evred he grinned. Evred snapped his fingers for two more swords. The joy was back, at steel-forging heat. This time he did not have to make an effort to be heard. "And at my left will ride Indevan-Laef Algara-Vayir, who will command this battle, while my cousin Barend-Harskialdna conducts the defense of the shore."

A susurrus of whispers rustled outward, and Gand himself came forward, offering two more swords, his own and another master's, hilts out.

Inda gripped them, swung them once, twice, then he stilled, facing Evred.

"Hep!"

Their swords clashed together overhead, right hand against right, sending blue sparks arcing out. And thirty-six boys who would talk for the rest of their lives about this moment pounded the rolling, rumbling tattoo of the war dance on hand drums, as Inda and Evred spun, clashed left against left. Whirled and clashed again and again. And then—together—threw the swords ringing onto the stones, north-south, east-west.

They stomped, whirled, and hopped, hands high, as the big boys drummed, the small boys clapped. Perfectly in sync, they danced through the complicated patterns that Inda had last performed two years ago on the deck of his flagship, with Fox Montredavan-An.

Then, as the boys shrilled the high, savage fox yip, the king and his commander walked side-by-side to the parade court, where the men waited, each by his horse.

Gand silenced the boys with a gesture.

"Mount up," Evred said, turning his gaze upward at the castle—and yes, there was Hadand high on the highest tower. Tdor at her side, he was glad to see. All as it should be.

A great clattering of hooves, the jingling of chain mail and weapons, brought his attention back.

Exhilarated to almost an unbearable degree Evred indicated Inda ride by his side, and not behind and to the left in Shield Arm position. Every man who saw Evred's smile, the rare, bright-eyed smile of unshadowed joy, took heart in his lack of fear, his assurance. Here was a young king who believed in victory!

Together they led the long columns through the old archway between the throne room and the great hall, where horses had not been ridden since the city had been conquered. They crossed the royal stable yard, and thence to the main street. On all the walls the old men had their hand drums out, and played the war charge. Evred gave the signal to gallop as the women lining the castle walls shouted, over and over, "Evred-Harvaldar! Evred-Harvaldar Sigun!"

The horses had been prancing, tails lifted, ears flicking. They plunged into the gallop, their riders easy on their backs, tear-shaped shields held aslant.

Tau rode behind Inda, Jeje and Signi at either side as Marlovan warriors closed around them. He saw at once the impulse behind the rumor of Marlovans on their flying horses: the dust-blurred line of galloping horsemen were like raptors with folded wings stooping to the kill.

*So what does that make me? A duck?* As he bounced and jounced in Inda's wake, he was glad that he'd learned to stay on his beast's back.

Civilians crowded along the city walls, drumming on family hand drums, clashing together pot lids and metal implements of every variety as children screeched and jumped. To them the day was exciting, and they danced about, some singing old war ballads, others fighting with sticks, Marlovan against the evil Venn.

Their elders cheered and drummed, but the faces of the oldest were grim.

On the highest castle tower, Hadand held a locket gripped tightly in one hand. At her side stood Tdor. Neither looked away from that dust-obscured line fast diminishing over the open ground as Hadand said, "You know where they went right after Inda arrived?"

"No. Somewhere in the castle, surely. No, wait, didn't they go out into the street?"

Hadand compressed her lips. Then, "They went to the academy."

Tdor did not answer; she dared not answer.

Gradually she became aware that Hadand did not expect an answer, though her free hand sought Tdor's, and gripped hard. Hadand shouted until she was hoarse, her women shouting with her. Tdor gazed westward until Inda had long vanished into the dust-shrouded mass on the plain.

## Chapter Twenty

BETWEEN the weather and the distrust on both sides, the parley at Pirate Island took a very long time to arrange. The actual conversation, however, was absurdly short, screamed across railings into the howling, sleeting wind: the two leaders would meet, alone, on the dock at midday the next day.

The midday sun peeked between racing clouds at the sleet-washed harbor where, according to the agreement, Scarf stood alone in the middle of Five Points Parade.

Directly against the agreement (she had dispatched them even before her boat met Elgar the Fox's midway between the two fleets) her people lay on the rooftops surrounding the parade.

They were all watching when a last gust of sleet from the departing storm briefly blew back the smoke from the burning remains of the last of the docked trade ships. She'd set these locals on fire partly out of revenge, but mostly to make certain her cheat force was screened from the northern side of the harbor where Elgar the Fox's ships gathered. Two could play at that game. The damned thing was, the murk also screened Elgar's approach.

A whisper ran round the hidden attack teams as a single silhouette strolled out of the smoke.

Another gust of wind, and there was Elgar the Fox, a tall, knife-lean figure dressed all in black sauntering through the thinning haze. The only color picked out by the chill slants of early spring light was the smoldering glint of the ruby hanging at one ear, the ruby worn by those who'd defeated the Brotherhood of Blood. His sword was strapped across his back and knife hilts gleamed faintly at the tops of his boots. Even to pirates he radiated menace.

Fox was only aware of his own sick sense of events moving beyond his control. He hated this plan. But he had agreed to it.

With his heartbeat drumming in his ears he lifted his voice slightly and said, “Well?”

And braced inwardly for arrows. Counting on others’ fear is not much of a shield. He hoped Mutt and the other young ones would learn that as his much-pierced corpse hit the boardwalk.

Fear stayed some hands, each pirate hoping someone else would shoot first, just in case Elgar had that Norsunder rift ready for anyone who attacked him. Curiosity stayed others’. It would mean something in the pirate world to sail under Elgar the Fox, who couldn’t be beaten. If he killed Scarf, well, it happens! Falthum was crouched behind one of the barrels stacked in front of a cooperage. His aunt gave a jerk of her chin. He rose, and together they walked out. Already breaking the accord—but Elgar didn’t retreat, or protest, or even react. Unsettling.

He stopped just a few paces short of the edge of the dock, empty wagons parked at either side. Scarf had searched them herself.

She advanced slowly, drawing strength from her trusty crew lying on roofs all around the parade.

All right, then. “Elgar. Can you really command Norsunder?” she asked, when they were maybe twenty-five paces apart. She could see him clearly now: maybe mid-twenties, lean, stance easy but ready for action. Intelligent, that narrow, slant-eyed gaze, the sarcastic mouth.

*Command Norsunder?* he was thinking. *Only two winters, and already the truth has warped.*

*So use it.*

He lifted a shoulder. “As sure as my name is Elgar the Fox.”

“I think we take him now, just the two of us,” Falthum said, ready to lunge forward.

Scarf saw the Fox’s smile thin and warning prickled through her. He *couldn’t* have gotten anyone onto the docks to back him. She’d had her own watchers posted along the dock and shoreline before the two ships even met for the parley—a long-used plan. But.

She caught the back of Falthum’s coat. “Just a moment. Maybe we can work something out, here. No use in spilling more blood.” The idea was to make it clear that two on one put her in the command position.

Elgar, the shit, smiled just wide enough for her to see the edges of white teeth. “I don’t mind spilling blood.”

Falthum looked back at his aunt: what do we do now?

She didn’t like showing her strength so early, but it didn’t seem this Fox was going to cooperate. So . . .

“Maybe spilling some of your own will change your mind.”

She drew her sword.

Fox had glanced up only once when approaching the dock. He knew he was being watched, and while one sweep of the area for enemies was to be expected, another would make the pirates suspect he was looking for something specific.

*Over to you, Dasta, Gillor,* he thought, flinging up one hand.

Scarf and Falthum charged him.

He had about a heartbeat to wonder if he was going to die stupidly with one arm in the air, then Dasta’s fight teams surged over the rooftops to take the pirates from behind, and Gillor led hers down from the back two streets just below the white chalk cliffs over which they’d spent two days trudging, out of sight of the pirates.

Scarf stared, as shocked as her crew. She had not expected anyone to come over the west side of the island, climbing mountains in the brunt of the storm.

That was her second mistake.

“Shoot!” Scarf yelled.

Fox whirled, sword blocking Falthum’s downward stroke. He grabbed Falthum’s thick wrist with his other hand, and pulled him round in front of him just as the hissing arrows struck.

Falthum cried out, stiffening. Fox dragged him backward the precious few steps he needed to vault behind the wagon he’d positioned himself near as another wave of arrows thudded into the old wood.

That would be the last wave of arrows from the rooftop pirates who were now busy fighting Dasta’s team.

Fox lunged out, knife and sword raised, as pirates came at him from all directions—Scarf, enraged past

caring, in the lead.

Fox spared them a glance. The pirates still outnumbered his people. He whistled sharply. Those who'd reached the parade snapped into the threesomes he'd drilled into them and took on the overwhelming numbers, backs forming triangles.

That was when the locals stampeded from three of the side streets, waving either real or improvised weapons, and flung themselves at the pirates. The press intensified, sharpened steel cutting almost as much inadvertently as by directed blows, until Scarf and Fox emerged from the crowd and stood face-to-face.

Fox whipped up his sword's point, then lowered it, stepped back, and smiled.

Scarf started a scornful question that was never asked because the consequences of her first mistake caught her squarely from behind: a hard wooden chair, swung with all her strength by Mistress Svanith.

The younger crew danced on the deck of the *Death*, surrounded by lamps and torches, as some clapped and sang. Mutt twirled on a barrelhead at the center, a bottle of wine in either hand as he kicked his legs up high to the tweetle of a flute and the shouts of his friends. Just below him Pilvig and Nugget sat side-by-side, Pilvig clapping and Nugget thumping a mug on the deck to mark out the beat.

Fox had snagged his own bottle of wine. His usual custom after an action was to get thoroughly drunk. It masked the pain of cuts and bruises he hadn't been aware of getting, and it also masked the howling, wintry gusts of laughter through his skull, reminding him that no matter what he did, no matter how many fights he won, there would never be justice for him to go home to.

Or for Inda. He was probably dead. Inda certainly had not been at Parayid. The golden magical transfer case was empty.

And there it lay on the side table. Fox checked the impulse to fling it into the sea—as usual. Visual reminder of the stupidity of hope, wasn't it? Or was there still some stubborn kernel of hope down inside him somewhere, bitter as aloe, dry as dust? Well, leave it.

He thrust open the stern windows to let out the cold stuffy air. Rain hissed on the sea just beyond, numbingly cold, but he smelled a difference in the air: spring was reaching the south at last.

He slammed the wine bottle down onto the table, dropped into his chair, and stared at the lamp. For a time after the fight he too had enjoyed the sweetness of successful command. But even at the height of enjoyment there had been moments of doubt, or something stronger than doubt. Moments too quick to identify during the swift flow of events.

He shut his eyes, trying to sort the images. Falthum, Scarf's nephew—Mutt, dancing and singing in his triumph—Scarf lying dead on the stones.

Her cabin had surprised him. Not just the neatness, but it was full of old and expensive books, carefully preserved in glass-fronted shelves. The nephew—

That was it. He leaned over and fingered the books he'd taken from Scarf's flagship, as Gillor (as the newest captain to earn her command) did not want them. There was not a book anywhere in his own fleet, that he'd swear.

The—call it anomaly—had begun during that parley, short as it was. The nephew and the aunt speaking so differently. Their accents—no, it wasn't the accents. He knew smart people who spoke in dockside idiom. He knew stupid people who had been tutored to emulate the Colendi cadences of the upper ranks. Scarf had spoken like one tutored to the upper ranks, but she hadn't taught her nephew to speak so. More to the point, she hadn't taught him the *vocabulary* to speak well.

That was it. Had she deliberately kept him ignorant? Intent was now past question, thanks to Mistress Svanith's summary justice. The fact remained the nephew had been ignorant. And . . .

Fox tipped his head back, listening to the rise and fall of young voices on deck. Mutt, the oldest of their young ones, celebrating his first command of one of the small schooners. He loved being a privateer. Fox wondered if he'd turn pirate if given a chance. What other life did he know? What was he, eleven or twelve when Inda first hired him, a hungry castaway off the docks at Freeport Harbor?



Fox took a long pull from the bottle, wrenched open the cabin door and yelled, "Mutt!"

The song on deck faltered for a moment, then resumed. Mutt's bare feet slapped down the hatchway a moment later, and he dashed into the cabin, his strong-boned face emerging from the roundness of childhood, his gangly limbs beginning to take on the shape of the man he would be. If he weren't killed. During the past two years they'd lost three of the young ones in battle (one recently returned); the others had cried fiercely at the time, but then recovered, eternally optimistic about the future and their place as future commanders.

"Do you know how to read?" Fox asked.

Mutt's mouth dropped open. His eyes shifted to the bottle—

"No. I'm not drunk. Yet. Do you know how to read?"

Mutt looked affronted. "Inda never made us—"

Fox's hand snapped out, quicker than a whip. He didn't use a knife, or even much force, but the Marlovan women's fighting style, called Odni, illegally taught to Fox by his own mother, enhanced Fox's speed so he caught Mutt off balance. He fell on his butt.

"I thought you stopped that." Mutt scrambled to his feet, rubbing one butt cheek. "Anytime anyone mentions Inda. It's not like we'll ever forget him—"

"If you want a life of violence," Fox cut in, "you have to be ready at all times. Now answer my question."

"A little," Mutt said reluctantly, glowering through his tangled hair at the pile of books. Then away, as if they were more a threat than Fox's ready fist.

*A little.* Fox knew that Inda, at age twelve, had taught his fellow ship rats how to read the winter they were all imprisoned in Khanerenth when it was undergoing its political upheavals. But he had apparently stopped teaching when they lost the Pim ships, and any hope of a legal existence. After that, all his energy had gone into building his defense marines. Mutt had been hired during that time.

"From now on, your duties will include reading to me at night."

"Me? *Why?*" Mutt glanced at Fox's long hands lying there so lightly on the one knee he'd cocked over the other as he leaned back in his chair. Then his wary brown eyes turned upward to Fox's ironic gaze.

"Quiet," Fox said. "And before you continue whining questions about why you're singled out for this torture, and what did you do, you may pass the word among the rest of the rats that you will be rotating this duty. You will all continue until you've all read these books. Even the ones in Sartoran."

"But I don't know any Sartoran!"

"You had better find the time to learn it, hadn't you? Go away. Finish your dancing and drinking. I'm certainly going to finish mine." Fox picked up his bottle. "Tomorrow, you start."

Mutt ran out. His young honk was audible from the deck as he reported Fox's newest outrage, his tone the distinctive teenage mix of belligerence and injury.

Fox turned back to the books, sliding them aside one by one until he reached one bound in finest blackweave edged with gold. His colors.

Over his life so far he had sustained many temptations, not the least of which was to kill Inda and take the secret treasure of the Brotherhood of Blood, now known to only five people in the world. Six, if you counted Ramis of the *Knife*—wherever he was.

And now a new temptation . . .

He dropped the black-and-gold bound book, uncorked the bottle, took a swig, stepped to the open windows. Then smashed the bottle against the stern timbers. And at the sudden silence abovedecks, he laughed.

## Chapter Twenty-one

TAU and Jeje were given a tent to themselves. They set up next to Inda and Signi, who were next to the king in the center of camp.

Everyone rose before dawn for warm-up drills before they took to horse.

Evred asked Inda to run the morning drills for the warriors. After some talk with Tau and Jeje, Inda decided to stay with single knife drills. He would attempt to train them in Fox's and his refinements on fighting techniques they knew. He would not attempt to train them in the two-knife style. The Venn would not wait for them to gain expertise.

So Inda did his double-knife drills on his own, then drilled the men while breakfast was made and packed up camp.

Tau and Jeje did not join the warriors out on the nearest grassy field, but worked between their tent and Inda's. They were used to lack of space. They had trained on shipboard, and then, for almost two years, they had practiced on a narrow rooftop with no rail.

Early one morning a few days outside out of the royal city, Tau finished warm-ups with Jeje in the dim predawn light, then wandered toward the cook tent for something to drink to find Vedrid waiting for him. Vedrid was outlined in the glow from the cook fires, fine pale hairs drifting down on either side of his face as they were not really long enough for even the back of the neck tuft that confined the rest of his hair. Tau felt a pang of sympathy. He'd once cut off his hair on a whim he still could not entirely explain. Consequently he'd endured the tickle and annoyance of short hair for a couple of years until, at last, it was long enough to bind back again. It had surprised him at first that Vedrid, the only one of the Runners with this absurd tuft sticking out over his collar, endured no teasing. After several nights at the Runners' camp, he recognized that Vedrid's short hair was a badge of honor.

Vedrid extended an armload of cloth.

Tau held it up to the ruddy light and discovered a newly made Runner's blue coat. "Thanks," he said. Inda popped out of the tent beyond Tau's, his bare feet slapping through a rain puddle. Tau laughed inwardly at Inda's obliviousness to the bemused looks that followed his rolling sailor's walk as he crossed to the field where the men were gathering for morning drill, his sailor-braid flapping against the Marlovan coat Buck had given him.

"No bandages today," Tau observed. "He must be getting used to being shod."

The planes of Vedrid's face shifted as he smiled. "We fixed the uppers of Landred-Randael's boots with cotton-wool."

Landred-Randael? Oh, yes. Cherry-Stripe. *Why don't these Marlovans get rid of their titles entirely, and just use their academy names?*

Tau signified agreement in the Marlovan manner—hand opening—which seemed to satisfy Vedrid, for he departed, vanishing in the gloom to go about his morning's tasks.

Tau smoothed his hand down his new Runner's coat. Someone had been stitching that by firelight every night since their departure. Of course he must wear it.

He had always believed that identity is mutable, at least group identity, if not individual. You dress like others, mimic their manner of speech and their interests and the way they move, and you become one of Us, and cease to be Them.

He'd played at roles ever since he was small, and been aware of himself playing at roles. Pulling on the long-skirted blue coat for the very first time changed the way he stood, the way he moved. It was tight through chest and shoulders, yet cut for a range of motion in using sword or bow; the high collars kept out wind as one rode, the long skirts warded the worst splashing from streams and puddles. For part of the day his spine seemed spiked, but by late afternoon, when they customarily halted, he felt as if he'd been wearing the coat all his life; only his muscles pulled from the alteration in his bearing, forcing shoulders back and down.

By sundown the Marlovans' attitudes toward him had altered. He'd made the transformation from stranger to Runner.

The day they expected to cross the Eveneth River into the southeast corner of Marlo-Vayir land, where they would be resupplied, they rose to a thin, chill rain. To Tau's surprise Jeje did not step between Inda's tent and theirs to begin warm-up drill.

In the faint ruddy glow from the cook fires fifty paces away, Jeje glanced around furtively, then motioned for him to follow. They passed Inda's tent and were crossing behind the king's before Jeje spoke. "Let's go somewhere these Marlovan nosers can't hear us."

They paced through the tough green grass to the other side of the enormous horse picket, swinging their arms in the old warm-up pattern.

Tau matched his rhythm to hers as they snapped into strike-block, whirl, lunge, strike-block, kick, whirl, strike-block-strike. So they had worked every day during their time in Bren harbor. They had talked freely about everything while running through these mock fights.

Jeje threw Tau. He rolled to his feet and lunged.

She whirled away, circling, then said abruptly, “Inda spent two years with that Evred. With these others like Cherry-Stripe. He lived with us for *nine* years. Or most of that. And he thinks of them as home.”

“They *were* home.” Tau feinted, blocked, sidestepped, and slammed her over his hip. “You seem to forget—” *Smack!* Block. Whirl, kick. “—we all chose the sea. He was forced aboard the *Pim Ryala* .” “I thought he liked it with us.”

“He liked us, not the sea life. Though he got used to it. You seem to be mixing the idea of home with friendship.”

Snap, feint. Block, *wham-wham-wham*. “What do you mean?”

She dropped, snapped a hook kick round his ankle, caught him just before he could shift his weight, and flipped away as he fell trying to take her down.

He laughed as they rolled to their feet. “I think I mean that there is no single definition of home. For you and me, home is wherever we are comfortable. You on *Vixen*, me anywhere I have . . . interests. For Inda, home is here. This flat land that smells like horse and rye and wind-borne weed.”

She ducked her head in acknowledgment and began again: strike-block, feint-block-lunge. “Which is one of the reasons why I’m gonna leave.”

“What?”

Her palm smacked against the side of his nose, splashing shards of pain-lights across his vision.

“Ow!”

“Augh!” She hooted. “You should have warded that!”

Tau clapped a hand to his nose, blinking away the stinging tears. He pulled his hand free—no blood. He repeated, far less forcefully “What?”

“I’m leaving.” Her voice was a growl. “And don’t even try to argue. I was awake all last night arguing with you in my mind, and I won. I’m not going through it again.”

Tau wheezed a laugh as he carefully fingered his nose. “Why?” He winced, trying to think past the pain reverberating through his eyeballs. “Is it this ride? The Marlovans themselves?”

“I could stand the ride, the smells, the boring food, the war gabble—I could even bear being treated like I am as invisible as a ghost. Did you see it on Restday, how they acted as if Signi and I didn’t even exist? I mean, I guess I can see why they wouldn’t ask Signi to pass round the bread, her being a Venn. But what’s wrong with me?”

Tau said, “You weren’t left out of the wine, were you?”

“No.”

“They aren’t used to bread while on ride, you could see that. Bread and wine are for home, with their families.”

“I know, I know.” Jeje waved her knife back and forth. “See, none of that would matter if Inda really needed me. But he doesn’t. I’m about as useful as a rug in water.”

“It’s not—”

“I know what it’s not. Marlovan women don’t ride to war, so these fellows don’t know what to do with me. I don’t fit anywhere, not even on Restday—they pretended I was another fellow. I wouldn’t care about any of that if Inda needed me. I’ve been thinking about what you said, our first night at that inn. Inda *didn’t* get a knife in the back when these people saw him again. He didn’t even get a bad welcome. He doesn’t need me to protect him, not with that king sticking to him like a barnacle on a hull. Anyway, he’s got you. And Signi.”

Tau rubbed his hand over his head. “But what will you do? Fox and the fleet are long gone. Maybe as far’s the Land Bridge by now, if not farther.”

To Tau’s surprise she gave him an evasive glance and a tight shrug. “I have my plans. All thought out. I

have a-a thing to do,” she said to the tumbled gray clouds, then faced him. “So don’t try to stop me, because you can’t. I’ve got my dunnage packed, and I’m just going to wait until I can catch Inda alone, then I’m off.”

Tau stood there with cold rain tapping his scalp and trickling down into his collar, scouring his mind for any possible secret.

Regret sharpened to ache when he remembered that Jeje had a home. A family. People she cared about, from whom she had not parted in anger, unless the war had struck them down. But Jeje had maintained stoutly that they were too smart to be caught short.

Jeje knew that Tau’s own mother had been caught short—that is, she’d been taken aboard a pirate ship, her house burned down, and he had wasted much time and money in Bren trying to find word of pirate ships that might have carried a golden-haired pleasure-house owner of astonishing beauty from Parayid Harbor in Iasca Leror.

Of course Jeje wouldn’t want to say anything about going home!

Jeje glared at him. How he loved that face, a love that he had defined as wholehearted and free of restraint or expectation. So how would he endure this great hollow behind his ribs?

“I thought you’d stay,” he said finally, and laughed somewhat shakily, a sound that came out a nasal honk through his throbbing nose. *I came here because of you*, he thought, but he knew it had been a whim, not a purpose. *I don’t have a purpose*.

Her cheeks reddened. “Look, Inda gave me the gold case back, after Signi did whatever it was she did to them. You can get one from him, too. He did say you should have one. And I remember Inda’s writing lessons just fine.”

“Yes.” Relief flooded through Tau. “Good.”

He held out his arms, and Jeje flung herself into them. They hugged, hard, a bone-cracking grip of wordless fervor, then she gave a strangled laugh that was half sob, and pushed away. “Oh, Norsunder take drill. I’m off. Sun’s up anyway.”

It was true. Muted by the heavy mist came the cadenced clashes of others working somewhere on the far side of the tent city. The horses were being fed and saddled by the young Runners on duty, horses and gangling boys now clearly visible in the strengthening gray light.

They walked back in silence, heads bent, and when she slipped around the other side of Inda’s tent, he forced himself to walk on.

Jeje stopped behind Inda’s tent, eyes squeezed shut. The worst was over, she repeated inside her head. Worst was over, worst was over—now to find Inda, if she could just get him away from that—

“Shall we,” someone said in Sartoran, “go somewhere the Marlovan nosers cannot overhear?”

Jeje started violently, then whirled round. There was that red-haired king not two paces away, and much taller than he seemed when glimpsed across the camp, his attention on someone else.

She sidled furtive glances left and right. Sure enough, he was—for the first time—speaking to *her*. Anger burned away the numbness of shock. But since she was leaving, why not answer? “You’re the king,” she retorted. “Seems to me you can go right ahead and order people out of hearing any time you want to.”

He opened a hand—invitation or command, she wasn’t sure which. Maybe both. She followed him back in the direction she’d gone with Tau, his long-legged stride rapid enough to require her to hop a couple of times to keep up.

When they were well beyond the horse picket she demanded, “What do you want?”

“Right now, to understand your place in Inda’s life,” the king replied, without heat.

Jeje did not consider herself the acute observer of the silent language of the body, as Tau put it, but she could see that Evred was trying to put her at ease without being em barrasingly (or condescendingly) vocal about it. After all, he could have summoned those muscular Runner fellows to haul her into that big tent of his, with all those commanders and their swords clanking around inside.

And *she* had started wrong, with her comment just outside that same tent. She grimaced, knowing she’d never remember that even if you can’t see into these blasted tents, or see who’s just outside, you can hear everything, unlike on a ship, where with the scuttles, hatches, and windows closed, there is a semblance of privacy, if you keep your voice low.

So she said far less trenchantly than she might have, "I came along as a bodyguard."

His brows lifted. In the gray light of dawn, the fine mist heightened his coloring. He really did remind her unsettlingly of Fox. It was not just how tall he was. Fox was taller, though more lean. Fox's hair was a much brighter red, his eyes the color of spring grass, whereas the ones regarding her so steadily now were more grayish than green. Their faces were wholly different—it was their manner that sent echoes through memory. Even though Fox, at his most mordant, also reminded Jeje of Tau in his most withdrawn, artificial mood.

Meanwhile, Evred observed the change of emotion in Jeje's face. He had been far too busy to spend time or thought on this woman who'd come along in Inda's party, who did not fit in anyplace he could conceive.

Then she made that remark about Marlovan nosers right outside his tent. Not deliberately—she hadn't used the tone for that and had spoken in the odd sort of Sartoran that Barend had called Dock Talk. But it was intriguing enough for Evred to set aside his ongoing tasks and wait for her return.

"Inda did not tell you we were friends when we were young?" he asked.

She shrugged rather sharply, her lips compressed into a line. He leaned forward, trying to divine the emotion behind that glowering brow. She did not betray the manner of a spurned lover. Then there was what Inda had said shortly after his arrival: Jeje was here to protect him from the wiles of kings.

Wiles. Inda had meant it as a joke, but there was some kind of truth behind it. Yet she just stood there, arms crossed, fists hidden down by her sides.

"Speak freely," he said, and with a smile, "Inda does. And there is no risk of retribution."

She snorted her breath out. "For how long?"

Evred rocked back on his heels. "What?"

Jeje clenched her fists more tightly, determined not to reach into her sleeves and grip her knife handles.

"You said to speak freely. Well, then, I'm going to, but I warn you, you won't like what you're going to hear."

"Which is?" He crossed his arms, but in an attitude of relaxed waiting, of listening.

She was briefly distracted, noticing he had fine hands. And they were no more revealing than his face.

Another snort, and she let it all out. "I hate kings," she stated. "I hate the very idea that one person can wake up in a foul mood and launch an army against people he's never seen. Or she's never seen. Near as I can tell, there's plenty of queens just as bad."

"You seem to assume that kings escape the consequences of their actions. I assure you it is not true."

"It's not the same. I wake in a foul temper and my mates joke me out of it, or give me a trimming. Or Fox gives me extra watches of drill. Your father wakes up one day, and maybe he didn't like his dinner the night before, but the next thing Idayago knows, they are under his yoke—and he can't possibly know all the consequences. I don't mean just on land, though from everything I heard in Bren Harbor, those were bad enough. But our captain, as good a man as ever lived, at one far away stroke, ended up deprived of his whole life." Her voice trembled. "Don't tell me you ever even heard of Captain Peadal Beagar."

"He was the captain of Inda's first ship," Evred said. "A merchant trader, one of a fleet of three."

She was momentarily checked, then shook her head. "Oh, yes. You could send spies, or whatever, to find out what happened to Inda, once you gained power. Bad example."

Evred suppressed the heat of irritation. "Never mind examples. To your original point. If you assume that my father's decision to take action against Idayago was a whim borne of mood, then you assume wrong. Nor did he escape the consequences of that action."

She jerked her head, then wiped impatiently at the beads of mist along her lashes. "Never mind, never mind, I know what's coming next, and no, I don't know anything about your politics. Don't care to.

Here's what I'm worried about. You could wake up one day and not like something Inda says, and next thing he knows, he's on the death list."

Evred's eyes narrowed, and a betraying flush edged his cheekbones. "You really think I'd do that?"

"Of course!" she said. "Because you can! You're one person. That is, you've got one man's temper, but because you're a king you have a kingdom's worth of warriors to throw at someone when you're

crossed. And no one can stop you.”

Evred gripped hard on his temper. Not that he was about to sic the guard on her. The idea was absurd! He, who had spent his lifetime laboring to control—to disengage from—the danger of emotions, did not want to betray how annoyed he was with her assumptions. Power! She did not know how very powerless he’d been most of his life. But yes, he did have power now.

And so. To the real issue. “You are here,” he said, “not to protect Inda from the Venn, or even from my people, but to protect him from me.”

And she said, “Yes.”

Another wave of anger, this time a deep stirring of rage. But again he controlled it. She did not know him. She made assumptions about kings. And most of them were regrettably true.

She let out an unsteady breath, and he understood that she was as upset as he. She said, “That is, that was my purpose. I can see that everything is fine. May stay fine. I don’t know. What I do know is that Inda doesn’t need me right now. He won’t need me in this battle, either. I’m best in sea battles, carrying him about the line, and while you could probably use my bow, it seems to me you’ll have plenty of bows on hand. So I’m going to see to another matter.”

Evred did not smile, but a hint of humor was there in the deepened corners of his mouth. “In fact you have decided to entrust him to me—for now?”

Jeje blushed. “Inda can take care of himself. And I know I’m being a busybody. Just, we didn’t know what he’d find, coming to land,” she admitted. “And I can’t help worrying.”

“Then how about this?” Evred lifted his hand, that same gesture Inda had used, which they could never quite figure out. “All I can offer is my word. Not as a king, but as a person. If I ever get angry enough with Inda to want to throw a kingdom at him, I promise I will halt long enough to summon you from wherever you are to defend him first. How is that?”

She scrutinized him in suspicion, suspecting facetiousness. But he’d never spoken facetiously, and there was no smirk now. Then she wanted to reject his words as the useless words of a king, except wasn’t that a kind of reverse swagger? She could just hear Tau! *Oh, you say kings are just people who happen to have power, but when they speak as just people, you won’t believe them because they are kings?*

She gave a curt nod. “All right. I’ll take you at your word.”

Evred opened a hand in agreement, then started back. Once again Jeje tramped through the mud past the row of smelly horses, this time not in companionship but next to a stranger she thought of as a waiting thunderstorm in human form.

But she’d been given the sign for clear sailing. She’d already readied her gear. The king walked out beyond the tents to where his captains and the rest were doing their best to follow one of Inda’s and Fox’s knife drills, and she had to admit they were doing really well.

She watched Inda striding back and forth, and listened to the sound of his voice. His countenance was so different from what they’d thought normal. This lifted face, the easy laughter, the quick, broad smile that brought out long dimples in his cheeks—this was his normal face. This observation left her with a heartsick sense that she didn’t really know him.

Well, Tau would say whatever needed to be said.

She reclaimed the horse that had been assigned to her, and during the rush to break camp and get breakfast she rode away, unnoticed except by Tau, who did not trouble her with any unnecessary words, and by the vigilant sentries on their perimeter patrols, and finally by Evred, who felt a strong sense of relief that one of his many minor problems had so neatly solved itself.

## Chapter Twenty-two

TAU sat on his mat near Inda and Signi, across from Evred. They had their own campfire, pleasant under a sky full of stars. The golden haze of the men’s campfires outlined the jutting skyline of tents surrounding

them. The air smelled of the supper Runners brought in wooden bowls, cheese-sprinkled rice-and-cabbage balls cooked in pressed olives.

Before Inda and the king could begin another of the endless iterations of past battles, often blow-by-blow, Tau said, "Jeje's gone."

"She's gone?" Inda asked, slewing around as if searching for her. "I thought she just rode off exploring." Signi sustained one of those painful heart constrictions: she felt she had failed Jeje. Two women alone, and one had inadvertently so shut the other out that she departed unnoticed. She pressed her hands over her face, her head bowed forward. Sitting there in Inda's shadow, she was unnoticed by everyone except Evred.

Tau said, "I think she went home. There wasn't really a place for her here." *Or for me either.* He would have gone with Jeje if she'd asked, but she'd been very clear about going alone.

Evred said nothing, which Tau found interesting as he'd glimpsed him talking with Jeje shortly before she rode off.

Inda rubbed his jaw. "Well, then, we'll know where to find her. And she'll know where to find us."

"Where was her home? Do you know?" Signi asked, raising her head.

"Just below Lindeth," Tau replied. "Though she had relations in Parayid."

The fire snapped, whirling sparks into the air; a shout of laughter rose from a campfire fifty paces away. Neither Evred nor Inda noticed. They'd withdrawn into reverie.

The day Inda arrived Evred found himself in another condition of being. Words like *happiness* or *desire* or *pain* lost their meaning the same way *red* or *blue* or *green* weakened in hue in the midday summer sun.

Pain and enchantment whipsawed Evred. The moments of enchantment were brief, and deeply concealed: he cherished Inda's manner of eating, unchanged from his ten-year-old self. Either Inda bent over and ate fast, laughing, talking, or listening, or he sat motionless—as now—spoon suspended above his dish, gazing beyond the world.

Pain . . . was more complicated, the sharper because Inda had not returned alone, but with this woman at his side, hands so gracefully composed as she listened, or talked inanities with Taumad. There was nothing offensive in her voice, her presence, or her manner. It had taken Evred only a day to observe how hard she worked to keep it so. Not that her effort showed. It was the opposite. Only someone who has learned habitual wariness can recognize another who never ceases vigilance.

She was as plain as a woman could be; what figure she had was entirely hidden by the old smocks she'd apparently gotten from the Marlo-Vayir women, the worn riding trousers and riding boots cast off by one of the castle girls. From a distance Dag Signi resembled one of the half-grown runners-in-training whom Vedrid had as part of his staff, only she was shorter than those boys, her shoulders rounder. When she wore the old hooded cloak one of the Runners had given her, she was indistinguishable from the boys. What could Inda see in her?

Inda had said that he was in love with her, but what exactly did "in love" mean? The definition changed from person to person. Inda did not follow her with his eyes the way her eyes followed him, but he sat close to her, some part of them touching, when at rest. And during the first night on the road, when Inda had cried out in some kind of nightmare, it had been her voice that soothed him into sleep. Evred had waited through the night for another cry, and in the morning for explanation, but Inda appeared to have forgotten, and the mage moved about in her courteous way as if nothing had happened.

The matter remained: she was a Venn. One who was aware that men had been detailed to guard her. She never strayed far, and sometimes even paused for them to keep her in sight. As if she knew they would be flogged if even once they lost sight of her.

Evred had seen how his Runners and staff walked around her as if she did not exist, not knowing how else to react to so puzzling an anomaly in their midst.

*She is not just a Venn, but a mage.* So far she had done no spells that he was aware of, and more important, had not asked for paper or pen, so she could not have sent off spy reports.

Perhaps it was time to examine the subject further. "I have some questions," he said.

No response. Inda's brown eyes did not even blink as they reflected the fires he stared beyond.

“Inda! Wake up.” Tau leaned forward.

Clack! The spoon dropped. Inda looked around with an air of surprise. “It’s the smells,” he said, as if continuing a conversation—one that had never taken place.

Puzzled, Evred sniffed the air. “Smells?”

“Home smells. Horse. Grass. Rye—”

“Rye? What do they eat, elsewhere in the world?”

“Seldom rye. Someone is burning rye biscuits.” He waved in the direction of one of the distant campfires, and everyone sniffed the breeze, now aware of the distinct aroma of singed bread. “Like they did on our last night all together, that spring, on the ride to the royal city. When I was eleven.” He shook himself.

“Never mind. Did I miss something?”

“The Venn,” Evred said. “We postponed discussion of them. Now perhaps is the time. I want to know more about Prince Rajnir. And his commanders.” He turned to Signi, his manner polite, formal. “I do not ask you to betray any military information that you possess. I would like to understand the individuals—especially this Dag Erkríc, whose intention to use magic to ensorcel my will is part of what brought you here.”

Her face did not change, but her shoulder tensed against Inda’s arm. “You must understand that I am a sea dag. I know nothing about land war.”

Inda flashed a grin. “She was right there in the sea battle off Chwahirsland. Remember when we were small, and heard about it? But the sea dags navigate, and do some ship repair, and healer spells. They don’t fight.”

“Understood,” Evred said.

Inda was sensitive to voices; a subtle flatness to Evred’s tone indicated some kind of conflict, or ambivalence. Yet he’d started this conversation.

*Make it easy for them, talk about what she’s told you,* Inda thought. And, to Signi, “You said that Rajnir’s commanders are a lot older than he is.” On her nod, “I noticed when I was in Ymar that the army was war-gaming far from the coast. If I was planning an invasion in the next year, I would have army and navy together, practicing landing and launching an attack over and over on a coast with as similar a terrain as possible. Why didn’t Rajnir order them to drill together?”

“He cannot.” Signi laid her palms together, fingertips pointing outward. Evred had seen her do that before, and again wondered at its significance. “That is, he could. He is the prince, though his position as deposed heir is anomalous. But then the heirship itself, for the first time in centuries, is anomalous.”

Evred drew a slow breath. Signi regarded him in mute question, her manner tranquil.

“Go on.” Inda smiled encouragingly. She sensed his concern, and tried not to let it magnify her own as he went on, “You told me there’s rough weather between sea and land forces.”

She spread her hands, then closed them again. “Hilda—that is the land warriors. Hilda Commander Talkar is well-respected by the Oneli Commander, Hyarl Durasnir.”

“The Oneli are the sea lords,” Evred said. “Correct?”

Signi bowed her head over her steepled fingers. “Hyarl Durasnir and Hilda Commander Talkar respect one another, all attest to it. Yet all Venn grow up knowing that in the lost times, when Venn came to this world, they sailed through the sky-between-worlds aboard a *drakan*, the first Venn warship. The Oneli are the First Venn, the sea lords. They have the precedence. The kings are chosen from Oneli families. There are Hilda families, but they have precedence only over commons. Anyone may join the Hilda.”

“So they don’t work together,” Inda prompted. “Outside of orders.”

Signi considered, then bowed her head in agreement. “They will do what they are ordered to do, for that is the oath of Drenskar. The-the military oaths lie alongside our own—”

*Drenskar.* Evred heard a twisted version of the Marlovan word for *honor* and knew it for the origin of their own word. “I am familiar with it. Back to the commanders, if you will.”

Signi’s fingertips touched gracefully in peace mode. “They respect one another. But each makes his own plans in order to carry out orders from the prince.”

“The prince won’t command by himself?” Evred asked. “I was told that he led the ship battle Inda just mentioned, when your people took Ymar.”



Inda flicked his hand out. “He lost. And that was after Ymar’s queen made some kind of deal with Durasnir to hand over the kingdom.”

“The Ymaran queen is believed to have died by treachery,” Signi said. “Not by our people. She was killed by one of her own relations, the young Count of Wafri.”

Inda’s hand jerked; Signi started, fingertips pressed to her mouth. Evred’s tension sharpened in question as Inda murmured under his breath to her, the tone comforting, as she shook her head, her manner remorseful.

Signi said to Evred, “Prince Rajnir means to take your kingdom for the good of the Venn, and to prove himself. The king has desired that the Marolo-Venn, the lost ones, be brought back to us, and their lands, too.”

Evred’s mouth tightened but he only inclined his head.

“Hyarl Durasnir will do his best to implement the plan from the sea and Commander Talkar the land, with the sea-trained Drenga, marines, joining the Hilda for the landing.” Signi leaned forward. “Dag Erkríc serves the prince, but his own plans are different, and that is part of what brought me away from my people.”

Was it mention of this Prince Rajnir that had made Inda recoil? It wasn’t Durasnir, Evred had watched closely. He leaned forward, the firelight reflected in his eyes. “Erkríc’s your chief magician, is he not? Yet you assured me that magicians are not concerned with war, that magic is confined to making and mending.”

Inda said, “Erkríc is trying to get around that by dealing directly with Norsunder.”

Signi pressed her hands together again. “It is so.”

Inda pointed at Evred. “Everything is to benefit the Venn. He wants our land to feed the Venn, wants our army to fight their enemies—and he wants you as his puppet to see to it all, so that he can help Rajnir reclaim his position back in Land of the Venn.”

“Me as puppet,” Evred repeated. So it was true, then.

“Magic spells from Norsunder, to ensnare your mind.”

Now it was Evred’s turn to recoil. He snapped a gaze of cold fury at Signi. “Is that possible?”

“It is not for me.” She touched the front of her smock. “Or for anyone I know. But this is what he seeks from Norsunder. We do not know if such spells actually exist.”

The fire crackled. From outside their camp circle came normal sounds: the racket of spoons against travel dishes, the fart of a horse on the picket, followed by the snickers and chortles of young runners-in-training working their way down the line with feed bags. From another direction, the crunch of footsteps in the gravel. Men’s voices, talking quietly, an occasional laugh, and in the distance the muted thump of hand drums as voices rose in an old war ballad. Normal, familiar sounds, but not comforting.

Evred said, “There is a question about Prince Rajnir inheriting his father’s throne?”

“The king is not his father,” Signi corrected gently.

Evred opened his hand, a quick gesture. “Thank you, I remember now. They cannot choose their own sons as heirs.”

“Kings do not have children at all,” Signi said. “It is part of the agreement. The Houses choose the heir. Or have. When the sons of the Great Houses born in a Breseng year—a king year—reach fifteen, the most promising of the youths is chosen by the Houses after examination. He who is chosen trains for fifteen years. When he is thirty, and the king is sixty, he becomes the new king, the old king retires honorably to head the Council of Elders. Queens are chosen separately: the marriages are entirely symbolic.”

Inda thumped his bowl down and played absently with the edge of Signi’s scarf. “So the Oneli Houses all try to have their babies born that specific year, is that it?”

“If they wish a son to be a possible king. But the Breseng youths cannot inherit at home,” Signi said.

“So what happens to the ones not chosen?”

“They go into service, usually to the sea. They are Oneli, and the honor of a captaincy is much sought.”

“Is Durasnir one of those?” Inda asked.

Signi’s face took on a ruddy hue, but her voice was even. “He was. He became the heir on his brother’s

death. But the king required him to remain at sea to guard the prince. Some say for his military prowess, some say for his loyalty—and some say so that the king could keep him at a distance during the troubles. All would be equally true,” Signi said.

Evred’s gaze was intent. “Bringing us to the present situation. Rajnir was chosen, right? And disinherited a year afterward?”

“Well, you might say two years. You must remember, in the south you all use the Sartoran calendar. In the north we do not. That is, our year is the same 441 days, but when you have the dark time, we have light, and so our new year begins at a different time.” She paused.

Inda said, “Go on.”

“So Rajnir was chosen in what you call your year two.”

“Two years before we started at the academy.” Inda grinned, causing Evred to smile briefly back.

Signi studied the pair before her, back and forth, back and forth. “There was trouble the year he was chosen. There was another chosen first, you see, but he died that week. No one knew how it happened. The second went mad and attacked someone, who killed him in self defense. There were witnesses, but no one understood the cause of the madness. When Rajnir was chosen, the king sent him to the south to acquire more land for the empire’s needs, and to learn governing at a safe distance, while the troubles at home were investigated.”

“So Rajnir ran the defense against the Chwahir and Everon, lost, and was disinherited.” Evred held up three fingers. “And there is a new heir?”

“No.” Signi’s voice was so soft it was difficult to hear her over the crackle of the fire. She was silent for a long moment, as if inwardly struggling, her brow tense, eyes somber. “That is, there was. But he drowned—no one knows why he sought to swim during winter. There has been no heir since. The king feels the old ways can be set aside until it is discovered why these boys did not survive heirship for even a year, and it is whispered he would like to rule past sixty.”

There was another, longer silence. Inda, who knew these things, was recalling the war games he’d viewed on the Ymaran fields; Evred contemplated kingship, and how difficult it was for kingdoms to guarantee continuity, whatever rules they imposed. There were the Venn, with a chosen king changing their ancient tradition. Ymar’s long-lived queen was killed by her own kin—as Evred’s father was by one of his own Jarls. Idayago and Olara conquered. Their kingships abolished by his own family . . . “So your kingship is supposed to change in three years, according to our calendar.”

“It is true.”

“Thank you for explaining.” Evred rose and gestured for Inda to follow.

The two walked beyond the firelight, and when Evred felt he was safely beyond earshot, he said, “I’ve sent orders to Barend.” His hand slid within his coat to clench on the locket; again he fought distrust and hatred of mages. A Venn mage, yet!

He did not want Inda mentioning the locket to Signi, which Evred had made the mistake of showing her. If she knew he was using it now for military communication, would she somehow magically extricate his latest note to Nightingale? She’d said that both lockets had to be present for their messages to be tampered with. Was that true, or a spoken convenience because he wanted it to be true?

“The north end of the pass is a narrow river valley spanned by a formidable castle, very old. The North Road runs directly underneath the outer walls. Flash discovered that the locals know how to destroy the road by bringing the mountain down on it.”

Inda jerked around. “Collapse a *mountain* ? I take it you’ll need to get a couple thousand men digging?”

“No. Magic will supposedly bring the cliffside down so thoroughly nothing can get through, except through the castle. Some long-ago mage designed it.”

Inda whistled softly.

“If we don’t get to the north coast before the Venn do, we can at least destroy the road leading southward. It won’t stop them, Flash told Barend, but it might slow them up.”

“Why didn’t the Idayagans use it against us when your brother and uncle went up there?”

“Flash found out that the Idayagans were arguing with the Olarans about who had to pay for restoring the road. Before they knew it, my brother and uncle were already through.”

“So the pass road won’t be usable at all?” Inda asked.

“It will be blocked only at the north end, with access through a narrow tunnel that opens a short way farther up the pass. That goes through the castle, like I said, which is why the castle *must* be held.” Though Inda could calculate rough estimates of sea journeys with only a glance at a map, he still had trouble figuring out how long a ride would take, especially through the mountains. On the map, the pass seemed the size of a footpath, its length an afternoon’s stroll. No doubt that would be different when he reached it. “Flash and his dad hold this castle?”

“Yes.”

“If he’s as fast as he was when we were boys, that’s good.”

“Fast, trustworthy, and popular. The Idayagans still hate us, but they seem to exempt Flash and his family from that hatred.” Evred flexed his fingers once, then clasped them behind his back again. “This is not for any ears but yours. Barend and Flash have arranged a beacon system over the mountains. When the Venn land on the north coast, Flash will light the beacons, and we’ll know within a night at the southern end.”

Inda was about to say, “How did you find that out?” But he remembered the talk about magic at their dinner in the royal city, specifically that little locket. He guessed that one of Evred’s Runners, if not Barend, had another locket. But it was also clear why Evred wouldn’t say: he still didn’t trust Signi. Inda looked away, grimacing. He knew you can’t just trust someone on command. Trust isn’t something you order, or not in his experience. It only comes over time.

Inda let out his breath in a hiss between his teeth. So far, the winds were yet in Marlovan favor, though the weather had been against them.

Evred waited, but Inda’s gaze had gone distant.

“Inda.”

Inda started.

“I require you to keep knowledge of the beacons to yourself. It is only for you, and eventually the Sier Danas, to know. Not even the riding captains will be told.”

Evred clenched his hands behind his back. Insects chirred and buzzed. Far in the distance a fox barked, causing the scout hounds to whimper and fret.

Inda said at last, “I understand.”

While they were gone, Signi stared into the fire, wishing she had not brought up Wafri’s name. Inda had not cried out in his sleep since that first night of travel; she hoped the stirred memories would not bring another nightmare.

She dared a glance at the two figures silhouetted against the glitter of the night sky. Even obscured by darkness their bodies spoke with intensity, Evred at war with his own emotions, Inda seeing in Evred’s intensity only boyhood loyalty and the stress of impending battle.

Tau sat just outside the circle of firelight in order to observe the others. He had less interest in the Venn—especially in a bald recitation from which motivation had been stripped—than in his companions’ reactions.

Not that Signi the Venn revealed much. Her training was a magnitude above what his mother had taught him about masking emotion. *Most intelligent people can control the expressions of their mouths,* Sarias Elend had taught Tau. *It is the skin around their eyes, and their hands, that betray them. If you cannot see their faces or hands, watch the entire body.* Signi didn’t move so much as flow—and she was about as outwardly expressive as water.

Evred and Inda returned, the king beckoning to his Runners on duty, and Inda rolling toward his tent in his distinctive sailor’s gait. Signi followed, her step composed, her head slightly bowed, her hands together in the mode of peace.

Inda flung open his and Signi’s tent, letting the stuffy air change for fresh as he unfastened the carved-wood buttons of his coat. He folded it, laid it on the mat, then brushed his fingers over the

smooth, cool golden case lying half out of his saddlebag, the campfire light twenty paces away reflected in a ruddy gleam along the edge. He felt an unexpected tingle.

The end of that first day's ride away from the royal city, he'd sat here on his mat, his feet bound up to protect the new blisters he'd given himself after dancing so wildly with Evred, and had written:

*Fox: I'm staying. Evred is now the king, and he needs me to run defense against the Venn.*

There was no immediate answer, or even one the next day. Inda hadn't expected one. It was possible that Fox had chucked his gold case overboard as soon as Inda sailed from the fleet, but Inda didn't think so. During their long journey together across Ymar, Inda had learned a lot about Fox. He could so clearly see how angry Fox could be—angry, then cynical. But he would answer, it was just a matter of when.

And so it seemed he had.

Inda picked up the case, aware of the little rustling noises Signi made as she readied the bedding. "Fox wrote back to me."

"Ah."

He clicked the case open and took out the folded paper. He had never seen Fox's writing before. His letters were a long, slanting dash.

*You will no doubt be delighted to discover that you just retook Pirate Island. Oh, yes, and you're also responsible for the rift to Norsunder that rid the world of Marshig the Murderer.*

Inda smothered a laugh, looking out of the tent for someone to share the news with. Evred had remained at the campfire, a tall silhouette surrounded by Runners, giving them their orders from the look of things. Inda remembered Evred's sudden reaction to mention of Fox, as quickly hidden, that day at Daggers Drawn. No, maybe best not to share this joke with Evred.

"Inda?" Signi asked gently. "Something bad?"

"Nah. Fox just retook Pirate Island. Has to be from some of Marshig's gang who slithered away when the fighting got hot. Says that rumors are going that I made Ramis' rift. How could they think I did it?"

The firelight reflected in Signi's wide eyes. The rest of her face was in shadow. "What did they see?"

"Everyone at that battle saw the rift. It reached right up to the clouds."

"But did everyone see who made it?"

Inda closed his eyes, trying to recall the jumble of images from that night. "I don't know." He sighed. "I think only those of us in the northern part of the battle actually saw Ramis and the *Knife*. He sailed in from the northwest. Made the rift. From the south, all they probably saw was the rift, because there were burning ships surrounding the *Death*, there at the center of things."

Signi dipped her head. "They attacked the *Death* thinking that you were upon it, is that not right?"

"Yes. And that was our plan. Anyway, Ramis hauled round, came directly to me before sailing away again, like I told you before. Tau told me that people in Bren didn't even believe Ramis had been there, but I thought that was the usual garble of distance."

Signi bowed her head. She suspected who had set it about that Elgar the Fox was dealing with Norsunder, and why. But because she had no proof, she said nothing.

Inda bent over the rest of the letter.

*As for you. Before you get yourself killed in useless causes, you really ought to marry your Marth-Davan and have a daughter to marry my hypothetical son. I've decided that the best revenge against the Montrei-Vayirs is for your blood to mingle with ours.*

Tdor, Inda thought. Saying her name in his mind used to evoke her childhood face: during his long exile he used to talk to that image in his mind. He pictured the steady gaze of the Tdor who had met him in the tunnel to the academy, her eyes brown with little flecks of green, her face long and clean-boned, tiny wisps of hair around her ears. Her smile, though, it was just the same.

"What is it?" Signi asked as he snuggled in next to her warmth.

"Tdor. If—when—we return, I'm supposed to marry her."

"Was it not always arranged so?"

"Yes. Tanrid was the heir, Joret would be Iofre. I . . ." He lay back, his breath slowly easing out. "Until a few weeks ago I'd gotten used to the idea that I'd never see Tdor again. That I had no home. No future

but what I made.”

*No you hadn't*, Signi thought, pulling him to her. *Nor, I believe, had she.*

### Chapter Twenty-three

FIFTY years of rising before dawn for meditational sword drill had brought the Venn's southern Fleet Commander Hyarl Fulla Durasnir to this realization: his ancestors had been aware of the moral advantage of meeting the day alert, dressed, muscles warm when everyone else was stiff and half asleep.

On land, his breakfast time would be given over to his wife and small son. This was time that he cherished because it had become so rare. But now that he was *asail* he sat alone, sipping steamed milk with honey as he scanned sky, sea, and sails, and contemplated this particular vagary of human nature. Conclusions so far: people felt comforted at the notion that the commander was at watch while they slept. Second, people were orderly and efficient if they knew the commander was up and about before they were.

And finally—this would be the unspoken advantage—one really needed that quiet watch, because it was far too seldom that the rest of the day would permit the luxury of uninterrupted thought.

His aide had left fleet communications at his table. Durasnir did not touch his scroll-case until he'd eaten the last bite of vinegar-soaked cabbage. The first message—as well as the fifth and eighth—were from Erkríc. The last also had Prince Rajnir's sigil scrawled below it: a royal summons.

This was why Durasnir never opened his scroll-case until he had eaten his breakfast. If there was enough of a crisis, Erkríc would come to him.

He acknowledged the order and sent it. He checked sky, wind, sea, then moved to the tiny Destination alcove off the outer cabin. He picked up the transfer token, braced himself, said the spell, and transferred.

As always, the spell nearly wrenched his breakfast away. Pain and nausea wrung through him in waves, then vanished with about the same speed, leaving him in the Destination square in the high tower at the Port of Jaro in Ymar. Here, the sun was nearly overhead, half the day gone.

When the blur cleared from Durasnir's vision he found Prince Rajnir and Dag Erkríc waiting.

Durasnir showed his palms to the white-dressed Erama Krona, the prince's personal bodyguards, surveying the round tower room as they surveyed him. As always the room was almost bare, only one chair on the tile floor, and the prince was not in it. The only other furniture was a small table carved like ivy vines. On it rested a very old Ydrasal candle-tree.

The Erama Krona moved away, permitting the fleet commander to step off the Destination tile.

All three saw in the other two their own tensions. Rajnir always had to fight the urge to exclaim, “Uncle Fulla!” He had fostered with the Durasnirs when he was a Breseng candidate; of all the Houses he had stayed at, he had liked theirs best and had been often invited back. His best friend had been Vatta, Fulla's son who had died in that damned useless sea battle against the Everoneth and the Chwahir.

Rajnir flushed, looking younger than his late twenties. He hated any reminder of that battle. Not just because he'd lost it, but because Lord Annold Limros, Count of Wafri, had so easily tricked both him and the Everoneth into that stupid clash that got so many of his own age-mates killed. Including Vatta. “My prince,” Durasnir said, on a note of question.

“I am still angry with Wafri,” Rajnir admitted, in part to try to provoke a response from his mage.

*Has he been talking about that again?* Durasnir thought. But Erkríc just smiled from his place by the window, the light haloing around his silver hair. “We have greater concerns than a petty Ymaran traitor,” he said in a mild voice, and then turned to Durasnir. “Hyarl Commander.”

The dag was older than Durasnir by ten years, but until last summer he had seemed ageless.

“We have received news from our people in the western seas,” Dag Erkríc said.

Durasnir remained silent, asking his question with gestures rather than words. He learned more if he did not provide the response that Erkríc wished.

“Pirate Island’s scout reports that Elgar the Fox just retook that island from some of the pirates leftover from the Brotherhood.”

“I hope he got rid of them,” Durasnir replied, an indirect arrow at Erkríc. Durasnir believed it had been dishonorable to ally with pirates, though tactically it had been masterly. Such a decision—practical but immoral—seemed only to lead to Rainorec, Venn-doom. Yet not just Rajnir but the king had approved, so nothing could be said. Directly.

“Yes,” Erkríc responded. “He did, or someone did. This was an eyewitness report. The one everyone claimed was Elgar the Fox was not Wafri’s prisoner, Indevan Algara-Vayir, but the one we think came to rescue him: tall, red-haired. Green eyes, not brown. Wears black clothing.”

Durasnir had sent out his own scouts since that summer and was fairly certain he’d discovered the identity of the mystery redhead who sometimes shared the name Elgar the Fox but he did not yet know for certain.

So he just bowed. “Did you issue assassination orders?”

“Our scout could not get near him. He slept onboard his flagship and they sailed as soon as they had sorted the pirates, their ships, and their supplies, leaving the surviving pirates to the justice of the locals.” His lip lifted in distaste.

Prince Rajnir’s sky-blue eyes flicked between them, his broad brow tense. “Then he will attack us on the sea?”

Erkríc said soothingly, “He sailed west, toward Toar, my prince. He will not interfere with our invasion. He is farther away every day. And even with the new ships he took on, his fleet is a mere handful against ours, and undisciplined at that.”

“So where is the real Elgar?” Rajnir asked.

“We think he might have landed along the coast of Iasca Leror,” Erkríc replied. “But—”

“—someone is killing our observers, yes.” Rajnir gripped the windowsill. “If Elgar did land, he will soon be marching northward at the head of an army. Why haven’t we gotten word of it by magic?”

Erkríc fought against an angry reaction. He had to remind himself that Rajnir and Durasnir were doing their duty. Still, Durasnir’s duty concerned the seaborne military, not the magical.

*It’s tension*, he thought, slowing his breathing in an effort to restore calm. Durasnir was unswervingly true to his Drenskar oath, which he saw as the trunk of the Golden Tree. That must be remembered.

But Erkríc knew that the true trunk was magic. The military, like all the other guilds, formed branches. He was going to change the traditional limitations of magic. Such change would only make the Venn stronger. So what could he say?

“You must remember that many of our scouts have been murdered,” he said.

Rajnir’s brows lifted in an “Oh, that’s right!” expression, and Erkríc was just drawing a breath of relief when Durasnir said, “But what about your dag scouts? Have they been murdered, too?”

Rajnir snapped round, eyes widening with surprise. “*Dags?* Murdered? Why did no one tell me?”

“Because we have found no bodies,” Erkríc said. “I will make a full report as soon as I know where my dag scouts are. When the military scouts were murdered, the bodies were left for us to find, as you know.”

“Yes, I remember that.” Rajnir’s fretful tone subsided. *He did need further soothing*, Erkríc thought. A king needs his mind serene and clear, and not cluttered with worry over what he cannot help.

Durasnir said, “Your dags have vanished in the way of our scouts, but you have found no evidence of their being killed?”

Anger flared in Erkríc, to be fought against. Anger clouded the mind. This was not the time to reveal any weaknesses on the dags’ part, which would be so misconstrued.

This was not the first time dags had just vanished. No one had been able to discover yet if Dag Jazsha Signi Sofar, captured by none other than this Elgar the Fox, was alive or dead. Even worse, no one knew why Brit Valda, Chief of the Sea Dags, had vanished, as well as the dag scouts they’d had to replace with army scouts.

Finally, and most important of all: were these questions connected to his recent, shocking discovery that the warding magic over his own scroll-case had been compromised?

These matters, he reasoned, were magical affairs. And the strain was great enough for each in his own realm.

So he said only, “That is true. As yet we do not know why. Our magical communications need to be limited for the same reasons we have to be careful landing observers. It was your own wish, my prince, that the invasion remain a secret. It requires as much effort from us as from the military to keep the plans from becoming known. This was before we discovered our long-established scouts were being murdered.”

Durasnir signified agreement. “Someone definitely knew who and where they were, and permitted them to operate undisturbed for years before this sudden sweep. This long wait before action argues against that ‘someone’ being the Marlovans, handing us yet another line of inquiry to pursue.”

Again Erkrick felt control of the conversation shifting. Since Rajnir had not yet asked the question that Erkrick had encouraged him to summon Durasnir here to ask, he gave in to temptation and asked it himself: “When will you be ready to launch?”

“The plans have not altered since last year. As soon as the winds change.”

Rajnir flicked his gaze between them. “But the Dag just told us that secrecy is hard to maintain. The secret of the invasion might even be broken.”

“If you discover that there is a large army marching north across Iasca Leror,” Durasnir said, “then you will know that the truth got out. But I never planned on surprise anyway. Only a fool counts on a major invasion being secret.”

Rajnir’s brow cleared. “So you planned on them knowing.”

Durasnir compressed his lips against saying, *I told you that before*. Rajnir either did not remember or more likely, needed reassurance. Or . . . he frowned, remembering something Signi had hinted at, very obliquely, some time ago—

Later, later.

“The plan is unchanged. Whether or not the Marlovans find out, we must have the steady summer winds. We don’t need entire ships swamping, killing our people before we even sight an enemy.”

Erkrick said, “I will leave you to review the details and return to my own investigations, then, my prince.”

Rajnir saluted Erkrick, again addressing him as Dag. Very close to the title he so coveted: *The Dag*, or *The Dag of the Venn*. *The King’s Dag*.

Durasnir bowed. “Dag Erkrick.” He gave the proper formal title.

The mage’s return bow was polite, his smile faint. “Hyarl Commander.” He vanished, not needing a Destination tile.

The window overlooking the harbor was open, so they did not feel the displacement of air. Rajnir breathed deeply.

Durasnir had not expected to be left alone with the prince. He had far too much to do on the other side of the strait; two long transfers in a day would leave him with a headache so he would be slower at accomplishing his work.

Yet, yet. Dag Signi had once hinted—unless he misunderstood—that some of the dags were trying to discover spells to guide minds. It was so hard to believe! Yet it had once happened, if the records were correct, and that magic had been forbidden for a long time.

He wished he could talk to her now, or to Valda. Only after months of thought had he recognized that her hint, given when it was, where it was, had not been a general comment, but was directed toward one person: the prince.

*If that is true, how will I know for certain?*

Rajnir whirled around. “It’s been two weeks since the Dag has come to see me.”

He whirled again and pressed his hands on the windowsill, leaning dangerously over the spectacular drop as he gazed down at the ships in the harbor. Durasnir was aware of the Erama Krona stiffening.

“Other than that all I get are couriers from you both, saying everything is fine, everything is fine. Fine, fine, fine. And yet someone is killing our scouts in Iasca Leror, just before our invasion. Elgar the Fox turns up in the south, and they are claiming he knows Norsunder magic, can rift time and place to thrust his enemies through. And now dags are popping away like bubbles. Yet everything is fine, fine, fine.” He

leaned farther out of the window, glaring southwestward in the direction of Iasca Leror.

Durasnir knew what would happen to the Erama Krona if the prince came to harm. Yet they could not speak unless spoken to and had no authority over the prince.

"Please do not lean out like that," Durasnir said, to spare them anxiousness. "I only know what Dag Erkrick reports on."

Prince Rajnir pulled his head in. He appeared sane enough. Surely that argued against some mysterious spell guiding his thoughts, if such a thing even existed.

Durasnir said with care, "He seems to be as limited as we are in gathering information. You will have to address him directly to find out why."

"I do." Rajnir breathed deeply of the cold wind. "He says I won't understand, but it's couched in words meant to comfort me. Uncle Fulla, I am not comforted. I *must* win this battle before the Breseng Menn." He touched his neck, where the golden torc of kingship should rest, though he did not wear the silver torc of the heir. "Everything has gone wrong since I came here to Ymar."

"We now know that a great deal of that was due to Count Wafri's treachery," Durasnir said.

"He was my friend." Once again Rajnir sounded oddly young, and he prowled around the room, stopping at the table. "How could he turn on me? I gave him *everything*."

"You gave him everything in his own kingdom," Durasnir corrected gently. "And we all share the blame equally for not discovering that he was an enemy all along. I dismissed him as a fool to my regret. So, it appears, did Dag Erkrick."

"He won't tell me what he did with Wafri." Rajnir had lifted the ancient, gold-inlaid candle-tree. He turned it slowly around in his hands, frowning at the whorled wood-grain highlighted with threads of gold, the twined leaves around each holder, and each of the nine unlit candles, as he spoke. "Wafri was my friend. I told him every thought, and he smiled, and praised me. Shared his wine with me, his cymbal dancers." He set the candle-tree back on the little table. "Some days I want him dead, others, I remember the fun we had—" He shook his head. "The Dag won't tell me."

"Maybe he deems it better for you not to know. But you must ask him, my prince. I know nothing either. You'll remember I was dispatched to sea soon after that wretched business."

Rajnir sighed. "And you have much to do, yes, I hear it in your voice. Just tell me this. Am I a coward to be so concerned? I find my mind full of questions during the day, and confusing dreams at night."

Durasnir said, "In my experience, the only people who use such words as cowardice are those who do not understand the weight of time, and anticipation, before battle. It is like the advent of thunder, only in the soul. We all feel it, from commander to the smallest horse boy. Yet we will all be in our place, though our heartbeats drum in our ears, when the time comes to face the enemy. I believe that the most fearful man is the bravest because his struggle to be faithful to his Drenskar oaths is the hardest. On him shines the golden light of the Tree."

"The golden light of the Tree," Rajnir repeated, his eyes wide as he rested his hand on the candle-tree. "Ydrasal. I must remember Ydrasal," he whispered, and Durasnir's neck prickled. These words were not for him, they carried the undertone of a private oath. But then Rajnir looked his way, and his gaze was sane. He smiled and gestured in peace mode. "Go prepare, then, Uncle Fulla. Bring us victory. The Venn need it. I need it."

Durasnir stared into Rajnir's young, troubled face. Was this young man he had loved like a son what good kings were made of? The thought made Durasnir uneasy. The question it seemed to be leading to was far too close to treason.

So he would not give it time to form. He had sworn his own oath. Behind all the sonorous words was a simple idea: you are trusted to be where you are ordered to be, doing what you are ordered to do. That was Drenskar. To disobey that oath was to betray the trust of the king, and therefore the trust of the entire kingdom. The good of the kingdom was Ydrasal.

Someday—if he lived—if he were to be called home at last—as a Hyarl he would be choosing a king. That would be the proper time to contemplate the question of what makes a good king.

He saluted, stepped onto the Destination tile, and vanished.



## Chapter Twenty-four

IN Lindeth Harbor, five people cursed the sudden spring downpour as they eased along the otherwise mostly empty early morning streets.

Lindeth Harbor was in the process of being rebuilt. Sheets of rain rumbled over raw-planed boards and plinked against new glass as two of the five splashed from opposite ends up the narrow alley between the dark shells of River's Edge, the part of town that dealt with the inland river trade.

In many parts of Lindeth people lived crammed in what once were their basements, or stables, or storage sheds as their houses went back up, stone by stone, and then room by room inside. River's Edge had twice been the entry point for pirate attack (its unofficial name was Pirates' Bunghole, which the locals, who wanted their new streets and buildings to be stylish, unsuccessfully tried to stamp out) so no one lived there until it was finished, lit, and patrolled.

Occasionally lights were seen, mostly at the old cartographer's. As the wind sheered, moaning along new roof poles and under bare eaves and around corners of fine stone, one of the two figures surged through the puddles with angry determination, her gaunt body bent into the wind, arms pressed close.

She looked around only twice, each time getting a face full of cold rain. She cursed the rain, cold, her old bones, and the necessity that forced her out into this weather.

She edged closer to the stone wall of what would be the cartographer's drawing chamber, with its bank of high arched west windows. This cartographer was the best sky-liner—that is, mapmaker who drew in skylines for the traveler to recognize—on the northwest coast.

She slipped into the newly built stable behind the cartographer's. Justly famed as well as rich, the cartographer had made certain that his house was going up first. Well, she was earning extra money, too. And her house (though small and unpretentious) was done. Meetings had been held there when they did not want the harbormaster interfering in guild business.

But this meeting was no one's business.

The stable was just boards inside with a tile roof overhead. No new wood had come for two seasons, so a lot of building had come to a halt.

She shook herself off, staring through the open stable door at the back wall of the house, complete to Sartoran sun-circles under the gabled roof-trees. All Lindeth was going to have Sartoran-style architecture—and at the expense of those damn Marlovans.

The doorway darkened. "Guild mistress," came a familiar voice from inside a shrouding cloak.

The young man she only knew as Rider shook out his cloak, laid it over a beam, then lowered his lanky form to the edge of the new trough, fists on his knees, elbows out.

She did not like him. He reminded her of a human stork with mud-splashed legs and a nest on its head. Even soaked with rain, his short pale hair stuck out in shocks. But there was nothing comical about his steady blue gaze nor, for that matter, was there anything comical about her own tall, meager form, her thin braid of gray hair wound tightly on her head, the grooves in her face worn by decades of pursing her lips.

She had preferred her old contact, a very young woman whose understanding and sympathy had been beyond her years. Rider despised this spy duty, forced on the army since the mage spies had begun vanishing, and he despised this miserly old woman who sold out her own people for a handful of gold pieces. He did little to hide his contempt.

But they needed each other, so they got right to business. "What have you for me?" he asked.

"Two pieces of news," she said, thinking of her new parlor floor and the fine etched glass she would have upstairs in her own Sartoran sun-circle. "Brought yesterday with a caravan out of the south. One, that Elgar the Fox is a Marlovan, and two, that he not only landed in Iasca Leror, but was seen at one of their Jarl castles. It was called *Marlo-Vayir*. I remember that because it sounds so much like *Marlovan*."

"How many mouths from the truth?" he asked, not moving.

She said, "Three, including me."

“For that I need to know exactly who spoke to whom,” he said. He much preferred news that she overheard herself.

“I was told yesterday in conversation with the caravan guide who accompanied the millwheel maker just arrived to help set up our new mill.” She added stiffly, “He’s my sister’s boy’s mate, been running caravans for ten years. He dropped off the millwheeler up at Dockside Circle, to begin working on the kingpin today. The millwheeler saw Elgar himself. He described him clearly enough for me to be certain that he’s the same one who was here two years ago: short, scarred face, brown hair. Rubies in hoops through his earlobes, pirate style. The Jarl family all used his real name, not Elgar. He’s a Marlovan, all right. Probably a murderer, just like they all said years ago.”

She let her voice show her affront. Selling information she might be doing, but it was for the greater cause, and so what if it also netted her money? After the last few years, a person had a right to tuck some extra behind a brick for the next time either Marlovans or pirates burned the harbor down to the ground, and this Elgar fellow was both.

Rider said nothing, just handed her the amount for thirdhand news. Then he picked up his cloak, shook it out, and swirled it around him as he stepped out into the rain.

Her shoulders twitched with ill-humor as she tucked her coins into her belt purse. She began counting to one hundred. They must never be seen walking together, and there was plenty of time yet before the Marlovan patrollers would be this way.

A thump and a thud against the outer wall startled the guild mistress out of her count, but she shrugged, figuring Rider had slipped on the stones and caught himself against the wall. After all, there had never been the slightest problem in the eight years she’d been meeting these . . . riders.

She stamped her shoes well to rid them of mud before she started toward the door, beyond which rain sheeted steadily.

She started violently as three tall figures loomed in the doorway.

She backed inside the stable. The foremost figure strolled in at a languid pace, removed his cloak with an elegant air, and tossed it, dripping, over the bare frame of a loose box.

“Mardric.” Fear gave way to exasperation. She loathed Skandar Mardric, head of the Idayagan and Olaran Resistance. “What are *you* doing here?”

With him was a tall, massive Olaran ironmonger, who rarely spoke but often attended Mardric when he met with harbor leaders. The other was a young rope maker, big ears standing out from his tangled curly hair. She knew he ran messages. Together they seemed oddly . . . purposeful.

Mardric lounged against a roof support.

“Well?” she demanded, perching primly on the edge of the trough where Rider had sat, her rigid posture expressive of indignation. “I am very busy. By the first bell I am expected to meet with the harbormaster.”

Mardric said, “You have been complaining about me.” His heavy-lidded eyes, usually so mocking and sleepy-looking, were wide and direct.

“Yes,” she retorted, determined to maintain her authority. Mardric and his “resistance,” what a joke! She sat even more upright, voice tart with righteous anger. “You go behind everyone’s backs. You sleep with anyone, man or woman, in order to winnow out their secrets. But do you do anything *useful* with that information? No. We are still under the rule of the Marlovans, and you’ve accomplished precisely nothing, except collect large sums from who knows how many cities, for your ‘expenses.’ Which you have never justified, anymore than you have your actions.”

She stopped. He made a wide gesture, almost a courtly bow. “Go on.”

“Two of my neighbors *saw* you row out to talk to those pirates the winter the old Marlovan king was killed.” She squared her shoulders. “Why, to tell the truth, we all thought you were spying for the Marlovans. After all, you never did manage to kill that Prince Evred, despite everyone telling you the Ala Larkadhe castle is honeycombed with secret ways, and two people I personally spoke with said they showed your people ways in.”

“Ye-es,” Mardric drawled. “And every one of them was caught. The Marlovan prince, in his arrogance, let my own brother go free. They, it seems, don’t take us any more seriously than you do. Go on.”

“Go on? I have work to do, even if you don’t.”

“Your work right now is to defend your life,” Mardric drawled, then feigned surprise. “Oh, I didn’t say? My mistake. I thought you heard your Venn friend get his final judgment.”

He turned a hand outward in a lazy gesture. The ironmonger tromped out the stable door, then dragged someone in by his mud-covered heels. Fear flowed cold and terrible along the guild mistress’ nerves as the rest of Rider’s lanky form bumped lifelessly in, sodden cape last. The front of his tunic was dark, soaked with blood where he’d been knifed in the heart.

Mardric said, “Leave him there.”

The ironmonger dropped Rider’s heels.

Mardric laced his fingers together as he regarded the guild mistress. “It’s true that the Marlovan prince—now their king, despite all our efforts—yet lives. But that’s only because no one can get into his citadel in Choraed Hesea. If the word you yourself just sold to the Venn, or tried to—Zek, get the money, would you?—is true, no doubt he’ll soon be back up here at the head of an army. The question is, *why* did you sell that information to the Venn?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She ignored Zek’s outstretched hand and batted mud off her cape, outrage and fear evident in the twitches of her shoulders, the jiggles of the flesh at her jawline. “The only ones strong enough to fight the Marlovans are the Venn.”

Zek turned to Mardric, who made another lazy gesture as he said, “Yes. And if they win, what do we get? Yet another overlord.”

She extended her finger, saw it tremble, and tucked her hand into her armpit. “He promised that the Venn only want to defend against the Marlovans before they get strong enough to launch northward and attack across the sea. We’ve all experienced how no one can stop them. It takes military people to stop military people. The Venn live far away, so once they’ve made sure their borders are safe, they will go home again. I was *promised*.”

Mardric sighed. “Are you really that stupid, or is it just greed? Did you really believe that any great power comes to your home soil just to defend you? Without a price?”

The rain had lifted abruptly, leaving the sound of drips and splashes outside. At a gesture from Mardric, Zek left to do a perimeter prowl—something Rider and the guild mistress had neglected, he thinking she had, and she having relaxed her vigilance years ago.

The guild mistress, authority for so many years—an authority she had worked hard for, and gloried in to the extent that she hadn’t used her own name for twenty-five of those years—turned increasingly horrified eyes from Mardric to the ironmonger. The latter would not meet her gaze.

Mardric smiled. “You have been selling information to the Venn for years now. I finally tracked you down. Thought it was a pirate spy at first, or a Marlovan, or a thief or dockside rat, but it was *you*. I didn’t believe it. Had to hear it myself. Not thirdhand, not even secondhand. You, an Olaran. With pride of rank.” His teeth showed on the last word.

“I told you why. It’s so they can fight the Marlovans.” Her voice shook.

“They are going to fight the Marlovans anyway.” Mardric waved a hand to and fro. “If you had told us about your spy contact five years ago—two years ago—we could have included you in the plans.”

“You talked of big plans, but no one ever saw anything actually happen,” she retorted. “I’m not the only one who thought you were just a cheat, taking good money as an excuse to seduce those foreign boys and girls if they were young and pretty enough. I remember *quite* well, your going on about how pretty those pirates were!” She made a spitting motion to the side.

“Spying,” Mardric said softly, “means idle listening, waiting, talking in order to provoke more talk. It means smiling. It means flattering. The fun part is the seducing. My sister,” he said gently, “has a very important one by the prick right now.” He waited, and when she didn’t answer, he went on, “And then, all at once, when they are relaxed, you strike.” He dusted his fingertips together. “Gone!” And dropped his hands. “Your information is correct. We had an eyewitness see Elgar on the royal road. He followed him to their city and stayed long enough to see their mighty garrison preparing for imminent departure. My witness just reached us yesterday.”

Zek came back in, stamping mud off his feet. Mardric looked a question. Zek wagged his hands.

The guild mistress tried to find a response—disbelief—attack—anything to fend off the sense of menace exuding from these men she'd considered fools.

"Elgar the Fox is, no doubt, on his way with an army," Mardric said. "He will fight the Venn, and who knows, maybe he'll even win, because the Venn are not going to get any help from Olarans or Idayagans. We're here to make sure of that."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"Because you decided what was best for everyone." Mardric's voice sharpened. "You worked against us as well as against the Marlovans. Well, just so you know. The Marlovans can win, but it won't do them much good because their king will be dead. He has no heir, which means that if they beat the Venn they'll be fighting each other for their throne. And they'll leave us alone. If they don't win, they'll fight the Venn to the last man, and still leave us alone."

She said poisonously, "Who is going to kill their king? *You?*"

"I've had plenty of practice of late, dispatching all the Venn spies I just mentioned. Spies we spent years locating. And watching. Talking to. Seducing, even, until one day—one night, actually—on the pillow, one let something slip: the invasion everyone has talked about for years is happening right now."

She licked her dry lips. "But—"

Mardric lifted a hand, turned over. "Strange. We say 'he has blood on his hands' but mine are clean. That is, blood washes off. Blood causes guilt only when you feel guilty. I have to confess I really enjoyed killing those spies. Most put up a good fight. I like that in a relationship." His teeth showed. "Even one as brief as these must be."

"I did everything I did to protect Lindeth," she stated, now trembling all over, and no longer trying to hide it.

Zek and the ironmonger had stepped closer, both with closed faces, neither letting his gaze touch hers.

"No, you did everything you did to make money, and gain secret authority, and oh, yes, to strike at the Marlovans, but your strike wasn't an important enough reason for you to share information with us. Well, despite you, the Venn are no longer getting help. From anyone." He glanced away, grimacing. "And while I enjoy fighting tough young men who've been trained to kill people like me—" His hand flicked out in a gesture that she didn't understand until the garrote had whipped round her skinny old neck.

The ironmonger's muscles bunched.

"—I take no pleasure in killing old women," Mardric finished on a sigh. "Thanks, Retham. I hated her, she hated me, a good cordial hate can make these things bearable. But—"

He shook his head as the ironmonger laid the old woman's lifeless body down. She was unexpectedly light, little more than skin and bone.

"Leave them for the Marlovans to find," Mardric said, grimacing again. Despite his words, the impact was a gut churning with remorse, and even a little thrill of fear.

You lived your daily life, you even fought for it occasionally, while managing to forget the fact that you could not Disappear anyone whose death you participated in.

You could go away. You could lie about it. But you could only Disappear someone you had not killed and even then, you could not do it alone, but would be compelled to talk about it unless the

Disappearance was before witnesses. Rules so inescapable that some lands formed rituals around them.

That argued for . . . *someone* watching, did it not? Except who? And why those rules, though those three could leave, and—"No one will believe she could stab him, so let's spread the word the Marlovans did it."

Zek rubbed his jaw. That was his specialty: rumors. "But the Marlovans always account for one another," he said. "I mean, they always know where they are. Patrols and the like."

"True. But we don't care what they think. People believe what they want to believe. Spread the rumor. Get the Marlovans tied up in a useless investigation of their own people, and by the time they sort it out, everyone in Lindeth will believe that the Marlovans killed an old woman for her money. Got her belt pouch? Good. Same with this fellow."

Mardric picked up his cloak, holding it by a finger, where it gently swung. "Meanwhile, I have an army to find." He smiled. "The nice thing about armies is, they can't hide."

Mardric tossed the bag of coins on his hand, then pulled his cloak on and they departed. The dead were left to the sound of slowing drips, and the widening light from the sun reappearing between parting clouds.

## Chapter Twenty-five

*Jeje: here's a puzzle for you. Elsewhere in the world servants are invisible. Runners here are not. Nor are they the same as servants. They serve but they do a lot of things. More things than I could have imagined. For example, there are two whose entire job is to see to it that all orders are written in an order book, and then copied in the book for the watch commander. One night, one day. So you could say that at least two Runners know as much about what's going on as the king and all his captains.*

*Yet I am invisible to Evred. He has never spoken to me, and if I cross his field of vision, he looks through me. Strange, how people look at one and see . . . what they want to see. Fox hated me on sight. Evred—some sort of cousin to Fox, if I am untangling these ballads and old stories right—finds me invisible. Odd, that.*

*Enough about me, are you saying? (I can almost hear your voice. Maybe if I throw myself onto the ground and put a knife to my neck, I will be able to imagine you here.) I guess I can say these things to you because I can't to Inda. I like practicing with him in the mornings. It's like a bout with Fox, but without the extra bruises. And I have been welcomed among the Runners, which means they give me things to do if I join them at their fire: fletching arrows, making the "smacker" arrows they use in practice. Sewing.*

*Here is my life: up at dawn, fight with Inda with two knives behind our tents. (I've a tent to myself. Respect or rejection? You tell me, Jeje.) Then he goes to drill the men while the Runners and the boys training to be Runners get tents down, loaded, and the animals ready. The wagons leave first. A day of riding—me with the Runners, or behind Inda in case he wants something, which he never does. You know how he is: never notices what he's wearing until I muscle him into something new, and he eats what's put in front of him.*

*When we stop, it's time for the horse drills while Inda watches and the wagons catch up and make camp. Then campfire. Inda inevitably sits with Evred, and they talk history, or about their boyhood days. Signi (who is under guard, though they keep a respectful distance) sits in silence during the latter, but converses politely on the former. My only use is to knead Inda's shoulder and arm when it gives him trouble. I said I am invisible to Evred. Signi gets cold looks if she's not aware, though if he has to speak to her, he's very formal, distant, courteous.*

*She and I don't speak. Inda and I only talk when we practice. Inda frets about how slow we are, about the muddy roads. (Need I mention it rains every night? Thought not.)*

The first balmy night of the journey, the Marlovans' drums rattled and tumbled in the familiar galloping rhythms as voices rose, fell, shouted in strict cadence, then broke into laughter.

Tau was still ambivalent about staying with this army in which he had no real place. The reason for the ambivalence was not only unspoken but unacknowledged. Tau sensed danger—and unfortunately, he had discovered a taste for danger these past few years.

Maybe it was time to find out if he had a place with Inda.

His chance arrived unexpectedly when the halt signal sounded while the sun was relatively high in the sky.

The usual orderly commotion followed, orders shouted up and down the disintegrating lines for horses to be led to the river. Evred rode back to talk to the lower-ranking captains.

Tau edged his mount up to Inda's. The horses lipped each another, snorting and tossing their heads.

"What's wrong?" Tau asked. "Why did we stop?"

Inda turned his way, brown eyes wide. "It's not a stop, it's a halt. We're going to break out the battle flags and ride properly into Cherry-Stripe's."

“Properly? What does that mean?”

Inda rubbed the old scar on his jaw, long gone white. “When we flashed sails, what did it mean?”

“To whom? To Kodl, it meant showing off. Strut,” Tau said.

“Did *you* think it was just strut?”

“Not when we did it. We were making a gesture.”

“Right.” Inda snorted a laugh. “So riding in at the gallop, banners flying, is kind of like we flash sails all at once, instead of sensibly handling ’em as needed. Every man here—though they won’t say it out loud—wants to be seen riding in like in the ballads, banners snapping, horns blaring. And if—” His smile thinned. “Whether we win or lose, in the local songs, anyway, that ride will be a whole verse.” He tipped his chin eastward. “Lay you any wager someone will be on the walls, paper in hand, to scribble down who was where in line, how many banners, and what color horse the king rode.”

Tau laughed.

Inda turned his palms up. “Everybody likes to strut. Just depends on how they do it.”

“*We*” flash sails. So Inda had not completely turned his back on his years at sea.

Tau did a quick scan. Evred was still talking to a group of captains. Signi had taken her mount to the riverside, thoughtfully keeping within view of her discreet guards as always. He was alone with Inda, with as much privacy as they were ever going to get. “Inda, do you need me along on this endeavor of yours?”

Inda slewed around, shading his eyes from the sun resting just above the hazy western hills at the edge of the vast plain. “Tau,” he said, exasperated. “I never could figure out what you were thinking. Do you want to stay, or not?”

“All things considered, I do. But I could as well do something else. Anything else. If you don’t see a purpose for me being here.” That wasn’t getting him anywhere. “What do you want from me, Inda?”

Inda’s eyes were honey-colored in the strong late afternoon light. His body shifted as his horse thrust her weight from one hip to the other, but his gaze stayed steady, his smile fading. “What I want . . . I got what I want. I think I got what I want. I got my name back,” Inda said, low as a breath. “Seemed easy as that. But right after it, Evred hands me this war to command. To him it makes sense—he never expected to be king. Didn’t train for it. But it happened, so he got to work. So I come home and he gives me a command I didn’t train for. But he expects me to get right to work, just like he did.”

“As a trade for your name?”

Inda flapped a hand as though shooing a troublesome insect. “No, no, I said it wrong. It’s a *part* of my name, see? With my name comes all the duties. D’you see it?”

“I think I do.” Indeed, Tau felt that a window had opened where he’d once perceived a wall.

“Good. Because I just don’t understand people and their reasons for doing things, not the way you do. I can sometimes hear things in their voices . . .” Inda made a quick, warding motion. “Here they come. Something’s happening. Look, Tau, I don’t blame Jeje for scouting off. I wouldn’t blame you if you did. But if you will, stay. I need you to help me see . . . what I might miss.”

*Like your king’s passion for you? His hatred for your mage, and his inability to see me?*

Evred and the others stopped just a few paces away, all peering toward the east.

*If I tell you any of those things, all I can see as a result is life becoming far more uncomfortable for all four of us. Because Jeje is right, the only one who has the power to change things is your king. And he cannot change the Venn coming, or how vexed you are at traveling only during daylight, or how ill-trained you think these men compared to our independents on the sea.*

Tau then asked a question he hadn’t meant to: “Do you think you can win?”

Inda snorted his breath out again. “I don’t know.” He flicked a glance at the others, still busy. “Tau, we’re too slow. That is, not just the travel. We should be in the field every day, dawn to dusk, training. Like the Venn were last year. Not doing it just at dawn and sundown, while in between mud, rain, and bad wagons slow us down.” He snapped his fingers against his thigh, then said, “We *have* to get to the pass.” He lifted his hand, rough-palmed, scarred on top.

“I don’t suppose they will be surprised that we found out about their surprise attack,” Tau said, watching as Evred laid his horse’s rein against its neck. The animal turned; all the horses turned.

Inda's expression was rarely sardonic, which made it the more startling when he lifted a brow and quirked the corners of his mouth. "Durasnir isn't that stupid." He swiped his hand over his head. "He'll expect us to be as surprised as we expected Marshig to be."

He spoke low-voiced; Tau had a heartbeat's time to see the king's hazel gaze flick between Inda and himself before they were surrounded by the group, including a scout, everyone talking at once. Inda and Tau picked out the words "east road . . . riders . . . horns."

"Here they come," Evred said.

In the distance a horn blared a single triplet, over and over.

"Riders!" a scout bellowed. And, "Khani-Vayir pennons!"

Everyone relaxed, joking and hoots rising on all sides as a neat column of riders trotted into the outskirts of the camp, the men dividing off toward the riverside, and only the leader and his banner-carrier and First Runner proceeding down the center divide toward the crimson-and-gold Montrei-Vayir banners behind the command group.

Signi and Tau gazed in curiosity at the young man in command. He was tall, his sloping shoulders powerfully built. His face was jowly, making him look much older than he was, his long horsetail was a thick, wiry mud-brown, his expression dour.

Inda flung himself off his mount, laughing hoarsely. He stumbled to a halt at the man's stirrup, sending pebbles skittering as he yelled "Noddy! It's *you!*"

"What brings you?" Evred's concern made him sharp.

Noddy's voice was chest-deep, and even less expressive than his face. "Got a message from Cherry-Stripe that Inda was back. My cousin thought you might need a few extra mouths to feed." A thumb hooked over his shoulder indicated his column—a wing of eighty-one men, with Noddy—busy dismounting and expanding the horse picket. "We're here to make sure you don't get lost on your way up north, where he's drawing more in."

Noddy Toraca slipped off his horse. His heavy face split in a white-toothed grin as he pounded Inda on the shoulder, and for a moment he looked like his twenty-one years. "Welcome back," he added.

"I didn't think I'd get to see you for weeks," Inda exclaimed in delight. "All we need is Cassad and Cama—"

Noddy said, "They were half a day off, last Galloper I got. We might catch them at the gates if we bustle. I think Cherry-Stripe wrote to every Jarl, threatening, begging, and pleading for us to be detached to ride as your Sier Danas commanders." He turned his chin toward Evred. "With a suitable force. Said you had to move fast."

Inda yipped, and tired as he was, executed a few steps of the war sword dance, to general laughter.

He didn't even hear it. "Come! We ride as soon as they finish watering the horses. You must need something to wet your throat. I know I do." He turned his head, still laughing. "Signi! This here's Noddy Turtle. I told you about him . . ."

The cook wagon's Runners had set up ensorcelled buckets of clean water for anyone who wanted it, and better drink for those of high command. Tau started toward the cook wagon. He'd decided he could, for once, do a Runner's job, and fetch the refreshments, only to discover Vedrid's pale head in the crowd, ten paces in front of him.

## Chapter Twenty-six

THEY began their heroic gallop well enough, riding at a trot down the last winding part of the road, harnesses and mail jingling. In the distance they could just make out the tops of the castle towers through the mizzle, dense gray squares against the solid gray sky.

Evred was about to signal the change in formation for a gallop when the unseen outriders sent up a whirtler. A heartbeat later came the long, thrilling falls of a war charge from the direction of the eastern road just beyond a low hill covered with wandering sheep.

Evred's force halted, hearing the rumbling thud of horse hooves; it was too wet for dust to rise.

Noddy said to Evred, "War charge?"

"That has to be Rat Cassad." Evred was trying not to laugh. It was strictly against all the traditions, the rules they'd been brought up to respect: you did not blow a war charge until your cavalry was about to change from the trot to the gallop into battle.

Around the hill, as the sheep retreated sending up baas of reproach, bounced the snapping pennons of yellow and white.

"He wants to leave us eating his mud," Noddy observed mournfully.

"He can eat ours," Inda said, and kicked his horse into a trot.

Still laughing silently, Evred put up a gauntleted hand, held up two fingers, and pointed. The column picked up the pace, with a bit of frisky bunching and sidling here and there, summarily reined in hard.

They heard a faint cry on the wind and Cassad's force sprang to the gallop.

As did Inda. Evred and the others were a heartbeat behind.

So the triumphant ride turned into a mad dash to see who got to the main gates first, while Marlo-Vayir Riders crowded the walls, whooping and yipping as they watched the race, and laying bets on who'd get in first.

Everyone reached the gate at about the same time, the sodden, mud-splashed war banners almost indistinguishable from one another. For a time there was a confusion of horses, mud-imprinted coats, swinging horsetails (animal and human) as everyone laughed and yelled at once.

Inda's mood soared. "Rat? That you?" he shouted, catching sight of a sharp-chinned face with a buck-toothed grin and a high brow.

"My brother said better to fight Venn up here than at home!"

"Cama! There can't be another one-eyed Tvei!"

"Only one I know of," Noddy said, his flat tone implying "just as well."

Tall, martial Cama grinned, looking more piratical than the pirates with that black eye patch, boot knives, and two swords—one across his back and one in the saddle sheath.

Rat Cassad leaned around Cama to peer at Signi as he whispered, "*That* the Venn mage? Thought she'd be bigger'n we are."

Cama made motions to shut up, but Inda said, "Dag Signi."

Obvious to them all was the pride in his voice, the lift to his chin; Rat couldn't think of anything to say to a Venn, much less a mage.

Evred said, "Let's go."

They wheeled their horses and rode in side-by-side, shooting questions back and forth.

Inside the court waited yet another huge force, which was Cherry-Stripe's own surprise. The consequence was a tight-packed, milling crowd of men and horses, as Cherry-Stripe gripped Inda,

yelling into his face, "I've got Riders from us, and from Tlennen, and some dragoons from the Sindans!"

They dismounted, all talking at once. From his post at Evred's shoulder, Vedrid swept his gaze over the crowd, his fine pale hair, almost all escaped from its inadequate clasp, flying about his face. He lifted his eyes. Ah, there in the window above was Fnor, making a hand signal to her women on guard duty.

She scanned the court and spotted him at once. They smiled the quick, inadvertent grin of lovers who'd parted amicably. Their teenage passion had entertained three clans while it lasted.

Inda shouldered past his friends and dodged around the horses to Signi's side, drawing her protectively against him.

The kindness of the gesture and the scintillation of Inda's ghost—brighter than Signi had ever seen him—caused her throat to tighten. How could Inda not see? Yet he was oblivious as he exchanged jokes with his friends. They talked over her head, or around her, or across her, always with that loud, raucous laughter that hurt Signi's ears. They all looked alike, these strong young men, their sun-brown skin flushed, mouths wide in toothy grins, their voices like the bark of hounds on fox-scent. How happy they were! *On the other side of the strait, if the long march west is over, the men of the Hilda are without doubt just as happy, just as wild.*

Even with her shoulder tucked under Inda's and her hip jammed against his, she was isolated, in spirit



and in time, if not in the physical sense. The pitiable ghost was even more isolated, and yet shone so brightly.

But Mran and Fnor had not forgotten Signi, and Mran soon appeared, her childishly small form deftly slipping between the men.

“Dag Signi.” She touched Signi’s offered hands. “Fnor sent me to fetch you, if you’d like to join us.”

“Very much. I thank you.”

Relieved, Inda relinquished her into Mran’s care, his attention promptly claimed by his old friends, who strove to outtalk one another. Rat glimpsed his sister, gave her a lazy wave, but went right back to trying to shout down Cherry-Stripe.

“Fnor’s getting a good meal together,” Mran began, then stopped, halted by none other than the king himself.

It was adroitly done. Already her brother, her beloved Cama, Inda, and the others were lost in a gathering crowd of captains and Runners, all full of questions. The last thing visible was Cherry-Stripe’s right hand gesticulating, and then he too was gone behind a wall of broad gray-covered backs bisected by sun-bleached horsetails.

That left a space just long enough for Mran to realize that the King’s Runners at four points around them were there by intent.

She gazed up into Evred-Harvaldar’s face, wondering what could possibly have happened between the time Signi and Inda left and now to make Dag Signi into a prisoner.

“She will be with us,” Mran said quickly, in Marlovan, which Signi hadn’t understood on her previous visit.

Evred regarded Mran Cassad, who was exactly as small and thin as she’d been when he met her years ago. She had the triangular face of most Cassads, sharper than most, her upper lip short and catlike, her eyes wide-spaced and enormous as one hand slipped protectively around the Venn mage’s arm.

The women had obviously taken to Dag Signi, despite her Venn origins. Part of the women’s secret quest to learn magic? Mran was Hadand’s friend, and had once thanked him for civilizing Cherry-Stripe .

. . .

He held out his hand: over to you.

Mran twitched a faint smile, then bore Signi away.

The two women left the noisy courtyard behind. The hubbub gradually diminished to the sound of their own footsteps in the cool stone hallway, as they climbed the east tower stairs to the women’s side of the castle.

Mran stopped on the landing. Watery sunlight slanted through the old arched arrow slit, highlighting the texture of the honeycomb weave in the undyed linen of her robe. “Why are you a prisoner?” she asked. “What happened?”

Signi let out her breath slowly. What thread of truth could she offer Mran without creating more knots than skein? “Your king has treated me honorably.” Which was true. When Evred could not avoid speaking to her, he was scrupulously polite, and his Runners, surely hand-picked, kept a respectful distance in guarding her. “But he cannot forget I am Venn, and mage.” *And he does not know that I could leave at any time. Nor will he know, unless I choose to leave—but then I could never come back.*

“Inda hasn’t said anything?” Mran asked, doubt creasing her broad forehead.

“He either does not notice, or pretends not to notice. I think . . .” Signi considered. “I think the guards’ presence is a compromise between Inda and Evred. Neither of them has to say anything to the other, one not trusting me, the other demanding trust. Because, you must see, they trust one another to the last degree.”

“Signi, you are a good woman,” Mran stated, echoing what Fnor had said after the previous visit. Mran did not add Fnor’s subsequent comment, *Too good for that ill-mannered pirate boy they’re all drooling over so disgustingly*. Fnor had been irritated to discover that Inda had not offered Baukid, the house’s tailor, so much as a copper in vails for sitting up all night remaking Buck’s old coat. Even after Cherry-Stripe had said reasonably, *Remember Inda’s been overseas the last ten years. Everybody*

*knows, no foreigner's got the least idea of proper custom.*

"It is my turn for a question," Signi said, making a gesture of appeal.

Mran had forgotten the strange way Signi moved. It was beautiful: she didn't walk, she glided. Even when she sat on a mat to eat it was like a dance, the way she arranged her clothes, the way she sat, even the way she arranged her feet. "Ask," she said.

Signi touched her fingertips in thanks. "Your family, the Cassads. You were here before the Marlovans came. It is said that they were seers, the old Cassadas. Seers of the world outside of that of humankind."

Mran leaned against the stones, arms crossed. Laughter ran through her body, made her fluting voice breathy as she said, "Way long ago. Then they got lazy. And so?" An ironic gesture toward the arrow slit. "And so we became Marlovans. Why do you ask?"

"Do you see ghosts?"

Mran pursed her lips. "I don't. But some in my family do. My grandfather, yes. And my poor third-cousin Kialen, who was supposed to marry Evred-Harvaldar. Hadand thinks she ended up living more in the ghost world than in ours. You can't really say she took her life, but more like took off her body the same way we take off a robe." She brushed her hands over her sleeves. "And you asked because?"

"Inda carries a ghost," Signi said softly. "And I think he might be from here. Or knows someone here: Dunrend? Hened Dunrend?"

Mran straightened up, her eyes wide, pupils enormous. "Yes. The Dunrends are connected to the Sindans. Hened was mated with the old Jarlan's niece. A Runner. She's here now, so she can take word back to the Jarlan about this gathering." She shook her head. "Never mind that. What are you asking, whether we should tell anyone?"

Signi touched her palms together. "Among the Venn, the seers are much honored. But among you?"

"There aren't what we call seers," Mran said. "In fact, you won't hear much about ghosts at all, though a few do see them. Hadand's father does, by her account. Anyway we just don't talk about them. My grandmother thinks this is because Evred-Harvaldar's first ancestor, Anderle Montrei-Vayir, killed old Savarend Montredavan-An, who'd conquered us." She thumped her flat chest in a gesture of ironic humor. "And after that Anderle slowly went mad, because he couldn't sleep without seeing Savarend's ghost come into his room. Knife sticking out of its back and everything. Since then, people tend to think ghosts go with treachery, but they don't say it." Her brows snapped together. "Did Inda kill Hened?" "No, no, Inda says Hened Dunrend died most honorably, defending him. Inda still grieves over his death."

Mran whistled softly, a fall of notes Signi recognized as the Marlovan Hymn to the Fallen. "I wouldn't tell anyone," she said finally. "It can't do anyone any good at all that I can see."

Signi bowed. "It shall be so."

"Well, come in and eat and drink and rest," Mran said practically, glad to move away. Silly as it was—she knew very well the mind took its burdens right along with the body's—she also knew that from now on, that landing was going to feel haunted.

The combined forces set out an orderly camp city on the hills beyond the castle gates and the captains squeezed into the Rider barracks inside. Anonymous in his blue coat, Tau walked among the hundreds of men—some barely eighteen, others closer to forty—who all seemed excited as boys though the word had spread they would be on the ride again come dawn.

With the added forces from the powerful eastern clans came wagonloads of supplies, which were sent on ahead. The remainder of the day was given over to repairing horseshoes, gear, and weapons that hadn't been completed during the hasty night's preparation in the royal city. The Marlo-Vayir forges would glow all night as the old Jarl's grizzled Randael, known to everyone as Uncle Scrapper, whisked tirelessly about the stables, overseeing everything.

The old Jarl, Hasta, stumped for a while beside his brother, both feeling the high glee absent since youth.

Hasta reminded the older inhabitants of Cherry-Stripe, the way he kept chuckling at the honing of weapons, shoeing of horses descended from his magnificent studs, the loading of wagons with household supplies that would leave the castle scrambling.

Buck and Fnor also moved about ceaselessly, she overseeing the division of supplies and the preparation of food, he beyond the gates, aiding in the massive task of organizing vast numbers of people for the long push northward. The castle's resources were stripped pretty much right down to stone, but no one cared. They all felt the bright sun of history outlining themselves and their castle.

Evred moved like a ship through the roiling currents, people flowing around him, aware of his presence and trying not to show it as they worked. With him was Inda. The Sier Danas came and went, seeing to logistical details of their own.

When they'd seen everything, Evred signed to Vedrid, who in turn gathered his own staff with minute tilts of the head. Runners smoothly isolated Evred and Inda as they paced back toward the hall where the king was expected to preside at the meal being prepared.

"Well?" Evred said, stopping at the foot of the wide, shallow stairs before the Marlo-Vayir great hall.

"It's not enough," Inda admitted. "Not if we're going to split in order to cover both ends of the pass. The Venn had easily twice this number out on the Ymaran plain. Probably more."

Evred lifted his chin. "I'm going to send my orders to Ola-Vayir from here, now that I have an idea of what we need. I will command him to raise a full decade."

Inda whistled. He still had to get used to the idea that Sponge could send out a Runner to raise half the fighting men in the largest jarlate.

Evred said, "I don't trust him, which is why I waited. He tried his tricks on my grandfather, who was forced to grant him all of southern Olara, but it's only made him more greedy. I shall not give him more land."

"How will you get around that?" Inda asked.

"Two ways. First, I am sending one of my father's old Runners, someone Ola-Vayir cannot misunderstand or make demands of. Second, I'm going to reinforce him with Buck, who's known to be loyal to me. Under Buck's eye, he will not be so likely to look for ways to linger, or bargain for more concessions if he thinks I cannot do without his men."

Inda rocked gently back and forth, heel to toe. "So we'll have a force going up the coast, then, to Lindeth?"

"That's my idea. By the time we get our men up through the middle of the kingdom and bear west, he'll have had time to raise his force and travel, though a much shorter distance. It's actually Buck who's going to have to scramble." Evred gave a brief, somewhat bleak smile. "But I know he'll do it."

Evred glanced at a group of men hammering and sawing fifty paces away, making new wagons out of wood that had been set aside for something else. "I also decided we cannot risk leaving the harbors below Lindeth open, after what you told me. So I'm going to require the southern Jarls—including your father—to cover them."

That night they celebrated, drums rumbling inside and outside the castle. Tau wandered through the busy courts, the lamplit stables, and up onto the walls. From the sentry walks he gazed over the dark plains on which a starfield of fires glowed, most with silhouettes dancing around them, occasional shards of ruddy light glinting off swords in quick-flash beams. Clangs and clashes marked the galloping drum beats, and voices rose and fell, the cadenced words adding yet another counterpoint.

Bright as the courtyards were, the great hall was far brighter, lit not only by torches all along the walls, giving off stupefying heat, but by carefully hoarded glowglobes brought out with increasing rarity as the magic spells faded. The massive iron-reinforced doors stood open, light and heat spilling out. Tau breathed in the warm, thick air, smelling of the pine pitch used for the torches, spiced wine, food, and too many people. In the cleared space the same songs and dances as he'd seen outside were performed, the same kind of food eaten. He found it interesting that though here, as everywhere, humans divided into

hierarchies, the concept of the courtier was unknown.

As in many of the castles Marlovans had taken from the Iascans generations before, the Marlo-Vayirs had adopted tables and benches in the formal halls. Chairs were set at the high table. Like castles, tables, benches, and chairs seemed more civilized than the mats and small, folding tables of their plains-roaming days; there was a jumble of tables and chairs and stools of various sizes extending down the long walls of the room, leaving the open space in the middle for the dancers.

The old Jarl liked tables because his bad hip made sitting on the floor more difficult by the season. He sat at the head of the table now, relieved to rest his old bones on a cushioned chair.

Evred sat at the place of honor midway along the high table. At his right was Inda, watching the dancing, at his left big, blond Cherry-Stripe, and next to him sat lean Rat Cassad, cousin to Evred and Barend.

Across from them sat Noddy, and at his left Cama of the eye patch and curling black hair.

They were in the middle of their meal as the harassed servants ran about.

Tau had refined his skills at serving courtiers when spying for Inda in Bren. As the companion of the most popular female entertainer, he'd overseen expensive parties every night for most of a year, and had discovered that people forgot your presence if you held a tray in your hand or poured drinks.

Tau joined the other Runners who, on the command of Vedrid, Captain of the Runners, reinforced the overburdened Marlo-Vayir servants. Vedrid himself was seeing to the preparations for the King's Runners being sent out that night.

Tau indicated with a gesture that he would take over serving wine to the high table, got a brief, grateful raised palm from the old Jarl's equally old runner, and so he kept the oddly-shaped Marlovan wine cups filled.

A song finished, three or four young Riders began a drum tattoo.

“. . . the Gallop Dance, Cama!" a woman cried.

Came peered up at the gallery, flashed a rakish grin, ran lightly down to pick a sword from the rack against the far wall, then took his place among the young men gathering. Tau enjoyed Cama's heedlessness as most of the females in the room, at the floor tables and up above, tracked him as unerringly as flowers follow the sun.

"What's that?" Inda bent forward, frowning at the new sash round Cama's narrow waist, a sash made of white and yellow silk.

*Cassad colors*, Inda thought, remembering his childhood days when he'd had all the Jarl colors by heart. Cama was a Tya-Vayir, but commanding a force of Cassad men, so he wore their yellow. Inda was surprised that the sash had been hastily embroidered over in the pale blue and dark green of the Marlo-Vayirs.

Inda reached across Evred and poked Cherry-Stripe. "Why's Cama got your colors on that Cassad sash?"

"Mran made that for him. Lover's token. Haugh! Sometimes I wish we could marry who we wanted to marry. It would make the bedroom arrangements ever so much easier."

Noddy snorted. "But how could you afford a wedding every half year? Or would it be four times a year?"

The laugh lines at the corners of Cherry-Stripe's eyes were a young version of the same pattern in his father's sun-browned face. "Can I help it if I fall in love a lot?" He hooted. "Isn't it a laugh that the first one o' us to get ourselves a son is ugly ol' Noddy?"

The Sier Danas grinned at stolid Noddy. "You'd think," Cherry-Stripe went on, "that Flash would have fifty by now. Buck would have a couple—he and Fnor are disgusting. But *Noddy*?"

A snort from Noddy. "You fools don't even know what good sex is."

A howl of laughter.

Noddy sat back. "My boy'll be a great commander. As well as handsome. See it already in him, the way he drools in my face when I toss him."

Another howl, and everyone tried to talk the others down with insults. Inda shut them out, trying to accustom himself to the idea of Noddy tossing a baby in the air. Noddy having a son. *Any* of them having a son. "What does your boy look like?"

“Me.” Noddy’s deep voice warmed as he added, “Got hair like a duck’s butt, sticks up all over.” He snorted a laugh.

“—a wife you *could* bed,” Cherry-Stripe bawled, and everyone gave up trying to talk over him. Cherry-Stripe waved his wine goblet outward toward the dancers. “Take Cama, now. He’s too good a man, doesn’t deserve Starand.”

“He doesn’t deserve that shit of a brother,” Noddy stated. “Didn’t get Horsebutt by marriage.”

“Horsebutt,” Cherry-Stripe repeated, making a spitting motion over his shoulder, as Tau leaned down and refilled his wine cup. “He and his coward’s excuses for not sending any men! That’s why Cama had to join up under Cassad.”

“Coward’s excuses?” Evred repeated.

His tone was one of neutral inquiry, but the others straightened up, or rubbed jaws, or showed in little ways that for just a moment they’d forgotten that their old friend was the king. Cherry-Stripe sidled a look at Cama, whirling on the dance floor, oblivious to the conversation.

“Better ask Buck,” Cherry-Stripe said uneasily.

“I will.” Evred understood their hesitation—though they all hated Horsebutt, nobody wanted to be a snitch.

Evred turned his attention to the dancers, tapping out the rhythm on the table, and gradually the others loosened up, the talk and laughter becoming more natural, as Cassad began pestering Inda for stories about pirate battles, and every single time Inda mentioned some aspect of sailing, Cherry-Stripe would howl, “What’s that?” or cup his ear, never tiring of the joke.

Eventually, Evred eased his chair back and sat with his elbows on the rests, the wine cup between his hands. But he did not drink from it, just observed his boyhood friends over its broad brim, his face more relaxed than Tau had ever seen it. For the first time he looked like the very young man he was.

Would such things ever appear in the ballads? Of course they wouldn’t. No one would remember the grizzled old Jarl, the firelight making his silver hair glint like barley beards at sunset, muttering as he pushed his plate away at last that he wished he could ride with them, but his hip wouldn’t even let him sit a horse. “And it’s not like I ever saw battle anyway, outside of that disgrace of Yvana-Vayir’s winter before last. When the *old* king died, I was just out of the academy, doing my rounds on the royal castle walls.” The old king being the present king’s grandfather.

Evred said, “You will be needed here.”

The old Jarl was now alert. “What’s that?”

Evred made a motion toward the room. “When the plates are cleared.”

“Heh.” The Jarl grinned. “A royal order, is it? And in my house. Heh.” Wheezing with laughter, he lifted his wine cup in both hands, downing what remained there.

Tau silently refilled it, then stood behind the Jarl, where he could observe the king. Evred lounged in his wingback chair, profile against the dark wood, watching Inda talk and laugh as his long fingers toyed with the wide, shallow Marlovan wine cup.

Evred had not just been watching Inda, though his face was turned that way as his academy mates caught up on one another’s news amid much joking and laughter. He watched the captains at the adjacent tables, he watched the interactions between the men dancing, and he chose exactly the right moment—just after the dishes were cleared away, as everyone began to chat. His father had left an unfinished testament to Evred’s brother (who would never have read it, which was perhaps why it was unfinished), with many observations about kingship. One had been: *You, as king, will end the banquets. If you have news, get their attention as soon as their stomachs are full. Never when they’re hungry, and never later, when they are too drunk to stand. If you don’t have news, but have to make speeches full of praise for the reasons I’ve already discussed, wait until they’re drunk. Whatever you say, they’ll remember only their emotions and call your effort brilliant. And always, always, keep it short.*

He stood up, lifted his cup in his hands, and gestured a salute toward the old Jarl of Marlo-Vayir as Buck was still outside supervising.

As soon as he lifted the cup the hubbub of voices was replaced by the *graunch* of wooden benches on

the stone floor as all stood.

“At dawn we ride away to war,” Evred said, and paused, because he knew the word *war* would raise a shout, and a full-throated, enthusiastic shout it was. Stone rang; some shoved fists into the air, others laughed.

“I call to defend the kingdom those whose trust and courage is the most proven. Taking his place with my Sier Danas at the lead of my army is your Randael, Landred-Dal Marlo-Vayir.”

Cherry-Stripe flushed down to the collarbones at having his family name said out loud so unexpectedly. He grinned around in obvious pride.

Evred took in the drink-ruddy, triumphant faces, grins of anticipation, laughter, pleasure. “But I am also calling upon the Jarl of Marlo-Vayir, Aldren-Dal, to ride to the coast to reinforce our men there, in case the Venn bring ships to our shores.” *Let any Venn spies assume that means he’ll ride up and down the coast.*

Buck was still outside, monitoring his people and resources, both taxed to capacity by this enormous gathering. Everyone in the hall shouted, some drumming with spoon and knife handles on the tables. Laughing, Cherry-Stripe knocked his chair over and ran from the hall to tell his brother the news. Cama leaped on the table, saluted Evred with his wine cup with such enthusiasm the wine sloshed to the table, bright as blood. “Evred-Harvaldar Sigun!” he shouted.

“Evred-Harvaldar Sigun!” the crowd roared as one.

Cama then turned with a flourish, his coat skirts flaring. “Indevan-Harskialdna Sigun!”

“Indevan-Harskialdna Sigun! Sier Danas Sigun!”

The shouts rang up the stones. Evred, smiling at last, saluted the room full of people, fist to heart.

Thump! Fists to hearts, which beat for joy, exhilaration, triumph.

Everyone then turned to his or her neighbor to exclaim, laugh, ask questions no one listened to. All except the old Jarl who sat back looking after his second son, his face grim—almost grief-stricken. He was proud, yes, but the prospect before him was not glory, not with both sons going off to war. The prospect was duty—and death.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

*Hadand: I arrived home last night. How strange it is that you shall read this the very day I write it. Assuming, that is, you find it right away—that you have time to go to your trunk and check the gold case, or wherever you will keep yours.*

Whipstick’s voice echoed up the walls outside Tdor’s open windows, the men’s responsive shout reverberating from the stone. Tdor leaned out to look down at Whipstick in the court. He wasn’t smiling—he never did running drill—but she could see pleased anticipation in the way he strode back and forth, and she heard it in the men’s enthusiastic responses to his shouts. They were happy, because they’d been ordered to the harbor to reinforce the dragoons already guarding it.

*Happiness.* She considered that, absently running the quill through her fingers. Should she write about how strange that was, happiness at the idea of being hacked to death, at hacking apart other men? But that was duty, so why shouldn’t they enjoy it? Maybe she should write about how happy she was to be home. She liked the royal city, and seeing Hadand as queen, how well everything seemed to be going, how much the women admired her. But oh, small as her room was, worn as the castle furnishings were, it was so, so good to be *home*. But would Hadand misunderstand?

*Of course the weather stayed cold and sodden the entire ride down, holding me up at bridges over swollen rivers, forcing us to ride around puddles the size of ponds. When did the skies clear?*

*Yesterday. But it was only a day after I got your message about Evred’s orders.*

Another shout, followed by a confused clatter of horse hooves.

*Fareas-Iofre was full of questions about Inda, but as soon as I told her about the orders, she said her questions could wait.*

Tdor ran the feather over her ear. How long had it been since she'd thought Fareas-Iofre so cool, so calm, so free of the tangle of emotions that seemed to be confined to the young? Tdor poked the pen at a glob of dried ink (time to make some more) as she thought back to her childhood, and her comfortable conviction that adults didn't feel love when they got old. Only what, really, was "old"? Until just a couple of years ago, Tdor had never considered the fact that Fareas-Iofre had been younger than Tdor was now when she was taken away from the people she'd grown up with and told that she was going to marry a man twenty-five years her senior. And everyone had expected her to be pleased because that would make her a princess.

*Your mother and Whipstick decided that the Adaluin will not be told about the Venn possibly attacking the western harbors. You must know by now—your mother said a Runner went north while I was coming south—that your father had one of those brain-spasms, and his right arm and leg don't work. They say he is not in pain, he dreams like in winter. So Whipstick will take the riders to our harbor to reinforce Captain Noth's dragoons. Everyone in the castle is full of jokes about how Horsepiss Noth can deal single-handed with ten, twenty, thirty mere Venn.*

She hesitated, the quill in the air. Should she add how uneasy it made her, thinking that the Venn were probably making the very same sorts of jokes, away up there somewhere to the north? A droplet formed at the end and she hastily tapped the quill against the side of the inkwell.

Before she could write more, Tdor's Runner entered. "The Iofre," Noren said, and Inda's mother walked in, looking thin and worn. But she'd been smiling since she heard that Inda had returned to his native soil at last.

*I was stupid to think she never had feelings, Tdor thought. I just never saw them. Because when she was sixteen and came here to marry the Adaluin, she hid her feelings behind duty.*

But she couldn't hide her yearning now.

"Willing hands everywhere," Fareas-Iofre said. "The men will be ready to ride out long before they can possibly be needed."

"Even Branid's hands are willing?" Tdor asked.

Fareas opened her palms. "Whipstick thinks your message from Inda acted on him as a threat."

Tdor protested, "It wasn't a threat. Inda just said, 'Tell him I'll talk to him when I get home.' Just like that. I didn't intend to misrepresent Inda's words." She smiled ruefully, more of a slight grimace than a smile. "I guess I'd make a bad Runner."

Fareas leaned her elbows on the broad stone windowsill, the diffuse light on her profile softening the lines in her face. "You know that what we say and what Branid hears have always been askew." Her mouth curled up at one corner, a rare expression. "He certainly heard a threat, even if neither you nor Inda intended him to. But then hasn't his life with his grandmother always been understood in terms of threat, bribery, and guilt?"

Tdor laid her pen over the inkwell. "I don't know how this will sound, but I feel bad now for how happy I was last night when you told me his grandmother was dead." *Finally.* She wouldn't say that word, even if they were both thinking it.

"There was no grief visible at her funeral fire, though we scrupulously saw to all the forms." No emotion in Fareas' voice either, but her entire body was expressive of relief. Inda's mother then glanced over her shoulder. "I see you are busy. I will wait to indulge my motherly questions."

"I only saw him the one day," Tdor said. "Half a day." Fareas' pupils contracted as she breathed, "I have not seen him in nine years." Tdor had gained just enough life experience to perceive the almost frightening intensity of a mother's enduring hunger for her missing child. "Any little thing you tell me will be news."

Tdor obediently described Inda, what he'd said and done before riding out. Fareas listened, still with that unhidden hunger. This was a different sort of hunger than what Tdor had seen so briefly in Evred, but just as frightening, because it was so intense, expressed by a person who had always been as calm and cool as the lake.

*Different kinds of love, different kinds of hunger?* Tdor felt she was riding over a rickety bridge. "And then they rode off. But here, I am writing to Hadand. Would you like to add a letter? I can let her know Evred's order is being carried out, and you could ask her about Inda."

Fareas-Iofre rose, frowning at the gold case lying there on Tdor's plain wooden table, the intent focus of her brown eyes bringing Inda vividly to mind. "Are you very certain no one else will see what we write?" "Dag Signi promised it would be so."

There was a brief pause, broken only by the flutter of birds nesting under the sentry-walk crenellation just overhead. "Do you trust her?" Inda's mother asked.

Do you trust someone who—no. Stupid ballads—"stole your beloved's heart" meant nothing but a claim to victim-hood. Tdor's inward struggle was short; she'd fought the battle and won, and won it again during her long ride home. Lust, she could honestly attest to—the thought of Inda's splendid shoulders, his big, expressive hands. The way he laughed, a burr deep inside his chest: the Sartorans (as always) had a word for it, *fremitus*. Everything about Inda made her want to laugh, to cry, to sing, to hold him close enough to breathe his breath and feel his heart beat against hers.

That sudden fire inside—that was lust. *Hunger*.

Tdor said slowly, "I think I must trust her. Inda does, though Venn she be. If she is full of guile, it is the deepest guile ever known, deeper than any of us can see. And she will be living among us, I suspect, so it's better to assume good will." She burst out, "I don't know why we have marriage treaties anyway. Wouldn't it be better if we were like the Anaerani, where Joret is, where they can pick the person they marry?"

Fareas-Iofre had not moved from the window. She laid her hands flat on the sill. "The girls are finished with knife practice. Chelis tells me the streams and the river are down enough to send the girls out to collect feathers from the high-water debris."

Tdor was about to say, "And so?" when she realized the Iofre meant for *her* to give the order. She felt hot all over.

Fareas-Iofre regarded Tdor's red face, and interpreted her expression successfully. "Yes, your first order as future Iofre. And your next act should be to go downstairs and use the measuring string on the Rider who seems closest to Inda's size, because you need to begin on his wedding shirt. And so you should tell the men, because it will cheer them enormously to think about that during the weeks to come, when these high spirits fade away. As they must."

Tdor—always so capable—stood up, sat down, and picked up her quill, playing with it absently as she frowned.

Fareas said, "As for your question. I never told you girls why we make wedding treaties—or why, for that matter, we make wedding shirts. Events being what they were, I always felt the subject could wait." In other words, while the heir to the throne was trampling treaties and tradition by chasing Joret all around the kingdom.

"True," Tdor said soberly.

"Easiest first. In the plains days, we know from songs that men used to weave bands in clan colors for the wife, and the wife for her husband. Those bands were treaty markers: no war between the clan, and to seal it they sent a daughter to the other family to be raised with the son, and eventually married to him."

"I knew that much," Tdor said.

"Well, just before we made the change to living in castles, one of Evred's foremothers made a shirt for her intended, who was also her lover. She made a shirt for love—she embroidered it all over with his house symbol, and various ballad images and so forth. Thus the shirt was better than a mere band for a treaty-wedding. So then it became a matter of derision for the men who didn't have wedding shirts, the implication being no one would have picked them if there hadn't been a treaty."

"I think I get it now," Tdor said. "Jealousy? Lovers and spouses competing? Because of the wedding-treaty system?"

Fareas opened her hands. "No matter what kind of system you have, there are inevitably going to be lovers and spouses competing. Meanwhile, the move to the castles changed almost everything. The bands went out of use. Men, living in castles now, lost their skills at campfire weaving. The bands in clan colors were also considered barbarian. Everyone wanted *written* clan-treaties. So on."

Tdor was ruining her pen. She laid it carefully down again.

"As for treaty marriages, surely you know by now that there is no way to put rules to love or attraction.



Because nothing successfully controls it.”

“No,” Tdor breathed.

“So we try to lessen enmity between clans with the treaties, the promise that *your* children and *my* children will produce *our* children. And we hope that a boy and girl who grow up together will know one another well enough to have family love.”

Tdor’s lips parted. Then her eyes blanked: she was thinking of how Signi had observed her, as if for a sign of what her place might be in Inda’s household. Just as there were stories about favorites who entered a house and began changing the furniture, as the saying went, there were others who (there were sayings for every situation, Tdor realized) who found snakes in their bed.

Tdor remembered Inda’s and Signi’s self-conscious care around her. How that hurt!

“I’ll give the order,” Tdor said, going to the door. As if that would leave those memories behind.

“And I shall write to Hadand. Thank you, my dear,” Fareas-Iofre said.

Tdor fingered the neatly hemmed length of Castle Tenthen’s best, fine-hackled, double-bucked linen, nearly smooth as silk and finer in substance: warp and weft both the same size yarn, made not into the formal tablet that they used for the house robes and tunics, but the honeycomb, only used for the best sheets and shirts.

She ran her hands along the fabric, wondering what she herself really knew of love. She thought: *To say that I am “in love” with Inda would make everyone laugh, for I had not seen him since we were small, and when we did meet again, it was for only a day.*

The ache in her throat had nothing to do with her lack of skill at embroidery. She knew her Runner, Noren, who was skilled with a needle, would show her how to embroider, and she knew that Inda would not complain if the result was not exactly deft.

*No, she thought, glaring at the needle, at the basket of silken threads in their neat twists. I have nothing to regret. Inda will never refuse to come to my bed. His dag will not make trouble in my home.*

*That much I could see by the end of that shared meal. Everyone will be thoughtful of the others. Everyone will be kind. If Inda loves her forever, then . . . then there is more love in the world .*

She threaded the needle with the brightest red she could find, and shoved a few stitches through with such violence she pricked her thumb. She popped it into her mouth lest she stain the shirt no more than thirty heartbeats from beginning her task.

*What hurts the most is that I do not know if he will come back. So I am going to make this shirt and believe he will return, she thought firmly, and set a straighter stitch. I will carry it with me everywhere I go, and every person in Castle Tenthen will see Inda’s wedding shirt, and they will know I expect him to come back. So here will be a sun, and then I’ll make the Algara-Vayir owl, and then maybe a ship, if I can get someone to draw me a model of one . . . and every stitch is going to bring him closer to home .*

## Chapter Twenty-eight

ABOUT the time that Tdor arrived home in Choraed Elgaer at the beginning of spring’s first stretch of warm weather, far to the north Evred-Harvaldar’s army slogged their way across the mired countryside under band after band of rain.

*Jeje: I notice you did not answer. Did I put you to sleep? Would you rather have less of Taumad’s inner tempests, and more of the ones he is traveling through? We have been crossing an ocean of grass. The road usually runs alongside rivers, except when it winds around low hills. People working in fields straighten up, down tools, watch us pass, some looking with longing, others wary. I wonder if there are some who, despite the snapping flags and these magnificent horses, go*

*back to their hoeing thinking: better you than me!*

Tau also rode past the old men who'd been seeing dashing cross-country riders all their lives, or had been among the dashers themselves.

Two old dragoon scouts sat in a boat on a placid lake, trying to fish, until the rumble of hooves sent the marsh birds flapping skyward, scolding raucously. The two eyed the ordered ranks who galloped up the road and splashed their way across the shallow end of the lake, enabling the horses to cool off and drink before they surged up the bank on the other side and vanished over the ridge.

"Montrei-Vayir pennons." One gnarled thumb hooked over a shoulder. "Tlennen's pup going north again. Think the Venn're coming at last?"

"I don't know about that, but what I do know is they're a damned nuisance," came the sour reply. "First good day we've had in two weeks, and what happens? Look at the lake, all gone to mud. It'll be tomorrow afore it settles, and the fish all hiding down at the bottom. We may's well give it up and paddle ashore."

There was one other watching them ride.

After leaving Lindeth Harbor, Skandar Mardric had traveled hard and fast in search of the Marlovan army. From a hilltop opposite the lake where the two old men were rowing to shore, he scanned the long line until he spied the snapping pennons behind the king.

He felt no triumph. That would come when he had ensured Idayago's freedom by ramming a knife between the red-haired king's ribs.

He studied the endless columns, tear-shaped shields hanging at saddles, bows slung, lances, staves, and spears in loose hands, steel blades winking when the sun did peep out.

Mardric rode along the hilltop, hidden by the trees, until he caught up with the leaders again. The king was easy to spot, just in front of two huge crimson flags. They did not hide him, for who would dare to attack now?

*Not me*, Mardric thought wryly. He laid rein to his horse's neck and trotted back to the town he'd just left.

He had even less chance of sneaking into a Marlovan camp than into one of their castles. But he'd learned while listening for news of the approaching army that the Marlovans sometimes broke ranks for supply runs.

During the next three weeks, as he rode an easy parallel course to the army, he watched Runners arrive early to arrange for fresh grain for the animals (despite their vigilance, they couldn't always keep theirs dry) and fresh food for people. They were welcomed, smiling, because word had spread that they always paid.

The ghost at Inda's shoulder was strongest when Inda drilled, though nowhere as bright as it had been the night they stopped at the Marlo-Vayir castle. Signi continued to be amazed that Inda could not perceive it, but so it was.

The morning routine had changed. The Sier Danas were invited to join Inda's and Tau's predawn practice. Cama and Noddy were there every day, the latter pairing off in turn with Evred, who had begun to join them.

As they crossed into Khani-Vayir, Cama began conducting the early morning training for the men. He also worked evenings with Tau, who was always willing and had no other duties. Cama had been practicing in secret since Inda's first drill in the courtyard of the Marlo-Vayir castle before he went to the royal city; Cama had expected Inda to be impressed with Marlovan skill after his years among pirates, and instead had been shocked to discover the reverse.

Cherry-Stripe had started out in racing spirits. The parts he loved were riding daily up and down the columns, sitting at the king's campfire at night, and he especially loved commanding attack forces in the evening war games.

He would have loved the prospect of war, had not Buck taken him aside for a private talk the cold, rainy

morning they departed. They'd gone up to the wall in the old part of the castle and, stolidly ignoring the cold rain, Buck had said, "Don't think war is fun, despite all the songs and the drum beating. I told you about the Ghael Hills."

"I know, I know," Cherry-Stripe had said. "Your first thought is you need to pee, and your second is what's going on? But don't you see, we've got Inda!"

Buck had glared eastward toward the faint grayish blur in the clouds where the rising sun hid behind the horizon. Then he grunted. "Yes. Take a squint at that face of his. He's all over scars."

"Aw, that was just pirates."

"Maybe. Here's what I do know. Ghael Hills was near to being a massacre. None of us knew what we were doing. If Inda really does, you do what he tells you. Come home alive."

Cherry-Stripe felt the cold grip of doubt when he remembered that his brother had to ride to back up Ola-Vayir. "You too," he'd said.

The doubt did not stay away. His belief that Inda could do anything—including lead them brilliantly to victory—wavered hard their second day out. The men warmed up by fast ride-and-shoot lines back and forth past a target, but instead of the commands being called by Evred through the captains, Inda took over himself. Right out loud he asked the stupidest questions, like he didn't care who heard. And didn't the men within earshot smirk!

But Inda just rode around, Evred giving answers the boys had known by the time they were fifteen-year-old ponytails: yes, light cavalry was for harassing attacks, mostly arrows; no, they didn't carry lances or staffs; yes the heavies still used the snap-staff, but only against enemies with no shield. How long could a horse go on charge? How about charges uphill? Did horses hold a line when under a rain of real arrows?

Evred just answered the questions as if they were the smartest ones ever aired, but then Evred had always been that way: wooden-faced, serious—you never knew what he was thinking.

Once or twice Cherry-Stripe overheard mutters go through his own men—just too low for him to take notice of, they knew it and he knew it. But he also knew that tone, and if he hadn't, the muffled snickers would have made it clear it was a wisecrack.

After the second time he whispered to Noddy, "Why's Inda acting like a scrub?"

Noddy leaned forward to brush a hovering insect from his mount's twitching ear. "Because he is one," he said. *Idiot*, his flat tone implied.

Cherry-Stripe had known him too long to care about insults. "Scrub?"

"Just in our ways of doing things." He gestured impatiently. "Limits of horse, of men on ground. *Where* was he these past ten years, Cherry-Stripe? At the academy?"

The sarcasm was easy to shrug off. Cherry-Stripe pondered the fact that despite those scars and how tough Inda looked out there behind the tents, whirling around with no shield and steel in both hands, he wasn't a one-man army. Could he actually run a battle against anything but pirates? Cherry-Stripe kept himself busy, and when he couldn't ride or drill himself to exhaustion he drank to escape that question, which made it easier to sleep.

During these same long days of travel and practice, Evred had begun confining himself to answering questions. After a time, when Inda seemed not to be watching the sunset evolutions he'd expressly ordered, Evred could not resist asking, "What do you see?"

Sometimes Inda started, other times he'd turn his head and out would come a rapid stream of observations, often scarcely coherent. Following these headlong thoughts was like trying to swim down a rushing river.

At first, Inda's observations were not much different than those Evred and his academy mates had expressed when they began lance training.

"I get it," Inda exclaimed, one bright day a week northward, as the men rode wearily around and around in their own dust, their hands drenched with sweat inside their gauntlets, tendons in their right legs

quivering after long practices pressing the lower end of the lance holster against the mount's side.

Cama and Rat were the opposing captains. They galloped up and down the line, shouting orders to bring the evolution to a close.

"I see why you train in circles with the damn lances," Inda said to Evred as Rat and Cama looked their way. Evred raised his fingers, and Cama signaled yet another evolution, riding with seeming tirelessness at the fore, lance steady, which kept mouths determinedly shut in the ranks behind him.

"You build strength." Inda watched Cama's skilled lead, his powerful arcs with the lance. "He can put that thing wherever he wants to." When the evolution ended, he lifted his voice. "Now I want to see a charge."

Cama raised his fist, divided them into lines with himself in the center.

"So . . . one of us might even have to lead the front lines of a charge, especially if we don't have dragoon lancers. If any of us can find ourselves in the front lines, then we all have to know what lancers can do."

Cama gave a curt nod to his signal man, the charge was blown. The horses knew that sound: they began to walk in line, then to trot, and on the next signal they galloped hard at Noddy's men two hundred paces away. The lancers locked down their heels, couched the lances with the back end in the holster, and tugged the shields held out by Noddy's men as they rode past. Then they play-fought as the second and third lines charged and joined the melee.

Inda almost fell off his horse, he leaned so far out, as if leaning would clear the dust.

"What do you see?" Evred asked again.

"The weakest part is just after the charge," Inda said, scowling at the ragged line of horses milling about.

"Do they ever finish in line?"

"No. Oh, in demonstrations on the parade ground, sure. But not in battle, when enemies are shooting at you," Evred said. "It's why we have the second and third lines so tight after the first. Our horses hate strange, untrained horses. The Idayagans don't train their horses any better than they do their men. Our horses also hate dead bodies. In the real records, not in the herald reports meant for archives, I've found time after time that they always break and run. And the men, losing their order, lose sight of one another. It's why we never use anyone but experienced dragoons in the first and second lines, but third can be mixed dragoons and riders. If the first two hold the line during the fighting, the third does as well."

"The Venn use their heaviest men in front." Inda's eyes narrowed as he tried to see past the dust. "They make a wall, standing shield to shield."

But all he could make out were silhouettes: he had to listen for, and try to make sense of, the hoofbeats on the ground. Something you didn't worry about on the ocean.

"They had few horses, but those were big. The men wore full, heavy armor," Inda said. "The men on the ground get into these square formations, shield held to shield, spears out if they are flanked."

"As long as they don't have the spears out in front for the horses to run onto, our dragoons can break one of those," Evred predicted.

"Can we armor our chargers?"

"Yes. It slows them, but it works."

Inda rocked in the saddle. "So we can break those shield walls."

"In the records we could. We sweep around them, attack from two sides or more. There's nowhere for a square to march, so they break up and then it's every man for himself. That's why our ancestors stopped using that formation."

Inda exhaled, short and sharp. "I used fire ships like dragoons. No one else did," Inda added. "It seemed so obvious."

Evred said wryly, "Well, pirates are free that way."

Inda snapped his head around. "What do you mean? You said something like that before, once, I think, when we were talking about the Brotherhood battle, but we got sidetracked."

"We always get sidetracked," Evred retorted, laughing for a moment. "You were *pirates*, Inda. You took ships, you did not build them. So you never had to deal with the Sartoran Wood Guild, who—I assure you—has the power of the Magic Council behind them. We have to deal with them, lacking as we are in forests. And even if you have them, the Mage Council comes down hard on anyone who cuts

down a forest—”

Inda looked amazed. “I knew that. Or, I once did. I even remember where I sat when Mother told Tdor and me about the old days, when humans were nearly exterminated and magical balance and all that. But I don’t know, I didn’t think of it when on the seas.”

“You were happily burning up some smaller country’s entire year’s allotment of wood,” Evred explained, and then lifted his brows. “No one reminded you?”

Inda spread his hands. “Dhalshev of Freeport Harbor made a comment about Khanerenth’s fleet growth once. How limited it was, I mean. But I thought it referred to the empty treasury after the war. Because the old king and his sisters didn’t just run, they ran with a good deal of the kingdom’s gold. I do know that they used to burn everyone’s ship who’d fought on the other side as revenge.” As he said it, Inda considered his time on the sea. He’d never thought about the building of ships. He’d been put in one, and when it was taken, he took whatever he needed from his enemies.

It was a hard realization, because beneath the temporizing of necessity, worthy goals, and the rest was the truth: he really had been a pirate in others’ eyes.

Evred, watching carefully, sensed the direction of Inda’s mood shift. “The biggest problem in the north has been this.” He gestured toward the circling men. “Once the dragoons smash through the enemy front line, they give chase, which has drawn our second and third lines behind them, and the lines usually break. That hasn’t mattered much because the Idayagans always gave way, and then our men went into a frenzy of chase-and-strike before we got them back under command. I don’t think the same will happen with the Venn.”

“Right.” Inda’s head jerked up. “So let’s put the captains in the second line, then.”

“What?” Evred’s horse shied. “But we’ve never—”

Inda jerked impatiently. “Tradition that can’t be changed, or that won’t be changed?”

Evred did not answer. Instead, he beckoned Cherry-Stripe and Cama over. Then opened his hand to Inda.

Inda said, “Try commanding from the second line. Most experienced dragoons in the first line. See if you can keep ’em tight that way. I want all the smackers shot at the first and second lines, and the ‘Venn’ are to ride wild.”

Cherry-Stripe waited for someone else to say it was a crazy idea—captains didn’t hide in the second row—but Cama fingered his bad eye under his patch, looked around, at the horses, the ground, and then grunted. “Good notions. Let’s do it.”

They pushed northward into Khani-Vayir, where true to his word, Nadran Khani-Vayir, Noddy’s cousin, sent them men as reinforcements, wagons of dry grain, and sacks of spring vegetables. Not long after they were grounded for three days under pounding rain, and Evred had them out riding evolutions signaled by a single dripping pennant.

The men were furious, but silently so, because all the Sier Danas were right there among them, the king and his temporary Harskialdna as well, everyone equally sodden, mud-smearred, and cold.

A last line of reinforcements and supplies caught up with them, having encountered each other on the road and combined. They were sent by the Jarl of Hali-Vayir and by Horsebutt Tya-Vayir; Evred met the latter’s Runner in silence, listening expressionlessly to Horsebutt’s message of flattery and loyalty. At the end, he said only, “Inform the Jarl that I appreciate the spirit of his message. So much so that he is chosen for the honor of hosting the triumph when we return.”

Inda listened to that in mild amazement. Return? Appreciation? *Horsebutt*? But from the Runner’s attitude, he recognized that a lot more had been conveyed—and understood—than Inda had perceived. Well, asking about that could wait till after the battle. Assuming they survived, triumphant or not.

*Jeje: I wish you would send me just a single line telling me why you will not answer. Is the silence my answer? We did not part in anger. Have you lost your golden case, and I am sending these thoughts of mine into the wind between worlds? Well, as there is no one else to say many of these*

*things to, I might as well keep writing. It's comforting (even if only my imagination) to think of you reading my words, rather than hearing them rattling around in my head.*

*So, I forget how many days it's been. Each is so much like the last. We've pushed northward toward Ola-Vayir, once the southern reach of Olara. Your ancestors lived here, did they not? The afternoon games have improved. Inda sets us different battle-situations, more interesting ones. The men thought themselves tough before, but now they are beginning to shape like our pirate fighters under Fox's eye. And they game with the same enthusiasm as we did. Inda told me this morning (as he threw me over his shoulder into a patch of nettles) that he thinks he's finally learning to evaluate despite the dust. We never had dust problems on ships. Sun, yes. And smoke. Then there are the horses to consider—they are more like men. Limited stamina, have to eat. You will be surprised to discover that horses are not like ships.*

*The limitations of vision are different. At sea, you do not have dust, mud, grass, bushes, and milling men and animals to make evaluating movement difficult unless one can climb a convenient hill. Climbing a mast gives perspective in ship battles, unless there's fire or bad weather.*

*Evred watches the games, but he also watches the men. He seems to know how much he's asking of them, to drill before and after long rides every day. He announced today that when we reach the border of Ola-Vayir, where the great trade towns are built at road and river crossings, a night's liberty would go to the winners of Inda's mock battles.*

*Inda also told me (while sitting on my back with my arm bent behind me as he urged me to throw him off) that Evred handed down orders to the captains about giving no information beyond "We're going north to reinforce Idayago against the Venn." He obviously expects spies to be planted along our route. Certainly nothing is said to the men about the actual plans once we do reach the north, but then I don't think even Inda is sure about those. Not from the way he keeps looking at that map in Evred's tent, rocking back and forth, or else roaming around the camp, round and round. Rather like those questions in my head, beginning with, are you all right?*

Far to the west, just past the jut of Toar called Land's End, a last hissing of rain departed quickly, the drops leaping back up from the deck of the *Sable*. The strengthening spring sun, regaining its southern height, shone under the fleeing clouds, lighting up the drops with crystal fire.

Eflis and her crew ignored this moment of beauty. They were too busy cleaning the deck and repairing the damage after this last fight.

Eflis swept the deck, pleased with the speed of repairs. They wouldn't have to slosh down the forecastle where the pirates had tried to board, as the rain was scouring away the last of the blood, a rose-colored flow down the sides and into the sea.

She stepped into the cabin, where Sparrow was about to turn in, having stayed awake through a day and a night.

"It worked again," she crowed. "Weren't we fast? Think Fox was impressed?"

"Nothing impresses that soul-ripper," Sparrow muttered, flinging her wet clothes to the deck and climbing into the hammock. "He expected us to be there, and we were there. End of conversation."

But Eflis' mood was not to be doused. "Quick as a fiddle, right down the middle." She chortled.

"Naughty pirates, too greedy to have sense. That's a beautiful trysail, too, if on the narrow side. Hold'll be small. But Tcholan will love it, just like you always love your first ship. Seems right it was his and Dasta's plan, ha ha!"

Dasta had created that wounded ship ruse not long after Eflis and her fleet of schooners had joined the supposed Elgar the Fox. In those days, he, Tcholan, and Gillor had been trading off wearing black clothing like Fox. Eflis still found it hilarious, that one woman and two men as different as Dasta and Tcholan could have fooled everyone—and still there was another layer to the ruse, because in those days Elgar the Fox wasn't Fox at all, but Inda.

Who was now gone. Her smile turned pensive.

Sparrow, watching through heavy eyelids, misinterpreted and said, "You going to do it this time?"

*It.* Eflis made a comical face. "I'd better."

Sparrow said, "It's none too soon. Before she affects the rest of the crew."

Eflis turned on her. "I don't suppose you would—"

Sparrow gave a hoarse chuckle. More of a gloat. "You're the captain, my dear."

"And you're a stinker for laughing," Eflis said, bent, kissed the tip of Sparrow's nose, then left her to her well-earned slumber.

She walked through the ship to the forward crew quarters, where the mids and lower mates bunked. Mostly empty, except for one wounded young fellow, and two from Sparrow's watch who'd been dismissed from cleanup, as they'd served four watches in a row. And then fought.

Eflis handed out praise where deserved, helped shift a barrel here, held a hammer for a moment there.

But she kept moving until she reached the hatch to the aft portion of the hold—and then backed up as a furtive face topped by wild (and dry) honey-colored curls peered round. Then up. The eyes rounding in dismay.

Nugget was caught flat. No excuses this time of being somewhere else, covered for by her sympathetic mates. Nugget had definitely abandoned her battle station, had gone down to hide, and there'd been no chance yet to concoct a story.

"Right," Eflis said. "It's time for a talk, Nugget."

The captain did not lower her voice. Forward in the hold, above, there were quiet rustles and slaps of feet on deck as crewmates dropped what they were doing and listened.

Nugget hooked her arm more firmly round the rung of the ladder she'd been sneaking up, and said wistfully, "Right here?"

Eflis crossed her arms. She was tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed, good-natured—not the sort you'd expect to find a-pirating, but that was where circumstance had placed her. She had found a way to become a privateer. And she was going to keep that place.

"Why not right here, among the crew who protected you while you didn't do your share to protect them?"

Nugget's large, pretty, wide-spaced eyes lowered. Eflis fought the instinct to feel pity, suspecting that if Nugget had been born plain as a walnut, there wouldn't be nearly the impulse to sympathy on everyone else's part. "I can't," she said, lips pale and drawn. "I just can't."

"Right," Eflis said again, not wanting to argue with poor Nugget, who it seemed was fast becoming better at being poor Nugget than being a crew member. But she'd apparently been a kind of mascot to Inda, whose rep among the older crew members was still so strong it was more like legend.

So Eflis just said, "Unfortunately, after this fight, I have to shift my watch bill about. You've got to go back to the *Death*. I just don't have room on *Sable* for everybody who wants to be here."

"But Fox hates me," Nugget protested. And, in a lower voice, "I hate *him*."

Eflis felt that burst of sympathy again, but did not give it voice. Fox did absolutely nothing to make himself liked by the crew, but she had to admit that within his clearly stated rules, he was fair.

He would be fair to Nugget—within those rules.

"You can ask someone on free watch to row you over," she said.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

INDA bent over his food, deaf to the fireside talk. He had been staring at Evred's map so often he could pretty much draw it himself, but there was something he knew he wasn't seeing. He hated that uneasy sense of meaning just out of reach. Maybe if he thought about something else, he could catch it . . .

To his friends, it was like boyhood again, Inda hunched at the plank tables in the academy mess hall, his body present, his mind galloping off somewhere distant. They never paid him any heed when he did that. But during a pause, just as Cherry-Stripe tossed back some wine, Inda jerked his chin up, looked vaguely around, and asked, "What's a claphair?"

Cherry-Stripe spewed wine into the fire, which hissed and steamed. Rat uttered a coarse "Hah!" Cama

thumped Cherry-Stripe, who was now coughing and laughing. Evred did not react.

Noddy handed his empty plate to his young Runner, who bore it off to dunk it in the magic buckets at the cook tent. “Horsetail slang,” he said matter-of-factly. “Original meaning: in the baths, when your hair gets caught between your butt cheeks as you’re getting out.”

Inda smacked his hands on his knees. “But why didn’t I ever hear it? Tanrid never said it at home. I’d remember. Don’t *you* remember, how we’d strut around using horsetails’ slang? And anything about butts had us laughing ourselves sick.”

Cherry-Stripe snickered. His sense of humor hadn’t changed much since those days. Rat flashed the sharp-edged Cassad grin.

Noddy gave a faint, one-shoulder shrug. “Has several meanings.”

Cama muttered roughly, “You can look to my brother for that. Before Horsebutt got there, it also meant sporting in the baths. Which’s why your brother didn’t say it in front of you at home—we were all still in smocks before you left.”

Inda had been frowning, but now his brow cleared. “In the *academy* baths? When did you have time?”

He remembered being hustled in and out of the stone pools, the splash fights, shoving, soap flung around, towel-cracking at your butt if you weren’t wary, scrambling into your clothes (and having to unknot your socks, and finding out who did it so you could get suitable revenge later), then running to the barracks for callover, your short hair wet and dripping nastily down inside your collar. You wouldn’t think anyone would feel the least urge for sex *there*.

“When you’re seventeen and you wake up with saddle-wood, you find the time. And anyplace is good. Especially for Flash,” Cama added, and they all chuckled.

“Flash?” Inda asked, remembering the grubby boy with wild brown hair, a lopsided grin, and a taste for scrapping out behind the barracks. Flash never walked, always ran.

The others laughed. “Flash liked everybody,” Rat explained. “And he always seemed to be able to find a place. He was first for most of the girls over in the queen’s training, we kept hearing. I don’t know how he even got near them, rules being what they were.”

“Nobody ever said no to Flash,” Cherry-Stripe said. “He had you laughing too hard.”

“He was the first for most of us, too,” Rat said, hands open. “So it followed we’d practice on one another until they finally gave us liberty and we could get to the Heat Street girls.”

“I didn’t,” Noddy commented. “You lot were too ugly.”

Crows of scorn and guffaws rose.

“*Ugly?*” Cherry-Stripe hooked an arm round Cama’s neck and jerked him close for a smacking kiss but his pooched lips met Cama’s hairy, muscular forearm, snapped up in a block.

“Ech.” Cama shoved him away and adjusted his eye patch as everyone hooted at Cherry-Stripe.

Who turned his palm Cama’s way. “The girls insist Cama’s the prettiest of us boys. Even one-eyed. Almost as handsome as me—”

When the pungent commentary died down Inda said, “So, what, Horsebutt went after people? They didn’t go after *him*.”

“Nah.” Cherry-Stripe flicked up the back of his hand toward the general direction of Tya-Vayir. “He changed the meaning again. Called anyone who got promotion a claphair. Came to mean a lick. Worse. Sort who’d spread ’em in order to get something.”

“It was mostly aimed at my brother’s Sier Danas after they got to go north without having to put in their two years of guard duty, and when they returned there was still no duty, just riding around the kingdom with my brother,” Evred said.

“Buck says they would rather have had guard duty.” Cherry-Stripe chortled. “Even stall-wandering.”

“True,” Rat put in. “Very true. My brother told me they were bored sodden and had to put up with his temper. Two *years*.”

Cherry-Stripe went on, “By the time the Harskialdna pulled us out of the horsetails and sent us home, that word was in everyone’s mouths down to the littlest boys. They didn’t have any idea what it meant.”

“My brother,” Cama’s voice was rough with old anger,

“can step out of the baths into clean clothes and boots, walk onto a clean floor, and still track shit prints



all over before he leaves.”

“Someone called you a claphair, eh?” Noddy asked Inda, who turned his palms up.

“Doesn’t matter. They can say whatever they want. Long as they obey orders when it counts. Anyway I don’t think I was supposed to overhear,” Inda added, then tipped his head, considering. “Though I could be underestimating ’em.” He grinned. “I don’t blame ’em. I know what it had to look like, spending those first weeks doing academy exercises again and again while I was just watching.” He flicked his fingers out, and the conversation turned to other things.

While the camp settled in to enjoy itself for the night, far to the northeast, on the extreme western end of the strait on Drael, Fleet Commander Hyarl Durasnir stood on the captain’s deck of *Cormorant*, Prince Rajnir’s royal flagship, in his most formal battle dress, the polished copper torc of a Hyarl at his neck—a very rare sight. Another rare sight was the three beaten-gold bands around his right arm that signified the Stalna, the Commander. The gold winked and gleamed as he swept his glass over his fleet, all as close in as they dared, anchored down as steady as possible.

Contrasted against the white beach, lines of men were silhouetted, each with his dunnage at his side. Weapons polished, helms glinting in the moonlight as the strong northern wind rippled hair and tunics. Men of the Hilda, the army, and men of the Drenga, the armed sea warriors, their rivalry buried in common cause. It would inevitably surface later but Durasnir had found that they fought harder, each trying to outdo the other. Good.

The tide had just turned. The anchor cables no longer strained to keep the ships from crashing on the shore but had eased to a vertical line. The ships were already loaded with supplies. The flat-bottomed troop boats were neatly lined on the sand, awaiting men and horses.

All was ready. Restday wine and bread had been shared before the call to line up, as always on the eve of battle. Even the wind was ready, blowing steadily from their homeland, warm from the sun climbing toward its highest arc of the year here in the south.

They waited only the prince’s word.

Under powerful glowglobes hung from the mastheads—so the army could see him—Rajnir stood just before the whipstaff, his armor glinting silvery-blue, except for the rich gold of the Tree of Ydrasal gilding his chest plate. He wore his winged helm, which he hadn’t touched since that appalling sea battle ten years ago. His neck was bare of the silver torc of heirship, the more noticeable for its absence.

Everyone who saw that bare throat wanted to be the one to win it back for him: his success was their success, and theirs was his.

Flanking him were the ubiquitous Erama Krona, fully armed as they always were when away from the prince’s quarters, though Rajnir would never be within a day’s journey of any fighting.

Rajnir breathed deeply, his countenance proud and joyous as he surveyed his invasion force, ready at last.

Their readiness was somewhat of a fiction, but it was one they all participated in. Durasnir’s long experience had taught him that last-moment scramblings and surreptitious tidyings were inevitable, no matter how long the plans, or how carefully executed. But each knew his unfinished tasks, and would see to them on board.

It was a necessary fiction, and not just for the king’s ears far away, or for the prince’s sight. They all needed it. They were going to war; many were going to death. They would be kept busy in the tight quarters on board the transport ships as they crossed the strait.

At the prince’s shoulder Dag Erkríc waited, the wind tangling his silver hair, the grooves in his face deepened by the harsh light of the glowglobe hanging just above him.

“Hyarl my commander.” Rajnir lifted his voice. “Let us depart.”

The horns gave long, weird blats, reminding Durasnir of the cry of some of the bigger sea creatures up in northern waters, to be drowned out by a roar rose from shore:

*“Victory to the Venn!”*

*Victory to the prince!*

*Honor to Ydrasal, nine times nine!"*

They began to move, men to boats, boats to ships.

### Chapter Thirty

TAU and Inda had been watching the sky, sniffing the air, frowning at the quality of the light for several days. It seemed remarkable to them that none of the Marlovans noticed anything, but then they themselves weren't certain that they'd felt that shift of the wind from one side of the world to the other. Neither said anything, wanting independent corroboration.

Everyone knew that air currents played over land from every direction, sometimes coming from all directions during a single storm. In some places, and seasons, there would be breezes from one direction in the mornings, then the air stilled in the heat of the day to flow in from over the water at sundown. But the big, steady winds that drove cloud bands over the oceans, those were unmistakable to those used to the ways of the sea.

What Inda could not determine was whether the strait lay under the summer winds as well. Mindful of Evred's order to keep silent about the beacons, he scanned the mountaintops as soon as they appeared, hazy and indistinct, on the horizon.

The third morning when they met for practice, as Inda was working his right arm to loosen the stiffness that he couldn't seem to avoid, Tau said, "Do you feel the wind change?"

And instead of a mild yes or no while they continued on down to a good, flat, grassy spot away from the command tents, Inda stilled and drew in a long breath that Tau heard in the quiet summer air. "Third day I've been sure of it." He shook his head, and to Tau's surprise, loped back, stopping outside Evred's tent.

"Sponge," Inda said softly.

"Inda?" came an immediate answer, with no trace of sleep.

"I think—that is, we're pretty sure. The wind's changed."

Evred was silent so long Tau wondered if the king had been asleep after all, except that Inda stood so still, his head slightly bowed. And what Evred finally said was, "I understand. Thank you."

Understand what? The quality of the silence had changed, though Tau could not define how. But Inda's manner, Evred's long pause before speaking, it was as if some great, invisible burden had passed from one to the other.

Keeping his questions to himself by now had become habitual, so Tau paced beside Inda until they reached the riverbank. They were alone. The Sier Danas had gone back to leading their own men in morning drill. It was too late to learn a new form, better to hone the old, they'd decided. All except Cama, who practiced both forms when he could get someone to partner him. But mornings he drilled his men, his single eye merciless. The Cassads had given Cama their dragoons, and Cama was determined to shape them to Horsepiss Noth's standards. Better, if he could.

Inda and Tau began the swings and twists of warm-up. Dawn was just beginning to color the east blue. Inda felt Tau's question more than he saw it. Tau seldom spoke in front of the others anymore, and even when he did, Evred never noticed. It was strange, but Inda hadn't pursued it. Evred was too much like Fox that way, in his reactions to people. Those two weren't just silent, they seemed to wear their silence like clothing.

Inda considered this particular one of Evred's military secrets. Surely he could tell Tau. Signi was also discreet—Inda suspected she knew secrets far deeper and more world-important than anything he could even think of—but he wouldn't burden her with things that would affect this coming battle against her countrymen. He sometimes wondered why she was still here. He knew she could do a spell and vanish any time she wished. When she spoke, she always made him see and think far outside himself, and outside of war. He was grateful for her presence, though the thought of her being by when they and the

Venn met made him uneasy.

Later, later.

“Tau.” He already had Tau’s attention as they moved, struck, tumbled on the long summer grass, whirled, struck again. But saying his name somehow made the subject more important without his having to say so. “Tau. There is a back-up plan. Was. Is. I think he’s going to have to signal it, because we’re just not fast enough. We can’t risk being too late.”

“Back-up plan? Signal? I take it you do not mean the flags. Or even Runners,” Tau added, indicating his own blue coat lying neatly on the bank—then striking a double blow toward jaw and gut.

Inda’s hands blurred as he blocked, feinted, grappled Tau, and threw him to the grass. “Remember that locket thing Evred showed us at dinner in the royal city?” A puff, a grunt, and they rolled to their feet and began circling. “Evred told me recently he wears one. Barend’s up at the north end of the pass, with Flash Arveas, and he has another one, Nightingale—Noddy’s brother—the third.”

Tau found it amazing, almost absurd that these powerful Marlovans were confined to tiny love lockets for communication. If the stakes hadn’t been so terrible, he would have laughed.

Unaware of his reaction, Inda tried a couple of feints, then went on. “Evred is probably writing orders to Barend right now. With the winds changed here, we have to figure maybe the winds are changing up in the strait as well. I wish we knew how widespread the wind changes were.”

Tau shrugged, though Inda’s comment had been to the air, and not to him. He whirled and swept Inda’s feet, but as Inda fell he twisted, snaked an arm around Tau’s ankle, and yanked.

“So anyway—” A fast exchange of light blows, Tau pinned Inda, but Inda heaved with enormous strength and Tau somersaulted away before Inda could catch him. “—anyway, the Venn could be launching any time. To stop them in case they get to the pass before we do, well, Flash is going to bring down a mountain onto the road.”

“A *mountain*?” Tau repeated, and Inda dropped on him.

When Tau slapped the grass, Inda let him up. “The side of one, anyway. The Venn won’t be able to come over the pass until they take this castle squatting across the entrance. Evred says the castle is almost as big as his in the royal city.”

Tau whistled. Then ducked and caught Inda’s wrist. Inda shifted his grip and pulled, which Tau anticipated. He was as quick as Fox that way. He matched Inda’s moves until Inda shifted his feet, then twisted, whirling Inda off balance. Whomp! Inda hit the dust flat on his back, breathing hard. Tau dropped on him, knees holding Inda’s arms down, thumbs at Inda’s windpipe.

Tau leaned over him, his golden hair hanging down as he panted lightly. “That’s good. Isn’t it?”

Inda tapped out, and Tau dropped his hands. “For us,” Inda said, a little hoarsely. “But with the road gone, there’s no way from Idayago to here except through this ancient waterway tunnel somewhere under the castle. Our people have to hold the castle. Alone. Until we get there.”

Tau’s lips parted. “Shit.” He pulled Inda to his feet.

Barend woke sticky and hot. His head ached. They’d drunk too much iced birch beer the night before, sitting on the battlements of Castle Andahi in hopes of a breeze, chattering as they drank. Barend had brought the recipe for birch beer from the east. There was plenty of black birch up here along the north. Add yeast to the distilled sap, some of the precious sugar left from the days when Idayago still had trade with the islands, and it had become more popular than cranberry punch with the castle folk.

Especially with ice. That was the one good thing about those blasted high mountains. The few trusted men who traded off beacon-watch always brought down ice from the heights, packed inside a number of closeweave bags. Since there were traders who made a living doing that, it was easy enough to lie and say they’d bought it, and thus they could have iced punch almost every night.

Every night of this hot weather, because for ten days—Barend had been counting—they’d woken up to a bright blue sky and still, warm air. Was this the summer shift in winds? What he needed was a good storm, straight out of the northwest, then he could be certain. But no thunder had wakened him.

What had? He scratched his head vigorously as he sat up, and when the locket slid over his bare chest, he started. The locket!

He thumbed the catch, and sure enough, there was a tiny rolled piece of paper inside. First thing in the morning? That could not be good.

He grimaced, fingering the paper open. The tiny letters twinkled and danced. Reading had never come easy even when he was young. He'd had some sympathy for his cousin Aldren-Sierlaef, who couldn't make sense of letters at all. That is, he'd had sympathy until the Sierlaef began taking out his frustrations on Barend and Evred with his fists.

Barend scowled at the tiny print, then reluctantly rolled out of bed. He pulled on his pants and shirt and ran down the hall, the stone cool on his bare feet, bursting into Flash's bedroom directly downstairs from the old Jarl's suite.

There seemed to be two shapes under the tumbled sheets. Of course Flash was in bed with someone—he always was in bed with someone. Even if he went to bed alone, lovers came looking for him, Barend had learned.

He found Flash's dark hair on the pillow, and peered past. With relief he recognized the pale yellow hair of Flash's wife, Ndand. She knew all the kingdom business.

"Flash," Barend said.

The two started, Ndand yawning as she pushed a braid out of her face. "Oooh, Barend. Why did you—" She yawned again, more fiercely. "—wake us up?"

"Don't you ever knock?" Flash added with mild injury.

"No. You'd not answer, and I'd have to come in anyway." Barend sat down on the bed. "Since it's just you two here, I can get you to read that."

Flash sat up abruptly when he saw the tiny paper in Barend's hand. His expression tightened as he angled it toward the weather-smoothed arched window, the shutters open wide to the balmy predawn air.

"Evred says they've got summer over the mountain, and he's still a couple weeks outside of Ala Larkadhe. We've orders to smash the road, and Barend, you have to ride south to join him." He balled up the paper. "Last, Dad is to abandon the harbors and pull everyone back to defend this castle."

The three had spent far too much time speculating and calculating distances, especially in the past few days. The truth was, if the Venn came first, with or without the road collapsed, they would be the only ones defending the entire north shore of Idayago.

Ndand was the first to move, jumping out of bed and whirling her cotton robe round her slight, hard body. "I'll order the horses and supplies for your Runners, Flash."

Flash dropped his hands to his knees. "Dad and the others should have been here by now."

"Well, they aren't." Barend flung out his empty hands. "So let's send the rest of our Runners to every castle. All at the same time. Faster than just one fellow stopping everywhere along the way."

"Good." Flash grinned. "Past time to bustle Dad along." Flash reassured himself with laughter. His wily old father was probably presiding over the destruction of every dock and siege weapon used to fling stones at pirate ships. And he'd want to do it at all three harbors, then maybe even set up some traps and pitfalls. He'd love that, but such things did take time.

Ndand whisked herself through the narrow door on the other side of the room that led directly down to the baths.

Flash flung a towel round his hips without bothering with any clothing. The smell of old, wet stone and the caress of relatively cool air touched their moist flesh as they followed Ndand into the bath passage. They could hear her light voice calling to her Runners in the women's baths as they took the turn to the men's side.

"Timing could be better," Flash said.

Barend had been thinking the same thing. He'd thought it a good idea at the time to let Dewlap Arveas take Barend's men—who had been assigned to patrol and defend the pass—in addition to his own castle guard. Many hands made work go faster, and the hostile Idayagans at Ghael always cooperated more when presented with a show of strength.

Dewlap Arveas might just be just a day or two away, delayed by the weather. The spring rains had been

intense this year, and some of the bridges, destroyed in a fruitless effort to halt the Marlovans years ago, had yet to be replaced. Men would be needed to help lash boats together to make floating bridges. If so, the Runners would turn around and come back.

Barend, Flash, and Ndand bathed fast, dressed, and grabbed biscuits to eat on the way to the day's tasks. Despite the steadily increasing heat, Flash's dark hair was still hanging down his back in damp tangles when he went to seek his mother.

She was in the office she and the Jarl shared, poring over sketched-on pieces of paper. He leaned down to get a look at what appeared to be design drawings of the castle itself and its jumble of outbuildings before his mother said crossly, "Don't get your crumbs on the—"

The door banged open, and nine-year-old Kethadrend raced in, sun-touched brown hair lifting, his pale eyes—typical for the Arveases—wide in his flushed brown face.

"Everyone is running around like a stick in a hive! Are the Venn coming?" He hopped from one foot to the other, his dusty toes leaving prints on his mother's prize woven carpet. "Are they, Flash? Are they? Shall I get my bow?"

To Keth's surprise, his brother, who always laughed, knuckled the top of his head lightly, then he knelt down so they were face-to-face. Keth didn't remember ever seeing Flash so owl-eyed, and his skinny shoulders hunched up.

"Look, Keth." Flash's mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't.

Keth's shoulders hunched tighter to his ears.

"I know how tough you are. And how ready you are for the academy come next spring."

"Yeah." Keth eyed his brother warily, knowing that when grown-ups looked serious and said nice things, something bad was sure to be snapping right on the heels of all that sweet talk.

"Would you . . . like to ride with Barend over the mountain and help the king? I'll wager anything you'd be the youngest boy there."

Keth's eyes widened with joy, then narrowed into wariness. "You don't want me here."

Flash turned to his mother, who took the boy's twitching shoulders in her strong, rough hands. "Keth," she said calmly. "We're about to let you in on a secret. Everyone will know by nightfall, or maybe tomorrow—we're not sure—but in the meantime, we're going about it quiet. We have to smash the road. The Venn are coming, and the king might not be able to get here before they do."

"What about Dad?" Keth looked from one face to the other as he put together the clues. "You mean we'll face the Venn *alone*?"

"Maybe," Flash admitted. Then at the distress in his brother's face, he added, "But Dad might very well get back in time."

Keth swelled with joy. "Let me get my bow. I'll fight 'em. You'll see."

"Wouldn't you like to go help the king?"

The boy wavered, then scowled. "Is Gdir going?" Naming his ten-year-old betrothed.

Flash looked unhappily at the Jarlan, who said, "I'm talking to all the mothers, including your aunt.

Anyone under twelve might be going."

"I'm not if they aren't," Keth pronounced. "I think you want to get rid of me, cause you don't think I can fight!"

"I know you can fight," the Jarlan said gruffly, the last word wavering. Then she cleared her throat. "I *know* you can fight. But I would rather you get a chance to grow before you have to."

Keth's upper lip lengthened, then trembled. "You don't think we can win, is that it?"

"Even a castle as tough as this won't withstand the entire Venn army, Keth." Flash tried to speak easily, but the words were not easy ones. "Though we'll do our best. And we know the king is coming as fast as he can."

Keth jerked free of his mother's grasp. "You think we're cowards. I'll show you. And so will Gdir and Hal and Han, you'll see!" He dashed out, his voice breaking on the last word.

"I'm sorry, Mother." Flash got to his feet, looking shamefaced. "I made a mess of that."

She swept her palm downward, her gray braids falling forward. "Don't you see? He doesn't want to show us he's scared. So he gets mad. Not at the Venn yet, they're too distant. So he has to get mad at

us.”

“I hope you’re right.” Flash sent his breath out in a rush. “Should we force the young ones to go over the pass?”

Liet-Jarlan brushed her hands over her papers, thinking hard.

Her life had been like a gallop over mountains. At first, everything was laid out straight before them. Liet was the second daughter of the Tlens’ primary family, unexpected in the sense that there’d been no treaty plans for a second daughter. But she’d been born a girl instead of a boy so the family had sent her to the Arveases, as they were the premier Rider family, the boys being consistently picked for king’s dragoons. Liet had grown up with Dewlap, had been sent to the queen’s training in case she was the head wife of any future garrison. That had worked so well that she’d made a treaty with one of her own guardswomen to take any daughter she had if Liet had a boy. And so it had come to pass, and Ndand came to them at two. And when Dewlap got promoted, she brought along several girl-cousins and their families, all guards except for little Gdir, daughter of the primary Tlen family.

A big family, tight-bonded. All fighters. The Arveases and their Tlen kin were tough! Tougher than Vayirs . . . except now they *were* Vayirs in all but name, and now they might actually be fighting right down to the last child, just like they’d bragged . . .

She shook her head hard. “I’ll talk to the others, but I don’t think so. I don’t think a woman here—or a man—would fight the better knowing their children left ’em angry. And we don’t know if the king will win even if he does come.”

“He could send them all to the royal city.”

“True. I would like that. Knowing they were safe.” The Jarlan’s voice roughened on the last word. She swallowed—he heard it—and compressed her lips. Then said, “Though that would mean the king would have to be sending them south with people he needs here. I don’t know . . . maybe it was a mistake to train them young to think tough. They’re all going to insist on staying.”

“There’s tough and there’s crazy. Our ancestors only took the boys on raids after thirteen or fourteen or so.” Flash grinned. “Rat Cassad used to comb every ballad he could find, trying to discover an excuse for us to get out of the academy early and come north here to fight pirates.”

The Jarlan’s smile faded. “And here we all are.”

“Here we all are.” Flash felt inexplicably sad. Despite all the talk about glory and honor and duty, he loved his life without the threat of war.

She sensed it in his sober downward glance, and said in her training voice, “In those old days, there were raids on the camps. That meant the defenders were the women and children. We all had to be tough, or we wouldn’t have survived.”

Flash lifted his hand, his palm up, fingers expressive of a regret he couldn’t put into words.

The Jarlan snorted. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll send the smallest ones up into some of the cliff caves.

Maybe that’s a good compromise. But one thing’s for certain—we’d better get to it.” She smacked her hand on the papers. “And if things come to the worst possible, we’ll have plenty to do here.”

Flash finally realized the papers at hand weren’t just a random stack of reports. “What have you got there, Mother?”

“Sabotage,” she said grimly. “Ndand and I have been working on these plans for weeks. Ever since Barend brought the news the Venn were coming, and the king thought they’d land here first. We’ve never had enough people here to defend the north, and it’s plain we’re not going to, even when your father gets back with Barend’s men.”

Flash breathed, “You’re going to sabotage the castle?”

“And the entrance to the tunnel. If the Venn reach us first, we want to make certain it takes them as long as possible to get through us and find the tunnel to the pass.”

As long as possible. Flash’s regret tightened his throat.

The Jarlan studied her son. “You go collapse your mountain. We’ll start as soon as the dust clears. No one will have time to worry because we’ll be too busy.”

Flash’s personal courage was unquestioned—proven—but she could see how disturbed he was. Yet he could not deny the necessity.

She made herself laugh, and was surprised at how convincing it sounded, though her heartbeat drummed in her ears. “While you’re playing with your mountain, keep your eye on the blue horizon for those sails. If you see ’em, you get that beacon lit. I intend to have some fine gifts waiting for any Venn who show up before the king.”

### Chapter Thirty-one

ON Restday, Evred-Harvaldar and his army passed the last town before their road would begin the long curve along the base of the highland. Another week would find them joining the Great Northern Road, which zigged its way up the deceptively gentle slope toward the distant, hazy mountains, and Ala Larkadhe.

Another week if the punishing heat let up. Despite the threats awaiting them, they could not gallop in this still, heated air.

Before dawn the runners-in-training were up, leading the animals to water. The air was already hot by the time they rode out.

By midmorning the horses were foam-flecked and drooping, and some of the men leaned on their animals’ necks, dizzy from the heat. After three separate requests for water breaks for the mounts, Evred called an early halt within a short distance of the market town.

“We will make up the time with a night march as soon as the weather breaks,” he said, and the Sier Danas agreed with unhidden relief.

When the signal to camp reverberated off the gentle hills just beyond the bend in the river, Evred said, “Since it’s Restday, and we’ve camped early, we’ll have contact fighting competition. The winner gets a night’s liberty. After you fight the winner,” he added, palm toward Inda.

Cherry-Stripe yipped, echoed by Rat. Those within hearing passed the word outward.

“With weapons,” Evred added. “Both knives.”

“I only do that with Tau,” Inda protested.

Evred dismounted. He smiled. “I think the time has come for everyone to see what your style of fighting can do.”

The subvocal commentary of those listening made a low, intense hubbub. Everyone had been hearing about Inda’s fighting style with two knives—like the women’s Odni—and a few had seen it from a distance while patrolling the inner perimeter at dawn.

Odni was defense, not offense. Women did not ride into battle, did not wield swords, so what use was there in fighting a war with two knives, except to look tough? You’d look stupid, dropping your shield! Well, maybe it made sense for pirates—maybe they didn’t have shields on boats, but one knife had always been good enough for Father and Grandfather, hoola-hoola-hoola . . .

Cama thumped Inda’s shoulder. “Time to show ’em.” His husky voice rasped. “Time to show ’em.”

Ripples of interest ran through the ranks, and then word splashed back that this market town had not one but two pleasure houses. Liberty, everyone knew, extended until riding time the next morning. If you wanted to be in the saddle all day after being up (with all the various meanings of up) all night, that was your business.

“I tell you what I want, and that’s to see what a Marlovan pirate offers by way of a fight—one knife or two,” a man said as he led his mount to the horse picket, to general agreement.

Tau overheard that as he rode by on his way to the Runners’ area. He got brief looks, some disinterested, one or two speculative. By now everyone knew that, though the would-be Harskialdna’s Runner would willingly tell how Indevan-Laef had gotten those gold hoops with rubies in his ears, would describe pirate fights and pleasures in as much detail as you wanted—he’d even tell you what a theater was if you asked—he was even more closed mouthed about the person of Indevan-Laef than was the king.

Tau reached Inda’s tent first to discover a small gathering of the runners-in-training. These boys would

one day be the King's Runners, who would serve the king in dealing with important affairs. The youngest in the army, they did not go to the academy. They were all from jarl or King's Rider families, mostly cousins or third sons, and were trained separately.

"Let us give him his gear," begged a young Khani-Vayir cousin.

"We need the practice," declared husky young Goatkick Noth, who hoped to be Runner to the king's dragoon commander one day. Younger brother of Flatfoot Noth, he was the oldest of the runners-in-training, and the others had been teasing him over the past week or two after he'd begun sprouting a beard. He'd had to ride into a market town with the supply run so he could find a healer to do the beard spell. His face still tingled faintly, which caused him to rub his jaw—a gesture the others regarded as pure swagger.

On Tau's wave of permission, the youngest boy, a weedy fourteen-year-old, plunged his hand into Inda's seabag and pulled out Inda's war gear, all wrapped in cloth. First was a fighting sword, disappointingly like the ones everyone carried, and not the expected pirate blade all crusted over with blood and jewels. Then there was Inda's second set of knives in wrist sheaths, and last, two bulky packages.

"Here, what's that?" asked a Tlennen cousin, impatiently shaking free the much-patched cloth around one heavy object. "Ow!" He dropped the thing, and stuck a bleeding finger into his mouth. "What is that?"

"It's a wrist guard," the fourth said, poking at the article in question.

They gazed in doubtful silence. Wrist guards were customarily only given to horsetails, or those who had attained full growth—wearing them too young, said current wisdom, made your wrists depend on them too soon and thus not strengthen. Wrist guards were usually worked with house devices or martial designs. This worn object with its dark stains (that *must* be pirate blood!) was not ornamented whatsoever, instead had a crosspiece as a palm guard (maybe pirates didn't wear gauntlets?), and worked into the back of it were slightly hooked sharp blades. Barbs.

A shadow at the tent flap caused them all to look up guiltily.

"What are you doing?" Inda asked, suppressing the urge to laugh. There were times he felt downright *old*, though these boys were only three, maybe five years his junior. A few years in age, and two or three lifetimes, it sometimes seemed, in experience.

"We wanted to get your weapons for you," said the Tlennen boy. "Runner Taumad gave us permission." Inda sent Tau a wry look, to be answered with a rueful shrug.

"But what is that?" asked Goatkick, knuckling his chin with one hand, and pointing with the other.

"Wrist guard," Inda stated, looking surprised.

"But it's *barbed*. Do you, well, use it as a weapon?" one of the boys asked. "Isn't it for bracing your wrist in lance work?"

"And why only one like it?" asked another, as he carelessly rewrapped it in the patched cloth. "This other one is more like ours."

"Here, be careful with that," Inda warned, and the boys all looked in confusion at the ragged cloth.

"That's my fighting shirt," Inda explained, amused at their various attempts to hide disgust and revulsion. That worn, patched old thing?

"There are no laces," Tlennen pointed out.

"No. Why get someone's point tangled in 'em and strangle me?"

"No chain mail?" the youngest asked. All of them were now somewhat subdued.

Inda had untied his stained green sash and dropped it to the bedroll, then began unbuttoning his coat.

"You don't want to fall overboard in mail. You'd sink and drown."

"So you don't use any shielding at *all*?"

"Some do. I never did. Slows me up." He indicated the wrist guard. "As for that, when I was on my first ship, my wrist broke." He flexed his right hand. "I don't think it ever healed right. It hurts in battle, always the first thing to go. I lose my grip with that hand, after a time. So I better be able to use the back, see? But it's also stiff, and shortens my range of movement, which is why I wear a regular one on the left."

Tlennen pointed toward the barbed one. "Are those bloodstains on it?"



“Of course.” Inda shrugged out of his coat, which was instantly caught by one of the boys and laid carefully aside.

Inda ripped off his shirt.

Scars all over! The boys stared, semaphoring questions with grimaces and rolls of eyes: How many pirates do you think he’s killed? And that fighting shirt! Those patched tears had to have been made by real weapons; the brown splatters, bloodstains that hadn’t gotten to the cleaning bucket in time and had set.

Inda had stripped off his regular wrist sheaths, the ones he’d carried for years. “I’ll take those.” He pointed to the longer ones lying on the ground. “Need to practice with them. Longer blades, d’ya see?” They respectfully handed him the wrist sheaths. There was a short, intense, and covert struggle to be the one to buckle them on for him. He was used to doing his own, but mindful of the fact that these boys were part of Evred’s army, and would be in as much danger as the grown men, he let them do it.

Then the old shirt last, the billowing sleeves falling over the wrist guards. As he ducked out they followed, silent until they could reach their fellows and render themselves intolerable by bragging about what they’d seen and heard.

Supper was eaten and Restday wine more hastily distributed than ever before. Then two fires were built up with about twenty long paces between them. They served as illumination and as borders for the matches; the air had cooled only slightly with the slow slide of the sun into the west. The fires were not set as high as they would be in winter, just enough for light, though the heat they threw off in the still air made it feel like midday.

But everyone ignored the heat. The camp crowded round, captains on sitting mats along either side with the best view and the best position from which to judge in case of a difficult call. The king had the central place, Indevan-Laef next to him, the Sier Danas at either side of them.

Tau found a spot just behind and to Inda’s left, out of the king’s line of sight.

Men crowded behind them, some on their knees, others in back having to stand. Those who’d drawn this watch for perimeter guards were justly pitied as the captains conferred, then began calling out their best men from each riding to compete in the first matches.

Bottles and bets passed back and forth as favorites emerged. Inda watched intently to gauge what they’d learned.

Finally a shout of approval rose skyward, contrasting with a groan of disappointment from those who had lost bets, after a big front-line lancer flattened a skirmisher bowman.

The martial ardor intensified as the lancer faced one of the dragoons’ own riding captains—one of those for whom the privilege of declining to fight without loss of honor was reserved. Captains were expected to be good, but they were also expected to rise fresh and ready to command at dawn.

The dragoon captain checked to see if Indevan-Laef was watching, then charged his opponent. Evred divided his attention between the two men—in the prime of life, strong, fast, courageous, fighting to win—and Inda.

Though around them shouts and cheers of approval rose, Inda’s profile was troubled.

“What’s the problem?” Evred asked, low-voiced.

“Two things. They use the safety rules by habit.” Inda spoke without shifting his gaze from the men, who were now straining for the captain’s dropped knife in the dust a pace away. The lancer had already lost his. “And not one of them has used any of the moves I’ve been teaching them for weeks.”

Evred’s brows rose. “So is it not time to demonstrate what your drills are for, Captain Claphair?”

Inda flicked back the loose, frayed cuffs of his sleeves, revealed polished darkwood knife hilts nestled against his inner wrist. “I’m ready.”

Evred smiled. It was a quiet smile, one he meant to be encouraging, but the anticipatory triumph expressed in every line of his taut body, the compressed breathing of denied hunger, made Signi fade quietly beyond the tents, where she could sit on a rock and study the stars, her long-suffering guards trying to position themselves where they could keep her, one another, and the fighting space all in view.

Matches were not with wooden or blunted blades, but your own weapons. You were expected to have the skill to stop short of death. Minor cuts and slices were a matter of course.

Three matches later, a muscular scout, faster than the dragoon captain and stronger than a bowman, was declared winner.

Inda stood up, knives already gripped in his hands. The entire camp had gone quiet. He noted then shut it out, and tipped his head toward the winner. "He's tired. Not a fair match."

Evred turned up his hand. "Then take them both on." He pointed to his dragoon captain, who was standing nearby with his men; the bowman had strained his arm in losing.

A howl of approval met that, and then someone brought out a hand drum. Several laughed. Inda heard the challenge in their laughter, and as usual, shrugged it off.

The two former combatants, recovering their breath as they recovered their weapons, exchanged glances, circled the fires, and then came at Inda from either side.

Inda knew within a heartbeat that neither had fought with the other. Worse, they'd let their gazes get drawn to the fire. Fighting on shipboard at night had taught Inda never to turn his eyes directly into fire because for a few crucial heartbeats it blinded your night vision. All it took to be killed was a single blind or unwary moment.

The captain wanted to recover his lost prestige and the scout to earn a win that would be remembered by everyone who witnessed it, and so they converged determinedly, using well-learned ploys from years of drill.

Inda gave his head a shake of disappointment. His strategy here was so obvious—get them into each other's way—it wouldn't be much of a challenge.

Still, it was practice, and practice was always good.

To the silent watchers, he moved with catlike speed and power, and when he struck, it was so fast, so unnervingly predictive of the others' moves, it was difficult to follow with any clarity. They saw only that he didn't pull out his weapons until the very end. Hands, feet even, and then the flash and glitter of steel, and one lay on the ground with Inda's knife point at his neck, while the other had to kneel as a kill, hands to his throat where Inda's knife had pricked a neat line from side to side above the collarbones—no more than a pink scratch. That, the earlier scoffers agreed, having changed their minds about the commander in a heartbeat, *that* was control.

"Three, this time," said Evred-Harvaldar.

Inda cast him a look of comical dismay, but in truth it felt good to practice against others again, though he did not feel the mortal challenge of a fight with Fox.

The spectators watched him turn his wrist with the ease of long familiarity and, still gripping his knife, wipe his hair back, the sharp-edged blade passing a finger's breadth from his ear. His scarred flesh moved over rib and muscle in the open neck of the old shirt; he looked tougher than the toughest dragoon, and his total lack of self-consciousness reinforced the impression.

The next match lasted longer. Again, Inda was a continuous whirl of movement, steel fire-limned, horsetail describing arcs in opposition to the flow of complicated circles and curves his hands, feet, body made. Then *thump! Thump! Thump!* Down they went in defeat.

"A riding." Evred gripped his knees, the fires gleaming in his night-black pupils. "They've seen what two knives can do. Inda, lay aside your weapons. Let's see what just hands, feet, and balance achieve." For Evred, too, had studied the women's Odni, taught by Hadand herself at Inda's boyhood request. But he'd had to try to adjust to moves designed for women's different centers of balance.

This new fighting of Inda's had been adapted to men.

Inda flung his unruly hair back, drops of sweat splatting on the beaten dirt of the fight circle. "Sponge!" he protested.

Whispers, quickly silenced. More drums appeared. The drummers changed the beat to the rolling syncopation called *the gallop*.

Evred-Harvaldar opened his hand toward a big riding captain out of the forest of fists raised. The man motioned his riding out onto the ground, smacking two of the fellows who'd begun to crow at being

chosen. “Pay attention, you turds. Yip when you win.”

“Either weapons or aid, then,” the king said to Inda through the laughter and insults from the ringsiders.

“Tau!” Inda called over his shoulder.

Tau got up from his mat, carefully removed his sash and blue Runner’s coat, and when Vedrid appeared, surrendered them to his care. Dressed in shirt and breeches and riding boots, Tau stepped into the fire ring. He flicked his knives from his sleeves and angled them, blade out, up his forearms, ignoring the susurrus of whispers that ran back through the crowd: so Inda’s Runner also carried two knives.

Tau took Shield Arm position behind Inda, slightly to the left and back, as they had drilled so many times: on the deck of a ship you are confined in space. Whether facing two or many, they had discovered, a trained pair guarding each other’s backs could do mortal damage to a dozen fighting as individuals. A riding is only nine.

One moment Tau stood between the tremendous fires, feeling the drumbeat in blood and bones, the heat of anticipation burning down through his belly and below; not for the first time he considered how close, how very close, were the pleasures of sex and fighting.

Just before the opponents attacked he risked a look toward the king. He saw what he expected to see: Evred’s inscrutability was gone, his gaze unwavering and intense. What surprised Tau was how strong Evred’s personal boundaries were to make just one fast glance feel like trespass.

Then the attackers reached them, and the world was reduced to instinctive movement, the exhilarating joy of strength overcoming strength. Together he and Inda divided and took out the entire riding, then Inda, laughing, gave his winner’s liberty to the nine, muttering privately to Tau as the talking, yelling, singing camp broke up, “Can you get your fingers into my shoulder? I think I landed on it wrong.”

“I’ll get some linseed oil.” Tau knew Inda hadn’t landed wrong. There was something really amiss with the bones or tendons or muscles—probably all three—in that shoulder. He could feel Inda favoring it in drill, and after a prolonged fight he could see him favoring it.

Inda said nothing. He knew he needed a mage-healer, but there weren’t any available to Marlovans in the entire subcontinent.

The night was warm, the stars dim—a pleasant evening, with insects chirping and stridulating in the thick green grasses surrounding his tent. Over that was the scree of birds in the distance, just discernable over the steady rumble of men’s voices as the army prepared to enjoy itself before the horns announced the watch change.

Inda eyed the breaking crowd, wondering where Evred was—probably issuing orders for the next day’s travel. And where was Tau? Not in that impatient line of liberty men who’d reported to the paywagon beyond the cook tents for a portion of their pay, duly noted down by Kened, the Runner in charge. The first of them tore off to fetch horses for a couple of his mates so they could ride posthaste to the town, whose lights twinkled cheerily to the west. They did not intend to be robbed of a moment of their fun.

Inda pawed ineffectually at his right shoulder, which throbbed in painful tingles down to his fingers.

Liberty was good, but a speedy night march would be far better.

Well, Evred had said they would have one when the weather broke. Maybe that was better for the horses, who might be expected to be running up a mountain pass within a week or so. He’d ask Signi to work on his shoulder until Tau got back with his oil.

## Chapter Thirty-two

HIGH on the cliff marked by wind-twisted conifers, Flash and his last and most trusted men gathered.

Filthy to their scalps with the dirt they had been digging almost nonstop, they peered down at the bottom of the pass. This was where it began, a broad expanse just behind the castle, rising and narrowing toward the first ridge turning.

Kethadrend stood close to his brother. He’d kept the secret, though he’d longed to tell the children his age.

Keth's reward was Flash saying, "Would you like to do the spell to start the landslide?"

Would he! Just wait until Gdir and the others heard *that* —would *they* turn sour!

So Keth did his best to possess himself with what patience he could by jiggling up and down as the last digging team struggled up the treacherously steep footpath above the cliff that had been marked on the secret map somebody had made ages and ages ago, like fifty years. If they weren't just making some kind of joke. Except that metal thing that felt like one of the magic buckets when you touched it, well, that made everything seem real. And the trees the map said would mark off the unsafe space were all there, huge and wind-twisted.

"See that rise on the west side?" Flash pointed across the wide mouth of the pass behind the castle.

"That's where Cousin Shend put the magic thing for the stone to shift to. She said there's a clearing, and we ought to be able to see it from here," Flash said to his little brother. "So if the magic spell still works, well, then, the big stone supposedly hidden somewhere in that cliff down below us will transfer there.

And so we'll see if the rest happens. As soon as Den and his team get up here, we'll do it. Now, let's practice a few more times, to make sure you have the words and the sign right. I don't know if doing magic wrong spoils the spell or does something really terrible, and we don't want to find out, do we?"

Keth crowed with joy. What a thing to tell the boys at the academy next spring!

Below in the castle while he and Flash practiced the magical spell, Ndand finally found her quarry—the last person not accounted for.

Ndand had insisted on being the one to search the entire castle to make certain no one was in any of the rooms, just in case. The inhabitants were all gathering on the western wall.

She had begun below and worked her way up toward the jarl's suites at the top, giving out onto the sentry walk facing the harbor. She dashed through room after room, all empty, and slowed as she approached the family suites.

Estral the Poet must have gone back home after all, despite being rejected by her own people for her friendship for the Arveases. Ndand was not sure whether to be relieved or worried when she came unexpectedly on a familiar short, round figure with dark curls, just inside the Jarl's office.

Estral whirled around, her mouth opening, her arms stiff at her sides, fingers spread.

"There you are," Ndand exclaimed. "I couldn't find you! Looking for Flash? That's what I came to tell you. I'm afraid there isn't much time, but I could signal if you like, and they'll wait."

"What will wait? Is there a drill?" Estral's hands wrenched together. Poor thing, she was taut as an overdrawn bowstring!

"Didn't you get the message to go up to the west wall?" Ndand studied her in pity, and took Estral's small hands in her own, sliding her thumbs gently over the tops to press away the stiffness.

"Yes." Estral's hands trembled in Ndand's warm, strong grip. "I thought it was another of those drills. Against the invaders. Since I don't fight—" She shook her head, her mouth working, then lowered her gaze. "I'm an enemy," she whispered.

"Estral." Ndand spoke gently. "You are a poet. Doesn't being a poet rise above things like borders and different kings? Anyway, we don't think of you as an enemy. How could we, when you were the first friend we made?"

Estral closed her eyes, but tears leaked from her lids.

Ndand kissed the blue-veined eyelids, tasting the salt of Estral's tears. "Neither Flash nor I will ever forget how brave you were, that first week we arrived. Coming to us with that armful of lilies when everyone else was so hateful. Not that I blame your people," Ndand amended quickly. "When I heard just some of the stories about the Kepri-Davans! Well. I just wanted to say, it's not a drill. That's why I'm here, to make sure everyone is out, and that you got the message, because I know sometimes you're absent, both person and mind." Ndand smiled, and kissed her again. "So like a songwriter! But Estral, we're going to collapse the mountain onto the road. Flash is up on the mountain right now—"

Estral's eyes widened in horror, and her lips shaped the word beacon.

Ndand did not mistake the word. So Flash had indeed told Estral the secret! Ndand didn't know whether to laugh or get annoyed. Better just to laugh, because that was so typical of Flash! As serious as he was about this whole matter, it was inevitable he still managed to make it fun. Like taking a lover

along. Estral, being an Idayagan poet, would appreciate the quiet mountain heights, and she had fallen so desperately for Flash. Ndand and Flash had both seen it—not just a short passion, but she seemed to live in a state of anxious desperation unless she was with him.

Ah well, Ndand thought, looking down into Estral's huge pupils. Even now she seemed to be so afraid! She'd kept the secret of the beacons, the main concern.

"No beacons yet," Ndand whispered, though no one was in the empty Jarl's office, or anywhere within earshot. "We haven't sighted any ships on the horizon. But somebody seems to be sure they are coming. What's happening is this. The king ordered us to crash the road. Now, here's why I wanted to speak to you alone."

Estral stiffened, not even breathing, her eyes wide with dread.

"You said you couldn't go home into Tradheval because you made friends with us, but, see, if the Venn are really coming, well, I'm afraid things will get . . . busy here," Ndand breathed out in a rush. "So if you'd like to ride over the pass to safety, well, I know that Flash would be glad to know you're all right. Whatever happens. And no one would know you over there. Didn't you say both your brothers are on that side? Anyway, Barend already rode out. I know you didn't like him, though I still can't think why. But he's galloping as fast as he can to the southern end of the pass, on the king's orders. So you wouldn't encounter him if you took a nice easy ride."

Estral shivered. "Thank you, Ndand," she whispered. "Thank you. But I'll stay." She swallowed, closed her eyes. Ndand was dismayed to see fresh tears fill her eyes and overflow down her distraught face. Then Estral reversed Ndand's hands with a jerky, convulsive movement, bent—almost a bow—and kissed her palms. One, then the other. Kisses too fervent, her forehead too tense, for the gesture to be easily interpreted.

Then she let go, and sped from the room before Ndand could say another word.

Ndand plunged through the last set of rooms, all empty. Then she dashed up the stairs and through the sentry walk doors, pressing through the crowd on the western wall until she reached the Jarlan.

"All clear." She turned her thumb downward. "Only one I found was Estral, but she ran off."

The Jarlan lifted a hand. "One of the women spotted her just now, scurrying up one of the inner footpaths." She nicked her head toward the eastern side of the pass, where Flash and his diggers were gathered above Twisted Pine Path.

"She might want to watch the landslide from above," Ndand said. "Maybe that kind of thing appeals to poets. We—"

She paused, aware of the oddest sensation. The other women stilled, chins lifting bird-quick, some of their arms rising instinctively outward as if they were balancing on something narrow and rickety.

The solid stone shuddered under their feet. They whirled, faces toward the eastern cliff, the striations in the rock barely visible as the last of the sun sank behind the headland.

On the crag above, Keth had just finished the spell, his fingers still rigid, forming the magical sign.

In a puff of moldy dust a huge rock appeared on the opposite cliff, causing a faint clap of an echo as the displaced air smacked out and then back again from the rocks on their side of the pass. Everyone laughed, exclaimed, and watched expectantly.

But nothing happened for a count of five, then ten. Keth had just turned his head up to his brother in disappointment when the ground twitched beneath his toes, like a horse dislodging an insect.

Everyone on cliff and castle wall stilled.

Below Keth, the clitter-clatter of small rocks gradually quickened to a rock-thocking, thumping rush, and then a low, constant rumble. The ground shivered and shook as the mountainside beneath them cracked, sending waterfalls of brown dirt and dust tumbling down.

And then the entire lower cliff crumbled with a vast roar as the falls expanded into cataracts of rushing brown dirt, clogged with stone and the roots of long-dead trees. The cataracts joined into a wild torrent, its power so terrifying and exhilarating that not just the boy but most of the men shouted in a wordless mix of terror and glee. The mountainside, unstoppable now, folded in on itself, slumping into the broad road beside the castle. The spillage piled higher and higher, heaping upward toward the solid stone curtain wall of the castle. Higher, rimming the crenellations, and spilling between the battlements in thin

brown streams until the main mass poured over the top of the wall. And buried it.

“It’ll smother the castle,” Keth screamed.

No one heard him. He could not hear himself over the tumult.

The flood of dirt coursed over the jumble of houses, causing the wooden additions to shiver then twist, and finally shatter, sending splinters the length of a man spinning into the eddying mass.

The slide rolled across what was once the castle’s shared truck garden, burying all the spring planting beneath tumbling boulders, and yet the dirt still spilled outward, reaching the inner wall, then mounding up toward the battlements. And over again, filling the shorter gap between wall and the castle itself with frightening speed.

But despite the rising pall of long-buried dust, in the fading light the men could just barely make out a gradual slowing.

The skull-ringing roar diminished to a low, thundering rumble, and the sliding ground thinned to a rubble of tumbling stones, slowed, slowed, leaving at last a clacketing of pebbles.

One or two last boulders thumped and jumped crazily down. And came to rest.

Keth let out a whoop of sheer joy.

Flash exchanged looks with his men, seeing his own amazement mirrored in their faces.

From the inner walls, the women stared down at the slope of dirt halfway up the two east towers. Then aching shoulders were loosened, locked knees worked until trembling legs would hold up, tightened jaws released gritted teeth.

The Jarlan tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry.

“All right,” she croaked, her thoughts as bleak as the sight below. She cleared her throat, coughed out some dust, and lifted her voice. “Time to get ready for our guests.”

In the town farther downriver from Evred-Harvaldar’s enormous camp, people were out for their Restday stroll, enjoying the mellow weather. Many turned their attention east, toward the golden glow of the army’s campfires, and speculated about the warriors they planned to watch galloping by on the morrow.

From the eastern road the sound of laughter accompanied the beat of horse hooves, as a small party of gray-coated warriors rode townward, looking to spend their money and have a good time.

From the main street inn’s balcony Skandar Mardric glared, his mood murderous.

Dead. His brother—the little boy who used to eat flowers and try to catch pollywogs as pets—*dead*. Along with eight others, and all as a result of his order.

It had seemed a whim, after seeing one of those damned blue-coated Marlovan Runners trotting arrogantly by. One saw them everywhere, reminding everyone just who held the whip in this land. *Kill the Runners*, he’d said. A whim, but one that swiftly gained meaning and rightness. What better way to harass the enemy than by interrupting their communications? Intercepting them and using them? Who knew that they went armed, that they were trained to fight?

Eight of his good men dead. Eight dead, and only one Marlovan killed. One could say he was old, yet it took five of them to bring him down.

Time for a drink. Mardric’s foot scraped, his hand—aching to close around a Marlovan throat—lifted from the rail. He’d just begun to turn away when a lone rider trotted into view, at first only a silhouette.

A familiar silhouette. Or was that just his desire to see the one he wanted most to kill?

Mardric stared into thickening darkness. He had seen that rider before, always from a distance, hadn’t he? Only was this some Montrei-Vayir cousin made one of their Runners? Because he was unaccompanied and wore one of those blue coats.

Still, Mardric’s heartbeat quickened as he leaned out so far he was almost in danger of falling, until the Runner reached the nimbus of the inn’s glowglobe.

And Mardric laughed. The impossible had happened. That dark red hair, the bony face, the kingly shoulders, trim waist, splendid legs: unmistakably Evred Montrei-Vayir himself.

And all alone.

### Chapter Thirty-three

“VEDRID, I can’t find any linseed oil.” Tau stuck his head inside the king’s tent.

When the king was present, one or more of his Runners stood guard outside. But no one was on guard, and inside Vedrid and a couple of his staff were busy brushing the king’s gray riding coat and readying his bedroll. Tau noticed the coat; despite the warmth of the evening, Evred did not seem one to wander about in only shirt and trousers.

“I think the farrier got the last of the oil,” Vedrid said over his shoulder. “Shall I send someone to the town?”

“Yes.” Tau spared a glance through the open flap of Inda’s tent, where, in the hanging lamplight, he could make out Cherry-Stripe, Noddy, and Rat with Inda. Signi knelt behind Inda, her fists pounding on his right shoulder; she said something and the others all laughed. Inda would be fine for a while. “On second thought, I’ll go myself.”

Yes. An evening away from academy reminiscences, old battles refought, and king-avoidance would be pleasant. The town was not far. He could ride in, find linseed oil, maybe find a pleasure house, drink a glass of local brew and look at other people besides warriors. Like women. Tau missed the sight of women. Signi did not count, shrouded as she was in those rumpled clothes that underage boys and girls wore, her manner so unobtrusive it was like she was invisible before your eyes.

He could be back about the time Cherry-Stripe and the others—talked out for the night—would be wandering to their own tents to sleep. Didn’t matter if Inda was awake or asleep; more often than not he ended up snoring halfway through one of Tau’s kneadings.

Tau retreated to his own tent to get some coins and drop off his knives, as there were stringent rules against bearing weapons inside a pleasure house. People needed to feel safe to enjoy intimacy—unless you went to one of the houses that made sex games of risk and pain. He undid the wrist sheaths and dropped them into his bag, followed by his Runner’s coat and plain linen shirt. Out came one of his fine civilian shirts and tunic-vests.

He shrugged back into his coat, claimed one of the mounts designated for Runners to use at night, and trotted through the camp, amazed again at its immensity. It seemed there would be no end to the campfires and neat half-circle tent villages, the streaming and bobbing torches of men visiting one another’s camps, the drums rolling and tapping, songs, shouts, and laughter, but he finally reached the outskirts and then the outer perimeter. His blue coat got him past with a wave of a hand in salute, which he returned. After he’d crossed a feeder stream and passed a ridge of ancient, tangled vines that had marked someone’s border long ago, he halted long enough to unclasp his hair, tie it back, and fold his coat into the saddle pouch. He pulled his long vest over his shirt, retied his sash, and finished the ride at a trot.

Like most western towns, he discovered, this one was not built in a walled, Marlovan castle-square or in a wheel shape, as was common in the east, but in a line alongside the river. The main street, with the best shops and wealthier houses, bordered the river.

The entire population seemed to be out on the stroll along the haphazardly-lit street. There were stone posts with big glowglobe glass casings atop them, all but one dark. Until the mages returned, the glowglobes were only used in emergencies. Lanterns, lamps, and torches proliferated up and down both sides, smelling heavily of the ubiquitous leddas oil and giving the place an agreeable party air. The equally pungent aromas of Restday mulled wine and pastries and special dinners made Tau’s mouth water after weeks of smelling nothing but horse, man, dust, and the camp food whose main constituents were rye and cabbage.

Ah. There, upriver a way, the sign of a horse’s head. Stables with tack shops were where most people bought linseed oil, as it was used for horse as well as human. Tau had been raised in a pleasure house,

where they often used fine oils. Many patrons liked a rubdown before or after sex and some houses boasted people so good with their hands that patrons came just for their muscle aches to be kneaded. Tau peered over the strollers' heads. Most pleasure houses were named for pleasing images—flowers, birds, songs, stars, sunset, dawn—except for those that catered to the stranger side of human desires. He found a sign with a painted sun, a moon surmounted by stars next door. The crowd thickened up as he neared. These two houses were clearly at the party end of town. By the time he'd threaded through groups of talking, laughing people, many holding mugs of local brew in their hands, he'd figured out that the Sun was where all the younger people went, the Moon-and-Stars preferred by the older. Music poured out from the Sun, and all the downstairs windows were open. Inside the crowd was even bigger, clapping for the dancers in the center, talk and laughter almost drowning out the musicians.

His mother's influence had gradually traveled up the coast from Parayid: the pleasure houses were decorated to please all the senses, the way they were in the older kingdoms on the eastern side of the continent. Murals, fine porcelain, the best scents and music, everyone dressed as artfully as imagination and the range of local fabrics could make them. Everywhere he saw signs of what he was certain was his mother's influence.

The music gave way to throbbing drum beats, followed by a delightful Sartoran ballad sung antiphonally by male and female voices—only reversed, men doing women's verses and women men, which gave the song an unexpectedly bawdy layer of meaning. Auditors (those who could hear over the street noise) bellowed with laughter.

He stopped to listen, and to thoroughly appreciate the spectacle of young women wearing soft summer robes. After weeks of nothing but men, women seemed exceptionally entrancing: tall, short, young, old, plump, scrawny—it didn't matter. They were all delightful.

Everyone was loose, free, bent on pleasure, so the sight of a tense body slipping between celebrants drew Tau's eye. His attention sharpened when the man seemed familiar. Who? When? Where? Dark, glossy long hair, well kept as any noble's, though the man wore ordinary travel clothes: the short tunic common here in the west, dun riding trousers, mocs. A fine profile, well-shaped mouth, now compressed—

Tau chirped softly, and his mount, ears twitching, moved forward a couple of steps just as the man glanced to the right and then to the left.

A dark, sardonic gaze brushed past Tau indifferently, obviously seeking someone, or something, else. *Where have I seen that face?* Tau recalled a reaction of annoyance, but not why the man had annoyed him.

Tau leaped down and tossed a coin to one of the hopeful children lurking around, who led his mount around to the hitching post between the two houses.

Tau had learned about stalking quarry when spying for Inda in Bren. He eased through the crowd, keeping three people between the dark-haired man and himself as he sorted memories, trying to fit the man into them.

Skandar Mardric did not expect any interference as he patiently followed Evred, but he kept searching the crowd for those blue or gray Marlovan coats.

The king himself wearing a plain blue coat had surprised him. So that was how Evred-Harvaldar had vanished so easily from the Nob that first time! Who'd think a king would lay aside the trappings that boosted him above everyone else?

Mardric's heart thumped with the thrill of danger, of anticipated triumph.

*Estral, we're about to change history,* he thought to his sister, far away in the north. Unfortunately, he could no longer dash notes off to her: the gold cases they'd so laboriously obtained had ceased transferring. Either the magic spells had faded, or—more likely—the Venn had interfered.

Considering what Mardric and his inner circle had done to their spies, it seemed a fair trade. The thought made him smile. Besides, there was no more planning to be done. Estral had her orders, and Mardric's long-sought target had just walked with typical Marlovan arrogance right into easy reach. *Two deaths and a vast empire falls. Then three kingdoms regain their freedom. All accomplished by you and me, Estral, a victory that will be the sweeter as our brother is now another of their many victims.*



*Have you thought about what you'll ask for your reward?*

Evred-Harvaldar moved up in the waiting line on the men's stairs, twin to the stairs on the other side of the main room for those who wanted a female partner.

He spotted a couple of the Marlovans on liberty on the far side of the room, and turned his shoulder before any of them could look up and catch his eye. He didn't care if they saw him from the back; what he didn't want was to talk, to smile or laugh with them anymore than he wanted to choose a partner from among the dancers circling so smilingly among the townsfolk, for that meant chatter, a decent pretence of interest, of friendship. Evred did not want any of that, nor did he want to give it: it was sensible, it was sane, to rid the body of unwanted passion; it was not an act of celebration.

*I love the beloved that loves not me*—the triune heart, symbolized by clover. Evred had discovered that in the ancient white tower of the castle of Ala Larkadhe where they were heading, in an archive so old its origin was impossible even for the Morvende caretakers to know. He'd found the saying written in Old Sartoran. After seeing that, he'd recognized the clover symbol when it showed up in poetry and verse histories, one of many symbols of hidden motivations and consequences. He'd once found it comforting to see in old texts that all the range of human variation had been experienced. *Shared*—“Your turn.”

He started. Discovered a pair of young women standing behind him, one laughing, the other's impatience becoming a slow head-to-toe of speculation.

He turned up his palm in polite thanks, and left them giggling and whispering behind him as he trod up to the landing where the plump, balding proprietor waited, a broad smile on his ruddy face.

Tau, just squeezing inside the front door behind a large, loud party of merrymakers, spotted the dark-haired man on the lower stair on the men's side. The fellow was in the act of extending a hand to push past two young women who were arguing with the proprietor. “If we're *sharrrr-ing* a fellow, we should *onnn-ly* pay for *onnnne*,” a woman declared with the earnest exaggeration of the tipsy as the dark-haired fellow attempted to slip behind her. But he was prevented by the woman swaying backward a step as she raised a dramatic hand, pointing a finger toward the ceiling. “One!”

Tau peered past her at the fellow, who tried again to get past her, his entire body tense with impatience. His reaching hand tweaked harder at Tau's memory—that hand, where had he seen it? Close, close, yes . . . *gripping his arm*. Lindeth harbor, the guild mistress's house. That same hand stopping him from following Inda, just after the pirate battle, when they'd gone to pay for supplies at Lindeth. He recalled those sardonic dark eyes, the drawling voice that did not hide hostility, *Is he really Elgar the Fox?* So who was the fellow chasing after now? Puzzled, Tau flicked a glance to the top of the stairs, a heartbeat before another familiar figure vanished down the hall. An instantly recognizable figure despite the blue Runner's coat: that height, those shoulders, and above all the long, dark red horsetail Tau'd been riding behind for weeks.

*Evred? In a blue coat?*

*Alone?*

Tau pinched the skin between his brows. Could this possibly be some assignation? He watched the dark-haired man squeeze past the women at last as they leaned forward, both arguing with the proprietor. Tau's interest sharpened when the man pressed past the second woman, a hand going revealingly to his side the way one did to steady a hidden weapon.

Assignation—or assassination?

The sharp inward goad of danger propelled Tau through the last of the crowd and up the stairs. Tau grimaced at how very angry Evred would be if Tau thrust his way in on a privately planned encounter, but instinct was against anything planned on Evred's part, especially with this Lindeth fellow.

Tau tried to slip past the women—but his own looks worked against him. One of the women gasped, lips parted, and Tau nearly tripped when the proprietor stuck out a foot. “Who are you?”

“I'm . . . meeting that fellow who just went up. Dark hair? Dark eyes?”

The proprietor's jolly face puckered into wariness. "Last one in was one of them Marlovan fellows. Red hair. What are you trying to pull here, pretty boy?"

The women were eyeing him speculatively. In desperation he bent toward the surprised proprietor and whispered into his grizzled ear, "I was trained by Saris Eland of Parayid." He added the insider code, and as the man's jaw dropped, Tau straightened up and forced a smile at the women. "If you'll excuse me a few moments, why don't I entertain you both? You can pay for the price of one, and I'll donate the second price." He indicated the proprietor, whose surprise altered to the smile of a good bargain made. As the woman whispered, pooling their last coins, Tau murmured, "Where'd you send the redhead?" The proprietor said in a whisper, "Four suns on the door."

Tau galloped past them and up the stairs, grimacing. There was no possible way he was going to avoid either farce or tragedy as soon as he opened that door. He just hoped it would not be both.

The doors were differentiated by painted suns, stars, and moons, arranged in charming groups. This was another of his mother's touches. He raced past the triangle of three suns and was just pulling up to listen at the next door when from within came thuds and a choked cry.

He knew the difference between cries of passion and cries of pain. He shouldered the door open into the small room furnished only with a low bed and a chair. Those within froze for the single heartbeat it took him to take in:

The naked young man lying on the bed, a widening pool of crimson sinking into the mattress, the knobs down his thin back pale and vulnerable as he curled round his slashed gut.

Evred, hair loose over his bare chest, one arm and his ribs slashed and bleeding, a deliberate nick dripping down into one of his wide, hazel eyes.

And the dark-haired man standing over him with a bloody dagger, intending to play with his prey before killing it.

Skandar Mardric jerked a glance Tau's way.

He had not expected the king to defend himself, which just added to the fun. Now, carried on the tide of triumph, he recognized that beautiful face, golden hair, golden eyes. "Elgar's lover?" he gasped in amazement.

Evred's mouth whitened.

Tau crossed the room in three steps.

Mardric grinned and slashed at Tau with the knife.

Two steps, snap-kick to the downward slashing knife hand, whirling palm-heel strike, and Mardric fell to his knees with an *oof*. Tau glanced once more at the young man lying there in shock, blood leaking between his fingers, and kicked again, this time straight at Mardric's head. "Wrong," he said.

Mardric seemed to hear, or maybe his plans had never included the possibility of his own death; his brows crimped in pained question just before Tau's heel snapped his head back, and he was dead before he hit the floor.

Leaving Tau alone with one wounded pleasure-house worker, and a very shocked, angry, spectacularly bloody king who'd rolled up into a fighting crouch.

Tau had grown up learning all about the symbolic boundaries of clothing. If you pretended it was there even if it wasn't, then you handed back the invisible wall of reserve to those who required it. He also knew better than to castigate this self-isolated, volatile-as-fire king. Evred's entire life was bound up with military necessity: the fact that he'd come away without a guard evidenced how desperate he was. The crushing weight of impending war day and night would distort the thoughts of the sanest man.

Tau's mind raced. *You will not grant me the authority to speak of your duty to your Marlovans, but I can speak within my own realm.*

"I grew up in a bawdy house. I can arrange these things with a lot less risk." He nodded toward the bed. Then, without waiting for an answer, he bent, slid his arms under the knees and shoulders of the wounded young man, and picked him up. "There will be a private exit out that way," he added, pointing with his chin toward the other end of the hall. "Kick the door shut behind me."

He hurried out with his moaning burden.

Twenty fast steps—he counted each—then he just had to get down the stairs. "Quick, help."

The proprietor gasped, casting an anguished look at the young man's face and the blood dripping down his bare flesh.

Then the screams and shouts began.

#### Chapter Thirty-four

THE sun was just lifting the eastern darkness when the Venn longboat, its sail lowered, the oars silent, drifted on the tide toward the headland above Castle Andahi's bay.

Nine Drenga, the Oneli's sea marines, all dressed in black, slid noiselessly overboard into the shallow water, gripped the black-pointed boat's sides, and ran it up onto the sand without a splash.

The tenth person leaped out, a tall, strong woman of middle years, wearing the blue robe of a dag. She stood aside as the nine swiftly used sea wrack to cover the boat.

There were no sentries in sight. The Drenga had landed themselves well west of the patrol line.

Motioning quietly, the leader dispersed his men in teams of three. As they progressed over the headland, in the strengthening light they spied a peculiar pall over the inner part of the bay, reaching as far as they could see between the enormous, sheer cliff walls. They moved belly flat in the brush so that they did not create a silhouette along the top of the headland, stopping when they could look down into the bay.

Squatting squarely between the bay's long, naturally terraced shingle beach and the narrowing gorge forming the Pass of Andahi sat a massive castle. From under the rocky ridge below the precipice the Venn crouched on, the northern branch of the Andahi River poured into the bay. The dull granite of the outer curtain wall was warm lit in the rising sun but the eastern side of the castle, still in shadow, did not look at all like their carefully drawn map. The whole east side was distorted in an enormous tear-shaped mass.

They puzzled over that as the sun crested over the eastern headland, bringing the shadows past them, down, down into the bay, then vanishing, and at last they made sense of the startling change. Gone was the great road that they were supposed to find curving round the base of the cliffs at the east side of the castle. Instead, a sharply slanted fall of loose dirt angled up the mountain from the castle, revealing a raw wound in the mountainside.

The Marlovans had collapsed an entire slope in order to block access to the pass.

The dag motioned peremptorily to the leader of the nine-man team and pointed with meaning at the lower paths along the headland as she started up toward the mountain heights. This sort of thing was exactly what Dag Erkrick had planned for.

The ships of the invasion were right behind them, soon to be visible. Until then, no word must go up the pass and over the mountains to Ala Larkadhe.

As soon as Dag Mekki was well out of sight, the Drenga leader cursed. Dags had no business interfering with a military exercise. But the Marlovans had just invited them in, with their damned mountain foolery.

The Drenga continued along the headland single file, where they surprised their first outer perimeter sentry, who was admiring the hanging dust pall instead of doing his job. It was the last thing he saw.

DAWN'S bleak blue light had harshened the contours of the old wooden building in the riverside market town, rendering bright paintings garish, and cozy cushions and mats into trampled, dirty wads of cloth that would not just require cleaning but restitching, the floor strewn with empty mugs and plates. Tau slowly picked his way across them to take leave of the proprietor.

"I know there's something missing in your story," the owner said hoarsely. "A murderer just picks out a random Marlovan for assassination? But the knife was there, and the murderer was there, and my sister's son with his gut slashed. I don't know what was worse, the sight of him like that, or the panic after. So bad for business. So bad."

Tau gave a tired nod. He'd helped the proprietor turn fear into excitement—his mother had trained him for that, too—by organizing the panic-stricken patrons in a search. When they discovered the dead man, the panic ended. Criminal found, end of threat, Tau there to congratulate everyone on the satisfying end to the mystery and to help along the spreading word.

Then everyone had to offer their version of what had happened—no one knew the dead man—not one of *us*—and the proprietor offered a free round of drinks for all. Tau went up to the prettiest woman there and began an Iascan hand dance, in which one or both hands have to be touching the partner at all times. The musicians picked up their instruments and hastily assembled themselves, weaving round them a merry tune. With her willing participation they'd made their dance so lascivious everyone soon was laughing, dancing, or going upstairs to carry on.

The proprietor, also thinking back over the surprising night, gave a short nod, his jowls jiggling. "But you earned your right to a secret or two, I'm thinking."

He cast a meaningful glance over his shoulder toward one of the larger suites across the main parlor, where parties with more than one partner usually disported.

After the dance, the waiting pair of women had appeared, and Tau enthusiastically kept his promise.

After months of enforced celibacy (though plenty of offers had come his way, he did not think a dalliance with anyone in Evred's army a wise idea) it had not exactly been a trial.

The two women were just leaving, a garland dropping from one's hair, the other softly singing, their arms around each other's waists.

Tau and the proprietor fell quiet as they walked past. The taller woman, dark-haired, some of her ribbons still untied, reached up to lay her hand against Tau's cheekbone. "I'm always going to think I dreamed you." She laughed soundlessly.

He caught her hand, kissed it, ran his fingers along her palm as he let her go. She laughed again, and walked out of the house, and out of his life.

The proprietor said, "You saved Ulec. The healer said he would have bled to death not two glass-turns more. And the way you got 'em all singing instead of yelling—" He groped forward, then shook his head. "If you come back this way, know we'll give you a place, a night, a meal. Whatever you ask. Even half the business," he added shrewdly.

Tau smiled and moved to the door. The proprietor sighed, then turned wearily back to his disaster of a parlor.

Tau stepped outside, breathing in fresh, pure air. It was going to be sunny, maybe even hot. Not good if he had to walk; by now his horse would be long gone from the hitching post. At least armies were not subtle about leaving trails.

He almost stumbled into the boy sitting on the porch, arms folded over his knees, supporting his brow. At Tau's step he raised a weary head, squinted, then said, "You know a Marlovan called Sponge?"

"Yes," Tau said.

"I was to tell you that the horse is at the stable." The boy added importantly, "He gave me a *whole golder* to make sure you found it."

And so Tau rode back, discovering that the army had not departed after all. From the dust and noise coming from the hills above the river bend, they were engaged in a war game; yes, there was Inda riding along the riverbank, watching intently.

Tau left the horse with the Runners on stable detail, and walked through the mostly packed camp to his tent, still standing. Inside were two ensorcelled buckets.

When he emerged, feeling cleaner if no less tired, there were several of Vedrid's staff waiting to collapse the tent. But what surprised him was Signi waiting with them, her ubiquitous guards just out of earshot.

She had never precisely ignored him, she just did not speak often, and never when Evred was present, unless he addressed her first. And she was so far Tau's superior in the art of self-effacement, he'd rarely noticed her unless he sought her out.

Yet here she was before him, her sandy hair untidy, her rumpled old clothes sun-faded, having sought him out for the first time. "The king returned last night bleeding over his eye." She touched her brow. "I think he was hurt elsewhere, for he moved as if in pain. And he was very angry." Her Marlovan had improved;

the only reminder of her origin was her accent. She made one of her little gestures, tipped her head and smiled faintly. “No one asks a king questions—except Inda, and sometimes his friends. But you know Inda.”

Tau huffed a tired laugh, beyond surprise. “I know Inda. I’m sure he didn’t ask.”

“Oh, he did. *Where were you*, he said. *You can’t vanish on us like that*. And Evred-Harvaldar said back, *I fell down the stairs. But I won’t trip again*. And they all laughed. Is that a metaphor that I have missed, or perhaps more of their private language?”

“Private language is my guess,” Tau said.

“Ah. The king added these words: *Your Runner caught the reins*. He went into his tent, the others dispersed, and that was all. What happened?”

Tau said, “Evred went to get laid. Why he didn’t take a couple of guards, I don’t know—he doesn’t usually seem stupid. Sure enough he was attacked, I think by an assassin. I recognized the fellow just before I killed him.”

*Ahhhh*. Her mouth opened, shaping the word, but no sound emerged. Then she said with care, “If I understand right, the king used to assume the guise of a Runner when he wished to move about unnoticed. I overheard Vedrid making reference to that being the way he escaped the assassins two years ago.”

“Maybe.” Tau was too tired to hide sarcasm. “But even he should see that there’s a difference between a prince roaming around anonymously and a king leading an army to defend his borders.”

“Privacy appears to be very important to Evred-Harvaldar.”

“More than that.” It was a relief to talk, tired as Tau was. He needed to sound his ideas, to determine if his insight was only misunderstanding. “He sometimes gets even more lost inside his head than Inda does. But he’s a king, so no one can force him back.”

“I hope you tried.” Signi touched her fingertips together. “For his own sake.”

“I did.”

They turned away from one another and toward the hills, where mounted shapes hurtled in and out of the considerable dust. Evred was just visible beyond Inda, no more than a silhouette himself.

“I hope he won’t resent it,” Tau commented.

Signi’s green-brown eyes were wide in the strengthening morning sunlight. “You think he will? Why? Did you lay a debt upon him?”

Tau snorted. On the hill Cherry-Stripe emerged from the dust, yipping at the head of a tight flying wedge of young men on the chase of a scattering of Rat’s dragoons. “Gratitude wins great renown in ballads, not in real life.” Tau lifted a shoulder. “In real life as often as not people hate you for doing them a good turn.” She did not deny it. “When the doer of the deed assumes moral superiority, but you have not done so. Do you think Evred-Harvaldar so small-minded?”

Tau shook his head. “The camp is here. And I found a horse waiting, when he could have taken it back.” He drew in a deep breath, feeling the first pangs of a headache as the sunlight glinted off metal and glared on the light-colored dirt. “Small-minded, no. Complicated, yes.”

A whoop went up from the other side of the hill and a moment later the war gamers galloped back. Tau gestured toward the Runners carrying his rolled tent to the wagon. “And certainly not rancorous.”

Signi opened her hands as the arriving warriors abandoned their mounts to be watered and strung with the remounts. Fresh horses were readied, and some waiting slices of stale nut-bread handed around; the supply wagons had already rumbled ahead. Signi walked toward the picket line to meet Inda, leaving Tau to follow.

They were on the move before noon, everything exactly as it had always been, as if the night before had never happened. Or as if Tau had dreamed it, but he had not dreamed the crunch of the assassin’s chin and the snap of his neck under his heel—nor had he dreamed the fire-charged beauty of blood-smeared, naked Evred, all muscle over long bones, and hard hazel eyes.

Tau’s own walls had nothing to do with physical privacy, but everything to do with the danger-fraught haunts of the heart.

He suspected Evred would not say anything to him or about him, that things would go exactly as before.

So he would not question it, or even think about it. Because every step brought them closer to battle, where the summary cut of a Venn blade could resolve all questions. But for now . . . he sank his chin down onto his collar-bone and dozed as his horse plodded behind Inda's.

### Chapter Thirty-five

LIET-RANDVIAR Arveas assumed a stern look. She knew very well how bitterly the children had been complaining, which was why she'd been firm. Girls of fifteen—old enough for the queen's training—could stay to defend the castle. There was a single fourteen-year-old boy, the cook's prentice, who had begged to stay, saying he'd be fifteen in two weeks. The other boys his age were down south at the academy.

All the parents had backed her up, some so intensely they'd frightened their children, who stood before the Jarlan now. The littlest ones were very small and bewildered, clutching the hands of older sisters or cousins. She was grateful there were no babes in arms. Sending three-year-olds to hide out for who knows how long was heart-wrenching enough.

"Your orders," the Jarlan began, studying the oldest three girls in turn—expectant Gdir, stone-grim Han, chin-lifted Lnard. The latter furtively watched the others for their reactions. "Your orders are as follows. Hadand, you are in charge."

Han straightened up, her spine rigid. When anyone used her full name, they were serious.

Gdir flushed with anger.

The Jarlan saw that and sighed inwardly. She'd tried so hard to raise a tough future Jarlan, maybe too hard. Or maybe Gdir would have been . . .

*I am out of time.* "My choice is not a judgment on any of you. You're too young for anyone to be certain how good you'll be in the future as leaders," the Jarlan said, not looking at Gdir. "I picked Han for this mission because she's closest kin to me. That happens in command. It's not fair but it's a clear, easy chain of command. Get used to this. When there's an emergency, people will make things as easy for themselves as they can, and sometimes that means ignoring all the expectations of rank."

The girls listened, each face giving tolerable clues to the thoughts behind it. Gdir's resentment did not abate. Lnard stood in a chin-raised pose she thought heroic, spoiled by the lizard-flicker of her eyelids as she watched the others for reaction. Only Han seemed to comprehend how serious the situation was as she glanced doubtfully at the three-year-olds.

"Second order. You are to hide out until the king comes. Hiding out means you will not attack the Venn. I don't care what happens here, and I know you'll probably hear sounds of battle, since the robbers' cave is just beyond the first ridge. Sounds might carry that far. You will ignore them. Understand?"

She waited until childish fists struck skinny chests all along the row, right down to the five- and six-year-olds. The half a dozen younger than that were bewildered, and would remain so, the Jarlan thought with another spike of dread.

"Your third order. If the king hasn't arrived yet and the enemy finds you, use the goat trails and run to the south. And report to Tdiran-Randviar. *No Raids*. You fight back only if you've been discovered. This is not a war game. Understand? I want to see those salutes, which means you understand your orders."

*Thump!* Fists hit ribs, Gdir and Han at the same time, Lnard with dramatic reluctance, her lips tightening to deliver some heroic speech she was surely formulating.

The Jarlan forestalled it. "Now line up at the tunnel. You're going to go up that way and cross the pass under cover of dark. Then use the goat trails to get up to the old robbers' cave." She thought of the report of sails on the horizon, so many the fisher had said they looked like the teeth of a comb. They were as yet not visible from the castle. But everyone knew they were there.

*The Venn are here.*

"Now!" she barked.

Ndand began to follow, but the Jarlan stuck out her hand. “Something is wrong, I feel it.” Her gut seized and she sucked in a breath. “I mean more than the obvious. I didn’t expect to see Flash back. His orders were to go straight to the beacon as soon as the ships were sighted. But why haven’t we seen any of his men come down? And where is my husband and the Riders? Where are Barend’s men?”

Ndand’s skin roughened with an inner chill. She worked to sound practical, unemotional. “You want me to light the beacon, if . . .” Her throat tightened on that last word, and she forced the words out: “He didn’t reach the beacon.”

“Yes. Then go out onto the viewpoint. If I’m running the red-black flag, you are not to come back here. You are to go to Tdiran in Ala Larkadhe.” Liet’s gut tightened again and she took her daughter-by-marriage’s arm, and squeezed with all her strength. “Ndand. I don’t care what you see or hear in this castle. If I run that signal and see *you*, I’ll break your marriage myself. Throw you back to Tlen. Stable wandering. Rest of your life.” She ended on a trembling whisper; the Jarlan let go of her arm and hugged Ndand so hard her lungs labored for air, and Ndand felt the tremor of a hard-suppressed sob go through the woman she thought of as a second mother.

But she knew better than to say anything except, “Orders received.” She summoned Keth with a jerk of her thumb, picked up her gear, and left.

The Jarlan then picked up the knapsack she’d packed and searched through the castle, until she found Radran, the cook’s prentice. She looked at that frail body, the knobby neck knuckle, and met those anxious eyes. *It would take just one strike to kill you*, she thought. *The Venn would forget you before he’d stepped over your body*. But of course she couldn’t say that. Nor could she say that what she and the other adults faced could be borne if they believed their children might live. “No Runners have returned. I have a mission of desperate importance. Only you can do it.”

Radran’s eyes widened.

She handed him the knapsack.

“You are to sneak up Lookout Mountain. Right now. Under cover of darkness. Hide out in Spyglass Cave, where you can see the bay and the road to the east. You have to count all the Venn you see—I put a slate and chalk in the pack. The Jarl will need those numbers. Or the king. Whoever comes first. But don’t move until our banner rises over the castle.”

The boy struck his chest and was gone.

“Barend-Harskialdna!”

The triangular face in the Ala Larkadhe forecourt lifted, squinting against the sunlight. To Nightingale Toraca, standing in the tower just off Hawkeye’s office, Barend Montrei-Vayir always looked as if he’d been put together by someone with a strange sense of humor: a triangular, squint-eyed Cassad face framed by thin dark hair pulled back into a sailor braid instead of a horsetail. A golden hoop with a ruby dangled against his blade-sharp jawbone, his body covered by the Marlovan gray coat and riding trousers, but instead of boots he wore field mocs. Barend was thin, hard as wire-reinforced rope, tougher than anyone on the practice mats—but he rode like a drunk who’d never seen a horse.

Nightingale grinned as Barend flipped up a hand in greeting. Barend slipped from the horse, whooshing a sigh loud enough for the sound to echo up the granite walls to the weird white tower at Nightingale’s back.

Nightingale leaped down the stairs four at a time. Everyone gave way for the King’s Runner, though he seldom demanded precedence. But word had flitted through the castle that Barend-Harskialdna was back.

Nightingale made it all the way to the court before Barend had finished rubbing his scrawny butt.

Barend was secretly amused by Nightingale, who looked like a shorter and thinner edition of his brother Noddy, but he moved with exactly the same slope-shouldered slouch. His hound-dog face was split by a gap-toothed grin as they exclaimed at the same time, “Any news?”

A laugh, then Nightingale said, “I just got in last night from the Nob. Biggest news out there was another

murder. I thought we'd seen the last of that."

"Shit," Barend exclaimed. "We can't be rousting all the men out again—"

"No, no." Nightingale patted the air. "This time not a secret murder. A gang of Olarans 'fessed right up. Said the fellow was a Venn spy. Caught him with reports written on the new defense plan. It was all there on paper."

"You mean we didn't get blamed?"

"Naw. It's only down in Lindeth, and over the hills into Idayago, that they hate us. Up on the Nob they like us. We can fight, and they've been overrun and burned out too many times to squawk about who thinks they're ruling 'em. In fact, worst complaining I heard's been about the Idayagan Resistance. Talk, trouble-making, money-gathering, and no results." Nightingale turned his hand up.

"We seem to get double the trouble down at this end." Barend made a spitting motion. They'd had to waste time at Hawkeye's request investigating a double murder in Lindeth Harbor just before summer. One body was supposedly a Venn spy, but the other was the well-respected guild mistress. Lindeth was still blaming the Marlovans for that, even though every single man had been accounted for. They may as well have saved their effort—the polite and noncommittal responses of the harbormaster and his council had made it clear that no one had believed them.

Nightingale said, "No news at the north end, I take it?"

He flapped a hand that took in the entire north side of the castle as he glanced ever so casually upward. No one visible at the windows.

Barend slewed around, peering skyward past the strange white tower that looked so much like a block of ice. Beyond it soared the mountains that created the Andahi River, rank on rank.

"Nothing—" He lowered his voice, so that the watching sentries could not hear his words. "Unless the beacons lit over my head on the mountaintops. You can't see 'em from below in the Pass." Barend touched his coat over his locket, his brows rising in question.

Nightingale flattened his hand, palm down.

Barend went on quietly, "Last thing I saw was the dust way up over the cliffs after they collapsed the road."

"Good." Nightingale also kept his voice low. "As for the beacons, Hawkeye says there's been no fires. And doesn't he have a special duty rotation just watching the mountains?"

"Hand-picked, between him'n me and Flash." Barend lifted his hands. "Venn sure are taking their time. Maybe the wind hasn't changed up northside of the strait."

They turned their eyes upward again, making sure that no one was within earshot.

Barend and Nightingale each carried a locket matched to the king's. Until just a couple weeks ago they knew more than anyone else did, including most of each other's news, but they'd had to go through the forms. It was Evred's will that no one, ever, find out about the magical communications.

Now, at a glance, they discovered that neither locket worked. Both of them had been cut off from magical communication. That meant they were equally cut off from the king.

*Well, what was good enough for our ancestors,* Barend thought as he yanked his sash free.

Nightingale hoped uneasily that the midday sun wouldn't conceal the beacon fires when they did come, and Barend wondered uneasily where the king's army was. "Ola-Vayir or Buck Marlo-Vayir reached Lindeth yet?"

"No sign of anyone," Nightingale said.

Barend paused in the act of unbuttoning his coat, then continued. Nightingale had to bite back a protest as Barend shrugged out of the sturdy cloth and slung it across the saddle just before the stable hands took the horse away, leaving him there not in a proper linen shirt, but one of those cotton tunic-shirts he'd brought from the other side of the continent. It was all rumpled and sweaty, but Barend did not seem to notice as he retied his crimson sash.

Crimson. The reminder that this was Barend, the king's cousin, who'd had no training except for that pirate-style contact fighting that reminded them of the women's Odni. No fault of his own, being thrown away to sea where nobody learned anything else of use. So the men reassured one another when he broke yet another unspoken rule.



A sharp-chinned face appeared in the window above: Hawkeye, summoned by a Runner who'd heard the familiar voices below.

He waved them to come upstairs. They vanished from below, through the entrance to the newer, granite-built part of Ala Larkadhe castle, and Hawkeye turned away to await them, staring down at the desk.

The poets maintain that the most vivid memories are happiness and sorrow, but there are others who will insist that guilt and humiliation reach far deeper, so deep that they are not just vivid memories, but have the strength to motivate across decades, even centuries in a clan or kingdom. Who seeks revenge for happiness?

Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir had had almost a month to think about the news from Evred-Harvaldar, spoken from Runner to galloping Runner: *The army is on the march, and at its head the king with Indevan-Laef Algara-Vayir at his side, to command the war as Harskialdna.*

Algara-Vayir. The first mention of that name threw Hawkeye back in memory to the Summer Without a Banner, the night a careless slap of his own hand struck a shivering, exhausted scrub to his death.

Hawkeye hadn't meant to hit him hard, but he'd been drunk on smuggled wine given to him by the Sierlaef himself, as consolation for being stuck on night guard duty. His companions had not blamed him afterward, and united in hiding the forbidden wine from the masters. They knew he hadn't intended but a slap. There hadn't even been a mark on the boy's face, but he had died all the same.

Now, riding back to take Hawkeye's place as commander (because no one regarded Barend as Harskialdna in anything but name) after all these years of jolting memories and terrible dreams was the boy who witnessed that. Who, for some unaccountable reason, had been given the blame for that death. Then exiled, young as he was.

By the time Barend and Nightingale arrived outside his office, Hawkeye had had time to consider what he'd say. He was technically under Cousin Barend's command, but they had agreed on how they'd handle that fiction during their very first interview. Barend had been disarmingly forthcoming, which won Hawkeye over immediately: he devised the orders that Barend either spoke or endorsed.

Barend said, "No news north of the pass when I left."

Hawkeye returned, "Nothing from our beacon watchers. And nothing from Ola-Vayir."

Barend whistled under his breath. Nightingale said shrewdly, "What do you wager he's dawdling along the road somewhere?"

"That family made no secret of wanting the north as part of Ola-Vayir." Hawkeye tipped his head back.

"Probably think because Evred's young, they can shoulder him into it."

His cousin Evred had been a quiet, scholarly sort of boy, but kingship had changed him. The older generation all said—in private—he was every day becoming more like the grandfather Evred and Hawkeye and Barend shared. Hawkeye's mother had said once, *My father inherited all the trouble the Montredavan-Ans willed us, along with their crown. The only way he could see to unite the Jarls was to ride off to war, give 'em more land. But our generation is paying for that war. And that land.* He'd always thought that meant old monetary debts of some sort, but since he'd come to live here in the north he wasn't so sure.

Barend's thoughts were obviously running parallel. "Hope I get to be there to watch Ola-Vayir try to squeeze Evred for more land before the old wolf brings his boys in."

Hawkeye said, "Why don't we save 'em the trouble? Nightingale, I'm thinking you'd better go yourself down the coast road out of Lindeth until you find Ola-Vayir. Ride alongside him. Offer to be helpful.

He's not going to lag under your eyes."

Nightingale's grunt was midway between agreement and a laugh.

Barend rubbed his backside again. "Wasn't that supposed to be Buck's job?"

"Right." Hawkeye grinned. "And Buck would cut out his own heart with a spoon before he'd risk missing the action, but there's no sign of him, either. So that's why Nightingale better go, just in case they got mired somewhere."

Nightingale said, "I'll ride out soon's we're done here."

"Barend." Hawkeye tipped his chin toward the east. "I got a Runner this morning. Evred's just a couple

days from us, and wants you to ride down and meet 'em.”

Barend chuckled under his breath. “You mean hand off command to Inda, then. And not a heartbeat too soon.”

His lack of strut made even Hawkeye grin.

Barend cocked his head. “Wonder if I’ll have to fight for it. Don’t Harskialdnas fight? I mean, in the old days, if someone wanted to challenge them for the position?”

Nightingale gave his turtle shrug.

“Challenges happened, yes. Usually at Convocation,” Hawkeye said. “Come to think of it, some of the old ballads have it happening in the field, too.” A corner of his mouth curled. “Did in the old ballad my father’s family sings, ‘Yvana Ride Thunder.’ We lost to the Montrei-Haucs, but we lost heroically.”

They all laughed, then Barend ran a hand over his broad forehead. “But isn’t that for Harskialdna as permanent rank, not for one battle? Or does he want Inda for life? Either way is all right with me. I never wanted it. Everyone knows that. Oh. It’s not me, it’s Inda, is that it? There can’t possibly be problems accepting him. I can’t believe people are that stupid.”

Nightingale tipped his hand back and forth, like a trader’s weight scale evenly balanced. “Some of ’em—coastal men, mostly—remember the pirate fights. No problem there. It’s the inland men. A lot of ’em from Horsebutt Tya-Vayir’s connections. Mostly think he’s the king’s claphair.”

Barend raised his brows. “Claphair?”

“Academy slur.” Hawkeye snorted. “Sex for favors.”

Barend looked vaguely surprised. “Not Inda. He hardly sees it when a *woman* wants him, unless she grabs him by the balls.” *And after he’d been living around that Taumad with absentminded indifference for years, it was safe to say that Inda hadn’t any interest at all in the fellows*, Barend thought, laughing inwardly. As for Evred, Barend remembered him having occasionally sent for fellows from Hadand’s pleasure house the winter before, but instead of loading any of them with privileges, he hadn’t even kept them for the night. “Naw, that can’t be right.”

“It’s just Horsebutt,” Hawkeye said impatiently, already through with the subject. He’d been remembering the men’s faces, their talk, before the battle at the Nob. “You might have to fight Inda to get the men behind him. Right before a battle, they have to believe he’s the best.”

Barend, veteran of many ship battles, recognized Hawkeye’s low, intense tone. *Just like a pirate duel on the captain’s deck*. He flicked his hand up in agreement. “I’ll rest my aching ass. Be off in the morning.”

## Chapter Thirty-six

“HEY, you men!” The high voice off to Tau’s left sounded thin as a gull’s cry, as he rode a way back along the column.

Tau turned his head. A skinny, barefoot boy had darted from the hedgerow lining one side of the North Road and shouted through cupped hands.

Heads turned, then back again. An embarrassed mother marched out and grabbed the urchin by the scruff of his smock.

The boy spread arms and legs, fighting to stay. “When’s the battle?” he cried. “When’s the battle? We wanna waaaatch!”

The mother thrust her son back through the ancient hedgerow, leaving behind the sound of her scolding and his rising wail of protest.

“Ye might tell us,” an old man wheezed from a rocky outcropping above a slight bend in the road.

“Where it’s gonna be, so we can hide ourselves.” And he cackled, as if at a very good joke.

From his clothing and the crook he was a shepherd. Sheep grazed over the slow incline rising toward those sky-touching mountains, evidence of a catastrophic landslide ages ago. The long flat slope had long been tamed by old trees and complicated long-grass communities, patch-worked on the eastern slope

with farms. In the center, guarding the narrowing entry into the mountains, sat Ala Larkadhe, shaped like a crown with its mysterious remnant of Old Sartor in the weird white tower soaring above the newer granite castellated city.

Tau turned back to the crowd of people alongside the road. Some sat in the trees planted by some long ago noble, or peered over the far older hedgerow; most stood out in the open, faces upturned. Many hostile, most awed, though they hadn't meant to be. But the sight of the long, long columns of warriors on their beautiful horses with the tear-shaped shields and gleaming helms hanging at their sides, the warriors' hair pulled up into those martial tails just like the horses', the tight gray coats with the long skirts, the composite bows, and above all the long swords with the wickedly curved tips in the saddle sheaths—it all impressed them. The Marlovans rode so well—they made it look so easy—they seemed easy, talking quietly, or looking at the countryside, but not answering back because (though the watchers did not know it) the captains had issued orders that the men were to remain aloof, no matter what. No comments, no questions. If they didn't look they wouldn't see the backs of hands, or spitting. Most important of all, they were not to answer questions.

It had been easy to ignore the first gawkers, but they had been coming out in greater numbers over the past couple of days. Now, within two days' ride of the city up there on the slope, the warriors had other things to think about.

Tau clucked to his mount, passing a pair of dragoons, one saying, "What's that tall one with the long leaves?"

"Corn," his riding companion replied. "Don't you southern boys know anything? That's corn. Just you wait until you taste cornbread."

Tau was past, and did not hear the answer. A commotion ahead caught his attention: a signal from the outriders.

Everyone's attention snapped forward as dust rose around a pair galloping toward the great war banners at the front of the column. When the dust settled, the word passed back that Barend-Harskialdna Montrei-Vayir was with them.

Two Harskialdnas!

Inda hadn't any such thought in his head. Alight with joy, he was about to yell "Barend!"

Barend saw him, but his mouth stayed tight. His posture stiff.

Inda's joy cooled to question as Barend leaned back, clumsily halting the horse, who snorted, ears flat, whuffing in protest at the heavy hand on the reins. Barend snapped his fist to his chest, the salute returned thoughtfully by his cousin Evred-Harvaldar.

Inda turned his gaze between the two, and as Evred gave the signal to ride on at a company trot, Barend slid a glance Inda's way, one thin brow ever so slightly raised, a corner of his mouth curling up.

Intrigued, Inda pulled back, ceding the Shield Arm position next to the king. For the first time, he dropped behind to ride with Signi and Tau.

Tau took in the alert glances of the men behind them, the furtive whispers. Everyone expected something to happen.

The king's army camped directly south of the city of Ala Larkadhe within a hard day's ride up the slope. Tau and Signi were taken by surprise when, in place of the usual drill, Evred gave the orders for two fires and then summoned the pair of Harskialdnas to his tent. Surprise was followed by apprehension when they witnessed the hand signal that Evred made when he wanted privacy, and the Runners formed an inside perimeter, not even Signi's guards within earshot of the royal tent.

In the privacy of his tent, Evred flicked a considering glance from one to the other, saw the unguarded grins, and his brow cleared. "Barend?"

"We have to make it good, see." Barend laughed. "Hawkeye agreed. Men have to see a tight win, commander against commander. Like pirates, Inda." And when Inda made a noise of disgust, "If I rode in friendly, well, then they don't expect a tight win."

Since his return home, Inda had come to the conclusion that his boyhood knowledge of history, once seemingly so complete, was far too sketchy. He smothered a laugh. "I'm to challenge you? I guess I can see it. But we really don't want a pirate duel, do we? Guts on the deck?"

Evred breathed in relief. He had not expected any trouble from his cousin, so the possibility had caught him up hard; and he had not even considered what Hawkeye had clearly foreseen. He said, "It has to look that way, they're right."

"Why?" Inda sighed. "What does a fight, any kind of fight, have to do with *us* —" He smacked his gray coat. "—taking on the Venn invaders?"

Barend jerked his chin outward, toward the camp. "It has to do with you looking so tough you'll lead them into victory. That means they might actually survive." Seeing Inda's grimace of misgiving, he added, "Worked for our fleet, too. You never saw it on the ships, but they saw *you*. You were good with leading, good hand-to-hand. See?"

"No. I don't. Because a ship fight is so different from a battle this size, when maybe a hundred of them might see me. No one else will."

Barend waved him off. "Never mind what's true. They have to see you win against me, and it has to be a fight better than anything *they* could win. Like one of our whoop-ups at Freedom. Even better. Then they'll blab it to everyone else."

"Oh." Inda grimaced down at his sleeve, which covered the scars on his arm. "Not with blood?"

Barend's eyes widened briefly, almost enough for one to see their color. "Of course with blood. But you'll be airing more of mine." He turned to Evred, and brushed his fingers against the front of his coat. Evred said, "He knows about the lockets, Barend. I have not been able to send anything for a couple of weeks."

"Us either. Weird, that," Barend said, without much interest. He'd never expected magical things to work long, and now he no longer had to try to make out words from those tiny letters. "Here's my report. Nightingale rode off to join up with Ola-Vayir."

"They're at Lindeth already?"

"No. No sign of 'em yet. So Hawkeye sent Nightingale south to find 'em."

"Nightingale's presence will no doubt smooth the road with miraculous ease." Evred's voice had gone dry.

"Just what Hawkeye said." Barend gave his wheezy laugh, smacked the tent flap aside, and strode out.

Evred said, "Whoop-up?"

Amazing how often Fox's name came near to mention. Inda gave his head a shake, one hand on the tent flap. "Display fights at Freeport Harbor, to attract captains to hire us. Later, to gain crew."

"Inda," Evred said, his voice low, almost inaudible.

Inda stiffened at the shift in Evred's tone. He could not have defined it in words, but it burned warning along his nerves like a shower of wood sparks. Wafri's voice had been like that at times.

But this was Evred—and the subject was imminent war.

Inda let the flap fall, cutting the flow of light. The two of them stood there in the hot, stuffy tent, each seeing the other mostly as shadow. Evred clasped his hands behind his back. "This fight. They'll expect . . . Barend never wanted . . . will you consider making the change of commander permanent? I cannot think of any better benefit to the kingdom."

Inda stared. "You mean become your Harskialdna for *life*?"

"Yes. Does that seem so impossible?"

"Impossible? No. Yes!" Inda laughed, tossed dizzily between joy and astonishment. He'd spent his entire exile schooling himself to face the fact that he would never get what he wanted. People didn't, sometimes. So you made a life as best you could.

But since his return, what he'd wanted not only fell into his lap without his having to grasp for it, but more. Honor, rank—far more than he'd imagined even in the craziest homesick dream. "I . . . well. I. Ah, look. I'll do whatever needs doing. You know that. And, well, if we survive this battle . . . well. I'd be honored." His voice was no more than a gruff whisper, but it resonated with conviction.

That resonance was so intense it was akin to pain. Evred unclasped his hands, one palm toward the tent

flap.

Inda almost leaped out, then jolted to a stop. He was not supposed to grin, or laugh, or give any sign of the fact that he'd just been offered the highest rank in the land after king. Not just for this battle, but for *life*.

All right, a show fight was what the men needed? He'd see that they got one.

Schooling his face as best he could, he settled on a mat opposite Barend. Cherry-Stripe and Cama sat with him. Despite his attempt to remain impassive, everyone could see that Inda was tense, but they all mistook his uplifted chin, his compressed lips, his stillness, as challenge.

Whispers rustled and hissed back through the men crowding forward.

Evred emerged from his tent and sat between Barend and Rat Cassad, inscrutable as always.

When the supper was over (cooked and eaten with unprecedented speed), Evred walked out between the two fires, something he'd never done before. By the time he'd taken half a dozen steps every man within sight stopped talking.

Evred turned in a slow circle. "Barend-Dal Montrei-Vayir, my Harskialdna, has accepted a challenge from Indevan-Laef Algara-Vayir."

The men were so quiet (except for a furtive curse or two as the men in the back tried to shove their way forward enough to see) the crackling of the fires was clear in the balmy air.

The duelists took off sashes and coats, handing them to Runners to hold. Barend loosened the top of his shirt laces to ease his breathing, but Inda ripped his free with an absent movement and tossed them aside; on the pirate ship he'd never fought with laces. Tau, on the watch, caught the silken cord from the air. Inda and Barend took their cavalry swords from waiting Runners, and at Evred's silent gesture saluted him and then faced off, standing only in shirt and breeches and boots, knife in left hand and sword in right.

"Begin," Evred said, settling back onto his mat.

They hurled themselves at one another, commencing a duel so wild, so unpredictable that the men crowded in on one another even more, leaning on those in front in an effort to follow the flurry of moves.

*Clash! Clang!* One, then the other, was sent rolling, to leap up and whirl straight into a complexity of fast moves nearly impossible to follow. Balance, speed, precision raised fierce joy in fighters as well as watchers; unknown to the Marlovans, it was just the sort of showy mock-duel that Kodl used to choreograph back in the Freedom Island days to draw ship captains to hire marine defenders before their reputation had rendered such displays unnecessary. But they had always been great fun, especially when Fox designed them.

At just the right moment Barend whirled, his sword hissing over Inda's head—nearly slicing off his flapping horsetail—then scything toward his knees. Inda tumbled over the sword, landed kneeling, arm straight out, sword point toward the sky, hilt toward the ground, the other hand bringing his knife into guard.

A single heartbeat later the square toes of Barend's boots (he'd stopped his horse and put them on when he saw the army's dust on the horizon) thumped smack under the hilt, sending the sword arcing over and over into the air. A small laugh escaped him, a brief flash of teeth, but by now the spectators were so intent that those few who caught it assumed it was the triumph of a man about to go in for the kill.

His foot continued its arc, snapping a sidekick toward Inda's head; he sheathed his knife, both moves beautifully coordinated. Inda tumbled away from the kick and rolled to his feet as Barend caught Inda's sword hilt in his free hand, to a roar from the watchers.

Inda pulled his second knife from the wrist sheath. Another susurrus whispered back.

Barend stepped toward Inda, swinging both swords with bloodthirsty zeal. Inda whirled in, caught one blade on his crossed knives, kicked up backward to block the second blade, whipped the first arm down, twisted, and slammed his elbow into Barend's gut.

Barend doubled over, the swords flying—one nearly landing in the fire, the other skittering across the dirt. Barend kned Inda, who flipped backward. Barend threw a knife, light glittering in runnels off the slowly spinning steel until Inda nipped it out of the air, causing a shout from the crowd. He threw it back. Barend kicked it whirling into the air, and caught it by the blade.

Roar!

They rolled to their feet and each gripped two knives as they circled, circled, then Barend attacked. Zing! Inda's cross block ripped along the edge of Barend's knife, sending sparks showering down, causing another shout.

Now the fight was even faster, a blur of complicated moves: all the men could see were places the knife points had been, marked by gleaming crimson lines of blood on the combatants' flesh. Forehead, shoulder, wrist, above a knee, cheekbone, arm bloomed with cherry spots of blood. Barend showed more cuts than Inda.

Barend took three hard blows in a row, ending with Inda whirling to deliver a crushing sidekick in the gut. Barend folded, letting out a yell. Inda brought a knife hilt down against the back of his neck. Barend slammed to the ground and stayed there.

Inda walked to the edge of the circle while Barend took his time rising to a sitting position, then standing; Vedrid and the Runners surrounded him with strips of cloth to bind up the cuts, which they discovered were extremely superficial. Precise. Inda shook blood off his arm and wiped the nick on his temple, smearing it as he turned in a slow circle. "Are there anymore challenges?"

Silence. Profound silence.

"I ask again, anymore challenges?"

No one moved.

Inda faithfully repeated what he'd remembered from the old ballad, surprised at how serious he sounded even to himself. "For the third and last time I ask, are there any challenges?"

Cherry-Stripe discovered he'd grabbed Cama's arm when the latter, with a faint smile, peeled his fingers off one by one. Noddy whistled silently under his breath. He had an idea that that fight had something odd about it, but only because Barend had fallen directly in front of him. Surely a man whose stomach had just been flattened against his spine wouldn't be grinning as he went down.

Inda turned slowly, meeting wide gazes in which the fires twinned. *Listen to me*, he thought. *Whatever it takes to believe you can win.*

The Sier Danas had watched intently, Cherry-Stripe trying to figure out whether it had been serious or not. Cama had figured it out from the first move, so he'd watched in silent appreciation, wondering if he was ever going to meet Fox Montredavan-An. Probably not.

What surprised Noddy was the intensity in Inda; he just did not seem the same person they rode with every day, even the same one who scrapped so deftly with Taumad-Runner each morning behind the command tents.

An impulse caused Noddy to flick a glance Evred's way, to catch an avidity in his old mate who was usually the model of reserve. He realized the impulse had come from hearing Evred's breathing; and that explained why Evred and Hadand, who so noticeably admired each other, behaved like brother and sister. Noddy was surprised at the sense of rightness he felt at the idea of Inda and Evred heart-bound. Then Inda spun about, smacking the knife blade against his heart in a gesture more extravagant than anything Tau had ever seen on the stage—but it worked. "Evred-Harvaldar, I present myself to be sworn as your Harskialdna."

Evred stood, remote again. "Bring me your sword."

Noddy, leaning forward, observed little signs that his first impression was wrong. Or almost wrong. Evred was ardent, his speech only to Inda. They all could have vanished right then, would he have noticed? But Inda spoke to everyone in hearing, not just to Evred.

*Evred's vowing to Inda, and Inda to the Marlovan king.* Noddy sat back, grimacing. Was that good, or not? He usually didn't think about such things. And he wouldn't now, either, he decided, reaching for the wine being passed from hand to hand.

Signi alone had not enjoyed the mock duel, nor did she like the intensity in these young, determined faces. She and Tau were the only ones who saw the tremor in Evred's hand as Inda dropped to one knee before him and held up the sword.

In those days Marlovans knelt when making their first vows at Convocation, at promotion on the field, or at public judgment.

“I, Evred-Harvaldar, call you, Indevan Algara-Vayir, to become my Harskialdna, Royal Shield Arm.” Then—assailed by hoarse, fervent cries of approval from all around them—he offered the hilt of his own sword to Inda.

Inda rose, flushing, and took the sword as Harskialdna, and raised it.

“Do you swear,” Evred said in his throne room voice, “to defend me, and by defending me, defend Iasca Leror, with your body and your blood, your heart and your mind, as long as you shall live?”

Inda spoke the words, his halting voice sounding to his own ears like it came from someone else. Tau, blocked by the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of Marlovans, heard Inda’s voice for the first time just as a voice—unexpectedly deep and resonant when he pitched it just so.

Tau clasped his hands together, thinking, *For six years you called no one master. I hope you know what you are doing.*

Signi kept Inda in her gaze, even though her eyes blurred. This was the time of life when the young, so new to adulthood, gave structure and meaning to their lives with vows. Sometimes so blithely spoken, so heartfully meant—sometimes so very hard to keep.

“. . . then you shall be my eyes and my ears, and my right arm. And you shall speak with the King’s Voice at all corners of the kingdom.”

Signi laid her palms together, breathing *May the Stars above the Tree light the path for the both of you*—and then the two clashed the blades together, sending sparks arcing skyward.

Inda and Evred returned together to the mats as the solid-packed crowd stirred and slowly broke up. Some brought out hand drums, and the ballads began, this time not in groups here and there, but everyone singing together, voices ringing with conviction.

Inda sat at Evred’s left again. He sang all the songs he knew, his voice clear and unexpectedly melodic. He thumped time on his knee to the ones he didn’t know, but joined the chorus as soon as he had some of the words. Tau had never before heard Inda sing. On Evred’s other side, Barend-Dal Montrei-Vayir also sang, tuneless as a crow, but just as full of conviction. He was still the king’s cousin, and still would command as Evred directed, but he was no longer Harskialdna.

He would no longer speak, and act, with the King’s Voice.

That was now Inda’s responsibility—and his life.

## Chapter One

NDAND Arveas and the children of Castle Andahi made a long, weary trek up the side of the rocky mountainside, sleeping under the stars when the sun vanished. Ndand walked with them, leading her horse by the reins. She left the children with the older girls in the old robbers’ cave that the youngsters used as their main headquarters when they camped out and played scout and stalk games.

From Twisted Pine Path upward horses were useless; the trail was too steep and narrow. Ndand retreated back over the ridge that divided the cave from the castle, and trudged straight upward, Keth with her. He kept looking back down at the avalanche, admiring it anew.

When they reached Twisted Pine, they came to the fork. One way led into deep old forest, eventually winding down into Idayago. The narrower path led straight upward. They began to climb that path. The landslide, then the castle, dropped away from view.

Upward for the steepest portion of their climb they toiled, through three drenching lightning storms followed by the blaze of the summer sun. Down below that meant stifling heat unless a breeze came directly off the harbor, chasing up the canyons of the pass. Up on the mountains, the sun was bright but the air more mild, summer defining itself in a rainbow splash of wildflowers. The higher they reached the colder the night air, and they huddled together in the same bedroll, Keth dropping off within half a dozen breaths, Ndand lying back quietly to think, the horse on a long line nearby.

The three oldest girls had begun the trek in silent cooperation, but by the end Ndand had seen the little signs that there was going to be trouble between them. Inevitable, she’d discovered during her teens.

Some girls were natural leaders, some just had to be leaders whether they were good at it or not, and some would do anything for attention. You could make do if you had only two of these types in any group, but all three always meant trouble, and they had all three.

Before she left the children in the robbers' cave, Ndand assembled them so that no one would feel singled out. She looked at each face as she repeated the Jarlan's orders. If good sense didn't prevail, the threat of the consequences of not following orders would.

She had no fears for them otherwise. The castle children had been all over the mountains since their arrival at Castle Andahi almost four years ago. They knew all the local trails and caves; they had sometimes camped out for days at a time. The Jarl and Jarlan had thought such ventures good for developing responsibility as well as hardiness.

*Good sense will keep you alive better than ambition,* she thought as she got to her feet and helped Keth up.

After another long trek, she and Keth reached the last fork. The left-hand trail wound around the mountain to the lookout point, which was lower than the beacon crag, but from which the entire bay and the castle were visible. The right-hand trail climbed all the way to the heights. There at the very top of the mountain someone long ago had built a one-room house out of stone. Flash and Barend and their chosen men had built the beacon there, after tests with lanterns. The burning beacon (or its smoke during the glare of day) would be visible from the crags up the pass, though the bulk of the mountain blocked it from the view of the harbor and castle below.

She wiped her brow. Even if the air was cool, the bright sun was warm. Keth had begun stoutly determined to do his share, but for most of the afternoon she'd taken his little bag of clothes and he'd been holding her hand. Her shoulder ached from the constant pull.

She eyed the two trails, then dropped the packs on a nearby rock and swung her arm. "Let's have something to eat, then push on," she suggested, and watched the boy sink down with silent but expressive relief.

They wolfed down a portion of their journey bread, then got to their feet. She forced her voice to cheery briskness. "Come on, then. We can reach them before nightfall if we really push. Horse'll wait here."

Keth's neck knuckle bobbed. "Right," he said sturdily.

And so they ran and walked by turns, stopping only to drink. As the sky clouded for the almost inevitable afternoon storm, Ndand sang songs. When the storm struck, with lightning flickering all around, she switched to heroic stories as they huddled under a tree. As soon as the sun peeped out, shining through the crystal drips all around them, they splashed on, a rainbow reflected in the puddles.

She was busy enough with her stories to keep her own mind from gnawing itself raw with the now-familiar questions. So she was not aware just when the atmosphere changed.

Maybe it was the emptiness. Instinctively she slowed, relieved to reach the last narrow trail bordering the rocky cliff on which the little hut was built. No one knew who had built it, or why, but it was there, the stone walls so old they were mossy. The roof had long since fallen in, but Flash and his men had made a new one, laddering scavenged branches from wind-twisted trees and covering that with cut turf.

Ndand sniffed, her shoulder stiffening. The air smelled like it always did: pine, mud, a trace of wildflowers. So why did she feel like a scout dog, hackles up, ears twitchy?

"Behind me," she said to Keth.

Her uncharacteristically sharp tone made him fall in obediently, tired as he was.

She began the stalk, treading on the outsides of the foot so that one moved in silence. The children learned it young; she didn't need to look at Keth to know that he'd begun stalking. His steps were soundless.

They circled the house in a wide perimeter first, scouting in all directions.

Nothing in the makeshift stable, which was nothing more than a roof on poles for the horses of Barend's or Flash's Runners. None of whom were here.

She eyed the house. Nothing. She looked skyward. No threat of a new storm, and the old one was now just a dark line in the east.

"Hello?" she called. The single small window was open, which is what you'd expect on a sunny day, but



Ndand's neck hairs stood up and her scalp prickled with a sense of danger.

"Flash?"

A small foot splashed the muddy ground next to her and Keth crept close, face blanched with question and fear.

She was scaring him. So she forced herself to walk briskly, her rain-soaked linen robe squeaking.

Pitching her voice to heartiness, she marched straight to the warped wood-slat door. A faint smell made her throat close. She whirled and gazed toward the beacon farther up at the pinnacle of the mountain. It sat there unlit.

Unlit? Not only unlit but sodden from how many storms? Its leddas-weave, rainproof cover lay abandoned on the muddy ground, caught against a boulder where the wind had flung it.

She whirled back, sprang to the door and flung it open.

The faint stench intensified to the lour of death.

"Wait." She flung out a hand, then gagged.

Keth backed away rapidly, eyes enormous.

She thrust her nose into the crook of her elbow and forced herself to look again at the two corpses seated at the table, covered with a mess of wet leaves chased through the little window by the storms.

There were no signs of violence.

Flash sat with his head cradled on his arms as if he were taking a light nap. Across from him, Estral the Poet leaned on the table as well, one arm pillowing her head, the other rigid next to a pen and paper.

Ndand dashed in, took up the paper, and ran out. Despite the weather the ink was clear. Estral had used the expensive heralds' ink, made to withstand sweaty fingers, years of seasonal change, decades of sitting on dusty shelves.

*My dear brother Skandar:*

*If your plans work—and why shouldn't they in the south as well as they have right here? You will be the first to find this letter, and I want you to understand that I do not blame you.*

*Skandar? Ndand knew that name. Wasn't there a Skandar leading the Resistance? Skandar Mardric. Brother?*

Sick with fear, anger, and grief, Ndand forced herself to read on.

*The spell on my magical case abruptly ceased to function, as I am sure you are aware: I do not know if it was only mine, or all of ours wore out the magic. That is why the silence of these past days.*

*I shall keep my hands to the paper so that these words will be the third thing to catch your eye.*

*Not your fault, so I say again. You know I never desired to trade my old, silk-broidered words for the knotted ravels of current passions. You always mocked me with your smile and your "Oh, Estral, when will you face up to the truth, that the poems of olden times just decorated the same old betrayals, greed, and ambition." I still believe if it is so, the greater cause was better than the meanness of our present choices—either "our" king (our loyalty far stronger after he fell than it ever was before!) or the carefully planned and impartial overlordship of the Marlovans. You say the Marlovans must die because we did not choose them. I say, but we did not choose our king, either.*

*Despite the kinthus my thoughts scamper in fright down this tangled path toward the gathering shadows. Is that because I know what lies ahead? If only I could see! Though pain there is none and the fear is gradually fading. My fingers slowly grow cold, see how carefully shaped my letters are? I have to state my point: I chose to follow you. But here, at the end, I can say it is not out of conviction, nor out of a wish for fame. I did what I did to see your smile of pride.*

*I will not see it now.*

In horror Ndand read the rest of Estral's confession: how she'd gone with Flash to the beacon. How she'd offered him a glass of wine while they waited for the storm to pass, so they could drag off the cover and light the beacon together. How she'd put a double dose of white kinthus into the wine, adding spices to hide it. The instant effect, Flash's last words—words of love, not of war.

How she held him until he was dead. Then she dragged the cover off the beacon so it would be

ineradicably ruined, just as Skandar had made her promise to do.

Everything done as she'd promised.

How she had judged herself for what she had done.

*So instead of your pride, give me your promise: that you send this letter to Ndand Arveas, Flash's wife. Yes, I am asking you to give information to a Marlovan. I beg you to try, just once, to see past the high fence of your political assumptions and extend a hand, human to human. Of all of them, she will understand most, and I would have her know that though I took his life away from him, away from her, away from his brother and father and mother and from the world, I gave mine in return. Not an equal bargain. Or a fair one. But it's all I have to give.*

Ndand crushed the letter into her robe, unable to read farther. She had to get control of herself, for there was much to be done.

Keth watched, white-lipped. "Did she kill him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She was part of the Resistance. We didn't know she was sister to the leader."

Keth's voice trembled. "Let's leave her here to rot."

Ndand closed her eyes against a lightning-bolt of anger. She'd shared her home, her heart, her husband with this woman, who had taken away the last. Estral had enabled the Venn to make it easier to take away the first.

But she had never wanted to hurt the second. Ndand knew it as true.

"No," she said, opening her eyes. "We will sing for her as well as him as we Disappear them. We will treat her with respect. We will—" No, they could not set the cabin afire to serve as beacon, for the furniture was as sodden as the beacon, and stone walls and a storm-soaked turf roof would not burn.

Instinct urged her to move fast, not spend days here hoping to coax a fire out of sodden wood.

"We will leave this cabin clean and open to the air. And then we'll go back down the trail to the lookout fork . . ." She let out a slow, shuddering breath as she caressed Keth's face. "And if we see the red-black flag, and I am afraid we will, there won't be time to visit the girls, and leave you with them. You and I are going to ride like thunder over the pass to warn Ala Larkadhe. Because it doesn't look like there's anybody else to do the job."

## Chapter Two

HYARL Fulla Durasnir, Commander of Prince Rajnir's invasion fleet, looked around the ruins of Castle Trad Varadhe.

The Marlovans had destroyed the castle and the harbor; it was no surprise that they had been ready for the invasion. The carefully timed simultaneous attack on all three of Idayago's castle-guarded harbors had thus been mostly a failed surprise, except for catching the Jarl of Arveas and his force leaving Trad Varadhe on their way to Castle Andahi.

Durasnir was here on inspection because his Drenga were a part of the invasion. Even though they came under the Hilda chain of command, Durasnir liked seeing whatever would be described in reports if he could. Hilda Commander Talkar had requested Prince Rajnir invite Durasnir as a courtesy.

The Drenga, as first in, had joined with the Hilda in attacking the Jarl's force. Once the Marlovans had been destroyed, Talkar had been shifted to the most important castle, the gateway to the pass.

Durasnir paced over the battleground where the Marlovans had been defeated, then he inspected the harbor, finally shaking his head.

"The docks will all have to be rebuilt," he said.

"The Idayagans can do it," Dag Erkrick replied, and then turned to the prince.

The way he did it burned warning through Durasnir. He'd turned too soon, not with the manner of seeing if the prince had anything to say, but as if giving him a prompt.

Sure enough. Prince Rajnir said, “Oneli Commander Talkar sent a dispatch just before you came, Hyarl my Commander.” He flickered his fingers, indicating a dispatch box. “He says they still do not have the castle gates down, even though he’s been there since yesterday! If Talkar’s men can’t get the gates down, I desire the Yaga Krona to help them. Since you are going to inspect there next, you may carry my will to Talkar.”

Behind the prince, Dag Erkrick smiled.

“As you wish, my prince.” Durasnir made his obeisance.

Erkrick said smoothly, “I would be glad to send you directly to the *Cormorant* by transfer magic.”

Prince Rajnir smiled. “It is a good idea. It will be so much faster.”

The dag might have meant it for a courtesy, though he rarely did anything for a single reason.

“I thank you both, my prince, Dag Erkrick. But I wish to finish inspecting the harbor so that we may begin rebuilding the sooner. We will need it.”

Prince Rajnir exclaimed, “Yes. Yes! You always know what is right, Hyarl my Commander.”

Durasnir saluted in peace mode, wondering if the prince really understood why “Hyarl my Commander” was insisting on traditional travel: because despite all the talk about expedience, and quick-thinking aid, and adaptation being equivalent of the bending Tree against harsh winds, *magic is not used in war*.

A direct order from the prince must be obeyed. And the method of delivery made Durasnir a messenger-ensign. He must take the order to Talkar, which would signal to everyone that Durasnir was part of this shift away from tradition to using magic in war.

Therefore, Durasnir refused the offering of magic transfer. He took his time in finishing his inspection of Trad Varadhe’s harbor, and then had himself rowed back to the *Cormorant*, his flagship. He signaled for his raiders to assume fleet battle stations as they sailed west from Trad Varadhe to Sala Varadhe, or Castle Andahi.

The Marlovans were there, defending it with life and blood, so he may as well adapt to their name for it.

The trip itself was all too short a distance, the shore winds having shifted to speed them along.

They reached the bay on the morning tide. He signaled for the fleet to anchor outside in the roads, as the bay itself was filled with the advance force’s ships. As his crew went about their duty, he raised his glass to scan the horizon, where the bulk of the fleet tacked and tacked again, polishing the coast as they waited for orders to land the army. They were a fine sight, on strict station all across the horizon.

By the time Durasnir had finished breakfast and inspected his ship, no messengers awaited him with the hoped-for news. The gates to Castle Andahi remained closed.

So Commander Durasnir set out to deliberately waste time.

He summoned his personal ensigns to get him into his heavy formal battle tunic again, and to have himself clasped back into his armor.

He brushed his hair out, rebraided it, and settled his winged helm on his head to his satisfaction.

He toured his ship on inspection again, pretending not to see covert looks of annoyance from his men interrupted in their duty rhythm.

He ate a biscuit while reading the newest dispatches—all three of them. He read them twice.

Finally he sent a polite message to Falk Ulaffa, the dag in charge of the prince’s Yaga Krona, sequestered in study down in the dags’ cabins, in case he wanted a ride instead of using transfer magic like the dags usually did. He issued orders for the boats, adding that the Drenga must find some mounts so that he could proceed by horse up the newly-secured road to the castle, after an inspection of the aftermath of the landings.

That ought to take up plenty of time, he reasoned, since the local tides did not cooperate, being mild.

Maybe by then Talkar would have those gates opened.

He was surprised when Dag Ulaffa accepted his invitation. Getting the old dag over the side and into the boat on a brisk sea wasted more time.

He climbed down, taking care that the frisky breeze just kicking up did not disturb the wings on his helm. He settled himself, asked the dag if he was comfortable. Ulaffa gave him an absent smile, and responded in the affirmative.

The men picked up the oars and pulled for shore.

Durasnir remained in the longboat until the marines had beached it, their usual smooth, swift competence more speedy than ever, directly under the eye of their commander. When you're at war, there's no way to tell your men to slack off, he thought wryly.

He stepped out of the command longboat. Ulaffa fumbled his way out of the boat with the painstaking care of the elderly who seldom are put to physical exertion.

Ulaffa bunched his robe up, extending a sandaled foot and setting it cautiously in the water. Then he trod with uncertain steps on the tide-washed beach shingle. He was so slow and deliberate one would almost think he was in secret sympathy with Durasnir and the army. But reading one's own emotions into others, especially the prince's own dags, was at best dangerous, at worst deliberately blinding to true motives. The Oneli and Hilda were forbidden to interact with the Erama Krona, the royal bodyguards. Durasnir did not know the strict wording of rules governing the mixing of the Yaga Krona and the Sea Dags, but he assumed they had a similar custom.

His efficient Drenga had somehow managed to secure a mount from the Hilda.

Durasnir turned away, scanning the shoreline road marked by darkened bloodstains. Here the last of the Marlovan jarl's defenders trying to reach the castle had been cut off and stood their ground to the end. It had been a tough fight, the silent party discovered as they proceeded, weapons and mail jingling, at a stately pace. Bloodstains splashed all the way up the shingle to the rising land below the castle, stains soon to be diminished by rain, wind, and hooves and boots when the army landed to march up the pass. Shortly before noon they arrived at the outer walls of Castle Andahi. The sweep of the great road to the mountains had been bisected by a massive landslide—not for the first time in history—which meant the only access to the road was directly through the castle. It was a crude defense, but it had been successful many centuries before.

Not against the Venn.

He paused a way from the outer curtain wall, studying the castle, an impressive structure nearly a thousand years old, much reinforced since then by ring within ring of massive walls and iron-reinforced gates made of the whole trunks of trees. What had been the cost of *that*? Or had the ancestors of these Idayagans ignored the wood guilds and mage councils, so far away on the other side of the continent . . . and was their decline a direct result of that?

Perhaps only Ulaffa could answer such a question. The old dag was studying the mountain heights under a shading hand, his blue robe blowing about his sandaled feet.

Time to get to business, distasteful as it was.

Approaching hoofbeats caused another halt as three riders traversed the scrubby land. The neat rows of tents belonging to the advance force lined the lower slope a short distance behind them.

The two snapping banners behind the riders sharpened into detail: one, the Owl-in-Hunt of Talkar's House, the other, the Great Tree Ydrasal. Talkar's jowly face resolved out of the dust as he and his banner-bearers drew near, the three golden rings of the Hilda Stalna, the army commander, embroidered on the upper right arm of his battle tunic gleaming softly: no one wore torcs into battle. Durasnir wore his torcs as a subtle reminder that he was here not to interfere with command but as courier only.

Talkar's gaze flicked from Durasnir's arm to his face. His expression was grimmer than usual under his gleaming winged helm.

*He can't get the gates down*, Durasnir thought, as Talkar slowed and saluted, hands together then opened out. *Damnation*. "Your report?"

Talkar stated, "The gate is stronger than we had estimated."

"It is the prince's will that we use the aid of the dags," Durasnir said.

The man's face tightened as he saluted, palms together.

Durasnir turned Ulaffa's way.

The dag said, "It will take until sundown to prepare. If you will pardon me, Commanders, I will summon the mages appointed by Dag Erkríc, and we will begin the preparations."

*So Talkar has until sundown*, Durasnir thought. *And now I would take any oath that Ulaffa is also dragging a sail.*

Ulaffa climbed with difficulty from his mount. His sandals crunched on the sandy gravel as he paced

slowly away, the soft breeze carrying whispered fragments of his magic spells.

Talkar raised his gauntleted hand, and the banner-bearers halted. He and Durasnir rode down a short, rocky slope toward the long beach of shingle, ostensibly to give the dag plenty of room for his spell casting, but in truth well out of earshot.

“This order was spoken directly to you?” Talkar asked finally, after another tight-lipped, nostril-flaring silence.

The great siege engines the army had counted on taking from the other two northern castles had been so thoroughly destroyed there was no patching them together. And on Dag Erkríc’s orders, they had not brought over the implements for making their own, full as the ships had been with men, horses, and their own supplies. *We will use their own weapons against the two or three castles they have on this coast*, Erkríc had said to the prince, who agreed with enthusiasm. *Next year, when we must penetrate to the formidable Marlovan castles inland, that is the time to fill holds with the big siege weapons, if we cannot build our own out of materials we find in Idayago.*

Dag Erkríc’s reasoning sounded sensible, and it certainly solved the immediate problem: use the dags to loosen the bindings in the gates to bring them down. It wasn’t fighting, it was merely the opposite of repair.

*Magic is not used in war.*

But they were using it. And if it was successful now, what would the next step be? Mages riding at their shoulders, perhaps whispering spells to ensorcel their brains, make their arms swing the sword harder and their feet march faster, without any thought on the part of the warrior?

“It is Prince Rajnir’s will,” Durasnir said finally. “Spoken in my presence.”

Talkar touched his fingers in acceptance, but turned his head to hide his loathing. He suspected that Erkríc wasn’t sending these orders over the prince’s name, he was getting the prince to issue them himself. And forcing Durasnir to do it before the men’s eyes made it look like the Oneli felt the Hilda could not carry out their orders on their own. It was yet another tactic meant to cause ill will between Oneli and Hilda.

Talkar faced eastward, away from the castle where his men strained with chains and horses, and brooded.

At least he’d personally overseen the dispatch of the Jarl of Arveas. A clean death, Talkar had made certain of that, despite Erkríc’s hints he would like a Marlovan commander or two to experiment with, if any were captured. Since the prince had said nothing about the disposition of enemies, Talkar and his Battle Chiefs had agreed that an honorable enemy—especially one who’d put up such a brave fight—did not deserve mind-torture by magic, the way Erkríc had done with that Wafri fellow, before he went mad and hurled himself directly off a castle wall to smash on the rocks below. The very idea of taking prisoners was dishonorable in the eyes of the Venn warriors, because they were asking their enemy to dishonor himself by throwing down his weapon. Talkar suspected the Marlovans felt the same.

Durasnir broke into these degrading thoughts with a question marching uncomfortably parallel. “Any sign of the Jarl’s heir?”

“No.” Talkar removed his helm, careful not to poke himself with one of the stiff upswept white wings, the lacquered white feathers wired into place. He wiped his damp forehead, then resettled the helm carefully over his meager knot of hair. “He might be in the castle.” He glanced back at where Ulaffa was carefully tramping out a square—probably a transfer square. Talkar hated the way the old man mumbled under his breath, like whispering secrets under your very ears. He hated the way magic made his arm hairs bristle in a kind of warning, like lightning about to strike. “What surprises me more is that there has been no recent message from the mage scout Erkríc had promised was stationed on the highest pinnacle, overlooking the narrowest portion of the pass. I was given a scroll case into which she was to send me reports of anyone she saw and killed.”

“Dag Erkríc has dags killing people?” Durasnir asked sharply.

Talkar turned his fingers skyward in assent, his expression grim. “And I did get a report, right after we landed. She spotted and killed two messengers sent up the pass. But since then no word.”

Durasnir did not ask why Talkar had sent no query. To do so would indicate a want, or a need, for dag

interference in military matters. So the Hilda Commander would keep silent.

Talkar blew out his cheeks, then added, "Any news since our landing?" A wave of his hand indicated the northern shore of Idayago.

"Yes. You remember the murder of our observers here."

It wasn't a question, it was a context. Talkar touched his fingers together.

"Dag Erkríc was in the process of replacing our military scouts with dags to be used as scouts. Like your dag on the pinnacle."

"Right, I understand."

"You apparently did not know that they all vanished overnight?"

"No, I did not." Talkar glanced at the mountain heights above the pass. Maybe that explained the sudden lack of reports from Dag Mekki. "Vanished, or dead?"

"Gone. No trace, and that means no bodies left for us to find. Unlike what happened with the observers in spring."

Talkar let his breath trickle out, glanced at the busy Ulaffa, then said uneasily, "No trace?"

"Dag Erkríc himself went to the south. Found and destroyed the Marlovan and Idayagan communication scroll cases, once he located them."

Talkar grimaced. "How does he do that? Magic eyes watching everywhere?" He grimaced again.

"I'm told that magic leaves a trace in the air, like scent, and the dags are like dogs who sniff out what we humans cannot. He doesn't even have to touch their devices, which are much more simple than ours. He just casts a ward around them."

Talkar raised a hand. "I don't know what that means, and I don't want to."

"Very well. After he broke our enemy's means of magical communication, he searched for traces of our dag scouts. This was while we launched the invasion. There he had no success. He returned to the flagship before we rowed to Trad Varadhe for the prince's inspection. He reported to the prince in my hearing that all the locals south of the pass are talking about the great Marlovan army no more than a day or so outside of the city of Ala Larkadhe."

Talkar's granite-solid jaw tightened. "Then we have to get to the top of the pass first. An army two days' ride from the city at that end? That leaves us a day to take this castle. Because the reports put the climb from either end at roughly equal. That's tight."

These words caused a pang of regret in Durasnir for his deliberate procrastination. But he dismissed it. A day could not make that much difference, judging from the poor defense they'd encountered so far. Of primary importance was resistance to Dag Erkríc's insidious plan to insert his mages into the conduct of war.

"Dag Erkríc has readied a plan for that, too," Durasnir said.

"A plan to get us to the top of the pass faster?" Talkar asked, lifting his helm again to rub his sweat-soaked, metal-baked head.

"No, it's some sort of ruse."

Talkar pursed his lips. His innate distrust of the interference of dags appeared to be warring with his desire to get up that pass as swiftly as possible.

Ulaffa finished making his square, laid a series of transfer tokens down, then turned an inquiring face their way. They rejoined him, standing well outside of the square. A short time later, half a dozen blue-robed dags appeared.

At Talkar's somewhat ironic gesture a party of warriors, all of them rigid with unexpressed resentment, conducted the dags to the walls. There they began examining the massive hinges and conferring with one another, while the invasion force watched.

Durasnir had no more excuse to be present. Ulaffa would transfer back to the ship whenever he wished, using one of those instantaneous transfer spells. One heartbeat here, the next there. The warriors hated that, too.

Durasnir and Talkar exchanged salutes. Durasnir signaled to his waiting marines and was rowed back to the flagship.

Once again on the *Cormorant*, he retreated to his cabin to wait. Now he was left with nothing but the

familiar, internal struggle with the concept—unexamined all his young life, now haunting him in his aging years—of one very young man embodying, in his person, the will of an entire people. Especially when one was not certain how much of his will was truly his.

### Chapter Three

“IGNI!” Inda’s voice broke into her sleep, light as it was.

She opened her eyes. It was dark, though she sensed the proximity of the sun somewhere below the eastern horizon. She sat up, brushing her tousled hair out of her face. “What is amiss?”

“Messenger. From the Venn,” he said, setting a candle down on the single camp stool. “I mean, from Ala Larkadhe, with a message from the Venn. They came in by magic.” Inda frowned. “Can they do that with whole armies?”

“No,” she said, poking her elbow out of the bedroll and leaning her cheek on her hand. “That is why Dag Erkríc desperately wants Norsunder’s rift magic. You need such great spells to transfer great numbers. More than three together, and the three feel the wrench at triple strength.”

Inda whistled. “Glad you told me that. All right. Evred needs you to tell us what their message means. I’ll be with you,” he added, and he couldn’t resist leaning down to kiss her, so sweetly she lay curled up in their bedding, drowsy, her sandy hair wisping about her face. His hands reached for the softness of her curves, though he knew that Evred was waiting.

Her lips, so giving, her smell like summer grass and blossoms on a cool wind, arrowed straight into his brain. No, it arrowed straight to his arrow. He backed away, trying not to laugh, and saw her smiling, her eyes reflecting golden flames of the candlelight.

It was like that at night too. She wondered as she rose and hastily pulled on her travel-worn smock and riding trousers how long his ardor would last, and why such things were so mysterious, so wholly uncontrollable. She loved lying in his arms at night, at peace. She would have been happy just doing that on this long, terrible ride surrounded by Marlovan warriors, and curtained only by a leddas-and-canvas tent that did not really muffle sounds. But for him proximity ignited the fires of desire, and those, once quenched (as quickly as they could, as silently) caused him to drop into slumber, leaving her lying awake, body content, mind anxiously seeking answers to questions she could not ask, except of herself.

They emerged from the tent into the lantern light. Evred-Harvaldar looked past Inda’s foolish little grin of sexual desire temporarily thwarted; there was no corresponding smirk in the woman’s face. Her eyes focused inward, her expression the blind one that either meant mental turmoil or she was doing magic.

No, he had to assume goodwill. Honor required it, and her self-effacing behavior during this long journey—she under guard—had been exemplary.

Evred handed Signi the letter.

Signi bent to the nearest lantern and read fast, her brow lined and tense. “Can you not read it? This is written in your own Iascan. It is from Prince Rajnir. He wishes his dag to parley under truce, on Restday, three days hence.”

“There was a thing with it,” the Runner explained. And on Evred’s motion, the runner held out a metal disk with Old Sartoran glyphs on it.

Signi only had to glance once. “Ah. That is a Destination token. Did he give you phrases to say when you place it upon the ground?”

The Runner repeated what the Venn messenger with the truce flag had told him, there at the city gate: simple words in Old Sartoran, freighted with a transfer spell.

“It will transfer Dag Erkríc to wherever you place this token,” Signi said.

“Or one of us to their arms?” Evred asked, tone dry. “And I use that term in the fullest possible sense.”

“No. The disks are different for that kind of transfer.”

Inda said, “That’s true. I used one once at Ghost Island.” Evred’s head snapped his way, his eyes narrow and remote, and Inda knew what question would come next. He quickly explained what Signi

had said about transfers and rifts, and they all saw Evred relax.

“Very well,” Evred said. “But we will prepare an appropriate reception first.” He gestured for Hawkeye’s Runner to take charge of letter and disk again. Motioning to Inda and Noddy, “We will ride ahead. The rest can follow us into the city.” He raised his voice to the Sier Danas, now straggling from their tents, buttoning coats or tying sashes. “Rat! Cherry-Stripe! You two and Cama bring them in. Barend. You ride with us.”

Wedid not mean just the commanders, but their personal entourages as well. Tau, as Inda’s Runner, was left to sweep together his and Inda’s belongings and give commands to the waiting runners-in-training for mounts.

The sun was still well below the hills to the east when they raced by streaming torchlight out of the camp, leaving the warriors cleaning weapons and talking among themselves. No morning drill for the first time—but there would probably be no more liberty.

Evred rode at the front with his Harskialdna and his cousin at either side, Noddy behind them, and from the sound of occasional hoots and crows of laughter, it was clear that no resentment had been harbored in the upper ranks at the permanent shift in command.

Tau and Signi rode side-by-side—Signi for the first time without her guards.

Stars twinkled overhead as they cantered behind torch-bearing Runners up the smooth, well-tended road. The setting moon still gave faint light. As they rounded a rocky outcropping, pungent with the scent of dry needle-grass and goldenrod, and spotted the glistening white tower projecting above the city, Signi swayed once in her saddle. As Tau urged his horse to close with hers, one hand reaching out, she shook her head and straightened up.

Tau dropped his hand. She’d slipped; Tau had made many riding errors before learning how to sit these scanty saddles.

Tau glanced ahead. The old academy friends rode together, talking back and forth in low, laughter-punctuated voices. Noddy was saying, “. . . so I’ll raise my Inda to scrag your boys on sight. You better raise ’em to fear my name—”

“Noddy Turtle?” Inda asked, to shouts of laughter.

Did they not feel the tension? On the surface, no. Under the surface? Ah. The laughter sounded too loud, too bright, the voices too forced. There was just enough of some quality to them that caused Tau’s heart to thump with warning.

Tau hated battle, and knew he was going to hate a war even worse. What truly bound him here? *Why am I here?*

*Because—*

His gaze strayed to the two figures ahead, the long tails of hair swinging against their backs just barely picked out in the smear of predawn light: one sun-streaked brown, the other red.

*It has always been people. Not places, certainly not ideals. People.*

He did not define *people* any further than that, but his hand clenched on the golden case he’d worn near his skin ever since Jeje left, in case she were to write back to him.

The sunrise lightened to pearlescent, the molten fire just rimming the eastern skyline sending spear-shafts of brilliantly pure, peachy-gold light to highlight the sides of trees, a rock here, and tuft of grass there.

Signi observed Tau’s profile against the dawn of a new day. Though Tau’s proximity would never bring her the glory Inda’s did, she had always loved beauty in all things, whether alive or not, natural or made. Tau was beautiful, riding easily now on his dashing young horse—both so alive, so capable of joy—the sight caused her heart to spasm in poignancy.

How different he was from Inda, and yet they had been raised with love, she could tell in all the little muscle moves, the warmth of glance and voice: Tau, perhaps, had been raised surrounded by love, but had come to regard love as an object, or an objective. For Inda love was sun and air.

Signi’s thoughts broke at the prickle of magic. Venn magic. It was very clear and distinct, as one might expect in this land where no dags dwelled. She could not test the trace, but suspected Erkrice. Who else would be arrogant enough to transfer somewhere within the city to watch the Marlovans ride in under his nose?



So she pulled the old, weatherworn cloak about her shoulders, the hood hiding her face, and altered her posture to give the impression of someone either elderly or infirm. And she slowed her horse gradually, so that Evred's party drew ahead. As she had the previous time she'd felt that same trace, she rode just behind Tau, trusting that he would draw attention away from her.

Tau had noticed her doing the same thing once before, a week or two previous. He'd assumed she had a headache from the dust and warm air, and wanted to leave the loud voices of the Sier Danas behind.

Because they were out of earshot, Tau met her eyes, which quirked in question. He asked, "Is this hood some kind of disguise?"

"In a way." She considered, then decided it was right to speak. "One of my people is spying on your army."

"Will you tell Inda?"

"If he asks. But I will not offer the information." She shook her head. "What can be done?"

"Nothing," Tau agreed. "So you refuse to fight against the Marlovans, but you're not fighting against your people either, is that it?"

How to answer that? Truth for Taumad, but also deflection. "I'm—I was—a ship dag. We had nothing to do with war, except at a remove. My job was to navigate, to assist in repair."

Tau shrugged ruefully. "I guess I hoped you might do some kind of spell and make the enemies go away."

Her nerves stung with cold. "You do not look forward to the coming battle?"

"Not," he said, "at all."

She closed her eyes. And though—maybe because—she had been so careful for so many weeks, so watchful, the pent-up words tumbled out, almost too fast to comprehend. "Why do not we see animal bones left in the wild as reminders of what can happen to us? Why not leave ours? But would they not be reminders of life smashed away, of what war means, if we saw them every day?" She lifted her hands, her fingers expressing the anguish of the unanswered. "How to remind humans, as we sing so bravely and dress so artfully riding to war that when we make war we are no more than predators?"

Tau had absolutely no answer for that. His fund of pleasant chat—taught to him by his mother to cover every possible social situation—had eased him through a variety of experiences all over the southern continent through the past ten years. Even with a pair of vicious pirates whose weakness was a wish to appear aristocratic. His chatter was inadequate now.

A quick indrawn breath from Signi ended the uncomfortable silence. She stiffened, staring downward, turning almost all the way around to gaze behind her as they passed by.

When she straightened again, her face was pale, making her light freckles stand out, her expression peculiar.

"Are you all right?" Tau asked her. "Do you need to stop?"

"No." Signi drew in another unsteady breath. "No, actually, I am quite well." She studied his concerned expression, and wondered if she ought to explain what she had seen, not once, but twice, now. On this otherwise unremarkable little hillock at the roadside, covered with summer wildflowers: placed amid the goldenrod a single blossom of milkweed.

"Are you worried about this mage fellow of Rajnir's?" Tau asked. "This Venn dag?"

The morning sunlight struck gold in his light eyes. How acute he was!

"Dag Erkríc," she said gently. "He is not yet, I trust, The Dag of the Venn. And I am not as worried as I was," she added, after some thought, within the shadow of her hood.

"Ah."

Was that an expression of comprehension, or of distrust? There were so many pitfalls here! But Inda trusted Tau. He had said so over and over, *I trust Tau with my life. Tau, Jeje. Barend—and Fox. I would have been dead many times over without them.*

"Do you know what wards are?" she asked, after more thought.

They could see the outer city wall now, and make out the sentries on the gates.

"No."

"Think of them as . . . walls," she said, gesturing toward the city just ahead, glimpsed through the

overhang of flowering trees. “Walls of magic that can permit spells, or keep them out. There are none here, so those who know magic can come and go without your knowing. Yet I sense a very great ward near, a most powerful one, and very, very old, so it has nothing to do with this coming battle. But I do not know if I should tell your king.”

Tau did not mistake the inquiry in her voice. “Don’t,” he said firmly. “If there’s magic of any kind that is a danger he can’t do anything about, then either fix it yourself or let it lie. Unless you want to deal with all the questions it will raise.” And then, in a pleasant voice, “Is dag related to the Marlovan *daka*, meaning *maker*?”

“Yes,” she said, grateful for the respite, and they talked of similar words shared between Venn and Marlovan for the rest of the ride.

She spied one more milkweed, faithfully planted at another juncture in the road to Ala Larkadhe. One could have been accident. Two made coincidence less likely, but three were a message. For her.

Inda and his companions raced up the road and into the castle. Signi never once raised her eyes to the castle promences; Dag Erkríc probably was hidden, and she must do nothing to draw his attention, which would be on Evred and those surrounding him. She and Tau followed more slowly.

Inda, Evred, Noddy, and Barend reined up in the forecourt, horses’ hooves noisy on the stones.

Hawkeye himself awaited them, flanked by his Runners. He and Evred saluted one another, aware of the watching sentries on the walls, and others in windows. There must be no sign of frantic hurry or fear.

Everything must be deliberate.

Hawkeye watched Evred speak orders that sent the Runners off in various directions, each with a specific logistical task. *You have come a long way in two years*, he thought. *I hope far enough to see us through this battle.*

At last only Hawkeye, Evred, and his companions were left. Evred checked; Tau and Dag Signi were just riding through the inner gate to the stable court. A motion to the head stable hand, and the two were surrounded by helpful minions—and kept out of earshot.

Inda flicked a question at Barend, who just tipped his head toward Evred. Inda said, “Sponge. I don’t think any of us trust this dag parley business. Too convenient a way to get at you. We’re all going to be on hand.”

“Then if he has the sense of a rock he’ll take us all out,” Evred retorted.

“You’re a target anyway. That can’t be helped.” Barend turned his hands up.

Hawkeye cracked a guffaw, sounding just like he had as a horsetail. He’d always loved the prospect of danger. “But if the rest of us, say, wear coats from the armsmen, and one of our boys wears your House battle tunic, maybe we won’t be obvious targets. Everyone seems to say that we Marlovans all look alike.”

“Very well.” To Inda: “I want you to set up the room we shall receive them in. Go through the castle, pick the best defensible place. Plan for every kind of treachery.” To his cousin and Noddy: “Hawkeye, show Inda around. Noddy, get the watch captain to assign you Runners. You had better inspect the barracks, make certain we’ve got enough room for everyone.”

They left, Inda hesitant, a backward glance toward where Tau and Signi stood on the other side of the courtyard, watchful Runners flanking them.

“She will be safe,” Evred said, and Inda could not answer that; as soon as he was gone, Evred’s gaze slid past Tau after the usual momentary hitch and he turned to Signi. “Please come with me.” He turned away, and Signi followed with her graceful tread.

Leaving Tau alone. Tau cast an inward sigh, remembering what Vedrid had said privately after all the celebrating the night Inda was made Harskialdna. *Now that he’s the new Harskialdna, when the time comes for battle, they’ll expect a crimson-and-gold House tunic to be ready and waiting.*

Tau had seen the one they’d made for Inda during the early part of the journey, the green of the Algara-Vayirs, edged with silver. A one-time Harskialdna apparently wore his own colors. That tunic was neatly packed at the bottom of Inda’s dunnage, along with a fine coat of chain mail; until they rode into battle, the Marlovan warriors traveled in their gray coats, now grimy at cuffs and hems, despite careful brushings and the occasional dunk into the ensorcelled buckets.

Tau hitched his and Inda's gear over his shoulder. Back to servant status, with a sidestep into tailoring. Well, it would keep him busy. Busy before battle was good.

Signi followed the king in silence. His head was bent, his expression thoughtful as they progressed from the granite part of the castle into the tower made of faintly luminous white stone. This stone was not marble, but something different and far more rare. It was called *disirad*. She had only seen it once before, in the magic-blasted remains of Roth Drael far to the north on the continent of Goerael, where humans had not lived for at least a thousand years.

The steps she trod now had ovals worn into them, testifying to the extreme age of this tower, possibly one of the oldest human structures on the world.

Her heart quickened its beat.

They paused on a landing and he touched a door whose wards and bindings she had sensed from the road outside the city. Powerful and *ancient* wards.

The door swung open, revealing the tall shelves, arranged like spokes, of a very old archive filled with treasures, precious beyond price: scrolls and handmade books that had to range over the centuries since humans had begun keeping records.

"You may stay here," he said, and she turned to him, eyes burning with the prickle of tears.

He saw her emotion without comprehending it. "You will be safe from any magic treachery they might try," he said, struggling past the press of worries, the proximity of battle, attempting to be kind. "I promise there will be food and drink brought. It's interesting," he added, looking around with open longing, one of his rare unguarded expressions. His gaze lingered on the case of ribbon-tied old scrolls. "I have spent time here myself. Not as much as I should wish."

So he would not misunderstand, she said, "I would willingly stay here a year, if permitted. I shall begin reading at once."

His smile was quick, inadvertent, the first genuine sign of pleasure she had seen since that dinner long ago in the royal city. He lingered in the doorway, obviously reluctant to leave, but when his slow gaze met hers his expression shuttered. He stiffened subtly as he took on again the weight of that invisible crown and withdrew.

He could so easily have consigned her to a stone cell. It didn't matter that she could escape from one as easily as the other, what mattered is that he'd given a thought to her comfort.

And so she would not burden him with the facts that this place was so protected by powerful, ancient magic that she could not be detected by any mage—including Dag Erkríc.

For the first time since she had been captured, she sent a magical summons to her Dag Chief, Valda, whose milkweed she had seen thrice outside on the road.

At Castle Andahi close to thirty dags were finally brought in, one to each massive gate hinge, others responsible for the heating and reshaping, thus loosening, the enormous nails in the outer curtain gates. The Venn waited in patient ranks just out of arrow range, so the defenders, glimpsed on their arrival, had withdrawn. Talkar did not assume that the empty sentry walls meant an easy surrender.

Dag Erkríc would have sent a hundred dags, had they been needed. The dags had been working hard, and so, just before dawn the next day, the great gates rumbled and cracked. With the aid of chain-reinforced cable pulleys supervised by Durasnir's own flagship Drenga captain, several teams of big warhorses pulled the gates enough off balance to fall to the ground with a thump felt at the distant camp.

The advance force—wearing armor, warhorses also armored, winged helms on the captains, great tree banners in the lead—trotted at a deliberate pace through the cloud of hanging dust in the motionless air. They halted at the castle's first inner gate, finding it closed and locked.

This time someone appeared on the battlements.

Arrows nocked and raised rattled behind Talkar, ninety-nine men across in the front line. Behind them a Battle Group of mounted heavy cavalry, drilled for two years, rode up in line, lances upright but ready to

be lowered at command. Behind and to either side of the mounted warriors bowmen took their places, and finally rank on rank of marching warriors formed up in rapid order, disembarked on the tidal flow the night before.

To Talkar's extreme left the dags waited in an untidy group, a faint morning breeze just beginning to rise, worrying at long hair and bright blue robes.

He raised his hand, and the longbows creaked as arms drew back, arrows steady.

The person atop the gate could be just barely made out against the rising summer sun: a woman, gray-haired, her own bow drawn and arrow nocked.

Talkar called up in heavily accented Marlovan (having asked one of the mages for the words so he could practice them), "Open the gates, or we shall bring them down. And then my orders are to put everyone to the sword, regardless of age, sex, or degree. But if you permit us entry, and passage to the road beyond, I promise your lives will be spared."

The woman stared down, her face too shadowed to see, the sunlight crowning her grizzled hair with silver. But her answer was unequivocal. She held up her hand, and from the front tower two young girls appeared, pulling up the crimson-and-gold banner. They tossed it down to where the woman stood. Venn and Marlovan gazes followed that slow, undulating length of fabric until it draped over two older women, who held it outstretched.

The gray-haired women took a knife and scored down the fabric, ripping it asunder. Destroying her own banner? Was that a surrender?

The summer air was so quiet Talkar heard Ulaffa's rusty whisper, "They will not dishonor their banner by leaving it to be taken."

And in a motion as swift as the any of Talkar's front-line archers could have achieved the woman raised her bow and shot her arrow directly at Talkar.

He had only to lift his shield with the helmed owl, and the arrow clattered harmlessly against the metal, and spun away into the dusty court.

The woman was gone.

"Mages," Talkar lifted his voice. "Take down the inner gates."

## Chapter Four

LIET-JARLAN stood at the edge of the half-smothered truck garden. All of the castle women stood around her, each wearing her best robes, neat and clean. Honor required them to go into battle with dignity. But their knives were no longer hidden.

As soon as the first boatloads of Venn had landed, every single man in the castle had ridden to the defense. These were not the still-missing Guard. They were led by an old dragoon whose great-grandchild was up in the robbers' cave with the children. He was aided by the cook, the cooper, the old brewer, the woodworkers, two Marlovan merchants who'd come over the pass and lingered, wanting to spare their horses the hot weather. A cluster of boys considered too young for patrol, who had stable duty until they gained some seasoning.

They had barely lasted a watch. Liet had forced herself to witness it from the tower. It was what she owed them.

"What we are doing," she said, looking at each face, "is not defending. There must be a hundred ships out there. More. Crammed full of Venn." She waved at the horizon, where the Venn ships had spread in a line outside the bay. She knew her people had been sneaking peeks through the spyglasses. That was all right. She had too, but they were not a nightmare, to fade away like smoke in the morning light.

It hurt so much to look in the young, tense faces of the fifteen-year-old girls. But they had voted not to hide with the children. *If the boys were here, they would be fighting*, their leader had said.

There was no answer to that. But the Jarlan's heart ached unbearably. Her mouth dried. Now the men of the defense would have no witness, and there would be no witness here, either.

“So keep that in mind as you take all the safeguards off the traps. Get the cauldrons on the boil. Pull those stones and flood the basement.” She groped in the direction of the emergency access to the tunnel. The main access had been thoroughly bricked up, hidden, and all the corridors leading to it sabotaged. When eventually they found the basement entrance, they would only be able to fit through two at a time. “What we are going to do.” Her voice scratched. She cleared her throat hard. “Until the last one of us stands, is buy the king time.”

## Chapter Five

VALDA appeared not long after Signi sent her message, stumbling forward as the magic released her, face exalted as she gazed at her surroundings.

“Oh, it is! It is!” she exclaimed, clasping her hands. “It is a Morvende archive! I had hoped, when I discovered Mekki and the *atan* platform—”

Signi waited through this tumble of words.

Valda made a visible effort and halted. Then, laughing and crying, she embraced Signi, her voice trembling. “I have never ceased to worry about you, my dear. But I dare not linger for long. I will return later, and we will talk.”

“Wait, only tell me this: does Rajnir send Erkrick to parley with the Marlovans?”

Valda regained some of her accustomed severity. “I never heard about that,” she stated. “Are you certain?”

“I saw the letter myself. And a transfer token.”

“I will find out,” Valda promised. “You have to realize I have stayed out of contact with the Yaga Krona—I *must*. So I no longer know—never mind. Ah, Signi, things have come to a terrible crisis for us! No, I cannot explain even that. The Hilda and the Yaga Krona are pulling at the gates at the other end of the pass at this very moment. Hisht! I *shall* return.”

The Yaga Krona? Battering gates? But she was gone.

When Evred came back some time later, he found Signi absorbed in an ancient scroll, busily making notes in Venn writing.

He glanced in and around. He was looking for someone, probably the Morvende archivist whose hand she’d seen noting many scrolls in the collection. From the evidence she was a copyist, replacing with laborious exactitude any scroll deemed too aged to be safely unrolled and read.

“The Runners are bringing you a meal.” Evred beckoned in a blushing youth carrying a laden tray. “I beg you will stay occupied until our conflict with your countrymen is past. Inda understands, and though reluctantly, he agrees. It seems the simplest solution.”

“I understand,” she said.

He closed the door. From the other side came the thump of guards taking up their stance.

Inda lurked on the stairway at the other end of the landing. “You can see, she is happily occupied,”

Evred said to Inda. “We can’t risk having the truce party spot her, and force her to go along with them.

You know that they would wring from her everything she saw in our camp, every word she heard spoken. I’d do the same, in their shoes,” he added, with a faint smile. “Can you see that it is better not to put her between hard choices?”

“Yes.” Inda rubbed his jaw. “But. Her there—Venn parley—mages. I don’t know, it makes me feel I’m sailing into an unknown harbor without a chart. So different from planning an attack.”

Evred was surprised at the spurt of annoyance these innocent words caused. *You’ve been home a full season, yet you have not abandoned your sea talk.* But he dismissed that thought as unworthy. “We will carry on with our plans as if their parley had never been offered.”

Inda stopped at one of the arched windows, his fist pounding lightly on the rounded, smooth lip of the sill as he gazed sightlessly out at the army now riding into the big stable yard below. Cama was still mounted, overseeing the orderly division of the wings. “That’s it,” Inda finally said, unaware of the long silence.

“That’s it. I need to look at the map.”

Evred did not ask what “it” might be. He led the way to the office, which overlooked the barracks court where the first two wings to ride in were milling about, gear slung over their shoulders or resting before the squared toes of their boots, as Runners dashed about. The low hubbub of male voices rose on the warm summer air.

Inda ignored them, too, his knuckles rapping a cupboard, the wall, Evred’s desk (partitioned by Hawkeye’s neat piles), a wingback chair, and the doorway again as they walked through to the map room, a chamber in one of the granite towers. The only piece of furniture was a heavy blackwood table, legs and supports beautifully carved in a style that called to Inda’s mind—to be instantly forgotten—the elongated lyre motif of faraway Freeport Harbor on the other side of the world, in the Eastern Sea.

“Ah.” He exhaled at the sight of the huge map.

Evred had promised him that the best map of the pass lay here at Ala Larkadhe; his uncle had captured it before it could be burned, when he first took Ala Larkadhe. Apparently, once a generation young Idayagans and Olarans had been chosen to remap every curve and cliff of the pass, as weather and wear changed them, an expedition that could take the better part of two years.

But the result was a map of chartlike clarity—

*Chart.* Inda’s thoughts forked between two trails, and regained neither. Too many things demanding his next moment.

*All right. Look at the map. You wanted this map, talked about it. There are all the details humanly possible.*

He closed his eyes and struggled to shut down the chatter of his inner voice. Now he would just look.

There was the snaking long lake on the eastern side of the pass. And on the west, directly opposite, the small lakes between the circle of highest peaks that fed into the great Andahi River carving its way down to empty into Lindeth Bay, and giving the pass its name. Above Ala Larkadhe the pass roughly paralleled the river, reaching its narrowest point between enormous cliffs at its highest reach. After that it started its way down toward the north, following an ancient river bed that had once emptied into the bay below what was now called Castle Andahi.

“That pass has to be like the Land Bridge in the south,” Inda muttered, looking down. “Says ‘narrow as a neck’ in your uncle’s writing, here, but what does that *mean*? No wider than a man can touch fingertip to fingertip, or wide enough to sail a capital ship through? And what kind of ‘enormous cliffs’—sheer ones, or ones you can climb?”

Evred said, “Sheer. Rising directly to either side. Some of them are broken by old animal trails. The trails usable by humans are mostly marked—you can see the small green dots—but it would take a year or more to get an army up or down those trails. They are mostly goat paths, and even the goats are slow. A man carrying a pack would have to rest frequently, and the footing would be dangerous.”

“Width of the pass?”

“At the high point, you can probably get fifty mounted men in a tight line.”

“That sounds—” Inda grimaced. It sounded wide if you thought about a couple of people ambling along. That was ‘narrow as a neck’ for an army—and narrow as a finger if you considered trying to negotiate it with a ship. “Not good for a charge, then.”

“In desperation, maybe. The sheer walls are perhaps twice the height of the white tower here. Some are higher. The tops can be obscured by rain or snow clouds. This is before the pass ices over in early winter, and small thunderstorms might strike one side but the other will be clear and blue. Lightning hits the rocks far above.”

Inda rocked back and forth, eyes closed. “No flank attacks, then.”

“I assure you, there is no more formidable barrier than those walls. The only advantage is to whoever takes the top of the pass itself. Anyone coming up from the other end will have to fight uphill.”

Inda still rocked. “Horses don’t charge uphill, right?”

“A short distance is possible. Very short. I would say they could break lines of disorganized Idayagans, but those walls of shields you described would be best charged with the incline in our favor.”

“How long to the top?”

“The fastest Runners take a week and a half or so to reach the top, and the same down to Castle Andahi,” Evred answered. “In good weather. The road is steep, and there’s no place to keep remounts, so you have to take them with you. Since we have not seen any beacon fires, we can assume we have two weeks’ warning, three at the very outside.”

Inda had opened his fist and was drumming with that hand, as his right traced over the mountain peaks where Hawkeye had labelled each of the beacon sites, with a notation on who was on duty at each, and when. “We’ll call it two weeks. That’s not much of a margin.”

“Better than nothing.” A couple of quiet footfalls, and Barend joined them at the table. “My beacons give us that two weeks.” His tone was of mild approval.

Inda turned on him. “How many know about the beacons?”

“No one, I’ll swear. Outside of us. Hawkeye and I picked the south end crews ourselves. Not a man with a family among ’em. No one to blab to. They report directly to us before and after rotation. Flash and I picked the ones at the north end.”

“How often do they rotate?”

“One coming, one going, one staying every week.” Barend added, “Flash does the same at his end. Reports weekly—”

“Reports that could take three weeks to get here, once they get down the mountain, and then sent south.”

“Well, say, fifteen days, if they really bustle. It’s the upward ride that’s—”

“I know. So, when did you last get a report?”

Barend lifted his head. “I brought it myself, when I reported in.”

“So when is the next due?” Inda asked.

Barend spread his hands. “Three days, maybe four, even five if there’s bad weather.”

Evred added, “If anything at all went wrong with the beacons at that end, we can trust Flash to have sent us word some way. And if there’s real news, even bad weather won’t hold them up.”

“Right.” Barend’s broad forehead creased. “What’s wrong, Inda? The beacons will be as near as sending a letter by magic as we can make it.”

Inda did not hear him. He was staring at the map, feeling that almost-vertigo again, just the same as the first day he’d looked at Evred’s far less detailed map back in the royal city. “This thing’s as good as a chart, all the details. Wait. I almost had it, something to do with charts—”

“I don’t mind saying—” Hawkeye clattered in through the door behind them. “—I don’t trust this parley any farther than I can throw these soul-ripping mages. I’ll wager anything you like it’s an excuse to nose around here and report in by magic.”

“They’re mages. They can nose by magic without a parley, and no one can stop them—” Inda stared fixedly at his hands.

“Inda?” Evred asked. “You were saying?”

“I forgot.” Inda’s hands smacked down. “I think I was saying two things. Neither of ’em any use, or they’d stick. Let’s go look at the rooms we’ve got available.”

The first day or so in the old robbers’ caves were mostly fun for the Castle Andahi children.

The three ten-year-old girls had been on plenty of overnight expeditions before, though usually with one of the older girls in charge, and they’d never take any of the ones everyone called the smalls—the children under six. Six was the age castle children got their first jobs, carrying dishes to dunk in the magic buckets, running messages, delivering small tools or packets of food out to those working in the gardens or outside the walls, and of course wandering horse stalls.

Hiding out felt at first a lot like an extra-exciting overnight. One the adults had ordered them to be on. It wasn’t until yesterday that things began to change.

Han rose before dawn and climbed out of her bedroll. For the first time since their arrival, the air was chilly. She crept past all the sleeping figures to the mouth of the cave, then she crouched down, grinding her chin on her knees as she glared out at the swirling drifts of fog.

At first, it had been wonderful not to have to brush her hair or bother with bathing. She hated going wet and chilled to breakfast. While she didn't mind going without a bath—that was part of the fun of overnights—her scalp felt gritty. She'd already had a small argument with Gdir about the fact that Han hadn't brought a hairbrush, and Gdir had said that meant she was a bad leader.

Han crunched up her toes, considering how she could get the hairbrush without having to admit she was a bad leader. She knew Gdir would make her say it before she'd let her use hers.

Somebody whimpered in the back of the cave where they'd made their camp. Had to be one of the three-year-olds. Han held her breath, hoping the small would go back to sleep. At first, the smalls had all just run around, laughing and splashing in the little stream that ran across the very back of the cave to vanish down a mossy crack. But yesterday they'd been more fretful than happy, whining a lot. What a relief when they finally got to sleep!

The seven- and eight-year-olds had gotten bored with staying inside the cave. They wanted games outside. No, not on the floor of the pass. That was orders, they couldn't go there, but they could be on the mountainside, couldn't they? Why not? Just to *there*? Han had gotten tired of the questions long before the sevens and eights got tired of pestering her.

A dusty rustle from behind made her half turn, as nine-year-old Freckles shuffled out, her toes grimy. Freckles shoved her bristly braids back, the reddish-blond hair imprinted with brown blotches of dried mud. "Babies are waking up," she whispered. Then she made a face. "Why'd we have to have babies on the overnight? Three isn't a small, it's a *baby*. They don't talk good, and twice Rosebud's forgotten the Waste Spell and we've had to dunk her drawers in the bucket."

"We can't blame her for that. Some don't learn it right away. The Jarlan told us Flash didn't."

Freckles giggled at the idea of a grown-up learning the Waste Spell, but it was more habit than humor, then she made a face. "I never got an overnight until I was six. It's no *fun* with them."

"Jarlan's orders," Han said.

Freckles sighed. For both girls, that was the end of the matter. Lnard wore you out demanding to know why, and Gdir complained about Han's orders (and about the Jarlan putting her in charge), but Freckles didn't care why. The grown-ups never made sense anyway.

Lnard came out, briskly dusting her smock and knee-trousers. "I don't think Rosebud feels good. Her face is hot, and her cheeks are even redder than her hair."

Han ground her toes harder into the cool, silken dust. "Then she should sleep. That's what the healer told me, the time I got fever. You sleep, and drink some listerblossom steep."

"I'll use the Fire Stick." Lnard flung a braid back with a self-important air. "I know how to make steep. First thing they teach us in the kitchen."

*Like I haven't known that since we were eight!* "In the way back. Remember Ndand's orders," Han cautioned.

Lnard rolled her eyes. "I've been baking since I was smaller than Rosebud!" she retorted, and marched away, shoulders twitching with righteous indignation.

Han clamped her jaw on a retort. She loathed the way Lnard told you things you knew, except exaggerating them, making her younger, or the work harder, and hinting that you were stupid. But Lnard had been the best with the babies. When they'd started to whine for their parents, Rosebud starting the other pair of three-year-olds off, Lnard had sidetracked them by telling stories and making pretend people out of rocks. When they got bored with that, she built a pebble castle for them to smash.

Gdir appeared. She looked like she'd just come from the baths, her smock and trousers neat, her braids shiny and straight. "Sun is nearly up. It's time for warm-ups," she said in that if you-were-a-good-leader-you-would-have-remembered voice.

Han dug her toes so hard that one foot cramped.

"After that, what're we going to do?" Freckles asked, turning to Han.

Gdir flushed, crossing her arms. She hated it when the others turned to Han.

"I have a new game," Han said, though she really hadn't yet. But she would by the end of breakfast, she vowed to herself. She could make up a new sort of training game, and—

A sharp boom cracked between the canyon walls. Han scrambled back, followed by Freckles. Gdir



recoiled, then lunged forward, peering out.

“Get back,” Han snapped.

Gdir ducked, then straightened up in affront. “It’s just thunder,” she snapped back.

But she knew it wasn’t. They all knew it wasn’t.

Everyone stayed in the cave that day.

Gdir was even quiet about the brush, so Han reinforced Gdir’s insistence on everyone getting clean and changing into fresh clothes. They had to renew the water in the bucket between each child, dragging it from the stream. The older girls scrubbed the smalls down, then dunked their old clothes, and spread them on the lip of the cave in the brief sun, which shone hot and still. The smalls ran around happily in their skin, even Rosebud, who seemed better after drinking listerblossom laced with big dollops of honey, and sleeping during the long session of warm-ups and knife drills.

Just before sunset, when they were eating thick slabs of bread with cheese toasted on it, another of those loud booms echoed up the pass, quicker than the flight of a hawk.

The smalls ignored it this time, but the older girls exchanged looks. They went on with their games, just as usual. But that night, no one spread bedrolls out to be away from others, they laid their bedrolls side by side, in a clump. All three big girls made certain the smalls were in the middle.

The smalls had dropped to sleep and the older girls were each drifting on different thoughts when, faint but distinct on the strong wind from the sea, the screams began.

## Chapter Six

JUST before dawn, Valda reappeared in the archive. This time she held a token flat on her palm. Signi recognized a tracer-token, warded against certain spells that Erkríc might perform.

Valda took in the bookshelves extending in at an angle toward the center, the rolled up bedding on the floor, the shallow dishes neatly stacked on a tiny table by the door. Early as it was, the Marlovans had been up earlier and Signi had already eaten. “If Erkríc moves, so will I,” she said, angling one of the chairs so she could see the door as well as the token resting now on her knee.

“You left me with many mysteries,” Signi said.

“I hardly know where to begin.” Valda scrubbed her hand over her frowzled gray hair. She had not combed it in days. Her insides ached from too many transfers: the human body was not made to be wrenched in and out of physical space like that.

But needs must be met. And needs had never been greater. She leaned forward, forearms on her thighs, which eased her cramping stomach. “Erkríc is searching for me again. I had almost had him convinced I was dead. He believes you are dead. You were very clever to avoid the major magics while you were gone. Anyway, he’s put up formidable wards and tracers all over Ala Larkadhe and the pass, most of which I’ve spent the night removing or compromising. He’s had a very easy time with his tracers, as these people have almost no access to magic. Ulaffa says days ago Erkríc was scorning your Marlovan king for using old-fashioned courting lockets for military communications. Is that true?”

“It is,” Signi said. *And I know how to restore that magic—the work of a few moments. But I dare not do magic, unless . . .* “Go on.”

“There is nothing I can do when our king is determined to send our people against these Marlovans, and they are equally determined to resist.” Valda touched her fingertips together. “But I am busy extirpating in any way I can magical interference in their battle.”

“Ah,” Signi said.

“Erkríc has forced Ulaffa and the dags into it by getting Prince Rajnir to issue the orders.” Valda’s smile was thin. “I have not heard these orders. As our first oath is to the greater good of Ydrasal, my conviction that the intent of such orders owes more to Venn aspirations of power than to Ydrasal’s harmony gives me leave, in good conscience, to act as if I never heard *of* them.” She glanced down at her token. “I do not know how long I have, so to specifics. But first. Before I go on, why are you here?”

With these Marlovans? Are you helping them against us?"

"No. I am doing nothing. I am asked to do nothing." Signi flattened her hand and extended her fingers in neutral intent. "The war I cannot stop, not when our people and theirs are so determined upon it. You do not stand in the way of the river's flood, even when you know it will sweep away the seedlings." A pause, as Valda's steady gaze did not waver. "Valda, the truth is, the enchantment I labor under is that of the heart, and yes, I examine my reasons every moment, not just waking but in dreams. Aside from my connection to this young man, I know that somehow I yet see the Golden Tree, the greater cause. After all, you yourself removed me from this war to devote myself to that greater cause."

Valda leaned back, exhaling slowly. "It's good you did not make it to Sartor. I think they know about Erkrick and Norsunder, for they have adamantly refused to treat with us. And Erkrick has his trusted followers watching as many of our movements as they can."

"Then our plan is abandoned?"

"No, postponed only." Valda's arms tensed slightly, cuing Signi to brace for the technique of emotional provocation. Valda loathed using emotional provocation, Signi knew, but it was often the only way to surprise the truth out of their formidably masked colleagues. "Why did you permit yourself to form a tenderness for Indevan Algara-Vayir? You know that, apart from Durasnir, whose opinions are necessarily shaped by someone's fitness for war, everyone believes he is the epitome of evil. He betrayed young Wafri and destroyed his home, causing terrible turmoil in Ymar. That's aside from all his bloody ship battles, burning people to death, and so on."

"He was Wafri's prisoner. Wafri was torturing him, did you know that?" Signi said.

"No." Valda's brows rose. "I did not. There were odd rumors. But that incident was so far removed from our concerns, I did not investigate further. Did Indevan tell you that?"

"No. He's never talked about it at all. But he wakes up in dreams shouting Wafri's name, or arguing with him and his—his—" She tried to find a term outside of the specifics of Hel dancing, which was so acutely observant of muscle expression. "His body," she said finally. "The scars of torture are evident not just in the pain he feels in his joints, but in the way he moves, sometimes in his voice. That is not what forced me from the old path onto a new. He shines, so." She flickered her fingers upward, miming the swirling rise of sparks.

"Ah." Valda looked skeptical. "A blood-handed battle leader shines with the light of the Golden Tree? I had not known the tree bloomed crimson for you as well as for Erkrick."

Signi lifted her expressive hands, as if taking a precious gift. "I know I deserve this rebuke." Her fingers opened, like petals. "Yet that is not how I perceive him."

Valda sat back. Jazsha Signi Sofar was a woman of complexity, one who had trained at all the levels but one of one of the highest disciplines known to the Venn, the Hel dancing. And then she had become a mage, mastering in years what most took a couple of decades to even perceive. She was no child to mistake the sentiments of desire for anything but that.

"I think, desperate as I am for time I don't have, I must ask. Ydrasal has brought us here, you and me. Flows the crimson river of Rainorec between us? Or is it possible we perceive different branches of the Great Tree? You must know that what I see is a lover of the very enemy about to lead his people against us, because I have seen your Inda riding next to the Marlovan king." Valda rocked again, forearms against her middle, the token winking on her knee. "He is so young," she said in a casual voice. "As I have grown older I find myself enchanted by the way the young have only to catch one's eye, to smile, to offer smooth limbs with the unconscious beauty of youth, and they are instantly ready for the happiness of love, however tired, or worried, or stressed." She smiled. "It is most precious of all forms of wealth, youth."

Signi was far better trained in observation even than Valda. She could hear Valda's physical effort just to speak, much less to sound casual, as if she were merely testing the depth of Signi's infatuation.

*You have been watching me*, she thought, as from below the open window rose the faint but distinct stamp and clash of drilling warriors. *What do you hold back?* She would not know until this part of the conversation was finished. "Life is the most precious gift," she said, a reminder of the inner circle's vows that transcended Venn, Marlovan, Ymaran, or any mere political or cultural polity. "Youth is—youth. If I

had met Inda at sixteen, I would have scorned him for his scars. Had I met him at his own age, I would have scorned him for the lack of grace that we Hel dancers believed, in our arrogant simplemindedness, divided artists from mere barbarians. He would have been ugly to me, compared to the male dancers.” “So define your enchantment,” Valda commanded. “Are you telling me this is a life love, root and branch?”

Signi knew the answer to that, but hesitated before saying it. To some it was not given to find that kind of love, that lasted from acorn to the last bloom, through all the seasons and storms of life. But there were other loves, and age taught one to appreciate each kind.

“No,” Signi said, reluctant because she knew that her love for Inda had rooted, while his (though he did not seem to know it) was still the green shoot of the young. “He’s like the golden fish in the river,” she said at last. “I can watch all day with pleasure, but he darts here and there, his movements as much a mystery to me as the currents of his river’s waters.”

Valda made the gesture of peace, as the rumble, zing, and clack rang up the stones from below, followed by full-throated roars in cadence.

“Then here’s what you must know now. The king lies in a strange sleep, somewhere between dream and death. He has not wakened for days.”

Signi pressed her fingers to her lips.

“The last command he made about us in the south was to bring the Marlovans back to the homeland. Those were his words, *Bring back the Marolo* —he used the old word— *into the embrace of the homeland.*”

“Which Erkríc comprehends as spells to take their wills away, if we win?”

“The wit and will of their leaders. Yes.” Valda bowed her head. “His present ruse is to further delay the Marlovans from marching up the pass so that the Hilda may gain an advantageous position. I know little about such details, but Signi, here is also what you need to know: he is forcing the Yaga Krona to use magic in aid of this invasion.”

Signi’s breath hissed. “Dags—”

“Do not belong in battle lines. Everyone knows it. But the prince commanded it, calling them ‘aid,’ not ‘warriors.’ So they must obey.” She tipped her hand toward the castle. “Prince Rajnir is eager, no, desperate to win the coming battle. The Breseng is nigh, and he must return with a triumph for the Venn.” Signi had felt the problems of the Venn homeland as a looming storm beyond the horizon. Always there, but far away. Now once again she was in the midst of the thunder.

Valda said, “The Yaga Krona is not just divided, we are fractured. Erkríc knows how to shape his words to reach the deepest roots of ambition, so that each of the most untenable of these orders is given to the dag who would most find a way to see them as reasonable. There are two of his spies in this city right now.” And she named them. “There was also Mekki, up on the heights. She was not just watching for Erkríc, she was killing messengers. There were two bodies directly below, one of them a Runner sent by the Jarl’s heir, and the other a girl hardly over sixteen, sent through the tunnel under the northern castle, which is hard-pressed now by our invasion force. Mekki killed messengers, not warriors, probably dispatched to apprise the Marlovans of the our invaders landing along the Idayagan coast, and attacking the castles.”

“Killed? With magic?” Signi cried softly, rocking back in horror.

“Yes.” The soft folds of Valda’s face trembled with the intensity of her emotions.

“How is it even possible? No, I don’t wish to know—”

“This atrocity will revisit your dreams, as it has mine. I want that to happen,” Valda said, low and intense.

“I want every one of us to see that young man and the girl in dreams, the transfer of a stone directly into their hearts. And don’t remind me that our transfer spells make that impossible, because Dag Erkríc has been given by Norsunder some spell to remove those protective wards.”

Signi hissed as if a stone had erupted into her own heart.

Valda breathed deeply in equal pain. “That was an act of war, not of magical necessity. Just as it was when our dags ruined the hinges of the castle gates. Though everyone called it aid, because no weapons were involved. Mekki did not deny it when I confronted her. And so she has been given the time these

young messengers might have lived, twice eighty years, in which to meditate upon her actions in betrayal of our oaths,” Valda added in the mode of *it-shall-be*.

Signi understood by these words that Brit Valda, Chief of the Sea Dags, had placed Mekki under a stone spell. To all evidence the body is so frozen that it takes in physical time half a year to move a finger. But the mind is free. One hundred sixty years as stone—a merciful sentence only because Mekki had been ordered to do what she had done.

Signi’s temples panged. She knew she might not be granted that much mercy if Erkríc caught up with her. “What do you see as my duty, Valda?” Signi asked, as the sounds shifted to drums and chanted ballads from a balcony somewhat closer to the tower’s prominence.

Valda sat up, fingers clasping around her token. “I will remove the last of Erkríc’s wards, freeing your magic. You can do nothing, I can do nothing, Falk Ulaffa can do nothing, to stop the war. With our own path so fouled by the dust of ambition, I must leave your actions to your conscience. Afterward, your purpose is still to find a way to get to Sartor.”

Noise outside: the brave, syncopated rolling rhythm of drums broke of a sudden into patter, and laughter. Valda whispered, and vanished.

Halfway through the night, the heat broke over embattled Castle Andahi. The mountain-reinforced echo of thunder, the crack of bluish-violet lightning did not diminish the occasional screams from inside.

Hilda Commander Talkar, in charge of the land portion of the invasion, knew those screams mostly came from the throats of his own men.

Talkar had set up a command post directly inside the outer curtain wall, his advance force one command from march-readiness around him.

He wrote in his scroll-case twice, asking for a report of the Drenga captain inside. To his surprise, and increasing displeasure, there was no response. Did they shirk duty? No, he must not cloud his mind with distrust of the Oneli, with anger. The noise, the sudden, red-glowing goutts of fire in windows, the intermittent cries, indicated strenuous effort of some kind inside.

Once again he suppressed the instinct to send in his own men. A fight in an unknown space, especially in the dark, could easily end up with his force and the Drenga already inside thinking one another targets. A signal for reinforcements would be different. But no signal came.

At dawn the Drenga captain himself emerged from the inner castle wall to report, covered by two men, shields high. Arrows rained down, rattling on the shields. Talkar peered up at the walls, making out vague shapes that appeared just long enough to shoot, then vanished.

Talkar waited at his camp table, having signed for an orderly to bring steamed milk with honey, which Captain Henga downed gratefully at a sign. His eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion.

“Captain Henga. You do not have the castle yet?” Talkar asked.

“No. But we believe we have one more section to go, and that most of them are dead.” Henga’s voice was a husky croak. “Unless there are more waiting for a last stand. Everything is dark in there . . .

sabotaged,” he finally said, because he couldn’t think of a word strong enough to encompass such thorough, single-minded ferocity. “Every passage, stair, room was blocked or diverted. Most with traps. All the stairwells have brought down rains of burning matter, oil, even furniture flung on us in the dark.”

He waved a gauntleted hand vaguely. “Diverted over to the side where the mountain came down. Into traps. Burying my men alive.” He threw back his head, staring blindly through the opening of the tent to the massive castle looming against the sky. “In pairs,” he added in a low, tired voice.

Talkar said, “Then it’s not a matter of doors to batter down?”

“If there is a direct way through to gain access to the road beyond, we have not found it.” He hesitated, reviewing the nightmare since the dags had broken down the last door: all the glowglobes had been smashed. Their reserve torches extinguished with tipped barrels of dirty water, leaving them floundering in the dark, to serve as targets for yet more arrows, knives, boiling liquids poured down onto their heads. Fire traps. Arrows shot from openings impossible to descry. Ugly traps, like sharpened spikes in walls

and floors.

The worst, though, the worst had been entire floors sawn through in the two western towers. In both cases young girls had darted past his men, each of them carrying pieces of paper. Of course the men gave chase, one party under Henga's direction.

He'd just reached the door himself when the girl stopped in the middle of one of the round tower rooms, with its bare wooden floor. She looking back over her shoulder at them, and time seemed to halt for one rush and thump of his heart: this girl was just the age of his daughter, about fifteen, freckles across her nose, her hair light, her braids tousled. Her pulse beating in her skinny neck above the rumpled tunic much like Venn children wear during their brief summer.

*Thump.* His men moved in slowly, surrounding her, she stuck out her tongue. Then she tensed, glanced down—an abrupt, instinctive reaction.

And the floor dropped.

The entire floor, taking them all three floors down to death.

The second one he heard, not a hundred heartbeats afterward, across the length of the castle. That is, he heard the same *crack!* of sawn wood giving way, the smashing long fall, the screams and shouts of terror, and then that awful silence.

He swallowed, knowing that if he survived this battle, he would always remember that girl, how she stood poised, not letting herself look down at that sabotaged floor until it was too late for them all.

He blinked, forcing his attention back to Talkar, and reported how many they'd lost—dead, burned, punctured, wounded with shattered limbs who would no more march through the pass than they could fly.

It was absurd in the face of the thousands waiting, a desperately absurd defense. In another circumstance one could say a gallant one.

Now? Right now they could not afford the time.

“Get control of that castle. We know there is a tunnel, leading up around the headland onto the pass. They have to have bricked it up, or buried it. Do whatever you have to do to find it.”

The man swallowed again, summoned his men, and the three ran heavily back inside, armor jingling, arrows clattering on the shields.

## Chapter Seven

*Jeje: My current domicile is a pantry closet between the kitchen and what was once the main banqueting hall or whatever they called those vast rooms. Now a barracks full of straw sleeping mats, smelling of wet wool and old socks. I was sitting in here sewing Inda's battle tunic when a message came that Inda was seeking me. He dashed in looking like he hasn't slept in a week, and it was just like the bad old days. With no warning, he blurts, "I might have to divide 'em, Tau. But I don't know who to send where. As commanders, I mean."*

*"You are not having this conversation with Evred why?"*

*He was ramming back and forth as if in front of a field of a thousand men and not in a room about four paces by five. "He knows 'em all too well. They don't—I don't—oh, I just want to know what you see. When Evred and I aren't there, or talking."*

*"You mean from your Sier Danas?"*

*"It has to be them." Then he stopped and glared at me. "Have you seen anyone else who could command?"*

*"No. They all expect to be commanded," is what I said.*

*"Who can I send to the top of the pass to charge the enemy and bring 'em all behind him?"*

*"Cama," I said, surprised he even asked.*

*But then I was more surprised when he waved me off for making a foolish error. "Hawkeye has to be one, and even I can see he doesn't like Cama. It seems to have to do with the past. He*

wouldn't—it's not enough to—oh, what about *Cherry-Stripe*?"

"He doesn't think you can do it," I said, trying to be offhand. Also, trying not to show how very strange it was to be included even at a remove in what in any other history would be called the Council of the Great, and Jeje, if that doesn't provoke you to answer me, even if it's a long curse against the pretences of kings if not my own pretensions, I don't know what will.

So Inda looks up, and snorts, just like the old days, and drums (we never knew his finger tapping was drumming, did we?) and says, "I saw that."

"The one you can probably rely on is Noddy. He's like a rock, that one. I keep forgetting he's only a year or two older than you, he seems like he's your uncle."

"He was always that way, even when he was twelve. Main thing is, I think Hawkeye likes him, so they'll work together. Good."

And out he shot. Will my advice net me a reward or a knife in the back? Not a dukedom, sadly, for they have no dukes here.

Having finished dispatching a meal to the dag imprisoned up in the archive and orders for new quarters in the city, Evred went hunting for Inda.

He strictly controlled his impatience at the crowds everywhere: they all had things to do but not enough space to do them in.

After a thoughtful glance at his face, Kened shoved unceremoniously ahead, elbowing aside Runners, Runners' aides, stable hands, horses and men moving this way and that, a few boys dashing between them, most laughing.

The startled glances sent Evred's way would have amused him at any other time, especially one without the prospect of a battle pressing against his skull in the form of constant headache.

A brown, unruly horsetail was surrounded by taller heads, mostly blond. Was that Inda? Yes. Inda bounced on his toes, his eyes briefly appearing above the press in the court as far too many people tried to shoulder their way to their particular task.

"It's as ready as it ever will be," Inda called to Evred as they worked their way toward one another, and when Evred cupped his hand to his ear, repeated it louder.

Exasperated beyond endurance, Evred made a rare, flat-handed swipe, and Kened signaled to the duty guards to clear enough space for them to go inside.

"What did you say?"

"Remind me about the rings." Inda poked his finger under the owl clasp and rubbed his scalp vigorously, making a face. "The parley room is ready for tomorrow. We've got the ruse all laid along. But Sponge, I need another look at that map—"

Inda's big, scarred hands rubbed over his face, his eyes blanked as once again his thoughts turned inward, and Evred said shortly, "Let's go upstairs."

They ran up the stairs to the top floor of the east tower. Now the clamor was just a low, steady rumble far below.

Then Inda whirled around, his coat skirt flaring, and dropped onto the top step at the landing, head in his hands.

Below the open window an entire wing of men shouted in cadence; from behind them the rumble of laden wagons smothered the clatter of iron-shod horse hooves against stone. Evred moved across the landing and pulled the heavy shutters closed.

Inda rocked back and forth, his unruly hair as always escaping from his horsetail in wild curling strands. Evred stared down at a lock caught in the glittering ruby dangling against Inda's scar-slashed cheek, was overwhelmed by a skin-prickling onslaught of affection. So intense and so unfamiliar an emotion had an unsettling, vertiginous effect on his perceptions; the inexorable pressure of imminent battle fractured his habitual control. Words were so difficult, and usually so was gesture—even proximity, but now—Inda. Loyal Inda. Everything Evred asked Inda granted, with the unthinking generosity of the ten-year-old he'd once been.

Evred stretched out his hand, fingers open, and just touched the sweat-damp, tousled top of Inda's head. The gesture partook more of the warmth of affection than the heat of desire, but desire there was, there

always was.

Affection and desire snuffed when Inda jerked upright, his face hardened into a killing glare all the more shocking because Evred had, as yet, never seen him in battle.

Just for a moment, then it was gone, but the deep, uncontrollable recoil forced Inda to his feet, color flooding his face.

He said to the ceiling, "Chart."

Then he whirled and sprinted to the office, trying to outrun that stomach-churning nausea, a visceral reaction from the days he lay under Wafri's stroking hands after torture.

Inda thumped against the map table, and threw his arms wide, as though flinging away the sensation brought by memory. *Wafri is not here. It was probably a spider, or the edge of his coat.*

He fought to shed the unwanted memory of Wafri's twisted passions, and to reclaim the insight that had eluded him for weeks. "That's it. That's *it*. I knew it would come to me, I just had to have quiet.

Sponge! Look!"

He pointed down at the map. Inda slapped the back of his fingers against the carefully detailed top of the pass. "What do you see?"

They'd mulled over the map at least twice since their arrival, but Evred said in a voice devoid of any emotion, "Sheer cliffs at either side. Above the cliffs, the lakes on one side, and on the other, the source of the Andahi River."

"Exactly." Inda breathed hard. "Evred, that's the mistake we've all been making, and I knew better. I knew better, which was why I was thinking of charts: on land, water's a barrier. In the sea, it's your access. It's *land* that's the barrier."

"And so?"

"Don't you see? Talkar, their Hilda commander, is a land warrior. He's going to think the same thing!"

"But the sea commander won't."

"But he's not in their plans! They operate separately. Oh, Sponge. That's it. People move faster on water than on land, it's a conduit. We can use the lake on this side, at least, to get people to the top of the pass. That gives us a chance to attack from an angle and take them by surprise. If only we could get to the river on the other side, we could come at 'em from three sides, but no use in even thinking about it. From the looks of these drawings, it would take half a year to get men up those mountains. But this side? The lakes are long enough . . . looks like a few days of hard travel, and . . . Let's get the others." And he sprang to the door, yelling, "Vedrid!"

The Runner appeared at the other end of the office, pale head highlighted against the gray wall.

Inda said, "Grab Barend and the Tveis. Tau, too," he added, whirled back and danced about the room.

"That's it, that's it, that's it!"

Inda thumped his fist on the map, spun around again, thumping the walls, the door, the windowsill, the table, the chair backs, walking and talking and striking and looking anywhere but at Evred's face. "I wish I could ask Signi, but it's one thing to ask about the people, and another to ask her about war plans. She has to know some of them, doesn't she? No, can't make her do that—not fair—and anyway I will wager anything Talkar would never think to send a force up and across the lake. I know it."

Whirl, pound. "Is she liking it up there in that library of yours? I didn't get a chance to go up there last night, and this morning Vedrid woke me up for the—you did see her, didn't you?" And inwardly, *It was a spider. Wafri is gone.*

"I had breakfast sent up to Dag Signi," Evred said neutrally. Was the introduction of Dag Signi calculating or instinctive? But Inda had never been calculating in human relations.

Inda thumped a chair back with both fists, staring at the map, but sightlessly this time, and then he smiled, but for the very first time it was not the old unselfconscious wide brown-eyed gaze, the candid smile of childhood. It was the quick, slightly anxious smile that people gave Evred because he was the king. Sometimes anxious, sometimes cunning.

No, he must not permit himself to think like that. It was too much like his uncle, this immediate fear of conspiracy, so immediate that it would be far too easy for fears to take on a semblance of reality, the conviction driven by just how much he would hate it. *Face the truth. Inda did not react with*

*calculation, it was disgust. No, it was revulsion.*

Inda was away again, prowling the room. "Truth is, I don't want Signi to find out how ignorant I am."

Evred snorted. "You were never ignorant."

"No," Inda agreed. "I wasn't. When I was eleven. But—I thought about this yesterday morning—I don't think I've read a book since. I think I've forgotten all the Old Sartoran letters, except the ones in my name."

Whirl, thump thump thump.

"The forbidden language." Evred looked away from Inda's scarred hands resting on the map to the latent strength in his arms straining against the coat sleeves. And away to the window. "I saw the note you wrote to Ryala Pim when you repaid her for her fleet: the Old Sartoran was quite clear." He did not add that he had recovered that note from the Pims, and had it still, kept in a box on the mantelpiece in his bedchamber at home.

Inda flung his hands wide. "Alphabet, yes. I can do my name, like I said. I can even sound out a few words. What I missed the most when they first put me to sea—besides home—was reading. But then I got over the habit."

Voices echoed up the stairwell. The moment of privacy was nearly gone, maybe lost forever. Touch was denied Evred; he had to make certain he had not lost the little of Inda he did have. "I've been reading the private records of kings, when I can," he said, hearing the falsity, the calculation, in his own attempt at lightness. "I'll show you one day. You would never believe why my revered ancestor Anderle Montrei-Vayir never wore a crown, though we took everything else from Iascan custom."

Inda looked up, and there was the old wide-open curiosity, the grin of anticipated humor. No revulsion, better, no awkward consciousness.

"He had one made, but it kept slipping over his ears, bending them. Once someone laughed."

Inda snorted. "He didn't have the wit to have it fixed?"

"They're metal. You either make it so tight it won't fall, then it hurts, he said, or it's so loose your ears dog down. You can't line it, like armor, it looked ridiculous. So it was either kill everyone or chuck the crown."

Inda was laughing as Cherry-Stripe charged through the door. The others almost trod on his heels, and the room filled with the smell of damp wool as Cama growled, "Damn rain!"

Cherry-Stripe demanded, "What's the joke?" He didn't wait for an answer, but flipped up the back of his hand toward the sky. "Rain holds off all summer while we're sweating up the road, and now the horses are penned up eating their heads off. They'll be bellyaching just in time for us to ride to war."

"Muck our way chest-deep through mud to war, more like," Rat said as he flung the casement wide.

"Phew, it's like a sweat-box in here."

A gust of wind returned a hissing spray of rain; papers circled like mad white bats and the map rattled on the table. Everyone cursed Rat, who hastily slammed the casement shut again.

Hawkeye, coming in last, contemplated Vedrid's Runner-exact rendering of Inda's order: *Grab Barend and the Tveys . . .* There had been no sign of collusion to take away his command, just the unthinking comradeship of the academy—the way Hawkeye had felt about Jasid Tlen and Cassad Ain and Buck Marlo-Vayir, and about Manther Jaya-Vayir and Tanrid Algara-Vayir before they died.

Sure enough, Inda's gaze slid right past him. He had not been excluded, he'd been forgotten. Inda, after all, did not know Hawkeye, had never known him.

Hawkeye backed up against the wall as the others closed up around the table, and at a sign from Evred, Inda said, "Hawkeye and Noddy, you'll be in command going up the pass. But we're going to split our force."

Relief washed through Hawkeye. His cousin had been more than fair. He would command the lead force, as was right. And though one of the Sier Danas was also being sent, at least it was Noddy Turtle Toraca, who wasn't on the strut like Buck's and Horsebutt's scrubby brothers.

"Split?" Cama repeated. "You sure that's wise?"

"Look. You tell me," Inda replied, and explained his observation again, gesturing along the pass.

All of them comprehended the shift in perspective from land to sea once it was explained. It was simple



enough, but you had to see water as a conduit, and not a barrier.

“So here’s the basic plan. Charging is our strength, with speed and fast maneuvers. Speed and maneuvering is going to be about as useful as shit in shoes.” Inda thumped the pass on the map. “With these cliffs on either side, what we need is heavy and steady. Dragoon lancers in front. As heavy and solid as you can get, instead of fast, because I think it’s going to be their heaviest foot against you.”

“You changed your mind about them being mounted?” Cama asked in surprise.

“Don’t know.” Inda thumped the map. “I still think a lot depends on how many horses they brought. And on how good they feel about their fighting skills on horseback. But now, after seeing the map, and those mountains, I’m thinking they’re going to hate those sheer walls as much as we do. When I saw them drilling with horses, it was out on the plains of Ymar.”

“Why don’t they have enough horses?” Cherry-Stripe asked. “I thought they had everything.”

“Everything you can pack into ships,” Barend reminded him. This was not a new topic, but it was the first time Cherry-Stripe was paying attention. “Can’t bring enough horses *and* enough men. If every man needs one horse and at least one remount, where do you put ’em in the ship?”

“On the pole things, of course.” Cherry-Stripe cackled at his own wit. Then sighed when no one else laughed.

Inda said, “Next year will probably be different because they’ll expect to face us on our plains. So back to the pass. They might have some chargers in front, but I’ll bet Talkar will trust his heavy marchers, the ones I watched in Ymar.” And to Cherry-Stripe, with faint emphasis, “Their shields are these big, heavy curved rectangles, much heavier than their round ones. They can either aim ’em forward or lift ’em high on command. But they can’t aim ’em in both directions at once.”

Cherry-Stripe was careless, but not stupid. He grimaced. “I did hear you say that much, when we were sweating on the road north.”

Inda turned his gaze on the rest. “That’s why I want archers up on the heights. So you, Cama, and you, Cherry-Stripe, are going to take your sharpest archers up there.”

“No horses? Just bows?” Cama asked doubtfully. “What if we can’t get up there in time? Then we’re useless.”

“That’s why you leave now. Cross that string of lakes, which puts you almost at the top of the pass. Sit tight until we come, because that’s our first line of defense. If we can push on down the pass toward Idayago without meeting the Venn, then you get back to the lake and go north—see, there’s an old mountain path more or less parallel to the pass—and meet us again at Castle Andahi. You’re our secondary force, our surprise. If we could only get at ’em from this side, we’d have a great plan: attack from the front, flanking support from the heights at either side. As it is, we’ll have one side.”

Cama’s jaw tightened. “I’ll copy the map soon’s we’re done talking. We’ll be out of here tonight. But how much of our arrow cache do we take?”

“As much as you can carry. Don’t worry about us. This morning the Randviar showed me the cache she’s had the women making ever since Evred sent the word north to get ready for the invasion. She says every Marlovan family donated wooden furniture to be cut up for arrow shafts. So we’ve got that in addition to everything we brought.”

He paused as the others made appreciative noises.

Noddy rubbed his ear. “Since you won’t be able to ride up those trails, that means no saddlebags.”

“We’ll wear our fighting clothes.” Cama shrugged. “More space in the packs for arrows.”

“They’re gonna smell us clear up the pass.” Cherry-Stripe cackled again.

“No they won’t,” Noddy said, wooden-faced as always. “There’s thousands of ’em bringing their own stink.”

“Knocking the trees flat.” Cherry-Stripe hooted.

“We’ll pick up scatter-wood and feathers on the way.” Cama squinted down at the stylized forest symbols on the map. “Make more when we camp.”

Cherry-Stripe had also been studying the map. “I see how we’re reinforcing Noddy, but all these wiggly lines mean canyons, right? With mountains between.” He jerked his thumb downward. “How can we possibly coordinate an attack like that, when we’ll be sweating up some mountain top and they’ll be in

the pass? I can't believe whirllers or signal flags are going to work."

Inda faced Evred across the table. "Sponge?"

Evred endured another inward struggle. This subject of the magic cases was not new. He'd decided against trusting them, a decision reinforced when the locket had abruptly ceased to function.

Inda waited. They all waited.

Evred knew he was going to give in, though he distrusted magic, Venn, and golden cases whose origins were obscure. The truth was, until the Marlovans had their own mage, he would never know if what appeared to be a distinct military advantage was just a magical trap. And even a Venn mage could have his own goals.

Just like Dag Erkrick was closing his grip on Prince Rajnir of the Venn, by using magic.

Hatred burned through Evred. He loathed depending on something he could not control. "If we agree on a code."

Inda's smile was his quick, unguarded, real one. He snapped his fingers. "Good idea." He remembered Fox saying just before they'd faced Marshig, *Codes are fun, but the first thing you forget in action, unless it's drilled into second nature*. "But it's got to be simple." He dug into his inner coat pocket, pulled out a golden case, and dropped it onto the table, where it gleamed with rich highlights. "You're each going to have one of these."

The others all stared in amazement as he explained the golden cases, how they transferred notes instantly. He taught them the transfer spell, which they grasped easily, then finished, "And I have enough for each of you, if I double up with Evred. Since I'm with him—that's my place as Royal Shield Arm—we only need one. You can practice as you move into position."

"What about the rest of us?" Rat said, pointing to himself and Barend.

"Let's get the parley over." Inda flipped up the back of his hand toward the window. "Find out what the Venn want. Anyway, we can't pull out of here until we have Ola-Vayir and Buck covering Lindeth and the road here—" Inda stopped, throwing back his head. One hand drummed absently on the map, then he jerked his chin down. "—what did I—yes. We have to have Buck and Ola-Vayir here, guarding our backs, because I just know the Venn are going to try to pinch us between two forces in the pass. That's what anyone'd do."

He sighed sharply, and flung out his hands. "Cherry-Stripe. Cama. I just—I want you in place."

"Watch," Cherry-Stripe vowed. "We'll be in place when you need us."

*Strut*, Hawkeye thought in disgust.

"Then it's starting now," Cama said slowly, turning his head so he could take them all in. "It's not in a season. Or a month. Or even a week."

The Sier Danas exchanged looks, as if something more was needed, some great speech, but Evred hated speeches, they all knew that, and none of them wanted to sing a ballad. Even the sword dance had been done.

"It's us," Cherry-Stripe marveled, his blue eyes wide and earnest. "The Tveis. Not, you know, everyone we expected to lead the battle against the Venn. It's *us*. How did that happen?"

"Because things have changed, and we're different," Rat Cassad said unexpectedly. Ranged alongside his cousin Barend, one could see the differences between them, though they shared the Cassad features: broad brow, narrow chin, short upper lip, but Rat's front teeth were as bucked as when he was ten. He had the Cassad fair hair and slight build. Barend was thin but tall, as well as dark-haired: Montrei-Vayir traits. "Remember the Battle of Marlovar Bridge? In the old days the fathers would have used that to test us. Instead we were bundled away, because our fathers wanted to protect the inheritance."

He jerked a thumb toward the boys training to be future Runners, who were down in the courtyard now, yelling and playing, now that the squall was past. "They're the same age we were then," he said, opening the casement again. "Things have changed again."

The boys' voices rose as they played with the scout dogs. Everyone except Inda lifted their heads, listening. Inda had turned his face to the wall. It was that weird mental absence they'd all gotten used to. He thumped his forehead gently against the stone, his sun-ruined hair jolting against the back of his stained, dust-printed coat on every thump.

Rat jerked his thumb toward the window. “They’ll be holding our weapons, right there in battle. The little girls up on the walls with Hawkeye’s great-aunt want to defend the castle. Now the young’uns are raised up to war.”

Noddy said, “Ten years of Idayagans, pirates, and Venn will do that.”

“Something our fathers found unthinkable ten years ago,” Rat said wryly. “Is it good or bad?”

Inda rolled his forehead against the stone, back and forth, back and forth.

Evred said, “Everything that happened was unthinkable. But it happened. We’re done here. Pick your men, get them ready—”

“Wait,” Inda said, a hand thrust out.

Hawkeye watched Evred-Harvaldar defer without any sign of affront. Defer to a command by this scrub mate who’d been fooling around with boats for years, learning fighting from pirates instead of properly at the academy. The academy bond seemed so strong it was unperceivable, like air.

Hawkeye remembered to breathe.

Your first loyalty was always to the king, and second to your family lands, but everyone knew that those were duty, that the strongest loyalty was the one that took no effort: to your academy mates. It was unprecedented for second brothers to ride to war like these had, yet they all appeared to accept it as an unquestioned right. And so had the king, because he was one of them. Though he’d scrupulously given Hawkeye this post, he’d relied most on Horsebutt’s brother Cama for investigation, advice, all the other functions of a Harskialdna. Until Inda came.

“They’re coming,” Inda said. Grind, grind. “I’ve been feeling it for days, ever since the winds changed. If we didn’t have the beacons, and people on the coast watching, I’d swear they were already here. I would be.”

“But we don’t have people watching the coast.” Evred frowned, turning toward his cousin. “Aren’t our patrols confined to the outer perimeter of the harbor?”

Barend said, “I tried to get a coastal watch but Lindeth fought me too hard. They scarcely tolerated the perimeter guard—except when pirates appeared, then they wanted us there to fight.” He flushed. “I guess I should have put someone out a month ago, but I was up north—”

Inda snapped a hand out, palm down, and the two Montrei-Vayirs shut up.

“Tau.” Inda’s face was still to the wall, as he ground his forehead back and forth.

Tau had been lounging unnoticed against the wall opposite Hawkeye. “Present,” Tau said after a protracted pause.

Inda said to the wall, “I should have asked if there was a coastal watch posted, instead of expecting—I thought Ola-Vayir would arrive when we did—yeah. Huh. Tau.”

“Still here.”

Inda turned around, dug his heel palms into his eyes, then slapped his palms on the table.

“Go to Lindeth Harbor. You can get there by sunset if you ride. Scout the horizon. If there’s nothing there, talk to the fisherfolk, but wear sailor duds. Don’t look like one of us. Find out who is watching the coast, and what they’ve seen.” Inda tapped his golden case. “Report back.”

Tau was gone in half a dozen quick steps.

Inda jerked his thumb in the direction of the inner castle, and the room they’d picked for the Venn parley. “Let’s get that set up. Nothing in view, nothing to see out the windows, nothing they can learn about us, is what I’m thinking ...”

## Chapter Eight

EVERYONE expected trouble. No one expected boring. The four men who appeared in a huddle around the transfer token were tall, two dressed like warriors—battle tunics, chain mail glinting at the side-slits, straight swords in baldrics—the other two in blue robes that hung down to the tops of their sandaled feet.

The Marlovans smacked hands to knives, ready to spring—then settled back to vigilance when they saw the strain magical transfer caused in the newcomers. One of the Venn staggered, another gulped in air, sweat beading his brow. The two in the blue robes plopped abruptly into the waiting chairs opposite a grand wingback chair.

The pair of warriors seemed to be an honor guard. As soon as they got control of the transfer-reaction they laid hands to their weapons.

The guards were herded behind the chairs by these muscular young Marlovans who had no intention of letting them anywhere near the red-haired young fellow in the crimson silk battle-tunic who sat in the wingback chair.

Since the guards' range of vision had thus been limited to shoulders, ponytails, and the backs of their two charges, they settled themselves into endurance mode.

The five Marlovan guards in the gray coats took up the remaining wall space around two seated Marlovans. The blue-coated messenger (also red haired) at the table leaned forward. His brows rose in question over steady hazel eyes as his inky fingers dipped a freshly sharpened quill in the inkpot and poised the pen over a paper.

The Marlovans studied the Venn truce party.

The ill-famed Dag Erkríc introduced himself and his companions in slow, sonorous words. The mage was a long-nosed, heavily-built man with light-colored eyes that never stopped moving, and smooth butter-yellow hair. He stood with his arms crossed, a self-important pose. But he was the Dag of all the Venn, kind of like a king of mages, wasn't he?

The second mage was short, round, young, and fussed nervously with papers that he never read, just held or twiddled.

Inda had chosen a room with the only two windows firmly shuttered. If the dags asked for air, the windows opened onto the back court and the outer wall. No sentry walked there. The perimeter guards, out of sight, made certain that no person, horse, dog, or even cat—and the castle was full of mousers, though they were nearly all hiding from the unaccustomed onslaught of humans—strayed into view.

Inda, Barend, and the Sier Danas had insisted that yes, someone had to be king, but not Evred. So Barend had plucked out a tall young man with bright red hair who sweltered in Evred-Harvaldar's heavy silk House battle-tunic, best linen shirt, sturdy new riding trousers, and his good pair of boots. The hapless scout was trying not to sweat into the royal garments—unsuccessfully.

"King Evred," the shorter mage said, bowing to the red-haired scout. "I am here to translate. The Dag shall speak the words of our prince in our tongue. Then I can translate his words into your tongue. If you please."

Evred caught himself before he could say, "Why not speak in Sartoran?" He resigned himself to tedium. The mages observed the king's gaze stray toward the messenger with the quill, then go diffuse. "Ah. Go on." The supposed king plucked at the stiff gold embroidery on the high neck of his tunic, then hastily lowered his hand.

Dag Erkríc unloosed a long, droning speech in his own language, as the short mage nodded his head every few words, his eyes half-closed, his fingers running up and down the edge of his papers. Every so often he covertly watched the room.

The speech went on and on. Evred had tried to study some Venn, not that they'd had many examples of the language in the royal archive, the last communication between Marlovan and Venn having mainly been confined to the Montredavan-An family. He comprehended maybe one word in twenty.

Hawkeye's attention stayed on the two armsmen, but Rat's drifted. Inda, stationed by one shuttered window as far from the dags' line of sight as he could get, at first fought against the itch in his ears. He clenched one hand around his earrings in his pocket, fighting the urge to scratch and tug at his earlobes. But when the feeling finally subsided, he found himself lulled by the buzzing of an insect outside the shutter. He studied the scuffed toes of Cherry-Stripe's old boots. Though the uppers had long ago reshaped to his feet, he still didn't think of the boots as his.

He summoned the map to mind, and mentally evaluated the dotted path just outside the northern wall of the city, trying to estimate how far Cama and Cherry-Stripe had gotten. He wondered if the beacon was

up there . . . maybe he should tell Cama to watch for it . . . *Oh, Cama'd think of that, wouldn't he?* Gradually his chin sank down onto his chest. *Evred . . . ask him . . . keeping beacons a secret, too late now, surely . . .* the thoughts turned into dreams . . .

A businesslike elbow thumped him in the ribs, and he jolted upright with a snort. Oh, it was a *snore*. Embarrassment burned through him. He discovered that the corner of his mouth was wet. Fine Harskialdna, falling asleep against a wall, snoring and just about to start drooling!

Quick glance. Barend shaking as he tried not to laugh. Rat smothering a yawn so hard his eyes watered. Inda could see the tears from across the room. Even Noddy looked more brow-furrowed and jowly than ever. Only Evred sat upright, writing away. What was he writing? Probably lists of what to do, in one of his codes . . . didn't his uncle used to do that? . . . maybe it's a good thing overall, codes . . . stop that! It was time for the tricks he'd used to stay awake on watch during long nights aboard ship, beginning with standing on his toes just enough to force his body to balance. Then he counted the flags in the stone floor.

Time wore on as the dag spoke, and the other man translated this long, complicated speech, full of compliments and diplomatic but empty phrases: . . . *mutual desire for honorable peace . . . assumed goodwill in negotiating a satisfactory compromise . . . with respect to all concerned parties . . . cognizance . . .* No words that meant anything, that you could get hold of.

Everyone shifted in relief when at last the Dag made a gesture of peace and nodded regally at the little mage, who said, "Dag Erkríc wishes me to inform you that there have been petitions sent to the north side of the strait, from all three harbor towns along the Idayagan shore."

"What kind of petitions?" the fake king asked, after encountering several surreptitious glances, nods, and thumb-twitches to remind him of his role.

"What? Kind? Of petitions?" the interpreter repeated, hands out.

Evred's feet shifted. He repressed the urge to start tapping his fingers. This was the first Venn parley, ever, and he must not be the one to break it.

"You mentioned petitions," the scout repeated, forgetting whose tabard he wore for just long enough to draw the rich silken sleeve across his brow.

His face lengthened in dismay; Rat turned his attention ferociously to the sharply squared toes of his boots. New boots, those. His father and brother had insisted he'd go to war in style.

The negotiator placed his palms together and bowed, then he addressed the mage in a long speech, to which the Dag responded in slow, rolling Venn.

Then the interpreter turned, his air apologetic. "These petitions, they request us to come to this land. To protect them. We demand nothing of the landmen, you see. Nothing. Only toll from ships, our just due for keeping pirates away from the trade ships."

Dag Erkríc uncorked another long, sonorous flow.

Evred's gaze strayed to Inda, who stood against the opposite wall, his jaw locked as he repressed a yawn.

In the distance the bells rang. It was later than Evred thought. He stirred, picking up the quill and brushing it against his ear in the signal they'd arranged.

The scout was stiff and miserable—and bored. Yawn after yawn tried to pry his jaws apart, so he kept his teeth gritted until his eyes watered into the drips already running down his face. A dry cough and a scrape of a heel from Rat (who was now studying the ceiling) snapped him back to the present. He shot a look at the king, saw the signal for End It.

How long had he been doing that?

Thoroughly miserable, he waited until the talking magic fellow drew a breath, then said in his most polite voice, "It's getting late—"

The short one said, "We just have two questions. If you will permit, that you Marlovans withdraw from the lands in the north, as we identify it: the lands just above the mountains."

"And?"

"Our honored Prince Rajnir requires, you must comprehend, the, ah, how to term, the body of the pirate Inda Elgar, who stands accused of attacking and burning civilian ships in our waters, and must be tried

and punished. To surrender a criminal, it is to be hoped, would serve as a gesture of honor, of peaceful intention.”

The pretend king sat up straight, looking startled, and then uneasy.

Laying down the quill, Evred mouthed the word, “Who?”

The scout took the hint, and repeated, “Who?”

The Dag betrayed a flicker of expression, quickly replaced by the bland goodwill they’d all seen so far.

The scout remembered his coaching and added, “And what are you offering us?”

The negotiator sounded smooth and well-rehearsed. “Prince Rajnir offers a peaceful negotiation satisfactory to all parties if you demonstrate your goodwill with the two gestures we just mentioned.”

And, seeing the scout stir, “Shall we retire to permit you to consider? And meet again? Say, tomorrow, when the bells ring at midday? Or do you need more time?”

The scout waved a hand. “Tomorrow is agreed.”

The two mages placed their hands together in the way Evred and Inda had seen Signi do, only with far less grace. In fact, it seemed that the short one, who had begun nervous and trembling, was now smiling with a faint smugness. But as soon as the two men-at-arms closed in behind them, they all vanished, the air briefly stirring.

Rat Cassad nearly cracked his jaws on a yawn. “So that’s a diplomatic parley! If it was a meeting between battle grounds I’d call it stalling.”

The scout stood up and, using great care, pulled the heavy Montrei-Vayir House tabard up over his head.

“Tau said diplomats can spin talks out forever when they have to,” Inda said doubtfully as he rubbed his ears vigorously, then began to affix the earrings again. “But you’d think they’d want peace right away.”

“Unless—” Evred frowned as he extended his arm for the scout to lay the tabard over it. So much of what he’d seen struck him as odd, though he couldn’t define why.

The scout thought the frown was for him. “I tried not to, but I sweated these up something fierce,” he said in a low, apologetic voice, indicating the damp, wrinkled linen shirt.

Distracted, Evred dealt with the easiest thing first. “It’s hot enough to boil broth in here.” He indicated the sodden shirt. “Just give the clothes over to Kened after you change. Thank you. You did well.”

The others echoed the praise as the blushing scout hustled out to go bore his mates, in strictest confidence, about his day as king.

“Unless they’re stalling for time,” Rat finished Evred’s comment, and stretched his hands over his head.

His back cracked as he kicked the door shut behind the scout.

“Thought the mage would know more of our language,” Noddy said from his place in the corner. “Heh. Why not Sartoran? Isn’t that supposed to be the court language for everyone who has courts?”

“If he’s the right mage.” Rat rubbed at his neck.

Evred turned. “Why do you say that?”

Rat waved a lazy hand. “Said the magic words mighty slow and stiff. Reminded me of a pigtail with the lances, instead of a dragoon.”

Evred so hated the idea of magical powers that could, at a mysterious word or two, spy, transform, even kill, he had not considered that aspect. *I want magic to be difficult to perform.*

Inda smacked his hand against the table. “We better find out. I’m going to ask Signi.”

“Vedrid?” Evred opened the door. “Please request the dag to join us here.”

Signi’s color was high, as though she’d been out in the summer sun when Vedrid brought her into the hot, stuffy room. Her cast-off child’s smock and worn riding trousers were neat and fresh: she’d clearly had access to some kind of magic while in that archive. Well, they all knew the tower was full of some sort of Morvende magic.

Signi’s earnest gaze sought Inda’s first, then moved swiftly to the king’s. Seeing no threat there, she glanced at the tabard hanging over his arm. Her sandy brows lifted, then met, puckering her brow.

“What is it?” Inda asked.

She stretched out a forefinger, but did not quite touch the crimson cloth so beautifully woven. “The tablet-pattern,” she whispered. “In the weave. It is the same as our formal house robes.”

Inda's indifference was mirrored in all the others' faces. "Signi, if anything I ask trespasses on the truce we've had between us, you have only to say."

Evred's muscles tightened against the now familiar resentment. Inda's words were entirely just.

"You have a question for me, then?" Signi asked, and made that peace sign—without the smugness of that young mage.

"You know Dag Erkrick, right?"

"I do."

"Is he big and tall, maybe forty? Hair as yellow as Rat's there? Carrot nose?"

"No." She pressed her hands together tightly, then dropped them to her sides. "He is very tall. Very lean. His hair is thin, but silver. He is old."

Evred turned to Rat. "You were right. It's a ruse." His mouth thinned. "Do we look like fools?"

Signi made the peace gesture again. "You are all very young. And you know nothing of magic."

Evred said, "So the dag knows who we are."

She opened her hands. "I believe so."

"That means he's been here spying on us."

Her color faded. "Yes. So I believe. I felt his traces on our arrival."

Evred's gaze was unwavering. "Is he spying on us right now?"

"No." She gave him a rueful smile. "Because I just finished completing wards."

"To aid us?"

"That was not my intent."

To the surprise of some there, Evred's expression eased. "Because he has broken his vows not to interfere in military matters?"

"Yes."

Evred turned away at last, his slow outward breath a hiss between his teeth. Then, "Hawkeye. Give that magic token to someone. Tell him to chuck it down the nearest steam vent." He pointed out the window, toward the great square between the castle and the city, underneath which lay the massive cavern that served as the baths for everyone in Ala Larkadhe.

Hawkeye, who as the castle commander had taken charge of the token, said, "I'll do it." Like his cousin, he hated magic and would take great pleasure in seeing to this order himself.

There was a quiet double knock at the door. When Kened appeared, Evred handed off the tunic.

"So what now?" Rat asked, shutting the door again.

Inda said, "If they are stalling for time, there is a reason." He thumped his fist on the table. "It's those winds. I keep feeling we're late. I don't know if it's—"

His thoughts splintered, like they so often did, two and three separate ideas skittering away. The others looked at him. Waiting.

He smacked his hands down, the sting in his palms oddly steadying. For two heartbeats. "Hawkeye. Noddy. Take your dragoons, start up the pass as soon as you can. Yes! We've got Cherry-Stripe and Cama heading for the cliffs above the top, that's good. You go too, and between the four of you, hold it until the rest of us can get there."

Hawkeye twitched his brows up as Noddy held up three fingers. "We've got six wings. Against *how* many?"

"Doesn't matter," Inda said impatiently. "I need fast, not numbers, and six wings will move uphill faster than sixty wings. If we had 'em. You get there first is all I ask. Hold it. The moment we know we've got Buck and Ola-Vayir to guard our backs, the rest of us will be right on your heels."

Everyone began talking at once.

Signi touched Inda's hand. Distracted by too much going on at once, he cast her a quick, impatient glance—and her expression caught his attention entirely.

"I must speak to you," she murmured.

Without a thought Inda opened the door, followed her out, and shut it, leaving the others all talking. Except for Evred, who watched after them in tight-lipped silence.

The pair of would-be dags arrived at the Destination aboard the *Cormorant*. They looked hot, tired, weary as they surrendered their transfer tokens into Erkrick's out-held hand, and then shed the heavy blue robes gratefully into the arms of orderlies. Durasnir had ordered steamed milk for them, but a glance at those shiny crimson faces and he beckoned for the stone jug. They drank down the cold water in greedy gasps as an orderly ran to apprise the prince.

While they'd waited for the parley to end, Dag Erkrick had twice vanished from the ship, each time returning tense and curt. Whether from anger or worry, Durasnir could not tell, and Erkrick did not give him a report. Instead, he restlessly studied the dispatches as they arrived and were brought in by the ensigns on duty.

The prince's quick step approached down the companionway. He flung the door open into the command cabin. "How went the ruse?"

The two scouts made their royal obeisance.

"We kept them there through the day. There were two redheads," the shorter one reported. "Judging from the motions of the others, the one posing as scribe was the king, and the one dressed as king a lackey."

Rajnir spread his hands. "You were right," he said to Erkrick, whose smile held no vestige of humor. "He was stupid enough to fall for the ruse!" Back to the scouts, "Why didn't you kill him?"

Despite the balmy summer air, Durasnir sustained an inward chill as cold as the water in the stone jugs that were suspended on chains to drag deep in the low ocean currents.

Erkrick tutted. "The parley was made under a truce flag, my prince. They believed Coast Scout Greba to be me, remember. Consider how the Marlovans would react to their king being killed under truce by Prince Rajnir's chief dag." And when Rajnir scowled, Erkrick said in a low, soothing voice, "Then consider this, my prince. How it would be if they came here under truce and killed *you*? Do you think Fleet Commander Durasnir here would ever stop until he had exacted retribution? Are we not enjoined to pacify their kingdom once we take it?"

Rajnir's lips parted, his light eyes widened. "Oh." He whirled, walked to the open scuttle, and breathed deeply of the warm salt air. "Oh. I didn't think! So much to think about—I can't remember—"

"So much depends upon our plans," Erkrick interjected smoothly, in the voice of a beloved tutor. "Scouts. Was Indevan Algara-Vayir among those at the parley?"

The two turned to one another for a moment, and read uncertainty in each other's countenance. "They denied him, of course," Greba said. "But that room was so dark. They had the windows blocked. And everyone but the scribe and the false king wore those gray coats."

The taller scout spoke up. "We were told that the pirate is short, scar-faced, and wears golden hoops with rubies on them. I couldn't see the face on the shortest one, but I heard him snoring on his feet. No earrings visible. It was too dark to see if his ears were pierced."

Rajnir waved his hands. "No matter, no matter. The snorer had to be a lackey, no commander would fall asleep in a parley. This is good, isn't it?" His anxious blue eyes turned to Durasnir. "Is it not?"

"It seems we have gained a day for Hilda Commander Talkar," Durasnir replied.

"Good! I like good news. So far we haven't had any. Are they *still* fighting those women in the castle?"

Rajnir smacked the door open. "When he's back, send Henga directly to me before you put him in the prison ship." He slammed the cabin door behind him.

Erkrick stared after the prince, exasperated. But then no one knew, must not find out, that Ala Larkadhe had in a single night been warded. No dag could transfer in, and the tracers were deflected by what appeared to be Morvende magic.

It was possible that he had inadvertently tripped an ancient protection ward. He hoped so. But the burden of not being able to see the enemy, of not knowing whose magic forced him out of the shaping battle, was thinning his hold on his temper. He could not lose his temper; a weary, sour glint of humor accompanied the thought, *I cannot lose my temper because I am not a prince.*

Unworthy, unworthy.



Erkrick was irritated afresh at the narrow-eyed suspicion in Durasnir's face. It must be because Durasnir's favored Drenga captain, Byoren Henga, had been assigned to the invasion, which placed him under the Hilda chain of command, outside of the reach of the Oneli. "I will investigate the attack on the castle," he said. "Since I must return to the camp to supervise the dags."

Durasnir signed acknowledgment.

Erkrick turned to the coast scouts. "You are restored to your regular duties until tomorrow. With the Fleet Commander's permission, we will meet before you are to transfer to Ala Larkadhe, and we will discuss the details of tomorrow's plan."

The scouts made their obeisances. Dag Erkrick performed a respectful salute to Durasnir, who returned it with the particular care of a deeply angry man—a detail that escaped the customarily perceptive Erkrick, who picked up his own papers, and walked out.

Durasnir turned to his scouts. The rank Coast Scout had changed in meaning over the centuries. Once the title had been used by charters, but charting had developed into its own branch of service. Coast Scout was now a neutral rank meaning spy. Coast Scouts wore whatever costume would permit them to pass unnoticed, and they scouted people as well as places.

Durasnir said, "You will have liberty for the remainder of the day. In addition to whatever orders Dag Erkrick sees fit to give you tomorrow, I would like you to observe closely. I want to know if Indevan Algara-Vayir is there," Durasnir said.

## Chapter Nine

INDA shut the door and followed Signi into the office. Vedrid sat on a chair against the inner wall, sewing silver piping to the edge of rich crimson fabric. Inda paused, distracted. "Isn't that the one I saw Tau working on?"

Vedrid's needle flashed. "Since he is under orders, I'm finishing it."

Awkwardly, Inda asked, "Is that for me?"

Vedrid smiled. "As Harskialdna, you'll wear Montrei-Vayir colors."

Inda waved impatiently. "I know that. I guess I thought I'd be making it myself."

"When?" Vedrid laughed soundlessly.

Inda gave a rueful snort. "Don't know. Don't seem to have a masthead watch anymore." He followed Signi from the office out onto the landing. She shut the office door with both hands, leaned over the stone balcony, touching the bunch of grapes carved into the edge before the rail started down the spiral stairway. No one below: the Runners had partitioned this area off from the crowded castle, reserving it for the commanders.

She turned around. "I am going to leave, Inda. But there are things I must tell you first."

Inda's eyes widened with dismay. His quick sorrow and hurt, so true, so unhidden, made her eyes sting. She leaned into him, bringing the scent of the fresh mountain herbs among which she'd been recently walking. He was damp from being overheated; his own scent was dear to her.

"What have I done?" he mumbled into her hair. And drew back, his voice a low, unhappy rumble deep in his chest. "Or is it the war? Sure it is. I'm stupid."

"I will return to you when it is over. So lies my duty. Yours lies elsewhere," she reminded him, and his unhappiness intensified. "Now, listen. I have been exploring, not just the archive, but it opens through an atan, from which I have been able to trace and dismantle those wards Erkrick made that go directly against our oaths."

"Wards mean magic warfare?" Inda asked.

"In part. Erkrick also interfered with your king's courting lockets. His wards were clumsy, necessarily because performed from a distance. That is why they ceased to transfer."

Inda wiped his hand across his brow, then fingered his scar. "Should I tell Evred?"

"You must do what you believe best about that." She made one of her hand gestures, slow and graceful,

though her fingers trembled.

Inda flicked his thumb up, and then the sense of what she had previously said penetrated. He knew she loved to share knowledge. “Atan?”

“The archive in the white tower is a Morvende construct, as I believe you know.”

Inda turned his palm up.

“Well, what few know, unless they have studied old magic texts, is that long, long ago, the Morvende made what they called ‘atans’—you know this word in Sartoran?”

“Sun,” Inda said, wondering. “Atan means sun.”

“Atan was just a part of the whole term, but we’ve lost the rest. We call them platforms or terraces or any number of other terms. The important thing is, these were places of meditation and observation, made high on mountaintops, where the Morvende could watch the progress of sun and stars unhindered. You touch the sun symbol in the archive, carved there beside the door. Say the word *atan*. That door will open a magic gate to the atan platform in the mountains above the source of the Andahi River.”

Inda was stunned. “The river—but that goes right by the top of the pass!”

“The source of the river is far higher than the pass, and the atan is even above that. You would have to go down the young river to get to the ancient trail leading down into the highpoint of the pass. You will find an old plinth marking the trail head.” She paused, observing the change in his expression.

“Can we—could someone come back the same way?”

“Ordinarily, yes. One steps on the sun carvings on the platform. One pronounces the word *atan* and steps through the archway. I tell you this for the sake of learning, not because I believe you will be able to use it.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“But I believe your king will,” Signi said gently. “Forgive me if I mistake, but if you think to use this for military purposes . . . Inda, this is important. The Morvende have nothing to do with war. There is a risk, if you use this door. No, no, nothing will happen to you. As I said, they have nothing to do with war. The risk is that, if you use it, you will never be able to enter this archive again.”

“But this entire war is the fault of the V—it’s not us attacking anybody! We’re defending—”

She shook her head. “I have no communication with the Morvende, and so cannot for certain speak for them. They might be aware of the circumstances or they might just not be paying attention to the archive now. How they view time is very different from how we do, who are so bound to the sun’s cycle. But when that archive door is opened, they know it. And if you move armed men through—for whatever reason—they will know.” She lifted her hand toward the white tower, just visible through the open window on the landing. “It will be closed to you, probably forever.”

Inda felt a brief spurt of regret, but far greater was his eagerness to tell Evred: the impossible had happened, and now they had a means to come down on the Venn from both sides.

Signi cupped his dear, scarred face with her hands, a gesture of such tenderness that his galloping thoughts stumbled to a halt.

He gazed into her green-brown eyes, distracted by his own tiny reflection twinned in the great black circles of her pupils; time stopped, or seemed to for a measure of ten breaths, as he groped for understanding of her emotions.

To Inda, Signi was like the great birds drifting so effortlessly overhead, who with one snap of their wings lift to speed and power far beyond his reach. Magic was just that kind of power. Her emotions were as subtle as those flicks and shivers of wide wings, but so far she had drifted alongside him as he galloped toward this war: her ardor matched his ardor, compassion enfolded his grief when he first arrived in his homeland and discovered who had lived and who had died. His laughter sparked her smile. There were other times he sensed emotional shifts in her, but could not define them, and as he looked into her eyes and felt the tremble in her fingers, he thought, *I need Tdor to tell me what I’m seeing*.

That was it, he was ten years behind, because he hadn’t had Tdor to comb out the tangles of his thoughts, make them smooth again. Signi made sense of history, the world, and magic for him, but even when she did he always felt that divide between Marlovan and Venn, and he knew she did too, because of the way she would frame questions. Tau could make sense of other people, but Tdor had always

made sense of *him*.

"Fare well, Inda," Signi said, and kissed him.

And was gone before he could answer.

When the weird, howling horns began blowing in terrifying echoes up the pass from Castle Andahi, most of the three- and four-year-olds still hiding in the robbers' cave jerked awake. Most of them puckered up and began to whimper.

"Shut it!" Han hissed. The cave mouth, now half blocked by stone, glowed faint blue. Not quite dawn. Why was it horrible things always started before sunup?

Small bodies pressed up against Lnard. She twitched, wanting so badly to shove them all away. She kept the fret inside. Everyone would just call her a pug if she admitted the truth. The smalls climbing on her and demanding kissies and huggies were gratifying when Han and Gdir noticed, because everybody could see that Lnard was the favorite. But when the other two ten-year-olds were doing something else, Lnard wanted to smack the brats away. Those three-year-olds were *always* whining, and she was sick of snotty noses and pee in drawers that *she* had to dunk and spread to dry.

You'd think Queen Han would help, since the Jarlan called her such a great leader, but oh, no. Not *her*. She was too *important* for drawer dunking.

"Some kind of new noise," Han whispered, hopping back inside the cave.

The children huddled together, everyone uncertain whether fun or bad things were coming next.

"I'll be lookout," Gdir stated.

"No. We'll do it just like yesterday." Han smacked the dust off her clothes with impatient whacks.

Lnard had no desire whatsoever to go out there and see whatever horrors made those noises. All that screaming, and the crashes. Now those terrible moaning howls, like monsters out of an old story. How could Han stand it? She was probably pretending to be brave. *Everyone is pretending*, Lnard thought. *It's the only way people admire you, if you act like a hero.*

So she made herself say, "I'll stand watch. You two did it yesterday."

Gdir wrinkled her nose like someone farted, making Lnard want to yank her hair out by the roots.

Han sighed. "I *said*, we'll do it like yesterday."

"You think I'm a coward." Lnard knew she really was a coward, but she was angry enough to bite and kick and scratch if Han *said* it.

"No." Han whacked dust off her trousers.

"Why don't you change into your other outfit. Those clothes are disgusting," Gdir said.

Han ignored her. "Lnard. Your job is the smalls. Keep them quiet. That means keep them happy. Hal and I can watch the pass, it's just boring sitting there. Gdir and Dvar on next swap."

"Haldred's only nine." Lnard put her hands on her hips. It was working, everyone thought she wanted to be out there.

"So's Dvar." Han turned a dirt-mottled hand over. "So? None of us will be alone, and I know Hal and Dvar can be quiet as mice, because they are on the games. I never knew anyone as still and quiet. Keth, too," she added with extra meaning: even the Jarl's son had to follow orders. "If he were here."

Hal had been glaring at Lnard, but now he flushed with pride. Dvar was too tired to care; she wasn't going to whine, but she was sure she'd heard her mother screaming during the night.

"But what about *us*? *We're* good at games!"

Han turned on the seven- and eight-year-old boys and girls who made up the most of the children. She didn't care which of them had spoken. "Lnard never put anyone under nine on tower watch, so you don't even think it."

Some of the eights muttered. The sevens stayed quiet, and Tlennen, Gdir's six-year-old brother, slid his thumb toward his mouth. It tasted like grit, but everything inside his skin felt better when he sucked it. He stepped behind Gdir, so she wouldn't see. He hated it when she slapped his hand down and said that warriors didn't suck their thumbs. Maybe they didn't. But nobody had let him be a warrior yet.

Satisfied that everyone thought she was brave and eager to be out in the danger, Lnard turned away from Han, and there were all those waiting eyes. Rosebud's lips were starting to pucker, and Lnard said in a hurry, "Who's really big, and wants to help with breakfast?"

"No fire," Han called.

Lnard heaved a loud, shuddering sigh. "D'you think I'm *stupid*?" She said it all the more fiercely because she'd just been looking for the natural shelf where they'd put the Fire Stick high out of reach of the smalls.

But of course they couldn't have a fire. Even in daylight, they'd discovered, you could see flickers on the roof of the cave from below. They'd wasted most of yesterday trying to build a wall to block the cave from view but the cave entrance was too big and they couldn't shift big stones. And Gdir had reminded them that a stone wall visible from below would look like someone was inside, unless it was mossy and old looking.

As Lnard set about unwrapping and dividing up one loaf and one wedge of cheese, Gdir prowled around the cave entrance to examine the wall they'd made. It was only knee height, and out of view from below. She'd checked before sunset the day before, though it had meant climbing down all the way to the pass. The horrible noises had somehow been louder there, she did not know why. She'd only taken a fast look then scrambled right back up the cliff.

She paced to where they kept their food stash, ignoring Han. Even the sound of her breathing was irritating. Han was just the daughter of a guardswoman. Why was she made leader?

Gdir accepted her share of the bread and cheese, looking down to make sure Tlennen had his. When she saw his clean thumb on an otherwise dirty hand, she arced her hand up to slap him, then stopped. He might drop his food, and they couldn't spare extra. She wouldn't let him pick it up dirty.

"As soon as you eat, wash up," she muttered, glowering. "And if I see that thumb in your mouth again, I'm going to thrash you. *No* Tlen sucks their thumb."

Tlennen's resentment burned like a ball of hate in his middle. He knew she was wrong. She always said they were Tlens of the primary family, not just Rider-cousins, and they were better than anybody, but Tlennen remembered Keth used to suck his thumb. He'd decided he would stop thumb sucking when he was eight. Sometimes you're just not ready for things, like riding a horse over fences. Thumbs were like riding in that way.

Gdir glared at Han, who sat with Hal just inside their wall, where they'd found the best vantage down to the pass, at least as far as the last great curve, just where the tunnel opened. Out of sight was the long downward slope of the pass, gradually widening—an ancient landslide, Flash had told them. Really ancient. Even more ancient than the tunnel, which had been where the river went after the slide, until that, too, changed, going deeper underground somehow. She wasn't sure why she found that comforting, but she did.

Thinking about that was better than thinking about Han's bad leading, and how unfair it was of the Jarlan to pick her. Gdir was betrothed to Keth! She was future Randviar! She was primary-family Tlen! Of course, you couldn't keep rank if you were terrible at training, but Gdir could shoot as well as Han, could beat her with right-hand knife, and almost with left. They ran and climbed about the same. So why wasn't Gdir leader?

Gdir looked around irritably. The cave was filthy again, and they all looked like little pigs rooting for vegetable parings. She turned on a wrestling pile of eights—all boys, of course. "Why aren't you clean so we can start warm-ups?" she asked, loud enough for "leader" Han to remember her duty.

Scowls and mutters were the only answer, but at least the boys broke apart and headed for the stream. Everyone else began doing their chores, even the fives taking each end of a bedroll and shaking it the way she'd showed them, though far too listlessly to actually dislodge dirt.

She nipped one end and gave the bedroll a snap. A cloud of dust rolled off. The child at the other end pouted at having her arms wrung; the one she'd replaced laughed at the cloud.

"Do it that way," she said, and satisfied that she had just cause, she marched across the cave to Han.

"Why won't you do your duty?"

"Go away, Gdir."

“You’re supposed to be leader. I seem to be doing the real work, like cleaning up and seeing that the brats don’t just fight all day, while you just squat there pretending to be a warrior. Why aren’t *you* giving those orders?”

Han snorted. “Because you’re doing it. That means I don’t have to argue about those orders like I do all the others.”

“Who’s arguing with orders?”

“You’re doing it right now. I said go away, and you started to argue.”

“Shut it, Gdir,” Hal whispered, his pale eyes sidelit in the strengthening light. “I think something’s happening.”

All three ducked down and peered across the pass and down at the far end, where a massive crevasse opened into the tunnel. They saw nothing.

“I am not arguing,” Gdir stated, turning back to Han. “I am quite reasonably pointing out the duty that you should be doing.”

“You wouldn’t point out the Jarlan’s duty.”

“That’s because she always does everything right.”

“This.” Han flung her hands out. “Is an argument.”

Gdir wanted to say Lnard argued, but she didn’t want Lnard hearing her name and rushing over to pretend to be hurt so everyone would pet her.

Han looked in the same direction, and snorted again. “You know she’s the worst pug in the world. But at least she’s doing her job.”

Gdir couldn’t express the depth of her loathing. Lnard was the worst pug of all the castle children, always wanting to be petted and cooed over for just doing her duty. Duty was to be done because everyone trusted you to do it. They shouldn’t have to praise you for it.

Han grinned. “Giving her orders is like trying to swim in mud.”

“Then you should fight her,” Gdir stated, though she knew Han wasn’t a coward. In fact she so much wasn’t a coward she didn’t see the hint about cowardice.

Han made a face. “Waste of time, and it hurts. Hurts twice.”

Gdir had to concede that, though not out loud. In a scrap, the idea was to get your enemy pinned, so they gave in and behaved. Most stuck with it, but some needed to be scrapped over and over. Lnard was one of those.

Lnard also didn’t scrap fairly—she bit and pulled hair and scratched, getting you in tender places that didn’t show. And if you got her down, she always fake cried and sometimes even snitched. Then you got the thrashing for scrapping—and you still had the bite marks and throbbing scalp. But at least everyone knew you weren’t a snitch. Though why that was any good when she got away with it, nobody could say.

“Seems better if she thinks she thought of it.” Han wound her hand in a circle, including Lnard and the smalls. “If I’d told her to, you think she’d be crawling around with them right now, being foals? No, because she’d still be arguing. Just like you.”

“Maybe. If the sevens and eights were watching,” Gdir said, though she felt unmoored, as if the discussion had drifted like a little boat in a pool. Gdir frowned, trying to find her way back to the point. Start from Lnard, who just always had to be the center of attention. *Her father’s the same way*, Gdir’s mother had said once, when Gdir complained about her. *Why he’s never kept a mate longer than two years, in spite of him being as good a baker as any at the royal palace.*

Gdir knew what *that* meant. When she was exactly Tlennen’s age, and they’d just arrived to live at Castle Andahi, she’d immediately gone exploring. She’d been curled up in what would become her favorite spot, a tiny jutting ledge where one of the towers joined the wall, where somebody small who didn’t look down could sit and look at the mountains folding away toward the sea. She’d heard voices coming—the Jarlan and Nland.

Nland had said, “. . . and Star Indran wants to go back to Tlen-Sindan-An on the next caravan. She’s parting with Cousin Dodger.” And then—her exact words—“Star says she might not be a ranker’s daughter, but she can take a hint when she’s become just another duty to dodge.”

The Jarlan had laughed, and her words started to fade away as the two passed along the sentry walk. "Second woman this season, and we're already short-handed. But who can blame them for not wanting to come up here? We'll have to reorganize the watch slates again, and . . ."

Duty, that was the point. You couldn't get promoted if you didn't do your duty, and apparently you couldn't even have a mate if you didn't do your duty. Duty was the purpose of life! Duty and everything clean and in order, it was so *important*, and Han wasn't *seeing* it.

Gdir sucked in her breath to tell Han exactly how stupid she was, when Hal knocked Han with his elbow. "Told ya."

As the three watched, tall men with horned helms emerged from the tunnel, their silvery armor glinting in the sunlight just topping the mountains behind the children's cave.

"Those are Venn," Hal whispered.

"Shut it," Gdir and Han both said.

The first ones were on horseback. As the children watched, the one with white wings instead of horns on his helm made a motion with a gloved hand toward another who carried a long oddly shaped brass tube. Like a trumpet, but not straight. This man put his lips to it, and his face turned crimson as he blew out a long, weird note, like the lowing of cattle when thunder is near, followed by a couple of loud owl-hoots and then a low bra-a-a-p.

"Sounds like a mountain farting," Hal whispered, snickering.

Han didn't hear. She held her arms tight against her, rocking back and forth, her mouth pulled awry, lower lip trembling.

Gdir stared at her, about to accuse her of cowardice when the enemy couldn't even see them, way up here. But then she realized what it meant, why Han looked like someone had slapped her.

If the Venn were here, it meant the castle had fallen into enemy hands.

Inda wished even more strongly for Tdor—or Tau—when he finally got Evred alone just after dawn. Inda had risen early, bolting down breakfast over a last talk with Hawkeye and Noddy in the officers' mess they shared with the other Sier Danas. When the two left to mount up, Inda discovered Evred up in the map room, reading the day's logistical reports gathered by the captain of the watch.

They were alone, everyone else either gone or busy, so Inda told Evred Signi's good news. He'd expected to see his own elation mirrored back, but instead Evred had reacted like someone struck blind and deaf. Half a riding of men old enough to know better were coming back from liberty drunk. They wove their way, singing loudly, directly under the open window, but Evred did not move.

Inda ducked out and snapped his fingers at Kened, who was on Runner duty. After making motions of grabbing the idiots by the hair and dunking them head first into the horse troughs (to prevent a far worse punishment; Evred was strict about drunkenness and sloth), he jerked a thumb toward the courtyard.

Kened comprehended at once, and leaped down the stairs five at a time.

When Inda got back into the map room, Evred still stood motionless, one hand on the map, the other holding the papers. Through the open window the drunks' caroling abruptly ended. That was followed by some thuds, a muffled "Ow!" and the rickety-clack of heels on the stones: the sounds of a hasty withdrawal as Kened and the door guards muscled the delinquents away.

Evred didn't hear that either.

He faced, alone, a terrible struggle. Should he not be accustomed to bitter choices by now? At first, his anger had burned ineffectively round the image of Signi, but he knew she was only the messenger. The Morvende had made the real choice explicitly clear on his very first visit. They had permitted him access to the archive because he'd come to make peace. He was here to defend his kingdom now. Perhaps they knew, perhaps they did not; they lived deep in the mountains somewhere in the great range.

One thing was for certain, though: if he opened the archive to its platform and moved warriors through, the Morvende would know right away, and they would see it as an act of war.

But Inda said they needed to do it.

Inda watched Evred's blind gaze, his tense profile. What to do now?

Unexpected relief arrived with the guard Runner sent to let them know that Hawkeye and Noddy were ready to ride out.

Evred blinked. He recovered the room, Inda waiting, the Runner in the doorway. This was the deceptive relief of postponement, not a release from choice.

But he would accept what little he was given. "We must see them off."

The entire city agreed.

The night before, once Hawkeye had flung the damn magic token down the deepest steam vent at the back of the baths, he had been afire to depart despite darkness and rain, so determined was he to reach the top of the pass before Cama. But Noddy had said with his usual stolidity, "Inda's gonna send the main body after us at the gallop, like as not. Let's be the ones to remember remounts. Grain for the animals. Supplies. They won't."

Hawkeye flicked an interrogative look his way, and Noddy said, "Inda's learned about ten years worth of academy gaming in a couple of months, but he still thinks horses are ships."

Noddy was right. Hawkeye bit back his impatience and they went to the stable to issue the orders to have everything ready for dawn. The reward was an evening of relative quiet, which Hawkeye spent with Fala, his beloved. His wife, Dannor, had only stayed a couple of months in Ala Larkadhe. She'd made enemies so rapidly Hawkeye had had to constantly stop his work to negotiate, remonstrate, reestablish peace. Then came Evred's wish that their generation begin the next generation, and Dannor had been enraged that the king would interfere in their private lives. She had no intention of being burdened with supervising squalling brats ten years before she should reasonably be expected to do so.

Hawkeye had pointed out that if she were at Yvana-Vayir, she could hardly be expected to have his heir. She'd thought that over. Hawkeye's parents were dead, his brothers in their last year of the academy, those bratty girls they were going to marry in their first year of the queen's training. Dull as Yvana-Vayir was, at least there would be no one to get tiresome about what they considered to be her duty.

So Dannor moved out of Hawkeye's rooms to go back to Yvana-Vayir, and Fala moved in. Fala was a potter. She'd opened a local business so that she could be close to Hawkeye. She made familiar dishes for the Marlovans; the Idayagans and Olarans preferred the tulip goblets and flat plates of the east. Fala had also volunteered to serve with the new Randviar's women on castle defense duty. So she was there this morning, standing next to the Randviar on the sentry walk adjacent to the white tower as thunder rumbled warningly in the northwest.

Below, Hawkeye and Noddy rode at the head of their six wings plus attendant Runners and stable hands, leading an impressive train of riderless horses and tarped wagons carrying supplies for a much larger force: horse armoring, bags of grain, and freshly scythed summer hay. They also carried a single wagon full of rusty old helms from the castle, leftovers bought as surplus by the Idayagan king the generation before. Many riders had none; most hated helms, especially these full-head ones with their narrow vi sored view, but Evred had insisted they take them. And wear them.

To the echoing sound of drums, and voices chanting the oldest and most stirring of Marlovan ballads, Hawkeye's and Noddy's men passed through the back gates of the castle into the city streets below. Inda, Evred, the Randviar, and the male and female sentries watched them wind through the old streets to the northern gates of Ala Larkadhe, under the shadow of the ancient tower. The northern gates stood open and beyond them lay the first great curve of the pass.

After a generation of Marlovan rule, the city was a mixture of adaptable Idayagans, Olarans, and Marlovans who had moved in as families of warriors and to carry on subsidiary business. Those who could not abide the conquerors had moved away or been forced out.

The atmosphere was tense and moody, with pockets of cheering, under the first heavy wet splatters of another storm. To civilian eyes, these gray-coated men with their shields and helms and jingling chain mail seemed a great army.

The women on the walls watched soberly. Their men were mostly in the castle guard, impatient to be riding after the dragoons. Fala stood next to the Randviar, motionless despite the rain streaming down her face, through her hair, dripping on her clothes. Her fingers gripped her bow tightly.

When the last of the wagons rumbled out of sight, Tdiran-Randviar and Fala turned away, the older woman scowling deeply.

The Randviar, Tdiran Vranid, was Hawkeye's great-aunt, who had come to run the defense of the castle when Dannor left the spring before. She glanced back just once as the last of the strings of remounts walked through the northern gates and vanished around that first curve.

She turned away and dealt Fala a well-meaning buffet. Fala lifted her head. She tried to smile, failed, and walked away silently to the women's guardhouse to keep herself busy making arrows until her next duty rotation.

Inda and Evred ducked under the awning outside the upper level sentry guard station; while splats of rain felt pleasant on the face, the prospect of having to wear a soggy coat through the rest of the day wasn't.

"Better get used to it," Tdiran-Randviar said to Evred and Inda, cackling as rain hissed in gray arrows against the stone walk and towers, the overhangs pouring sheets of water. "The locals are all saying this here is a little breeze. To let us know the winds are bringing a big one."

Blue flickered above the mountain peaks, mostly obscured by clouds. Inda wondered how far up Cherry-Stripe and Cama had gotten, hoped they wouldn't be struck by lightning. Then he swung around to face the Randviar.

"So. Now that it's just us," she began.

Inda had learned by now that when people said the obvious, they usually had something else on their minds. Something that might be problematical. So he said to the Randviar, "What kind of defense—" "Inda!"

The shout echoed up the tower stairwell.

"Tau?" Inda said doubtfully.

"Inside," Evred said.

They entered the round room, bare stone except for the battered table of the guard captain on watch, the duty roster, and an ensorcelled jug of water.

Tau leaped up the stairs and dashed through the door. "There you are," he croaked, and bent over, hands on knees, to catch his breath.

He was almost unrecognizable in his sodden civilian garb, his hair hanging loose over his long tunic, wheat-colored even when wet; his linen deck trousers flapped like loose sails at his ankles. There were blood splatches down his right side, but they did not appear to be his.

"Tau?" Inda prompted.

"Inda . . . the Venn," Tau wheezed.

"They're coming?" Evred's voice was sharp.

Rain dribbled down Tau's forehead and dripped off his nose to the floor. "No." He sucked in air. "They are *here*."

## Chapter Ten

THE air above the Destination on the captain's deck flickered darkly. A moment later Erkrick appeared, groped with one hand, sat down on the waiting chair so that the residue of transfer sickness could pass. Durasnir signed to his Battle Group Captain to retreat; the crew of the *Cormorant* flowed around them, attentive to their duties. Captain Gairad, long accustomed to serving under the fleet commander, saw to that.

Erkrick turned up his hand. "The Marlovans in Ala Larkadhe figured out the ruse." He did not add—they wouldn't understand anyway—that the transfer token that they'd sent to the Marlovans had had a secret ward on it that would permit Erkrick to send an assassination team of Erama Krona if his ruse failed. But



that ward had been blocked and he could not trace the token, despite a tracer spell he'd put on it himself.

So he shifted to the good news. "Hilda Commander Talkar's advance force has taken Castle Andahi, and found access to the tunnel. The army is now making its way through the tunnel to march up the pass." Durasnir said to the waiting scouts, "You are dismissed," and they left.

Rajnir paid them no attention. He smiled over the rail toward the land, his fair hair blowing in the wind. The gold in the tree embroidered across his breast glinted with each breath. "We are on the march at last!" he repeated, but then his brow furrowed. "Why were you gone so long, Dag Erkríc? Was it necessary for you to come to the aid of the army again?"

"No, no. The army has done well," Dag Erkríc said, motioning to an orderly for something to drink. "But I had to make several transfers, including investigating the failure of the ruse."

"Well, now that all is as it should be, take me there," Rajnir commanded. "So that I may at last see them on the march. That is what we have been awaiting, is it not?" He brushed his hand down his silver and gold armor, the fine battle-tunic beneath.

Dag Erkríc raised a hand. "I do not deem it safe even so," he said. "Remember, this is no longer drill. It is an invasion of a people desperate for bloodletting."

Rajnir stared at him in dismay, then whirled around. "Tell him, Hyarl my Commander. Tell him to take me there, so I may see my warriors march to victory."

Durasnir resented so strongly the position this statement put him in that he could not trust himself to speak for a long, tense moment.

It was long enough, and tense enough, for Rajnir to abandon his own worries to turn around, question overcoming his desperation. "Uncle Fulla?" It slipped out without his awareness.

The mage only smiled.

Durasnir said, "You know the oaths we make, my prince. I can only advise you in matters of the sea."

The mage made the bow and gesture of pacific acceptance, and Rajnir sighed, and once more relinquished decision making into the mage's hands.

Durasnir lifted his glass and swept the distant line of rough mountains. He could see nothing of import, but it gave his hands something to do, and his face a semblance of cover as he considered what lay behind the mage's sudden worry about the prince's safety. Was there a chance he did not, after all, have control over the magical part of this invasion?

The more Durasnir considered it, the more it seemed possible. That would explain Erkríc's protracted absence. Otherwise, it would have been far more characteristic of Erkríc to sweep Rajnir to a pinnacle somewhere so the prince could look down in triumph as his will was translated into the action of thousands of tramping feet. So he could revel in the power of a prince.

So he could revel in the power of a king.

Inda led the way through the sentry walk arch onto the top floor of the tower, where the guard station was. Everyone crowded in behind him, Tau standing in the middle, water pooling at his feet. Rain roared on the awning outside the door, running off it in hissing sheets. Vedrid shut the door, diminishing the noise.

"How many Venn?" Inda asked.

"Looked like an advance force, a raider group." Tau shaped a wedge with his hand. "Hull up in the west, probably a dozen warships. I'd guess with their attendant Battle Groups, but it was too hazy to see."

"Raider group?" the watch captain asked.

"Raiders are bigger, have say a hundred men. Scouts have about thirty," Inda quickly translated for the Marlovans. "Think of 'em as cutters, or tenders." And when those two terms earned him blank looks, "Nine scouts serve each raider. Nine raiders serve a warship. They make up all their Battle Groups in nines, like we do. Call it somewhat over a thousand men."

"Where?" Tdiran-Randviar asked.

“Standing off to the southwest.”

“Ships?”

“Landed, or—”

“Tried a landing. Buck Marlo-Vayir fought ’em off.”

Inda had always admired the way Tau seemed to effortlessly handle any situation with people. Now, as everyone (except Evred) shot questions at him he not only seemed to hear them all and answer in the order of importance, he also answered intent instead of just words. This was until Inda said, “So what about Ola-Vayir?”

“Ola-Vayir is not here.”

“What?” Evred snapped.

Everyone had seen Evred express irritation, though it was rare. No one had ever seen him in a cold rage. Vedrid’s neck tightened. That pale face, with the hectic color high on the cheekbones, most of all the wide, angry stare—Evred had never looked more like his brother, the Sierlaef.

“Lindeth knew the Venn were there?” His voice had dropped to a whisper. But they heard it.

“Had to.” Tau sucked in breath, and threw back his wet hair with a loud smack against his back. “The first night, I hired a boat. Saw them hull down on the horizon, straight west. The Lindeth fisherfolk all knew they were there, and knew those masts did not belong to any fishing fleet. Came back. Started checking around.”

“So Lindeth wants these Venn to attack us?”

Noise on the stairway brought Nightingale Toraca, one hand clutched tightly to the opposite shoulder. Blood darkened one arm, spreading in a dark purple smear down the side of his coat. Rat and Barend followed behind him, ready to spring to his support.

Nightingale wiggled his fingers interrogatively, and Tau said, “I’m getting there.” To the others, “I spent the rest of the night doing some talking. To make certain. Here’s what I don’t think you know. There were a couple of murders earlier in spring—”

“The old guild mistress, and some fellow they said was a Venn spy,” Barend said from behind Nightingale. “We’ve already been through that, including the blame being assigned to us.”

“Well, he *was* a Venn spy. And she was in the pay of the Venn.”

“What?” three voices exclaimed.

Nightingale grimaced, swaying on his feet. “That old hypocrite,” he murmured, hoarse and breathless. “*Howshe* used to go on about our evilness.”

“She was killed by the Resistance. One of ’em couldn’t keep his mouth shut, especially after their leader, er, died.” Tau tripped over that one. Maybe now was not the time to reveal that the vaguely familiar man he’d killed in the market town pleasure house had been none other than Skandar Mardric, head of the Resistance.

“Lindeth has been divided since,” Tau went on. “Half think the Venn preferable to Marlovan rule. The rest think that’s crazy. Those people are divided between putting up with the familiar, and pursuing the Resistance goal of getting rid of all overlords.”

He coughed.

Vedrid, always thoughtful, brought water. Tau gulped it down, briefly amused at the irony of being soaked to the skin yet thirsty. It was a familiar sensation from life on the sea.

“Go on,” Evred said.

“That’s it. With a strong application of sympathy and flattery, I got them to accept me as an ignorant easterner, and last night they opened up. Several rounds of the local barley wine helped.” Tau saw Inda shift impatiently. Evred hadn’t moved. Tau sensed his wrath; his nerves coruscated. “They were stalled during what I gathered to be some very heated arguments about whether or not to let you know that the fishers had sighted the Venn on the horizon. Standing on and off for just under a week.”

“A week,” Inda breathed. “Waiting on a signal?”

“I don’t know. Whatever cause, the Venn raiders sent that advance attack toward land before dawn today. I was taking a last sighting before returning to report my talk with the fishers. Spied shaded lights bobbing about, the same way lights move when someone else in the fleet is climbing down into boats.

Had to mean a landing, so I took to horse southward.” He made a quick, self-deprecating gesture. “I—” He shook his head.

Inda’s eyes widened. “You were going to attack them yourself?”

“I don’t know what I was going to do,” Tau confessed. “I’d been up how many nights? All I could think of was, you wanted me to scout, so I’d better go see for myself. Which is how I met him.” He gestured toward Nightingale, who leaned shakily against the wall. Crimson drips from his limp hand pooled beside his foot.

Evred made a flat gesture, quick and sharp. “You said Buck.”

“There,” Nightingale whispered. He was just barely hanging onto consciousness.

“Right. Buck first.” Tau jerked his head up, his fine brow furrowed. “I need to go back a bit in Nightingale’s report, which he told me on our ride here. The Jarl of Ola-Vayir never received his orders.” Pause for exclamations; Evred made another of those quick, flat moves of his hand, and everyone shut up.

“And we can corroborate that because one of the brags the rope maker in Lindeth made was of the Resistance having killed a Runner.”

The reaction this time was no more than a whispered curse.

“Some time back, the Lindeth people were arguing with this Mardric fellow about how little the Resistance had accomplished. Mardric claimed he’d killed all the Venn spies, and got stung by their lack of belief. Double stung by their lack of gratitude.” Tau paused to drink again. “Anyway, Mardric decided to make a grand gesture and issued an order to attack any Marlovan Runners they saw, after squeezing their orders out of them. They tried. All but one Runner killed their attackers instead. The one who died was an older man, they said. But as tough as any of the younger ones. Sifting through the brag, I figured the only reason they brought him down was because they were traveling as a gang. He took out half of them before they brought him down. The rest, ah, didn’t bother with kinthus when they tried to pry his orders out of him.” Tau grimaced.

Evred’s fury intensified, mirrored in them all. “Go on.”

“The man died without speaking. When they cooled off, some of them were fairly sick about what they’d done. When word got around, most of the Resistance decided not to go after Runners anymore. Too costly, and for no benefit that they could see. Mardric got angry, and they were shaping up for some in-fighting when he turned up dead in a market-town pleasure house.” He glanced Evred’s way.

Evred’s mouth opened on a soundless *Ah*.

“Which seems to have ended the Resistance, as envisioned by Skandar Mardric. Back to Buck. He arrived in Ola-Vayir, thinking to ride through his city, collect any messages or things left behind, and follow up the north road after the Jarl and his men. Get in a dig about how much faster Buck was, if he did catch up.”

A smothered laugh from Rat; Evred hadn’t moved, but they felt the gradual lessening of his wrath.

Tau coughed again, and continued. “But to his surprise he found the Jarl and his people busy planting, training horses, so forth. The Jarl was astonished, according to Nightingale. Let’s see if I can get this right, being as I am employed (*doesthis job come with pay?*) as a Runner. Here’s how Nightingale gave me the Jarl’s words.” Tau shut his eyes, dropped his voice to a gravel-rough intensity underlined by a high note of fear: “*I will swear on my knees before the Convocation no such orders arrived.*” Tau had been trained in dramatic reading; his rendering of the Jarl’s words were probably truer than Nightingale’s had been.

This time Evred’s “Go on” was almost in the normal range of extreme tension, a storm cloud instead of cataclysm.

“So they consulted on what to do. Decided Buck would ride north to Lindeth, as ordered. They wouldn’t send a Runner since one had already vanished, and nobody knew why. Instead, Buck and his men would make the fastest run they could. Ola-Vayir was going to strong-arm everyone in his land to ride on their heels, though it would take time to send the word out. But no one would be permitted to rest until they had.” He rubbed his exhaustion-marked eyes. “Nightingale reached Buck’s people about four days south of Lindeth, turned around, rode back with them. Said his locket wouldn’t send his report.”

Barend shuffled his feet at this out-loud mention of the secret lockets, but Evred did not move.

“When Buck heard about the mystery of orders not received, he figured the only answer was someone targeting Runners. Buck insisted Nightingale not try to ride ahead, that they were about as fast as Runners, or as near as damnation.”

A brief flicker of humor; all of them could hear Buck’s voice.

“So Buck saw this advance attack?”

“Correct. They’d gotten up before dawn to ride, thinking to reach Ala Larkadhe by sundown. Saw just enough winks from imperfectly covered lanterns out on the sea to raise suspicions. Buck told Nightingale if the lanterns had been swinging free, they would have assumed these were fishers, and ridden on. But a wink or two? They decided to lie up in ambush, did, and though the boats were obviously going to outnumber them, Buck remembered something Inda had said on his first visit, during spring, about how the worst possible moment of a landing was when the breakers take the boat and the men start leaping out into shallow water. So he commanded the men to hold up until then, arrows nocked and ready. They shot as each boat reached the breakers. Dropped three boats full before the others back oared, and hung off the coast, by now shooting too.”

“Me,” Nightingale muttered, clearly fading fast. “Buck.”

Tau held up a hand. “Buck decided to send Nightingale north to report. Unfortunately, the light was up enough by then for the Venn to make out his blue coat, and Nightingale became the target. His horse caught one in the flank, and he caught two, one along the ribs, and the worst one went through his arm into his side. He, ah, insisted we cut it out.”

Tau’s color faded for a moment, and everyone there twitched or grimaced.

“We left the animal with the Lindeth Harbor outer perimeter guard—we chanced to catch them—and I brought Nightingale here.”

“Buck—” Nightingale lifted his one working hand.

Mistake. His mouth opened, and his body, rigidly held until his messages were discharged, failed him at last. He began to crumple, but Barend and Rat caught him as he fainted.

“Rat,” Evred said, and Barend as well as Rattooth looked up, sharp Cassad faces wearing identical expressions.

Barend had been called Rat for years aboard a pirate ship before Inda’s mutiny freed him. He grimaced, and his cousin cast him a rueful look as Evred went on, “You and Vedrid get Nightingale down to the lazaretto.” To Tau, “Is there anything else?”

“Only this. Buck told Nightingale to tell you that if the Venn kept hanging off the coast, he was going to stay put, and maybe try to look like a force twice the size of what he actually had. He’d had the foresight to get his Runners to keep the horses in the gully alongside a stream adjacent to the road, so there were no silhouettes on the horizon for the Venn to count. But if they land anyway, it’s going to be roughly two hundred to one.”

After the commanders breakfasted with the prince, Dag Erkríc departed from the Venn flagship on unnamed duties, as had become his habit. Durasnir was about to make his morning ship inspection when an orderly summoned him to the after cabin, where the dispatches came in.

“Hyarl my Commander.” He put his hands together in the mode of orders given. “You said to come to you at any time if we receive anything from warship *Petrel*. ”

Durasnir sat down. News from Captain Seigmad, the Battle Group Captain he had placed in charge of the transport to Lindeth Harbor, could not be good. Seigmad was even older than Durasnir, sixty years of wind, weather, and sea in the king’s service. He would report only problems.

*We were forced to abort the landing. What at first we took to be a sizable force was lying in ambush awaiting us. The night scouts now believe this force is little more than skirmishers, perhaps detached from the army at Ala Larkadhe. Without definite numbers, and because we have lost the advantage of surprise, Hilda Battle Chief Hrad demands we abandon this site and*

*move in all haste to the north side of Lindeth, despite the rocky shore and adverse winds.*

Durasnir wrote a hasty note saying that they should comply, but that they must wait for the most advantageous wind and tide, and sent it off.

Then he continued his inspection, which was in part a search. The prince had shown no interest in the latest dispatches, which alarmed Durasnir. It was so uncharacteristic. Where had the prince gone? He was not in his cabin, nor prowling around the mages' portion of the ship. Nor was he below.

When Durasnir climbed back to the weather deck, his eye was drawn upward by the glint of white and silver of the Erama Yaga. They stood guard on the masthead. That meant the prince had clambered all the way to the topgallants. He had gone even higher than he'd loved to perch as a small boy.

Tradition said that anyone captain or above did not risk his dignity by climbing to the tops unless under direct threat of attack. Durasnir climbed past the strictly schooled faces of the Erama Yaga and squeezed between the shrouds on the narrow planking that pitched slowly on the sleepy summer sea.

Rajnir sat on the narrower topgallant masthead. He leaned back against the spar, eyes closed, so relaxed Durasnir could see the veins in the prince's eyelids. Durasnir recognized how gradually he had become accustomed to extreme tension in the prince.

"My prince," he said.

Rajnir opened his eyes. "Don't say anything, Uncle Fulla." He gave a soft sigh. "I know it's not seemly to climb up. But I can breathe here. I . . . the wind clears my head."

Durasnir touched his fingertips together in acknowledgment, then said as gently as he could, "If you truly regard me as Uncle Fulla then you will permit me an uncle's trespass?"

Rajnir sighed again. "What have I done? What must I hear?"

"Only this. That Captain Henga is a good man. One of the best Drenga captains we have. This is why he was chosen for the honor of leading the advance guard on Castle Andahi. What—" *Dag Erkríc might not have told you*, "—you might not know is that the defense of the castle was ferocious. Courageous, too. That must be acknowledged."

Rajnir leaned back, his eyes closing.

Durasnir went on. "Those women were armed and trained warriors. They sabotaged the castle, and killed almost half of Henga's entire force before his men finally gained control. And not a single defender, young or old, was left alive, because they kept on the attack to the very last. I will not be surprised if taking that castle does not end up being one of the harshest battles of this invasion."

*And if not, we are marching straight into more grief than we've endured in centuries.*

"So I beg you to reconsider your view of Henga's execution."

Rajnir opened his eyes and said, "Who?"

Durasnir stared into those blue eyes, so wide, so incurious. The skin over the backs of his hands tingled painfully.

"Thank you, my prince," he said.

Rajnir did not ask for what, so uninterested was he. One corner of his mouth lifted, then he closed his eyes again. The wind tousled a strand of his fair hair that had escaped its clip, and he breathed softly and steadily.

Durasnir climbed down. He finished his round of the flagship, and then sat down at the dispatch desk.

Waving the duty ensigns off, he sorted the Oneli commands, scrupulously written and dispatched by magic, and then he turned to the Hilda commands. From the beginning, Rajnir had granted Dag Erkríc and Oneli Commander Durasnir permission to read them, which Erkríc did regularly. Durasnir read them seldom. He had tried to maintain that distance between the services that protected parity.

Had protected parity. He read them all thoroughly now.

The only recent order for Captain Henga of the advance guard at Castle Andahi was a commendation, written out in Erkríc's hand, above the prince's name.

There were many of these orders written by Dag Erkríc above the prince's name. And a few above other names, including Durasnir's; the prince often gave them orders to write for him.

So no hard evidence there.

Durasnir closed off the well-trod mental path about the dangers of mages. Here was a new path, as yet

shadowed and perilous: for the first time Fulla Durasnir comprehended that he was not just set opposite Erkríc in an adversarial position. That would be all right. It was part of the balance of power, of compromise, of parity. They spoke the truth expecting to hear other points of view, so that the king or his heir could determine the right path.

Did Erkríc speak the truth, or shape it in secret?

Specifically, why had Prince Rajnir, who had debated the niceties of diplomatic usage with Durasnir's own son Vatta when they were about twelve years old, think that a truce was an opportunity for treachery? Every day it seemed the prince sounded less like a man nearing thirty, and more like a boy of ten. And now he was up on the masthead, higher than he'd sat as a boy, because it made his head clear .

..

*And I cannot ask because I regard Erkríc as an enemy.* A dag—with all that magical power that none could gainsay—as an enemy.

Evred waited for Inda to speak. They all regarded Inda with the “what now” expression.

Inda beckoned to Tdiran-Randviar, standing there grim and silent the entire time. “You said something about a defense plan?”

The old woman said tersely, “Dewlap Arveas' Jarlan, Liet Tlen, is an old friend from queen's training days. Had a plan for making a castle into a trap. We talked about it once. When the word first reached us those shits were coming over in their boats.”

Inda's lips parted. “Can you extend your plan to this city?”

“I can try.”

Inda turned his head. “Barend. Take everyone you've got. Every arrow you've got. Split 'em up.

Reinforce Buck with one group, get someone north of Lindeth to intercept that landing.”

“That's all rock.” Tau chopped his hands up and down. “I scanned it myself with the scout. Deadly landing.”

“Exactly. So if you wanted to take us by surprise, and we were lying in wait right where you were going to land in the best spot, where would you go next? I'd go to the worst lonely spot beyond the harbor spyglasses.”

“North shore,” three voices said.

Rat had quietly returned. “But if they've got an advance force of a thousand just to clear the landing space, and we've got maybe that for each group, and no reinforcements—”

“The idea is, you don't let 'em land. They can't sneak ships in—” Inda's voice hitched when he

remembered Dag Erkríc and magic. Then he remembered what Signi had said, and continued firmly,

“You'll see the landing boats coming in. Don't let 'em land. Eventually they will anyway, especially if they figure out how few of us there are, but for now—until Ola-Vayir gets here—that's going to have to do.”

Evred said to the Randviar, “If they do land, and break through, your orders are to mire them as long as you can in city fighting.”

Before Tau first appeared, Tdiran-Randviar had been thinking about what it meant if the Venn reached the pass. It meant that Liet Tlen and the Arveas guardswomen would be dead, because Liet would never let a Venn past her threshold while she lived.

“You leave them to me,” she said fiercely.

## Chapter Eleven

AT first, all the Castle Andahi children had to see the Venn. They scrambled to the entrance to the robbers' cave.

Han ordered them back in a voiceless whisper, making terrible faces and violent hand motions instead of

yelling like she so badly wanted to. All she got was mutinous looks, nasty hand signs back, and pokes from the eight-year-olds to “go anyway”—a mutiny. At least it was a quiet one. They were trained enough not to make noise with an enemy nigh.

Gdir’s sour expression made Han think of order—and then she got an idea.

She left Hal on watch at the cavern entrance and beckoned for everyone to surround her as she retreated all the way to the stream, where she hoped the rush of water would smother whispers.

“Whoever is standing straight and quiet,” she said low-voiced, quoting her first arms mistress back at Tlen. “Any noise, you lose your turn.”

A hissing scrabble and all the children, right down to the smallest, got into line. They all knew that command.

“Not the smalls,” Han muttered to Lnard. “You’ll get a turn. I’ll watch them when the sixes are done.” Lnard sighed loudly, then cut out the smalls, promising them a fingerful of honey to lick if they sat down like creep-mice.

At first it was interesting, watching the Venn march by, so tall, so many of them yellow-haired, just like most of their own people. They carried a different kind of sword, and most of them had these odd round shields that Hal insisted in a whisper (that still earned a stinging swat on the top of his head from Han) were really rain covers.

Two of the eights started a whispered contest about what kind of turds they were made of and Han thrust them out of line to wait at the back. No one talked after that.

The first time through, Han counted to a hundred for each pair. The second time, the children were less eager, so she let each pair stay longer. By the third time they got bored fast, especially when they couldn’t talk. So everyone retreated all the way to the back of the cave, to where the stream came out of a fissure in the rock. They got the pent-up words out of their systems.

The younger ones wanted to ask questions: where were their horses? Why did they have brass horn things on their helmets? Did they have an academy for their jarls? The eights all wanted to offer disgusting ideas about how to fight them, variations on not using the Waste Spell and throwing their own droppings at the enemy, only could they do it and not get chased?

Han told them exactly what Liet-Jarlan would do if they tried it, and no, that was not snitching, because she’d be required to give a field report on all action, and turd-hurling was action. The eights couldn’t argue with that.

As the steady march of footsteps echoed up the stone, more and more Venn emerging from the tunnel without any end in sight, the children returned to their old games, but quietly. Except when Billykid, the leader of the eight-year-olds, who was always acting the goat he resembled, tried to sneak to the cavern entrance and mount their low wall in order to shy just one rock.

Han slapped him down so hard he went tumbling. But when he sucked in a breath to yell, Gdir reached him first, and stuffed the hem of her smock into his mouth so hard he began to choke, legs kicking, hands clawing desperately though ineffectively, as they were pinned by her knees.

Into his purpling face and frightened eyes she hissed, “Shut it! Shut it! One noise and I’ll kill you myself.”

Billykid turned up both thumbs as best he could with his scrawny wrists pinned to the cavern floor. He looked more like a goat than ever when she turned him loose and he sloped to the back to pout and make vile gestures at Han and Gdir.

Somehow Billykid changed everything, even though he never got to throw a stone at the Venn. Maybe it was going to happen anyway, maybe it was the result of Billykid’s muttered threats and insults, but once the last of the Venn had vanished up the pass in the other direction, and even their marching *thrum*, *thrum* had stopped echoing down the pass from above, arguments burst out.

As always, Lnard was the loudest and most persistent, shouting everyone down until she had their attention. “We *have* to go check the castle. We just *have* to,” she began in a tragic tone, and went in an anguished, quivering voice: surely someone was there. Her father was smart, so was the Jarlan. Maybe they’d decided there were too many Venn, and they were hiding.

In Lnard’s mind, it was all over. She had an intense, bright vision of all the grown-ups crowding around, proclaiming the children to be heroes for staying put while the Venn . . . did whatever they were doing.

She very badly wanted to get home, get praise, and maybe her father would make honey-topped cornbread for everyone.

But there was no agreement in either Han's or Gdir's faces. She stamped her foot. "You with *two* parents might not care, but *I* only have a *father*, and I might even be an *orphan*!"

Han's mind had been wandering, the way it always did when Lnard acted the pug. So she was as surprised as anyone when one moment Lnard was standing in the center of all the children, her palm to her heart, and then she was tussling in the dust with Gdir, kicking, gouging, grunting and yowling in a horrible struggle that looked and sounded like the castle cats during mating season.

The children all gave voice, the older boys shrieking with laughter, shouting insults and encouragements, the smalls wailing and sobbing.

Han screamed, "Stop! Stop!" until her throat hurt.

No one was listening.

She looked around. No, she couldn't use a weapon, though she wanted to. Ah! The ensorcelled bucket. Five steps. Splash! Cold water hit squarely in the fighting girls' faces. They rolled apart, Lnard's fingers clutching tufts of Gdir's pale hair. Gdir stood still, too shocked to make a noise. Her scalp felt like it had been ripped off her skull and her hair was filthy with mud, as were her clothes. Her front was sodden.

But everyone turned to Lnard, who was *bleeding*.

Beads of blood had welled where Gdir had scratched her face, running together in the splash. In the shadowy cave, to the excited children, the trickles looked like goutts of blood. Lnard commenced wailing and sobbing as she staggered toward her bedroll, pulling everyone after her.

When Han couldn't see her face, she could hear the falsity in her voice. Oh, sure, that scratch had to hurt, but they'd gotten worse slipping on rocks during their stalking games when camping, and no one had peeped (including Lnard) because tears meant instant dismissal back to the castle and the lazaretto. Han turned her back. Gdir stood where she was, trembling all over. She hadn't even pushed her muddy hair, tangled as it was, out of her eyes. This was the girl who braided her hair twice a day—at dawn and before bed—because she couldn't stand mess.

Gdir said brokenly, between half-suppressed sobs deep in her chest, "She's even a pug about-about—! *Orphan*. L-l-like she's the only—my father. W-w-with the Jarl. *Your* father, day watch captain of the outer gate. My m-m—" She shut her mouth so hard that Han heard her teeth click.

Han rubbed her itchy scalp. She hated to think about her mother up on the west tower. Gdir's mother, as next arms mistress, in charge of the alter watch bow teams. Nobody knew if Gdir's father, Captain of the Riders, had made it back with the Jarl and the rest of the Riders in time to defend the castle. After watching all those Venn march up the pass, Han didn't know whether to wish they had or they hadn't. Since she didn't know what to think, she'd tried to think only about her orders, and what she would have to report. She didn't let herself consider to whom she'd be making that report.

Gdir said in a fierce, low voice, "I have to know. I have to go see. If they're alive. What if they need help?"

Han's body flared with warning. "That's against orders! We were told to wait until the king comes."

"The king isn't coming, Hadand," Gdir whispered. "He's too late. The Venn will get to him first, and they'll be fighting forever. You saw how many there are! If no one comes for us in a day, I think we should go see ourselves." Her voice changed, pleading. "Not right out in the open. At night, on the stalk." "No."

"You can lead us. You're good on the stalk."

Han wavered, then crossed her arms tight. "No. The Jarlan's orders were to wait. Nnard's orders were to wait. We have enough food back there for weeks. So Nnard thought we might have to wait weeks."

"You don't care," Gdir began.

Han gave way to her own temper. "If you start pugging like Lnard—"

She never got a chance to finish the threat. Gdir's hand came round so fast Han only registered it just before it hit her face.

Gdir backed up, staring at her hand, and at Han, who had staggered back, her face buzzing like it had been stung by a thousand bees.



Gdir whirled around and ran to the back, where the water trickled down the wall from a crack way up in the shadows.

Han ignored Gdir for the rest of the day. Her cheek throbbed as she got everyone to clean up and organize the cavern. Then she conducted warm-ups for the first time, and the snap of her voice got them all in line and working their best.

All except Gdir.

Lnard abandoned her languishing pose when everyone else was intent on warm-ups, and with a tragic air of sacrifice, she drifted to the front. She made what looked like the supreme effort as she took up the rhythm, favoring one knee and one wrist, and making faces of silent suffering. The younger girls and all the smalls moved closer to her. A few of the boys called the gruff, joking encouragement they got from their older brothers, now away at the academy.

When Han, who watched narrowly, saw the familiar small smile Lnard couldn't quite hide, she picked up the pace, ignoring Lnard's limping and posturing. She also ignored Gdir, who remained a silent hunched ball of misery at the far end of the cavern.

The rest of the day they played blind-stalk, the one with the blindfold having to use other senses to catch people sneaking slantwise across the cavern and back. It was a great training game, one of the favorites, and the winners got a lick of honey.

At supper time Han ordered no lighting of the Fire Stick, and no one protested.

Gdir did not speak to Han or to Lnard. In fact, they did not see Gdir speak to anyone, but suddenly the eights and Hal, the nine-year-old, swarmed around Han, asking variations on "When can we check the castle?" adding, "We're cowards if we don't go. They might need help!"

Han was tired, worried, and unsure about everything. She said angrily, "No castle! If you even bring it up again, then I'll tell Liet-Jarlan that you broke orders! Now, lights out!"

Though everyone moaned and a few of the eights flipped up the back of their hand at Han (when she couldn't see), Lnard was relieved. Even then it seemed to take forever to get the smalls settled, especially as they had no more milk and didn't dare make a fire, so they couldn't even make warm steep. But at last the younger children were settled, and Han climbed wearily into her bedroll. The last thing she saw was Gdir lying in her bedroll, Tlennen just beyond. Gdir had moved them away from everyone. Her profile was a pale blotch against the dark stone. From somewhere the faintest gleam reflected in her wide-open eyes.

Han was just as glad not to have her nearby and curled up gratefully. But as disjointed images from the day mixed with memory and as her mind chattered imagined conversations with everybody—all the things she should have said—something bothered her. She kept remembering Gdir's eyes open and staring in the dark. Was that it?

The creeping sleepies withdrew, and Han too glared upward at the shadow-hidden cavern roof. She didn't want Gdir to see her checking on her, if she was still awake.

Besides, it wasn't Gdir that bothered her. It was Tlennen, his bedroll on Gdir's other side. They'd never done that before. Tlennen had always had his bedroll next to Young Tana, Rosebud's six-year-old brother.

Slowly, so she wouldn't be obvious, Han turned over. She eased her head up . . . to see two flat bedrolls.

Han went cold all over. She scrambled out of her bedroll and groped her way to the back where Nnard had set their roll of weapons, with a whole list of terrible threats invisibly attached if they used them in any but dire need.

She unrolled the weave-reinforced canvas with its rows of wave slots holding weapons so they wouldn't clatter together and nick. She felt her way down with shaking fingers and yes, two bows were missing from their hooks, and one pair of knives.

But Tlennen didn't have a bow. None of the boys had their own bow until they were older.

Han's chill turned to sickness. The knives were Gdir's, of course, but who else was gone? Oh. Yes. Had to be Gdir's first cousins, seven and eight. The girl cousin, just turned eight, would have her bow.

Han grabbed her own bow, and her knives, but they felt heavy and clumsy, and she knew she couldn't

fight a grown-up with them. But she strapped them on anyway, her hands shaking.

Then she turned away—and tripped over the lantern, set out ready to be lit. It jangled loud as thunder.

Lnard started up. “Who’s there?”

“Me,” Han said.

“Who?” Lnard crawled out of bed.

Han closed the distance, and drew Lnard away, toward the mouth of the cave. After the profound dark of the back, the cavern entrance seemed almost bright in the light of the stars and the rising moon. “Gdir left. Took Tlennen and her cousins. I have to go get them.”

“I’ll go,” Lnard whispered promptly.

Han had figured Lnard would love a night sneak—and a chance to fight Gdir again. “No. You stay here. If something happens to me and Gdir, then you’re in charge.”

Maybe Lnard thought it was dark, but the starlight lit her teeth when she grinned. Han saw that grin, and her annoyance hardened to hate.

She hitched her loose-strung bow over one shoulder and her quiver over the other. She hopped over the low wall and walked out. Lnard called a soft question, words too low to make out. Han ignored her, feeling her way to the trail that led up over the ridge.

The air was soft and warm. Somewhere high up, wings flapped, and a wheeling shape crossed the low half moon. After the cave dark, Han’s eyes had adjusted enough for her to pick out the animal-made ridge trail. Not the one that led down to the pass, but the one that ran parallel to the cliffs. From below you’d be outlined against the sky—the children had discovered that on their campout night sneaks—so they only used that one to travel fast, but never on the sneak. But now, at night, with the Venn gone and no teams of children out roaming, she hoped no one was around to see her.

Still, she remembered Lnard’s pale face, and when she crossed a small stream winding down the mountain from the thunderstorm just after sunset, she stopped and scooped up the soft, silty mud, rubbing it over her face and the tops of her hands. She took off her brown sash and tied it around her head, tucking her braids into it. Then she smeared mud down the bleached muslin of her summer smock. That felt cold and nasty, but she was used to that from their stalking games.

She bent to the trail and stalked over the big ridge that jutted into the pass, forming the first big bend.

When she topped that, she caught her first glimpse of Castle Andahi down at the bottom of the pass. It was reassuring to find it just the way it always looked, except for the familiar landslide slanting down to the inner wall on the east side. Relief welled inside her until she realized the ruddy glint of the night torches was missing.

A vague sense of motion caused her to squint at the base of the landslide. Four ghostly blobs were just beginning to climb the long dirt spill.

Had to be Gdir. So she wasn’t marching right up to the castle at least. Looked like she was going to scout by going up the landslide to peer down inside. Han began to scramble down the ridge, her bow bumping on her back. Twice she tripped over unseen roots and fell flat.

She moved faster than the four. Gdir was treading cautiously. Her brother and cousins weren’t very good at night moves yet. Gdir had Tlennen by the hand.

Gdir was a good scout. She spotted Han just as Han reached the landslide, which was disappointing:

Han wanted badly to scare Gdir as she deserved.

At least Gdir halted the others about a hundred paces up the steep incline. Little rocks pockety-pocked down the slope toward the castle, making Han wince as she bent lower and lower, almost crawling.

As soon as she reached Gdir, she put her mouth up to her ear. “I don’t like it. No torches, and I can’t see any sentries.”

Gdir’s wide eyes reflected the moon. “I saw that. Something happened. We need to check.”

Han shivered, though the air was warm. Everything felt wrong now, and not just because they were breaking orders.

“Let’s get just a little closer.” Han crouched low, instinct tightening the back of her neck. “Maybe the torches aren’t visible from this part of the landslide. We never had a chance to check before they sent us away.”

Gdir flicked her hand open. The three younger children crouched down. *They're following her orders now*, Han thought.

"I think you need to mud up," Han whispered.

Gdir shuddered. But she'd stalked long enough to know that pale faces showed up if you knew how to look. "If we see anyone."

"But that might be too—"

*Late.* At that moment a tall, horn-helmed sentry walked slowly out from the west tower arch on the castle wall and made his way northward.

He was on the other side of the castle from the children, moving away. The children stared in horror at the castle.

The moon shone down from overhead, just enough light for them to comprehend that the Venn had taken control of the castle. The children could make out sentries on the north wall of the castle, where the gates were.

"Did they take our parents prisoner?" Han whispered.

Gdir said, "Where would they put them? The garrison lockup only has two beds in each cell—"

"Four cells—"

"—then they must be down in the old dungeon, but they'd have to move everything around—"

"But remember, they already moved things, when we helped make those mazes."

Tlennen pointed his wet thumb. "Why are all the guards at the front?"

"They must expect attack from the sea," Han said slowly. "They must think nobody will come from the pass. Because they have all those marchers."

Han looked Gdir's way for corroboration, but Gdir was staring intently up at the top of the landslide. She pointed with her bow, and the others saw the line of pale faces all the way up at Twisted Pine Path, adjacent to where Flash and Keth had stood to start the avalanche.

The line spotted Gdir's pale face. They halted.

"They're sneaking up on the castle," Gdir said, sucking in a happy breath. "It's got to be *our* people!"

Han got a single heartbeat of joy before she had to say, "No. Ours'd be in mud. They wouldn't be standing up like that, making targets."

"They're attacking the castle." Gdir shivered with excitement. Everything was going to be all right! "We can help them! We can tell them how we'd do it!"

"I think we better hide," Han ordered, still crouched low.

But Gdir was already running. Her brother and cousins launched after her.

Gdir waved her bow, which she hadn't strung yet. "We can help," she called in Marlovan, and then in Iascan, "We can help—"

The attackers talked in Idayagan, too fast for Han to catch the words, or maybe it was the words themselves she didn't know.

The voices were angry. One carried on the summer air all the way to Han: "No, they won't," and then in the children's own language, accented but clear, "Little Marlovan shits!"

*Twang!* None of the four children saw the arrow until it smacked Gdir's chest, not twenty-five paces from the speaker.

Han's eyes swam with weird spots. But she could see—would forever see—Gdir's body twist around, her hands going to the arrow, just before she crumpled up.

Tlennen began to screech, high, breathless, shrill.

*Hiss! Zip!* More arrows, at least a dozen, and before Han's horrified eyes the other three children jerked then fell, Tlennen with four or five arrows in him.

Some of the Idayagans missed—one arrow landed within arm's reach of Han. She tensed, not sure whether to yell, to fight, to freeze.

From inside the castle a horn blatted. It was answered by another. Mounted Venn emerged from the back of the castle, carrying torches, and rode toward the landslide. The Idayagans had scattered, some running straight back up to Twisted Pine, others toward the far side of the landslide and out of sight.

Han backed all the way down the southernmost edge of the landslide as the Venn horses plunged in

pursuit of the Idayagans, perhaps five hundred long paces away, racing at an angle away from her. She remembered orders. She remembered the cave. She kept backing away, low as a turtle, until she reached the gully between the avalanche and the ridge. Shivering with fear, terror, shock, she darted from bush to bush, pausing just once to look back.

There were the four small bodies, just barely visible on this side of the landslide, hidden from the castle. Memory was cruel, forcing her to see them fall—the small things—Gdir’s jerk, Tlennen’s little fingers scrabbling, and she bent over a bush and vomited.

She collapsed onto the trail next to the bush. The smell of the vomit forced her away, clawing at the back of her throat. And though her head throbbed, she got to her hands and knees, crawling until she could get her feet under her.

Somehow she got back to the cavern. Lnard had lit a lantern, shading it on the side where the children lay sleeping.

“Oogh, what is that stink?” Lnard whispered.

Han did not answer. She found the bucket and dunked her whole head. The water was merciful on her hot, smeared, itchy face, but memory granted no mercy.

She sucked in water then spewed it back out, and the magic fluoresced a brief blue as it snapped away the vile taste in her mouth. She raised her head, breathing hard.

Lnard waited, so still the lantern’s orange tongue of flame reflected in her eyes.

Han had left hating Lnard. There was no room inside her for that now. She fell to her hands and knees, and Lnard stared in shock at the tears tumbling down Han’s face, her contorted mouth.

“She’s dead. Gdir is dead.” Han keened, trying to keep her voice down. But a sob sucked in her chest, and she bent double, rocking as she fought to contain it. “All. Dead.”

“Who did it? Venn?”

“Idayagans.”

Lnard whispered, “Did they see you?”

“No.” Han squeezed her eyes shut. What to do? They’d already broken orders once. And Gdir was dead! No, maybe she was alive. Han caught herself up. Yes, maybe she was alive—she saw a lot of bad shots—she might be hurt—

“I’ve got to go back,” Han said.

Lnard hissed her breath in. She looked back toward the children, and Han knew she was scared. Lnard was far too frightened to hide it.

“You’re coming with me,” Han stated.

“But you said before if something happens—”

“It’s all changed. The Idayagans know about us now. Maybe even the Venn. If Gdir is alive, any of them, the Idayagans might even try to find out where we are.” Han breathed hard, the ideas coming faster.

“Yes. If they’re dead, we’ll Disappear them. We won’t just leave them there. I can’t do that.”

“No.” Lnard hunched up. “But I don’t see why I have to go. You’re making me go to be mean.”

“You have to help me against those Idayagans. They are talking right now, I bet anything. I mean the ones who ran away. They’re talking right now, just like we are. ‘Where did those brats come from?’

They called us little shits. ‘Where did the little shits come from? We better find out. Maybe the little shits we filled with arrows are alive. We can drag the bodies away so they can’t Disappear them, and throw them off a cliff.’ ”

Lnard was too shocked to act shocked.

“They might think the Venn saw us, but I don’t think they did. They might be afraid the Venn will find out about the Idayagans from Gdir, if she’s alive. They might think grown-ups of *ours* will come and find out, and come after them.”

Lnard’s mouth turned down. “I wish we had grown-ups.”

“We don’t. It’s us. So wake up . . . oh, Freckles and Dvar. I’ll wake Hal. He’ll have to be in charge here, since he’s not very good with the bow yet.”

Even Hal would agree. There was no insult in that. Boys started with sword when girls started with bow. Usually, they didn’t get bow until they were eight or so. Hal had only been shooting a year—and that

maybe twice a week, when the girls shot every single day.

Han and Lnard shook the three nine-year-olds awake and told them what had happened. Freckles and Dvar reacted with disbelief, and then angry determination, catching their mood from Han. Haldred shivered, all bony knots, but turned his thumb up when Han gave him his orders.

Under Han's sharp order, the girls bound up their hair and covered themselves with mud.

Then in low-running single file they stalked from cave up over the ridge, down to the landspill, and up.

They'd almost reached the four small death-sprawled figures when Lnard poked Han with her bow and pointed upward at Twisted Pine Path.

Han had been right! Figures slunk out from behind the wind-shaped conifer that clung to the broad ledge, and began picking their way down.

The Idayagans were terrible at the stalk. They didn't wear any helms. A few had mudded their faces, but most hadn't. They all wore dark clothes, but they faced the moon, and were clear as could be.

Marlovans wouldn't be that stupid.

Han wondered if the Venn saw them, too. She glanced back at the castle, but saw nothing, not even any sentries.

"We have to wait for them to get into range," Lnard said, which was the second rule on drills.

Han said, "Right." Gdir would have gotten mad at Lnard for saying something they'd all known since they were six, but Lnard's shoulders relaxed as soon as Han said *right*.

Lnard's expression was hard to make out because of the mud, but Han could tell she was worried. "Will they come at us in that line? We can't shoot the first one, all the others will just run away."

*She wants to know if everything we practice is going to work.* Han said, "No. If they're looking for Gdir and them, they'll have to spread out. I bet they don't remember just where they were. They can't know the landslide like we do."

Lnard turned her thumb up: that made sense.

"So let's get into position—first rule—just like in practice." Han tried to say it the way the arms mistress had. The way Gdir's mother had. "And when I shoot, and you hear it, everybody shoot as fast as you can. Get square between your targets, lay out your arrows. Just like we were taught." Han paused, and the two little girls turned up their thumbs. "Lnard, you and me do odds, me left of the line, you right. Freckles, you the left, and Dvar, you the right on evens. Chest, no fancy shots. Now."

Dvar let a single whimper escape, but when Freckles poked her, she stopped. "Just like practice,"

Freckles whispered, and again, no more than a breath, "Just like practice."

The four girls blended with the dirt- and rock-tumbled slide as they wriggled across the landslide in a line roughly parallel to the spreading Idayagans. They positioned themselves between the enemy and the fallen children, their instinct to guard the latter.

As Han had guessed, the Idayagans had not remembered where they'd left those squalling Marlovan brats. They crossed the landslide, well spread, but moving at the wrong angle. They might even have missed their victims, at least on a first sweep.

Han's sweaty hands were tightly gripped on her bow, her arrow nocked. She had fixed on a certain rock as the perfect range, and counted the outermost Idayagan's steps as he moved toward it. He was scarcely visible as an individual, just a looming man-shape, eye sockets black. When he scuffed past her rock, she shot.

*Spang!* The noise sounded as loud as the thunderclap days ago. She hesitated a moment, then nocked another arrow as he fell. Lnard's shot hissed through the air a heartbeat later, and truer than Han's.

*Thump.* Square in the chest.

"Augh!" the man howled.

The rest of the Idayagans stilled into perfect targets, standing upright to look around for danger. Four bows twanged, the nine-year-olds at the same moment, and Lnard and Han with their second shots.

Six down, though the girls did not know if they were dead or just wounded. Several Idayagans returned arrows, though they could not see their targets. When four more arrows zipped back at them from unseen shooters, each hitting at least a limb, the Idayagans began to scatter. The girls were good shots but had little power; the Idayagans were very soon out of range.

And then the Venn horn blew. The girls and Idayagans alike jerked round. From the castle's back gates rode a war party, a much bigger one this time. They galloped straight for the landslide.

Han waited only long enough to see what angle they came at, then worked her dry mouth. She was terrified she wouldn't be able to do the cricket chirp that the children used in games for *Center on me!* But it worked—it worked—the other girls, anxious for orders, began crawling toward Han the moment they heard the familiar tongue clicks. When the ground trembled under the horses' hooves, Han gave the *kek-kek* hawk cry for *lie doggo!* Her voice was too high, she didn't sound like a hawk at all, but the enemies were making too much noise to pay attention to a faint mewling bird cry. The Venn galloped past at extreme bow shot, chasing the Idayagans, who were scrambling away as fast as they could over the hump of the landslide in an effort to get out of sight. Two or three fell, and slid, causing more dirt and rocks to cascade; a couple of horses floundered in the fresh, unsteady dirt flow.

Venn and Idayagans vanished over the landslide. There was nothing the girls could see, but they all lay flat to the dirt until a horn howled from up high and another horn answered from the castle. The faint tinkle of harness and armor echoed back from the castle's inner walls as the Venn rode back down and into the castle.

Han and the girls waited until the moon had passed the top of the sky and was beginning its slide down the other way before Han gave a single cricket chirp. Then she counted to fifty, and gave another, and the girls homed on her. They arrived swiftly, Lnard pressing so close her breath was hot on Han's cheek. "I thought it all out," Han said in as forceful a whisper as she could contrive. Now was not the time for Lnard to start pugging! "Those Venn will be back looking around as soon as sunup comes. Maybe the Idayagans, too, if any got away. So we have to go to Gdir and the others and Disappear them. We'll sing them as soon as we get back to the cave. They won't care, or if their spirits are still here, they'll understand."

She was relieved when Lnard stayed silent.

"Right now?" Freckles said.

"I don't want to see them dead." Dvar's whisper was softer than a sigh.

Han's whole body twitched, followed by a flare of anger, but she had just enough sense to recognize that she was mad because she didn't want to, either.

"We owe them. Gdir would have for us. You know that. And you've seen dead people before."

"Not our age," Lnard said somberly.

"So we're going to sing extra. But let's go. You each pick one, and straighten them out proper. Just like the Jarlan does. Then we'll all Disappear them at the same time."

Nobody had anything to say, so they elbow-wriggled back down the slope to where the children's bodies still lay.

Han wished one would still be alive. The Disappearance spell wouldn't work if one was alive.

Lnard avoided Gdir and went to little Tlennen, so Han crawled to Gdir, whose fingers curled around the arrow. The children's limbs were cold, loose, unexpectedly heavy, life-abandoned; Lnard and Freckles were too shocked yet for anguish, but that would come later. Dvar wept silently, not just over the cold, open-mouthed face lying at her knees, but because she *knew* that the same had happened inside the castle. Everyone was dead.

Han had hesitated. The grown-ups always pulled arrows out, but she didn't think she could, and anyway, she had to stay dog-flat, or as low as she could crouch. Pulling an arrow out was a standing up job. So she unstrapped Gdir's knives and gently laid them aside. She took Gdir's cold hands and put right hand over the heart, like a salute, and left hand crossed over that. The arrow stuck up nastily in the middle of her chest, but Han tried not to look at it.

She straightened Gdir's legs, then moved up to her face. Her eyelids were a little open, the sinking moon causing a faint, gelid gleam. Somehow that was worse than anything, even that arrow, because it reminded Han of Gdir staring at the cave ceiling just a little while ago. Alive.

Han pressed dirty, shaking fingers over Gdir's eyelids. And then, she did not know why, she pulled Gdir's filthy hair out from under her head, and parted it with hurried motions, and then braided it as neatly as she could. Finally, because her own mother had always kissed Han before bedtime, and Gdir's

mother wasn't here to kiss her own daughter, Han pressed her lips to Gdir's cold forehead. Her mouth shook—she could feel a big cry coming, but she *couldn't*, she had to keep the others alive, that was orders. She stretched out her hand the way the Jarl and Jarlan had when they Disappeared someone, palm up as though holding a torch. The magical words whispered in her mind, and she said them.

Gdir vanished in a soft puff of air.

Han looked up. The other girls had been watching. They performed their spells. The three little bodies vanished. The killing arrow tumbled onto the dirt. Even the blood was gone. Han looked closely, then scowled. "These are our arrows. They stole them." She closed her hand on the one that had killed Gdir. "They're ours now. I'm going to use these to shoot them back."

The girls gathered up the arrows, the two bows, and Gdir's knives. They crawled down the landslide, and sneaked back to the cave.

## Chapter Twelve

JUST after midnight, after a long day of planning sessions with everybody, Inda ran downstairs with Barend and Rat, who talked across him as they divided up the castle guard and the remainder of the force they'd brought.

When they paused for breath, he said, "Barend, I want your best wing of bowmen."

Barend stopped on the landing, his usually squinty eyes wide in the torchlight. "Inda, we've already stripped the castle of everything but the clothes we're standing in."

Inda lifted a hand. "I know. But if Ola-Vayir does get here, it's your bare asses that'll get drawers first." Rat snickered.

Barend knew Inda better. He sent a "shut up" look at his cousin and crossed his arms. "What do you intend to do with them?"

Inda said, "If Venn are landing here, what does that mean?"

Rat turned a puzzled look from one to the other, then to the arrow slit, through which they could see a slice of mountain.

It hit the cousins at the same time: the unlit beacons.

Barend's mouth thinned. "Shit. You think they're already in Castle Andahi." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the pass.

"Yep. Why else would these ones on the ocean choose now to land? The signal just has to have been the northern force either attacking or getting past the Arveases. Let's figure on the worst."

Rat slanted up a brow. "So what can you do with eighty-one archers? Not thinking of trying on your Runner's idiot plan, one against ten thousand?"

"I'm going to take them to the heights."

Barend flexed his hands, then dropped them. "Damn. I just don't see—" He shook his head. "Damn. All right, Inda, I'll pick 'em out and leave 'em here for your orders. And as many arrows as I can squeeze from everyone else." He shoved past, talking to his cousin. "Come on, Rattooth. Let's roust our boys . . ."

They splashed across the courtyard in the direction of the barracks as rain hissed down, Rat sharing an idea about fire arrows, only would they work in rain? Barend would tell him about the fire arrows they'd used in their pirate fighting days, Inda thought as he vaulted back up the stairs three at a time.

He found Evred alone in the map room, surrounded by lanterns as he gazed down at the map. Evred's fingers traced up the pass, tapped lightly on the heights next to the lake. Then tapped rapidly thrice in succession: north of Lindeth, Lindeth itself, south of Lindeth.

He glanced up, a sharp movement. "Inda. Are you aware that you've got our army split five ways, and we cannot count on Ola-Vayir's reinforcement? Six, if you keep any here."

"Five. We're leaving the city to the Randviar and the women. They'll be better at getting civ cooperation

than we would be. Especially if they make it clear the Venn are going to take the city else.” He hesitated, fidgeting with his knife hilts. “No. Six, actually. What we were talking about before. If you give me leave to take a wing of archers through the archive magic door to the heights opposite Cama.”

For a long time Evred stood with one hand resting on the map, as all around the tower rain sheeted down with a roar.

Here it was, no respite this time.

He said to the map, “This was not part of your original plan. Why do you think it necessary?”

“My plan depended on us getting to the top of the Pass before we faced the Venn. I think they’ve already landed. They might be marching up the Pass right now, and their numbers have to be far larger than ours. If we can reinforce Noddy from one side and Cherry-Stripe from the other, maybe from three directions we can hold the Venn at the top long enough for Ola-Vayir to back us up.”

“If Ola-Vayir doesn’t come, we’re defending the north with a tenth of what they have. If that much.”

Evred breathed the words. He shut his eyes. “They all look at me. Expecting the problems I inherited to end. If I cannot—” He stopped, though his jaw ached. It sounded like whining to say, *People blame the king for failure, and so does history*. “How do you do it?”

Inda flinched inwardly at the pain shaping Evred’s whisper. He said to the map, “I just don’t stop. I won’t be a prisoner again. I’m going to keep running if I have to. Until I die. Everything’s easier that way.”

“Run until we die. It does sound simpler, doesn’t it? Makes death sound like rest.” Evred made a great effort, and Inda sensed that too, in his forced laugh, the sharp twist of his head. “So where is their Commander Talkar? Sitting out in the ocean here, waiting to land?”

“Where he’s at the mercy of the Oneli, and can’t see anything? Naw.” Inda was definite about that.

“He’s in the pass. So that’s where I have to be,” he added.

Evred straightened up. “Then the top of the pass is where I should be as well. We will go together,” he said.

Inda heard the flat affect of his voice. Evred had not used old kingly so-shall-it-be verb mode, but it was there in his tone.

Inda brushed his hand against his chest, then ran out, clutching his head as he clattered downstairs. It seemed like his brains were leaking out his ears, leaving behind a hammer that kept whanging him somewhere around his eyes. It had been the same before the battle against the Brotherhood of Blood.

*Run or die.*

So he ran, formulating his orders on his way to the barracks, where he found Barend’s archers awaiting him, all dressed despite the midnight watch being well advanced.

“All right,” he greeted them as he dropped down onto someone’s bunk, hands on his knees. “We’re going to need nine canoes. Anyone know where to get some? Good. You’re in charge. Now. You have two days to get ’em and ready your gear, including as many arrows as you can get. First in, five pairs of socks, because where we’re going, there won’t be horses. Ever smelled your own feet after an all-day hike?” He paused for the laughter, fought off memory of running about war-gaming on the hills behind Freeport Harbor, and issued the rest of his orders.

In the robbers’ cave above the northernmost end of the Andahi Pass, Han looked around at the other children. Babies! How was she supposed to run with babies?

She and Lnard had been arguing ever since they crossed the ridge. “We have to hide,” Lnard insisted.

“We’re good at hiding.”

“We can’t hide if they have scout dogs.”

“They don’t. My father says they’re too stupid to know anything about anything important. Or they wouldn’t have given up when the old Harskialdna just rode up the pass.”

“They might have them now. Look, Lnard, I don’t think the Venn got all those Idayagans. I think some got away. And if they did, that means they’re blabbing to everybody about us. And that means they’re



going to come searching in order to slaughter us.”

“Why would they do that?” Freckles asked, her fists pressed together under her chin.

“Why did they shoot Gdir, and then come back? We’re the enemy,” Han snapped, goaded into sarcasm because once again, she wanted to howl.

She looked at the babies. The urge to cry changed to anger. That was good. That meant she could think.

“We’re not going to let them get us. That means we have to go, and that means we have to tell the smalls something so they won’t get scared.”

“What could *that* be?” Lnard demanded.

Han knew Lnard was scared, she’d seen it on the mountain. What’s more, Lnard hadn’t wanted to *be* leader. She just wanted to be *called* leader.

It felt like a window opening. Han drew a deep breath. “We’re making up a story,” she said to Lnard.

“And you have to be the leader in that part. I can’t make up stories like you do. The smalls have to think it’s a game. And they’ll get a big reward.”

“What reward?” Freckles asked doubtfully.

Dvar hadn’t spoken since they’d Disappeared the four fallen children. Her eyes were huge, her face streaky with mud and tears.

Well, all their faces were streaky.

Han groaned. “I don’t know! But if we’re going to wait for the king, like Ndand told us, then *he* can give them a reward. That’s what kings *do* !”

That made sense to everyone. They roused the smalls, who were sleep-soggy and fretful. At the prospect of a game, and a reward, they soon were as bouncy and cheerful as ever. Lnard went around and in a bright voice renamed them after various animals. They wouldn’t run as smalls, they would be ponies, scout dogs, cats, hawks. That made the little ones bounce with joy, as Haldred, Han, and Freckles faced the stores.

“How can we carry all that?” Freckles said it aloud after a protracted silence.

Ndand had brought the food on the horse to add to the bags of dried beans and rice they usually kept here for overnights. There was the huge, heavy basket of cabbages and carrots, untouched since the time they’d abandoned the Fire Sticks and Lnard couldn’t cook food.

“We can’t take anything we can’t carry,” Lnard said over her shoulder, in a sugary voice so the smalls would think it part of the game.

“And we have to carry theirs,” Freckles said, pointing to the little ones.

“Five and up, you all carry your clothes pack, and we’ll put food in each,” Han declared, aware of the passage of time. She wanted to be well away by sunup. “You eights? The more you carry, the bigger your reward from the king.”

That caused a mad scramble. By the time the older children had rolled up the bedrolls, all the eight-year-olds had overstuffed their packs with food supplies.

Han, Lnard, and Hal divided up as much of the rest of the food as they could carry. Freckles and Dvar loaded themselves with four bedrolls, or they tried. Dvar’s knees buckled when she tried to stand up, and she knelt there on the stone, tears spilling down her cheeks and her skinny chest heaving on silent sobs.

Han yanked the top three rolls off her pack sticks. “We’re going to share these,” she said.

“Warmer that way,” Lnard added. “Aren’t we going up higher? We can’t go into the pass.” On the word *can’t* some of her drama came back.

“No pass,” Han said shortly, and, seeing them more or less ready, “Let’s go.”

“Leaving this stuff?”

“Aren’t we going to sing?”

“What if they find it?”

“We’re leaving the stuff we can’t carry. It’s not like a blind goat wouldn’t know we were here, with all the footprints around, and the smell of pee from you-know-who.”

Round-cheeked Rosebud sucked her thumb, her ruddy curls sticky with honey and grime.

Han sighed. “As for the sing, yes. But not here. I keep feeling like the Idayagan spies are sneaking up

right now. As soon as the sun is up, we'll sing 'em." She remembered Gdir's face, so still. Her voice broke. "We'll sing 'em good."

### Chapter Thirteen

THE locals had been right.

For three days a howling storm battered its way down the peninsula, prowling along the mountains before it wandered east.

The Venn fleet, having seen the signs of trouble, had sailed out to win sea room; the north shore above Lindeth was a pleasant morning's ride in good weather, but it took two days for Barend to get his men there and into place.

The storm was a disaster for crops.

As Evred wrestled with angry merchants, pledging credit far beyond what he could hope to pay in his determination to keep his army supplied, Inda ended up spending watch after watch in sodden clothing, helping the people of Ala Larkadhe plan a lethal welcome for the Venn, under Tdiran-Randviar's general orders, but Inda added some piratical touches that pleased the grim citizens.

Everyone left in the garrison as well as in the city worked; Inda was seen everywhere, which (Tdiran-Randviar thought) either heartened people or shut up the slackers. They helped close off streets and create blind alleys, showing people how to set up traps. They also created a maze that would lead the Venn in a continuous loop, once they hammered together then dragged a false stable front across a narrow street.

Up in the castle the Randviar strode about, her ferocious determination wearing out much younger women as some parties worked to sabotage everything and other parties, mostly castle and city children, were put on duty to guard the few remaining warriors from impaling themselves or tripping traps and breaking limbs.

The storm reached all the way to the north shore.

In the pass, Hawkeye's and Noddy's force plodded grimly day after day, night after night, in occasionally horizontal rain, gaining a little relief only when the winds were baffled by the soaring cliffs. Because they had all the remounts they could keep going by the dim, flickering light of torches. Their pace was slow but steady.

Hawkeye liked Noddy Toraca, he realized that fourth morning, when at last they gained a brief glimpse of sky.

Noddy didn't talk much. Before his father's accursed conspiracy, Hawkeye had no memory of Noddy, though he knew he'd had been part of Evred's litter of scrubs during their academy days.

Hawkeye did remember the horror after his father tried to take the throne. The Marlo-Vayir men hauled his father off to the garrison prison, but no one had seemed to know what to do with him. Some thought he should be bound, others that he should be escorted.

Noddy said something to Hadand, and when she agreed with evident relief he appeared next to Hawkeye. "I'll walk with him."

And he accompanied Hawkeye to the garrison, even though he had been riding all day and was about to depart again. Not that Hawkeye knew that at the time. He was just aware of a slope-shouldered, scowly-faced fellow Evred's age who said, "I'll walk with him," and fell in step beside him as if they were boys on the stroll to Daggers Drawn for a root brew.

Hawkeye had a sketchy memory of that walk. At some point he said, "They'll flog me to death as a traitor."

"No, they won't," Noddy said, with about as much expression as someone else would say, "I prefer light ale to dark."

"My father—"

"Yes." Noddy made a vague hand motion. "No way around that. He took a sword to the king. But you

didn't. We all saw that.”

“But I disobeyed my father's orders.”

“Evred will hear you out. Cherry-Stripe, Buck, and me, we'll tell him everything. You'll see.”

“I'll stand against the wall. That I accept. Because I disobeyed orders. No, I don't accept it, because he betrayed his oath when he gave me that command. I-I-just not the traitor's death—”

“You have witnesses. We saw you disobey orders from an oath breaker. That's as much law as oaths are. We just don't hear about that one . . . well . . . because there's some dancing around the way Evred's family came to power in the first place. Never mind that now. Here's the thing. None of that will happen to you. Might have, had the Sierlaef lived. Or the Harskialdna. Bad business, all around.”

Inside the garrison they paced side-by-side, past all the watching eyes. Some men muttered, some flipped up the backs of their hands. Two spat, one uttered “Traitor” and gripped his sword hilt.

Hawkeye's blood ran from hot to cold to numb, but Noddy just walked by his side, past the eyes, and the whispers, and the weapons.

“But what if Evred's dead? Didn't my father say he did something?”

Noddy said, “That's what I'm going to find out. He's got Captain Sindan and an entire garrison up there in Ala Larkadhe, against four. If for some reason he didn't make it, then I guess they'll have to see if his cousin Barend is really alive. Didn't someone say something about him? Anyway—” They arrived at the door of one of the cells, and Noddy walked right in first, and sat down on the bed, propping his elbows on his knees, hands dangling between. “—anyway, you let Hadand-Edli and the Adaluin sort it all out. They've got rank on anyone else. They won't let anyone do anything more stupid than what we've already seen today.”

*Anything more stupid.* That's when Hawkeye knew he liked this fellow. Trusted him. And so he sat down at the other end of the bed and dropped his head into his hands.

Noddy got up and left. Quiet. Easy. Whereas (Hawkeye experienced during many cold-sweat nightmares afterward) if any of those sneering men with the spitting and the backs of their hands and their whispered “Traitor!” had tried to grab him there in the throne room or along that walk, and drag him to prison, he would have fought with all his strength. Killing if he could, to make certain they killed him, because life had ended anyway, or the meaning of the life, and he wasn't a traitor and would not die at the post flayed as a traitor.

He'd never told anyone about that afterward, not until much later, after Noddy kept his word, and Evred listened, and restored his lands, took his oath at the coronation, and then appointed him interim Harskialdna in charge of the north until Barend was ready to take on the work. Gave him back not just his own personal honor, but the family's.

Then to Ala Larkadhe came Noddy's brother, called Nightingale for the gap between his front teeth and the astonishing ability he had with whistling. This was before Fala came to live with Hawkeye, when he was drinking too much distilled rye. One night, after Dannor had been particularly irritating, he downed a bottle or two and blabbed the entire story to Nightingale.

And Nightingale just said, “Heh. Didn't know how dusted up Noddy got over that.”

“He was the calmest man there.”

Nightingale grinned, showing that gap between his front teeth. “No he wasn't, or he wouldn't've been that gabby.”

“That was gabby?”

Hawkeye had laughed a long time, and after that, the nightmares ceased. And though Hawkeye had seen Nightingale and Noddy since, neither had ever referred to those events.

Hawkeye was thinking about that as the weather finally eased a little. You didn't really notice, but Noddy was capable. People trusted him. Evred, for example, had saddled them with those yapping half-grown runners-in-training, no use to man or beast. At fourteen, fifteen, and one sixteen, they were academy pigtail-age, not even old enough for lance training. Now they were expected to be running messages and holding weapons in the heat of battle, which was where commanders were?

If Evred had thought it a good idea when he departed the royal city, he'd changed his mind, because just before they left Ala Larkadhe he'd caught Noddy and turned them over to him, with strict orders to keep

them at the back of the battle once the main force joined up with them.

Noddy had promptly assigned them to keep the wagons dry under the greenweave tarps, and to wand-and-feed duty on the remounts.

Hawkeye could hear them whooping and crowing in the back. He debated between riding back there and whacking heads to get them to settle down and ignoring them.

Noddy just rode along, apparently oblivious as he squinted up the steep cliffs rising to either side. Birds wheeled and darted about the craggy heights, so high up they were like fingernail dents against the sky. The pass had gotten more winding, narrower, and steeper, just over the last day. It smelled like wet rock, moss, and occasionally—strangely—brine.

They had slowed to a walk to protect the horses, while the scouts and the dogs made short forays ahead. Another loud, braying teen laugh echoed from behind. The swirling fog that had descended after the storm deadened sound, but not quite enough. Hawkeye's patience gave out. His knee tightened against his horse's side and he laid the rein to his neck when the animal's ears twitched forward. Then flattened. Noddy straightened up. He and Hawkeye peered into the gently falling mist over the rain-sodden green grasses. Neither could see anything, but their horses' ears flicked forward. Not long after the tall grass rustled crazily and a swarm of scout dogs raced down from the curve ahead. They pranced around the horses, quivering with excitement, ears flat, but quiet, as trained; behind came two riders, a scout and a young woman with a child riding behind her, leading a string of three horses that looked as droopy as the one being ridden.

Dripping flaxen braids flapped on the woman's back as she slid down. She leaned against the animal's shoulder, her face shockingly drawn. As Hawkeye and Noddy approached she lifted her arms to a brown-haired boy of perhaps nine, a boy with the distinctive pale eyes in a brown face and the generous, curving mouth characteristic of the Arveases. He too looked drawn, beyond exhaustion.

"I am Ndand Arveas. M-married to Flash," she said to Hawkeye, her voice high and breathy on the *married*. "Liet-Jarlan ordered me to ride up the pass in warning if I saw the red-black signal flag." Her throat worked, then she went on in the hard, flat voice of tight control, "I checked the beacon. Since the men had not returned. I found Flash dead. At least several days."

Her hand slid into her robe, half-pulling out what looked like a folded piece of paper, but she slid it back again.

"The little girls I left in the old robbers' cave. With food. Like we arranged. I brought Keth—"

She indicated the boy, who lifted his chin as he said in a voice thin as a gull's cry, "Flash is dead."

The boy's chest heaved on a sob. Then he sucked in his breath, teeth gritted.

"The beacon couldn't be lit. My orders were to ride, no matter what. So I did. Me and Keth." Her lips twisted in a spasm of grief. "Found these horses without riders. In the pass. Took them. I knew you'd need a scout report. There's a place. On the pass. Where if you go up the path behind the Elm Cliff you can see down the pass. I counted at least twice ten wings of Venn marching. More coming, many more, judging from the noise all the way down the canyons."

A wing was eighty-one men. Hawkeye and Noddy had six wings.

"Riding or foot?" Noddy asked.

"Both. Mostly foot."

"In the lead will be the heavies for the front lines and the longbow men for just behind," Hawkeye said, remembering Inda's prediction.

Noddy tucked his chin into the collar of his coat. Then turned to the boy. "You're Flash's brother?"

The child straightened his back. "I am Kethadrend Arveas. I will be Flash's Shield Arm." His brows puckered. "Was. He was dead. We saw him—" He turned his face into the woman's arm.

"Is there anyone who needs aid?" Ndand asked, face tight with misery.

Noddy said, "Tdiran-Randviar in Ala Larkadhe will probably welcome another woman on the castle walls. Why don't you ride down to the city, talk to her?"

She touched fingers to heart, tossed the boy up into the saddle, remounted and rode past.

Hawkeye said, "We know they're there, then, and approximately the numbers."

Noddy gave his turtle shrug. "Time for Inda's trickery." He pulled out the gold case Inda had given him

back in Ala Larkadhe, thumbed some damp paper from his inner pocket and a herald's field quill-and-ink tube, then cocked his head. "D'you think the Runners will rise up against us when these things take over communications?"

"They won't." Hawkeye was definite. "Take over, I mean. First, we don't have mages, and second, you'll never be able to use 'em in battle, unless you can convince your enemy to stand by, sword lowered, until you finish writing your note before you commence your fight." He forced a laugh at the notion. "Third, who'd trust 'em? You saw Evred when he insisted on all that code stuff."

Noddy whistled between his teeth as he wrote carefully on the paper, using Evred's simple code nouns. Then he put the paper in the case and said the words of transfer.

That done, Hawkeye summoned the Runners to pass the word down the line that the enemy had been sighted. "Tell 'em we're going to push on as fast as we can ride. Our orders are to reach the top first. Hold it until the Harskialdna gets here with the reinforcements."

Leaving everyone to wonder how long that would be. But no one said it as they changed horses and saddled up for a hard ride.

Rain began to fall shortly after.

## Chapter Fourteen

ON the day the weather cleared, Inda found himself at loose ends for the first time. For a short time he caromed around the castle, but he was in the way of working women, and he couldn't sit still enough to listen to the various guild and merchant representatives all yawping at Evred, either demanding or begging or asking questions no one could answer.

The wind had shifted. The Venn had to be coming in for their second landing try. It was time to see the enemy.

He roused the harassed stable hands to go through the diminished stock for the fastest, freshest horse they had left.

The Randviar had given them an impressive cache of arrows, but Inda had learned during his days dealing with pirates that you never had too many. So he loaded both saddlebags with wood to be planed and sharpened and fletched, and added a bag of feathers just brought in the day before by some of the Randviar's girls.

He found Evred surrounded by a committee of city merchants; he made riding motions from behind one's shoulders, saw Evred's eyes flick his way and register the fact. He was surprised by the many salutes—fist to heart—he received, and further surprised by how the salute created a ball of warmth inside his chest. He still felt like he was pretending to be a Harskialdna, like it was a war game, except for the hammer inside his skull, the nightmares. His body knew a fight was coming.

The horse was frisky and wanted a good gallop. Inda's ride was not particularly refreshing as they splashed through a brief hailstorm followed by steaming heat, but the intense green of the sloping countryside dotted with enormous elms, clusters of oak, and bisected by farm plots, it all looked so fresh and green and . . . *normal*. Was that it? He'd lost any sense of what normal meant, except as something akin to *home*.

The quiet of the countryside wasn't familiar. And the countryside wasn't normal either, he thought as the horse slowed just as they topped a rise. He stared down at the bay, with the harbor city scattered like square blocks along the inner curve. It was too empty. No one worked in those fields up on the slope, no one was on the road, the puddles left from the big storm reflecting the sky as they steamed gently in the sun.

The haze off the coast was too strong to spot any masts on the sea, which was still a thin strip of silver just visible from the hillocks the road climbed and descended.

Each descent dipped lower, until the patchwork of farm plots below the mountains on the far side of the Andahi River ended abruptly in rocky ground. Beyond, white cliffs dropped toward the shore. The

mountains continued onward into the distance, forming the southern base of the Olaran peninsula. Below the white cliffs the shoreline extended thin fingers of treacherous rock into the sea.

The horseshoe of Lindeth lay far to Inda's left. Straight ahead was the north shore. Barend would have taken up position below the cliffs.

Inda turned off the road before it curved away left to the harbor. The horse took him to the cliffs. He stopped under the sheltering branches of some gnarled old firs so he wouldn't create a silhouette, dismounted, and loosed the horse to crop at grass while he snapped out his glass and swept it over the harbor, then beyond to the sea.

And there were the Venn, tacking in at a slant. From a distance the ships were extraordinarily beautiful with their arched prows, the pyramid of wind-curved square sails. Inda's heartbeat drummed as, with deceptive slowness, they shifted sail with skilled precision, came about and began to beat in toward land. He shifted his glass directly below him, at the rocky coast. There as he expected were Barend's people, all crouched behind rocks, spread as far as he could see.

Inda snapped his glass to the breakers. The tide was nearly out. The waves were choppy, but was that all storm wrack? No, the water surged over hidden and not-so-hidden rocks. A deadly beach for a landing.

Now, where was Barend? No crimson flag planted, not for an ambush. Inda remembered his gold case, slapped his pocket—and then remembered that he'd taken it out of his pocket to check it—  
—and then put it down somewhere. Damn.

Well, if he could find Barend, he could write to Evred, make certain there were no messages, right? He walked the horse down the chalky cliffs to an old stream bed below the rocky beach. Then he rode along the streambed. He could not see the ocean, but no one with a powerful glass would see a lone horseman, either.

The outer perimeter guard had already spotted him: a Runner met him, and before long he was sitting with Barend behind a jumble of glittering granite stones, his bags of arrows at hand. His men were all hidden behind rocks, effectively invisible unless you came directly up behind them, so uneven was the shore.

"Rotten ground for fighting, but equally rotten wind for them, eh?" Barend said, grinning.

"Might work for us." Inda hunkered down. "Ground will be rotten for them, too. Give me your gold case."

Barend tossed it to Inda, and the untouched paper and traveler pen he'd packed with it. Inda wrote to Evred, who promptly wrote back on a thin strip of paper saying only that he hadn't received any messages from anyone.

Barend snorted when Inda read it before he ripped it to bits and buried it under rubble. "They won't write to him, they know he hates these magic things. They'll write to you."

Inda glowered at the golden case. "Should I write to everyone to report in, or would that seem like I was breathing down their collars? We should have practiced with 'em, maybe. Set up some kind of protocol—"

He stopped, and Barend finished wryly, "Except Sponge wouldn't have liked that, either."

Inda was surprised and then displeased at his spurt of impatience. It was disloyal. If Evred distrusted magic, he probably had a reason to. He'd been reading about it while Inda was out at sea and hadn't touched a book in years.

"Hai! Some kind of signal went out. They're shifting sail again—"

Barend had been sailing master for Inda's fleet. He peered through his glass, and though Inda watched as well, he couldn't predict movements with square sail like he could with fore-and-aft rigged craft.

Barend had no problem. "Advance landing, only one. They must have seen those rocks. That and the wind freshening, they'd be crazy to come in."

"Or they'd have some land commander above the navy in chain-of-command, doesn't know bow from stern." Inda spewed out his breath. "Give 'em a nice welcome. I'd better ride back."

Barend grinned. "You don't want to stay for the fun?"

Inda rubbed his scarred jaw. "I'm blind, here. I didn't think about that until I reached the cliffs. I'm blind

without that case. I thought I could come while my archers are getting the canoes—”

“Canoes?” Barend repeated.

“We have to ride down the river.”

“What river? No, don’t bother wasting your breath.” Barend shook his head. “This is even stranger than taking on Marshig and the Brotherhood. Here. An extra twenty or so.” He brandished the arrows he’d finished. “We won’t need ’em here. You take ’em wherever you’re going.”

“You’ll need ’em tomorrow.” Inda waved the arrows off. “Those rocks are going to do your business as well as your archers, but that’s just today. I don’t see any more storms coming. They’re going to land down south if they can’t here.”

“Soon’s we see ’em haul wind, we’ll be off to reinforce Rat and Buck.” Barend tipped his head.

“They probably sat out there during the storm making shields for their landing boats.”

Barend’s grin had vanished. “I know. I was thinking that last night. We bought ourselves a couple of days. Maybe that’ll make a difference.”

There was nothing useful to say to that. So Inda just picked up his arrows, backed downhill, and left.

There was no new flag over the gate, just the crimson-and-gold eagle banner indicating the king in residence, so Inda was surprised to find the castle swarming with men, a lot of them gray-haired or balding, mixed with loud, shoving young fellows who looked a year or so younger than Inda’s own age. He didn’t waste time talking to any of them. They didn’t know who he was. So he just turned the horse over to a harassed stable hand and used his considerable strength to muscle his way inside, leaving behind a trail of “Who’s that?” “Hey, Scarface, who’s burning your butt?” and “Stop shoving, there are enough Venn for all of us!” protests. He finally emerged into free space when the duty guards spotted him and summarily cleared the way.

This time the commentary was more specific: “Who’s the strut with the earrings?” “Didya see the scars?”

“Damn! That’s not the pirate boy they were talking about . . . ?”

He left the answers, if any, to the guards to make, vaulted up the stairs, and reached the office to find a flushed, grinning Evred talking rapidly to a big-shouldered fellow of Inda’s height, with butter-colored hair even more unruly than his own.

He knew that face, didn’t he? “Tuft?”

“Inda!” Tuft Sindan-An roared, bounding around the table and pounding Inda on the back with such enthusiasm that Inda coughed, eyes watering.

Inda spotted his case, untouched, where he had left it. He half listened to Tuft’s exclamations and questions as he grabbed the golden box and flipped it open. A paper lay inside. For how long? “It’s from Noddy.”

“What’s that?” Tuft asked, shoving his horsetail over one ear as he scratched vigorously at his sweat-salty scalp.

Inda didn’t hear him. He read Noddy’s short, succinct message, the relief at the prospect of reinforcement congealing to that sickening sense of being too late, of missing something.

“How many did you bring?” he asked Tuft, whose eyes narrowed, all the humor gone.

“Ten wings. All I could raise, after Dad gave in.” Tuft studied the floor.

Evred said reassuringly, “Your father and his clan allies have already given me two nines. No one has forgotten his great response to my father’s call for men.”

Tuft’s broad cheeks colored under the sun-brown, but his manner eased from the scout hound expecting the scold to one eager for the run.

Evred said to Inda, “Tuft seems to have done his best to bring his father to son-murder in his campaign to be released to join us.”

Tuft grinned. “Drunk every night. Let the colts out. Poured distilled rye into the watch’s water bucket. Every day, I did something new. My brother told Dad to either kill me or send me after Cherry-Stripe, and Dad said to go, but only with volunteers. I raised them in two days,” he said proudly, a thumb

toward the window. "I kinda had my fellow spread the word, sort of, beforehand. And some are old, and some a bit on the young side, but after that ride north, they're tough enough!"

Inda said, "How soon can you mount up again?"

Evred leaned forward. "Noddy sighted Venn?" He glanced toward the window, and the mountaintop, where no beacon burned.

Inda tossed Noddy's note to the table. It fluttered through the air, and landed on the map like a crumpled butterfly. "They're on the way, as we guessed. Nband-Randviar rode over the pass. The castle fell, Flash was killed at the beacon site." Evred's wince hurt Inda on his behalf. His own memories of Flash were good ones; how much worse would it be for those who knew him well?

He turned to Tuft. "We meant Noddy and Hawkeye to be the advance scout, make sure we grabbed the top of the pass first. But they're alone until Ola-Vayir gets here. Flash's Randviar saw the Venn on the march. How fast can you get your men up to reinforce them?"

"We'll get there," Tuft said grimly. "We've gotten real good at the fast ride. And that gives us just the kind of odds I like."

Evred touched hand to heart, Tuft thumped his fist to his chest. Another clump to Inda's shoulder. "Good you're back," he said, and was gone in two steps, his strong voice roaring for his Runners.

Inda said, "Sponge, I rode down to see the Venn myself. Looks like an advance force. Listen. The important thing is, I forgot my case. I should have taken it with me. I lost Noddy a whole day by not reading that note until now."

Evred made a vague, negating motion. "If he'd sent a Galloper, it would have taken two or three days. I hear what you say about your Venn dag, but Inda, a part of me is afraid that we're supposed to rely on these things, find them so convenient we depend on them. And at the last moment, they cease to function. Like the lockets."

Inda felt words piling up behind his tongue, but he kept his jaw shut. It was only in the last day or so that Evred would even discuss these things. "I think I've failed Noddy," he said, reverting back to sure ground.

"Tuft just arrived. You didn't even lose half a watch."

"Well, then, that's all right." Inda shoved the case into his pocket. "Here's the thing, we're done here.

Barend and Rat are set. If they aren't busy sabotaging that beach as soon as the sun goes down, and Barend knows plenty of pirate tricks for that, then, well—" He halted, not wanting to finish that thought. Reality was bad enough. "There's nothing more to be done except to get to the top and put our bows to work until the last arrow. I'm going to write a note to Noddy right now. Let him know what's happened."

"When should we go?" Evred asked.

"Dawn watch."

"It will be cold." Evred half lifted a hand, then dropped it. "Give the orders," he said.

Hawkeye handed Inda's paper back to Noddy.

The light was fading fast as it did in the mountains, the sun having disappeared beyond the western crags long ago. The horses had slowed on a steep switchback below a looming cliff. Water from the big storm sheeted down from the cliff, running across the road, and vanishing between rocks on the other side.

Somewhere below the outcropping of rocks they could hear a gully rushing, the sound thrown back by the dripping walls of rock.

When night fell, they would break out the lanterns and change mounts but keep going. Secrecy was no longer a possibility, if it ever had been. Each side knew the other was there, and approximately where. Speed was now the imperative. They galloped on the few declines and flat curves.

Noddy Toraca gave a long, low whistle. "Looks like we're the practice dummies."

Hawkeye's heart had begun to drum. They knew what the news really meant: instead of being an advance force, it was far too likely they were it, unless Tuft Sindan-An's ten wings could reach them in



time. This was unlikely, unless they learned how to race. They were several days' ride behind. The Venn might be a week ahead, but could be less.

"But the Venn are marching," Noddy said, his thoughts paralleling Hawkeye's. "That gives us some time, because we haven't halted. We have to get us more time."

"By?"

"Looking like more than we are."

Hawkeye grimaced. He had never been good at ruses. His fighting style had always been to fly into direct attack.

Looked like he'd be doing that, all right—against the entire Venn army.

But the less that army knew, the better.

Noddy said, "What the Venn have to see when we meet is a mighty force."

"Right." Hawkeye glanced back at their six wings and all the remounts. "If they know we're this few they'll run right over us."

Noddy had slewed round in the saddle. "Yes. We want them to halt. Plan. Rest up, even. Meanwhile. Every arrow that is aimed at something other than us doesn't hit us."

"I won't argue with that," Hawkeye said, cracking a laugh despite the drumbeat of his heart. Strange, how he hated getting ready for a fight, but when the time came, well—

Noddy whistled between his teeth, thumb hooked into his sash as the other held the relaxed reins. Then he grunted. "How's this? We're the ones with all the extra horse gear. We'll armor all the horses. Not just those forward. Get all the remounts behind, say, the first five lines of lancers. That's half of us.

Scatter the rest of our men through the rest, to shoot, yell, move around. The boys give us their fighting tunics, we stuff 'em with straw. We brought plenty of it. We'll wear our grays over our chain mail. We put the extra helms on the straw riders, helms on the ones in back."

"You mean, you and me're gonna lead ten or fifteen wings of straw men?" Hawkeye cracked another laugh.

"Twenty wings of lancers," Noddy corrected, blank as always in tone, expression. "More, if we've got enough clothes to stuff. They only have to look convincing in the front."

"We'll be sure to insist we go into the songs as Captain Hay and Commander Grass. Hah!" The echo ricocheted back like a clap.

"But first, I'm going to write me some letters," Noddy said and to Hawkeye's amazement, he fumbled in his pack, produced pen and paper, swung a leg up and crooked his knee over the horse's shoulder to make a rough-and-ready desk, then got right to it.

## Chapter Fifteen

IN the officers' mess, Evred found Inda seated at the table, hands busy fletching an arrow. As soon as Evred dropped onto a seating mat, there was a movement in the shadows beyond the single lamp's circle, and Taumad appeared, a tray balanced on each hand.

"Everyone is at other tasks, and Nightingale is sleeping," Tau said to Inda. "So I took dinner duty." He swung the trays to the table with an elegant air.

Inda gave him an abstracted glance. Why did Tau have a red mark on his cheek, or was that the lamplight? "Good. Listen, Tau, what about that battle-tunic? The red one? Is it done, or should I finish it up tonight?"

"I finished it this afternoon." Tau set bowls and spoons out for two. "Before we Runners had a meeting. Vedrid scarcely left me anything to do but some edging work."

"Two places? Aren't you eating?" Inda asked, rummaging through the canvas bag on his lap for another feather.

"Ate with the day watch," Tau responded, unloading last the shallow cups and setting them down. He served smoothly and quietly, the way Evred's mother's Adrani servants had. Evred had never

particularly liked Adrani custom, but having grown up with it, he had discovered that he didn't care for food to be thumped down onto the table the way most Marlovan Runners did it. This night he found Tau's skilled efficiency oddly soothing, though ordinarily Tau's presence was distracting, sometimes disturbing. Even in his blue coat, with his hair queued back exactly like the other Runners, he seemed to be playing at being a Runner. Nothing could hide the way he spoke and moved so at variance with the others. Though it seemed disgustingly fanciful, and Evred would never have said the words aloud, Taumad's presence among the other Runners was like a golden Nelkereth charger among the sturdy workhorses of the north.

Evred had known better than to watch him fighting with Inda.

Inda finished the arrow, added it to the pile on the table, then stared sightlessly at the food.

"We don't have enough arrows?" Evred asked him.

Inda grunted, blinked. "Yes. No. I don't know. It gives me something to do with my hands, d'you see? Though I thought after we eat, I'd write letters." He said it somewhat shamefacedly, as though he'd committed an error in referring even obliquely to the possibility of his own death.

Evred sustained the usual grip of fear at the idea of Inda's death, but he'd gotten used to that by now.

"It's a good idea," he said. "However, do you—" He wished they were alone, but knew the wish unworthy. Taumad had proved his trust: not just by saving Evred's life, but by the fact that no one seemed to have heard about it afterward. Not even Inda, who was worse at dissembling than the academy boys they once were. So he squared to the question. "This matter of the restored magic on the lockets. Do you know what Dag Signi is doing right now?"

Inda had begun eating in his absent way. He dropped his biscuit onto the plate and thumped his elbow on the table so he could regard Evred with that direct, searching gaze Evred had to brace inwardly to meet.

"Why don't you trust her?" Inda asked. "Is it magic, or is it her being a Venn?"

Tau poured out the light ale that was scarcely more potent than the root brew Inda had drunk as a boy. Inda seldom drank more than half a glass of wine, but many of the Runners had not noticed. Evred had become aware of that himself only toward the end of their cross-country ride. Inda never said anything at all about food or drink. He just ate and drank what was put in front of him, or went without if he didn't like it.

Inda scarcely waited until Tau had finished pouring. Evred noticed Tau's long, beautiful hands were marked with red, and one bore a thin, puckered red line across the back.

From hands to face. Tau's profile was absorbed, as though his thoughts were at a far remove, though Evred suspected that was part of his role-playing.

The distraction had become a silence. Evred forced himself back to the irritating question that Inda had a right to ask.

Still, he waited until Tau picked up the empty bowl of cabbage slurry and bore it away. Then Evred said, "It's both." And, unwillingly forced the words out, "At night. Alone. It's so easy to see the worst. Over and over." In a low rush, "The older I get the better I understand my uncle. Not condone, but comprehend. You cannot be taken by surprise, you must imagine every contingency, and conspiracy is so very easy to envision. And then to believe. Because it does happen."

Under Inda's unwavering regard he busied himself with a biscuit he didn't want to eat. His stomach had closed.

"You're not like your uncle," Inda said after a pause. And when Evred half raised a hand, as if pushing the words away, Inda dropped that subject. "Signi won't do anything against us. Against her own people either. Against that damned Erkrick, maybe." He waited, and when Evred didn't answer, Inda did not consider why. He grabbed up his spoon and shoveled slurry in as though he'd just discovered he was hungry.

"You too?"

Runner-in-training Goatkick Noth sat back in the saddle, surprised to discover two of his mates at the

cook wagon, which creaked and rolled along.

“Here. You as well? What’s going on up front?” asked the runner driving the cook wagon.

“It’s *Toraca*, ” one of the boys snarled so ferociously his voice broke into a squeak. “He’s gone mad.”

“Probably gone rabbit,” Goatkick sneered.

“Yeee-aaaa-hhhh,” the third drew the word out. “Rabbit. So now he has to write Armband letters to everybody and his uncle, and we don’t wait for the battle to end, we have to take them *now*. ”

“I don’t believe it!” Here came the fourth. He threw his arms out wide, one hand clutching a rolled paper.

“He has to write to his old mother *now* ?”

“He’s getting rid of us,” said Goatkick.

No one argued, but they all fumed, thinking variations on, *What’d we do? . . . He couldn’t be holding a grudge about that little sting . . . He must’ve found out about me catching a nap behind the oats that night on midnight watch . . .*

The cook wagon driver, a man with two children back in Yvana-Vayir, said with unsubtle irony, “Don’t you boys have duty? Or are you all promoted to commander? Move only when in the mood?”

Accused thus of the worst possible thing besides cowardice—frost—the boys flushed, hunched up defensively, and muttered among themselves.

“All this way, and we’re not going to get within a sniff of battle,” the first one stated in disgust, shoving his journey bread down into his pack, and twitching his reins.

The last of them appeared soon after, and on hearing that the others were already riding down the pass he snatched his travel loaf and took off, not even stopping to curse.

*Ride on, boys*, the driver thought, his armpits prickling. *Ride on and stay alive. Maybe someday you’ll look down at your newborn sons and hope, if they get sent young off to battle, they’ll be under a Noddy-Turtle Toraca. Because maybe then they’ll live to complain about it.*

After supper Inda packed everything he’d need and set it below his hammock. He’d shared a hastily converted weapons storage closet off the officers’ mess with Rat and Noddy: they’d put a bunk bed in for the two, and swung a hammock in the tiny remaining space. Even though Noddy and Rat were gone, Inda had found it unexpectedly comforting to sleep in a hammock again.

He picked up his gold case and ran up to the command tower. He found Evred in the office, his pen scratching swiftly and evenly over the page. Inda marveled at the speed with which Evred wrote. Another reminder of his own ignorance. He plopped down at the side desk, where ordinarily a Runner sat to copy or take down dictated orders.

Evred glanced up briefly. “Do you wish me to add any message for Hadand?”

Inda twisted around, and noticed the two closely-written sheets lying at Evred’s left hand. “I’ll write to her myself. But how are you going to get all that into the case? Cut it into pieces and number ’em?”

Evred made a negating move with the quill. “Runner.”

Inda opened his mouth, but Evred smiled bleakly and forestalled him. “No, this has nothing to do with my distrust of magic. Don’t you see? If I do not survive, there has to be a record, carried the way everyone expects.” His brows slanted derisively, as usual bringing Fox to mind. “If she doesn’t carry a child—and I would have heard by now if she does—this is probably a waste of time, and there will be a civil war. I can name who will start it, and probably who will win. Yet I must go through the forms and set out my wishes for the kingdom’s future in case she’s able to hold the kingdom long enough to see them through.” Inda was back a step, uneasily contemplating the alien idea of his sister getting pregnant. “Hadand is chewing gerda?”

“She drinks it, actually. Says the taste is less abominable.” Evred grimaced slightly, remembering the first day she tried it, how she choked and gagged. He’d tried it too, choked, and they’d laughed together.

Laughing helped, she said afterward. “For a year now.”

“Oh.” Shift again. “If anyone can hold the kingdom, it’s Hadand.”

“I think so, too. And so will most. But inevitably not all. Not if there isn’t any heir.” Evred flicked the quill, indicating the barracks-side of the castle. “Also, the only way I can think to keep Nightingale nailed down instead of having him try to drag himself after us is to appoint him the Armband.”

Inda vaguely remembered his old history lessons. How, at the bloodthirsty age of nine, he’d thought the

notion of acting as King's Armband exciting. When you carry a dead Jarl's or king's last wishes, you have all their power until you deliver it to the heir or the heir's mother, if the heir was underage. Nightingale's duty now was to stay out of battle, for he must live and protect those papers. Inda perceived the benevolence in that. Otherwise, Nightingale would surely force himself to follow them up the mountain.

Inda turned to his own task. He pulled out one of his knives and sliced one of the waiting papers into strips, then picked up the Runners' quill, kept sharp and ready, and opened the ink bottle, always kept full.

His first was easiest:

*Fox: We found the Venn. They found us. In a couple of days it will begin.*

Now his family. Inda's nerves tingled. Hadand first.

*When you were training me, you kept stopping yourself. Saying you couldn't talk about things.*

*Well, now you can. Evred made me his Harskialdna. Barend and I gave the men a smashing good duel beforehand. Well, it's time to prove myself. If I come back, I'll tell you all about it.*

For the first time he signed himself *Indevan-Harskialdna*, knowing how much she'd enjoy that. But it felt very strange to write it.

Tdor's letter seemed impossible to start, a problem he'd been wrestling with all along.

*Tdor: I'm at Ala Larkadhe. By dawn I'll be somewhere else far away. Evred doesn't want us saying where, just in case the Dag gets this somehow. But it won't be for long. The Venn are a few days away at most.*

That didn't feel like enough. He rocked back and forth, hunched over his little paper.

Once—not long after they'd left the royal city—Inda had thought about writing to Tdor. But when he'd had paper and pen to hand, he had had no idea where to begin. Everything he wanted to say had a "But wait!" behind it, and another behind that, and another behind that, going all the way back to the last time they'd seen one another at eleven and thirteen.

Signi, always near, had said gently, "Inda? What is amiss?"

"I was going to write a letter to Tdor. How do I start?"

Signi's profile lifted toward the west as the sun dropped beyond the city of tents. "If she were here and you had the space of a hundred beats of your heart to say anything to her, but then she'd be gone, what would you say?"

Someone had come to the tent, interrupting him, and he'd put it away for later . . . a later that had stretched out until now. Seemed reasonable at the time.

Inda shifted uncomfortably, forcing himself to the truth: he didn't know how to write a letter, not to Tdor. Strange. What to do had always come easy. Not what *was*. She'd always been the one to tell him what was.

*Tell the truth, fool! So what's the truth? I miss her. I miss Tenthen. I want to be home. All three of those sound so obvious they're stupid.*

Inda whooshed his breath out again. Stupid, but maybe a place to begin? Yes. And if he didn't live, it wouldn't matter about being Harskialdna, and maybe living in the royal city, and all that.

Inda ducked his head down, and printed neatly:

*I love you, and everyone at home. I want to be home. I want to dance at our wedding. I hope this is the last battle in my life, and that it doesn't end my life. But the battle's going to start.*

Then he signed it just *Inda*, and stuffed it into the golden box, hating how tight his throat felt. The tap, the words, and it was gone.

## Chapter Sixteen

GRADUALLY, dawn's blue lightened to the peachy clarity of a rain-fresh summer day. The molten gold of the new sun limned the reedy edges of grass tufting the sand dunes. It glinted off the minerals in the

heavy rocks lugged to the shore all through the night when the tide was lowest. There they squatted as sea water hissed and foamed all about them, edges pointed seaward, ready to tear apart boats trying to land.

Sunfire glinted in the loose pale hair drifting below the cold, muted gleam of helms, along the cruel edge of drawn weapons, the tips of fish skewers, and in the grain of newly sharpened bits of wood planted all along the shore south of Lindeth. The same sunlight glinted in similar pale hair under similar helms out in the boats waiting for the signal.

A tangle of sea wrack pulled up during the recent storm had been artfully draped over holes dug in the wet sand, all evidence of a very busy night as Buck's, Barend's, and Rat's combined forces labored to make that shore as lethal a landing place as possible.

The last of the ebb tide hissed and flowed out, and then the surges gained strength as tidal flood began. The inrushing sea brought boats filled with warriors, all with shields angled upward, complicated arrow-fouling nets draped from the single masts to the boats' blunted prows.

A weird, moaning note from a horn and sails jerked up those single masts. The boats launched together, a hundred across. Then another hundred, fifty boat lengths behind them. The snap of the single sails as the air filled them, the lift of prows, caused hands to tighten on weapons, fingers to check the tension on snapvine bowstrings, whispered exchanges and shiftings of crouched positions.

The chief of each boat swept the shoreline through field glasses. The slowly strengthening light pricked the bristling of spikes, skewers, sharpened posts. Huge rocks. Nothing they hadn't expected. They knew the landing was going to be rough, they knew men crouched behind every boulder and shrub on that desolate stretch of beach where not a single seabird pattered or rooted.

They were the advance force, the Drenga. They had been honored with the task of making it possible for the Hilda coming in behind them to break through the enemy lines, even if they didn't. Hearts began to drum, bellies to tighten, mouths to go dry.

Breakers formed, surged under the boats and rolled beneath them. The breakers crested, rushed up the beach in creaming foam. The boats picked up speed as the rising waves pushed them forward; a command and the sails were loosed, brought down, the masts stowed under the benches.

On a second command, the men snapped out oars and rammed them into the pintles for the last ride toward the shore.

A strange sight wound its way up the glistening white stairs of the white tower. Three men per upside-down narrow-hulled canoe went first, followed by others carrying paddles as well as bows, and packs with helms attached to loops. The last of the line of men carried rolls of weapons.

Evred halted on the landing outside the archive doors, head bent.

Inda could not see his face, but the stiffness of his shoulders, the audible breathing, brought back the memory of the other morning, when Evred had taken Inda's good news about the archive like a blow to the heart.

Inda was distracted by Tau's face, half lit in the torchlight. "Those marks *are* bruises. You been fighting?"

Tau grinned. Vedrid, behind him, smiled. "No, no, everything's fine."

"What?" Inda demanded.

Evred turned around, his face and voice neutral. "My father was not yet Harvaldar when you left, and so you did not know. The Captain of the King's Runners protects the king, but there was usually a competition to determine who protects the Harskialdna." Evred gave a brief, bleak smile. "Do you think my uncle would have tolerated Captain Sindan else, jealous as he was? But no Runner could best Sindan in those days."

Inda met Tau's eyes, got a rueful shrug of one shoulder.

*And here is where Sindan met his death, right where we stand. He believed he was defending me—and I was standing there in Lindeth—*

Evred thrust away the memory. "Shall we go?" He indicated the open doors.

Inda jerked his thumb toward the shelves, slanted in from the round walls. The men in front shuffled inside, looking around warily at the tall shelves, the ancient books and scrolls. When they got inside they turned around again, the ones carrying canoes wedging in uncomfortably, and doing their best to keep the canoes from whacking the bookcases. This was only possible because of the tower's high ceiling, enabling them to turn the canoes upright.

Nobody wanted to touch anything. Nearly ninety people were crammed into that tower room, along with packs and nine canoes, as Inda inspected the wooden carving around the door, with words in some ancient language worked into the images of green and growing things.

Not knowing what to expect—afraid he might not get any response at all—Inda touched the round figure of a sun with its stylized rays, said the word *atan* —

—and jumped violently back when the door to the landing flickered and vanished, leaving them staring not at the landing, but a flagstoned terrace with snowy mountain crags in the distance under a weepy gray sky.

“Damn!” someone exclaimed behind him.

Inda smiled. This would be about as far from damnation as one could possibly get.

He braced for the remembered transfer wrench and plunged through into the shock of almost-frozen thin air that smelled of wet rock and pine. “Hey!” he exclaimed. “It didn't hurt!”

The men hustled through, crowding on one another as if that magical door might flicker away again and cut one of them in half.

Inda backed out of the way and stared at that door, which was even stranger than the way the doorway had looked from within the tower: in the middle of the air a rectangular door-shaped hole existed, beyond which was the archive with its glistening white walls, the light slanting down from the unseen high windows, shelves visible behind the men, seemingly extending into nowhere.

When the last man was through, Inda spotted weather-blurred carvings in the carefully fitted, rainwashed stone flagging. The carving matched that around the door in the archive. He stepped on the carved sun and the weird door vanished in a blink.

“I wish you'd waited.” Tau sighed. “I would have loved to go around behind it, and see what it looked like from there.”

“It's magic,” one of the men exclaimed. “Like as not your nose would fall off.”

“Or your nob,” one of the younger men cracked, and though some laughed, many made a surreptitious check to make sure they still had all their parts.

The change in air had clogged everyone's ears and noses. For a few moments they sneezed, sniffed, shook heads and stuck fingers in their ears in order to get them to pop. It was cold enough that their breath puffed brief clouds of vapor in the chilly drizzle.

Inda said, “The path seems to begin right here.” He pointed to a broad, flagged path cut in switchbacks down the rocky incline. The path was edged with small stones.

As the men filed past, Inda said, “Sp—Evred. I meant to remember, and I'd better do it now.”

Evred half turned. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Just, if we get separated. These rings. I, ah, got 'em in Ymar. They *find* one another. All you do is touch it, turn around, go in the direction the ring, ah, buzzes at you. I don't know what else to call it. Feels like a bee caught in your skin. No sting.”

“More magical surprises?” Evred asked, with a slight smile.

“Just rings,” Inda said, sliding one onto his little finger; his other knuckles were too large for the plain golden band to fit comfortably over. “Don't do anything else. But now I don't have to worry about losing track of you in case something happens.”

Evred took his in silence. Vedrid started ahead; Tau was the only one who observed the slow deliberation that was almost ritualistic as Evred slid his onto his left forefinger.

“Let's go.” Inda plunged down the path.

Evred followed. Tau fell in last.

On board the flagship, Commander Durasnir finished his morning drill ritual, stepped from his inner cabin to the outer cabin. He drank a spice milk while he read the night's dispatches. Then he walked his accustomed morning tour of the ship, finding everything efficient and orderly as always under the watchful eye of Battle Group Captain Gairad.

He proceeded at an unhurried pace down one deck to the cabins for the leaders. Erkruc was gone. The wardroom assigned to the mages was empty except for a young mage attending the communication device that eventually furnished the dispatches up in the cabin, and except for Dag Ulaffa, who was eating some berries and drinking a spice milk.

Ulaffa regarded Durasnir for a few moments, then said, "Alfrac, please bring me another spice milk. Would you like one, Commander?"

Durasnir made a brief sign, the dag whisked himself out, and Durasnir said, "Can you transfer me to some vantage so that I may see the battle in progress?"

Ulaffa's gaze went diffuse. His old hands gently caressed the sides of his glass, then he said, "I will see what I can do."

Durasnir put his hands together in peace mode and departed.

Inda and Evred followed the bobbing canoes down the slanting switchbacks. Stones clattered over the edge and down into an abyss as Inda's toes kicked them up. He scarcely noticed, he was too busy peering down into the enormous canyons to the east as the rising sun slowly lowered the shadows. He hoped they'd be able to spot the pass—or rather anyone in the pass—from these heights.

Evred's attention was drawn in the opposite direction. He rounded a wind-twisted pine and gazed upward, until at last the bends in the path led to a place where—however briefly—the cliffs and the ancient firs all parted. The drizzle had lifted in the west, promising respite later; the clouds were underlit like silver streamers, an arrowhead of ocean sparkled in the distance to the south. Green hills, fields, flower-dotted meadows all demonstrated the healing power of rain after the previous month's drought. It was beautiful, and deceptively peaceful.

Aware of the irony, he rounded another cliff, which gave out onto an open vista, rank on rank of climbing crags. His eye was caught midway up by a rocky structure never made by nature. Ah, there they were at last! Tall stones curved, dimpled with wind- and weather-smoothed carving made by hands an unimaginably long time ago.

"What?" Inda asked over his shoulder, alarmed at Evred's intent stare upward. "Venn?"

"Wind harps." Evred's face was cold-reddened like everyone else's but his voiced burred with deep pleasure.

"What?" Inda asked, curious at that rare note of elation.

"The Morvende archivist told me about them," Evred said. "I did not explain them already? No, though I started half a dozen times. But we were always interrupted. Anyway, the harps were apparently meant to evoke the resonance of some old Sartoran stone called disirad. Supposedly, the tower is made of it, though all the magical virtue has long gone out."

Inda had a vague recollection of hearing something similar, though not about wind harps. Tdor? Fox? He couldn't remember anymore.

"They consider them a failure," Evred continued as the next switchback carried the wind harps out of view. He wished the wind would rise and sound them, but the soft rain remained vertical. "How could such a thing be a failure? I used to listen to them when I was alone in the tower, my first winter at Ala Larkadhe."

"What did they expect?" Inda asked over his shoulder, hopping over a tiny stream cutting slantways across the path to drip down the cliff on its way to some distantly booming waterfall. "What's disirad supposed to sound like?"

"It resonated in the spirit, the Morvende archivist said. It sang."

“Wonder what *that* means?”

And as they clambered down the path, feet sometimes sliding on mossy patches that were always in the shadow of a rocky outcropping, they speculated, drawing on old readings and half-remembered stories. It was for a brief, exhilarating time just like childhood.

Inda felt it as well. He'd had such conversations with Fox, and sometimes with Tau. Meaning—people bring meaning to things—Fox's thoughts on meaning—is there any meaning, and if not, why do human beings see meaning in so many things? Inda stumbled cheerfully over a tangle of questions and observations, wishing he'd made an effort to get books and read more as he fumbled for the words to express his conviction that there is meaning beyond the meanings.

Evred laughed. “Now I suspect we're chasing our own backs. Though Hadand says the same as you do. Is your mother's mind shaping the way you two see the universe? Fareas-Iofre once said to me that age has given her the ability to perceive just some of the patterns behind the patterns.”

Inda was about to observe that Fox did not want there to be any patterns, because patterns suggested order outside of human creation, and order implied justice, but where was the justice for the Montredavan-Ans?

But that would shift the talk from questions of being to politics. “Is politics just another word for injustice?” he mused.

Evred was wondering how Inda's mind had jumped from his mother's patterns to injustice at the same time the archer just in front was telling Tau in a low voice that his father, a herald, had a good quote from Adamas of the Black Sword on the subject of politics—

“Hep,” Inda exclaimed, and everyone stopped.

Inda dug a hand into his belt pouch. He pulled out his gold case, gleaming richly in the soft light. He grabbed the damp bit of paper inside, his face intense in a way Evred remembered from the old days, just before a game. “First report: Cherry-Stripe is just below the lake, but they split up to find boats and haven't seen Cama's men anywhere. They can write to each other, but since neither knows the terrain, the landmarks they describe are useless, and they're wasting time trying to find one another.”

“Shall we pause and write to Cama?”

“And then what?” Inda asked, his good mood vanishing. “This is just as bad as on the sea, damn it. How do the Venn make it work on land? We get speed—no Gallopers taking days—but what's that mean when we don't have location to orient on?”

The men with the canoes shifted uncomfortably.

Inda sighed sharply. “They'll just have to find some mountain they recognize. If they can. Orient from there.” He sat down on the muddy trail, turned the paper over, held a hand out for the Runner quill-and-tube Tau carried, and scribbled quick words.

Durasnir was reading Captain Seigmad's report on the launch of the southern half of the invasion when the dag on dispatch duty stepped up. He laid a folded piece of paper down in front of Durasnir and then retreated.

Durasnir finished Seigmad's report. Even stated in short, succinct words, the horror of the dawn launch punched him with images: bodies tossed by the crimson breakers, swamped boats, men bleeding to death on the rocky shore.

He threw the paper aside. But the images remained.

He opened the dag's paper. A token slid out, ringing on the table. There was only a single rune inscribed on the paper, representing “U.”

U had to signify Ulaffa. This was one of his personal transfer tokens.

Durasnir summoned his servant to help him into his armor. He slipped his baldric over his shoulder, hung his sword from the rings, and fitted his helm on.

Holding the token, he pronounced the rune and was wrenched out of time and space then shoved back in before his anguished heart could attempt to pump. Pain made him gasp and fall forward a few steps, but



when he discovered who stood just outside the drawn square on a muddy hillside, he ignored the reaction. “Brit?” he said, forgetting honorifics, salutes, all the protocol he was usually scrupulous to observe.

“Greetings, Fulla,” said Brit Valda, Chief of the Sea Dags—who had been missing for weeks.

Her old face was blotchy from cold; he could see her breath. And his own when he exclaimed, “Where are we?” He did not recognize the terrace of flagstones surrounded by thick, gnarled pine.

“Mountains. Erkríc is nowhere to be found. But more important, he is prevented from transfer anywhere here, and so are his dags. Ulaffa knows I am here. He and I made contact yesterday.” Simple words for the terrible risk they both dared, out of growing desperation. “There is much to discuss, if you will hear it.”

“May we talk while observing the battle?”

Valda dipped her head once, hands together. “The one at the landing waged all morning. Oh, Fulla, the waters of the shoreline carry blood all the way along the coast—” She pressed her fingers against her eyes, then said, “Our people broke through the Marlovan lines a short time ago, and are heading north to Ala Larkadhe, which blocks southern access to the pass.”

“I know, he said. “Take me there.”

As Inda and his party raced down the slope, they became aware of a stream tumbling beside them, sometimes on one side, sometimes another. Waterfalls that had been trickles now roared into white water, widening into a racing river.

The middle of the afternoon brought them to the point at which the river was flat enough to navigate—for a time. Most had wanted to risk it earlier, because they’d discovered that walking downhill was only easy for a while. Not one of them had escaped aching legs, or toes throbbing with pain after being jammed against the rigid squared toes of their high-heeled riding boots.

Inda stopped them at last, but stood there looking doubtfully at the fast-moving water as many of the men eased their boots off and dabbled their feet in the river, grimacing with pain.

Inda ignored his aching feet. This seemed to be the right place. Farther down would be one mighty fall, but the stone plinth marking the old trail to the pass was supposed to be well before it. That had seemed easy enough when Inda was standing in the office looking down at the neatly drawn map, but when he looked from that rushing river to the wild tangle of trees and outcroppings at either side, he hoped they’d be able to spot the plinth.

If not, they’d find themselves airborne over the big fall.

Above the sun rimmed the departing clouds through the cotton-batting of fog. Inda said, “This is it.” And, eyeing the many barefoot men, “May’s well stow your boots, you won’t need ’em in the water. Wash out your socks, too, and wear three pairs when we move again, or stuff a pair in the toes of your riding boots. At least we won’t be carrying canoes.”

They lined the canoes along the edge of the fast-moving river, some of the men uneasily watching the water rilling the bank. What had sounded so easy before now looked daunting, and they paid attention as Tau showed them how to pack the canoes to balance them.

They had found five men who knew something of boats, and two who’d volunteered to steer. Ranging the steersmen in rows, Tau and Inda stood in front of them and demonstrated the stiff-armed stroke, and then the steering stroke.

Tau and Inda would steer the lead canoes of the first two groups. Inda went over the stroke with the lead steersman of the third group until he could sense resentment under the man’s impatience. It was just water, after all; Inda gave up when he knew the fellow had ceased to listen.

They picked likely-looking strong men who seemed to have mastered the stroke for the bows of the canoes.

“All right.” Inda demonstrated once more, moving his paddle slowly through the air. “Remember, keep to the middle of the wake of your leaders, and you should be fine. Take your places!”

Everybody clambered into the canoes, paddles in hand. The guide for the third boat watched Tau launch his and leap into the rear, every muscle straining as he steered; now they saw why the steersman was at the back.

The second and third canoes swiftly followed.

Inda went next, with Evred seated in the middle of his canoe, Vedrid taking the forward position. Evred took a paddle, too, listening for the call of the stroke. Seeing the king bend arms and back to the work, the men were more assiduous than they might have been.

Inda and Tau had learned how to paddle on Freedom Island, racing down the mountain streams for fun after a long day of training. Balance and rhythm came back within a stroke or two, opening them to the exhilaration of speed. The men whooped and yelled as they sailed in a fast line over a submerged rock, dove into foam, then came up again, whooshing between more rocks as the steersmen planted their feet and put their entire bodies into controlling their paddles, which functioned as tillers.

One group, two, three, they shot down the river, a snake line of nine, the cliffs passing with glorious speed.

It was fun until the lead boat in the third group came too close to a submerged rock. Their second boat, bobbing in their wake, hit the rock, hurling men and gear to smash against jagged granite teeth. The third boat nearly missed them, bucketed: the steersman turned purple in the face as he wrenched them straight. Three bodies floated past the line, one in a pinkish cloud, arrows from their packs spinning and bobbing crazily on the surface.

The rest of the line managed to pull four men out by catching their arms or legs as they tumbled past. One swept by the entire line too far out of reach, yelling incoherently.

“Swim to the side!” Inda roared.

White water ahead—this time they rode the foam in grim silence.

## Chapter Seventeen

AT the same time that the Venn landed just to the south of Lindeth Harbor, the people of Lindeth woke early to the smell of smoke.

Uneasy gazes went to unlit fireplaces. No flames in sight, and anyway Fire Sticks gave off a faint smell, not this acrid, nose- and eye-burning reek. People popped tousled heads out of doors, checking the streets and then one another, all mirroring the same question: Where?

Finally, someone spotted the smoke billowing lazily up from the direction of the water, ghostly against the fading night as it rose above the jumble of new-laid tile rooftops.

A few ran to the harbormaster’s house on the central square (still unfinished), to discover a crowd of his neighbors already there, all clamoring for him to Do Something.

He stood in his front door, tall, gaunt, his sparse hair nearly white. He was drinking the coffee he’d just scorched, ground, and brewed. Those who had enough wit left to notice the coffee realized he’d been awake a long time as he said, “Well, we didn’t want ’em, did we?”

“What? What?” newcomers asked.

Someone in front turned around. “Marlovan patrols are gone.”

“But first they set the docks on fire,” the harbormaster said.

“Why? As revenge against us?” a woman demanded shrilly.

The harbormaster snorted. “I don’t pretend to know much about running a war, but it seems to me, this is what you do when you have fewer men than the other side. And no stake in protecting people who’ve been causing you trouble ever since you came. But a big stake in keeping the enemy from landing.”

“So they started a fire to keep the Venn from landing those warships,” said the new guild master, a tall, gaunt fellow who’d been a merchant captain until sea trade was ruined. “Right. What do we do?”

The harbormaster said, “You go back to your house, shut the door and shutters, and sit. If the Venn do land, they won’t stop and ask for your partisanship. Angry men with pointy things sent to secure a foreign

city are pretty much alike anywhere. That's what I've heard. So far nothing's convinced me different." So the word spread from house to house: sit tight.

That kept everyone indoors until early afternoon when the wind freshened, blowing off the sea and sending sparks showering over rooftops, walls, shutters. Sparks kindled to flames, joined, and spread. The Lindeth people emerged once more. Whatever was going on elsewhere, they had a new war on their hands: people against fire.

"Kill the man, take his horse."

That was the strategy given the Venn chosen for the first wave of the invasion. They had drilled on the plains of Ymar, two men per horseman, the target being not chests or heads but joints. *A smashed knee and elbow gets him off the horse, then he's yours.* Everyone knew the mounted man had the advantage. But though they'd done their best to emulate the fighting style of the horsemen, no one had foreseen the killing effectiveness of those slightly curved blades when swung down from on high. Many Venn died before a few of Durasnir's superbly trained Drenga figured out an adaptation: one feinted for the sword, the other went after the shield, and just when the horseman turned, the all-important third came up from behind and struck knee, elbow, shoulder, even wrist. Whatever was within reach.

It didn't always work. The Marlovans were good at sticking on their horses. But the Drenga discovered if they were fast and strong, they could get just that glimpse of an elbow, or a knee if the chain mail rucked up, or the shield angled another way—a smashed joint could be as effective as a stab wound. Best of all was a chance to cut the tendons at the back of the Marlovans' knees, and there was soon a plunging, wild-eyed horse with no rider.

The breakthrough occurred at the west end of the landing site, when a chief, having seen too many of his men die, pulled the remainder back long enough to regroup them into threes.

He had plenty of men to do it with because they outnumbered the Marlovans. Outnumbered them even with men still waiting for launches, so they could take the time to move down their own forces, regroup them, and put the tactic to work.

As soon as the other Venn saw ten, then twenty, Marlovans topple from their horses, the word spread, followed by the deep and fierce joy of battle lust and soon there were five hundred dead or dying on the crimson beach, limbs hacked up.

The first to recognize the shift in tactics was Rat. He then forced his way to Buck, who fought madly in the thick of the Venn who had flocked round the Marlo-Vayir banner, each thirsting to be the one to bring down a commander.

"They're killing us for the horses," Rat shouted.

Buck couldn't hear anything but the clang and ring of metal, grunts, and shouts, couldn't see anything beyond the lunging, stinking press of men, all blood, steel, wild eyes, teeth.

He flexed his calves and his horse reared, striking out, driving three Venn back. A plunge, two hard strikes, and he was out of the melee, breathing hard. "What's that?"

"We're outnumbered. And they're killing us to get horses," Rat shouted.

One sweat-blinded glance toward the shore made it clear that they'd failed to halt the landing. Yet another massive line of boats was surging over the breakers toward the gore-splattered shore.

Buck whacked his blood-crust sword against the shield of his trumpeter. "Fall back."

The trumpeter, scarcely out of boyhood, looked incredulous. Fall back before these shits who weren't even mounted?

"I'll be damned and soul-eaten before I let them use our animals against us," Buck yelled, yanking the trumpet from the fellow's fingers, and he played the charge in reverse, loud, hard, and flat.

The Marlovans lifted heads, some circling, others riding away in relief, clutching bleeding wounds. Many, infuriated by the piles of hacked Marlovans tumbled into the bloody water, gave chase and tried to get the animals to trample the running Venn. They struck from behind, *see how you like it*, before veering

off.

The new Venn commander saw the retreat, and gestured to his ensign. He shouted orders.

The horn blatted once more, marshaling those with horses to ride toward the tall white tower sticking up like a ghostly finger against the dark mountains: the city of Ala Larkadhe.

Dag Signi watched from the top of the white tower as the Venn horseman gradually became a distant line on the southern horizon.

Tdiran-Randviar had placed a girl at that prominence, but as soon as the advance guard was spotted cresting one of the hills above Lindeth, she abandoned the white tower, useless as anything but a lookout vantage. They now knew the enemy was coming, and from where. The Randviar shifted her lookouts to the lower, granite towers, where they could watch and shoot. Dag Signi slipped into the lookout's place, unseen from below, then sent word to Valda.

So Commander Durasnir was wrenched in and out of time and space again. He found himself on another prominence, this one circled by a raised rail carved with the patterned overlap of acorn shapes, many of them worn to vague bumps by weather and time. The rail and the stone beneath his feet were made of the strange, glistening white metallic stone that he'd seen only once before. This had to be the famous white tower of Ala Larkadhe, and he and Valda shared it with a small figure in a youngster's smock and riding trousers, bare feet below.

Then the person turned, and he stared in astonishment at the familiar face of Jazsha Signi Sofar. "They told us you were dead," he exclaimed.

Her eyes were red and puffy, her nose glowing. The surge of compassion was acute enough to make him forget the war: so had she looked all those years ago when she discovered that she was not in the final choice for Hel Dancer. He opened his arms, she walked into them, her small, strong arms wrapping around his waist, her chin knocking against his armor, which made her chuckle tearily. He pressed her against him, one hand cupping the back of her head the way he'd done so many years ago.

The hug, brief as it was, restored warmth, reassurance. Sanity.

But sanity brings one back to question.

"You came to witness the fighting?" she asked, wiping her eyes with a freckled wrist as she backed away.

"Yes." The grooves in his face deepened.

He snapped out his field glass as he walked to the rail and peered down the road toward the harbor. The swarm on the distant hill, the tiny glints and winks of sunlight, became a galloping force shockingly besplattered with gore, the shards reflecting the new sun off naked weapons, helmets, armor.

Signi sensed in the tightness of his grip on the glass, the rigidity to his shoulders that he was deeply disturbed.

Valda gripped her elbows, her inward senses blinded by auroral glare around the Golden Tree. She had not planned this meeting, yet now it seemed important for the three of them to be there.

Erkrick had worked hard to isolate dags from the military, and the military branches from one another just as he'd isolated the sea dags from the Yaga Krona.

"You must watch," she said to Durasnir. "But we must talk as well. Did Erkrick leave word of his whereabouts with any of your military people?"

Durasnir's brow contracted. "No. I thought all dags were enjoined to make their whereabouts known to one another, if not to us."

"We have to." Signi emphasized the "we" but with a faint irony that underscored the fact that she had been missing since winter as far as her own people knew.

"He ordered us to submit to tracers, in fact," said Valda. "He claimed it was for our own safety, after Signi vanished. That's why I had to vanish."

In the distance, a signal horn bawled, a hoarse, mournful note, followed by a couple of short blats. The Venn reformed into rough columns; some had not mastered the horses. On one of the lower hills in the

distance, the glint and wink of sun on armor was just visible to the unaided eye.

“So you believe he uses the homeland as an excuse to cover his movements?” Signi asked.

“I did.” Valda watched the Venn riders lurch toward the city gates below. The Marlovan women crouched behind the battlements on the walls below the tower, bows taut, cut-down barrels of arrows ready. Unaware of the three Venn above them. “Now I am afraid if he does go back.”

“Afraid?” Durasnir repeated.

Another blat from the long, curled brass horn caused the mounted troop to rein to a ragged halt. Many of the horses jiggled and backed, ears flat, heads plunging to protest riders who smelled like human blood, who sat wrong, held the reins wrong, moved wrong.

“So you too suspect something . . .” Too many years of careful silence made the words almost impossible to say to anyone outside her circle. “Something to do with the king?”

At the command, a Venn war party rode through the gates below, weapons gripped at the ready. The horses had bunched together, their ears forward: they smelled home.

Outside the gates the main advance guard milled in bad formation as they struggled with the horses and waited for the warriors on foot to catch up. Looked like there’d be no more horses. To Signi their jerky gestures and sharp-angled postures signified murderous tempers.

The commander made a gesture. One of the horsemen raised a fire arrow, aimed it at the crimson-and-gold banner over the gate. A shout went up from the men.

The city streets were empty, the shops closed, doors locked, windows shuttered despite the heat. It seemed no Marlovans were present to see their banner burn, but everyone knew that was false.

As the banner was consumed by pale flames, the men of the foray party moved slowly into the first courtyard of the castle, and finding it empty, to the second.

The women on the castle walls waited, still as death.

At the gate, the Montrei-Vayir banner dropped to the stones, smoldering. This time the Marlovans could hear the word their enemy shouted: “Ydrasal!”

The foray party passed directly beneath the tower, helms bobbing with the rhythm of the horse hooves’ sharp, distinct clop. Mail jingled as the first foray party passed through the stable yard, out of sight.

A second foray party was motioned inside. They rode up the main street into the city.

Durasnir endured the wind-twist of inner conflict. Honor required he state one truth, the most fundamental. “You and Signi have betrayed our vows to the prince.”

Signi stiffened. Valda half raised a hand. “Is he the prince we swore to?”

“Can you prove otherwise?” Durasnir retorted. “I can’t.”

“Neither can I,” Valda said. “But if you had not doubts you would not be here. Yes?”

The hissing, humming zip of arrows echoed up from the interlocked stone canyons somewhere below. In two strides Durasnir reached the opposite rail, glass to his eye. Valda backed away, hands upraised, palms out, an instinctive gesture.

Signi herself had backed away from a horror she could not prevent.

Trained to locate and assess such noises, Durasnir could do nothing here, but old habit guides the nerves and muscles faster than the brain. He turned away from the rail almost as swiftly as he’d reached it.

A third party and then a fourth were sent in, each to scout a different quadrant.

Bone-deep pain wrenched Signi.

The work of war went on. Gently guided by their silent surroundings, the cautious Venn forays rode straight into traps. On signal each hidden shooter took aim and killed a chosen target. The horses found themselves taken by new humans, but these ones had the right hand-talk, the right smell. The animals went peaceably to the nearly empty castle stable.

Above, the three watchers struggled with the question that threatened to bring down the Venn way of life. Was it right to swear unquestioning obedience to another human being? *Could* any one person truly embody Ydrasal?

A short series of blats from the army at the gate pulled the waiting Venn riders back into a rough line, heads turned toward their chief, who stayed apart as he dictated a message to his ensign.

The ensign sent his message.

In the pass just days from the highest point, Hilda Commander Talkar read the message his signal ensign had just handed him.

He read it again, then gestured to his nearest captain. He held out a tiny strip of paper, already damp from the dreary weather, the letters running into a smear. "From Acting Battle Chief Vringir. Battle Chief Hrad died at the landing. They're at the gates of Ala Larkadhe. Four scouting forays went in, have not come out. No signals. The city looks empty from the outside."

"That city doesn't completely block the pass at that end." The captain had known Talkar for years. He stated the obvious to focus their thinking. "We could narrow up, ride along the river into the pass. Circle around the city completely."

That's what Talkar had been considering. But what about the scant numbers of Marlovans reported at the landing? "The enemy's entire army must be in there, waiting to strike us in the back," Talkar said.

The captain gave a short nod of conviction. "Soon as Vringir starts up the pass."

Talkar's rage was cold as the rain, deep as the abyss. Hrad had fought beside him for years. Talkar had trained those men killed at dawn, he knew most of their names. *I hope you are hiding in that city, Indevan Flame-Ship*, he thought. *See how you like your famous pirate tactics.*

He waved to his message ensign and said, "Tell Battle Chief Vringir to burn Ala-Larkadhe to the ground."

## Chapter Eighteen

INDA shifted his gaze ceaselessly from the river water to either bank. He was in the lead now, Tau having hauled over when they spotted their missing man clinging in a blue-handed death grip to a low-growing tree branch. Tau's canoe group had swerved with him, the white-knuckled steersmen determined not to vary from what Tau did by a finger's breadth.

Inda had thrown his entire body into the stroke, shooting them past Tau's canoes no more than an arm's reach away. He feared they'd come too far, and strained to hear the boom of a waterfall over the roar and rush of the river. The canoe shot over water-smoothed stones, plunging down into rushing foam. Then they raced around a massive upthrust of striated rock—and straight ahead a tall carved stone stood up above the river's bank.

"Marker!" Five of the men raised their paddles.

"*Stroke!*" Inda bellowed, wrenching the boat over as it began to drift.

Hastily the men resumed paddling, using such vigor they veered sharply and plowed up onto the steep riverbank. Rocks ripped holes in the wood-and-canvas sides and the nose came to rest in a holly shrub, but no one cared.

They picked the gear out, shaking and wringing out the excess water. The men they'd rescued stripped, shivering violently, and wrung out their clothes.

"Spread 'em on the rocks," Inda said. "We'll eat and then start down." He jerked a thumb at the plinth, which Evred was climbing up to inspect more closely.

The rescued men warmed up in the sun and their clothes baked dry on the rocks. A short time later Tau's boat appeared. Leaning into the paddle from the hip, he brought the canoe smartly up onto the riverbank.

The men leaped out, sorting gear and themselves. By then someone had started a campfire, prompting men from each riding to plunge into the water and hand catch swimming trout. Others broke apart the canoes so they could use the wood and canvas; trout were sizzling on former canoe ribs as Evred skidded down the hillock from the plinth.

"The carving on that thing is worn but readable," he said. "I don't recognize two of the alphabets. The third is Sartoran."

"Ancient or modern?" Inda asked, swinging and stretching his legs.

"Modern. I don't think the marker is that old." Evred accepted his share of the food.

“Might have been replaced.” Inda waved his bread in a circle. “I’m going to take a look around.” Behind the plinth lay a clearing circled by mossy boulders that looked like they’d been set before Iasca Leror was named. The trail began at the far end, lined by melon-sized stones.

Inda wandered barefoot a way down the trail, wincing when he stepped on small rocks. Only a few months wearing boots and the bottoms of his feet were already losing their toughness from the years of shipboard life. He grimaced, bending to examine the trail. It was packed hard, scoured low along the center in the way of trails used for centuries.

He straightened up, unlimbering his glass, and swept it over the mountains. No sign of villages, but they had to be out there.

When he reached the riverbank again, everyone was dressed and the gear had been redivided, accompanied by some not-so-soft muttering about having to share arrows with idiots who lost their packs. Most of the men had shoved a sock into each toe of their boots.

Inda dropped onto a boulder and fingered some damp paper from his pocket. He uncapped the travel pen from the ink nub, wrote, *Where are you and Cama?*, put it into the gold leaf-etched case, and sent it to Cherry-Stripe.

The answer came back before Inda had counted nine nines.

*We’re on the way down. We found each other on opposite sides of the lake. Cama’s boys are force-marching on the north side of the lake, us on the south. Villagers say we’ll come out on either side of the high point of the pass.*

Evred said, “How long would you guess they are from the pass?”

Inda shut his eyes, mentally considering the map, and its drawings of the pass and the lakes relative to Ala Larkadhe. He still did not really have a sense of land travel, especially in mountains. “Three days?” He slapped his side and exclaimed, “Another!”

He opened the case, took out a badly crumpled paper. Evred recognized Barend’s large, backhand scrawl, and his breath tightened in his chest.

“Venn outnumbered us too bad, and broke through.” Inda’s voice roughened as he gave Evred the details. “They started killing us to take horses, but Buck pulled our people out. Venn’re on the way to Ala Larkadhe.”

Evred’s heart hammered against his ribs. “Send Buck to harry their back.”

“Later. Not enough of us to make a difference, so let’s protect Lindeth. Venn’re going to want to bring those ships in, soon as they hold Ala Larkadhe. We might have a chance there. Barend knows some good pirate tricks.”

Evred’s throat was tight; he was too angry about the defeat to speak. He turned his thumb up.

Inda wrote and sent the command.

When the last of the Venn invasion reached their advance force outside of Ala Larkadhe’s city gates, the horns moaned and blared, bringing the Hilda’s southern invasion force into squares. They sat in place to eat and drink. Ensigns and their own orderlies passed around water from the stream alongside the road, and then waybread stuffed with dried and salted fish.

As they wolfed down their meal, Acting Battle Chief Vringir’s ensigns walked among them speaking orders.

Signi, Valda, and Durasnir watched from the tower.

Durasnir observed the issuing of small bundles that surely were sticks and leddas oil soaked hemp: torches. Valda watched the commander gesturing toward various parts of the city as he talked to a group of armor chiefs. The way his hand chopped the air, he seemed to be dividing the city.

Signi went cold when she observed the subtle signs of battle-experienced men reacting in surprise, even shock.

Then a long blat brought the men to their feet and into line. War bands were ordered to mount up and trot into position outside the city walls. Others took up a stance blocking the city gates.

The rest formed up into offensive squares—helms on, shields up edge to edge, swords at the ready—and marched inside the city, each to a specific area.

One man per party passed by the armor chief's fire keeper to light his torch; the rest of fire teams carried the entire army's supply of leddas oil until the ships could offload the barrels down in the hold.

Valda exclaimed, "They are going to fire the city!"

Signi turned on Durasnir. "There is nothing but women and children and old people in this city."

From each square's torch man thin drifts of smoke reaching lazily skyward on the heavy summer air.

"If there is nothing in this city but women and children, it was women and children who killed the scouting parties," he returned. At the rejection in her face he said quickly, "I hate it as much as you do. But I cannot interfere. This is Talkar's battle to command. Vringir down there has his orders."

Valda pressed her hands to her face. "He must think the city is full of warriors."

"It is," Durasnir said.

"No it is not," Signi exclaimed. "I have been here several days. I spent all of yesterday down in the caverns where the water flows from beneath the mountains. They have the baths there for city and castle. I was renewing the spells, and saw everyone who came to bathe. The men are all gone, except for a few wounded, leaving boys ten and under, or men over sixty." She opened her hands in supplication as she faced Durasnir. "Can you not tell Hilda Commander Talkar?"

"No." His voice was gentle, but decisive.

"No," Valda said at the same time. Her eyes were full of tears, her face distraught as she added, "Fulla is not supposed to be here, do you not remember? Or you, or I."

"It wouldn't matter even so," Durasnir said. "In his eyes, the killing of our scouts means the inhabitants are warriors."

Signi remembered the armed women in the Marlovan royal city. Hadand and Tdor, so quiet and reasonable and kind—and every time they moved, there was the glint of polished hilts inside the gap in their sleeves, the glimpses of knife hilts in their boot tops when their voluminous trousers swung at their long strides.

It was true. The Marlovan women were warriors. Maybe two or three hundred of them, and easily ten times that slowly assembling around the city in a circle, so that no one would escape alive, but the fact was inescapable.

As if someone below had heard her thoughts, an eerie noise whirtled through the air. Heads snapped skyward.

The Marlovan women on the walls knelt on the sentry walks between the battlements, testing bow strings, pulling arrows close. The woman almost directly below Signi had an untidy gray braid. Her gnarled first and second fingers trembled as she expertly nipped the feathers of her arrows between them. When the war parties had marched within arrow shot of the defenders on the walls, two more screamer arrows arced over the city.

Drilled and smooth, the women jumped up and took aim. *Zzzzip! Sssst!* With smooth, rapid, and deliberate skill they began shooting at the invaders.

Arrows clacked against upraised shields.

The Venn angled their shields high as they walked in cadence down the street toward the old, carving-decorated guild house on the opposite side of a broad square from the western castle entrance. The Venn crossed the square at a run, and spread efficiently out. The ones on the outside shielded the ones who smashed windows with rocks. The next two slung dippers of oil through the jagged gaps, followed by twists of straw touched to torches. On to the next window.

The shields could not ward efficiently against trained archers when the men were in violent motion: arrows hit two men as they reared back to fling the oil. They crumpled, and were promptly replaced.

A short blat from the Venn signal man and the back rows of each square raised bows, took aim at the bobbing figures on the walls. Arrows hissed and clattered in both directions now.

An arrow thunked into the woman directly below Signi, twisting her around like a cloth doll. She fell onto the safety walk, where she writhed at the feet of a young woman loosing arrow after arrow. The shooter glanced down once, face white and blanched, then she bared her teeth and kept shooting as fast as she



could.

Presently, the wounded one stopped pawing at the arrow in her chest and lay unmoving, fainted or dead, Signi could not tell. Two younger women emerged onto the sentry walk and ran, bent and low. One lifted the fallen woman under the arms and dragged her off. The other strung her own bow and shot.

Signi sneezed. Smoke! She whirled back to face the guild house square. Now more than half of the windows belched flames and smoke. A flicker from a doorway: a young woman carrying a bundle ducked out and ran.

She made it ten steps before she dropped dead with at least a dozen Venn arrows in her. The bundle fell, and out rolled a baby too young to walk. The child opened its mouth wide, sucking in its breath for a long, agonized moment before the fist-clenching, body-shaking scream. An attack party crossed the court from another direction, their path intersecting the fallen woman and the squalling baby. Most ran past. The man at the end closest cocked his wrist back, sword high, but he faltered midway in his stroke, leaped over the baby and ran on, leaving the child sitting by the dead woman, screaming and screaming. Signi smeared the blurring of hot tears from her eyes and coughed from the thickening smoke. More figures dotted the smoke-shrouded street, many of them absurdly small—children separated from families in the smoke, most wailing in fright. Some were shot or struck down by the swords of the Venn, others were hidden by the thickening smoke.

“I can’t bear it,” Signi whispered.

“Is it any more right when young men have life and light struck from their eyes?” Valda asked, gripping the stone rail.

“No. But most chose such a calling. Those children did not. My Dag Chief, I cannot stand by as witness.” Yes. Yes. The words hummed through her, diminishing the pain, the screams, the smell of burning. The world below glimmered in a haze of light. “Yes, I will act.”

Valda took hold of Signi’s shoulders. “You *cannot*.” And when Signi did not answer, she shook her hard. “You. Must. Not. Act.”

Signi’s head rocked, but her gaze lifted beyond Valda’s shoulder. She brushed at the fingers dug into her shoulders. “Go, Valda,” she whispered. “Take Fulla. Go.”

“I will not be able to ward you,” Valda warned. A shake. “Do you hear me?”

“I know.” Signi trembled with effort. Valda felt it under her fingers. “The consequence is mine. And if I am discovered, perhaps it is time to let Erkrick know that I live. Because I am going to take a stand against him.”

Valda shook Signi a last time in a frustrated attempt to hold her to the now, to her own plans, so desperately important. But Signi was gone, gazing beyond the rim of the world at Ydrasal, the Realm of the Tree; to Valda’s magical vision Signi shimmered in pale fire.

So Valda let her go, and backed away a step as Signi began the deep breathing of a mage gathering all her inner resources. Valda gripped Durasnir’s thick, bony wrist and without leave transferred him back to his ship. Then she left herself.

Signi did not see them go. Her ears rushed and thundered, closing out the screams of the baby far below, the shouts and cries and hissing arrows, the sickening thuds of falling bodies as she reached down and down, to the strong flow of water below the ground.

She began to whisper a chain of spells held together by strength of will.

If you knew it was there, and you were strong enough to form the conduit, then the water would drive itself upward. First a trickle, then a stream, moving in and out of space so that every pot, every bucket, every pond and pool and fountain in the city bubbled up to the brim, quivered, spilled over in a thin trickle that rapidly swelled to overflowing.

Small animals put ears up, twitched whiskers and noses, then scrambled, skittered, swarmed for higher ground. Water spilled onto shelves, tables, puddled onto floors, rilling out of doorways. Water rushed down stairs, through broken windows, seeping, dripping, gouting down into flames that sent up hisses of steam.

Thin sheets of overflow strengthened to cascades, the fountains jetted huge sprays that arced high enough in the air to glimmer with rainbows between roiling columns of smoke.

Spouts and falls lifted charred furnishings, papers, books, clothing, carrying them out of windows and doors to wash down streets in ever-widening rivers. Black ash streaked the whitewashed walls of buildings as the jumble of furniture, curtains, pots, cups, plates, and corpses bobbed and spun in eddies across the courts.

Warriors and defenders alike ran from the deluge, or tried to run until they found themselves caught waist-deep in the swirling waters. Though no one signaled, the women on the walls began in ones and twos, and then in a mass, to run down to the aid of the old and the small, all struggling not to get swept away in the terrifying flood; Venn warriors dropped shields and weapons as they slogged heavily, weighted by their armor, through the climbing torrent. There would be no fires set now. They had to get out with their lives alongside city dwellers, some clutching bits of belongings gathered up witlessly. A Venn slogged out of nowhere, thrust a squalling baby into the arms of an old woman guiding a frail old man, and surged on. Nightingale Toraca appeared with a string of the horses recaptured earlier, his arm in a sling. His wounds had reopened, and he half leaned on the lead mare. If the Venn even noticed his blue coat, they paid no attention to him or to the horses—who snapped at anyone unfamiliar who tried to touch them.

Screamer arrows and blats repeated frantically; everyone headed toward the gates, thrust forward by surging water.

When all living things had cleared the city's central square directly above the underground caverns, a rumbling boom punched through. A geyser shot skyward, tossing up massive flagstones like leaves in the wind. Water and stone rained down, dousing all the fires, the white-foaming crest near the height of the ancient tower where, unseen from below, a small woman stood, arms upraised, fingers trembling, until her spells collapsed around her and she fell to the white stone in a faint.

The geyser bumped lower. Then again. Gradually it subsided. Water roared through the southern gate, carrying most of the city's first-floor furnishings out into a spreading tangle of wreckage. The torrent diminished into running gutters, and then even those lessened to a thin trickle, leaving the city tinkling unmusically with drips.

The amazed defenders gradually perceived that they were surrounded by uncountable enemies. The amazed enemies took in the defenders standing in small clumps within easy reach. They looked around for weapons, shields—most of them gone—and then sought out their captains, their faces expressing variations of “What now?”

Nightingale was the first to recover. He knew the Venn wanted horses; he hoped if he got the animals out of sight they'd stay out of mind.

The last of the horses vanished inside when Hilda Acting Battle Chief Vringir broke through his dazed ensigns and slogged toward the gates, eyeing the defenders in the fading light. The army he'd envisioned did not exist. What did were a few nine-nines of Marlovan women defenders, most of them now as unarmed as his men. No one looked ready to carry on a fight, and though he'd been ready to slaughter them all at noon, he had no stomach for cutting them down in cold blood now.

“Let them go,” he said to his signal ensign.

Instead of blowing the permit passage toots, the ensign said, “Who *did* that?”

Such a breach of discipline would have netted him summary punishment under ordinary circumstances—as ordinary as war ever was. Vringir ignored the persistent longing to sit right down and empty the water out of his boots as he said, “Dag Erkríc's business if anyone's.” Adding wryly, but only to himself, *For a change*.

“Signal,” he said, more sharply, for some of the people were starting to stir and eye one another warily. This time his order was promptly carried out. The Marlovans reacted as if shot—it was almost funny, the way they backed together, looking around for weapons that were not there, some of them slipping in the mud or tripping over cushions and jugs and broken chairs. But when his men backed up obediently, reforming into rough lines, the Marlovans trudged back into their ruined city, some stooping to pick things out of the mess.

Ruined city, ruined camp. The flood had also carried away all their neatly lined up and guarded supplies. More supplies would be on the ships, but first they must land.

Vringir contemplated the west in the fading light. A thin brown pall hung over the harbor city. It looked from this distance like the fires set early that morning were under control. He beckoned to the signal ensign. Talkar would need an immediate report, but it was easy to guess the new orders: "We'll find dry ground and camp. At dawn we'll march on Lindeth Harbor and secure it." He thought of the men's bellies pinched with hunger by morning, and how hard they would fight. He smiled sourly. "If our ships can't get into the harbor to bring our supplies, then the city can re-supply us for our march up the pass."

## Chapter Nineteen

THE children of Andahi Castle began their sing as soon as dawn lit up the summery grasses and tangled wildflowers around them. As the light strengthened, turning blobby shadows of trees to bright green, glinting in the rocks, their high voices took on the cadence of ritual, the eights staggering under the weight of their packs.

They sang the "Hymn to the Fallen" four times for each of the four fallen children. It didn't seem enough somehow; when a grown-up died, the sing had always been fine, it was over, life got back to normal. But Han still hurt inside when she thought about Gdir lying there so still in the pale moonlight, poor little Tlennen curled in a ball. The memory made her eyes burn and her middle shaky, so when Lnard suggested in her tragedy voice that they sing for everybody in the castle, no one argued, or said "But they're alive!" They just sang as they wound upward and upward, toward the second set of high cliffs, just below where the abandoned beacons lay. When the Venn marched through the pass, the beacon men figured out what had happened and scattered, some toward Ala Larkadhe, others over the mountains into Idayago to find other Marlovans in order to fight back.

By mid morning the children were too hot and thirsty to keep singing. They slunk wearily along a narrow path. The three-year-olds ran along willingly enough until the morning sun had lifted above the mountains, but when they came to a narrow bridge suspended high over a rumbling, rushing waterfall, everyone came to a halt.

They stared. There weren't any bridges in the territory the children had been permitted to roam. They eyed the rope and slat affair swinging gently in the tumbling air currents made by the wild frothing waters. To the children it looked like it was about to fall down.

"Let's go one by one," Han said.

"I'll go first. Test it." Hal stepped on the first slat, then hopped back uncertainly when it wiggled.

One of the smalls began to cry. Rosebud promptly puckered up, and when Lnard tugged impatiently at her hand, she started to howl.

"Come on, Rosebud. Just a quick run."

"No."

"We have to! The bad people will get us if we don't!"

Rosebud's answer was to shriek.

Lnard's hand clapped over Rosebud's mouth, and the brat twisted against her, scratching at Lnard's fingers. Lnard tightened her grip, her stomach burning with fury. She yearned to slap the brat. Not just slap her, but shove her right off the bridge into the cascade. How *good* it would feel to be rid of her! Lnard was sick of whining, dirt, pee. When would it end? It would never end, they'd be lost in the mountains until wolves ate them, or the snows came and froze them, or Idayagans caught up and shot them all. Just because of these *brats*.

She opened her eyes. The sevens and eights had dropped their packs, and all their sogginess was gone, as if somebody had done magic on them. They ran back down the path a little way, to a grassy dell they'd passed, and happily scrambled around in a wrestling game. Young Tana had taken his sister's hand.

"Go on," Lnard told him, her whisper shaky. "Take the other two. Watch the big boys play."

Young Tana looked back once—she was watching as she clutched the struggling brat against her—as he led away the other two babies, both sucking their thumbs.

Hal tested the slats once more, then juttied his jaw and ran over. At the other side, he broke into a wide grin, and Freckles and Dvar followed. They vanished over a pile of ivy-covered rock, exploring.

Lnard and Han were left standing alone. Lnard whipped a fast glance Han's way. Han was glaring—at Rosebud! *She wants to throw them over the cliff, too!*

A weird thrill sang along Lnard's nerves. Her mind jiggled through possible plans—no witnesses, get the others away, not quite push Rosebud, just get her on the bridge and pretend she got loose, and just . . . *do it.*

Han shook with resentment and fury. The morning had just started, and the brats were worse than ever. They would only get even *more* worse. And the others couldn't move unless the brats did. Her head ached as if someone pounded it with a rock.

She hated those snot-smearied, filthy brats, Rosebud squealing so loud her voice was like glass splinters in her ears. She stank like an old dog. At least an old dog had done good service and deserved a place by the fire and frequent wandings. Rosebud hadn't done anything of use, she just whined, and squalled, and had to be picked up, and she wasn't even *trying* to use the Waste Spell any more.

Han jerked her gaze away from the brat as if not seeing her would make her disappear—and shock pooled inside her belly. In her experience, Lnard either sneaked looks at you quick as a lizard's tongue, or else she made one of her oh-poor-me faces, her eyes round and big but that little smile curling the corners of her mouth. This face was unlike any Han had ever seen, a steady look, a weird one, her pupils big and round as night.

Pin-jabs prickled along Han's arms. Lnard was thinking the same thing! The cold sensation in Han's middle formed into a clod of ice. She knew that ice. A small ice ball hid behind her ribs the day she'd been sent on an errand to the pantry, and when she passed through the empty bake room, there was a tray of honey corn muffins. She'd stuffed them into her smock, then lied when Lnard's father, the castle baker, questioned everyone. Lnard and the two older kitchen helpers ended up getting a double thrashing, one for theft, and one for lying.

Han had gotten away with it, and it had even felt good, especially when she ate them and thought about Lnard's wailing. The snitch! But when she saw Lnard's cousin, Radran, with his eyes all red, the ice ball came back, even bigger. Everybody liked Radran—he was fun and never mean—and Han had gotten him a beating for something he hadn't done.

The ice ball was big now. Could Gdir see ice balls? Han knew that sometimes ghosts walked in the world, and some people said they could see inside your head. Gdir would never throw brats down a cascade. Gdir had said Han was a bad leader because she didn't make everyone wash and do warm-ups like when life was normal. Gdir said that a good leader keeps everyone in order, and clean. *But the Jarlan wanted us to be kept safe.* The ice ball was taking over Han's body, turning her into ice. *I promised to keep Rosebud safe.* That was it. It didn't matter that Rosebud peed herself. It wouldn't matter if she threw everyone's bedroll down a chasm, or screamed all day and all night. The Jarlan trusted Han to keep them all safe.

Han's breath slowly leaked out.

And Lnard slowly relaxed her grip on the squirming, angry child. She could have done "it" when she was mad, but to *plan* it? And with everyone there? What would they say? Could she get Han to make up a lie? But Han never lied.

"Blindfolds," Han stated. *Keep them safe. That's my job. As long as I can.* The ice melted away.

"We'll play the scout game."

Lnard heaved a loud sigh. She would pretend that nothing had happened, that she was annoyed at more work, but she was secretly relieved. Han wouldn't do it, and Lnard couldn't. *Now*, her secret inner voice whispered, and Lnard shivered. "We'll tell the smalls they're now sixes, they get to have big people jobs. If we lead them around in a circle, and tell them they have to balance on wood that's on the ground, they won't know."

Neither was going to make any mention of what might have happened. Instead, energy infused them,

Lnard worrying about what Han might say about Lnard when Lnard wasn't there, and Han whispering to Gdir in spirit. *Help me be strong, Gdir. I'll be a better leader.*

They gathered everyone again, blindfolded the smalls, started the scouting game, led them over the bridge, pulled the blindfolds off when they were out of sight of the cascade, then gave everyone a honey lick for doing a good scouting job.

Two more bridges, and everyone over five had figured out the ruse. Since they'd all survived, they found the bridges fun, and only the smalls needed the blindfolds, but it had become habit by now. Rosebud liked the game because she'd get a honey lick.

By noon, though, the smalls had had enough walking up steep trails. Even honey licks wouldn't get them along. "We're going to have to carry them," Lnard pronounced.

Han sighed. "Then let's arrange the packs again. Anyone who carries a three gets some of their pack taken away."

The eights hunched and sidled. That was when Han realized that they hadn't been staggering nearly as much, though from all the uphill climbing they should have been as tired as she was.

The flickering, sneaky looks exchanged confirmed her guess. They'd somehow been chucking away some of their burdens. "First, what are we going to eat in a week?" She was so angry she wanted to knock them all down.

"But we have plenty—"

"Too much—"

"We never get to cook anyway—"

"*Second*, when you threw away our food you left a trail even a stupid Idayagan can find!"

That shut them up.

The remaining food got redistributed. Lnard moved briskly, feeling like she'd escaped something horrible, that Han might say something horrible when they saw grown-ups again. She dunked all Rosebud's clothes, then said sternly, "If you don't use the Spell, then you have to have diapers again. Drawers are only for *big* people."

She ignored Rosebud's wailing, and hoisted her onto her back, Han and Hal taking the other threes.

Han hoisted her child, rearranged the little arms trying to squeeze her throat, and told Lnard to walk in front. "I'll walk in back," she said, glaring at Billykid. And, before he could make up some excuse, she said, "Let's sing."

They sang through most of the day as they climbed up and up, over trails so old that they had been worn before the Marolo Venn had appeared on this continent. They began with the "Hymn to the Fallen," then went to the "Hymn to the Beginning." The drumming cadences of that one cheered everyone, just a little, even the smalls, who took comfort in the familiar sound, so from then on it was war ballads, which everyone liked.

They made their way up a steep slope to the goat trails that Han and Hal thought might be too small for grown-ups to see or to travel along. Thunder and lightning roiled, bellowed, and struck all around them, but they were too frightened to stop until lightning shivered weirdly just across a field, torching an old tree.

They stopped under another tree, seeing it only as shelter. They passed out pieces of cheese and journey bread, eating silently until the rumble of hail had passed, and the sun peeped bleakly out.

They were moving again as steam rose off puddles. They stopped at a brook, and Lnard made certain that all the babies drank whether they wanted to or not.

They'd nearly finished when, faint but distinct, the belling of hounds echoed from the direction they'd come.

"They're after us." Hal gripped his hand on his knife, which he'd stuck through his sash like the big boys.

"We'll get up this canyon. Then camp," Han said.

The children looked around. They stood on a grassy ledge between high, brooding rocky spires, with even higher crags above. When they set out again, some of the middle children began to fret at the dreary uphill climb. Han ordered the older children to each take a small by the hand, and on they marched.

Shortly before sunset they stopped, not because they couldn't see, but because they had gone cold all of

a sudden, especially wearing still damp clothes.

They found an old cave that smelled of some long-gone animal. Hal explored to the back, but reported it wasn't very deep, or that it might have been, but only a cat could get beyond the place the crack narrowed.

"No fire," Han said.

Lnard straightened up and put her hands on her hips. "Then we're going to eat sodden food? Look! It's all *r-r-r-oooo-ined*! She pointed an accusatory finger at the pile of packs dropped by the drooping eight-year-olds.

"Nooooo," Han moaned.

She pounced on the packs, pulling out the canvas sacks and discovered that the rain had gotten into most of them. What had been fine in the relatively dry air of the cave of course had been spoiled by rain.

She pressed her hands against her face. "I should have thought of that."

Lnard was quite ready to remind Han of her mistakes if she strutted, but a Han standing there looking sad and anxious made her sad and anxious.

"No one else thought of it." Lnard lifted a pack that had contained the flour for their pan biscuits, and dropped it with a squelch. "So we learned something. We better separate out anything that will rot, and pack up the rest extra tight."

"Yes."

They tried squeezing into the bedrolls. That didn't work because people got tangled up, and shoving fights started. So Lnard said they'd be cheese-breads, that is, open a bedroll and have several people lie in a row, like cheese on a bread slice, and then pull another bedroll like a blanket over them.

That worked much better, especially as everyone drew inward into a puppy pile for warmth when the cold turned bitter.

The next day they set out again, but a terrible storm boiled up overhead, this one much worse than the last. Hail and then sleet began to fall. When lightning struck not a hundred paces away, not just the smalls began wailing.

Hal ran ahead, but shortly came running back. "I found a cave!"

This was more of a crevice than a cave. They crammed in. It was narrow, and had a very smelly nest in it. They wrapped up tight, and as soon as they were fed cold, damp journey bread slathered with honey and crumbly cheese, the smalls all fell asleep where they dropped.

The others sat shoulder to shoulder, too weary to move. Han fell asleep without meaning to. She woke suddenly to a thunderbolt that sounded directly overhead. She wondered wearily where she was. White needle sleet hissed just past the cave opening. Her toes and fingers ached.

Lnard blocked the watery weak light, nothing more than a silhouette in the gloom. "Rain's gotten into everything." She held up a sack. "All the journey bread except the ones in the closeweave packs are moldy."

"How many breads do we have?" Han asked.

"Just those two. The eights all unwrapped theirs, I think to pinch pieces while they were walking. They shoved the food in with their dirty clothes, it all smells bad."

Lnard sounded so tired she wasn't even strutting.

Han knew she should have caught the boys at it, but at the end of the hike she'd just been putting one foot in front of another as she carried a small on her back, and she'd only watched the ground.

So she didn't even look at the guilty boys. "This crack is narrow, and there's all that rain. How about this. We'll post a watch, and squeeze in beyond the nest thing, and light the Fire Stick. We'll boil the rice and beans together. I don't care if they're soggy, they have to cook in water, right? We'll set the bucket—"

"Billykid says they lost it. On one of the bridges."

This time Han jerked around to glare at the eights all clumped together. She was about to ask who'd been careless, but she could tell from their faces no one was going to snitch. And anyway, what could she do?

"Do we have a pan?"

“I brought one.”

Han decided Lnard’s braggy tone was a relief—it meant maybe things would someday go back to normal. “Make the beans and rice. We’ll have to figure out some way to carry it. We’ll be careful with the food. When we have to, we’ll do half rations and promise them rewards. And if we have to, half of that. But as soon as the lightning stops, we’re going on.”

“Where? It’s just going to get colder up here.”

“I know. We’ll just have to go back down. Here’s an idea. Let’s leave a whole lot of the bad stuff in this place. So if the Idayagans find it, they’ll think we went up even higher. Who wants to plant clues leading up the path farther?”

“I will.” Hal hugged his skinny knees against him. “I know how to make a false trail.”

Han thumped him on the shoulder, and he smiled a little. “We’ll get hot food made while you do that. We’ll eat and sleep. And if the lightning isn’t hitting the ground tomorrow, we’ll go back down toward the pass, but zigzag.”

“And move every time it rains?”

“And move every time it rains.”

Night fell suddenly in the mountains.

Nowhere were fires lit. The Venn sat in their rows, on signal, as they had been doing. Talkar’s scouts returned at midnight to report that the top of the pass lay two days’ march ahead, no sign of any enemy. Just before sunset Noddy’s and Hawkeye’s scouts returned with the news that the top of the pass lay two bends ahead.

For the first time, the Marlovans camped instead of rolling drearily upward, changing horses four times a night. They had saddle-slept, others creeping into the wagons until the animals slowed, to be summarily turfed out. Many had put on a grim burst of speed, just to drop onto a rock and snore until the rest caught up.

Food was passed out, horses unhitched and cared for, then exhausted men and animals slept, the wagons with six and eight crammed in.

Up on the mountain above the pass, Inda and his party stopped on the trail as soon as the last of the light vanished. No one wanted to fall down the side of a cliff, so they settled with their backs to a broad stretch of rock, looking out at the jagged mountaintops blocking the lower reaches of the canopy of stars. Tau sat above the others on a rock, paper aimed westward to catch the last faint gleams of twilight, and wrote:

*Jeje. If I survive, will I remember anything of this dash down the mountains, my skull rocking on my neck, my leg muscles long bands of pain? Maybe I’ll remember silly things: the slap of bare feet on a trail probably two thousand years old, the occasional yelp or curse when a barefoot man treads on a rock. The sight of drying socks flapping gently from the backs of packs at each step—every stop, the ones with boots change out their socks. Some of them have bloody toenails. If they live, will they bore their grandchildren with stories about those bloody toenails? At least the stars are out, which means no rain. It gets cold very fast this high.*

On the other side of the pass, Cama’s men, filthy and stinking despite regular dousings of rain, marched across a plateau under starlight; most of them had long since resorted to bare feet. They were beyond exhaustion and into exhilaration. Cama strode at their head, seemingly tireless, singing one war ballad after another in his low, raspy voice. On the south side of the lake, Cherry-Stripe’s men were scrambling as fast as they could force themselves. Cherry-Stripe no longer thought about Inda, the plans, or the future. His entire life was focused on one thing: making sure Cama didn’t beat him to the pass.

By midnight, with one last snow-pale peak between them and the pass, Cama’s men were too tired to sing, but they could hum, and hum they did, until teeth and bones resonated. Over and over the “Hymn to the Beginning,” a beat on each step, a hum that only ceased when Cama held up a fist and the Runners took out their meal and passed it down hand-to-hand.

Both armies chewed the heavy, sweet-stale journey bread whose recipes shared the same origin, generations before; the only material differences were the Marlovan addition of rye and raisins as opposed to the Venn tradition of honey and nuts.

Signi stirred, waking to a dry mouth, her head pounding. It took her a long time to sit up. Grateful for the soft summer air, she contemplated the stairs on the other side of the tower. *Come, Signi, come. Twelve steps at most.*

She tried to stand, fell to her knees, crawled forward, then rested her damp forehead against her trembling wrists. Then again. Rest. Again.

The stars had wheeled halfway across the sky before she reached the stairs leading down to the first landing. Then it was easier to descend on hands and knees, seeking each step out with her toes, resting, then easing herself down. Step. By. Step.

But she made it. The door to the top room was open as it had been left. Though her knees had begun to bruise and her palms to ache, she crawled inside. The room was plain, empty but for a narrow bed: here, they said, the young king had slept so that he might have nearer access to the archive below.

She reached the bunk, fell in, and sank into slumber.

***Tdor, have you heard from Inda or Evred since yesterday?***

*Hadand, you were in my mind all day. I just got in from perimeter ride. All I could think about was what is happening in the north. I confess I half wish we did not have these magical cases. Is it cowardice to admit that I hate knowing the battle is happening now? I hate it more because it is so quiet here that I can hear the robins scolding. It's like a mockery of peace. I don't feel peace, it's just the hush before lightning. Only would months' wait be any better?*

*Fareas-Iofre says to not look at records—they are all written later—but to letters sent during important times, they all speak of the agony of the wait. But I have had no time for the archive. We're making certain we have defense coordinated between the harbor and here, which means a lot of riding between Castle Tenth and the Noths for me. On my return I have to undo all Branid's worst orders, because he's trying so hard to drill the men and be ready, he's become nearly impossible. Yet he tries so hard! I can't be angry!*

***O Tdor, if you are a coward, than I am one too. We are trying to do everything that must be done, but today was the very worst Fourthday of the games in my life. Not once, not twice, but three times I saw that everyone was watching me for a sign. My eyes took in those boys and girls competing down there, but all my mind could think about was—just to you I will confess it wasn't Evred I kept seeing. And I didn't see Inda, either. He's so blurred in my mind, sometimes old but mostly a young boy, despite his day here.***

***What I saw was Tanrid, and me, that day so long ago. How happy we were! Then I lost the siege, and he rode away to be killed by my betrothed—***

***No. I'm done. I gave the boys and girls the accolade out of guilt, and the watchers shouted out of duty. Everyone felt it, I feel sure. They cheered but did not smile. Even the boys and girls looked as if punishment awaited them, not praise.***

*Hadand, here is my idea. If we are being foolish, let us be foolish together. I will do my rounds, and you do your rounds, and then we will sit here with these magic boxes all night if need be, and we will do nothing but reminisce. We will not talk about what if, we will not plan a campaign for next year. We will look back, not forward, until we get news.*

***Tdor, that's a promise. I'm yours as soon as they ring Lastwatch and I oversee the shift change. Everyone seems to like it when I do the Harskialdna's sentry watch station rounds, just as***



***Evred had begun doing before he left.***

Rain slanted down from mast-scraping clouds when the lookout shouted, "Sail hai!"

Gillor rode the northernmost station closest to the island of Geranda, a very faint line on the horizon just off the beam. She waved to the flag hand to let the rest of the fleet know they'd spotted someone, then climbed up the foremast herself.

She'd just snapped her glass out when someone yelled, "Them walleyed masts . . . It's gotta be *Blue*!" A wash of rain blew on, leaving sharp and clear the slightly forward-leaning foremast and straight mainmast. Gillor smacked the glass to. "That's *Blue Star*," she said. "We must be clearing the rain now. They have to be able to see us."

Sails frantically jerked up on the distant ship.

"Thinks we're Scarf's *Princess*," Gillor said, sneering on the word *princess*. Some of the crew laughed—the sneer had become habit.

"Wait! Wait, wait, they're haulin' round."

"Heh." Imagine calling a pirate ship *Princess*! Gillor liked the fancy work all over her new command just fine, but she'd gotten rid of that ridiculous figurehead with the crown, leaving just the rail scrollwork and nice, clean hull planking. *Death* and *Cocodu* and *Sable* didn't have figure-heads, so she wouldn't have one either, though she would have liked something with crossed swords.

"He's raising a signal," the flag hand yelled. "Free traders' flag below the parley."

"Run the same," Gillor yelled as she lowered herself to the masthead. "Signal the rest of the fleet. See if Fox wants to talk to 'em himself or what." And she slid down to the deck.

The *Death* signaled back for her to close with the newcomer, so she did, smiling when she recognized Captain Fangras, grayer but otherwise much the same as she remembered from the old days in Freeport Harbor, as he clambered aboard.

"Captain Fangras," she said in welcome as he flicked his fingers in salute to the captain's deck. He was an independent-turned-privateer who'd given Inda's marine band a cruise when they were just starting out. "I've got something to drink in the cabin."

Fangras' lips pursed appreciatively. "I take it Elgar got rid of Scarf, and a better job I never heard of, save Marshig being shoved back to Nightland with the soul-eaters, where he belonged." He jerked his thumb aft, where the new name was painted on the stern, and said in a lower voice, "*Rapier*? Are you by chance a Fal?"

She crossed her arms. "What makes you say that?"

Fangras turned a laugh into a cough. "Pirate fighting, dueling weapon, Fal, it seemed to fit together." It fit together if you knew that rapiers were the required weapon for duels in Fal. "You from there?" she asked, ready for that sense of kinship that comes of unexpected encounters with countrymen, even far from the home you will never see again.

"No! That is to say, yes, but I don't think of myself as any Fal, not for thirty years!" His hands went out.

"I left to get away from them and their everlasting quarrels. Now, was that the *Wind's Kiss* out there beyond Elgar's *Death*? We'd heard that that sorry crew'd turned outright pirate after Sarendan revoked the letters of marque 'gainst Khanerenth. Mistake, if you ask me."

Despite Fangras' obvious attempt to smooth over the insult and shift the talk to sea gossip, she ground her teeth hard against a retort. And then had to laugh at herself. She'd left Fal because of those very same everlasting quarrels, yet here she was, arm already reaching for her side, the ritual words almost shaping her lips to call him out for an insult that wasn't even an insult. Because it was true.

So she said, "Yes, that's *Wind's Kiss*. We took them just off the tip of Toar, which we cleaned up for five years' berth privilege at Pirate Island. That was right after we got rid o' Scarf."

"Wish you'd do for that crew that took the Windward Islands. Moved right in, sitting on the west-end trade routes—"

"We did. Just came from there. That is, last action. We stopped out here to preddy up. Listen, before you give me the news about Sarendan and Khanerenth and Scarf, let's talk in comfort, what say?" She indicated her cabin. And when the door was shut, and the scuttles closed, "First, were you layin' for us?" Fangras signed agreement. "Dhalshev paid me'n a couple others to polish the roads where you might

come in. Here, south o' Sartor, he even sent someone up to the strait. Word is, now't Khanerenth has made peace with Sarendan, they're going to launch the navy against Freedom Islands. They may be on the way right now."

"Shit," she exclaimed. "And we're being called in to help defend?"

Fangras spread his hands. "That's the sved."

Gillor eyed him. "And so what's in it for you? I can't believe you are running Dhalshev's errands—oh. Yes. Right. If Sarendan revoked the letters of marque . . ."

". . . That's right," Fangras said. "Rest of us privateers either have to turn pirate or find someone else. There's no trade, not with the Venn threatening every harbor with fire and sword if they stick a toe out into the sea. So we're looking to join your fleet."

"All right, we gotta talk to Fox."

Fangras started to rise, then sank back down. "Fox? What Fox? Elgar the Fox, or that redheaded, green-eyed icicle Fox?"

"That would be Fox, yes," Gillor said, laughing.

Fangras rubbed his face. "Oh, damn."

"You got something against Fox's fighting skills?"

"Oh, not his fighting skills. Everyone on Freedom knows no one stands up to him. Some said even he can beat Inda Elgar. But . . . he's not Inda Elgar, who never loses a battle. Can Fox command one?"

Gillor thought of Fox sitting on the flagship the way he'd been the last day or so, drinking steadily, so angry you felt it like a blow just walking past his cabin. Never mind why—he wouldn't tell anyone—but how did he *do* that?

"Inda left him in command, and we haven't lost yet. As you noticed comin' in." She pointed through the stern windows at *Wind's Kiss*, and then down at the deck under her feet. "Come on, we'll row ourselves over. You talk to him."

## Chapter Twenty

LONG before dawn, Hawkeye and Noddy woke. They were cold and exhausted from bad sleep, but they had reached the top of the pass first.

Now to hold it.

They must hold it with five hundred men and an army of straw.

The intermittent, rumbling din and faint clashes echoing up the stone canyons made it clear the Venn were somewhere near, maybe a day or two away at most. As soon as the light was up, Hawkeye took a couple of scouts and dogs to explore the downward slope and see how much time they had.

Noddy strolled back, watched by men who'd been straining forward, peering at the cliffs on the downward slope. A glance showed that most were still stupid with sleep, others peered back looking squalid in the way of men who had, under cover of night, taken comfort or consolation in various ways, one of which Noddy could smell. Five years ago a whiff of stale distilled rye would have caused the Harskialdna to assemble the men for a flogging, even on the eve of battle. Noddy pretended he didn't smell it, though his unsmiling glance as he passed by the dry-tongued culprits with pounding heads was judgment enough.

Noddy had grown up thinking human beings absurd, though he liked some of them as individuals. He loved few people—his family, his old mates—and few things, one of which was the idea of trust. He loathed war and tended to despise anyone who admired or craved it. But since that admiration or craving seemed to be a part of most of his friends, well, one came back to human absurdity.

When in doubt, you speak to the absurd, but act up to the ideal.

He kicked the wheel of the nearest wagon. "Still in the rack. Are you made of straw?"

A guffaw crashed in echo between the cliffs.

"Roust up. Drill time! Anyone slacking in the hay gets ninety-nine lashes."

More laughter, the high, sharp laughter of people who know through tightened muscles and tense jaws that it's here, it's soon, this muddy, mossy canyon is where they would make their stand.

"Army! To your mounts!" Noddy shouted, flicking straw in the nearest wagon.

He was answered with a roar as men leaped to the wagons and began making straw men. Noddy continued on down the line so everyone could see him, hear him.

"Where are your guts?" Noddy slammed a hand against another wagon, making the entire contents jump.

"You got grass for brains? Grass prick, for certain. I've never seen anything so limp this side of the Venn."

More of the harsh laughter of emotional release as everyone got busy stuffing their good shirts and House battle-tunics. Then their secondary clothes, and when they ran out of those, they fashioned man-shaped forms out of bits of rope and blankets. Amid the laughter, people shouted increasingly coarse jokes as everyone tried to make up a name for the straw army that the others would heed. Breath froze and dropped, then clouded, and then vanished as sunlight slowly warmed the high cliffs above with color. The men had woken with numb fingers, but they were sweating by the time they got all the remounts armored with the link-reinforced leddasweave horse covers and the straw men firmly affixed to them, the hems of the battle-tunics sewn to ropes and tied to the armor belly-bands.

Ribald comments put a wall of mirth between them and what tomorrow or the day after might bring as the men personalized the straw figures wearing their clothing. Noddy watched from the driving bench of the cook wagon, where he'd hopped up to grab something to eat. As soon as the men became restless he'd have them run some mounted drills in order to get used to a charge between walls. But no fighting drills. He wanted them rested and ready. They were as trained as they were ever going to be.

The shadows on the western cliffs had sunk to the ground and the sun peeked at last over the eastern cliffs, boiling down onto their heads. Noddy climbed down, strolling among the straw men, addressing them as if they were alive.

The jokes were stupid—accusations of drunkenness, of impossible sexual feats, and he promised them insane punishments to be dealt out the moment the fighting was over. Men howled with laughter at a sentence of a thousand lashes for a crooked hair clasp, their hilarity just a little breathless, just a little loud. Noddy could smell the sharpness of fear in the air—they all could. But everyone worked hard to hide it.

Last, they shoved bent arrows and sticks wrenched from the wagons down the backs of the straw men in order to hold up helms. And when it was done, and they led the remounts back behind the animals selected for the actual charges, the effect was surprisingly lifelike.

The straw army was light enough to leave on the horses' backs. Buckets of water from one of the many trickle-downs, carried from horse to horse, became the main job, as they waited for Hawkeye to tell them *when*.

*Jeje: we caught our first glimpse of the pass midafternoon. The unreal is becoming real—a thought yet unreal. Does that makes sense? Don't answer that—weak joke—I know you won't answer. Why?*

Tau sent the note and straightened as the others lined up along the extreme edge of the cliff edge, trusting to the screening effect of a tangle of firs. They ate journey bread and peered down into the distant canyon in the pass. Steep cliffs, yes, and narrow access. There were the Venn, marching in perfect order, winged helms on the commanders, the men with steel or brass horns the breadth of a palm at either side of their helms. Inda wondered what the symbolism of wings and horns were. Maybe the horns were practical, to catch downward striking blades?

The question fled when he got a glimpse of the commander's chest just before he rode out of sight. Was that an owl? This owl flew in the opposite direction of the silver owl of Inda's own family, the Algara-Vayirs, but was that device green? The sun dazzle muted color.

Is he some sort of relative from centuries ago? Inda felt as if he stood in some strange place outside of time hearing owl hooting to owl across the grassy plains of their ancestors.

"We've got a long way to go," Evred said.

And they were in motion once again.

Rattooth Cassad slammed the rough stable door open. “Venn’re coming back. Should be here midafternoon. Harbormaster’s following me,” he added, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Buck and Barend sat in the converted tack room that had served the Marlovans as their garrison headquarters, just outside Lindeth Harbor. The patrols had rotated in and out of Ala Larkadhe, half a day’s ride away, so—with wood a precious and increasingly rare commodity after years of pirate incursions—the “garrison” had never been more than a barn made into a stable, the tack room doubling as a rudimentary office, with a few beds for injured men or for sleeping over during blizzards.

Now the converted barn was the command post for Barend’s and Buck’s combined forces. The animals were all outside on guarded pickets, the stalls full of wounded men from the failed defense of the coast. They’d posted four rings of guards on the animals. Galloping horses could not be chased by men on foot, so they’d managed to get away clear, returning only after the Venn had all marched off to Ala Larkadhe. They’d faced the grim chore of crossing that wrecked, blood-blackened beach to gather their hacked-up wounded after the commanders Disappeared their dead. They sang the “Hymn to the Fallen” until their throats were raw, the men around them singing or humming with them.

As the sun dropped below the sea they rode to the outskirts of Lindeth, the exhausted men and horses drinking from the streams swollen from the runoff up the mountain. Everyone was too tired to ask why the streams ran so high when there had been no rain for two days.

They bedded down around the garrison outpost.

At dawn, Rat had insisted on scouting himself. The other two agreed on the condition that he take a tough runner from each wing as backup.

Now they were back, and Rat waved an ironic hand toward the open door, through which they could see a gaunt old man picking his way soberly through the lines of wounded stretched out on the hastily-swept floor. The worst hurt were inside, the ones who could manage to sit or move about had been put on the grassy hills with the rest of the camp.

The harbormaster’s furrowed face seemed to age as he took in the number of wounded. He stopped just outside the tack room door, and the three commanders watched him run a knobby hand over his sparse hair.

Then he drew in a deep breath. His scrawny chest expanded beneath the linen tunic that, like his dark robe, was part of his clothes of office.

It took courage to face these martial young men in their blood-spattered gray coats. But he was desperate. “Don’t fight in my city,” he said in the slurred Iascan of the north. “Please,” he added, though more than half the angry people waiting back at his house had insisted he not beg the evil Marlovans. “Your? City?” Buck repeated, powerful arms crossed.

Barend waved him off. “You’re in trouble whichever way you turn, Harbormaster.” He’d had several meetings with the man over the past year. The former guild mistress had been the Marlovans’ most determined enemy, but the harbormaster had deferred time and again to her in his attempts to find a middle ground between conquerors and the older inhabitants.

Rat propped a foot up on a barrel and leaned his forearms on his knee, wriggling his shoulder blades to ease the pull of a long cut over his ribs on his back. “You really think they’ll leave you alone if you let ’em in?”

The harbormaster said, “Do you think they’ll go on a killing spree, then, Marlovan?”

Rat was indifferent to the sarcasm. “No. What they’ll do is boot you out of the few standing houses you’ve got, because they’re going to need space to bring in men and supplies for the second invasion next year. Though they might keep a few of you to work for ’em, but you’ll be living in your own barns.” “Invasion? *Next* year?” the man said, appalled.

Buck snorted. “This here is just a welcome party. Next year they’re coming back. And not just with these fellows. They’ll bring more of ’em from the north. They need food, they need cloth, they need wood and steel, above all, they need workers and warriors. You’ll be the workers.” He jabbed his finger

within a hair's breadth of the old man's chest. Then jerked his thumb at his own chest. "We're supposed to be the warriors. The word is, they have some kind o' magical spells that make your mind go blank, so they can run us clear to Sartor, and it's you people who'll be busy making the supplies."

The harbormaster stared, eyes distended. Then they narrowed, and his face flushed to the tips of his ears. "You're lying, Marlovan."

"So you think we're here watching our brethren die for the fun of it?"

"That's exactly what we thought," the man said, though without the conviction he might have used before treading through that room outside. That and hearing at dawn a private report of the horror of the south shore. His breath hissed in and he rubbed his hands over his head again. "You're protecting what you've already taken. And I suppose it's understandable, and you've not used us unfairly. But no one wants you fighting in our streets, or worse, setting fire to the entire city just to keep 'em out. As it is, you've destroyed the docks."

"And who will have to pay for rebuilding it?" Barend retorted.

Rat straightened up, wincing. Terrible fight yesterday, fast gallop this morning, the bandage was leaking. His coat was already ruined.

But he grinned, his prominent front teeth making him look fierce. "What if we only seem to set fire to your city?"

"What?"

"What?"

"Hah?"

He lifted a hand toward the shore, trying not to pull the open wound on his back. "Still haven't got all the fires out. Right? I saw smoke when riding in to report."

"That's so," the harbormaster said, adding dryly, "When you people set fire to something, you're as thorough as the pirates ever were."

"Hey—" Buck began.

Barend wagged a hand. "Never mind. What are you thinking, Cousin?"

"That we keep those fires going," Rat said. "From the ocean it's got to look like the entire city's aflame. Inda told us they have magic communications. That Venn mage o' his said so."

"Venn mage?" the harbormaster repeated, wondering if that shocking rumor could be true after all.

No one paid him any attention. Rat said, "Which means the fellows coming here got to see a burning city from this end, see?"

"You mean, make it look like all of Lindeth's gone up in flames?" Buck said, and whistled.

"That's it." Rat turned to the harbormaster. "We'd need your cooperation. We have maybe a watch or so before they reach us. So it has to be now if we're to do it."

Barend chuckled. "Oh, a watch ought to do it easily." He did not say that he knew some pirate ruses for making fires look far worse than they were.

The harbormaster huffed. "You won't be setting fire to the city?"

Barend raised his hand, palm out, in a gesture of promise. "You tend the fires yourselves. Just keep them going, lots of smoke, like I show you, and they won't set foot in Lindeth."

"Ourselves?" the harbormaster said, bushy white brows raised. "What will you be doing?"

"Riding over the white cliffs the back way. So when they turn around again to go upriver to the pass, well, they'll get their own welcome party."

"You don't have nearly enough men," the harbormaster protested.

Barend's grin faded. Rat looked sardonic. Buck widened his eyes. "We don't?"

The harbormaster kept shaking his head all the way back to his house, now crowded with frightened faces.

"We've got a plan," he said.

A thick cloud mass moved in on a strengthening wind. Just as the afternoon shadows began to lengthen

the Venn smelled fire on the wind, and when they topped the highest hill before the gradual descent toward Lindeth Harbor, there was no harbor to be seen. Just a thunderhead of smoke over the entire city, glowing with flame.

#### Chapter Twenty-one

SIGNI woke before dawn. The headache was just a shade less murderous. She managed to rise and force her shaky legs to bear her out of the room and down the stairs. She stopped on the landing outside the archive, and felt the door. It was closed: she bowed her head, accepting judgment.

She made her way slowly downstairs, trusting in the dim light and her rumpled, anonymous clothing to draw little attention. The few awake paid her no heed. They were too shocked, too weary, and wondering where to begin cleaning up the sodden remains of the city. Not one of the few people moving about the castle that morning noticed a small, sandy-haired woman of indeterminate origin.

She drifted to the kitchen. In the light of a single lamp, she found less devastation than she'd feared.

Certainly everything on ground level or below was ruined, but the water had left the bags, jars, and jugs on shelves above table height untouched, and tightly-made barrels had also survived.

She helped herself to some heels of the day before's bread and a hunk of cheese. She felt much better, enough to set to work. She was a sea dag. Most of her spells pertained to water in some way.

The morning sun had crowned the distant hills and the summer air was hot enough to spoil wet things when her spells began to take effect. In a reversal of the calling spell she evaporated pools and puddles, compressed water out of wood and cloth, sending it all back to the underground river. The dank smell diminished, leaving dry detritus for the citizens to clean up.

Signi found her way to the lazaretto. Her second set of skills was in healing. She knew she would be needed that day.

Hilda Battle Chief (newly promoted) Vringir's mood was vile when the sun came up. Overhead a blanket of low clouds promised stifling air later; it already smelled of smoke drifting from the still-burning city.

The thud of horse hooves caused his head to pang. All night long horsemen had attacked his camp: a flurry of galloping hooves and arrows, then they dashed away into the darkness. The Marlovans were far too fast to chase even if he'd had enough horses.

He issued the command to rouse the camp. The second half of the landing party had been ordered to share out their journey bread, which had been meant to get them through the first day. Instead, half rations would have to suffice until his scouting parties could gather food from the countryside and meet up with them.

They would have to march hungry, but march they must. He glared in the direction of Ala Larkadhe's white tower, hazily outlined against the rising sun, the battlements of the walls just visible. If anyone came riding out of the gates of Ala Larkadhe, there'd be no mercy this time.

He nodded at the signal ensign, who blatted the horn. The men rose and prepared to march alongside the river to the mouth of the pass.

When it was just barely light enough to make out figures, Evred woke with a snort. An Inda-shaped shadow stood in the middle of the trail, head slightly bent.

"Inda?"

The shadow straightened up. "Can you see me?"

"Barely."

The sound of their voices roused the others.

“Then I can see the trail. I’ve been wondering if I can or I just think I can.”

Evred did not try to make sense of this. He got to his feet. “Let’s go.”

They emerged through a mossy natural archway onto an outcropping where the stone foundation of a tiny house sat looking over what once had been a spectacular panorama.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.* The tramp of many feet echoed up the stone canyons. Evred had thought the thumping was just the ever-present headache; he became aware that it was external.

They couldn’t see the pass, only a wider gap in the rocky cliffs and crags. But they certainly could hear the army marching up the last leg of the pass toward the top.

They stopped at one of the many little waterfalls and drank, then shared out one of their travel loaves.

Finally, with a luxuriant whispering of cloth, Evred pulled out his heavy silken battle-tunic, golden light running along the embroidery, the silk itself glowing like the heart of a fire. “I think we’d better get ready,” he said.

Inda grinned, sat down, pulled on socks and boots. Then stood up, wiggling his toes and rocking back and forth to get used to footgear again. “Tau?”

“Right here.” Tau pulled from his pack the neatly folded battle-tunic that he and Vedrid had made.

Inda hadn’t thought about clothing for so long, he felt strange as he took off his coat. Tau lifted the battle-tunic over Inda’s upraised arms. His chain mail bunched at the shoulders, then lay flat again, jingling as the cool silk rustled down around him. He looked down, his rubies winking at his cheeks, then up. “I look like a hothouse fan dancer.” And he swung his narrow hips from side to side.

The men nearby laughed heartily, for there could not possibly be any vaster a difference between a daintily and alluringly dressed pleasure house performer and this powerful, hard-bodied, scar-faced fellow with the king’s eagle spread so splendidly across his chest, piratical earrings glinting. His total lack of strut won favor in their eyes—even if it did not in his king’s.

But only Tau observed the quick contraction of Evred’s features. Once again Evred had been moving with that ritual deliberation, signifying an internal scale of meaning of which Inda was unaware. But his expression shuttered again. “Let’s run.”

When Durasnir emerged from his cabin ready to begin the day, he found Dag Ulaffa waiting, eyes closed, hands together.

No one else was in the little breakfast alcove. Durasnir looked from his message case to Ulaffa, who gave a single shake of the head. “Erkric is not here,” he said. “The prince sleeps. In the south, they are marching toward the pass.” And then, “The clash will be in the north this day. Valda found a place if you wish to observe our people and the Marlovans meeting in the pass.”

Durasnir did not wish to, but once again he felt the conviction that he *must* be there. Through the roots, the trunk, the mighty branches—people, culture, kingship—came meaning. Though roots were uplifted, the great tree twisted and cracked, and the branches shed leaves into the fires of ambition so that everything around him burned, he had to see.

Why? Perhaps his real motivation was only the military hatred of being taken by surprise. Simple curiosity.

Immaterial. He was not going to question anymore. “Please take me there,” he said.

## Chapter Twenty-two

HAWKEYE’S and Noddy’s men heard the Venn approaching long before they saw them. The sound was intermittent because of the thick, swirling fog. But the animals knew they were there; ears twitched, heads tossed, forefeet plunged.

Noddy and Hawkeye waited side by side in the middle of the second row of lancers. The fifty in front were the biggest, toughest dragoons on the toughest horses. The wings of the second line were the next toughest. The honor of riding to either side of the commanders had been hotly contested, though a couple of them had not been able to hide little signs of relief when they were not picked. Maybe only Noddy noticed because he was paying attention: though all protested, some vehemently, there was just that lightening of the voice, the easing of tense faces, that betrayed the stubborn body that wanted to live. Wanted to *live*.

In the realm of the spirit few can hide thoughts. As the Venn marched up the last distance, Noddy and Hawkeye fell silent, but their inner voices were clear to any who had the ability, and the interest, to listen. Hawkeye had never told anyone that the urge to fight made him hot. All the others saw was smiling, fierce alertness, as he checked the placement of archers behind two lines of straw men, then more straw men and the stronger archers. His lust for battle being real lust, well, it sometimes bothered him—felt wrong, somehow, except wasn't he a fighting man? If he knew the fight was honorable, then it couldn't be wrong, could it?

Back in the academy days, he'd loved fights until Gand pulled him aside one day after lance practice and pointed out that broken bones and teeth on our side was doing the enemy's work for them, right? So Hawkeye had ceased scrapping, saving his martial ardor for a real enemy.

He'd got that when he faced pirates on the Nob. Battle was far better than scrapping, he'd discovered. But it had been over far too fast.

Now, at last, here were the Venn.

"Fog! Came down to help us, eh?" Hawkeye laughed, clapping a man on the shoulder as he rode down the lines in inspection, then he passed through the last line of lancers and reached the first line of the fake army. "Hey, straw man, where's your prick? Who built this one? Tlennen, get over here, give him yours. Who'll notice the difference?"

A shout of laughter amid hoots and jibes at the grinning Tlennen. Hawkeye rode back and forth, horsetail swinging, handing out insults mostly, but the tone was one of comradeship, and the laughter felt good. Men took courage at the sight of his flashing smile, the ring of anticipation in his voice, the strut in his moves. He was not yet thirty, tall and tough and handsome, looking like he was riding off to Heat Street and not to a battle where he was outnumbered a hundred to one.

The men scattered among the straw army were under orders to yell and wave weapons, to look like more than one man. "We couldn't have asked for a better day," he said to another who kept chewing his lips, which were revealingly chapped and red.

*Yes we could*, Noddy thought. *A good day would be me at home, eating breakfast with my wife and cousin before we plan the day's work. Watching my boy drool. Chasing the colts around the paddock before the watch changes.* He had done his best, but he couldn't resign himself to certain death. He couldn't fight off the sickening conviction that Inda's plan was a shambles, that no one was where he was supposed to be—except for himself, Hawkeye, five hundred men, and how many thousand Venn?

Oh, yes. Five hundred men and a whole lot of horses and men of straw.

The *whisht!* of arrows was the first sign of battle. *Damn the wait*, Noddy thought, and was surprised at a small spurt of relief. The inevitable was here at last. He'd soon be too busy for regret.

"Helms!" Hawkeye shouted, one hand winding up his horsetail, the other thumping his helm over his head.

The men unhooked their helms, shoved their hair up inside to further cushion their heads, settled the helms down tightly over their ears. Though they'd all complained about their heaviness, the heat, no one complained now.

"Shields up!"

*Conk! Plink! Clang!*

Indistinct movement in the gray murk resolved slowly into tall figures, square shields, spears. Swords. Horned helms. Rank on rank of them, more shadows than shapes: a hundred men across, for Talkar had never liked how messily charges ended on the plains, and here they were in a terrain that couldn't be



more different.

When in doubt, fight the way you know how.

A horn winded weirdly, and a rustling hum became the hissing rush of arrows. Noddy jerked up his shield. Four, five clunks jolted his arm.

The straw men jerked as arrows pierced them.

Cold fear washed through Noddy, followed by wordless rage when a shot, either better aimed than most, or carried by errant wind, struck his own Runner, who'd begged and pleaded to ride at his left.

The boy clutched at his neck, then toppled away from Noddy's reaching hand and vanished.

"Lances!" Hawkeye shouted. "Archers high!"

Right arms brought up lances, heels locked down hard behind the stirrups. Horses, trained, began the deliberate walk forward, muscles bunched for the expected command to leap to the gallop. Archers brought back arms, points high, a straight line from arrow tip to back elbow.

"Archers: loose! Second line: lances!"

From the Marlovans arced a lethal hissing of arrows. The front ranks of the Venn serried under the impact, but kept moving forward. Noddy's heartbeat thundered in his ears.

The second line fell in step, slow at first, then more rapidly; the horses' ears pricked, tails flicked, one whinnied as the third line formed up behind them.

The Venn blatted horns, the sound echoing like wailing ghosts. *Thump, clutch!* The men shifted, standing square, the big square shields braced and tight one against the other in a wall. They used round shields in the back ranks, but the front had extra heavy metal shields, locked edge to edge by big men with powerful arms, the only difference being no swords spiking between each shield for they wanted horses, they were ordered to just kill the riders. Their second row formed up on their heels.

"Hold," Hawkeye warned, eyes forward now, gauging. "Hold . . . hold . . ."

And when the enemy was a hundred strides off he shouted, "Charge!"

The front row's horses sprang to the gallop. "Yiyiyiyi yip yip yip!" Hawkeye shrieked, a high, harrowing cry, the sound picked up by the men in a shrill and savage echo.

The front of the Venn lines faltered as those behind shoved forward; the ranks shifted just before the thudding crack and smash of fifty lances striking shields, helms, chest plates.

"Charge!"

And it worked the way Inda had drilled them: the first line was still even, fighting furiously as the second line galloped up and neatly as a comb passed the first line and smashed into the Venn front lines, driving them back some twenty paces.

Many of the lances splintered. Hawkeye's did not, and he wielded it with enormous strength, screeching, "Yip! Yip! Yip!"

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" the terrible shriek was taken up behind, the canyons echoing it back.

Venn front liners lost balance and fell, to be trampled under the feet of their own forces, far too tightly packed. The lancers used their spear-tipped weapons until they broke, and then out came the curve-tipped swords and the powerful downward strokes.

The captain of the third line shouted, "Charge!"

They hit with a thundering smash, driving the Venn ten more paces back: the Venn at the rear had stood fast, making a press as lethal an enemy as the Marlovan warriors. Men fought to stay upright, fought just for air.

The mass shoved against Talkar's struggling mount. He peered through the arrows, the weapons, the swirls of vapor: he had vastly underestimated the power of a charge. You couldn't really charge your own men in drill—

"Kill the horses!" Talkar shouted, but not even his ensign, separated by fifty shouting men, could hear him over the din.

There was no more thinking, just the whirl and judder of sword and shield, the plunging of horses, the flying of mud, while the slowly emerging rays of sun beat down on steel helms.

For longer than they believed they could, the Marlovans shoved the Venn down the incline, perhaps a hundred paces in all. For that length of time the Venn did not see anything beyond the high point but

horses' heads and waiting men, shadowy and ill-defined, some shooting, some waiting for attack. But then the lancers began to fall. Talkar grinned in satisfaction as Marlovans with hacked joints toppled from horses to disappear under the melee. Waiting hands gripped the riderless horses and muscled them inside the Venn lines. Just as well no one heard the order, Talkar decided, and did not reissue it. *Now just bring us a few thousand more—*

Another massive surge: the yellow-haired Marlovan commander, his teeth flashing as he laughed, had rallied the remainder of his front lines into one, this time joining it himself and together, stirrup to stirrup, the horses reared and threw the Venn front line back into more chaos.

Talkar shot his arm up in the signal for "form attack circles."

Venn horns blatted with angry insistence, and Talkar urged his horse forward as he whacked the flat of his blade against helms to get the men into bands to surround each rider.

Noddy yelled something, lost in the noise, but his tip of the chin alerted his trumpeter, who sounded the retreat. The horses plunged, kicking out, biting, smashing with forefeet, forcing the humans back so the animals could go with their fellows.

The surviving lancers backed out of the surge to reform their lines and the Venn—directed by the mournful howl of horns in a new pattern—stamped, locked shields together, and charged uphill.

Hawkeye stopped his chargers at the top of the slope.

Runners brought fresh lances from the back. When the Venn were twenty paces off, the horses charged. They were tired, but a short charge downhill still packed power.

Again the lances smashed hard into the Venn shield wall. The Venn horns bleated. The men in the center of the shield wall performed a rapid retreat before those lances and the wing men scrambled along the canyon walls to flank the Marlovan horsemen.

Hawkeye and Noddy made their horses rear, followed by the others. The animals struck out with hooves. When the horses came down, their riders' slashing blades hummed through the air, cutting and hacking at the press of Venn.

Unbidden, the men from the back abandoned their ruse with the wagons and formed into a rough and ready line, sighting on Hawkeye and Noddy.

Noddy glanced back, saw them, and jabbed his sword skyward in the command to charge.

The line serried as the flanking Venn surged out of the way, exposing the Marlovan lancers, who had lost all semblance of order. The new chargers turned to one another for clues and then it was every man for himself as Venn pressed on them, trying to surround each mounted man.

Hawkeye laughed, kicking shields, striking down with maddening speed and force at the forest of swords around him. "Yip! Yip! Yip!"

"Yip! Yip! Yip!"

For a time he held the front by force of will and speed of blade, surrounded by his personal Runners tight on either flank. No one got past those three.

But on one wing five horseman went down under a concerted attack, and the Venn, running over the top of the high point, discovered the straw army.

The cry shrilled back through the ranks, "Ruse! Ruse!"

Talkar grunted in surprise. The straw men had probably taken most of the covering arrows. Smart move. But—

A series of images followed by a new idea: were they as lamentably shorthanded as their brethren on the far side of the pass? If so, would a spearhead attack be more effective?

Talkar scowled impatiently up at the cliffs. On the east side they were impossibly high, rugged at the top. But no one could scale those heights. And behind the cliffs, bodies of water made army access even more impossible. There was no getting an army up there, not without a year to prepare.

He peered more closely at the Andahi River side, which was rockier, full of chasms and cracks. Maybe there was some kind of—

He motioned to his Scout Chief. "Take a look along the western face here. If there's a way up, I want you to get high. Count the Marlovans."

Another charge, another roar, this one bright with howls of laughter as the Venn knocked down the straw

men, grappling for the plunging horses. The real Marlovans abandoned the straw men and formed up for a desperate last charge—

“Yip! Yip! Yip!” Hawkeye screamed.

“Yip! Yip! Yip!” Horsemen erupted through the middle of the straw army, the last of Noddy’s and Inda’s dragoons, striking hard into the Venn warriors. But the Venn were over the top now, and it was the Marlovans’ turn to be forced backward, step by step, downhill.

Hawkeye was closed in by the forest of steel.

“Yip! Yip! Yip!” His fox cry rose to a nerve-ripping shriek, and screeches answered him—primal cries like the terrifying shrills of predator birds—

From the heights.

“*Yip! Yip! Yip!*”

Arrows whirred down and smacked with liquid thuds into Venn. Eyes on both sides lifted skyward at the impassable stone walls to discover men lining the tops of the cliffs. One of them carried a huge pennon, just visible in the swirling mist: a crimson-and-gold eagle.

“*Inda!*” Hawkeye yelled, teeth flashing—

And dropped his guard, just for that moment. A sword smashed the back of his elbow; as he lunged up in his saddle, another blade cut viciously behind the knee. He fell back onto the saddle as the swords struck again and again.

Noddy was breathing through his mouth, which cut down the stink of fear-sweat, blood, and death-voided bowels. Sorrow had flared into hatred and rage, directed at the horn-helmed men trying to kill him: beneath was rage at the senselessness of it all, the meaty crackings and thunks no one should ever have to hear as men he knew were smashed out of life one by one.

A flurry at his left—he lifted his head, arm poised to block—and a Venn longbowman took aim just under his upraised arm, shooting at the shadowy gap in the chain-mail sleeve under his tunic.

Noddy recoiled as white fire bloomed behind his eyes. He clutched at the arrow in his armpit, fighting for consciousness, bitter and furious that there was no hope after all. He swayed, fighting against his fading strength. Two Runners slashed and hacked in a frenzy to get near and catch him; one pulled him over the shoulders of his horse.

Rage pumped through Hawkeye, the hot glorious rage of intent. He took shield position behind the Runners, fighting off a circle of Venn, as arrows struck all around him. He’d lost use of his left arm and right leg, but he stayed in the saddle even so, laying about him at a crazed pitch.

Five, six, ten closed in; crimson blooms of pain blossomed once, again. He willed them all away, but his body no longer obeyed, and he slowed. Again and again he lifted the blade, and then once more. The roaring, rushing sound in his ears grew—

As he fell the sweet, brassy ripple of horns echoed down from the heights. Cama’s men appeared on the eastern cliffs and began a furious barrage of arrows, each aimed with deadly precision.

And from behind.

Muddy to the eyebrows after four days of running, horses flecked with foam, Tuft and his men had arrived, the trumpeter blowing wildly.

“They’re here,” Hawkeye said, as his own Runner caught him, sobbing. “Evred. *Here.*”

“Charge!” Tuft roared, and horses thundered by, wild-eyed and sweating.

Blood ran from Hawkeye’s mouth, but he didn’t feel it, he only heard the horns, the horns of triumph.

Evred was here—the Sier Danas were here, he was not alone . . . the bond of brethren . . .

With the words “Sing me” on his bloody lips, Hawkeye lost grip on his broken body, his mind winging through ethereal streamers of honor and glory until it winked out beyond the world.

“What?” Talkar shouted, trying to peer round the shields his own men raised to protect him against the deadly arrows.

“There! Is! A! Path! Up! The! Cliff!” one of his skirmish chiefs shouted through cupped hands, pointing

at the cliffs they'd recently gained. "It looks like their king is up there!"

Talkar waved his sword up at the men near that insolent eagle banner. "Take a Battlegroup—take two, or three—but kill him!"

The skirmish chief grinned, for here was eternal glory indeed. He waved out a Battlegroup of the best men to follow him, and they surged through their fellows toward the trail.

"See that?" Tau asked, pointing down at them with a fresh arrow, which he slapped to the bow and shot. It flew straight and true—and clattered against a helm before spinning away. Damn. "They're coming up to dance."

"Right." Inda swung his sword from hand to hand, loosening his arms. "You and me at the front. They can't come at us more than three across if we get to that turn in the trail right there and hold it. Rest of you keep the cover shots, one arrow one man." He turned to Evred. "You better stay up the path."

"No." Evred gestured toward a spot directly above the high point of the pass, and the clashing, roiling forces below. "I have to see."

Of course he did—he was the king. Even if he'd pitched hay by your side when you were ten years old.

Talkar watched from below as the pirate (identified by his ruby earrings) and his golden-haired companion in blue moved to a broad bend in the trail. This position kept a good fifty paces between them and the redhead in crimson, who had to be their king. The latter stood partially shielded by a large boulder from below. The king could obviously see in all directions from that vantage.

Talkar cursed, wishing he'd arrived just half a day earlier. He would have been able to get his men on those heights instead. He waited for his skirmishers to make their way up, impatient with the lingering drifts of vapor revealing and obscuring those crimson-clad figures.

His signal ensign came forward at that moment. "Battle Chief Vringir is a watch's march from the pass." He held up a slip of paper.

Talkar smiled for the first time in days.

## Chapter Twenty-three

TUFT and his men formed an arrowhead wedge and charged over the lip straight into the Venn, a tight-packed, fury-driven attack that shoved the Venn back again, even as it scattered the remainder of Hawkeye's and Noddy's lancers, far too few of whom remained in the saddle, and not a single one unwounded.

Hay drifted through the air as straw men were flung aside and Tuft's men leaped into the saddles of the fresh remounts, ready on signal to launch with murderous force into the foot warriors. They'd seen their own dead. They saw Noddy, bleeding from the mouth, lifted to a cart.

The fog had almost burned off.

Men intent on killing one another were just barely aware that it was easier to see who you were striking. Inda's band of archers loosed arrows down through the swirling vapors, guided by faint silver glimmers off metal helms and chest armor when the fog thinned.

Inda stood at the turning he'd chosen in the trail, amazed at the extraordinary sharpness and clarity of rock, water, sky. Those Venn pounding up the trail toward him seemed to move so slowly, the dust kicking up from their footsteps limned in pearlescent light. Each sound—the steady lump of his heart, the soft puff of the crimson banner that Vedrid was draping over a rock, the crunch of Tau's heels in the dirt to Inda's left, his own breathing as he waited for those figures toiling so slowly up the trail—each sound so clear, so distinct. So purposeful.

He sucked in another breath, feeling his lungs fill and then empty. Each indrawn breath a pleasure, each exhalation a sigh of bliss.

*Purpose.*

The scintillation, the purity of sound, the elation of a sacred vow, it was his and yet not his. And when the coruscation glowed into brilliance around the silhouette of Evred, embodiment of the Marlovan kings, Inda thought, *Dun? Is that you?*

For Inda knew that no one else saw that aura around Evred, that it was a vision from the world of the spirit. For the first time Inda was aware of Dun looking through his own eyes, feeling with his hands, breathing with Inda's lungs. Now Dun would fulfill his vow, a double vow, for he protected not just Inda, but the king himself.

What Inda could not see was how Dun's own presence in the spirit realm fluoresced like a comet, drawing unseen watchers: one mirrored the light over and over again, creating an aurora of complicated luminosity until the watchers drifted away, leaving only that one with intent.

Strength flowed through Inda's veins, like liquid sun.

Then the skirmish chief, foremost of the eager Venn, reached Inda at last, and thrust his sword in a downward stroke. The two big men flanking the skirmish chief twisted to take powerful side cuts at Inda. All three had narrowed their purpose to one intent, to earn glory by striking down the Marlovan pirate Elgar the Fox.

Time jolted abruptly back into remorseless speed. Inda's sword ripped the air with a hissing moan.

Impossibly fast, impossibly strong, three strokes killed the three leading Venn.

*Hiss, clang*—Tau dealt with numbers four and five.

Inda planted himself in the center of the trail's turning, his eyes wide and strange. He slowly whisked the sword back and forth, back and forth, as he waited for the next group of attackers. Inda that day was two men, one standing at the gate between the worlds of flesh and the spirit as Inda and Dun both fought to protect the king.

Evred intended to watch the battle, but he could not look away from Inda, who had captivated him once before in the contest between the two fires. Now Evred saw what only pirates had seen, the vicious concentration of deck warfare, as Inda and Tau as his Shield Arm carved tirelessly through flesh, sinew, and bone, Inda always knowing just where to turn, where to strike.

Evred was not the only one who could not look away. As the last of the mist vanished in a faint, glaring haze, Talkar and his chiefs watched from underneath their upheld shields, their intent focus drawing the interest of more men in the back rows as they waited for give in the mass struggling uphill.

From across the canyon, Cama could just make out Inda, faster than a darting serpent as he faced down a line of Venn. "Inda!" he howled, a hunting wolf's howl, hoarse and low, the sound instantly taken up by his dragoons as they shot tirelessly, one arrow to a man.

"Inda!" Cherry-Stripe heard the cry just as he rounded the last rocky spire. He slipped and tripped down the arrow-length trail, crowded by his men.

Cherry-Stripe nearly fell in his effort to scan and run at the same time. "We're right here," he yelled at Inda, who was directly across the pass, just like the villagers had told them. But too far away to hear. All right, then, let Inda *see* that he was here! "Shoot," he bellowed over his shoulder. He pulled his own bow. "Arrow to man, on that cliff!"

An arc of arrows hissed across the distance, and the Venn line wavered as a dozen or so dropped on the trail leading up to where Inda fought. Two Venn fell from the sheer rocky cliff, dead before they tumbled into the air.

"In-DA!" Cherry-Stripe bellowed.

"In-DA!" His men took up the cry.

*"In-DA!"*

The rhythmic roar echoed around the pass. The sound, the rhythm, heartened the Marlovans. With equal strength and speed the shouted name disheartened the Venn. The word "Trap!" followed it down the ranks: the Marlovans had scaled the heights everyone had believed impossible, and were shooting down from both sides of the pass as well as charging from ahead. Despite the ceiling of shields, their archers were finding chinks for their lethal rain.

Obviously they'd planned it, which suggested they had entire armies of reinforcements hidden on the

heights. The Venn commanders exchanged questioning looks across the sea of bobbing heads. If they had marched straight into a trap, the only hope of the speedy resolution they had been told to expect now lay with killing this king, and with Vringir's flank attack up the pass from Ala Larkadhe.

Talkar beckoned to his ensign, but wrote the report himself in three scrawled sentences.

He sent it off then beckoned to another chief, pointing toward the cliff as he shouted, "Get up there and take the king!"

Shafts of sunlight widened between the departing clouds, striking blood-bright glints in Inda's dancing rubies. Sun glowed on the crimson battle tunic and in the splashes of blood that gouted up as Inda and his blond shadow scythed their way through men who tried to rush them, but who fell lifeless from that cliff. Venn tried to shoot them, but more Marlovans had edged themselves just below that trail's bend, shields angled out to keep any arrows from reaching Inda or Tau.

From his towering crag Fulla Durasnir witnessed it all, how slowly, inexorably the attention of all but the mass of Marlovans and Venn shoving back and forth at the lip of the pass shifted toward those two in crimson and blue on the trail turning, the one fighting glimmering faintly in reflected sunlight as if he had a sun-shadow at his shoulder.

*"Inda! Inda! Inda!"*

Vringir noted with sour relief that the foolish Marlovans had withdrawn with dawn's light. As well. Though they could not possibly make any material difference, they'd done more damage than he'd expected.

Let them have their fun now. They'd pay for it once the pass was cleared.

He kept the men at a steady pace up the river valley alongside the wide Andahi River rushing its way toward the sea. Not ideal ground for defense, but this was not a battlefield, and the city of Ala Larkadhe, just visible beyond the sloping riverbank, was no threat.

He rode down the columns, his men in perfect formation. As soon as they gained the foot of the pass, they'd break for another even scantier meal and then begin the march up the heights at double-pace.

A rustle of voices whispering caused him to turn. The men faced right. Up.

He faced right. Up.

All along the top of the hills above the sloping riverbank horsemen appeared as if they had risen out of the ground, a thousand or more silhouettes against the westering sun.

Then another row behind them. And as the first two started riding slowly downhill, the beautiful horses dainty as dancers, yet more silhouettes appeared.

Shock made Vringir's horse sidle, head tossing. Vringir reined in hard.

The brassy fall of trumpet notes carried down the hills, and the Marlovans charged, flanked by flying archers—and smacked straight into the middle of the Venn column.

Ola-Vayir had arrived.

Durasnir was unaware that Dag Valda had left him alone. His focus was on Indevan Algara-Vayir, who swooped down to cut under a chopping blade to his left then lunged up and arched the blade behind him to block a strike from the right—a strike he could not possibly have seen. There was no breaking past his extraordinary guard. And the men on the trail below him knew it. Their faces had changed from battle lust and rage to fury and determination.

"Fulla."

Durasnir's head snapped around. Valda stumbled, almost falling, Dag Ulaffa at her side. Ulaffa blinked rapidly, gray-faced and haggard until he caught his breath. His skin was blotchy.

Durasnir gripped Valda's elbow. Under those blue robes she was no more than skin and bones held together by force of will. "I come to you first. The king is dead," she whispered, her eyes stark. "The

king is dead.”

“Dag Erkrick says the prince has demanded a cessation. We are to return to Venn so that he may claim the golden torc as king.” Ulaffa spoke in the reedy, trembling voice of a very old man.

*The king is dead.*

*This is not a coincidence.*

Durasnir pinched his fingers to the skin between his brows. “A cessation?” The Venn didn’t lose—they had no drills for this situation.

Ulaffa said, “Hilda Commander Talkar just moments ago sent a message that we have walked into a trap. The prince declared that this news joined with our king’s death means we must lay aside our endeavors here for another day. We are to go home at once.”

Durasnir’s hand dropped. “If the prince has spoken, then there is nothing more to be done.”

Ulaffa made a brief sign to Valda and then transferred below to Talkar.

Valda said to Durasnir, “Erkrick does not know I am here. Is it really a trap?”

“It looks that way,” Durasnir said again, and this time she gave a minute nod, lips parted. “We were not going to win in days, or even weeks. But everyone knew that. Valda, what has happened?”

She whispered, “This war no longer serves Dag Erkrick.”

*She knows the king’s death is not a coincidence.*

And that could only mean that Dag Erkrick’s hand lay behind the death of the king.

The truth was as powerful a strike as any dealt by a weapon, though the pain was all in mind and spirit.

Durasnir closed his eyes as he fought to comprehend just how vastly he had been blindsided. They all had. He opened his eyes. “Then the invasion was nothing more than a ruse.”

“Oh, I think it was more than that: an experiment to blend war with magic and to get us to accept it. And a fast win would have done all that the king wished, as well as added greatly to Dag Erkrick’s and the prince’s praise.”

Durasnir shook his head slowly. The money for ships and supplies, the time for training, all of it a ruse?

The men dying below—a mere decoy to keep the eyes of the homeland on the war in the south?

Valda’s shocked gaze acknowledged his thoughts. “I traced Erkrick’s movements through his scroll-case. He was returning to the king in Twelve Towers. When I was certain, I told Ulaffa. He went to investigate and discovered yesterday that the Erama Krona’s supply of white kinthus was missing the equivalent of five doses.”

“The king’s strange sleep?”

Valda made the sign of assent.

Durasnir said, feeling his way along this new pathway into darkness, “And now the prince has a well-drilled, well-supplied, powerful army to sail home and secure the throne.”

“Yes.” Valda tipped her head from side to side to ease her aching neck.

They had to talk fast. “If Erkrick killed the king—why? Why now? He couldn’t think we could lose?”

“No. There is the matter of magic.”

*Darkness—Rainorec. Venn-Doom. Which is not monsters, or war against well-trained warriors.*

*Venn-Doom is when we turn on one another.* “Signi’s geyser?”

“Yes. Erkrick is badly frightened. He thinks the Morvende aided her because their magical signature was blended with her own. She must have used spells she found in the archive to bind hers.”

The magical talk meant little to Durasnir. “Our oaths, our cooperation, for *nothing*.”

“Our purpose was superseded.” Valda’s face was bleak.

The word *supersede*—not just to replace but to replace something outmoded—struck Durasnir another blow.

He had to think. Magic was Valda’s and Ulaffa’s concern, but he knew the military. “If we cease fighting now, the Marlovans will go into a slaughter frenzy. We had better save what lives we can,” Durasnir said, decision affording him a modicum of relief. “Can you take me below? Not to Talkar. To the Marlovans. There, on that bend in the trail on that cliff, the crimson tunics.”

Valda glanced down at the blood-soaked cliff trail, and then away.

The transfer was short and wrenching, then came another wrench when the cloying, thick smell of blood

scoured the back of Durasnir's throat. He flung up his open hand and said, "Truce!" He repeated the word in Sartoran.

The Venn on the trail fell back, more shocked than the Marlovans at the sight of their Oneli Commander there in his silver armor and winged helm. Valda stayed well back, so that the Venn could not see her. The Marlovans surrounding their king slapped arrows to bows and aimed, but Evred held up his hand, palm forward. They stilled, arms taut.

As the Venn on the trail lowered their swords and backed out of range, Inda gave one sweat-burning, weary glance at the tall man in the winged helm and exhaustion hit him like a wave of seawater. His right arm tingled painfully all the way to his shoulder. Unnoticed his sword dropped from his fingers; he sank down onto a low rock, whooping for breath.

"We would call a halt." Durasnir also spoke Sartoran, hands spread, empty palms up. "Our king is dead. Prince Rajnir returns home. We are finished here."

Evred's first response was disbelief. It had to be some kind of trick, but even as he thought it, Durasnir walked to the edge of the trail head, Inda's face turning to track him. Tau slithered in the gory mud, keeping himself and his sword between Durasnir and the other two. Vedrid took up a stance beside him. Below, Talkar was with Ulaffa, of necessity shouting. Durasnir saw the Hilda commander gesture violently behind him, and he saw Talkar's lips shape certain words: rear-guard action . . . massacre. Then Ulaffa indicated the cliff and Talkar stiffened, the light glimmering on his armor, his horse backing, ears flat, when he recognized Durasnir on the cliff.

Talkar raised his arm, reluctance and anger evident in the set of his shoulders, but he too would do what needed to be done to protect the lives of his men. Rigidly he made the hand signal ceding Durasnir the right to parley.

"Wind the halt," Evred said sharply.

Vedrid had brought a trumpet in case they needed aid; he lifted it and blew a fair version of the "Halt Battle," to be picked up from below and then from above.

Cama's men straightened up from their cover, bows lifted high. "Yip! Yip! Yip!"

Cherry-Stripe's men joined, and then Tuft's down in the pass as they reformed into lines, Runners bringing lances forward as they lined up, watching for a signal.

Talkar gestured, hand flat down, and then a sideswipe.

*Cease and retreat!*

The signal men stared, but one was quicker than the others. Two toots and a blat, two toots and a blat, hastily joined by all the other horns, and with more rapidity than either side would have thought men disengaged, backing up a step, then another and another, some cursing, some spitting, others wary, shields up, weapons out as gradually the distance widened a few paces between Venn and Marlovan, revealing a horror of mud and bloody, hacked figures sprawled together in the mindless intimacy of death.

Ulaffa transferred to the cliff. He tottered, but this time he did not splat into the gore-thickened mud because Tau and Vedrid caught him, one on either side, guiding him in silence to a flattish rock. Ulaffa was scarcely aware of them. He drew in a shaky breath, his heart laboring. *One more transfer*, he thought. *One more.*

He hoisted himself to his feet and reached for Durasnir for the last transfer.

"Wait." Evred stumbled forward. "Are you coming back against us next year?" Then hated himself for so stupid a question. As if he would hear the truth—as if he could believe anything they said!

Durasnir paused, studying the troubled young face before him. "I go where I am ordered. That decision is not mine to make." And then, because Evred Montrei-Vayir reminded him with unexpected pain of Vatta, his own son, he added, "Had your defense been less effective, we might have been ordered to stay and see the objective through."

No reaction.

*How to convey meaning within the requirements of honor.* . . . He transferred his gaze to Indevan Algara-Vayir. That peculiar glow from the sun-shafts was gone, of course, leaving an ordinary young man sitting there, filthy and sweating. There was no wit whatever in that face right now, just the scars, the



earrings, all testament to his surprising career.

Durasnir addressed him. "Did you meet Ramis of the *Knife*?"

Indevan the Pirate's Sartoran turned out to be the same curiously old-fashioned accent of his king. "Yes. He commanded me to meet him at Ghost Island." A brief smile. "I thought you sent a fleet to chase me."

"I chased you myself. Can you tell me what Ramis said?" *By the Tree, let it be pertinent . . .*

Indevan's eyes narrowed: there was the wit, or maybe just wariness. "Yes. That the three greatest dangers to me were your Prince Rajnir, Dag Erkríc, and you."

And there was his chance. "Two of us," Durasnir said, "must obey." He nodded to the waiting dag.

Ulaffa closed his hand around Durasnir's wrist. They wrenched in and out of the world, then Durasnir stumbled forward, breathing hard. But now he was on his own captain's deck.

Ulaffa fainted with a quiet thump, ensigns rushing to his aid.

"Ah," Erkríc said, standing behind Prince Rajnir. He flicked a glance at Ulaffa, who was being lifted up.

Then turned his attention back to Durasnir. "Your report?"

"Talkar has ordered the cease and retreat, as commanded."

Erkríc smiled, then turned his head to the prince. "Quite correct," he said in a smooth, calm voice.

"Though this is not a retreat, it's a regrouping for the greater cause. We are called to escort a king."

"Hyarl my Commander," Rajnir said eagerly. "We must sail for home."

Durasnir stared into those blue eyes, empty of curiosity. Empty even of concern. Rajnir smiled, the sweet smile of youth. "Do you hear?" Rajnir opened his hands, holding them palm up in the sign of good tidings.

"The king is dead, and the Breseng will be nigh when we reach home. You will walk at my right hand as I take the golden torc and bring us peace."

He turned around, hands out, including Ulaffa in his smile. The old Yaga Krona had roused and insisted on remaining on deck, though the two young ensigns remained by his side. As Rajnir turned his way,

Ulaffa made a low obeisance, and Rajnir said again, "Home. At long last."

And went to his cabin. The Dag—*TheDag* of all Venn—followed him.

Durasnir's men, high rank to low, showed some of the same shock he felt. There was shock in Ulaffa's long mouth, his haggard face and distracted gaze.

There had been no shock in Rajnir's incurious blue gaze. There had been no shock in Dag Erkríc's calm, serene assurance. Only the affect of sorrow.

Durasnir walked into the command cabin, where on the desk lay lists of the dead, all written out in red and gold. One of the signal ensigns opened a case and brought out three more lists, the ink fresh as blood.

Durasnir forced himself to look at the dispatches, and the initials that indicated what was sent to whom.

The churning inside indicated his body knew what he would find, even if his mind insisted on evidence: and there they were, the reports on the attack.

The last one was Talkar's scrawled report on the trap. The neat initials in the corner indicating a copy sent to Erkríc—which meant he was not waiting on the *Cormorant*.

So Erkríc was in Twelve Towers, the king's city . . . and then the king died.

Durasnir looked at those pages and pages of dead. He remembered the pass below the cliff, the mounds of Venn and Marlovan lying together heedlessly. Young and old, the Venn faithful to the Tree unto death.

All for nothing.

He slid his hands over his face and wept.

## Chapter Twenty-four

INDA never remembered descending the last part of the trail to the floor of the pass, once a riverbed.

He remembered pain. Not just the physical pain, though it bothered him that his right arm had gone from needle stabs to so numb that he couldn't pick anything up. But that had been happening every so often of late. He'd just tucked his hand into his sash and waited for the sensation to go away. Now it wasn't

going away.

The pain he remembered consisted of sharp, distinct jabs to the heart. Like the ragged voices singing Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir's favorite ballad, "Yvana Ride Thunder," after Hawkeye was discovered under a pile of dead who Inda was helping to straighten the limbs of and then Disappear, one by one. Hawkeye, as a Jarl and Commander, would be Disappeared in front of as many of his men as could be found by nightfall. For now his body was hoisted to shoulders, followed by more men bearing his personal Runners, friends from childhood, who had died trying to protect him. The battered helm fell off, leaving his loosened long yellow hair hanging down in brown-streaked clots, his lifeless hands dangling as men sang in grief-roughened voices.

Inda did not remember the Venn pulling their own wounded out of the heaps and piles, Disappearing their dead. Many looking at him strangely, some backing away as he passed. Men of both sides avoided meeting anyone else's gaze as they loaded their wounded over the backs of their horses, and then onto hastily emptied carts brought forward from farther back in their lines.

"Inda. You have to come now."

As Inda stared witlessly, motion beyond his shoulder distracted Evred. Most of the departing Venn glanced back at Inda one last time before they vanished down the other side of the pass whence they had come. Later he would think about that. Now grief was too acute, need too immediate.

"Inda." As Inda's blank gaze slowly focused, and Evred knew Inda heard him, he said slowly, "Noddy. You have to come. He—" *Is dying? Won't believe me?* "—has to see you."

He turned his back on the scattering of Venn mages who recorded and then Disappeared the last of their dead, one by one.

"Noddy?" Inda exclaimed. "Where?"

He launched toward the wagons being filled with wounded. Men cleared space to the wagon where Noddy lay, bluish white in the lips, except where an obscene pink froth bubbled. One of his hands being clasped by Tuft, who was almost unrecognizable with one ear almost cut off, the other side of his face bandaged where a Venn blade had sliced just below his helm, nearly spitting his eye. Crusted cuts on his powerful arms and on one leg marked him beyond the edges of his chain mail. He leaned over the wagon, breathing compressed as he labored to keep tears back.

Noddy's free hand twitched, and Inda tried to reach, but his right arm still wouldn't work, so he took Noddy's hand with his left.

"See, Noddy?" Evred said, at Inda's shoulder. "We won."

Noddy tugged faintly.

Inda climbed up onto the wheel spokes and leaned next to Tuft, a spring of burning tears dripping onto Noddy's chest.

"You. Were. There. Like. You. Said." A quirk at the corner of Noddy's mouth might have been a smile, but the horrible froth bubbled there, and Inda caught his breath. "No. More," Noddy whispered.

"Promise."

No more what? "What can I get you?" Inda asked, his voice unsteady as he thought of water—wine—food—*life*. But Inda couldn't give life. "C'mon, Noddy. Hold to us. You've got to lead the sing for Hawkeye." His plea broke on a sob.

"Promise. No. More. No war."

Noddy's voice had sunk to a whisper; was that *no more* or *no war*?

"Yes," Inda said. *Yes, if it will help him hold on.* "Yes, I promise."

Noddy relaxed; his fingers gripped Inda's with all the strength he had left. Inda had come, just as he said he would. They'd heard the Venn horns. Retreat, Evred said. The Venn were defeated because he and Hawkeye had held the pass. And now the Venn were going. *No war.*

Noddy floated, the thought winging away. He made a brief mental effort to catch it, then decided it could wait. Everything could wait. It was good right now, right here, to drift . . . like being on the lake behind Cousin Nadran's castle on a sunny day, light splashing and winking on the deep blue waters . . . His friends had come home with him. He could float here in the sun and listen to their voices. The sun was so bright. Shut his eyes . . . contentment . . . just listen to their voices on the other rafts. Inda. Evred. Tuft.

Cama . . . Cherry-Stripe . . . as he floated closer and closer to the warm, bright sun . . .

Inda stayed beside the wagon, holding Noddy's hand until there was no return grip, and the hand went cold.

He looked across the wagon straight into Evred's eyes, taken aback at the hard glare of the Sierlaef, of Fox at his most infuriated. Evred shifted his gaze to Noddy, and in the compressed, downward turn to his mouth Inda saw that he'd mistaken wretchedness for rage: unmasked and bare was the severity of Evred's pain.

Evred reached, and with a gentle gesture closed Noddy's eyes. Then sobs crashed through Inda's chest with relentless strength. He wept in gulps, and men wept around him.

There were more shards. The dying men, known and unknown. The uncovered faces of the dead, hands stiff and empty. Strewn mementos from packs. Fallen hair clasps. Inda had to sit down, sick and trembling and dizzy.

When he shut his eyes, there was the blurred image of Tdor's face. The blur was perplexing, not quite a blend of Tdor as she used to be and as she was now. He remembered his promise to write. But his hand could not grip anything well, sending more shards of pain up his arm. He got up and found his pack. Pen. Paper. He scrawled, *We're alive*. What else could he say?

Tuft's voice in his ear. "Inda. There's more of 'em over the top there."

Inda looked around, bewildered. The stars had gone and it was morning. He crumpled the note into the box and sent it. Then he forced himself into motion.

He must help see to the dead before they Disappeared them. He and Tuft and Evred all worked alongside their captains, taking care to smooth hair, to tug clothing into place, to straighten limbs not obscenely hacked. One by one, because each deserved to be restored to dignity, and then to be Disappeared by the hand of a captain or a commander. This was right and true in the eyes of all the men, who might so easily have lain there.

More shards. Blood squelching underfoot. Riderless horses leaping lightly over the unbreathing human obstacles and racing about wild-eyed, heads tossing. Carts, once loaded with horse armor, now loaded with wounded, Runners jumping up and down to and from the carts, putting cups to lips as others bandaged and sometimes sewed. And sometimes sawed.

Vedrid easing off Inda's crimson Harskialdna tunic so that his own cuts could be sewn—he had two, and a lot of nicks—and bandaged. Someone put his right arm in a sling, and he tried to protest—he wasn't wounded—but it was so much easier on his shoulder to let his arm rest in the cloth.

He remembered daylight fading as Signi walked out from behind a group of men bearing one of the few wounded left untended, a bag of cloth for bandages over one of her shoulders, her trousers mud-and blood-splattered, her arms held out, fingers distended. She stared into the air, or something beyond the air.

*Ghosts?* Inda thought. Tired as he was, his heart pinched hard in his chest.

"I'm sorry," he said, meaning her countrymen who had died that day, and she said something in a tear-choked voice over and over, something in Venn, but it was all right because he couldn't hear her anyway, he just sought her mouth and lips met trembling lips in a sticky, salt-tear tasting kiss.

## Chapter Twenty-five

OLA-VAYIR, Buck, Rat, and Barend sat on their horses atop the highest sand dune. Buck was supported by his Runner; they'd wrapped his half-severed arm tight against his body, the opposite knee stump was stiff with bandages, and his usually trim middle was bulky. Pain came and went in waves, but he insisted on being there. He said (once they got a heavy dose of green kinthus into him and he could talk at all) that he owed it to the king, but internally he vowed he'd be damned before he'd leave that strutting old man to scarfle up all the credit.

Ranged directly behind them, in lines nearly a thousand men across, their riders outlined the shape of the

dunes down the beach, bows ready, swords loose in the saddle sheaths, their rich silken House tunics glowing with a splendid array of colors as they talked quietly back and forth. A closer look would reveal bandaged heads under helms, arms in slings, bulky lines under trousers indicating various sorts of bindings, hastily mended tears in the tunics, others stained badly.

No one moved, except horse ears twitching, tails flicking, the occasional cock of an equine hip. No one put arrow to bow, though everyone had bows strung and ready.

That battered impression was reflected in the mostly silent Venn on the beach as they waded out to the launches in orderly lines, climbed in, raised the single sails, and thumped back over a running sea driven by the brisk offshore breeze.

The Marlovans watched, passing water jugs down the line and sharing out travel bread—except for Buck, who gently dozed, leaning against the shoulder of his Runner, who'd eased up on his side and shifted to the extreme edge of his saddle. The sun had begun its downward drop toward the west before the last of the Venn boats reached the tall ships out on the horizon.

When the last boat was taken up, the sails on the big ships dropped down, tightened, and filled. The ships slowly turned about and then began to rock away, slanting as they gathered speed.

Ola-Vayir finally sat back in his saddle, smiling. "They're gone, boys," he said genially.

Life was good. He'd made it in time, he'd won a smashing battle, only losing a hundred men. True there were ten or twenty times that in wounded, but most of those would be able to ride in a few days or weeks at most. He cast a glance of mild scorn at Buck. Young fool, who'd be impressed with his strut? Look at that green face. Ah well, live and let live, the point being, they were all alive. The number of wounded, he gloated inwardly, gave him the best reason in the world to linger. He looked forward to riding up to that white tower, there, where the others said young Evred would return: by the time Ola-Vayir reached his own home again, the old Jarl would have convinced himself that his wild ride had won the war.

"Let's go see what the king wants us doing next, eh?"

Buck jerked awake, and wiped drool off his chin with his good hand. Then he rolled his eyes, prompting a muffled snort from Barend. Rat just sat, face tight with pain. He hadn't drunk green kinthus, and wished he hadn't been so quick to turn it down so it would go to the worse wounded fellows; he was nearly fainting in the saddle, and just longed to lie down.

"I'll go find out," Barend said, and because he had the rank as former Harskialdna and no one could stop him, he wheeled his horse and galloped along the beach, cursing Ola-Vayir as he rode.

As the sunlight vanished in the Andahi Pass, Cama and his men had just reached the bottom of a cliff after a solid day of picking their way down, sometimes feeling like spiders on a wall. Only they hadn't eight legs to help them; half a dozen had lost grip and slid, one man had fallen to his death.

"Where's Inda?" Cama demanded, striding forward.

Everyone gave way before the tall, one-eyed Sier Danas. There was Inda in the center of things, his arm in a sling, but otherwise apparently unhurt.

Cama walked up to him. "What needs doing?"

Inda did not see the exhaustion in their filthy faces because they were all equally exhausted and filthy. He looked past Cama. None of his men seemed to be wounded, so Inda said, "Follow the Venn back. Make sure they leave."

Evred stepped up and added, "If there are no defenders left, and I suspect that to be the case, hold Castle Andahi. I will send you more men in case the Venn leave anyone on the northern shore."

Cama's lip lifted—not a smile, but a semblance of one. He struck his fist against his chest, then strode on, seemingly tireless, to choose mounts from the former straw army. His men hefted their gear and followed his straight back and martial saunter.

Cherry-Stripe said under his breath to Inda, "Good thinking, sending Cama north. Now he doesn't have to go to Horsebutt's for that damn celebration. Because you know Sponge hasn't forgotten."

Inda heard about half of that, and comprehended less. He found a free corner of a wagon, climbed up, and dropped down to rest, just for a moment—and sleep took him so fast he did not even remember putting down his head.

Just as the last of the day vanished, one of the sudden summer storms piled clouds high above the mountain peaks. Evred set himself up in a half-empty hay wagon next to Inda's to begin the task of clearing the wreckage of a kingdom.

Around him, Runners and volunteer Riders joked and laughed. They were done here. The last of the dead had been Disappeared, the wounded were all loaded. The king gave the expected signal to start back down the pass.

The horse teams began to move, the drivers now with one hand on the wooden brakes of carts and wagons rattling and bumping over small stones. Evred grimaced as his wagon jerked and swayed; his report to Hadand would be illegible.

He settled his lap desk on his knees as Runners rigged a horse armor tent over him. Lightning flickered pale blue and thunder rumbled over the distant peaks. He could not see those who chatted and laughed, which somehow made their voices clearer. The undertone of hilarity, of relief, was extraordinarily different than the tight, hard barks and cackles of laughter after the rough jokes they'd traded back and forth on the long hike down the mountain.

For them the battle was over. They'd won. They anticipated songs, celebrations, a return to life.

Admiration.

Normal life.

What was going to be normal in a kingdom with an empty treasury, most of its men scattered up here, far too many dead? He leaned forward, peering around the edge of the makeshift shelter at Inda in the next wagon, who lay like one of those dead—

Image: midnight last night. Hawkeye and Noddy, stretched out together on a wagon, surrounded by men with torches. Light beating on faces, most with the clean tracks of tears cutting through the grime on their faces as they sang the "Hymn to the Fallen," and Evred waved the torch over them.

Then he had to touch them and make their bodies go away. Noddy—flat-voiced, jug-faced Noddy—was no longer just around the corner with a comment, his components were in the ground, his spirit—where? It was not here, that was what mattered. It was not here, nor was Hawkeye, his dashing cousin, loyal to the last.

Evred pressed his hands against his face. When would he master the pain?

Not when. How? By keeping busy, not sitting around feeling sorry for himself. He permitted himself one more glance at Inda, and could not prevent the harrowing intensity of his relief. To no human being would he admit the vile helplessness he had experienced during that long battle, watching Inda—unable to not watch Inda out of a nightmarish mix of terror and desire.

Inda lay snoring where he'd dropped, one arm dangling over the side of the wagon. The Venn dag was, like Taumad, busy tending the wounded at the back in the slower wagons, so none of Inda's followers were here. He could sleep as long as he needed. Snoring, filthy from his tangled mat of hair to his muddy, blood-splashed boots, there was no sight in the world more dear.

*Inda.* Evred drew in a deep breath, and pulled out a sheet of paper. First duty: this report to Hadand. He would begin with the fact that her brother lived.

Inda did not stir for the rest of that day or night. He woke to the glow of light under one of the horse-armor tents, his mouth dry, his head hammering. He lifted his head—mistake. He lay back and shoved his grimy hair off his face. Turning his head slightly, he could just make out Evred framed by the space gapping between a makeshift tent of piled horse armor resting over lashed lances. Evred was writing steadily, his pack open beside him.

Tau appeared, seemingly by magic, and pushed a lukewarm cup into Inda's left hand, lifting his head with the other. Inda coughed at the bitter taste, but swallowed the rest, and then with more eagerness drank

the cup of water Tau silently held out next. Inda sat up, wincing against the hammer inside his skull; it lost strength with rapid speed, leaving lessened aches and a yawning belly.

Inda looked around, this time with more awareness. They were moving briskly, the wagon brakes smelling slightly of singed metal. Somewhere ahead the cooks had jury-rigged a makeshift stove aboard one of the carts, for the delicious smell of toasted grain drifted back on a thin white stream of smoke. "Oatmeal," Tau said, his mouth smiling, though no humor reached his eyes. "Got somewhat burned, but it doesn't taste bad."

"I'll eat it even if it's burned solid." Inda frowned. "Tau, you look terrible. You fought as hard as I did on that cliff. Why aren't you asleep?"

"No one fought as hard as you did." Tau looked away. *How do you bear the guilt?* he thought. But he would not speak. Maybe the Marlovan way of bearing guilt was to not think about it. Tau kept hearing his own voice over and over, so careless, so superior when he said he thought Noddy Toraca would be suitable to command with Hawkeye. *I recommended a man to his death.*

He would not say it. It was his burden, and he would not add to Inda's. "I don't think you realize just how dismaying a sight that was. I just stood there and caught the occasional wild strike. And I did sleep, though probably not enough. But if we're comparing our deficits in slumber, yours would far exceed mine." He waved his hand. "We'll have plenty of catch-up time to rest when we reach Ala Larkadhe." "No, we will not."

They turned. Evred had emerged from his horse-armor tent. He appeared to be even more tired than Tau, his eyes circled with dark flesh, his skin taut as he held up his gold case. "I just discovered that Ala Larkadhe seems to have been destroyed by a mysterious flood."

"That had to have been Erkrick," Inda exclaimed.

A faint trumpet call from the advance riders interrupted them. Soon came the sound of a horse cantering uphill.

A Runner rounded the craggy cliff just ahead. "Outriders report it's Barend-Dal," the Runner said to Evred.

"Send him directly here."

They did not have long to wait. Through the middle of the lines rode Barend, rolling in his saddle as usual, reins in his fist. He'd made excellent time, finding plenty of horses to commandeer from the roaming patrols stretched between the coast and the southern end of the pass. His new mount, swapped with the outriders' remounts at dawn, was unaccustomed to so clumsy a rider, and jobbed scoldingly against his hand but he didn't notice. "There you are!" Barend called, relieved. "I didn't trust those gold things—" "Never mind that," Evred cut in, too tired for amenities. "Report. First what you saw, then what you've heard."

Barend gave Evred a succinct report that was mostly good news: the Venn had departed in a fast, orderly manner from the south shore. Lindeth prudently kept their fires burning, though by then the smoke was a suspiciously thin combination of olive and leddas oils with a seasoning of grass and old blankets and broken wooden gear. The long beach (which would take the name Venn's End in Olanar for several generations, eroding to Visegn by the turn of the millennium) was stained with brown and crimson patches, though the bands of storms had done much to wash them away. He ended with what everyone was already calling Ola-Vayir's Charge (with the Jarl's and his men's enthusiastic encouragement), "... though it was actually Buck's idea, it being his scouts who spotted 'em and brought 'em to the right place. And Buck said we should form up in lines over the hills above the river road and charge together. Anyway. As soon as Ola-Vayir said he was going to wait for you, I figured I'd better come up here. Better than trying to find something to eat back in Ala Larkadhe," he added with faint humor. Then he squinted at his cousin. "He's going to be expecting some kind o' reward."

Evred turned his palms up. "I won't give him the north, and what else is there? We have an empty treasury, all the harbors to rebuild, and it sounds like Ala Larkadhe as well."

Inda rubbed his jaw with his good hand. "Treasury? Empty?"

Evred turned his way, but Barend rode over him. "Ala Larkadhe isn't destroyed. Just washed out. Except for the central square. You know, over the baths? That's gone. But the rest, the houses and the

castle, those stand. There just isn't much in the ground floors as yet. When I rode past people were still picking stuff out of the mess."

"But there cannot be food for thousands of men."

"No. That's why I'm here. You better come fast, because everyone's a hero right now. A whole lot are flat on their backs recovering from Venn sword and bow work. They went after arms and legs—"

"Did here, too," Tuft put in.

"—but there's going to be trouble if we don't get 'em under orders. We ran out of barracks space, and we can't billet 'em on civs when the ground floors of every house lack furniture. Not a lot of extra food, and though the fun houses have all thrown open their doors, they'll run out of supplies about the time they run out of patience. Long before they run out of liberty men, is what Tdiran-Randviar said."

"We'll give them something to do." Evred's smile was rare, the tips of his teeth showing. It was a singularly unpleasant smile. "Packing to march. Because I promised there would be a triumph."

Barend gasped, "Who's paying for that?"

"Horsebutt," Evred said, the nasty smile even wider.

Inda had completely forgotten that strange moment during the long ride north, but he remembered it now, and gasped as the implications hit him. "You mean, he has to entertain us all?"

"That's what a triumph is. It's also an honor," Evred said. "It's an honor kings rarely confer, and that's only when they want to ruin someone without lifting a hand in anger. We have the moral force of our victory, and he the honor of being chosen as host."

Inda laughed, then shook his head. "That's . . . that's piratical. Especially since we didn't have a victory."

"Yes, we did."

Inda looked startled, and Barend lifted his brows. Evred had never flatly contradicted Inda before.

Inda rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Sponge, that wasn't any victory, they just retreated. You heard Durasnir, and even if he lied about everything else—"

"Inda." Evred looked into Inda's startled face. A stream of insights flickered through his mind, most images, scraps of past conversations. Inda's understanding of victory was purely military—you won when you either left your enemies in smoking ruin or ran them off the map. Inda was profoundly ignorant of the political side of war.

How to explain swiftly? Education could come later. It would, as Inda was now Harskialdna, and he would be the instrument of Evred's will. *Be immediate*. "Would you deny these men their triumph? Deny Noddy's family?"

Inda grimaced. "But—"

"Inda. The men saw you on the cliff, they shouted your name. That heartened them. You were unbeatable, and the Venn retreated. They are gone. You gave the men the victory. Do not take it away from them."

Inda smacked his hands over his face. "It's Boruin all over again," he mumbled.

Evred pointed at Tuft, who was gingerly fingering the stitches on his blood-crust-ed ear. "Vedrid?" The Runner appeared from the other side of the makeshift tent, wet clothes over his arm. "Horses for us all. Tuft, you are in command. The wounded must go to Ala Larkadhe, but all the rest of these men will ride for Tya-Vayir. We'll spend one night in Ala Larkadhe, then we will join you on the road."

## Chapter Twenty-six

NIGHTINGALE Toraca cautiously leaned against the window of the tiny stable hand's room the Runners had taken as their watch station. The room smelled faintly of wet wood; through the open window came the heavy summer air, scented with the adjacent stables.

The Runners who had galloped ahead of the king all greeted Nightingale, scrupulously careful not to say anything, and went out about their duties. But the very care with which they greeted him—the lack of mention of Andahi Pass—prepared him for Evred-Harvaldar to come seeking him almost as soon as he

rode through the gates.

Nightingale was shocked by the lines of tension and exhaustion in the king's face. He saluted, though the movement hurt, and whispered, "You're wounded?"

Nightingale was almost unrecognizable. His lips were bluish, and he had trouble breathing.

To few would Evred have answered that question, but Nightingale was already as far inside his personal boundaries as he let anyone, and now Evred felt he was owed more than evasion. "I never lifted a sword. No weapon was near me," he said, and ill as he was, Nightingale could not comprehend Evred's low, flat tone. Then Evred said in a very different voice, "Noddy and Hawkeye died defending the top of the pass. They held it in the teeth of half the entire Venn army."

Nightingale had thought he was prepared, but the words made it real. At least the king had come right out with it, not shuffling about, or speechifying about honor and glory.

He wasn't aware of reacting, but suddenly there was a chair underneath him, and Evred's hand on his good shoulder, keeping him from falling.

Nightingale held his breath, glaring at the table with its neat papers, a hastily scrawled duty roster on top. The big slate with messages from one Runner to another. Pens. Chalk. Papers, a couple of extra weapons, a sewing kit. He concentrated fiercely on each thing. His chest hurt too much to breathe.

Evred's voice went on, husky with grief: unexpectedly he sounded like Hawkeye. "Noddy died knowing we won. He asked Inda to promise him something. I could not hear what it was, but no doubt Inda will be speaking to you about it. Now. I have decided—and will tell your Cousin Nadran so—that you will choose whether you will take Noddy's place as Randael to Khani-Vayir. Noddy's son will inherit, all as before. But if you wish to become Randael, then you must marry. Unfortunately, there will be far too many unmarried women whose treaties cannot be kept, so you will probably be able to choose. Or you may stay my Second Runner, and name your preference in a Randael for your cousin, and then little Inda."

Nightingale could not speak.

"Do not decide now. There is time. Nothing will happen before Convocation, and that is half a year away. Recover first. Think about it."

The hand lifted, and Evred turned to leave.

Nightingale forced words out. "You'll sing them?"

"Yes. There will be a triumph at Tya-Vayir."

"Then. I'm going."

"We will arrange it."

"Here they are," came Inda's voice from the Runner barracks outside. And then, to Vedrid on duty outside the door to the Runner watch station, "Is he being private?"

Evred lifted his voice. "Enter, Inda."

He was at first annoyed to see that Inda was not alone. He'd hoped the Venn mage would vanish altogether, though he knew it an unreasonable wish. She'd stayed with the wounded, transferring by magic back to rejoin them just before they reached Ala Larkadhe. He did not hate her—that had vanished long ago—but he hated the magical power and freedom she used so easily.

Inda said, "We went straight to the lazaretto, but Signi says it's too late for Buck's arm. There isn't any magic for when it's gotten that bad. His leg above the amputation will probably heal. They won't have to cut all the way at the hip. And they sewed up his parts." Inda grimaced, brushing his hand over his crotch. "They said Nightingale was up here."

Signi's gaze scarcely touched Evred, going straight to Nightingale. "Ah," she exclaimed. "It *is* the lung. You are breathing blood. We must take him down to Hatha-Runner."

Nightingale had his face turned away; he made a vague motion to leave him be, and Signi faltered, uncertain. Then Inda snapped his fingers. "Message, Sponge. Tdiran-Randviar stopped me on the way in. Said to tell you that no one died in the mystery flood, it was the battle before that gave us a stiff list, mostly of women and a handful of civs. Also, they got the horses out. And this fellow here reopened his wound doing it." Inda pointed at Nightingale.

Evred had been watching the Venn dag, who, tired, stressed, was far less masked than he'd ever seen



her: on the first mention of the flood her hands stiffened. And then, on Inda's report *No one died*, her eyes closed in unmistakable relief.

"You did that," Evred said, advancing on her. Not that he had far to go in the tiny room. "The flood. Not the Venn Erkríc. You."

"What?" Inda exclaimed.

Signi's eyes fluttered open, wide and frightened, then she straightened, her face smoothing with that inward control. "Yes."

"You did that against your countrymen? In aid of us? Why?"

"I did not mean for people to be killed, for then I would count myself among those who murdered others. Venn, Marlovan, Idayagan, Olaran—the inhabitants, they were all killing. Children, the old. Everyone. Not just your warriors, men and women. And so my people were going to burn the city."

Nightingale had shoved aside papers and dropped his head onto his folded arms. He turned his head and croaked, "True. Had us ringed. No one could get out. We half choked on the smoke."

"Do you not see," Signi said, her gaze wide and intent. "How terrible it is, when all fight? War is terrible, it turns everyone into murderers."

"But you yourself told us that your Dag Erkríc was going to ensorcel us all, to take our minds and make us fight to his will."

"Not everyone," she said. "Even Norsunder has not such magic, or you can be sure it would have long been used. Just you, the king."

"So you believe it is wrong for people to defend the king?" Evred's voice flattened. "Would that include your king, your prince, who ordered you against us in the first place?"

"The people in the city would not have been put to death had your people surrendered. Life would have gone on much as it does under you. Perhaps with a greater wargild, I do not know and cannot answer. The warriors would then have gone up the pass, and yes, probably more men would have died there. I don't have easy answers, I only ask a question that I believe must be asked. Asked again and again. Is it right for everyone to make war without rules? What happens when war is something everyone expects, from baby to grandmother?" She turned away, hands toward Nightingale. "I have been helping Hatha-Runner, I have been teaching him some healer magics, since the Magic Council will not let healers come here."

Evred said, "I thought you could not do magic. They would find you."

Signi's smile was painful. "I have done magic all along. Restoring your lockets' magic most recently, and longer ago your castle spells. I did the same at the Marlo-Vayir castle. But no, those are not the major magics that would have drawn Erkríc's eye. When I washed this city clean, I drew his eye. He now knows I am here, that I stand against him. This does not increase your danger from Erkríc. Only mine." Nightingale had gotten to his feet. Signi helped him out.

Inda fell in step beside Evred. "Tdiran-Randviar's putting on a dinner for all the captains and the city guild chiefs," he said. "Here's a surprise. The new guild master from Lindeth Harbor is coming, as well as the harbormaster. She says that's something new."

"It's more likely something prudent," Evred said, in the flat, soft voice he'd used ever since the battle. There had always been a small space of personal reserve between Sponge and the world, back when they were first year scrubs at the academy. Gradually—except for that one moment, just after Noddy died—that space had become a gulf.

"Prudent?" Inda asked, sliding his right arm out of his grimy sling and flexing his hand.

Evred gestured, palm up. "I'm certain the impulse is less a truce with us than making certain that they aren't overlooked when it comes time to rebuild. And I'm morally certain we will be hearing, underneath stirring speeches about heroism, that that time should be as soon as possible."

Inda grimaced. He'd thought the news of Lindeth's harbormaster coming, a first, would be a good sign. "We can deal with that later. Thing is, Tdiran-Randviar says that hoarded stuff is coming out right and left, now that they're beginning to believe they aren't in for a summer's siege. So we'll have a hot meal, our first in what? I don't remember, do you?" He didn't pause for Evred to answer, but ran right on. "I set the loose Runners to work on putting together a report on what supplies we've got, what the city's

got. Told them to prepare for the ride.”

“I’d like to leave at dawn,” Evred said.

*You’d do better with a night’s sleep*, Inda thought, but he didn’t say it. Evred had not asked for personal advice, and even when he was small he’d hated to get it. Inda sighed, wondering how to broach the subject without offense. He didn’t think Evred had slept more than half a night, if that, since the battle. Maybe work it in with the last bit of good news? One he’d been saving for the right moment.

Evred led the way along the back end of the castle, which was full of a jumble of furnishings rescued from below during the flood. Runners, women, servants dashed about, most distracted, some catching themselves short to let them pass, hands snapping to chests.

Evred, usually so observant, did not appear to see any of them; he walked with his head bent, hands clasped behind him. Inda recognized where they were heading, and grimaced again when they reached the white tower. So he filled the silence with a running list of the logistical chores he foresaw needing attention once they were on the road again, in hopes Evred would himself suggest a day’s wait. Better, a week. They could scrounge food from somewhere.

No response. They mounted the last round of stairs in silence. The reserve had become a gulf vast as a sea, isolating Evred on an island of his own making.

“... and Rat gave me permission to send the rest of those Cassad dragoons north over the pass for Cama to use, as soon as they’ve gotten a watch or two of rest. Cama had the training of ’em, and Rat admits they’re devoted to Cama. But I was thinking it would be right, wouldn’t it, to send the Khani-Vayir men home? Or do we take them along with Hawkeye’s people to the triumph, so they can hear their leaders sung?”

“We can give them the choice,” Evred said. “I’d like to keep a few of them as an honor guard for Nightingale. After the triumph they can take him back home.”

They stepped onto the tower landing. After the days of summer storms and the constant jingle and creak and rumble of men on horses and in wagons, they had reached so still a place all Inda heard was Evred’s breathing.

Evred walked to the closed archive door and laid his hand against the latch, which was immovable as stone. His hand slid up the door, then he rested his forehead on his arm.

Just for a moment. He straightened up, turned, dropped his hand. “We were warned.”

Inda tried to bridge the gulf. He’d saved what he’d thought the best news, but now he wasn’t sure even this would make a difference. Feeling oddly diffident, he said, “Evred, Kened told me those tunics of ours made it into the bucket in time, and the rips are all sewed. And he has a section of the baths set aside for us. Right now! We can go soak! I don’t know about you, but I really, really want to get rid of this stink. I’m surprised people don’t run out of a room soon’s I walk into it.”

Evred opened his mouth, his gaze lifting to the smooth white stone ceiling, then to the stairs. He started toward Hawkeye’s old office, saying over his shoulder, “You go along. As you said, there’s much to do. I’ll be there as soon as I see to things here.”

Inda gave up, and galloped downstairs. He had a plan formulating in his mind. He was so involved with his own thoughts it was his turn not to notice others. He was not aware that his path was clear despite the crowds of people wandering about, either packing, unpacking, rebuilding, carrying, or just recovering. He never saw the stares in his wake.

He was Indevan-Harskialdna, winner of the battle of Andahi Pass—some said he’d even fought the wing-helmed commander of the Venn into surrender, there on the cliff. He’d hand-picked Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir and Noddy Toraca, who held the Pass with six wings against the entire Venn army, though only two out of each riding survived. But they’d held it for Inda-Harskialdna, who brought them triumph, and glory. Who couldn’t be beaten.

As yet, only Signi was aware that Hened Dunrend, Inda’s faithful ghost, was gone.

\* \* \*

The children of Castle Andahi were settling into a new cave when Hal and Dvar arrived at the same time from different directions. Over the days after they’d spent coming down off the heights toward the pass in a zigzag, Hal and Dvar had devolved into the forward scouts, as both were fast and observant.

Han had been sending Dvar out because Dvar hadn't spoken since that terrible day on the landslide. Instinct prompted Han to give Dvar responsibility, but also something to keep her away from the little ones' crying. Most of the threes cried a lot now, they wanted their parents, they pushed away Lnard and Han when they tried to hug and kiss them. Everybody had snot noses, and there weren't any ensorcelled handkerchiefs. There was listerblossom—Lnard had kept that wrapped in closeweave cloth—but most days they did not dare light fires. Once again they'd heard dogs.

Dvar and Hal arrived, panting, and Hal said, "The Venn are coming back!"

And they were. Like before, what looked like a full wing in every line, too many lines to count. Their marching feet sent *thrump thrump thrump* echoes up the cliff walls.

The children huddled in their latest cave, the smalls asleep, the older ones silent until at long last the enemy vanished once again.

That meant one thing: the king had won, just like the Jarlan promised.

Hal said, "What now?"

Han smiled for the first time in days. Her lips cracked, but that was all right. She took her forefinger away from her teeth, which had been worrying at the nail. Strange, how she kind of liked crunching grit, when it used to make her shudder.

"Now," she said, "we wait for the king."

## Chapter Twenty-seven

*Evred, do you not see? You've already put everyone in place for the perfect solution. If you keep Cama in the north, create another jarlate and if you hold Castle Andahi for Flash's brother, then the problem is solved. And it seems to me, looking at your map here, that there is easily enough work for two Jarls in that area. In addition, if the Jarl of Ola-Vayir presses you to rescind the exile order I passed on Starand, well, if she is elevated to Jarlan far in the north, she thus regains her honor, yet she cannot possibly make trouble down here. If we give Cama a good pair as Randael and Randviar, they can be trusted for castle guardianship and good relations with the north, and to overrule Starand when necessary.*

*Hadand, once again I thank you for your wisdom. It shall be as you say. Now I can go to this dinner with a quiet mind. And tomorrow early we will begin the ride home.*

Evred smiled as he slid the folded note inside the gold case. He'd had far too much business for the locket, and perforce had to trust the golden case. So far there had been no evidence of tampering or of untoward effects.

"There you are!" Barend entered, scratching his scalp vigorously. "Come on, they've been holding one of the hot baths for us. None o' the Runners've had any, and it's empty, which makes it really unfair to the others waiting."

"I did not realize. I will come at once," Evred said.

"I did the round of the wounded with Ola-Vayir like you asked," Barend reported as they rapidly descended the stairs to the basement level.

"Who needs my attention?"

"I think those who lasted this long are going to make it. Hatha says the dag gave him some of the healer spells. Nothing is going to put a limb back—Buck's lost an arm as well as a leg, and he's not the only one. But she taught him how to seal internal wounds. Those are the worst." He whistled on a low note. "Like Nightingale's lung. We didn't know how bad it was. Hatha said he was a day or so from falling down into a coma. You know what happens then."

Evred swore under his breath. He'd not lose another Toraca, that he vowed.

They reached the enormous natural caverns that formed the baths, a hot spring having long ago been diverted to mix with the water of the underground river. Here they discovered that "complete ruin" meant

a spectacular hole in the ceiling, and the men's side was pretty much unusable, enormous slabs of solid rock having been tossed around like toys. Evred contemplated the power behind such an act. The women's side was nearly intact, the rubble shoved to one side, neat curtains marking off a couple of private bath chambers. The open baths had once accommodated several hundred at either side, now reduced to maybe a hundred. One of the private, curtained alcoves was vigilantly guarded for the Marlovan high command.

The clean scent of running water caused Barend to suck in a deep breath. "Ah," he exclaimed, flinging aside the curtain then tearing at his clothes. He hopped and writhed toward the bubbling, steaming pool, throwing coat, shirt, pants, socks, drawers in every direction.

The Runners had done their best for them all during the descent down the pass. Evred had endured the lack of amenities in silence because his men did, because Barend, Inda, and Cherry-Stripe had appeared to be cheerfully indifferent to grime and smell. But now, with the prospect of being clean at last, his body seemed to protest in every pore, becoming one vast itch. Evred was right behind his cousin, impatiently flinging off his clothes until he sank into stinging hot water.

His body relaxed into the ruffling motion of the hot spring bubbles. He used the herb-soap from scalp to heels, and then lay back—

—and the burn of water in his nose caused him to surge up, coughing and sneezing.

Barend splashed over, eyes wide. "You all right?"

"Fine. I almost fell asleep," Evred admitted, scooping a handful of soap and applying it vigorously.

Barend snorted, ducking down until just his face was above water, his hair floating like weed around him.

"How much have you slept in the last week? One watch all told?"

Evred ducked his head under one more time to make sure the soap had rinsed from his scalp, and then forced himself to rise, though his body felt as heavy as stone.

Sleep. Sometime he would have to sleep. He dreaded it, for every single attempt had brought those images back—

"You getting out already?" Barend said, surprised.

"As you point out, the Runners have not bathed yet. And we've a dinner to get ready for."

"Not this moment." Barend floated, torpid with bliss.

Evred waved a hand to keep him there, and stepped out to where his Runners had laid out fresh clothes, including his House tunic. The sight of that crimson tunic with its gleaming embroidered eagle brought back the images of the battle, more powerful than ever.

He held his breath, wrenching his mind to his immediate surroundings. He stared at Vedrid, waiting patiently for orders, and noticed the darn in his sleeve, and another along the bottom of his coat. When did that happen? Kened walked toward the curtain with an armload of dirty clothes, a bandage just visible at his wrist and a nick in his ear. Which battle was that? The sound of voices rising and falling: a local song in women's voices echoing off the stone, and on the other side of the baths, perhaps a hundred paces distant, male voices joined in the slow cadences of "Yvana Ride Thunder."

*"Valiant, loyal men, ride the five hundred*

*Ancestors watching them, cheering the charge*

*Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir. Noddy Toraca*

*Lead the five hundred . . ."*

The voices broke up, one protesting, "No, no, the next verse has to name the captains!"

"Try this—wait—listen! *Lancers united, three lines to charge* —"

"What about the second charge, eh?"

"I'll get to them, but Houndface, he was *there*, said the first charge was three lines, and—"

"Here, stop yapping, *listen* to me! Before the battle part, you have to say things about Hawkeye. And Toraca, too. Garid says it should sound like the same hero deeds in the first verses of the old ballad, when Fleetfoot Yvana issues the challenge to Nickblade Montrei-Hauc—"

"Yes! Yes! Like this." A cleared throat, and a young man began to chant,

*"Surrounded at Ghael Hills, vastly outnumbered;*

*Fire and pirates, Prick Point defending—"*

“Not bad, not bad. Only you can’t say prick in a war poem—”

“Evred?” That was Barend. Close by.

“Why not? We say it in life—”

“But in the songs you use the right name, see!”

“In that case, why are we saying Hawkeye? I don’t even know what his real name is. Wasn’t he named for one of the kings?”

Evred met a searching gaze, then Barend’s eyes narrowed to their customary squint. “You just stopped, like one of those mages froze you. Something wrong?”

“They’re adding verses to ‘Yvana Ride Thunder.’” Evred jerked a thumb toward the distant baths on the other side of their privacy curtain. “Was it always this way, arguing about what to put in those old ballads? I always thought bards stood up and spun those songs from the air, the glory of the event somehow turning into gold. Glory.” He breathed the word out like an obscenity, then straightened up. “I thought you were going to stay in the baths.”

“I did. Quite a while, while you took root there like some tree. I thought the Venn snuck in and put a spell on you. Sponge, you really need some sleep.”

“Do you think any songs we make up will take?”

Barend flicked out a hand. “If people like ’em they’ll sing ’em. Let’s go. Sooner we eat, sooner you hit your hammock.”

They fixed up their wet hair, checked to see that their clothes were straight (Barend’s newly-assigned Runners had seen to it that he was in proper clothes, not a haphazard collection of old pirate wear under his House tunic), then walked together to the main hall, which hitherto had been converted to an extra barracks.

Evred did not know where the men were housed now. It did not really matter, since he intended Ola-Vayir’s as well as his army to be on the march by morning.

Tables had been brought from all over the castle—probably from all over the city. Certainly dishes had been donated. Evred noticed sets of fine old porcelain mixed in with good Marlovan dishes. The Marlovan dishes were plain, shallow bowls, the Olan and Idayagan varying shapes that the Marlovans eyed with misgiving.

A dais had been erected at one end, with a tapestry-covered table set on it. Inda was already there, laughing at something Cherry-Stripe was saying, Buck next to his brother, head bandaged, one arm in a sling, his face pale with long-endured pain. He blinked slowly: he was full of green kinthus. Inda was using his right hand more, Evred saw; Taumad had been working on it earlier, as he had from time to time during the journey back down the pass. There actually seemed to be some utility in whatever it was he did.

The Jarl of Ola-Vayir had claimed the seat of honor, which irritated Evred. But if Inda had already ceded it, then it was better not to take notice. A glow of angry triumph warmed him briefly when he recalled that Ola-Vayir was not likely to get his way in much beyond that.

Evred stepped up, and as the old man turned his way, making the usual disclaimers about honor, glory, and the like in too loud a voice, Evred reminded himself that it was not the Jarl’s fault that he’d almost been too late. He’d also lost his heir leading a defense against pirates.

Barend elbowed Cherry-Stripe to get him to scoot over, and swung a chair next to Ndand, Flash’s wife, who sat at Tdiran-Randviar’s left, looking thin and somber. She’d arrived after everything was over, but had been of enormous help in reorganizing the castle.

At Barend’s appearance she smiled a welcome, and they fell into low-voiced conversation.

The room was full of civilians in bright dress, as well as all the captains. These latter rose when they saw Evred, and saluted. The merchants and guild chiefs surreptitiously eyed one another; when the tall, gaunt old man who’d been harbormaster of Lindeth for almost half a century gave a slight bow the rest followed suit.

Evred struck his fist to his chest. The civilians could take the gesture how they wished: his salute was for the men.

Everyone sat down. Kitchen people, male and female Runners, and some volunteer city people—mostly

youngsters—came out bearing trays of food. Vedrid and Tau served the high table themselves, Tau so quietly and skillfully that the king was not, at first, aware of his presence.

Evred frowned down at the fine bowl set before him, its edges fluted. He hated porcelain. It was impossibly fragile, the pieces often too small to fit comfortably to the hand. It broke almost willfully. His mother, an Adrani, had had porcelain dishes. But the herb-spiced tomato soup in it smelled good, waking the appetite that had slumbered for uncounted days. The soup bowl reminded him of Hawkeye's mate, the potter.

He caught the grim gaze of Tdiran-Randael. He tapped the bowl, and was not surprised when she lifted her chin in comprehension, and then gave her head a shake. Fala was not here, probably by choice. Another thing to make note of: that Hawkeye's beloved Fala would have a home to go to if she no longer wanted to remain in Ala Larkadhe. And if Hawkeye's twin brothers did not have a place for her—*twins*. Which one was to inherit? Was he to force a division between them by making one of them Jarl? Evred's headache hammered harder.

He fought off the blanketing shroud of fugue and discovered that Ola-Vayir was talking. To *him*. He forced his attention to the food, and to the talk, which was the expected blunder-footed hinting about royal generosity for loyalty and courage.

Another flare of warmth at Buck's snort, which he turned into a cough.

Evred raised his glass to Buck and drank, then to Ola-Vayir and drank again, until his veins warmed. It was his duty to eat, to be seen enjoying the food, and to be seen smiling over their victory: there must be no reaction that Ola-Vayir, or his friends, could later name resentment, reluctance, or most of all, weakness. Then he must speak, and the praise must be as unstinting as the men's loyal efforts had been. Inda kept patience until the food had been eaten, and the songs sung (many drumming on the tables with their knives, which plainly horrified the Idayagans)—old songs, mostly, though there were one or two new ones, hastily put together, but cheered with enthusiasm, especially the one that mentioned most of the captains' names.

Then Evred stood up and made a brief speech, naming every person at the high table and what he or she had done, to great cheering. "It has always been our tradition to award the loyal and the brave with further responsibility. I will have more to say between now and Convocation, but my first act shall be to create a new jarlate from the Niolay River in Idayago east to Ghael." Pause for cheers. "And the Jarl shall be Camarend Tya-Vayir, his Jarlan Starand Ola-Vayir." Pause for cheers, and a pensive smile from the Jarl of Ola-Vayir, a smile that hitched, his brows twitching, when he began to suspect the truth: that *this* was going to constitute the extent of family honors.

He cheered with the rest, but inwardly cursed his daughter for insisting he raise that dust over her exile when it really had been her own fault. Everyone would say their family honor was restored, but their gain was all just words.

"My cousin, Barend-Dal, will ride north to carry my wishes to the new Jarl, and to help design the defense of the northern shores. For we must look to the future—and guard against the Venn coming back."

*Oh yes*, Inda thought, amazed at how Evred had just handed him a good part of his own plan for Barend. The stone walls rang with cheers, the tables rumbled with such enthusiastic pounding that the dishes jumped, liquids sloshing.

Evred said, "The Tradheval and Andahi regions of Idayago shall be held in promise to Kethadrend Arveas, in honor of his father, mother, and brother. We still do not know what happened at the north end, but what evidence we have is that they sacrificed their lives to hold off the invaders. We do know from the timing of our encounter that however long they held out made all the difference."

A full-throated, heartfelt shout: "Arveas Sigun! Ola-Vayir Sigun!"

And: "*Evred-Harvaldar Sigun!*"

"*Indevan-Harskialdna Sigun!*"

From his seat, Inda waved his empty wine cup in his left hand—his right was still giving him twinges, though a good soak in the baths had helped, and Tau's strong hands had helped even more.

Ola-Vayir's smile thinned, but the Arveases had been popular long before the rumors about their tragic

bravery. Evred brought both hands under the wide, shallow wine cup and lifted it high in salute as the men shouted approval, then he recklessly drank the wine off. Hah! There was nothing the Ola-Vayirs could say to that.

*Come, finish up*, Inda thought, tapping the table. Cherry-Stripe, flushed with wine, glanced his way, question in his lifted brows. Inda stopped drumming and reached for the wine he didn't want to drink, hiding his impatience in movement.

"And so, except for those given specific patrol orders, we shall withdraw, and further announcements will be made at the Triumph to be held by the Jarl of Tya-Vayir."

Evred sat down amid rhythmic shouts of "Evred-Harvaldar! Evred-Harvaldar Sigun!"

Relieved at having brought that off well enough, Evred drained his wine again. Warmth streamed through his veins, rendering voices, sounds, the outer world a pleasant blur. For a time he let it all wash past, caught by the rhythmic crash and surge of his own heartbeat in his ears.

"You've got a headache?" Inda's voice was startlingly near.

Evred's eyes flew open. Ola-Vayir had left. Cherry-Stripe leaned back in his chair, laughing loudly at something Barend said to Ndand.

Inda knelt on Ola-Vayir's vacant chair, his eyes wide and expectant.

Evred turned his own attention to the empty glass in his hands. "Yes," he said, because it seemed simpler.

"I thought so." Inda grinned. His next words broke Evred's rigid but increasingly tenuous grip and flung him into cold air. "Tau? Would you take Evred off and do your magic on him? He's got a headache."

Evred's eyes closed. "No, don't bestir yourselves. I'm fine."

"No you're not," Inda retorted, surprising Cherry-Stripe and Barend, because they never would have dared. They knew how prickly ol' Sponge could be, and becoming king hadn't exactly blunted those thorns. "You've been walking around like a corpse who forgot to fall down. Go on. Tau's good at it, I tell you. I don't know why it is, but whatever he does to my shoulder makes it work. And I can't tell you how many headaches of mine he's killed off."

Evred turned slightly, and there was Taumad standing right behind him, tall, smiling, only a healing cut on his neck indicating he'd been anywhere near a battle. "I do not want to take you from your duties," he said, though he knew it was weak—and could see in the smile narrowing Tau's eyes that he knew Evred knew it.

Tau gestured toward Inda, a courtly gesture, though none of the Marlovans recognized it as such except for Evred. "I believe I was just given an order."

Evred closed his eyes, listened to the rapid wash-wash of his blood through his head, and felt the beginning of the stabbing prong through the eyeballs that was inevitable, especially after he was careless enough to drink more than three glasses of wine. And what had he drunk? Five.

"Very well," he said, and Tau was surprised. He'd made his comment about orders as a mild joke, but the Marlovans all seemed to be reacting as if he was the only one who considered being given an order and choosing to obey it two separate acts.

"Thank you," Evred said. "But not here."

Tau turned a thumb sideways. "The servants' old banquet station is through there. No one's using it."

Evred rose, taking up his wine cup and the bottle. Not because he wanted more wine, but it gave him something to do with his hands. He followed Tau through the back entrance where the servants had brought trays from the kitchens back when the castle served as dwelling for a single family and not as a garrison. To the immediate right was a small room where there had once been tables and shelves for ease of service during banquets, and a handy place to stack dishes afterward. Now it, like so many odd places around the castle, had been fitted haphazardly with sleep mats; the tables were gone, the stone shelves held people's gear. On the far wall the neatness of the folded clothes, the exotic colors and materials, seemed characteristic of Taumad.

Evred turned around. Tau was watching, his expression mild. "Yes, it's also our quarters. The other three are all on duty. You can sit here." He placed the single chair in the middle of the room, between the mats. Tau shut the door, latched it and then, with a thoughtful air, removed his Runner's coat, folded it, and set it neatly aside.

Inda watched the door shut from across the room, then turned away. “Keep him busy as long as you can,” he’d told Tau.

Without any politeness whatsoever, he grabbed the front of Barend’s House tunic and all but yanked Evred’s surprised, protesting cousin from his chair. “Come on, you and me are going to have a talk,” he said. To Cherry-Stripe, “It’s something good. But I don’t know if it’ll work.” To Ndand, “Were you and Keth going to ride back to Castle Andahi right away?”

She was surprised to find herself so abruptly addressed by Inda. “Once I talk to the king about Keth and the academy. Like, how we’ll get his dispositions, when there probably isn’t a stick of furniture or a stitch of cloth left.”

“Leave that to me.” Inda brushed his hand down the front of his crimson tunic: he was Harskialdna.

“Evred and I know what the family did. You just get Keth down by spring, the rest will be fine.”

“All right, then. I can leave anytime.” Ndand flushed.

“Saddle up. Tell ’em the order is from me, say it’s for at once, if not sooner—and pass the word for the rest of Cama’s dragoons over at the Cassad barracks. Those fellows are going north with you.” Inda grinned. “The sooner you are there covering our butts, the better everyone will feel.”

Ndand found herself grinning back.

“I’ll get the horses seen to, and ask my niece to fetch young Keth from the castle children,”

Tdiran-Randviar said, having listened to all this. “You go pack, Ndand. Including a full pouch of arrows,” she added with scowling distrust. “You never know if them Venn’ll come back on the sneak. Wouldn’t put it past ’em.”

## Chapter Twenty-eight

EVRED set the wine bottle carefully by the chair leg, sat back, and braced himself to endure.

He trusted his lethal mood to keep the necessary distance between his will and his physical self.

Taumad said nothing about removing clothing, which would have been summarily rejected. Tau did not even try to disarrange Evred’s heavy crimson tunic, stiff with golden embroidery. He just placed his hands over the top of Evred’s shoulders, fingers either side of his collarbones, and thumbs on the rock-knotted muscle at the base of his neck at either side of his spine.

And then began to knead. At first gently, so gently Evred experienced a brief—and promptly dismissed—wish that there were not two layers of clothing intervening.

“As it happens I really can get rid of headaches,” Taumad said, his tone light, impersonal. Evred was wary, all angles and tension over and above the rigid muscle structure caused by a lifetime of slowly tightening stress. “But it takes a few moments to discover the likely physical cause.”

He said nothing about mental or temperamental causes.

Evred’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

That was the right approach, then: easy, professional. The body seen as a vessel, only distantly connected to will or identity. He must talk to Evred-Harvaldar, and not to Sponge. That citadel permitted access to few, and two of them had recently died.

Inda stopped on the stairway to what he considered the captains’ wardroom. “. . . No, we hadn’t bedded down,” someone was saying. “We nipped at the Venn all night. Come dawn we’d just pulled back to plan another run when one of the Marlo-Vayir outriders reported Ola-Vayir on the way. Buck said we should bring them up to the hills above the river. What fun that was! We charged like thunder, all



in a line, and half them vinegar-stinking shits pissed their pants.”

Raucous laughter rose. Inda sent Barend a glance, brows raised in question.

Barend turned his thumb down. “Fought just as hard as we did.” Inda shrugged; he’d learned after overhearing tavern talk following some of his pirate battles that they’d killed ten or twenty or fifty times more pirates than had been in both fleets.

They passed down the rest of the narrow stone hallway, and stopped. Barend checked to make certain they were alone. They were, though voices echoed up the stairways at both ends of the hall. “Here’s what I didn’t tell you and Evred in front of the others. Buck said he’d ride to Norsunder before he’d let Ola-Vayir lead the charge.” He opened a hand. “His heir was the academy bully when Buck was a scrub.”

Inda said, “So leading the charge shows the son up? I thought the son was dead!”

“Is.”

“So Buck nearly gets himself killed?” Inda threw his arms out wide, then resumed his fast walk. “Maybe that will make sense someday. Here.” They’d reached one of the cubbyholes that, from the looks of the contents, had been a wood repair station. A couple of sleeping mats lay on the floor, a reminder of how cramped space was. “Barend, I want you to go north with Ndand and the men, because I think I have a way to fill that treasury. Like, with treasure. Pirate treasure. What could be better?”

“*Piratet* treasure?” Barend’s eyes widened for a moment, reflecting the light of the candle Inda lit from the torch in the sconce outside. As Inda shoved the candle into a lamp hanging on a wall hook, Barend demanded, “Inda, what exactly happened at Ghost Island?”

“We found the treasure.” Inda spread his hands. “There really was one. More like fifty treasures. Well, not that I know how big a treasure is supposed to be. It lies in a cavern bigger than that feasting hall. Mounds as tall as a man, and that’s just the stuff above the waterline. I read the Brotherhood Book—it really was written in blood, and remind me to tell you what Ramis said about that—but it was *generations* of treasure.”

“Ramis,” Barend repeated. “The one who made the rift to Norsunder and shoved Marshig through?”

“Along with five other capital ships. Yes, that Ramis. And yes, I know what you’re going to say about believing, so belay it. I was there, the treasure is there.”

“Right.”

“So here’s what I want you to do. Go to Bren, talk to Fleet Master Chim. He can tell you who’s trustworthy. Take a fleet of ships. Bring the treasure to the north shore here, where we can rely on Cama to take charge and—what?” This last word Inda barked when he saw Barend’s expression of skepticism.

“Inda, do you have any idea what problems a bunch of jewels and so forth will cause?”

“It’s also Sartoran coinage, the big twelve-siders as well as six, all gold. But what problems? Evred says the treasury is empty. Won’t that fill it?”

Barend rubbed his nose. “Treasury isn’t treasure,” he said finally. “Oh, I thought it was. Evred did too when we were in the schoolroom, he told me. Said he used to slide his finger past all mentions of money in search of more battles, when he was reading. I don’t know how much of that is true and how much was him trying to keep me from feeling stupid. Because I know Uncle Tlennen was a master hand with the ins and outs of trade and so forth, and taught Sponge some.” Another vigorous rub.

Inda said, “Evred said we have no treasury. I want to bring that treasure in as a surprise for Sponge.

That’s why this secrecy. I don’t want him worrying about that, too, d’you see it?”

Barend held out his hands. “No, no, I agree. You’re right. Less to worry him, the better. Things are bad enough. But . . . Inda, as for the rest . . . I don’t know where to start.”

Laughing voices neared.

“Start with what’s in the treasury, if it’s not treasure.” Inda kicked the door shut and crossed his arms.

The tingle in Evred’s muscles intensified to an itch. It was the strangest sensation—not exactly unpleasant,

very faint but distinct. It bothered him enough to force him to stand, pull off his tunic, and set it neatly behind him over the back of the chair.

Tau said nothing. When Evred sat down again, he increased the pressure incrementally, following the contour of Evred's muscles under the fine linen shirt.

Tau controlled the impulse to let his fingers drift over those contours, and shifted to using his knuckles for a slow increase in pressure at certain points, then releasing. Much less personal—less dangerous for a person so taut.

Evred was only aware that the itch was almost . . . not scratched, what would you call it? Pressed? He had no words, no one had ever done that to him before. He hadn't wanted anyone to do that. But the opportunity to kill that persistent drum behind his eyes was so persuasive. The prospect of clear thought again . . . Except that his mind, gradually freed of pain, refused to ride to harness. Tomorrow's tasks, the next day's, next week's, what he must accomplish before he faced the Jarls at Convocation, he could not focus on any of it. His mind stayed stubbornly on his limbs warming to that itch-that-was-not-an-itch, even though Tau's hands had not strayed from his shoulders.

He cast down the golden wine cup onto one of the sleeping mats, grabbed up the bottle, and took a swig out of it. The wine chased away the tickle or tingle or whatever it was. That he did not want.

Tau's hands had lifted when he moved, but when he stilled, the wine bottle gripped in his fingers, back they came. Knuckles again, pressing down into the ache. Evred shut his eyes, leaning into them so the pressure would increase. He wished those hands could press the rocks away, right down to his bones; Tau was using his full strength now, and had loosened the top layer, but felt stubborn muscle beneath. After a time, Tau said, "That's enough there. You don't need bruises. Instead, I'll shift to the sides. This is one of the places that kills Inda's headaches the fastest."

That was the first mention of the name between them. Evred had never wanted to talk about Inda with anyone, Tau least of all.

But now it seemed safe, for the matter was headaches. Nothing personal. Yet the questions in Evred's mind were nothing but personal.

He took another swig, like many who lock themselves from communication, permitting the liquor to turn the key.

"I'm surprised," he said, "that such methods work on Inda. I'd gathered he does not like to be touched." Inda? *What happened?* Tau thought.

Tau dug into the sides of Evred's neck. The muscles were like knobs of bone. He said carefully, "Inda likes me to use my skills on that right shoulder of his. You know he's taken damage there. I think that actually happened when he first took ship, or not long after."

And Evred said, "Tell me." He bowed his head, resting it against his thumbs, fingers laced loosely around the wine bottle.

Tau kept his voice light and detached as he related the story of Inda's first days at sea, the fight with Norsh and its results. Events so very long ago, another lifetime entirely. Yet, judging from the subtle reactions Tau felt under his hands, still immediate for Evred.

He finished, "And we are fairly certain he was tortured while in Ymar. He never minded people's proximity before then, but afterward, we all saw him recoil if he did not expect to be touched. Especially around his head. His hair was drying on a mild day last winter, and we were on deck eating and planning a raid. Against the Venn raider at Ghael, as it happens. The wind blew a lock of Inda's hair into Dasta's slurry. He lifted it out. Inda whipped around and for a heartbeat or two we thought he would deck Dasta." Tau chuckled at the memory.

Evred had gone tense again at the word *tortured*, and did not relax during the quick shift to the funny story. Tau cursed himself for undoing all the good work he'd done, and added, "In any case, Inda never talks about it, so we know nothing of the details. But we never touch his head and keep our food out of reach of his hair."

A pause, another drink of the wine, then Evred took him by surprise, holding the bottle up over his shoulder. He did so without speech, without looking at Tau, but the offer was clear.

Sharing wine. A human gesture—a *personal* gesture. After having traveled in Evred's proximity for a

season, Tau knew how very rare those were.

And though Tau never drank when he was working, he broke that rule now, and helped himself to a long, sweet pull. Fire burned along veins and nerves as he handed the bottle back, and Evred set it down. "I did not know," Evred said finally.

"Like I mentioned, he doesn't talk about it. He didn't talk about any of you, either, for nine years."

Tau shifted to thumbs, pressing outward in slow strokes, working up the side of Evred's neck to the muscles at the base of his skull, then at last the sides of his jaw.

A sharp indrawn breath. "That hurts."

"Let your mouth hang open. No one can see. It's the way you'll get rid of the headache. I press some of the knotwork out of the hinges of your jaw."

A soft laugh, a slight tightening, then an act of will to relax again. "If we used torture, this would be a sure one."

Tau said, "It works. But no one likes it."

Evred contemplated a sharp retort, except he didn't feel angry. The rushing in his ears was gone, leaving a pleasant lassitude. He said, "Do something that works but doesn't feel like a hot knife through the skull."

Tau hesitated, then shifted his grip, working the tightness out of the muscles below Evred's collarbones, back over to the shoulder blades, and then front again, slow and easy.

Evred's surface tension was nearly gone. Lingering in the deeper muscle layers was the iron-cable tension of years. Tau waited until Evred's breathing had lost the last of the self-conscious control then said mildly, "This goes better if you are lying flat."

The muscles under his hands jumped: back to surface tension, wariness, distrust.

But then Evred bent forward, almost pulling Tau off balance, grabbed up his wine. Passed it back, again without looking. And again Tau took a drink, a long one meant to mute his own responses.

Evred cast himself face down onto the nearest mat.

Tau set the bottle carefully under the chair, knelt down, and spread his fingers over Evred's back, testing the stresses there, and the pulse under the muscles.

Someone banged on the door to the woodworking alcove. Inda and Barend ignored the noise.

"I'm trying to think of a short way to explain," Barend said, after a scowling pause. "Heh. Remember when you paid off the Pims' debt? The guild didn't send money, did they?"

"No, they wrote up what they called a letter of credit. I signed it, and they put on a sved with magic."

"Well, when the Pims got that letter, like as not they didn't demand gold. Nobody in all Lindeth has that much gold anymore. So they used the letter in place of gold. She gives the letter to her own guild, and then writes letters of credit against that letter, until it's all used up."

"What's to stop her from writing letters for twice the amount, if everyone is just sending letters around?"

"That's what the sveds are for. Guild scribes are very specific. You're used to the cheap sved new hands carry on board new hires. All that promises is that someone accepted as a witness spoke for you, said you are who you said you are. Scribes write what they hear. Money scribes write what they count. Their standing depends on never being so much as a copper-flim off. In some places, their lives depend on it."

Inda remembered watching Kodl deal with dock officials—something he'd never had to do. "Letters of credit, right. I think I have it. So there's money somewhere, then, right?"

"Right. That's half of it. The other half is made up of time and the what they call 'kind.' Kind is trade of things for other things, and time is what the Jarls pay taxes in, along with kind: you owe the king a certain number of men per year. That means trained men with their horses and gear. In times of war, the king can ask for more, but there's another kind of cost to that, and he has to pay most of it. And then there are things like deathgild if a man dies while under orders, costs of animals, costs for training, costs for patrols and defense and so forth. It's mostly measured in time, and translated out into established charges for food and garrison and stable and who pays for boots and steel and the rest. The guilds all do that

accounting.”

“Got it. So Evred’s used most of the crown’s share up?”

“It was already being used up before Hawkeye’s dad went after my uncle with a sword. If Yvana-Vayir had won, he would have discovered an empty treasury and no oath-sworn dues coming in, either. Not to *him*. Unless he had more allies than we knew.” Barend snorted. “Always possible.”

Inda waved a hand, as if waving away Barend’s words. “So tell me why jewels and gold are bad. I didn’t have any problems with them. Nor did any of the rest of us.”

Barend shook his head. “Have you seen any Stringers in this country?”

Inda was going to point out that he hadn’t been in it but a few months, and never in any harbor—then he realized what Barend meant. Even if he rode straight over to Lindeth, he was not likely to find any of the people in the brown clothes of their guild, silken counting strings at their belts. “No money changers because there’s no trade. Right.”

“People here deal with their guilds. There might be some willing to turn jewels into time or kind, but none of ’em could do a kingdom-sized job. So your jewels will just be a lot of bright stones. Good for plugging holes.”

Inda sagged against a rack of woodworking tools. “Damn.”

It was Barend’s turn to wave a hand. “I didn’t say it was impossible. Just that there needs to be a step between getting your treasure and turning it into anything Evred can use.”

Someone banged on the door again.

“Tell me how,” Inda said.

Tau kneaded his way down Evred’s spine, trying not to think too much about the strength he felt in those slowly uncoiling muscles, the clean, strong lines of his body. Most of all the amazingly . . . human aspect to Evred, lying there in a rumpled shirt and trousers, no weapons or banners or throngs of attentive Runners to assist him in keeping the world at a distance.

No man is made of stone.

One can try to be, but like any other effort to wrest change from one nature to another, there is a cost. Evred drifted. He could attribute the euphoria to wine haze, but that just muted the intensity of desire and well-being mixed that resulted from the touch of those strong, knowing hands. How could one know just where to press, where to stroke so slowly with the thumb, how scratching lightly down the outsides of the arms left trails of invisible fire?

Evred had not moved, save to fling his arms out in a loose curve round his head, which lay on one side, face to the wall.

He could not know that Tau heard his mood in his breathing, and smiled crookedly as he dug with the heels of his palms deep into the muscles supporting the trunk, knowing full well the effect it had. Tau laughed inwardly, aware of the danger he was playing with, but that was exactly the attraction. He could sympathize with the heart-wounded, be kind to the hopelessly devoted, hold off with cool reserve the hungrily possessive, but complexity and danger, yes, and power, were a constant allure.

He also knew that prolonged isolation did not make one sane.

And so, not knowing what to expect, he finished working to the extremity of hands and feet. And when Evred slowly, reluctantly propped himself on his elbows, head down, face hidden, Tau leaned down and placed on the back of that pale, exposed neck a loud, mocking kiss.

Evred’s violent recoil surprised a laugh out of Tau. Who sat back on his heels and watched those angry, wary green eyes take in the locked door, the room, Tau. Who matched him in size, and strength, and mood.

Tau smiled, a rare smile: mocking, his upper lip curled just enough to show his white canines, unexpectedly sharp. “I think you’re afraid of me,” he drawled. “Prove that you’re not.”

Evred doubled up his fist and slugged Tau.

“So you’re saying you won’t do it?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” Barend kicked the toe of his moc against a cabinet.

The banging on the door redoubled into thunder. “Go somewhere else! This is our room!” someone roared.

Inda turned his head. “Go away! This is important state business!”

Barend snorted, and as voices mumbled outside the door—the only distinct one saying, “It is? No it’s not, why would he lock himself in our closet?”—he said, “You shouldn’t have done that. You know they’ll be waiting when we open the door.”

Inda turned his palm up. “Why not? There’s no privacy anywhere else, why not an important conference here?”

“Because no one will believe it’s a conference,” Barend said with a wheezy laugh.

Inda’s brows shot up, then he grinned like a scrub. “Good. Far fewer questions that way. Want to make some noises, help them along?”

“I do not.” Barend straightened up. “All right. It’ll take some time, mind you, because I’m going to be turning that treasure of yours into ships. Trade. I’ll see if I can find wood anywhere, though we’re bound to be paying triple the price.”

“Whatever it takes. That treasure is just sitting there. Someone has to use it, may as well be us. Rescue a kingdom.”

“I’m gonna laugh if we arrive and it’s not there. Meantime, what do we tell Evred?”

“Nothing about the treasure,” Inda said firmly. “If we actually get it, then let it be a surprise. He could use a good surprise. As for why you’re going east, well, let’s tell him you’re going to contact Chim’s fleet to negotiate the possibility of trade. Which has the advantage of being true.”

“We’ll tell him in the morning, right before I leave with Ndand for the pass. He’s sure to like the idea of trade negotiations, not to mention a possible fleet.”

“That’s what I had in mind.” Inda smacked the bar up and yanked the door open.

Three identical expressions of amazement greeted him and Barend as they walked out. Inda made it about five steps before he succumbed to snickers.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

“INDA

The whisper was more insistent, woven into the sound of the wind through snapping sails; when it repeated next to Inda’s ear, the dream washed over and past him, leaving him lying in bed. He started up, hands flailing.

Signi sat up as well, a stray beam of departing moonlight shining in her wide eyes.

“Sorry to wake you, Dag Signi.” It was Tau. “I need Inda for just a moment.”

“In the middle of the night?” Inda protested. “I just shut my eyes.”

“It’s a couple of glass-turns before the dawn watch. Come outside?”

Inda muttered curses as he fumbled around for his trousers. He stuck his feet in, hopping as he pulled them on and followed Tau out of the room. Inda had been given an actual room, one with a real bed. Too bad he’d only gotten this half watch to sleep in it, he thought irritably as Tau shut the door behind them.

Then he recognized Tau’s blue coat and his gear slung over one shoulder. Inda sniffed. There was the faint, distinct trace of herbs in the soap that Tau had bought at great expense from Colend, and had hoarded ever since he’d left Bren. Tau was not only bathed, dressed, and ready for the day, he was leaving.

“Where are you going?” Inda asked in dismay. “Why? What happened?”

“To answer the first question is why I’m here. As for the second—” Tau checked the silent hall. The doors were all closed, behind which the remaining Sier Danas slept. “Come out on the wall,” he said abruptly.

They walked through the empty stairwell to the sentry walk. The only posted guards were women as lookouts on the four towers: with an entire army cramming the city, Evred had declared the walls did not require sentries, and had issued general liberty.

Faint blue smeared the eastern horizon. The air was soft. It would be a very hot day for a ride. But they were no longer in a hurry.

Inda shook his head to get the fog out of it. The woman at the top of the east tower recognized him, touched fingers to chest, then turned away.

Tau said, “I need you to send me on an errand. Something a Runner would do.”

Inda thumped his fist on a stone battlement. “What’s going on, Tau?”

“I had a tangle with your Evred.”

“You what?” Inda rubbed his thumbs across his eyelids. When he peered more closely at Tau in the torchlight, there was a mark on one cheekbone, and dark roughness across his knuckles. “You didn’t get into a fight with him,” he exclaimed in dismay.

“It was fun,” Tau retorted, with a quick grin. “It was fun for us both. I don’t think he’s permitted himself to just have fun for far too long,” he added reflectively, his tone odd enough to send warning prickles through Inda’s nerves. Inda shook his head violently, trying to wake up as Tau went on, “He’s had storm sail set too long. I gave him an eye in the storm. I’d better be gone before the winds hit from the other direction.”

Inda leaned his arms on the battlement. “Tau,” he said, exasperated. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Let me try it this way. One reason Evred’s so taut is that he doesn’t trust people easily. He doesn’t trust emotions at all.”

Inda said, “He’s been—” He rubbed his eyes again. “Don’t know how to describe it. Shut away, sometimes. All the time since Noddy died.”

*It started when he first laid eyes on you, is my guess. Or maybe it started when he was born.* But Tau only said, “I used scrapping to seduce him. And he enjoyed it as much as I did, I made sure of that.” Maybe even more, because Evred so very rarely permitted anyone to breach the ringed ice-walls of his reserve. But the powerful effect of that breach had gone both ways. Tau had always known that sex and fighting were dangerously parallel desires in some people; he was drawn that way himself. But that did not explain the compelling, almost overwhelming lucency of Evred lying there wrist-lax and utterly undone.

Tau knew two things: that no one had ever seen Evred so exposed, and that Evred would waken to equivalent suspicion-impelled anger.

Tau became aware of Inda’s confusion. “By the time Evred comes to breakfast he’ll most likely have talked himself into thinking I’m as vile as Coco. People like Coco happen too often to those in power. It’ll be better for everyone if I’m not there.”

“Right. I get it now.” Inda almost rubbed his eyes again, but dropped his hand. “If you’re gone, and there isn’t any bragging or any demands like Coco made, then everything goes back to normal. Huh. Since we already sent the Runners with the personal letters to Khani-Vayir and Yvana-Vayir, how’s this? You go all the way south to Choraed Elgaer. Remember Tdor? See, after this triumph in Tya-Vayir, I’m to go home, get married. I did write Tdor a quick note, but I haven’t had time for a letter about everything. That way, it’s understandable orders.”

“Perfect.” Tau grinned. “I’ll see you at your wedding, then.” He gave Inda an ironic salute and vanished into the tower stairwell.

*Wedding.* What a strange sound that had. Inda had expected all his early life to marry Tdor, and had longed for a return to that life all the years he was at sea. And now it was time to do it. But it felt strange. No stranger than being a Harskialdna, though. He laughed inwardly as he let himself back into the room. Signi had kindled a light, and dressed. She sat neatly, hands folded. “Is there trouble?”

“No. Tau needed an errand, and I gave him one. Sent him to tell Tdor to get ready for my wedding.”

Signi smiled. "She will be glad of good news."

Inda dropped down and squashed her in a tight hug. "I wish I could marry you, too," he said huskily, his face pressed into her hair. "You hardly got to talk to her, but I know you'd like her. Everyone likes Tdor. I think she'd like you, too."

Signi held him away and looked earnestly into his face. "Ah. I was going to say, there are places where you can marry whom you like, and there is no limit in number. It's just a matter of degree—"

"Don't tell me: Colend."

She chuckled. "Yes. Among other places. I am honored, dear Inda. But you know, even if Tdor was not waiting, and no family expecting you to take your place, I could never marry in this country."

Inda's joy faded. "I guess I see that."

It was her turn to hug him. "I beg your pardon, dear Inda. You give love with both hands, without calculation. I take the joy of that, and we will not worry ourselves about what marriage means."

He played with her fingers absently, his brow puckered. "I never thought about *that* at all. I just knew, oh, I liked the idea of being married to Tdor. You too," he added uncomfortably, then grinned. "Just supposing we could marry anyone we wanted? If she's got a favorite, would that mean four people get married? I hope it's Whipstick. Not Branid." Inda remembered what Tau had told him, and laughed.

"Whipstick. Huh. He was fourteen when I left. We thought him so old and tough! All he thought about were fart jokes and stings and winning scraps. Do you have to sleep with everybody you marry, in those other lands? I just can't see hopping under the covers with his skinny, hairy arms and legs, and then he cracks some joke about bran gas."

Signi chuckled, a quiet sound.

Inda said, "Though he probably wouldn't want me, either." His sudden grin reminded her how young he was.

She wiped her eyes, tenderness hollowing all around her heart. "Marriage and love have so many meanings." Her voice softened to huskiness. "Marriage cannot build walls to keep love inside. Marriage can give a structure to the family."

"To the castle." Inda jerked his thumb toward the walls. "The people of the castle."

"You Marlovans marry your place and your duty as well as a person." She made one of her complicated hand gestures. "Oh, it is the same with us: the meaning of marriage lies mostly in our place among our fellows. But love is free as air."

Inda swung his arm round, thinking that over. She caressed his cheek and then left to go down to the baths.

*She's going to leave me*, he thought, sobered. Then rubbed his shoulder absently. *But not now.*

He got up and sat at the little table, shoved aside the royal order book that he'd taken to look at before sleeping, pulled out one of the scraps of paper he'd sliced before, and wrote:

*Fox. We're done with the Venn, and I'm alive. If you want details, let me know. I'm sending Barend to get the treasure. The kingdom is in worse shape than our fleet after the Brotherhood battle, and I mean to fix it.*

On the other side of the world, as the sun began to set, Mutt vented his sour mood by uttering a stream of curse-punctuated, unfair observations of Fox. If he and his mates had been stupid enough to think that the wind dying to calm would mean an easy day or two, Fox must have stayed up for nights figuring out so many ways to prove them wrong.

They'd begun by replacing winter-worn rope and changing to summer sail. As for free time before the afternoon drill? No! They boomed planks over the sides so they could sand and repaint the sleek, low hull of the *Death*. True, its fine black paint had worn streaky over the winter. But why paint it now, when there was every chance they were sailing straight into battle? Why not *after* the battle, when they weren't already drilling for two solid watches, making arrows with the wood and feathers they'd scrounged off the Fog Islands, and resharpening all their steel weapons?

They wanted to ask. Well, they each wanted the others to ask. Nobody wanted to risk getting flayed by Fox's sarcasm. He'd been in a nasty mood for days, either lurking in his cabin, or prowling around when least expected—or wanted.

The entire fleet knew Fox was in a temper.

All the other captains had remained prudently on their stations, their activities matching the flagship's.

"Cowards," Mutt snarled, whacking his paintbrush against the stern-post. Naturally the ship gave a lurch, he nearly fell backward, and the paintbrush splattered back into his face.

And just as naturally, everybody was watching.

Out of the howls and comments came Pilvig's voice, "He's on the move!"

At once they fell silent, everybody sedulously painting, except those at the booms, attentive to the ropes.

Mutt peered over the rail. Fox looked exactly as wicked as always. Except—was that squint a laugh, or just an eye-tightening against the brightness of the sun?

"Who's on flags? I want all captains. Fangras as well." He paused, leaning down. "Less chatter and more work might get that done today," he added as several glares were shot at Mutt.

A short time later Fox faced the captains, with Fangras attending silently, as spokesperson for the loose confederation of former Sarendan privateers.

"We're not far from Freedom Islands." Fox held up his position chart so that all the captains gathered in his cabin could see the islands and their fleet a finger's width apart. "There's been no message since Fangras joined us, so Khanerenth is probably coming to attack Freeport Harbor. Now, we know Dhalshev. Once the king's friend, as well as former high admiral. He won't let us take any Khanerenth ships, despite this attack, which may only be a test foray. There's no reward in risking our lives boarding and carrying any of 'em."

The captains all signified agreement.

"So we want to damage them enough to make them feel their test has failed for a generation or more.

How? Sail right through their midst, and let 'em chase us. Then we shoot 'em up. If they board, we'll board them, make as much damage as we can, then leave."

Eflis chortled, and Gillor sat back in her chair, arms crossed. "Schooner ruse, I'm guessing?"

"Right." Fox drummed his fingers on the chart. "Fangras, if you or one of your fastest craft want to be our chase, that's fine. Be aware they might not let you through unscathed."

Fangras grinned. "I'll take that position meself, then there's no arguing."

Fox lifted a hand in acknowledgment. "Here's the twist. Those of us on the chase are going to be running the red sails."

"Red sails?"

"*Brotherhoodsails?*"

"But those are *pirate* sails!"

Fox waited for the noise to die down. When no one got an answer, they shut up. "I hope most of you have your red sails in storage."

"We turned the red storm sails into hammocks," Dasta said.

"Then unstitch them and make them sails again. The rest of you, dye some of your older summer sails with red paint. They just have to get through this one ruse. Now, we're all going to be trailing smoke, hunters as well as prey. The red sails behind me. What I want Khanerenth to see as they start their battle line is this ship, the *Death*, at the head of the chase, and behind that a gray cloud full of fire and red sails."

Gillor hooted. "I see where you're going." She hooked her thumb out at the weather deck. "We've got a bad enough rep on this tub to look like ten sails all by ourselves, especially in smoke."

Fox grinned. "Right. They won't know if this is a separate attack or a defense by Freedom's confederation. Throw them into confusion and fear. Above all fear."

Eflis chortled. "Red sails. No wonder we been prinking and prettying!"

"But if we're all smoking, how do we maneuver?" Tcholan asked. "We don't want to risk ramming one another."

"We'll sail straight through them, fire arrows both sides only at targets you can see. Then continue on straight north. Dhalshev and the Federation can deal with the mess."

Thoughtful looks, then Eflis said, "Why are we going north?"

"Thought it was time to investigate the strait. See if the Venn are back, or gone, or who thinks they rule the waters."



Eflis whistled on her way out.

Dasta, Tcholan, and Gillor waited until everyone else was gone. Then Dasta shut the door. “That’s an Inda kind of plan,” he observed. “The strait, I mean.”

Fox tipped his chair back on two legs. “So no one else would think of sailing up the strait but Inda?”

Gillor and Dasta turned questioning gazes to each other. Tcholan just scowled down at the deck. No one knew who was in control of the strait anymore. No one had thought Fox would care one way or another. “Sounds all right to me,” Dasta said, and the other two signified agreement.

### Chapter Thirty

CAMA and his front riders reined up.

None of them had believed the war was over, just like that. But following the Venn through the silent canyons day after day gradually brought them to think of it as true.

The pass was a long, narrow, twisting canyon of ever-changing shadow. Over the echoing rumble of a departing army rose the closer rustlings of brush as some unseen animal passed, the distant scream of the gliding raptors, and all around them the steady hiss, drip, and trickle of water after the frequent, short thunderstorms.

The Venn did not dispatch skirmishers to cover their retreat, though they guarded their tail. Venn occasionally caught glimpses of Cama’s force and the other way around. As long as the Venn kept moving, the Marlovans would remain at a respectful distance.

The Venn fires at night beat with a ruddy reflected glow all the way up the cliffs. Prudently the dragoons made no campfires except once, when one of Cama’s scouts discovered a curiously scooped-looking cave as if a gigantic hand had reached down and poked into the stone with a knuckle.

Morning poured warm light on water-smoothed walls, highlighting stripes in the stone. Once, unimaginably long ago, this pass had been the bed of a river. Cama frequently eyed the enormous cliffs overhead, aware of the silent power of stone, and water, and time. He tried to guess at the scale of the cataclysm that had caused a river to change its pattern of flow.

When the gradually widening bluffs gave a glimpse of the sea, the Marlovans ranged up. They’d been told that the castle lay two or three bends below that prospect.

There had been no letters from Inda in the magical gold case since the one informing Cama that he was now a Jarl—with his new orders—so Cama knew the Venn hadn’t come back for a second try in the south.

“We’ll wait here,” he said in a low voice.

It was going to take a long time for the Venn to get through the tunnel. Cama surveyed the scene, then said to his dragoon captain, “We’ll camp. Cold. Send scouts to watch ’em go.”

Fists thumped scruffy travel-worn coats. They wheeled the horses and started a slow walk back, looking for a good spot to camp. The pair starting a perimeter inspection reacted, and Cama heard why a moment later: distant, faint cries.

Those were not birds.

One of the men said, “Up there.”

The sun was dipping toward the western side of the pass, which lit up the eastern side with rare clarity. The seemingly solid cliffs had more cracks and crags than one assumed; just visible in an old crevasse a little figure waved.

Cama’s dragoon captain exclaimed, “It’s a girl.”

A thin, filthy child of ten or so slid carefully around a water-carved rocky spire on a crag about castle-tower height. “You’re Marlovans?” she called down.

Her voice was so thin and high Cama decided against a joking, “No, we’re Venn.” Despite the distance the sinking sun shone clearly on her filthy face and clothes, her thin limbs. So he lifted his voice. “I’m Camarend Tya-Vayir, sent by the king.” And waited while she took in the riding coats, the Nelkereth

horses, the tear-shaped shields. Runners in blue. The horsetails, the curved swords. Not Venn. The time it took her to check everything, her head jerking birdlike, wiped every smile away. She vanished behind the spire.

That released the men to action, amid the rough jokes that had become habitual as they followed the enemy along the pass, camping when they did.

The Runners carried around journey bread and jugs of water filled at the last waterfall. The men were just beginning their meal when the perimeter guard gave a shout. Everyone set aside their bowls to fetch weapons, lowering their hands when a line of dirty, gaunt children emerged from a barely discernable trail beyond a rockfall. The two tallest girls bore on their shoulders small children barely out of babyhood. Two other children carried a small one in a makeshift sling made of two packs tied together.

Cama said, "We've got food."

"Food." The word whispered along the line. The men offered their journey bread. Most of the children grabbed it and stuffed their faces. Two or three just stood, staring downward, and a couple of very small ones sucked in air and sobbed, a quiet, helpless, broken crying as if they'd been doing it for a very long time.

Every father and brother there ached to comfort them. But one look at the distraught faces, and they waited, distraught themselves, for the children to make the first move.

One girl silently surrendered the smallest to offered hands. Two of the babies—they really were scarcely more than babies—went willingly to strong arms, quiet voices. The third clutched a girl's trousers with one hand, thumb in mouth.

"I'm Han—that is, I'm really Hadand Tlen," the first girl said. "Rider-family, cousin to Liet-Jarlan. They call me Han." She wiped her nose on her dirt-gritty sleeve. Her face was smeared with snot and mud and moss stains. Cama realized the dirt was purposeful—camouflaging—as the child said, "Liet-Jarlan put me in charge. We were to wait for—" She clamped her mouth shut.

"Sit down." Cama made a sign to his Runner in charge of meals. "Find a cave that will smother most of the light. Start a fire." To Han, in a calm voice, "Eat. You drink coffee? We have just a few beans left in the bag. We were saving it for—well." He didn't usually yap, but the silent struggle this girl made to keep control rattled him.

She stared down at the bread in her hands, her mouth working, for what seemed a long time. Then Cama said, "You can report after you eat."

She crammed the bread into her mouth with both hands.

Cama went around and spoke a little to each child. Most of the very smallest were frightened by him, and shrank near the one with the baby clutching her. "I'm Lnard," she said, and made a little business of fussing and petting them.

The two nine-year-old girls were too exhausted to speak, but the freckle-faced one smiled at the men, her relief at rescue clear to them all.

Cama paused when he came to Hal, whose thin face was familiar. Cama ruffled his hair. "Name?"

"Hal." Hal did not know why he was whispering. He was safe now. Maybe it was just being hungry.

"Haldred. Mondavar." He cleared his throat and said in a stronger voice, "I ran as scout. Me and Dvar." Pointing at one of the girls.

"He was a good scout. He was the best scout I ever saw," Han said thickly, around a bite of bread.

Cama smiled down at Hal. "I know your brother. He was just a scrub when I was a horsetail. He fought in my army a couple of times, on banner games. Name's Moon, right?" And then, "Know what I think? I think you should join him next year."

Hal blushed furiously at having someone say right out the thing he'd wanted most, and had been told (with sympathy and understanding, but firmly) that he couldn't have. "But da's just a Rider captain. They said only one son could go."

Cama laughed. "You'll see. Now eat that journey bread. If you get any skinnier your trousers will fall off, and they'll all be calling you Moon Two."

Hal grinned, dizzy with happiness.

When the children were done eating, many took a child or two into their tents and tucked them up into

their bedrolls. The smallest ones were slumbering within a couple of heartbeats. The older ones sat up, listening through the open flaps of the tents as Cama said, "Han. Are you ready to give me a report?" "Yes." Han squared her shoulders.

Her report was disjointed at first, as she jumped back and forth in time. When she got to the name Gdir she hunched up, face distorted in a rictus of pain.

Cama's Runner scorched the last of his precious coffee beans—all the way from Sartor—then pressed them into powder with a spoon. He poured boiling water over them and handed her the fresh coffee before Han spoke again.

She held the mug in her hands, her light eyes glimmering with firelight from the low fire in the cave fifty paces away as she said in a dull monotone, "We—some—thought we were cowards if we didn't go back and check. But there were our orders to stay put, fight only if they discovered us. Gdir got mad." She turned her head, sent a long look at the other girl, who sat with a slumbering three-year-old on her lap, firelight glinting in the little one's red curls.

Cama sensed dire significance in that long look.

Han turned around again. "Gdir went anyway. With her brother and cousins. I went to bring them back. We saw Venn on the walls. Then a line of Idayagans came down the landslide. Gdir yelled to let her help, let her help. Then some Idayagan yelled little Marlovan shits! And shot Gdir dead. Her brother ran. To help. And her cousins. They killed them all. Left them lying right there." Han's skinny chest heaved. She took a big swallow of the coffee, and choked, then swigged down some more. "I didn't-I couldn't—" "Hold hard." Cama leaned forward, his one eye steady in the distant firelight. "The Idayagans shot those children out of hand? Were your friends armed?"

"Gdir had her bow. So did I. But hers wasn't even strung, and mine was loose-strung, and I was doggo. I mudded up, see."

"Good," Cama said. "They didn't?"

"No. I don't think Gdir thought there would be anyone. Her brother didn't have anything—he's six. Was." A hiss of indrawn breath. Her lips trembled, her knuckles whitened.

Cama rubbed his jaw, trying to get control of the rage her words caused. Rage made one issue stupid orders.

But he was aware of the listeners behind him, so he said, "You gave Gdir orders—the same orders you were given—and she disobeyed?"

The child shaped a protest, clearly intending to loyally defend her dead friends, but obedience to orders was the first concept drilled into them all.

She hesitated, then finally flicked her thumb up. "Yes."

"So the Idayagans began searching for you?"

"Yes." Han opened her dirty, rock-scratched palm. "The Idayagans came back. They spread out. Searching. They came down to the landslide from higher on the Twisted Pine Path. It was night, see. But we kept watch. Venn didn't patrol the landslide. So me'n Lnard and Freckles and Dvar, we went out and shot 'em. Outside in. So they wouldn't get Gdir and the others. I wanted revenge, too."

"We *both* did," said the girl with the baby on her lap.

Cama turned back to Han. "That was part of your orders?"

"Yes." Her shoulders hunched up to her ears. A grimy hand drifted near her mouth, exposing nails bitten down to the quick. "If they found us we could fight. They knew we were somewhere."

"Good work."

Her voice lifted faintly. "The Venn came. Chased them over the slide. We were doggo. All mudded. They didn't see us. When they were gone, we Disappeared them. We did it right. Except the sing. Then we had to move, because they knew we were there. They'd search. We took what we could carry, and we sang them when it was light. We heard scout dogs once. We moved during storms. We kept moving until there was big noise in the pass. The Venn were coming back."

"So you hid again?"

"Orders were no fighting Venn. We were running out of food. We've been doing halfies, then halfies of halfies. We were going to start halfies once a day while Hal and I did a sneak back to raid our cave,

Dvar and Freckles covering us with their bows in case.” She finished the coffee, then grimaced, her eyes watering. But her voice was a little stronger as she said, “Lnard saw to the smalls. Hal and Dvar were our scouts. Hal saw you. I came down to make sure you were us.”

Cama had spent his life making and hearing field reports. He knew when details were bustled by—and he could gauge fairly accurately why.

He lifted his voice, aware of half a dozen children listening. “You did well. You did so well that I’m going to do what the Jarlan would have done. I’m giving you a nickname. So when you go to the queen’s training—and I’m going to see that you do—they’re to call you *Captain* Han. You tell ’em that comes from Cama Tya-Vayir.”

“You’re Cama One-Eye,” the new Captain Han marveled. Keth told stories about him and the other Sier Danas, gleaned from Flash-Randael.

“Listen, Captain Han. New orders. I was sent by the king to secure Castle Andahi, so I can speak with his voice. You’re all going to sleep, you right in my tent. Commander’s tent, see? You can have my bedroll, because I’m taking a couple of my Riders down to grab a squint at the Venn and the castle under cover of dark.”

He grinned, and she smiled. He was a Marlovan, sent by the king. He knew what to do, and she had orders. Tension leaked out of her, leaving her leaden with weariness. “Watch out for those horse-apple Idayagans,” she mumbled.

This time his grin was even wider as he said in a voice rough as a rockfall, “Oh, I hope we meet them.”

## Chapter Thirty-one

CAMA was back the next evening, just as the sun was setting.

“All right, we’re on our way. The Venn did not camp. They kept moving through the night. The last of them are getting into their boats in the bay. I think we need to take possession now. Those Idayagans are sure to be coming back.”

“We *got* to help!” the other older girl shrilled, coming to stand at Cama’s stirrup. She looked exactly like the rest to him, a scrawny pup of a girl with braids the color of flax and light-colored eyes, but her voice irritated him as she piped, “You *have* to let us. You *can’t* shut us away like the little ones. I can’t *bear* it! Not after what we’ve *been through*!” He shifted the irritation to himself, knowing she had endured a rougher time than many adults ever did. And it was not her fault she reminded him of the way his wife, Starand, used to talk in their schoolroom days.

“Mount up,” Cama said.

The girl marched away, chin elevated. The children were all thin and dirty, but their cheeks showed color after a night of sleep and a couple of meals. The older girls all wore their bows tucked over their childish shoulder blades, and quivers full of arrows. The Runners packed the older children three to a remount and carried the smaller ones themselves.

As soon as they began the short ride toward the last bend, Cama said, “I’ve got a defense roughed out. The Idayagans have to be watching from the heights somewhere. I’m hoping we can get in before they see us, which is why we’re riding down now under cover of dark. The Jarlan probably told you girls and boys that when attacking a castle, whatever the numbers, whoever has the inside has an advantage.”

“Not enough,” Han whispered.

And that other older girl shook her bow. “*We’re* going to guard the walls.”

She repeated it with a self-conscious flick of her braids that caused the rest of the big girls to give her a revealing, narrow-eyed glare.

“I’ll just *die* if you leave *us* out. You *can’t*!” she declared.

“Lnard,” Han said. “Mount up.”

If Lnard really was like Starand, she would keep that up until she got a response. “Wasn’t going to,” Cama said. “You girls can take the towers and walls, just like you’ve practiced. That’s your best

position, and it also leaves any hand-to-hand to us. Yes, I know you're training with knives. Odni is best when you've got some hips to balance with. None of you are anywhere near that."

Lnard tossed her head. "Just so you don't think we're *babies*. You don't know *half* of what we had to do—"

"Lnard," Captain Han said again.

"What?" Fists on hips—just like Starand.

"Shut it."

Lnard opened her mouth and began a long defense—she was just defending the girls' honor—but a freckle-faced girl and Haldred Mondavar made "Yeah," noises.

Captain Han said, "We'll all take care of our own honor."

After another odd look exchanged between the two, Lnard sniffed, but subsided.

Presently, they spied the castle at the bottom of the pass, a distinct pale shape, one side buried in a mighty landslide, the whole bathed in starlight.

"All right, into the tunnel," Cama said, leading the way.

The last stretch of the pass broadened out, except for a jut of rock at the left, the west side. What looked like a crevasse was actually access to the tunnel, carved by the river that had once flowed there. The pass itself was broad, stone-floored part of the way, the upper portion trampled down over centuries.

As soon as they were inside the tunnel they lit readied torches and rode single file downward, surrounded by stone walls worn smooth by water. The cold, motionless tunnel air smelled faintly of horse, wool, and sweat, and a tinge of vinegar from the exhalations of thousands who had breakfasted on vinegar-soaked cabbage the day before.

The tunnel ended at the castle, opening into one of the basement levels. It smelled dank, and mournful drips here and there were evidence that it had been flooded, then emptied out.

Cama motioned ridings of men to explore, torches held high, weapons out. The silence seemed thick and heavy, oppressive with the weight of old stone and the rusty tang of spilled blood.

The ridings returned looking bleak.

In brief words they all reported, giving Cama a dismal picture. But no enemy remained.

Cama said, "We'll set a close perimeter, everyone within earshot. Here's how we'll set up watches . . ."

Dawn brought a rise in the summer winds, kicking up dust whirls in the air over the enormous landslide looming over one side of the castle. From time to time tiny bits of rubble clicketty-clattered down the slide. At first, Cama's sentries stiffened. There were four sentries posted on the landslide portion of the back wall, with overlapping fields of vision. But nothing moved on the long, rock-strewn sweep all the way up to the mountain. Though they never ceased their visual sweeps, they stopped pulling weapons at every rattle.

The rest of the sentries patrolled near the front gates, which gapped open, the mighty hinges destroyed. From the walls, scouts watched the last of the Venn boats launching onto the turned tide.

The Venn had restored the baths on one side at least, patching up the hole that had let water into the basement to drown the tunnel entrance.

Once the children had been sent to bathe and eat, Cama rotated his dragoons through the baths in small parties. Since there was not so much as an oat left in the pantry rooms, the dragoons' Runners brought in the remainder of their stores. Their cook was exercising his imagination when midday made the shadows vanish under their feet.

The noon watch change was rung by a Runner. That had been chosen as the signal by Idayagans who figured the Venn would be gone by then.

A swarm of Idayagans raced out of what had seemed in the darkness to be shrubs growing below the level of the outer wall. These were actually the front entrance to some old tunnels, known to the Idayagans but not to Cama and his group.

It was an enormous force of Idayagans. Weapons raised, yelling wildly, they attacked in a mass.

A sentry shot a whirtler up over the castle. Cama abandoned his grim inspection and shouted for everyone to get to battle posts.

Captain Han and the bigger girls had been gathered in the kitchen, Han trying not to lose her temper at

Lnard's loud grief at the destruction of the bakery.

Sure enough, Lnard's tears winked away the moment they heard Cama's shout. She was right behind Han as they raced to the top of the east tower.

The girls were just beginning to pick their positions when the slope of the landslide erupted as if by magic. Idayagans shook dirt off taut bows, knocked arrows, and let loose at the sentries.

Most of the first volley missed, but not all. Two of the sentries running for cover recoiled and fell dead. The rest dove behind battlements, though this was only partial cover as the enemy was shooting down almost on top of them. One sentry took an arrow in the arm, the other in a bent knee sticking out from cover.

The archers had copied what they assumed was the tactic used by the Marlovan children. Under cover of night, while the Marlovans were in the tunnel, they'd crept down the landslide and burrowed down, covering themselves lightly with the loose rubble to wait for the signal: the noon bells.

They loosed arrows as fast as they could, concentrating on the hidden targets.

One of the eight-year-old girls started shrieking. Captain Han yelled over her, "*Line!*"

The well-drilled girls scrambled into a line.

"Arrow!" Han's own first arrow was the one that had killed Gdir. She'd dug her nail into the shafts of those arrows to mark them off. "Lnard, this one killed Tlennen. Freckles, Dvar, here are yours."

Fingers had been hastily tightening strings; arrows were clapped to.

"Loose!"

*Spang!* The girls shot together.

The front five Idayagans staggered, and one dropped: each of the girls' arrows hit something. One girl squealed in triumph and two brangled over whose arrow had gotten the kill until Captain Han yelled, voice desperate, "LINE! Arrow! Loose!"

Long-drilled habit snapped the girls back into a wavering line.

The girls spread behind the battlements. Han pretended not to hear Dvar's keening breathing. Dvar was shooting with everyone else.

The Idayagans scrambled for cover, then began shooting back from behind rocks, unsure of what else to do. The more decent ones did not want to shoot at children. Others longed to shoot down the brats who had better aim than they did.

The best Idayagan archers had been in front, the rest were to provide a lethal rain to keep the Marlovans pinned down. Consequently, at first the girls hit more targets than the Idayagans, as shouts and clashes of steel echoed from the castle gates.

The Idayagans began shifting, spreading out, so that they could get a better angle on the tower and walls. Meanwhile, the underfed girls, inexorably tired, found their shots falling short and going wild.

One Idayagan arrow grazed Freckles' scalp just as she bobbed out too forcefully. She fell to her knees, bleeding spectacularly. Some of the eights began shrieking; Captain Han and her older girls, driven by anger, renewed the conflict, and this time, *Zip! Zip! Zip! Zip!* four Idayagans—lulled from cover by the increasing wildness of the girls' shots—fell, arrows square in their chests.

Then more arrows, fast and deadly accurate, began picking off the Idayagans from a new angle.

Barend, his reinforcements, Ndand and Keth Arveas had arrived, galloping wildly down the pass when they reached the ridge and heard the unmistakable sounds of battle.

As Barend and the dragoons raced to the aid of the men fighting at the gates, Ndand sent Keth inside with the horses. She sped up onto the tower opposite the girls' and took up position without being noticed.

"Lnard! Get her downstairs," Captain Han ordered, pointing to Freckles rocking back and forth on the tower floor, fingers pressed to her oozing scalp.

"Why does it have to be *me*? *I'm* as good a shot as *you*," Lnard announced.

Goaded at last beyond endurance, Captain Han said in a low, fierce voice, "Just wait till I tell Ndand-Randviar—"

"I didn't do it! And you're a snitch!"

"*I'll* tell her," Dvar said, stung out of her fugue.

Lnard went still. Han scowled.

Dvar flung her braids back. "I'll tell her you *always* argued."

Han said, "C'mon, let's get Freckles down before she bleeds to death."

Freckles squinted up through blood-sticky eyelids. "Not that you care about me, Lnard. You just want Cama One-Eye to give you a nickname. But I'll give you one first: Frostface!"

Lnard veered between fury and relief that Dvar didn't know about . . . *it*. That meant Han hadn't told anyone. Did Han know, or didn't she? Lnard did not dare ask.

*She's afraid I'll tell about Rosebud at the bridge*, Han thought. The ice ball formed behind her ribs—the same ribs that splintered in Gdir when the Idayagans shot her. She sensed Lnard wanting it secret—maybe even demanding something as the price of secrecy. But Han knew that secrets are weapons. Her parents were gone. So was the Jarlan. She would tell Ndand. And if Ndand told her she wasn't good enough for queen's training, well, it meant she wasn't worthy.

The ball of ice was gone. Discipline was as well, that was all right. The sight of the reinforcements caused most of the Idayagans to panic and throw down their arms.

When the cease-fighting trumpet blew, the girls understood that the battle was over. Yes, here came warriors to take charge of the men on the landslide, who looked around uncertainly, not sure if their own people had surrendered, not sure what to do next.

Captain Han flung her bow over her back and bent to help the angrily sobbing Freckles to her feet. The other girls followed, half of them whimpering too, though they didn't know why.

Cama stood in front of the prisoners, who clumped together sullenly, fearfully, miserably in the middle of the rubble-strewn parade ground just inside the second gate.

There were twice and half again as many Idayagans as Marlovans. The former were dismayed, then angry, to discover that. It had seemed to them a full army swept out of nowhere onto them, and many couldn't throw down their weapons fast enough. Most had had little or no training. Cama strongly suspected the leader had been at the front gate. The ruse with the landslide had been clever, but there had been no one to follow up their advantage. If the leader had known how to command his two fronts, the battle would have gone a lot worse for the Marlovans.

And it would keep being like that, unless Cama could force them into peace through fear.

He walked back and forth, glaring at them with his one good eye. Then he said in Marlovan, which Ndand translated into Idayagan, "I want to know who killed those unarmed children the other night." No one answered.

Cama lifted a hand, rigid with disgust. "Fine. You're under our law. That's specific about the consequences of cowardice."

"They were shooting at us!" came a voice from the back, which Ndand translated in a whisper.

Hissings and violent language issued from the Idayagans, but the same voice shouted, "Those soul-rotted brats *shot* at us!"

Cama said, "I am not talking about your attempt to take this castle. That comes under rules of war. I mean four children just after the Venn came. Unarmed. You killed them in cold blood, and I'm going to exact a price for that. From every one of you if I have to—"

"They were yelling!" the same voice protested. "They would've called the Venn on us!"

Cama waited until Ndand translated.

"So none of you were capable of saying 'Shut up, the Venn will hear you?' But apparently you *were* capable of calling them 'little Marlovan shits'—in their own language—before you killed them."

"*Murderingshits. All of you—*"

Ndand did not have to translate that. The man shouted it in Marlovan, which he'd learned in order to sell flour to Castle Andahi.

The Idayagans sidled and shuffled away from the speaker, as if contact with him would make them targets. Cama now had a clear view of a tall, plump man in a miller's heavy green apron over a jacket

and old breeches. His face was red, distorted with a mix of fury and fear.

“Who else?” Cama asked.

No answer.

Cama said, “Then we’ll flog the backs off every one of you cowards. Beginning with you.” He pointed at the one he was fairly certain was in command.

“Your shit-stinking murderers pretend you have civilized laws—” He too had learned some Marlovan.

“You,” Cama rode over him in a field voice, “don’t even have the guts to speak up for the men under your orders. So you can watch us kill every one before we get to you.”

Green Apron shouted in his own language, “So we’ll have an easy win, eh, Djallac? And when I’m dead, your cousin—with his oh so convenient twisted ankle, he can’t go on this stupid suicide run of yours—he gets my mill?”

Ndand caught up rapidly.

Djallac was the leader. A man of about forty, short and spare, he’d once done a stint of duty in the Ghael Hills before the Marlovans came. Like many, he’d melted back into civilian life, waiting and watching for a moment to strike back.

He turned an ugly glare from Cama to Green Apron, then back again. He licked his lips. “We want our land free. Last week those Venn soul-suckers sent out people to divide us up into land parcels. Telling us what we were going to plant for them. What we would make!”

“You thought you could stop that by taking the castle?” Cama asked, amazed at this combination of bravery and ignorance.

“We thought they were all gone up over the mountain. We didn’t know they had left some here. As for the brats, you can blame that on me since you want to lay blame on someone. I killed the last of ’em before they could betray us to the Venn.”

Cama made a grim face, then lifted his voice. “I am the new Jarl for Idayago. The new Jarl for Andahi, Olara, and Tradheval is nine-years-old Keth Arveas.” The children standing in a line against the wall turned to look at Keth, as he stared down at the ground.

“Our job will be to keep the Venn from coming back. Keep pirates away. Keep the law. And we do have law. You can grow what you want, you can make what you want. You can sell what you want, once you give us our share—the share you’d be giving your king, who used it to build palaces. If you attack us, we fight back. Hard. As hard as we fight pirates. If you kill our children you die as murderers. Understand?”

One of the younger men said in accented Marlovan, “So are you going to kill us all?”

“Not if you go home and get back to your usual life. You’ll never even see me if you do that.” And as Ndand translated, Cama turned to Djallac and Green Apron. “But you two? I meant what I said about those children. I’ll offer you a chance to fight for your lives. Right now. You a sword, me my knife. You’ll never get a fairer offer.”

Djallac died without speaking, fighting viciously but wild; Green Apron protested and threatened and finally pled in a sobbing, gibbering whine, mixing up demands that his mill be left to anyone but Djallac’s cousin with offers to do anything if his life would be spared. Even the Idayagans were relieved when Cama cut that short.

“All right, out of here. You can take these two with you and give them to their families, or we’ll disappear ’em, but with no ceremony.”

Men exchanged looks uncertainly, then a mob of them turned to the bodies, the rest slinking away in haste, not believing they were still alive.

Before those carrying the dead vanished through the gate, one turned back to Cama, who stood watching, fists on hips.

“What about his mill?”

“You settle that.” Cama peeled off his gauntlets, and jammed his knife into the dusty ground to clean it. He looked up. “But if you fight over it, you’ll be dealing with me.”

As soon as they were out of sight, Cama issued new orders for trackers to watch the Idayagans, new routes of patrol, a party to find wherever it was the Idayagans had been hiding. The wounded were taken



inside the bare castle and the few dead gathered. At sunset they would sing them.

Then he started on the self-appointed inspection, but this time he had company. Ndand Arveas insisted on going with him.

Together Cama and Ndand walked through the ruined castle, room after room with scorch-marks, collapsed floors, sharp barbs worked into doors, floors, walls. Bloodstains, as yet unscrubbed, everywhere: the Venn had not had time to get more than the lower floor cleaned up.

“Damn,” Cama kept saying, over and over. “What a fight. What a defense.” And then, when they stood in a tower archway and gazed down at the blood-blackened splinters crashed below, “How many women were here?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. Some might have been sent oth erwhere. But including the girls fifteen and over, not quite two hundred.”

“Of course including the girls,” Cama said, his voice as rough as stone. He looked up, around, and down again, and shook his head. “Of course including the girls. Do you realize what they did? Two hundred women held off thousands and thousands of Venn. For how long? However long it was, they bought us that time at the other end. Fifteen-year-old girls.” He shook his head again.

Ndand couldn’t speak. Her throat had tightened and she held her breath. She would grieve later, but right now she was needed to restore the castle, to mother those poor children. She owed the women of Castle Andahi that.

Presently, Cama moved away. She squared her chin. “The way to the walls is through here.”

In silence they toured what remained of the sentry walk, and gradually Ndand got hold of that cloud of threatening grief. A steadying list of immediate tasks formed itself in her mind.

She knew the grief would be back. The pain of Flash’s death had stabbed her over and over, sharp as knife cuts, and no matter how hard she cried, she could not cry out the pain. But in Cama’s astonishment as he looked around, in his evident respect, she found the small consolation of pride, and held onto it.

At length they stood alone in the Jarl’s old office, which had been stripped of all furniture by the Venn. The sun was setting. It was nearly time for the ceremony of Disappearance.

Cama was scarcely more than a silhouette, tall and strong, one dark-fringed eye gleaming with reflected torchlight, the other patched. When that eye met Ndand’s, she was taken by surprise: there was, just for a moment, the spark she never expected to feel again. Other feelings promptly overwhelmed it with a cascade of the tears that must fall first, in spirit and in life. But the idea that she could feel something besides pain, regret, and grief again was another small comfort, next to the pride.

Cama regarded the slim young woman standing there, bow over her shoulder. Her robes were filthy from her long ride, the fight, the grim inspection of her home. Her face, like his, was grimy.

Straight-shouldered, capable, she had a kind voice for those chattering girls downstairs. He smiled, without knowing why he smiled, for he, too, was tired, and overwhelmed by the destruction he’d witnessed in detail for his report to Evred.

“Cama!” a Runner dashed in, eyes wide. “A boy just showed up. Says he’s Radran, used to be the cook’s helper. Says he was holed up on the mountain counting enemies. Says he saw *everything*.”

“Radran!” Ndand exclaimed happily. “Wait till I tell Keth.”

Ndand took off, and Cama followed on her heels. This new responsibility seemed just a little easier now that he’d met her. He had an ally. Maybe a friend.

## Chapter Thirty-two

DANNOR Tya-Vayir threw Evred’s official tribute letter to the floor and kicked the nearest object.

It was a tall vase with herons standing in arch-necked poses, the colors blue and silver. One of those Colendi things Tdiran-Jarlan had droned on about so tiresomely all the years Dannor was growing up. You’d think if they were going to draw herons they would draw them with power and grace, lifting in flight. Otherwise, they were spindle-legged birds.

The vase was heavier than Dannor expected. The impact sent a shock of pain up her foot, but that was worth the spectacular smash, and the tinkle of pieces in the empty fireplace.

Her door burst open—something that had never happened before—and the twins dashed in, looking around wildly.

Dannor gave a hoot of angry laughter.

Badger Yvana-Vayir's voice was thick with dislike. "Did you read it?"

"I didn't read past the news about Hawkeye." *What would be the point?* She wanted to say, but the words stayed unuttered.

The boys were standing too close. For the very first time she was aware of having to tip up her head to look into their faces, which she seldom bothered to do. They were annoying, sulky boys, tedious as all boys are. But now they loomed over her, their faces tight with anger and grief, emphasizing the strong bones they shared with their older brother.

Now dead, *damn* him.

Badger dashed a muscular forearm over his eyes. "Y-you don't even care," he began, but Beaver sent him a quick look, and Badger gritted his teeth.

Beaver said, "So what are you going to do?"

Yes. That was the question that made her kick that stupid vase to pieces. From the stances of the two, their scowls, they were just waiting to turf her out of Yvana-Vayir.

She wouldn't give them the pleasure. Kicking some of the shards into the fireplace, she said, "Go home, of course." A wave of fury burned through her. *Stupid* Hawkeye, to run at the front of that battle. If only she'd taken the war talk seriously. But she'd heard it all her life—*When the Venn come*—and they never had. So now there was no heir, which would have cemented her for life as senior Jarlan.

But Hawkeye was history. Her business was living. She had to find a new life, preferably somewhere better than Yvana-Vayir. Definitely not back at Tya-Vayir, smallest jarlate of them all, and crammed with the worst people. So where to go? Wasn't Evred Montrei-Vayir going to her brother's? She bent to pick up the letter, but Badger was quicker.

"That's ours." And his eyes teared.

Dannor sighed. "It says that the king is going to Tya-Vayir for the triumph, am I correct?"

"Yes," Beaver said as his brother carefully rolled the letter, picked up the black ribbon from the floor, and tenderly retied the scroll. "We have to go. On account of the title."

*I wish you joy of deciding who's Jarl and who's not*, she thought, but she swallowed that. She smiled at them under her lashes, as if they weren't just tiresome boys. "Then please honor me with your escort home," she said sweetly.

She was a widow, they didn't want her here, she had to go home. And she'd used *that* word.

She watched them realize each fact, one by one. Idiots.

They were also handsome and popular. She'd look good arriving with them as escorts, and Hawkeye's death in battle would bring some glory to his widow. So . . . how much was glory worth?

Dannor was standing beside her brother in fine new robes, her hair brushed to a burnished gold and braided in a complicated pattern when the king's party rode up the curving road to Tya-Vayir Castle. The long columns of the Marlo-Vayir, Sindan-An, Khani-Vayir, and Cassad warriors snaked behind, led by what was left of the Riders who'd accompanied Hawkeye when he took the command at Ala Larkadhe.

The road was bordered with a low stone wall, and behind that tall, beautiful silver-leaved argan trees from somewhere east, planted by the first Jarlan's hands. It was the most impressive of all the Vayir castle roads, leading to the castle built along the highest of the gentle hills surrounding a small lake.

As soon as word had reached the Tya-Vayirs that the war was over, Imand-Jarlan had ordered the entire castle into a frenzy of cleaning. Stalgrid had sent a couple ridings of Runners out to his own allies, requesting them to come back with him. He did not say what for.

When a second Runner arrived with the news that Cama had gone north as the new Jarl of Idayago, Starand had wandered about wailing and moaning, “I caaaaan’t live in Idayago! There’s nothing up there! Nobody! Just horrible people, they all haaaate us!”

Inured to her eternal whining, no one paid her the least heed. That is, until Dannor arrived a day later—having been abandoned at the border by the twins, who said they’d been invited to Tlennen. So she’d come home alone after all. After enduring half a morning of Starand’s wailing and whining, she’d shoved past Imand, caught Starand by the shoulder, and swung her around. “Why don’t you end the marriage, then, and go home to Ola-Vayir?”

Stupid Starand! She just stood there with her mouth open. Dannor could have come up with three return jabs by the time she’d drawn a breath, and one would even have been true.

Then it was her turn to be whirled around. Imand was much smaller and lighter in build than Dannor, but she was strong from daily drill, and from handling a castle full of difficult personalities.

“That was fair.” She dipped her chin. “But don’t think that makes you welcome to stay here making trouble. If you’re moving back in, you’re going to work, and I am going to ride you every watch to see that you do it.”

Dannor flushed. She’d loathed Imand ever since they were girls. How she missed the days when she was ten and Imand only seven, and Dannor could sit on her and slap her silly—as long as Imand’s shadow Hibern wasn’t around. “Don’t worry, Imand. I’ll be out of here as soon as I can. So you just do your own work.”

“See that you are.” Imand pushed on by.

So here she stood at Stalgrid’s side, where she had been since the king’s outriders arrived to give them advance notice of imminent arrival.

Stalgrid’s temper, always bad, had been foul all day. His only ally present was Hali-Vayir, who everyone knew licked whoever’s boots were nearest. Marth-Davan was dead, probably out of spite, and Stalgrid’s other allies had all sent excuses—harvest, shortage of men or money for travel. He knew they were all wary of the king who’d driven off the Venn, and they were afraid to cross the pirate Harskialdna who couldn’t be beaten on land or sea.

Dannor peered at the lead riders. She was infuriated to see Badger and Beaver riding with a clump of Sindan-An, Tlen, and Tlennen men who’d joined Tuft Sindan-An’s warriors. They must have ridden cross-country to join the returning warriors as soon as they abandoned her.

Everyone in the king’s party wore their House colors, no helms or chain mail. Their shields were slung at the saddles. The new Harskialdna (only medium height, and look at those disgusting scars) wore the green-and-silver of the Algara-Vayirs instead of the royal colors. There were two spaces for riders in the middle of the Sier Danas to honor the two fallen captains.

Everything done exactly right, to honor their host. There was no hint of a kingly mailed fist coming down hard on Stalgrid, which would have been obvious if they’d ridden in war gear, weapons clanking. The two Tya-Vayirs felt the fist anyhow. As did old Hali-Vayir, standing slightly behind Stalgrid, fingering his sash.

The unsmiling king dismounted, inclined his head so that the host could speak first.

Stalgrid said stiffly, “You honor our House, Evred-Harvaldar.”

“Your House,” Evred stated softly with just the faintest emphasis, “honors me.”

Dannor watched him from under her lashes as he turned to formally name everyone. Again, everything according to form—the old way of making promotions known.

She ignored the male jabber. During her days in the queen’s city, what little had been said about Evred, then just a second son, was that he was awkward, preferring old poetry to war games. That had clearly changed. There was no use in intriguing him—they said he was like his father in preferring men. Hmm, could that possibly mean he’d mated up with that scar-faced Harskialdna? Time for a bit of investigation. She smiled, knowing that she had the same dimpled smile as her younger brother, Cama. As the Runners took away the horses, she fell in step beside Indevan-Harskialdna. His eyes were just below the level of her own. “I hope you will have the time to sit with me and tell me about Hawkeye.” She did her best to appear sad, when—it was strange—she couldn’t recall ever feeling sad in her life. Angry, yes, but sad,

no.

Indevan's eyes were wide set, an unremarkable brown, his expression hard to interpret past all those scars. Was he simpleminded?

"You were his wife?" he asked.

"I am Dannor Tya-Vayir," she said gravely. "And yes, I was married to Hawkeye."

"I did not see exactly what happened to him." Indevan had one of those deep, resonant voices you get with chesty men. It was unexpectedly attractive. "Not many with him survived, but there are a few. I can point them out to you." And he actually craned his neck around, the fool.

Dannor looked past him at the small woman walking on his other side. She wore a plain linen robe, with a blue cotton under-robe beneath. "Did I miss hearing who you are?"

Evred turned away from Stalgrid and the cluster of Sindan-Ans and Tlennens. He regarded her out of cold hazel eyes, reminding her unexpectedly and unpleasantly of his older brother. "This is Dag Signi. She aided us as a healer."

The woman was plain as a potato, and old. Dannor relaxed, dismissing Dag Signi as no threat. "Come along inside," she said to Indevan-Harskialdna. "I'll show you to your room. I know Imand is busy—" "No, she is not," came Imand's calm voice from behind, tall blue-eyed Hibern, her mate, at her shoulder. Inda turned around, relieved. Dannor was standing too close to him—she made him uncomfortable. This new woman was shorter than he, with the pale blond hair of most of the Tlennen family, wide-spaced eyes with a Sartoran tilt to them.

"I am Imand-Jarlan," she said to Inda, and smiled past him to Signi. "Welcome to Tya-Vayir." Then, lifting her voice, "Welcome to you all. Stalgrid-Jarl will see that the men are properly settled.

Evred-Harvaldar, if you and your Sier Danas will come inside with me, I will show you around."

It was pretty much the same as other castles: public and workrooms downstairs, living space upstairs, and an enormous stable with a barracks over it.

The room Imand opened for Inda was plain, clean, with a comfortable bed big enough for two. "Here you are." Imand's smile included Signi as well as Inda. "We'll have biscuits and ale laid out just off the kitchens. Follow your nose if you're lost." She shut the door.

Vedrid had already gotten a Runner to bring Inda's gear up. Signi had carried her own small bag, which contained just a change of clothing and a comb. She set this down on the bedside table, one of those peculiar ones with the raptor feet as legs and thin, horizontal stylized wings curving from armrests up to the back.

Signi regarded Inda, who stood in the middle of the room staring at his bag. She waited in patience until he regained the present world, and his place in it. "I hope Evred doesn't make us stay here long." He ran his hand over his hair, a sure sign he was disturbed about something. "Though I like Imand."

Signi considered. While Hawkeye's wife had been talking to Inda, Stalgrid-Jarl had said with a strange, enforced sort of heartiness, "And so we stand ready to give you a triumph tonight. Say the word, Evred-Harvaldar."

"The word can wait until we have rested," Evred had said.

Signi knew she missed significance here, some kind of silent, private struggle between Evred and this tall, strongly built, ferocious-looking Jarl. Stalgrid's Venn ancestry was very much obvious in his stature and frost-pale hair.

Inda said abruptly, "I feel like I'm in one of Tau's plays. I wish he was here."

He sank onto the bed, elbows on his knees. Signi sat next to him, stretching an arm across his broad back. She hugged him to her. "Can you tell me?"

"Oh, it's more Marlovan thinking. Barend told me just before he left that I was going to have to get used to politics. What *is* that? I'm still trying to get used to there being no threat. Not just the Venn, but pirates." He gave her that slightly guilty, mostly uneasy look that he always did when he mentioned the Venn. "I feel like I'm becalmed. No wind, no sail. I'm here in Cama's house, but he's not here, and there's Horsebutt—Stalgrid, that is—with that pinched face, he's probably thirty but he looks old. Jowls. Then I think of Noddy." Inda shook his head slowly. A tear slid along the scar on one cheek as he stared at his hands. "I sent Noddy to that death, Signi. Don't say I didn't because I did. I sent a lot of people to

their deaths. I killed a lot of people with my own hands. But a friend . . . oh, I wish I knew what I promised him.”

“Did he die comforted?”

Inda closed his eyes and dropped his head back. A couple more tears escaped from under his lashes. Finally he drew in a deep breath, opened his eyes and swiped them with his sleeve. “Yes. Yes he did.”

“And he went to the light. I saw them go.”

“You saw Noddy?”

“No. There were too many.” It was her turn for the throat-tightening, eye-burning pain of memory, and its spring of grief. “But they are all gone.”

He took her hands. “All? Including Dun?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so,” he whispered. “Why can’t the rest of us see that?”

“I don’t know. But I did. Please take comfort in that.”

“Noddy—and Dun.” Inda kissed her hand again, and stood up. “Noddy left behind a son. He has my name. And I’m going to be teaching him in the academy as part of my duties. Isn’t that strange? But I’m going to do it right, oh, such a good job, I promise Noddy that. Even though he can’t hear it.” He wiped his eyes again, and held out his hand. “May as well go find the others and do whatever a Harskialdna is supposed to be doing. Want to come?”

“No. You go be with your friends. Laugh, and give them comfort. Nightingale needs cheering. And Buck. As for me, this castle, the magics are fading, like in so many others. I think I will attend to that.”

### Chapter Thirty-three

STALGRID was worried about the magic as well. The baths under the castle drew water off the lake, but since winter it had begun to smell slightly dank under there, and the water had been gradually getting more and more chill. During the hottest part of summer they had not minded. They’d begun using the ensorcelled buckets to wash first, and the baths for a cooling soak once their bodies were clean. Less magic was used that way.

Now he was worried about what would happen to the last of the water magic with all these people using the baths. Even worse was the thought of that damned Evred forcing one more day’s stay on them, with all those mouths champing at his harvest stores.

Stalgrid had risen early, determined to do his absolute best to bootlick Evred into making an end to this nightmare—lick until he choked on the words.

But. He would be on the watch for Evred’s weakness while the fellow was camped in Stalgrid’s best room, eating all his food. Only justice.

The first test would be this surprising Harskialdna. Dannor had sat next to him at dinner the night before. From what Stalgrid could see, the fellow just leaned over his food and shoveled it in, never saying more than a word or two. After dinner, Stalgrid had asked Dannor what he was like, to get a furious whisper, “He’s an idiot.”

“You say that about everyone,” he grumped.

Her lip curled. “I’m wrong?”

He snorted. “No.”

So . . . was the pirate just a claphair? That would be prime, if so! Challenge him and you’ve got the king by the short hairs.

It was with the king’s short hairs in mind he’d gotten up as soon as the man placed on watch reported the Harskialdna going down to the baths.

Stalgrid hurried down the stairs, and was distracted by steam. What had happened? The hot end was hot again? He sniffed—no dankness!

Relief—gratitude—then suspicion. Magic did not just happen. Was this some kind of oblique threat? Just

what kind of stuff had that damned Evred been reading in those old archives, anyway?

“... but Janden saw it, I tell you! Go ask him!”

“I heard the same thing.”

The voices echoing up the access stair distracted Stalgrid. The latter one was one of his own Rider captains.

“They said it was plain as plain could be. Everyone was yelling IN-DA! IN-DA! The Venn commander was right up on the mountain with the Pirate—tall as a house, wings on his helm—and threw down his weapons, just like the old days! Right at the Pirate’s feet!”

“And they just ran? Like that?”

“Gone quicker’n you could spit.”

Stalgrid entered then, and his own two captains instantly moved down to the cooler end of the water, leaving the hot end for him. The other captains gave him an uneasy look—they knew who he was. He did not invite them to stay, so they moved, too, and by the time he had taken off his robe and eased into the hottest end of the water—no bucket, not if the magic was back!—they were all gone. Good. A moment later, there was the one they were calling the Pirate. No pretending it was an insult, not in that admiring, possessive tone of voice reserved for heroes. Stalgrid had no use whatever for heroes—unless they could serve him.

“Good morning, Indevan-Harskialdna,” he called, eyeing the fellow. He was medium in height, good shoulders and chest. He wore only a shirt; there were two white scars on one leg, and a long purple slash on the other. His feet were the same shade of brown as his face and hands, unlike everybody else’s. Did he go barefoot, then, like the farm laborers? *This* fellow was a Harskialdna? If he was as stupid as Dannor said, then who really made his plans?

Inda was surprised to find Horsebutt alone in the baths, which he’d expected to be crammed full of captains, leaving the lake for the men. When Horsebutt spoke he sounded just like he had in the old days, like he was accusing you of something, even when he was pretending to be friendly.

“Good morning, Jarl,” Inda said, and set his towel down, hoping the fellow was leaving.

Stalgrid splashed out into the water. Not leaving then, just arrived, apparently. Inda sighed inwardly.

“Going to teach us fighting today?” Stalgrid asked, swimming all the way across his bath and then back, using wide strokes. There was definitely strut in the way he took up the whole bath. Was the man challenging him, or was this some kind of a sex lure?

Inda dropped onto one of the benches along the stone walls. “If Evred asks me to.”

Voices in the stairwell: the Marlo-Vayir brothers, sounded like. Stalgrid retreated to the other side of the bath, annoyed. He considered how to issue a challenge without sounding too insulting. He didn’t want Evred finding out and staying another week with his entire army. “I hope you will. I offer myself as a partner. I’m sure it will be most instructive,” he added, cleverly not defining what he meant by “it.”

Cherry-Stripe and Tuft were easing Buck down the stairs one at a time, Rat Cassad behind them. When Buck had been lowered slowly to a bench, his forehead dotted with sweat, he waved off Tuft and Rat, who threw off their robes and dove into the bath, causing a mighty surge. Cherry-Stripe began to help his brother get his shirt and bandages off.

Inda jumped up to help, which Buck permitted. They lifted the shirt off without it catching on Buck’s stump, which still hurt enough to make him weak in his one knee if it only brushed against something. *Too bad the Venn weren’t better fighters*, Stalgrid thought viciously. If there was one thing he hated, it was favorites. Buck Marlo-Vayir had been on the strut ever since the academy, when he was one of the Sierlaef’s favorites. Then, after the Sierlaef was killed (good riddance!) what does Buck do? Become one of Evred’s favorites.

*He looks bad now*, Stalgrid thought as Cherry-Stripe loosened the bandage around his knee-stump and then bent to the one round Buck’s hips. When Stalgrid saw the red flesh around Buck’s groin, he looked away uneasily.

Cherry-Stripe threw off his robe and splashed down to help his brother. Inda pulled off his shirt and dropped down to the other side, presenting Stalgrid with an astonishing view of scars. Long ones, short ones, most of them gone white, but several pinkish and recent. Beneath those scars he was all rippling

muscle.

Stalgrid grunted, for the first time regretting the last five years' lack of real drill. He was a busy man, and his Rider Captain tended to the tedium. Maybe he should swing a sword again . . .

Inda and Cherry-Stripe eased Buck into the water. Buck hissed, head arched back. At a glance from Cherry-Stripe, Inda waded out into the water.

Stalgrid muttered to Rat, "What happened to him?"

"Venn went after joints, mostly," Rat answered, low-voiced, as Inda ducked underwater and swam in a few powerful strokes. "One tried to tendon-slice Buck. Another got his other knee when he lifted his leg to avoid the first, a third mostly took off his arm, and he fell onto a fourth fellow's sword. Nearly lost his parts."

Stalgrid's own parts constricted. He shifted his gaze to the water.

Buck leaned his sweaty forehead against his brother's as Cherry-Stripe held him steady. "Let me die, Landred," he breathed. "Let me die."

They held the triumph the next night.

As many captains as they could fit into the hall were entertained sumptuously, with the very best Tya-Vayir's kitchens (as well as those of their surrounding liege-houses) could offer. Braised fish fresh from the lake, braised potatoes (rice being rare, with Idayago's lowland rice plantations all trampled up), buttered cabbage, perfectly crisped rye rolls, and after that, honey-and-nut cakes.

Imand's First Runner, Hibern, had noticed that Inda only drank the ale, so they served the locally brewed dark ale as well as wine. Maybe that explained Inda's mood, or maybe it was just the rise and fall of ballads, both the old ones—joined in by everyone—and the new.

Someone had added verses to Hawkeye's old favorite, "Yvana Ride Thunder," an ancient and somewhat self-serving song justifying Yvana ambitions, though it had a good, table-thumping rhythm and a chorus like a trumpet charge. The new verses vividly celebrated the five hundred men, most of whom had died at the top of the pass in order to hold the Venn back. Badger and Beaver (who had convinced Evred in their private conversation that they could swap half years as Jarl just as easily as they had intended to as Randaels) wept openly, hardly able to sing. The sight of those lifted faces and exalted voices from the Sindan-An, Tlen, and Tlennen clans choked Inda up. He was not the only one.

Noddy was given tribute with his share of songs as well. They weren't great as songs—one was too plainly an obscure old ballad with new names inserted—but the singing was resolute and heart-deep. Nightingale and the Khani-Vayir captains listened to every word, drinking them straight into the spirit. Evred did not relax until the speeches were done.

He'd said to Inda just before sitting down, "You'll need to speak, you know."

And Inda's jaw dropped open. "Me? I've never made any speeches!"

"It doesn't have to be long. My uncle scarcely said more than a couple of words, I'm told. But it's traditional. Before you lead the 'Hymn to the Fallen.'"

And so, after Stalgrid offered a toast to the Harvaldar and Harskialdna, Inda stood up and studied the rows of expectant faces. Emotion tightened his throat. He cleared it. "When the call went out. The king—"

A hand toward Evred, sitting so still, his hands gripping his wine cup, his gaze in its depths. "—Evred-Harvaldar needed the Sier Danas. And they came." He lifted his gaze toward the ceiling, one big hand groping, then turning palm up. "They came."

It was the way he said those last two words, so simply, with the gruffness of undisguised grief, that caused many throats to tighten, and eyes to burn with tears of sorrow. And of pride.

Then he began the "Hymn to the Fallen," at first a lone voice: everyone had expected more of a speech. But Imand joined in a sweet, high, clear soprano, and Badger and Beaver joined, tuneless and loud, and by the tenth word they were all singing full-throated, the emotion all the more intense for being shared.

Then it was Evred's turn.

He stood up. The room quieted. "You all have been hearing details about the two battles we fought.

There was a third battle, far rougher than anything we saw.”

Some of the men looked up in surprise. Stalgrid scowled, uncertain; he hated surprises. Imand, Hibern, and the few other women all lifted their faces. They knew, as the women always knew.

*And so should it be.* “The first Jarl I ever made was Dewlap Arveas. His first son was lost fighting pirates. He and his second son were lost when the Venn first arrived in their boats. That left Liet-Jarlan and two hundred women and girls to face nearly three hundred ships full of men.”

The silence had been comfortable, but the small noises of shifting fabric, whispers, quiet steps as Runners and servants moved about, had ceased.

“Two hundred women and girls. Against thousands. *Thousands*. Of enemies. When surrender was offered them, the Jarlan struck our banner herself, so that the Venn could not take it. And then they fought to the last. Because they fought to the last, we are able to celebrate today. They held off the invasion for what seems to have been two, almost three days. Long enough for Hawkeye Yvana-Vayir and Noddy-Turtle Toraca to reach that pinnacle.”

He paused. From across the room he could see the gleam of tears in Imand’s eyes, but her face was exalted.

“There are no songs yet, because most of us did not find out until we were already on the road to come home. But there will be songs.”

This time, he led the “Hymn to the Fallen” himself.

The volume of sound made glassware ring faintly, and Evred himself found his throat closing. But he must speak on; when the adulation that bound them into one inevitably faded, restoring them to individual ambitions, regrets, angers, and curiosity, they would be comparing memories of what he’d said. Whom he’d ignored. Such was human life.

So he said much the same as he had in Ala Larkadhe, knowing that those old words *glory, bravery, heroism* forever remembered, forever sung, weighted with fresh grief, and pride, and affection, carried meaning to those who sought meaning.

Then he shifted from the dead to the living, as it must be.

He praised Ola-Vayir, now gone home.

He praised Buck, so badly wounded in leading the charge at the river, and the ringing shout that went up—the men standing and raising their glasses—had its effect on Buck, who never should have been there. His glittering eyes, the flush in his thin face, all eased as Buck took in the tribute, and Evred waited, giving the men time to express their admiration. Giving Buck the time to look around the room at those shouting men, their fists held against their chests.

Then Evred praised Cherry-Stripe, whose ferocious covering flights of arrows from the heights kept the Venn from sweeping forward to a victory based on sheer mass.

He praised Tuft, who arrived so spectacularly, and he described Tuft’s thundering arrowhead charge that threw the Venn back over the top of the pass, which caused cheers and drumming on the table, Imand’s dishes rattling dangerously.

He ended by praising Cama, who was entrusted with following the Venn retreat. Cama was now a Jarl, which brought even more cheering.

Imand wiped away tears. Stalgrid showed his teeth in that false grin Evred had loathed since he was ten years old and watched the bigger boys at the academy games. Dannor’s mouth was twisted, and she tossed back more wine, longing for this tedium to end; Starand sent her a triumphant smirk. One of the captains had told Starand that Idayago was at least four times the size of Tya-Vayir.

Now the ritual was done.

Evred ended with formal thanks and dismissal to his Sier Danas, giving them leave to return home.

The Marlo-Vayirs were never subtle. They rose together, Buck aided by the ready Runners. Together with Cherry-Stripe their Runners carried Buck out and straight to the wagon already prepared and waiting. The brothers would not spend a moment more in Tya-Vayir than they had to; Buck was very soon insensible to the constant, searing pain, having drunk from his Runner’s anxious hand a mixture of green kinthus and liquor that probably would have killed a lighter man.

Rat and Tuft did their best to make conversation with their hosts as benches scraped and people began



rising, talking in low voices, some repeating stories, or singing snatches of song, others discussing logistics of the long rides ahead.

Evred beckoned to Inda.

They walked out into the open air of the lakeshore. Evred didn't trust Stalgrid not to have spy holes riddling the castle, so he waited until they were down by the rippling, splashing water. "If you are ready," he said, "I want you to go home tomorrow. You have a long journey ahead, and I would like to have you and Tdor back in the royal city to make your oath at Convocation. Hadand will welcome Tdor as Harandviar. There is much work ahead for us all."

Inda turned around to search Evred's countenance in the golden light from the castle windows, but Evred gazed over the dark waters of the lake at the glimmering reflections of the stars.

"I will." Inda touched hand to heart. "But about my marriage. If I'm your Harskialdna, does that mean Branid is going to be Adaluin?"

"Yes, of course." Evred flung his hands behind him, clasping them tightly. "I wish there was a way to hand that rank off to Whipstick Noth. But Branid is Algara-Vayir. Reports state he's been trying to cooperate, and is in fact eager about defense. He can have the title, it will probably keep him to duty. But I want your children to inherit, not his."

Inda hit his fist to his chest, and Evred walked along the water's edge under a clump of willow, and past a row of late-blooming queensblossom, the pale petals just opening.

Inda followed. Tau had been right: Evred's mood had been terrible that first day they rode out, but not for long. He'd been quiet since, but not the tense, terrible quiet of those days right after the battle.

Calmer. But not happy. Not the way you'd think a king would be after a terrible enemy ups and goes away, even if you didn't really defeat him.

*Hurry, Barend,* Inda thought. *He needs that treasure, in whatever form you bring it.*

Evred said in a low, tired voice, "And when you get to the royal city we can discuss Durasnir's words. I can't see them returning next spring, not unless they have another invasion force waiting, and their kingship problems are all resolved. But it seemed he was trying to tell us something without actually telling us—"

"Ah, there you are. Enjoying the stars from the walls?"

They turned, Evred sharply, as Dannor walked up, hips a-swing. With supreme confidence she walked right between them, but her attention was fully on Inda. "It is beautiful here, is it not?" She plucked up some queensblossom, sending a sharp fragrance through the summer air. "Though damp, soooo damp in winter. Is Choraed Elgaer damp?"

"I don't really remember," Inda said. "It seemed fine to me, or at least I remember it that way."

"I'll say good night," Evred put in, and turned away.

Inda wanted to call him back, but for what? They wouldn't talk about anything important now.

*I don't want to be alone with her.* Why not? Dannor was not about to pull a knife on him! "What a joy, to return in triumph to your homeland! Hadand and Tdor have said so many wonderful things about it," she said, shredding the petals and dropping them.

Inda grimaced after Evred. "Uh, yes. It's beautiful. From what I remember."

"And you're leaving? To go home?"

"Yes, tomorrow," he said, relieved.

"My life is totally free." She turned her back on the lake. The rising moon reflected in her wide eyes, off her golden braids. In her teeth. Funny, how her mouth was shaped like Cama's, but her grin was just like Stalgrid's. "I can go anywhere I want. Do anything I want." She stretched her arms out. The sharp-sweet scent of bruised blossoms filled the air as the petals fluttered to the lake water.

"Great," Inda said, looking around for an excuse to decamp. "So you should."

"Should what?" she asked sweetly.

Inda said, puzzled, "Go anywhere you want."

"Oh, I know what I want! To visit my old friend Tdor. What could be better? Thank you, thank you—your last kindness tonight is to make a widow happy. You honor me with your generosity," she crooned, emphasizing the magic word, *honor*. How stupid men were if you just tapped that word into

whatever you said! “I will be waiting whenever you want to ride.” She leaned forward, grabbed him by the ears and kissed him.

#### Chapter Thirty-four

“SIGNI, will you tell her to go away?”

They lay in their bedroll in their tent, Inda whispering into Signi’s ear.

She shook with laughter. “Inda. You fight fleets of bloodthirsty pirates, yet cannot find a way to rid yourself of one woman?” But then she heard the hiss of his breathing: he really was in distress. “I beg pardon. I did not understand.”

“It’s how she turns words inside out. Like a sock,” he whispered. “I feel like I’m falling. She says ‘Oh, I am a widow’ and I know how I’m supposed to act toward a widow. But she’s not acting like one. Do you see?” He breathed out, “It’s like being with Wafri, all but the beat ings.”

“I see.” Now she felt sick.

“Whenever you go off to do your dancing drills she talks at me.” His breath hissed again. “She wants to *marry* me! For me to set aside Tdor—she thinks Evred will do anything for me, even that. I’m pretending I don’t understand what she wants, but now *my* words are starting to turn inside out. Here.” Inda sat up, snapped one of Signi’s glowglobes on. The light would be visible to the other tents, but at least no one could see what he was doing.

He fetched a scrap of paper out of his bag, and dug out the golden case that he’d half forgotten, then, as Signi watched, scrawled:

*Tdor: Dannor is with us, trying to trick me into marriage. Can you have the wedding ready as soon as we arrive?*

He tucked that into the case, carefully activated the spell, and lay back, dousing the light. “Don’t leave her alone with me.”

Signi had her chin tucked on Inda’s shoulder, her lips to his ear. “I won’t.”

Tdor got to her feet, then sank back down as black spots swam before her eyes. Two deep breaths and they were gone, and she rubbed her eyes.

This time she got up more cautiously, but as the dizziness and disbelief washed away in the rushing heat of happiness, she ran out of her room yelling, “He’s coming home! Inda’s coming home!”

Fareas-Iofre heard the sound of her voice, and the tone, not the words. She left the preserving shed, wiping her hands, then stopped in the practice court when Tdor came dashing down the north tower stairs, her brown braids flapping on her back just the way they had when she was ten years old.

“Inda’s coming home,” Tdor cried, flushed and smiling. She really did look just like a girl again. “He’s coming *home*.”

“Oh.” Fareas sat down suddenly on a barrel, and drew in a deep breath. Joy chased fear, braiding like starlings in flight. She did not know if she dared to believe the news: she would see Inda again.

“What’s that?” Whipstick called from above. He leaned out his office window, which was in the tower between the guard barracks and the house proper.

Whipstick and the men had arrived back in Choraed Elgaer from their coastal watch days ago, on receipt of orders from one of the King’s Runners sent down the coast. He and Fareas-Iofre and Tdor had been debating whether or not it was too late in the season to do a full border ride.

“Inda’s coming home!” Tdor laughed. Then wrinkled her nose. “Mudface—er, Dannor Tya-Vayir is with him, which is why he wants the wedding right away.”

*Looks like that settles that question,* Whipstick thought, laughing to himself as he turned back to his summer’s worth of reports to catch up on.

“Right away?” Fareas-Iofre repeated, looking around. “At harvest time? There is so much work to do . . .” She whisked herself off. “We’ll talk tonight!” she called over her shoulder.

Tdor went about the rest of her daily chores, buoyant with happiness. Even Branid appearing from one of his war games out in the stubble fields couldn’t irritate her. She smiled at the castle children, she smiled at the Riders, at the women, even at Branid. The thought of Dannor Tya-Vayir was irritating, but only mildly so. Tdor could put up with her for a few days.

As for Signi . . . Tdor told herself firmly that she was welcome.

Late that night, after the castle people had separated off to night duty or to their own chambers, Whipstick and Tau entered the archive room together. They found Fareas-Iofre reading an old history aloud to Tdor, who was busy finishing up Inda’s wedding shirt.

The princess laid aside the book. “We had better discuss our plans,” she said.

Noren, Tdor’s Runner, went to the door, looked out, then shut it and put her back to it.

“Branid’s gone down to the pleasure house at Cedars,” Tau said. “Vrad promised to keep him there.”

“We’ll have to let all the kin know, of course,” Fareas-Iofre said. “I wonder if we can get Branid to ride around with the Riders as honor guard to do that?”

“Oh, what a good idea.” Tdor poked her needle through the cloth. “He can strut all he likes, and he’ll be out of the way. Let me try to figure out how to get him to think of it himself, since you know he’ll complain and whine if we just ask him. What I wonder is, what will we do with Dannor?”

Tau grinned. “Shall I do my best to distract her?”

Whipstick snorted a laugh. He’d gotten a lot of secret entertainment from watching how the sober, hard-working Tenthen guardswomen almost fell off their sentry walks if Tau bent over to pick up a practice blade in the drill yard. “I’d say that would be a good plan.”

“Here’s another thing I can do.” Tau turned his hand down toward the great hall. “I’ll take over the wedding organization. I enjoy putting together parties.”

“Thank you.” Fareas-Iofre smiled with relief. “That would be a help, since we’ll have to be rearranging furnishings for Inda and—”

She stopped herself when Whipstick shook his head, his smile gone.

“What is it?” Tdor asked, needle in the air. “Do you know something we don’t? Dannor can’t have—”

“No.” Whipstick leaned forward. “There’s something I think you have all forgotten. Inda’s the Harskialdna now. That means he won’t be living here. He can’t. He’ll have to go straight to the royal city, soon’s the wedding is over.”

“Then so will I,” Tdor said in disbelief.

They were all looking at her. “It is a great honor, to be Harandviar. The highest honor a woman can have besides being queen,” Fareas-Iofre said, her eyes anxious.

“You’ll be with Hadand-Gunvaer,” Whipstick pointed out, but his tone was tentative.

Tau did not say anything, but he was thinking, *Inda will miss his home as much as you will. And as much as these people are already missing you.*

“I look forward to it,” Tdor said, because of course she must.

## Chapter Thirty-five

AUTUMN had come and harvest was over by the time the little party reached the outer boundary of Choraed Elgaer.

Inda began saying, “That’s familiar.” Or, “I know I remember that stretch.” At the end he rode in silence, studying their surroundings with a fervor Dannor mistook for stupidity. Signi watched in silent empathy, the more poignant because she knew she could never go home again.

As Inda’s silence grew protracted Dannor was subdued, watching for clues that she could use. She had to find a home, and she was afraid this was her last opportunity. Too many men their age had died; there were far too many women who would end up without rank or establishment, who would be forced to go

home as an unwanted extra pair of hands. She was not going to be one of them.

When a long line of tall trees rose like the teeth of a comb on the southern horizon, at last Inda spoke. “We’ll get there soon. This is part of the castle’s outer perimeter, and all that way are the farm fields. The lake is down that way. We used to have riding practice out here.”

He would have gone silent after that, sunk into the memories that he had struggled so hard to forget for so long, but Signi kept gently making comments, asking about why this castle had a name when most didn’t, asking about the Tenth family, or were they all Algara-Vayirs now?—easy questions all.

Dannor did not listen to the answers. She had no interest in the fact that the Algara-Vayirs had married into an Iascan family instead of taking the castle, like her own ancestors.

And then they rounded the line of trees at the far side of the lake, and there were the golden walls and towers of Tenth. Inda thought, *How small it is*, but his eyes blurred. At first he didn’t see the people on the walls, or hear the cheering. Or rather, the cheering blended with the memory of the day he left, for they’d cheered then too, and blew the trumpets, Tanrid riding there, Joret over there . . .

Dannor gasped as the most beautiful man she had ever seen walked alone through the gate. He was dressed in some outlander fashion—a long tunic that fitted his lovely body, trousers tight across the hips and widening down toward the feet, a style she’d never seen before but liked instantly.

And he walked right up to her, and raised dark-fringed golden eyes. “Are you Dannor-Jarlan?” he asked, his smile entrancing. “Let me show you inside.”

Dannor followed him without a backward glance.

Inda snapped back into the present when he saw his mother. How small she was, how old!

She held out her hands, weeping and smiling both, and he closed his arms around her. He tried not to crush the life out of her as she buried her blurring eyes in his shoulder.

Tdor stood transfixed by the sight of a ring on Inda’s finger. Didn’t rings mean heart-bonds in Sartor and other countries? *Do not assume anything*, she scolded herself.

“Father?” Inda asked, looking around.

“Asleep.” Fareas-Iofre wiped her eyes across her forearm in the exact gesture Inda used. “He’s best in the mornings, generally.”

“All right, then I’ll wait and see him tomorrow.”

Tdor was right behind the Iofre, gaze searching his face. Inda met that regard with a sense of relief that he couldn’t explain. They didn’t speak at all, but it felt like they had. Then there was everyone else to greet: Branid, towering over everyone and anxious to be noticed before anyone with lesser rank, and there were all the castle children grown up. Inda recognized each instantly.

Finally, there was Whipstick, looking like a tougher, leaner version of Horsepiss Noth. “Inda.” Whipstick smacked his hand to his chest. “Welcome home.”

That was all, but memory came back in another wave, bringing Dogpiss’ laughing face. Inda wiped his eyes, then pounded Whipstick’s lean, strong shoulder.

Then they were inside, and there was food. Everyone talked at once, but Inda couldn’t follow any of them because he was distracted by yet another half-familiar face, or by the way the light fell, and there was memory again. This time he was running through the house, a stolen rye biscuit in his mouth, as he raced up to the archive . . .

“Inda.” Tdor’s voice broke through, and he discovered he was standing in the children’s old dining room. Here was the battered old table where they’d eaten. From the look of the worn mats, they still did.

“We’ll have the wedding tomorrow,” she said from the doorway. “It’s all ready. You can thank Tau for that. He knew exactly what to do. I’ve been busy with harvest, and we had to get everyone resettled since Whipstick and the Riders were released from harbor duty, and it was too late to do a border ride—”

“Sorry, Tdor.” Inda backed out of the room. “I’m hearing one word in five. Walk with me? I just want to look around.”

Tdor glanced at that ring, and braced herself to hear what it would mean in their lives.

As they walked through the work rooms, the Iofre led Signi upstairs. “This is the heir’s suite,” she said, pointing. “And here is Inda’s old room. I don’t know where he will want to stay. For now you can have

Joret's old room, which is here.”

She opened the door onto a small, pleasant room whose stone walls were rendered more peach than honey-colored in the morning light. The furnishings were plain, carved with rough horse heads. Signi liked the room, and this kindly-faced older woman with Inda's eyes. She set her little bag down, and the Iofre took her down the back stairs and out on a castle tour.

By the time Tdor and Inda reached the front stairs, three Runners had nearly blundered into them, all seeking Tdor. And Inda hadn't even spoken. He was lost inside his head, just like in the old days. She turned away, issuing rapid orders.

When his reverie ended he found himself alone, unaware of the castle people ushering everyone else away on Tdor's quiet order; at least, Tdor thought with relief, Branid wasn't complaining about something.

Branid was busy with the pretty one who'd come with Inda. Dannon Tya-Vayir, a Jarl's daughter and a Jarlan in her own right, whose husband had died in the war. Pretty? She was *better* than that cold icicle Joret! Inda was obviously too stupid to notice, because everyone whispered the old one was his favorite. Dannon had been disgusted to discover that the gorgeous Taumad had no rank, no name, nothing but his looks. She'd stayed with him just long enough to find out who was what in this family, and before the dinner bells, she'd found a chance to single Branid out.

Inda was now alone in his house.

He set his foot on the lowest step of the main stairway. Why wasn't he happier? He had everything he could possibly want. Impatient with himself, he ran up to the first landing, then halted. Should he just go to his old room? He was the heir now—except he wasn't, really. He was the Harskialdna, and Branid was the heir. Inda would have to tell him that.

He opened the door to the heir's suite, Tanrid's rooms. The outer chamber was exactly the same as it always had been: the fine wingback chairs with the claw feet that he'd thought real when he was little; the beautiful owl rug on the floor, kept away from the windows so it would not fade, and never walked on. Inda sustained a brief memory of Tanrid scrupulously stepping around it in his stable-dirty riding boots. Inda paced the room, listening to the silence. Strange, how silences differed. Sometimes they were heavy with threat, like the silence on the sea before battle, before a storm. This silence was one of time suspended, and of absence. Tanrid wasn't here, there was no sense of him. The furniture was too old, he'd never used it.

Inda continued toward the inner chambers, wondering if the sadness sitting in his stomach like a hard knot was grief for Tanrid. There were no signs of him. Had everyone forgotten him? Inda peered into the bedroom. It was clean-swept, empty, the covered bed just a bed. Tanrid's things were gone, and he'd never had any books or papers. He'd been impatient with anything that kept him out of the stable or the practice court, or from riding the perimeter when their father permitted.

His clothes had surely gone to Branid, who was much of a size. All traditional, but Inda walked out again, head bowed.

## Chapter Thirty-six

THE next morning, Tdor woke to her wedding day.

She hurried down to the baths, startled at the difference in the quality of the water and the heat. She was too busy to think about it, and ran back upstairs swiftly braiding her damp, cold hair. It was just before sunrise.

She pulled her robe around her and paused outside Inda's old room, her heart thudding. Inda herself had whispered to her before they'd parted just after midnight, “If I don't sleep soon I'll drop. Meet me in my room at breakfast.”

She scratched softly, just once, then jumped when the door opened.

The smell of steeped silverleaf wafted out, bringing back a hint of summer, though here in the hall it was

so cold her toes hurt on the stone, and she could faintly see her breath.

“Tdor? Come in.”

He held the door wide, and she entered, seeing that he was alone, also in his night robe. The mage was nowhere in sight.

Because she would not live with any hint of deception or secrecy, she asked, “Where is Signi?”

“She went down with Mother to renew the house magic. Said it’s not quite worn out, but near enough. I want to see Father, but he’s apparently still asleep.”

“He wakens after the sun comes up. We shifted him to an east room.” Tdor forbore saying that, these days, he seldom woke even in mornings, other than to sip a little soup, a little healing brew, and then subside again into his dreams. “You said last night that you wanted to see me?”

Inda turned his thumb up. “You were so quiet during dinner. Is there—do we understand one another?” He shook his head. “I guess I wanted to talk to you. Just you. Before everyone expects us out there.” He waved at the walls.

Tdor turned her gaze away from that ring on his finger to his searching brown eyes. There was pain in them; his lower lid was narrowed just as it had been in the old days, after Tanrid had thrashed him. “You wrote to me the once. After the battle. Then not again, until that note about the wedding.”

“Yes,” Inda said.

Tdor thought of those long weeks after that very first note, the letters ill-formed as if written by a numb hand by campfire, which reported so briefly and so baldly that Inda and the king lived. She’d had to find out from Hadand that they had won. Then nothing for long, tense weeks as they waited in the south for retaliation to come over the sea.

She said, “I wasn’t sure if you didn’t write because . . . there was a problem. That things had changed. Again. So much has changed! But I didn’t write because of your responsibilities. I didn’t want to trouble you unnecessarily.”

Inda sank down onto the bed where once they had lain together so innocently. His hair was loose, falling down his back below his waist, his night robe unlaced; it did not hide the white puckers of long scars on his chest.

“Is that some kind of accusation?” he asked. “I couldn’t write. You do not know what it was like.” His voice cracked on the last word, ragged, husky.

She gripped her forearms, her blood cold in her veins. “Tell me.”

“I hope one day to forget what it was like. It took us all night and then all day—an entire day, Tdor—to get the wounded away, and then to Disappear the dead. Everyone working. I helped as best I could, though my right hand had gone numb after the battle, and I didn’t get feeling back for days.”

He hesitated out of habit. With Signi he did not talk about war.

Tdor said, “Go on.”

“Do you want to hear it?”

“If you want to talk about it.”

He sighed. Yes. Everything had changed. Except Tdor. “I don’t. But maybe if you know, the past will stay just a memory, and not come at me at night. When we came down from the cliffs, most of Noddy’s and Hawkeye’s men were already dead. Most! The only ones who made it through were Cama’s and Cherry-Stripe’s, because I had them up on the mountains.”

“But it worked, right?”

“Only because the Venn left. We’d be up there now if they hadn’t, Tdor, each side chewing the other to death day by day. They’re hard fighters, a match for us. I keep having nightmares about two armies marching together without stopping and the bodies piling higher and higher.” He shook his head and groped, his fingers opening and closing vaguely.

She hugged her arms against her.

“You were so right when you said it’s not a game, Haywit.”

“I was a pompous snot,” she retorted.

“So you said in the royal city, but I thought about what you said all the years. It-it helped me. When I made a plan, it was because I thought you’d like it. That I was making a net. Not tearing it.” He looked

into her face for understanding. She looked back, a little puzzled, but waiting to hear more. "Well. The thing is, the Venn are gone north again. Evred is worried about the future. I think he can't let himself believe they're gone, though we don't think they'll be back next year." He looked inquiringly at her. "Go on," she said.

"When I was coming down south, I got notes. In that gold box thing. Cama's in the north, d'you see? He had some trouble at first. The Idayagans thought they could attack us after the Venn left."

Tdor winced. "Will the war ever end?"

"He thrashed them hard, and they slunk off to their homes. Cama will ride around with his men on inspection, show off their numbers. Evred says we cannot let the Idayagans know just how weakened we were, or the war won't end. Now they're frightened, they think we're invincible. They seem to think I am invincible. Cama wrote that all he has to do is threaten to bring me north, and they settle down. Isn't that funny?" Inda made a peculiar grimace.

"No," Tdor said. "If it works."

"That's what I think, too. If it works. But after the battle, I just couldn't write."

"It must have been terrible for Signi," Tdor said, obliquely approaching the ring. And what marriage would mean: legally they knew their duties, and what they didn't know they'd learn. But the law said nothing about how a Jarl and Jarlan, or Randael and Randviar, or even a Harskialdna and Harandviar defined marriage in personal terms.

Inda's expression made it clear his mind was back at the battle, despite the mention of the Venn mage.

"Signi won't talk about the battle. All I know is that she saw ghosts leave."

"Ghosts?"

"That's what she said. But she doesn't talk about those, either."

Tdor accepted that, and remembered her promise to herself. "You are wearing a ring."

Inda stared down at his hand as if surprised to discover it still there. "Magic rings." He lifted his hand.

"Fox gave 'em to me. Evred wants me to wear it. He wears his. We can find one another. When I take up my duties in the royal city, it'll mean we can always—"

*Evred's ring. I'm such a fool,* she thought. There was a lot more to be defined than just Signi's place in their marriage.

A soft tap interrupted before she could think about how to begin.

Inda sprang to the door. Fareas-Iofre entered, with Signi behind her, wearing one of the women's blue robes. "Your father is breakfasting. Get dressed. Now is the time to see him."

Shortly thereafter, they walked quietly into the Adaluin's chamber. Signi effaced herself, a gesture of grace noticed only by Tdor.

Inda's father lay on his bed, white-haired, lined, and frail. His robe was clean, his hair freshly combed and tied back simply: all the signs of care by his wife and servants, though he was not always present enough to recognize them.

"Papa." Inda knelt down and took the thin hand lying loosely on the coverlet.

Jarend-Adaluin breathed deeply, but his eyes stayed closed.

"Papa, it is Inda. I am home."

No reaction, only the slow, steady breathing. Inda gently squeezed the gnarled, weathered hand lying in his so passive and childlike, remembering how it used to grip the hilt of a sword in practice early each morning, before his father went on the endless rounds of riding to protect Choraed Elgar. How strong he'd seemed. Strong, ageless, like the rocks and hills.

Inda wiped his eyes on his shoulder, then glanced at his mother, who said, "Jarend. Inda is back. The Venn are defeated."

Jarend's lips worked. He muttered something, too soft to hear. Fareas dropped down on the other side of the bed, bending close. When he muttered again, she faced them, her eyes stricken. "Pirates," she said. "And Joret."

"The pirates are gone, Father," Inda stated in a strong voice. "What Whipstick told you was true. They are gone. I defeated them."

Jarend's breathing came faster. His fingers twitched.

“They are gone,” Inda repeated. “And I am here.”

Jarend-Adaluin opened his eyes then. His gaze wandered vaguely until he found Inda’s face. Then he focused, and his hand tightened. “Inda. You are home again. To stay?”

Inda looked to the women for clues, but they stood quietly, hands in sleeves. “I will always protect you, Father. But Evred Harvaldar made me his Harskialdna. I can ask—”

“The king honors our House.” Jarend-Adaluin smiled faintly and lay back, his breathing slowing, his free hand moving restlessly over the coverlet to his side, where a sword would hang if he wore the baldric.

“The king chose . . . Honor.” He sighed, closing his eyes again. His breathing deepened into slumber.

“That’s the most he’s talked since last summer,” Fareas Iofre said when they had filed outside. “He is glad you’re back, my son.”

“Maybe now he will regain some strength.” Tdor gently closed the door.

Fareas-Iofre raised her head, listening. The sound of voices rose from the courtyard outside the window.

“The people are arriving. It’s time to get ready for the wedding.”

They parted, the women in one direction. Inda took the long way, passing outside his brother’s chamber again. The same strange sense of loss assailed him, and he stood outside the door, trying to resolve it.

But a flicker at the edge of his vision snapped him round, knives out and ready.

Branid gasped and nearly stumbled back down the stairs. His eyes widened. As Inda resheathed the knives, Branid said, “Hoo, you’re fast.” He glowered. “Why are you wearing weapons in your own house?”

“I wear weapons everywhere,” Inda said. “Why are you lurking around like a thief?”

Branid’s gaze shifted, and then the tips of his ears reddened. He couldn’t believe that the beautiful Dannor Tya-Vayir, daughter of a Jarl, chose *him* to sleep with the night before. Maybe Dannor didn’t want Inda because of all those scars? Or maybe that old one wouldn’t share?

Branid had never gotten all the female attention first. Ever. And what a night! But—

It was strange to Inda, seeing so big a man hunch and sidle. Branid said, “I just wanted to know . . . what it was like. The battle, I mean.”

Branid used the longing tone of a boy, not that of a man who had witnessed violent death. “Bad.” Inda gestured, hand flat. “Very bad.”

“We didn’t see a sniff of any pirates. Or Venn. Or anything else.” Branid’s regret was odd. Defensive.

“I’ve worked hard. Learned all Whipstick’s drills. I drill the men myself, now. Just the way you learned it in the academy.”

Inda’s irritation vanished. For the very first time he wondered what it had been like to watch Tanrid and him go off to the academy, especially when Inda, originally, was supposed to stay home. After Tanrid was killed, Branid was too old and the Harskialdna had not wanted three Algara-Vayirs, anyway.

Would Branid have turned out different if he’d gone to the academy? It hadn’t improved Horsebutt. Or Kepa.

Inda couldn’t answer that, but he could do this: “Since we’re alone, let me ask you. Is your promise good?”

“What?” Branid looked affronted, his voice echoing down the stairs to the alcove he’d shown Dannor the night before—the place you could hear everything said in the hall upstairs. Branid had just been showing off, but Dannor always remembered useful information like that.

She was there now, mostly out of idle interest. She had been debating whether she could tolerate being second woman to a pompous duty-stick like Tdor Marth-Davan, if she got this fool Branid to marry her, since he seemed to be free to choose. By the end of dinner the previous evening Dannor had figured out why the local women avoided Branid, who had only two subjects: bragging about himself, and whining about everyone else.

“When we were boys, you never kept promises,” Inda said. “But people change. I’ve changed. Have you?”

“I should hope so! Why, if it wasn’t for me—”

“Then listen. Evred-Harvaldar has given me orders to take my place as Harskialdna in the royal city.”

Below, Dannor was beginning to turn away in disgust—her weight actually shifted—when she heard Inda



say, "He agreed that when my father dies, you are to become Adaluin."

Dannor stilled. Oh, this was far better than she could have imagined. Far, *far*.

On the landing, Branid's eyes widened with shock, then pleasure. Then narrowed wariness. "But? I can't believe you're just going to give me the title. Just like that."

"It's the king's order. Like it's his order that my children will inherit. But I'm happy with the title going to you if you promise me two things. One, you will honor my father as yours until he dies. Second, when he does, you will permit my mother to stay as senior woman. That means if you marry, my mother has to approve. And if someday my mother chooses to leave, you will see that she is able to travel wherever she wants to go."

"I promise," Branid breathed, his face so painful to see—so much longing, fear, greed, even shame. Inda pulled the owl clasp from his hair, which fell down his back. He held out the clasp, and Branid's hand closed around it. "Then it's done."

Inda walked away before Branid could say anything. He thought about the things he'd say to Whipstick before he left, then forgot everything when he entered his room and saw the wedding shirt lying on his bed.

Tdor had made it; Inda knew it was customary for the wife to make the man's wedding shirt, to embroider it with his House device, or with things from his life, whatever her skill and patience permitted. This shirt was covered front and back with intricate designs: ships and suns and owls and the House symbols of all Inda's Tvei friends, the lines somewhat crooked—Tdor was no needlewoman—the ships like nothing that had ever floated, but he knew as he ran his fingers over the bright lines and colors that every stitch was lovingly made.

An icy rain began to fall by midmorning.

Inda's shoulder ached, as if often did when the weather changed. He found Tau downstairs in the kitchen, which was filled with good smells. "I need your hands."

They went up to Inda's room, where he plopped into a chair and leaned his head on his hands. Tau kneaded his bad shoulder.

"Thanks for everything you did," Inda mumbled as little zings and shoots of pain, and then not-quite-pain, lessened the constant ache in his bones and shoulder socket. Maybe now he wouldn't have to wear that stupid sling at his own wedding.

"I had fun here," Tau said. "I was amazed to discover that the new cook has never made a feast for a family wedding. I find that sad."

"As sad as everything being worn out?" Inda asked. "I didn't see it yesterday. Then I was just glad that nothing had changed. But this morning, well, everything is worn through. The mats at the children's table have to be the ones my father used. I'd thought I would get me some new boots, but mine are in better shape than anyone's here. Mother's have patched toes."

"Signi has been renewing your magical spells. I came across her doing the buckets out behind the kitchen. It's like she's surrounded with the sun-glitter you see on water."

Inda sighed as Tau's strong hands moved to the muscles between his shoulder blades. "Thank you for taking on Dannor. Keeping her out of the way. She invited herself along, and I couldn't figure out how to say no. Soon's we were inside the gate, I could see that Tdor didn't want her here."

"I did my best, though it wasn't long. You should have seen how fast she dropped me when she discovered I had no rank or relation to anyone with rank." Tau shook his head. Dannor was the closest he'd ever met to the terrible Coco on Gaffer Walic's pirate ship—not the taste for blood, but the utter lack of conscience. Well, at least Branid seemed to like her, which kept her out of Inda's way.

"Tau. Are you coming to the royal city with me? You don't have to be a Runner if you don't want to. I can keep those two King's Runners Vedrid assigned me. Turns out Fiam, who was supposed to be my Runner, didn't like the knife training, and he's going to be the house steward."

"Yes, I taught him something about scent packets, and a few tricks for protecting old linens, like ribbon

hems to make them last. It amuses me how many of my mother's lessons—all deeply resented as worthless, you understand—I've been teaching people hither and yon." Tau worked the muscle at the base of Inda's skull as he considered what to say about the royal city.

"I think—I think you did Evred some good. Back in Ala Larkadhe. You're right about him being taut as a bowstring." Inda breathed deeply, half ready to fall asleep.

Tau smiled at the thought of Evred taut as a bowstring. Tau knew his response to Evred was complicated, and could be dangerous—but oh, the temptation to . . . civilize a king was devastatingly seductive.

He thumped Inda lightly. "There goes the summons bell."

The wedding was held in the great hall, as rain was falling hard by noon. Below the family banners hung garlands made of ribbon-tied blossoms, all bound with ivy. Tau's contribution was bunches of fragrant herbs.

The best beeswax candles—also dipped with herbs—glowed warmly over everyone's House robes and tunics, hiding threadbare patches and striking highlights in silver embroidery. In that warm, golden, faintly glistening light everyone and everything looked its best.

Inda and Tdor stood side-by-side and made their vows before all their dependents, the chief men and women of the closest trade towns, and as many Fera-Vayir cousins as could make it in time. Standing just behind her supposed old friend Tdor was Dannor Tya-Vayir. It so happened that her place as guest put her next to Branid Algara-Vayir in his green-and-silver House tunic, the silver owl clasp binding up his hair. She smiled at him every time he happened to glance sideways.

He glanced a lot.

The vows were the solemn part. Tdor dug her nails into her palm once, trying to make a memory. She was afraid the entire day would vanish like a dream, it seemed so unreal.

That was until she reminded herself she had to leave. She would be taking up duties as defender of the royal castle. It was good work . . .

But it was not Castle Tenthon. It was not home.

She closed that acknowledgment away, keeping the hurt private. No one must ever know—to all, including Fareas-Iofre, she was full of pride and expectation. Any other woman would trade places with her in a heartbeat. She would now be the most important woman in the kingdom next to the queen, beside whom she'd been raised as a sister.

Inda also felt unreal. The last Marlovan wedding he'd attended had been when he was eleven, when their academy tutor, Master Gand, married and moved away as Randael to a northern castle. He remembered being aghast that a master would marry. He had known even less about politics than he had about sex in those days.

As the Runners carried the trays in, and the hand drums came out, Inda remembered himself and the other children running round the perimeter of the room, trying to pinch extra lemon cakes. Just as at that wedding, the adults passed from hand to hand the flat open-flower wine cups full of hot spiced wine. One after another they called out toasts and drank, most speaking the ancient witticisms that were pointless to children but carried double meaning so funny to the teens.

Then: "Dance, dance!"

Flushing—almost unrecognizable—Tdor moved out in her new green-and-silver over-robe, flowers bound on her head, and took her place in the center of the inner ring of married women, the outer ring of single girls and women.

Drums and cymbals started the thump and ching in counterpoint, and people sang "Green Grows the Ivy" as the women wound round and round, Tdor leading.

Then it was the men's turn. Inda grinned stupidly, wondering why he'd forgotten to practice, but then the men's circle dances were so easy, variations on the sword dance: Stamp stamp, whirl, kick, whirl, clap clap, leap. High smack of the opposite man's hand against yours. And then onward, as the drums raced

through the gallop, gradually picking up the tempo until men began to stumble, trip, or just bow out. Incomprehensible until just a few years ago was the old saying, “Married man who lasts out the Ivy Dance lasts out the night!” It was silly—everyone knew that—but Inda did his best, until only he and Tau and two of the younger Riders from the outer ring were dancing, and when Inda stumbled, Tau pretended to trip, and sat down with Inda, laughing.

Inda could see how popular Tau had become, but he could also see from Tau’s smile, his flow of witty jokes, that once again, Tau was playing a part. Tenth then wasn’t his home. It was another stage for his life’s play.

The unmarried girls danced a ring dance next, many eyeing the young fellows speculatively. And vice versa when the unmarried fellows took their turn.

The men brought out the swords next, to general acclaim, and this time the drums rumbled in the 5/4 rhythm as men leaped, clashed, posed, whirled. Leaped, and clash, clash, ring!

Signi watched it all from a corner seat. Fareas-Iofre had meant to look out for her, but she was far too busy acting as hostess, and because no one knew Signi, she was left to herself.

It was Tdor who noticed her sitting alone at the very end table where the children had been. At the other end of the room, Inda was deep in conversation with Whipstick and Branid. *I thought Inda’s ring was something he shared with her, and so I made myself jealous. The most unworthy, useless, and painful emotion there is. And totally unnecessary,* Tdor thought, and crossed the room to join Signi.

“I remember you were trained in dance,” Tdor said. “Are our dances pleasing to the eye, or just strange?”

“Ah, all dance is good.” Signi smiled up at her.

Tdor dropped down on the mat beside Signi and pulled off her flower garland, which had begun to itch her scalp mercilessly. She turned it around and around in her hands. “But Venn court dance is very different, is it not? Hadand looked it up and wrote to me about it. It’s a lot like a play, she said. Each gesture holds meaning. Levels of meaning, even. I’m afraid ours must seem fairly simple.”

“No, all dance tells a story.” Signi extended a hand toward the young girls. “See? They tell the story of courtship, of hope. They may not have great skill, but their youth gives them beauty.”

Tdor leaned back with her elbows on the low table, watching robes swirling against shapely young bodies, laughing looks cast backward, neatly booted feet tapping, flower-tucked braids swinging. “And the men?”

“Ah, theirs is so different. Some is courtship and desire, some—” She pursed her lips.

“The sword dances aren’t.”

“They are challenges, to one another. They play war. Sometimes they play sex and war.”

“And they don’t up north?”

“Yes, they do there too, though perhaps in different ways.” Signi looked troubled.

Across the room, Inda—flushed and laughing the way they saw so rarely—said, “Come on, Tau!”

“Not here—”

“Someone has to uphold sailors’ honor. Can’t be me. I always fumble the steps!”

Tdor had it on her lips to ask about the battlefield—if Signi truly saw ghosts—but the melancholy quirk to the woman’s eyes, her pensive almost smile, made her hesitant.

The men shouted approval, and most of the women took it up. The drums tapped a new rhythm, and Signi smiled. “Ah! You must watch. Tau will dance a sailor dance. He is quite good. His dance story is to seduce every watcher by making them feel beautiful and desirable.”

Taumad moved out to the center, laughing back at Inda, and put one hand up, one at his waist, to begin an old Sartoran step-dance that had become popular on the decks of ships all over the south, mostly because you could do it in a small space. Many of the girls grabbed up drums and rumbled up a stirring counterpoint, trying to catch his eye. He managed to flirt with every single one of them before he twirled to a graceful finish amid laughter and clapping.

Signi chuckled. “He will not sleep alone tonight, that one.”

Tdor did not hear. Her ear, always sensitive to the atmosphere, caught Dannon’s light, cruel laugh.

Liet—who could be bossy—and a couple of newly married Riders’ wives were flushed and uncertain,

Dannor smirking in the way Tdor had hated ever since she was fifteen.

Tdor said, of a sudden, "Will you dance for me?"

Signi turned her head, searching Tdor's face, and Tdor waited, holding her breath, afraid she had trespassed.

But whatever the mage saw did not affront her, and she said, "I will."

Tdor got to her feet. "Silence," she said, turning around, but her gaze rested on Dannor. "Our guest from foreign lands is going to dance for us. Dag Signi, do you need a beat?"

"No drums." Signi moved to the center of the room.

For a short time she just stood in the center of the room, a small, compact figure with flyaway sandy hair, humming beneath her breath, and swaying gently, so that the hem of her blue robe brushed the tops of feet they saw were bare, her slippers placed neatly beside her mat.

Then she turned in a slow circle, her hands rising, palms up. The robe flared, revealing the plain linen gown beneath.

She danced in silence, at least most thought so, but the front spectators heard her humming in a soft voice that wasn't particularly musical. It was her movements, so fluid, so flowing, like water down a mountain or widening in a pool, that became conduits to vision. You were not seeing a small, plain woman dancing alone on the great stone flags, but youth, and summer days, and the long bonds of friendship and faithfulness.

But she was not done. She whirled and leaped across the floor in a startling change, evoking the horse and rider on the charge: the dash and valor of battle. The dread and clash of wills as well as swords and lances, and then, and then, she stood in the center again, arms raised, muscles articulating an agony of grief so expressive that throats tightened as muscles remembered private griefs. She threw back her head, mouth open as if uttering a long, wrenching howl.

Many wept, and Tdor, wiping her eyes, thought, *Oh, what have I done?*

But Signi had not finished.

She raised her arms again, and this time leaped, light as a drifting leaf, her wrists arched and airy as she scudded in a circle with the freedom of a childhood dance. Hearts lifted with remembered joy as Signi mimed the bonds of childhood. Her arms circled, her head canted, and there was a mother holding her baby; her shoulder led as she bent, and there was a young father teaching his son to walk. And then the child grew, and with a flirt of hip and a curling of fingers she danced the entrancing magic of attraction, miming the young who look on one another with the gleaming smile of spring.

Tau's dance had been unabashedly sexy, but this dance celebrated love—all the forms of love, transcending the physical and emotional into the upward-yearning realm of the spirit.

When Signi finished she bowed her head and folded her hands into peace mode, and people laughed, talked, exclaimed. Dannor smiled at Branid, who turned anxiously Inda's way as if to get a cue to how he should be feeling. The mulling rods were then brought out, and the sweet, heady scent of warmed spiced wine filled the air as everyone shared the wedding cups.

And at last the midnight bells rang, and Signi wasn't there. Inda, befuddled with wine and tiredness, met Tdor's gaze. He saw the invitation there, the faint pucker of question in her straight brow, and the profound tenderness that had overwhelmed him at the first sight of his wedding shirt seized him anew.

"Will you come to my bed?" she asked, holding out her hand.

Inda took her hand, and it was not the slim child's hand he had remembered from childhood, capable and square. Her hand was nearly the size of his—not as broad, but her fingers were long, her palm rough as all Marlovan women's were, her clasp steady.

Her room was unchanged from what he remembered in childhood. It confused him. He looked around at the familiar objects as if all were new, and then back at Tdor, who let go of his fingers and gripped her forearms.

He smiled and took a turn around the room. "All those years. I saw you as I left you. I even talked to you in my head. You were my guide. But you didn't change."

"I grew up." Her smile was crooked. "Same as you did."

"I know." He made a helpless gesture.

“Inda. Once before we tried to lie together. Do you remember? I think you were nine, and I was ten, almost eleven, and thought myself so wise.”

“You were always wise,” he said, laughter smoothing his face beneath those terrible scars.

“I was always curious. And far too bossy.” Her fingers trembled, but she stilled them as she shed her robe, and then loosened her shirt laces. “I think we might try again. And if nothing happens, well, then we’ll have a pleasant nap, just like we did that time.”

Inda grinned. It was not the grin of a ten-year-old boy.

The warmth of his grin tingled through her, intensifying at the sight of those broad, powerful shoulders as he carefully lifted his wedding shirt over his head.

Sex had always been a duty for her. A sensible person saw to the needs of the body, so she had been raised. But though she had earnestly sought enlightenment in the matter of sex, she’d never felt what the songs had talked about, and she’d concluded that she wouldn’t. It was the way she was made.

Then Inda had come back, both alien and dear, grown yet still so much like the boy she’d known from babyhood. For the first time, the fires within had lit for her. But he’d had to go off to war.

He stood naked before she did. He unclasped his hair, braiding it swiftly; her heartbeat quickened as his gaze drifted down her length, a slow gaze of appreciation.

He held out his hands.

“You’re grown up.” His fingers caressed her cheek, and then stroked lightly down the contours of her body, his hands warm and lingering.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

“You look so strong.” He buried his face in her neck.

“I am strong.” She gave in to impulse at last, pressing a light kiss over the scar just below the hollow of his throat. “I am very strong.” And she was. For the very first time, the strength of need and promise and desire beat power through her veins, and she laughed, and reached for him. “Come see how strong I am,” she whispered, pulling him down beside her.

Signi was wrong about Tau. He stood up on the tower under the sentry roof, watching the torchlight gleam through the sleeting rain, and then he tried one more time with his golden case:

*Jeje: I am alive. Inda is alive—and married. I suspect his great day is over, and he will settle into the royal city, training boys for the possibility of glory, and that it is time for me to invent another amusement besides watching greatness in action.*

*But because I’m drunk, I keep thinking. Does anyone, outside of madmen and kings, ever perceive his own greatness? What defines greatness, anyway, other than being the one who forces people and events to change whether they will or no? Inda does not see himself as a figure of history, but neither does he see himself as others see him: Fox who wishes to be him, Evred who wishes to possess him, and Signi who wishes to change him.*

*Once, never mind when, I realized I have no driving purpose. Now that I am suffering under the so-called wisdom of wine fumes, I wonder if this is why I seem to be drawn to those who do have driving purposes.*

*Enough, enough. You have never answered me, and I believe this shall be my last time shouting into the wind. If you are well, stay well, and smile when you think of me.*

He shoved it into the case without reading it over. He suspected that if he were sober, he’d throw it into the fire. But he was drunk, and so he tapped out the pattern that had become so familiar, and off his fool letter went into the void.

Then he trod downstairs to fall into bed.

But halfway down the stairs he felt, at last, the tap of an answer. His heart thumped with joy as he sat on a stair under a sconced torch and opened the case.

And there were the rounded, careful letters that Inda had taught Jeje to use so long ago, when they were in prison during Khanerenth’s civil war:

*I didn't write before because I didn't know if my plan would work. Or even if it was a good plan. But you'll have to decide, because I've found your mother.*

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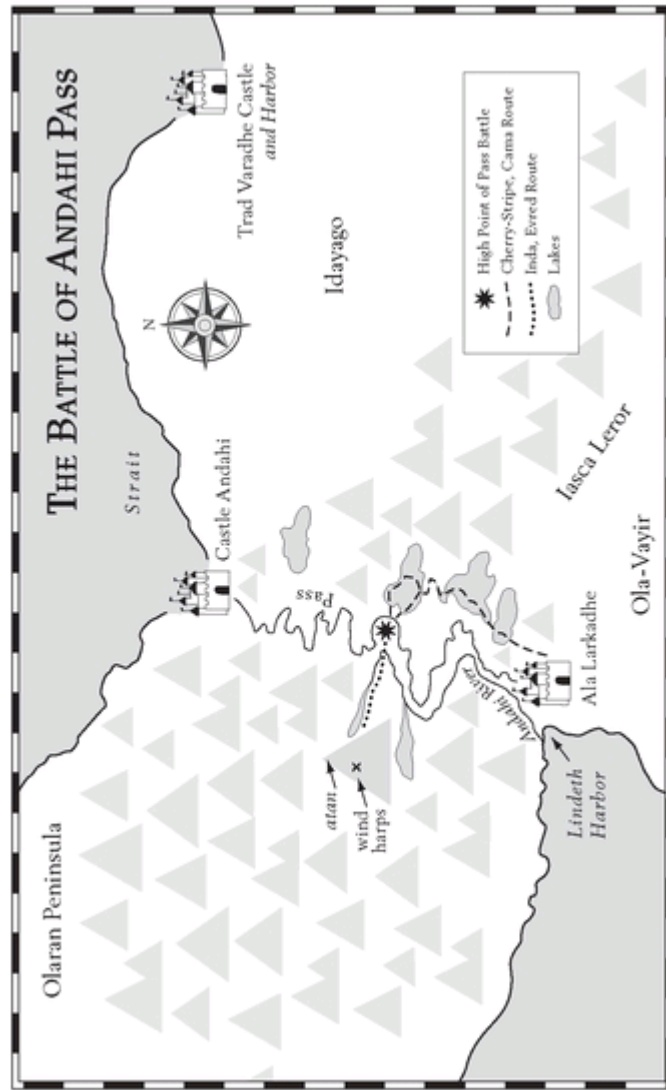
TREASON’S SHORE





IASCA LEROR'S EMPIRE  
ON THE HALIAN SUBCONTINENT





PART ONE

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THE docks in Bren Harbor were deserted except for the roaming patrols of guards, all fully armed. On every single rooftop along the quay—warehouses, stores, taverns—guards roosted in the cold, snowy weather, bows to hand, and a cache of arrows apiece.

Behind windows, people watched. They speculated to no purpose, worried, cursed, laughed, laid bets. Others threw up their hands and went on with their lives, some with a pirate-thumping weapon ready to hand, just in case.

The sinister black pirate trysail floated in the middle of the harbor, its consorts at either side, crews (at least a hundred spyglasses made certain) ready to flash sail at word or sign from the lone red-haired figure, dressed all in black, lounging on the captain's deck.

Through an entire day the spyglasses stayed trained on that ship. Not long after nightfall, a stir at the main dock brought word relayed up to the watch commander: "Woman wants to hire a boat to take her out to the pirate."

"What? This I have to witness."

Jeje never saw Barend. As soon as she returned from her interview, she skinned out of the fancy clothes, rolled them up into a ball (with some regret treating silk with so little respect) and shoved them into her bag. She got into her sailor gear, pulled on the shapeless wool hat hanging by the door for everyone to use when going into the small truck garden. Always scrupulous (according to her lights) Jeje left her old knit sock cap in its place—too obviously a sailor's cap. Then she hefted her new gear bag and under cover of darkness slipped through the garden, over the back fence, through another garden, and into the street, walking anonymously past the patrolling guards.

She had spent the night at Chim's, as the weather had turned too rough for rowing out into the harbor.

Then there was the matter of the King's Guard having the entire harbor locked down. Chim sent word to a couple of his more trusty watermen to be standing by when Jeje reached the first perimeter.

"Who are you? Where are you going?" the sentry captain asked.

"I want to hire a boat." Jeje poked a thumb toward the hire craft floating at the dock. "Get back on board."

"On board what?"

"My ship."

"Which would be?"

She hesitated. By now she was surrounded. In the lantern light, naked swords gleamed. Not the time to be mouthy. "My ship's out there on the water—"

"Look at this," one interrupted, pointing under the terrible hat, where her ruby glittered in the lantern light.

"She's gotta be the pirate Jeje. I think you better get the Commander."

"I'm not a pirate." At the various shufflings, shiftings, and snortings of disbelief, Jeje sighed. "Look, no one wants any trouble. I just want to get back on deck. Princess Kliessin already interviewed me yesterday," she added.

The mention of the princess caused more looks and shuffles, then someone sent someone else loping off into the darkness as the warriors closed in around her, standing within sword length.

They stood like that, no one talking (Jeje wondering if she'd start a war if she asked the one who'd been eating fried onions not to stand on her toes), until the approach of running feet broke the circle. A tall, strong man with grizzled hair marched up. This just had to be the watch commander.

"You belong to yon pirate?" he asked.

"Yes." That was simple. "I've been acting as envoy," Jeje said. "Saw the princess yesterday. Now I'm supposed to report back." She jerked her mittened thumb toward the *Death*.

Heads snapped seaward, then back. Another day she'd remember that and laugh. Now she just stood there, jaw jutted, feet planted, arms crossed, mittened hands gripping her knife hilts.

"Send her." The commander waved, his attitude adding *good riddance* .

Chim's watermen appeared as if by magic, and Jeje, recognizing them, said loudly, "Got a boat I can hire?"

"Right at the dock," was the answer, hint hint, wink wink.

The commander rolled his eyes at this lumbering attempt at covert communication. If these people were sophisticated international spies, he was a Venn. "Row her out, and *you* 'll report back to me before you run off to Chim," he added grimly, causing the would-be secret emis saries to deflate a little.

On board the *Death* , Fox had posted sharp eyes at the mastheads, watching the coast as steadily as it watched him. He'd expected someone to row out and demand his business; the long wait made him wonder what was going on inside the city. He was considering whom to send when, at last, a boat set out from the main dock, lanterns aswing at every heave of the oars.

"I think that's Jeje," Mutt yelled, his voice cracking. He was acting as lookout, and as captain of the foremast bow team. And then a triumphant aside to one of his cronies on the mizzen-mast, "Nugget's gonna be *fried* she wasn't here t'see her first."

"She's too busy showing off for Cap'n Eflis," came the hoarse reply.

Mutt scowled into the darkness.

Below, Fox was quite able to hear the sotto voce conversation going on over his head, but the time for absolute silence had passed. And Mutt of course had known that very well.

So Fox snapped out his glass, satisfied himself that this was indeed Jeje on her way through the night-black, icy waters. He said, "Signal the captains of *Cocodu* and *Rapier* ."

Then he returned to his cabin for the first time since dawn, and sat down at the desk. Two movements were habitual: with one hand he reached for the desk drawer containing the gilt-edged black book, and with the other he touched the golden case. When his fingers tingled on contact with the gold, he shoved the drawer shut again. After months without any message, it seemed Inda had remembered someone besides his damned Montrei-Vayirs.

*Fox, what are you doing in Bren?*

Fox eyed the large, scrawling letters. Of course it could be Inda's fingers were almost as numb as Fox's were now, but Fox read anger in those sloppy letters, and laughed. "I don't yet know, but you're not going to find that out," he said aloud.

Inda deserved to sweat. How stupid he was, to even consider throwing away ten generations of pirate treasure on those fool Montrei-Vayirs, whose own stupidity had run the kingdom aground in the first place.

Fox warmed his fingers over a candle, dashed off an answer, and tossed the golden case back onto the desk as Jeje's boat thumped up against the hull. On deck he discovered the older crewmates surrounding Jeje, some pounding her on the back, everyone talking at once.

Well aware of the spyglasses trained on them from the shore, Fox flicked a drifting snowflake from his arm and said, "Come into the cabin." And as soon as the door was shut, "Why did you leave Inda?"

"To find Tau's mother." Jeje glared around the cabin. Looking for signs of Inda, perhaps? No, Inda had never left any signs of habitation anywhere he'd lived, and she'd know that. Disapproving of the row of books on the carved shelf? The golden Colendi gondola-lamps, or the astonishing silk wall hanging of raptors taking flight in the pale shades of dawn? All legitimate pirate loot.

Jeje eyed Fox's smile as he dropped onto his chair and propped a booted foot on the edge of the table. A knife hilt gleamed in the boot top, winking with golden highlights as the beautiful lamp swung forward, back.

"Well?" she said finally. "I'm waiting for your usual nasty remark about Tau. Or his mother."

"Don't tell me," he said derisively. "She's a long-lost princess."

Jeje almost laughed out loud. Fox was interested. Despite himself. She thought about what she'd discovered, and decided he'd have to ask. "No. That is, long-lost yes, princess, no. So where's *Vixen*, and who's in charge?"

"Right now, Nugget—"

"She's alive?"

"Showed up in Parayid. All but one arm. Instead, you might say, she'd armed herself with the conviction she was now everyone's responsibility to protect and defend." His smile turned nasty. "I've been thrashing that out of her since summer. Now she's teaching herself to move around the rigging, either to impress Eflis, or to show me up. Maybe both."

From outside boat calls:

"Boats, hai!"

"*Cocodu!*"

"*Rapier!*"

Dasta and Gillor had arrived from their ships.

Jeje turned her attention back to Fox. "She's playing in the rigging on *Vixen*?"

"No. Maybe. After she and two loudmouths rerig the scout, and finish with some sail shifting practice." A snort of laughter. "She'll be back in time for dawn drill. It's for backchat on deck. We had a little brush with some of Boruin's former friends just off her old lair east of Danai, and Nugget acquitted herself so well she's got lippy." Fox shook with silent laughter as he glanced over his shoulder.

Jeje grinned. *Good for you, Nugget.* She hopped to the stern window and peered through the drifts of fog. The *Vixen* was only a faint silhouette, just emerging from the island's lee side, sails shifting with commendable speed. It would be a while before it tacked across the harbor.

Jeje fought off the strong surge of longing to see her scout again, and drew in a grateful breath of brine air, loving even the tangs of wood-mold and slushy ice and a trace of hemp. No better smell in all the world.

The cabin door banged open and there were Dasta and Gillor, looking tough and weathered. *I wonder if I look land-soft to them*, she thought, then leaped up, laughing, to find herself squeezed in a rib-creaking hug by Dasta, and then by Gillor. Laughing questions—half-answers—a sudden, sharp, "Where's Tcholan?" to be reassured by, "He's in command of the blockade—guarding one end, and Eflis at the other. Even a floating plank won't get past those two."

Fox cut through the chatter. "Jeje was in the middle of her report when you interrupted. Do continue, whenever they will let you."

Gillor snorted and dropped onto the bench, Dasta preferring to lean against a bulkhead where he could see everyone.

Jeje smacked her hands together. "So good to be back! I hate land."

Dasta ducked his head, making a sympathetic gesture. "But you went to help Inda."

"She went," Fox drawled, "to discover Taumad's mysterious heritage. And seems to have found his mother. Behold my curiosity."

Gillor snorted even louder, though Dasta thought, *I'll wager anything that for once he's telling the truth.*

Gillor said to Jeje, "Was it true pirates got her?"

"One of Marshig's gang was holding Parayid. Got bored waiting for battle. Wanted to burn the town down for fun. She offered to trade herself for leaving the town be. Which is why Parayid was only partially destroyed, unlike some of the other harbors."

Dasta looked disgusted. "So she's now a Coco?"

Fox's brows rose in satirical question.

"Not her! That is, she agreed to be the captain's favorite, but just for a while. She hated the captain's habits of carving up crewmembers who'd made him mad. She asked him not to. When he wouldn't stop, she organized a mutiny. Wasn't hard, she said."

Gillor whooped for joy. "So she's a pirate captain? Why didn't we hear about her?"

"Because she isn't any more."

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# KING'S SHIELD

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